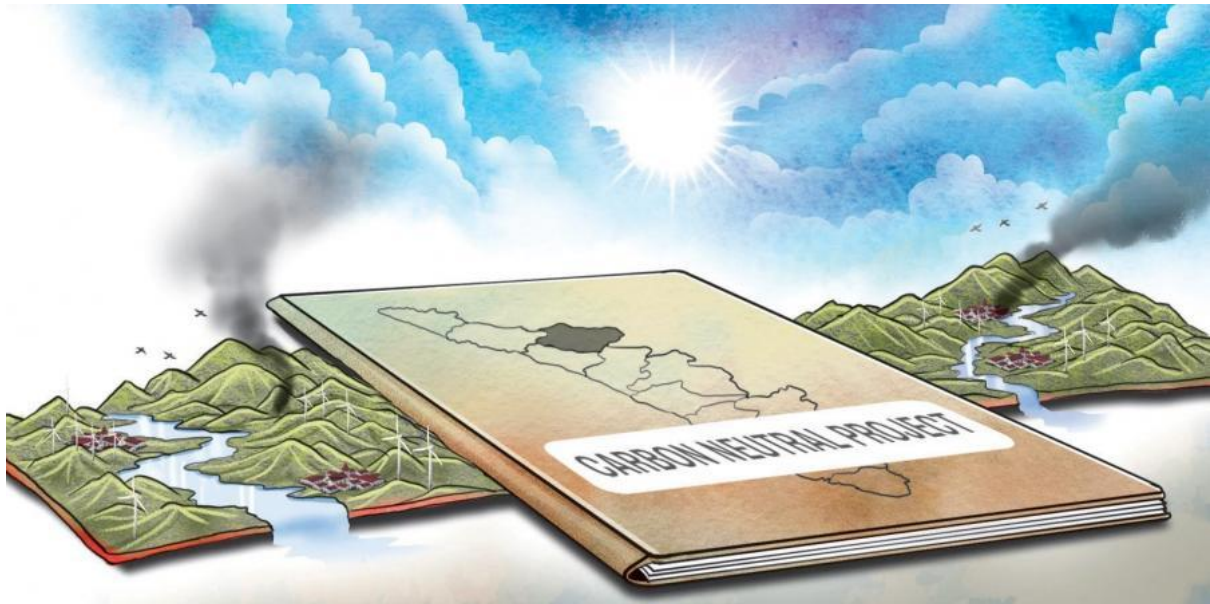


Towards a carbon neutral Wayanad

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It is a common notion that there is a trade-off between growth and environmental protection. The growth over-enthusiasts lose no opportunity to undermine environmental safeguards. And the opposite camp constantly reminds us of the limits to growth. The Western Ghats region of Kerala has been in the news for recurring landslides and floods and for bitter wrangling between the two camps on development. It is in this context that the proposal for doubling the income in five years through an eco-restoration programme in Wayanad assumes importance.

Wayanad district in Northern Kerala, sitting at an altitude of 700-2,000 metres in the Western Ghats, is one of the richest agro biodiversity regions of Kerala with more than 40% forest coverage, fertile soil and adequate water. But in the past two decades, the district has been more known for its agrarian crisis and farmer suicides. The collapse of coffee prices, wipeout of pepper vines by pestilence and ecological degradation have played havoc with agricultural production and farmers' income. The region was the epicentre of the 2019 monsoon disaster. It is in this backdrop that the new programme makes a promise of doubling the income through eco-restoration.

It all began with the "Carbon Neutral Meenangadi" project in the local plan of the grama panchayat. With the help of an environment activist group "Thanal", the panchayat prepared an assessment of total emissions, sector by sector, using internationally acceptable methodology. In the next stage, an assessment of sequestration of emissions by the existing trees in the forest and homesteads in the panchayat was made. It gave a net emission of 15,000 tCO₂eq for the panchayat. The challenge was to adopt measures to reduce the emissions and increase the sequestration capacity to neutralise the excess carbon emissions.

The annual plans of the local government were to be the main instrument for achieving this target. Projects were prepared to mitigate emissions in each of the sectors through appropriate measures like promotion of high-efficiency stoves, reduction in wastage of electricity, energy auditing, electric autos, solar energy programme, effective composting, etc. It was calculated that for the creation of additional sequestration capacity, 6 lakh trees would be required. Thus began a campaign to increase the tree density of the panchayat to offset the excess emission. Besides Thanal and MSSRF, neighbouring colleges, universities, research institutes and activists are involved in the programme.

A major challenge with tree planting programmes in private land is related to intergenerational equity. The tropical long-gestation trees may not bring income to the present generation that plant the trees but only to the next generation. How does one incentivise large-scale tree planting? The panchayat innovated with a tree banking model. The local cooperative bank would pay an advance of `50 per tree per annum to the farmers on the guarantee that the amounts would be paid back when the trees are ultimately cut after 10 to 20 years.

But this time horizon was found to be too risky for the cooperative. Therefore the state government stepped in to deposit `10 crore in the cooperative bank as guarantee. The earnings on the deposit could be used as annual interest for the advances given to the farmers by the cooperative. During the last two years, the local government has planted nearly 2 lakh trees, half of which were in private homesteads. This programme is being scaled up to the district-level with a target to sequester 6.1 lakh tCO₂eq, where 1 lakh tCO₂eq is expected to be covered by KSEB through solar power generation and the rest by 26 panchayats through their intervention in the forestry and agriculture sector.

How will it help double the income of the people? The main source is going to be through doubling the returns from coffee, the main crop. Today the producers of beans receive hardly 10% of the final value of coffee products. The major portion of value addition accrues to the dealers and processors at the higher end of the value chain. This can be drastically modified if the coffee is processed, branded and sold. Frankly, we were inspired by the success of branding the Araku Valley Coffee in Andhra Pradesh. The Carbon Neutral Wayanad tag would be a great asset in branding.

There would be a large modern agro-processing park with common facilities. Besides the coffee processing plant, it would also have facilities for processing fruits and vegetables that could be sourced by any farmer producer company. Large-scale jackfruit processing can easily fit with a centralised processing plant linked to decentralised primary processing units. The land and money for the park has been identified. The programme would involve major changes in coffee cultivation, picking and curing practices. Watershed-based planning is another key element.

Coffee will have to be graded into homogeneous quality based on the microclimatic and soil conditions. It would involve mobilisation of farmers and planters into producer companies or cooperatives, who would also be the shareholders of the company that would own the coffee brand and manage the common facility. The conscious promotion of fruit trees can provide supplementary income to the farmers. The increase in biomass can also enable expansion of animal husbandry. The increase in biodiversity and tree coverage would make Wayanad an important destination for eco-tourism. Meenangadi has already started developing eco-trails.

A major challenge is financing the tree planting programme on the model of Meenangadi tree banking. Some kind of green fund support would be required to prod the financial institutions to bank on trees. Meanwhile, international interest in the Wayanad experiment is growing. TUDelft University recently started a webinar series on Climate Technologies for Carbon Neutral Agriculture with the Wayanad programme as the central focus. From the local experiment of a grama panchayat, it has been a long journey, but this holds out promise of a positive and people-centric way of conservation of the Western Ghats.

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