

Banko Janakari

A journal of forestry information for Nepal

Death of sissoo trees : a coincidence

Commercially grown sissoo (*Dalbergia sissoo*) trees in the Nepal's Terai plains that are three years or older began withering on the top and dying. The tree-top starts to wilt and dry in the beginning. It follows downward and the tree ultimately dies after a few months. This is a symptom typical to the sissoo plantation areas from east to west of Nepal's Terai. This has greatly perturbed the sissoo growers because it will have a devastating effect on their prospected income due in a few years time.

Sissoo, for its multipurpose and fast growing nature, became the most sought after species for plantation. It is for this reason, the Terai farmers planted this species everywhere: on inland fields and on boundary, on road sides, on canals, etc. The plantation programmes of the 1960s and 1970s in the Terai were dominated by sissoo. The forest authorities have also preferred this species to enrich degraded sal forests, or in some places even replaced sal by sissoo. Such preference of sissoo by the government authorities and planting them in sites most suitable for sal might have perhaps, created a demonstration effect for the Terai people to adopt this species to such an extent. Also, the property dealers advertised this species as the only answer to those who wished to have a risk free investment for their money. The countrywide shortage of timber and fuelwood since the 1980s, is also one of the prime reasons for its adoption. The lack of interest in growing agricultural crops is yet another reason. Such is the influence of these circumstances that, no one, ever paid attention i) to the site suitability for the species, ii) the disadvantages of its monoculture and iii) the importance of all other locally growing species. This is how, within a decade or so, the Terai plains which is called as the rice-bowl of the country and which is supposed to be filled with paddy crop is seen progressively filled with sissoo. However, an exact figure is not available on how much area of the Terai is covered with sissoo plantation (official records estimate it about 50000 hectare), but, as one can see sissoo almost every where on Terai plains, the area under its cover can only be surmised. Such was

the popularity of the name sissoo in the Terai, that the Terai people did every possible thing within their means to include it at every piece of land.

Let us, for the time being, assume that, sissoo adapts very well in the Terai and yields a profit better than that of the agricultural crops. There will still remain a few vital questions that, what would be the end result of continuing sissoo plantation on the very limited area of the Terai plain ? Should we allow the rice bowl of the nation to be swamped by sissoo ? Is it really the people of the so-called agricultural nation want ? Can not we save the remaining piece of fertile land for growing agricultural crops and concentrate on the proper management of the remaining forest cover and/or increase forest cover in, the much needed, degraded hills ? These could be argued by the respected authorities, nonetheless, what one has to take into account that the grain production growth rate of Nepal which is 1.2 percent is far less than the population growth (2.08%), and the food security for the country is a serious challenge. Also, none of the related organisations such as the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Forestry took notice that the trees grown on the eastern and southern boundary of the fields might cause a reduction of paddy, wheat, and other agricultural crops. Is it, among many others, a reason of declining productivity of our agriculture fields, and are these the reasons why we have to depend on food grains donated by the friendly countries, the situation shifting from a stage of food grains exporter country a few years before to the importer these days? The lack of any policy intervention in this matter indicates towards the lack of our interest to save the remaining chunk of the country's granary.

These thoughts, however seem unrelated to sissoo death, but a recent report on the preliminary survey of problems in sissoo plantation in the Terai submitted to the Tree Improvement Programme of the Department of Forest is related in the sense that, of the various causes such as the lack of information on seed source, quality seedlings, and inadequate management practices of the sissoo plantation areas, the major cause underlying for such death is the decay of sissoo root which in turn is due to the plantation of sissoo in sites unsuitable for it. It is such a coincidence which could draw attention of the agriculturists and the foresters as well to think on the proper management of the limited, yet vital piece of land on which twenty million people of Nepal depend for their piece of bread.

Sushim Ranjan Baral, Ph. D.
Editor