The Coffee Board of India is taking key initiatives to bring sustainable farming practices to coffee cultivation in India, and nudge the industry towards greater adoption of certified coffee norms.

Coffee consumption was once confined to South India, but now coffee has emerged as a Pan Indian beverage that is used commercially in cafes as well as domestically at homes. Coffee cultivation is done under a canopy of thick natural shade, which in India is found in the regions of the Western and Eastern Ghats. The production of coffee beans is carried out on large plantations and also by small farmers. However, coffee is an expensive crop to grow, given that its production is very labour intensive and requires attention to a lot of details. As such there are various challenges that the coffee industry faces, and the problem of shortage of labour and water wastage are amongst the most acute.

Recognising the problems surrounding coffee as a crop and those faced by coffee growers, the Coffee Board of India has taken various initiatives like the one on introducing Eco-pulpers, also referred to as Ecological Pulping Units or Ecological Washing Stations. These units reduce wastage of coffee, bring down water consumption, and abate water pollution.

Towards sustainable coffee cultivation

The eco-pulpers are provided to small groups of coffee growers at subsidised rates, thanks to a tie-up between the Coffee Board and the Indian Institute of Plantation Management (IIPM). While the Coffee Board offers 40 percent subsidy on the market price of eco-pulpers, IIPM pitches in with another 15 percent subsidy. The initiative has helped to support producer organizations of coffee growers in India who have not been able to operate in a sustainable and viable manner. SHGs (registered under the State-level Societies Registration Act) have been promoted by the Coffee Board since the year 2002. SHGs, short for "strictly high grown", refer to coffee grown at higher altitudes. Beans grown at high altitudes mature more slowly and grow to be harder and denser than beans grown at lower elevations. The inherent consistency and taste attributes of high grown beans makes them more desirable, and generally more expensive, than coffees grown at lower elevations. About 125 coffee grower SHGs are being supported in the states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

However, most of the SHGs have not been undertaking commercial activities for the benefit of the groups' members. Therefore, IIPM has identified a few operating SHGs and is supporting them to obtain eco-pulpers and certifications. Dr Aswini Kumar, Research chair, Coffee Board of India and IIPM, Bangalore, says, "Eco-pulpers can reduce water consumption by 80-90% for coffee pulping and washing resulting in reduction in avoidance of pollution of millions of litres of water annually."

"In India, currently, seven firms are involved in supplying eco-pulpers. However, the smallest eco-pulper (1500 kgs of fruits per hr), fitted with a diesel generator, costs a minimum of Rs. 11 lakh. The largest eco-pulper (5000 kgs of fruits per hr) costs about Rs. 35 lakh," Kumar informs.
"In India, eco-pulpers are being sold by private entities since the last seven years. These pulpers are of large capacities, (approximately about 1500 kgs of ripe coffee per hour) and are expensive, resulting in their adoption being limited to very large plantations. Thus, the smaller plantations continue to use conventional pulpers," Kumar concludes.

However, in the last 2-3 years, the State Pollution Control Board has adopted stringent measures towards such pulpers and has also confiscated many polluting pulpers. Therefore, to address this problem and taking into account the imperative to introduce more environment-friendly eco-pulpers, the joint initiative by the Coffee Board and IIPM will go a long way in providing succor to the sector.

In another major initiative, the Coffee Board has entered into a joint initiative with the Netherlands-based UTZ, which is an independent, non-governmental, non-profitable organisation dedicated to create an open and transparent marketplace for socially and environmentally responsible agricultural products. As there are factors such as soils, climate, altitude, and the care with which the labour-intensive crop is handled throughout the year, affecting the quality of coffee at the level of farming, sustainable farming methods in coffee production and trade has assumed critical importance. Sustainable practices are therefore the need of the hour as it generates economic value, reduces poverty and inequality, replenishes the environmental resource base.

