

Cardamom in the forests of Sikkim: A Success Story

The subsistence dry land farming on sloping crop lands of north Sikkim should be presenting the poverty cum resource degradation scenario for farmers. However, ethnic mountain farming communities of Sikkim had chosen a wild high value spice –cardamom for barter and cash income source. The farmers started farming it under the forest floor like any perennial crop. For decades now, cardmomis their high value cash crop grown under the shade of natural forests as well as under alder afforestation.

Almost 75% farmers of north Sikkim have replaced the food grain agriculture on their farmlands with cardamom and alder tree plantations. Cardamom-alder forestry plantation provided permanent green cover to thousands of hectares i.e. 23% of farmland. The contribution of cardamom farming to livelihoods ranges between 40-88%. Four key factors which make cardamom farming on marginal sloping lands useful are:

It is ecologically adapted to farming on sloping lands and forestry system and the plants maintain permanent green cover on forest floor.

Cardamom farming ensures ecological stability to fragile mountain slopes by requiring farmers to maintain a good forest cover of nitrogen fixing alder trees.

Cardamom is farmer domesticated, low volume-high value cash crop and it generates employment for minimum of 80-100 days per hectare.

Globally almost 90% of cardamom is produced in Sikkim and its neighbouring valleys of Nepal and Bhutan alone, therefore, the region is the real niche of cardamom and enjoys comparative advantage in marketing.