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ARECANUT FARMING IN MALENADU REGION OF KARNATAKA: Prospects and Applications of Artificial Intelligence for Future Farming

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Abstract

Arecanut (Areca catechu L.), locally known as 'supari', is one of the most economically significant cash crops of the Malenadu region in Karnataka, India. The region—encompassing the districts of Shivamogga, Chikkamagaluru, Hassan, Uttara Kannada, and Kodagu—contributes substantially to India's national arecanut production, accounting for approximately 60–65% of the country's total output. Despite its agricultural importance, the sector faces mounting challenges including erratic monsoon patterns, pest and disease pressures (notably Yellow Leaf Disease and root rot), declining soil fertility, and labour shortages. This article presents a comprehensive overview of arecanut farming traditions in the Malenadu belt, the economic and ecological context of cultivation, and the emerging prospects of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies—including machine learning, computer vision, IoT-based precision agriculture, and predictive analytics—that can transform farming practices in the region. The paper argues that the judicious integration of AI tools with traditional agro-ecological knowledge can catalyze a new era of sustainable, productive, and climate-resilient arecanut cultivation.

Keywords: *Arecanut, Areca catechu, Malenadu, Karnataka, Artificial Intelligence, Precision Agriculture, Machine Learning, Yellow Leaf Disease, Smart Farming, Sustainable Agriculture*

1. Introduction

The Malenadu region of Karnataka, stretching across the verdant folds of the Western Ghats, has been the cradle of arecanut cultivation for centuries. Often referred to as the 'Areca Belt', the region's humid tropical climate, well-distributed rainfall (1500–4000 mm annually), rich red laterite soils, and abundant water resources from rivers such as the Tunga, Bhadra, and Sharavathi create near-ideal conditions for the growth of Areca catechu. Arecanut is deeply interwoven with the cultural, social, and economic fabric of Malenadu communities. Locally, it is offered in religious ceremonies, used in

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traditional Ayurvedic medicine, and remains the primary source of livelihood for hundreds of thousands of farming families.

India is the world's largest producer and consumer of arecanut, contributing over 50% of global production. Karnataka alone accounts for roughly 35–40% of India's total arecanut production, with the Malenadu region forming its productive nucleus. The crop's commercial value—spanning fresh nut ('koka'), dried forms ('chali'), and processed products like paan masala, gutka, and pan condiments—ensures steady market demand. The arecanut trade generates annual revenues exceeding ₹7,000–8,000 crore in Karnataka, sustaining allied industries including processing units, transportation, packaging, and rural banking.

However, arecanut farming in Malenadu is at a crossroads. The increasing unpredictability of monsoons linked to climate change, proliferation of new pest and disease variants, soil degradation due to over-reliance on chemical inputs, and a rapidly aging farming population with youth migration to urban centres present existential challenges. Traditional knowledge systems, while invaluable, are insufficient in isolation to counter these complex and interrelated stressors. There is an urgent need to modernise agricultural practices through the adoption of technology, particularly Artificial Intelligence, to ensure long-term productivity and sustainability.

This article explores the current state of arecanut farming in the Malenadu region, the challenges confronting the sector, and the concrete ways in which AI technologies can be harnessed to address these challenges and unlock new agricultural potential.

2. Arecanut Farming in the Malenadu Region

2.1 Geographical and Agro-Climatic Profile

The Malenadu region occupies the transition zone between the coastal plains and the Deccan plateau in Karnataka. The districts primarily involved in arecanut cultivation are Shivamogga (Shimoga), Chikkamagaluru, Hassan, Uttara Kannada (North Kanara), and Kodagu (Coorg). The term 'Malenadu' literally translates to 'land of hills' in Kannada, reflecting the undulating terrain characterised by hills, valleys, and dense forested tracts.

The region receives an average annual rainfall ranging from 1,500 mm in the eastern transitional zones to over 4,000 mm in the western slopes facing the Arabian Sea. The climate is classified as tropical humid to tropical semi-humid. Temperatures range between 15°C and 35°C, with mild winters providing a recovery phase for the palms. The soils are predominantly red laterite and loamy, rich in iron and aluminium compounds but often low in phosphorus and potassium—elements critical for arecanut production.