Globally, coffee cultivation and trade is moving toward "certified" coffee, a benchmark that confirms that coffees have been sourced ethically and produced in a responsible way and the people lowermost in the chain have been taken care of. To mitigate the problems coming in the way of increased coffee cultivation and production and to accomplish its goals of improving the quality and reputation of coffee produced in the country, the Coffee Board of India has allied with the UTZ, which runs the largest sustainability program active in the Indian coffee sector.

The alliance with UTZ will help to bring more of coffee cultivation under the UTZ Certified label for sustainable farming. The eco-label stands for sustainable farming and better opportunities for farmers, their families and our planet and its program enables farmers to learn better farming methods, improve working conditions and take better care of their children and the environment.

UTZ Certified is associated with 500,000 small growers and 400,000 farms. In India, UTZ has its presence at tea and coffee plantations spanning from Darjeeling to Kerala besides pockets of western and eastern India, to drive sustainable farming practices in coffee. The UTZ programme and code of conduct covers coffee, cocoa, tea, and rooibos production and sourcing. The programme has been instrumental in introducing social initiatives such as offering residences for workers, transport wage systems and safety awareness, all of which has had a positive farm impact.

Certified coffee

The role of the UTZ certified programme in spreading greater awareness on coffee handling and storage among coffee growers cannot be overstated. This kind of assistance is especially worthwhile considering the state in which a large numbers of coffee growers find themselves in. As per the research findings of IIPM, 99% of coffee farms in India have small holdings, which constitute 75% of the total area under coffee cultivation.

But, possibly due to the lack of enthusiasm of producer associations and effective intermediaries or support agencies, the awareness regarding the effects of certification is limited. However, during the last few years, the entry of sustainability certification labels such as UTZ has enabled coffee growers to produce
differentiated outputs (through the adoption of improved production systems) and realize higher returns. Beth Hearn, corporate communications Officer, UTZ Certified, says, "The objective of UTZ is to reach out to more and more farmers so that they can benefit from UTZ certification, and this also has the effect of increasing the supply of sustainable coffee, cocoa and tea."

"The main aim behind UTZ's initiative is to provide a better environment and better life to the farmers. Farmers following the UTZ code of conduct work with respect for the environment and in better harmony with nature. Along with animals, plants and nature reserves, water, raw materials and natural resources are also protected, preserved and pollution is reduced, "Hearn added.

Apart from UTZ Certified, there are other players too, such as Rainforest Alliance and Fair Trade, which share a similar goal of making agriculture more sustainable. However, as Hearn points out, "There are some key differences in the way we approach our goals. The Rainforest Alliance has an emphasis on the environment, while Fair Trade focuses on social/trade factors. UTZ takes a balanced approach that covers the three pillars of sustainability - people, planet and profit. The focus is on good agricultural practices and productivity and enabling farmers to increase their incomes."

Regarding the strategy of the UTZ Programme, Hearn states that it is about promoting economic resilience through diversifying the income of the farmer, promoting good agricultural practices, and improving the position of farmers in the negotiation process. Th us, in this way, UTZ supports profitability that is sustainable and focused on the long term benefits for the farmers. In addition, UTZ ensures that buyers pay a negotiable premium.

An edge over conventional machinery

According to the Coffee Board of India, in 2014, India produced about 3.10 lakh tonnes of coffee with about 70% of the coffee produced in the country being exported. More than six lakh people in the country are directly employed and an equal number get indirect employment from this sector.

The study on coffee plantation in India by IIPM reveals that 75000-80000 MTs of coffee is washed annually with 6-11 litres of water being used to pulp a kilogram of ripe coffee fruits. The untreated effluent from pulping units is high in BOD, COD etc, and if released untreated into the surroundings, can cause land degradation and water pollution. In fact, in India, coffee washing is primarily carried out in the Western Ghats, which is a rich source of biodiversity and the point of origin of major peninsular rivers.

Hopefully, with the collaboration with UTZ Certified, the problem of water pollution can be ameliorated to a great extent and the process of coffee manufacturing and production can attain higher standards of environmental efficiency as laid down by the global benchmarks.

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