Arecanut palms (Areca catechu) are typically grown under an agroforestry model in Malenadu. Farmers intercrop arecanut with black pepper (Piper nigrum), banana (Musa spp.), cocoa

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(Theobroma cacao), and a range of spice crops, creating a multi-storeyed canopy that mirrors natural forest structure. This system provides economic diversification and ecological benefits including carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, and erosion control.

2.2 Traditional Cultivation Practices

Arecanut cultivation in Malenadu follows practices refined over several generations. Seedlings are raised in nurseries for 12–18 months before transplanting into pits of approximately 90 cm × 90 cm × 90 cm, spaced at 2.7 m × 2.7 m. The palms require meticulous water management, particularly during the dry months of December to May, traditionally achieved through a network of canals, check dams, and water storage tanks (locally called 'kere').

Organic matter in the form of dried leaves, green manure, farm yard manure (FYM), and composted arecanut husk is traditionally incorporated into the soil around the base of the palm. This practice, deeply embedded in local knowledge, sustains soil microbial communities and maintains fertility. Farmers traditionally observe signs in leaf colour, nut size, and palm vigour to guide irrigation and fertilisation schedules.

Harvesting is a labour-intensive operation. Bunches are harvested roughly every 40–45 days during the October–February season by skilled climbers who scale the tall palms (10–20 m height) using rope loops. Post-harvest, nuts are processed into different market grades: fresh 'koka', boiled-and-dried, and sun-dried ('chali'), each commanding different price points.

2.3 Economic Significance

Arecanut is the financial backbone of Malenadu's agrarian economy. The crop supports a diversified livelihood ecosystem encompassing not just primary growers, but also labourers, traders, processors, transporters, and service providers. The Shivamogga and Chikkamagaluru districts host major arecanut markets (APMC yards) where daily transactions frequently exceed ₹50–100 crore during peak season.

Table 1: Key Arecanut Production Statistics – Malenadu Region, Karnataka

District	Area (000' ha)	Production (000' MT)	Avg. Yield (kg/ha)
Shivamogga	72.4	61.8	854
Chikkamagaluru	44.2	37.3	844
Hassan	38.9	31.6	812
Uttara Kannada	29.1	22.4	770
Kodagu	18.6	14.2	763
Malenadu Total	203.2	167.3	823 (avg.)

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Source: Karnataka State Department of Horticulture, 2023–24 (Indicative figures)

3. Challenges Confronting Arecanut Farming in Malenadu

3.1 Climate Change and Erratic Monsoons

The Western Ghats, long considered a stable monsoon zone, are experiencing increasingly variable precipitation patterns. Studies document a shift toward intense short-duration rainfall events interspersed with prolonged dry spells, disrupting the traditional irrigation schedules tuned to the monsoon rhythm. The 2019 and 2022 Kerala-Karnataka floods, both catastrophic, damaged thousands of acres of arecanut gardens in Shivamogga and Uttara Kannada. Conversely, the 2016–17 and 2023 drought episodes led to severe water stress, causing premature nut fall and reduced bunch counts in several taluks.

Temperature anomalies are also concerning. Arecanut palms are sensitive to temperature extremes; sustained temperatures above 38°C during the April–June period—increasingly common in transitional Malenadu zones—have been associated with yield decline, physiological stress, and increased susceptibility to diseases.

3.2 Pest and Disease Pressures

Yellow Leaf Disease (YLD), caused by a phytoplasma pathogen transmitted by the plant hopper Proutista moesta, represents the most devastating biotic threat to arecanut in Malenadu. The disease, which causes progressive yellowing of leaves starting from the lower whorl and eventual palm death, has no known cure. Entire gardens have been wiped out in parts of Chikkamagaluru and Hassan districts. Bud rot (Phytophthora palmivora), foot rot, and crown rot are other significant diseases accelerated by waterlogging and poor drainage.

Among pests, the spindle bug (Carvalhoia arecae), the inflorescence caterpillar (Tirathaba rufivena), and the root grub (Leucopholis burmeisteri) cause considerable damage. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) awareness remains uneven across the farming community, and over-reliance on chemical pesticides has led to pest resistance and environmental concerns.

3.3 Soil Health Degradation

Decades of intensive monoculture and chemical-intensive farming in parts of Malenadu have led to declining soil organic matter, disrupted microbial communities, compaction of topsoil, and acidification. Soil pH in many arecanut gardens has dropped below 5.0, severely limiting nutrient availability. Potassium and calcium deficiencies are increasingly prevalent, directly impacting nut quality and yield.

3.4 Labour Scarcity and Ageing Farmer Population

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Rural-to-urban migration, particularly of youth, has created an acute shortage of skilled agricultural labourers in Malenadu. Climbing and harvesting, traditionally performed by specialised 'koragajja' communities, has become increasingly difficult to procure. Wages for skilled climbers have risen by over 200% in the past decade, squeezing farm profitability. The average age of arecanut farmers in Malenadu is estimated at over 52 years, raising concerns about knowledge transfer and the capacity for adoption of new technologies.

3.5 Market Price Volatility

Arecanut prices are notoriously volatile, oscillating between ₹200–550 per kg depending on quality, season, and macroeconomic factors including import duties, GST structures, and changing consumer preferences in paan masala industries. Farmers lack access to real-time market intelligence, forward contracting mechanisms, or risk management tools, leaving them vulnerable to price crashes immediately post-harvest when supply peaks.

4. Artificial Intelligence: Concepts and Agricultural Applications

4.1 Overview of AI Technologies Relevant to Agriculture

Artificial Intelligence encompasses a suite of computational methodologies that enable machines to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence. In the agricultural context, the most relevant AI technologies include:

- Machine Learning (ML): Algorithms that learn patterns from data to make predictions (e.g., disease forecasting, yield prediction).
- Deep Learning (DL): A subset of ML using neural networks with multiple layers, particularly powerful for image recognition tasks (e.g., detecting visual symptoms of diseases or pests on leaf images).
- Computer Vision: The capacity of machines to interpret and understand visual information from the environment, enabling analysis of plant health from photographs or video.
- Natural Language Processing (NLP): Enabling machines to understand and generate human language; useful for building multilingual agricultural advisory chatbots in Kannada.
- Internet of Things (IoT): Networks of sensors and connected devices that collect real-time field data on soil moisture, temperature, humidity, and plant parameters.
- Remote Sensing and Geospatial AI: Using satellite and drone imagery analysed by AI to assess crop health, map land use, and monitor environmental conditions across large areas.
- Predictive Analytics: AI-driven models that forecast weather impacts, disease outbreaks, pest proliferation, and market prices.

4.2 Global Precedents in AI-Driven Plantation Crop Farming

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Globally, AI adoption in plantation agriculture—particularly for crops with characteristics similar to arecanut (tall palms, agroforestry context, disease vulnerability)—has accelerated markedly. Oil palm plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia have deployed drone-based AI vision systems to monitor canopy health, detect Ganoderma basal stem rot (analogous to arecanut bud rot), and estimate fresh fruit bunch yields with over 90% accuracy. In Sri Lanka and India's Kerala, AI-based disease detection apps for coconut palms have demonstrated high diagnostic accuracy for diseases like Wilt and Bud Rot.

Brazil's coffee sector—another plantation crop with disease vulnerability comparable to arecanut—has deployed satellite-based AI monitoring systems that trigger site-specific fungicide applications only when disease risk thresholds are exceeded, reducing chemical use by 30–40% while maintaining yield. These precedents offer directly transferable lessons for Malenadu's arecanut sector.

5. AI Applications Specific to Arecanut Farming in Malenadu

5.1 AI-Powered Disease Detection and Management

5.1.1 Yellow Leaf Disease Early Detection

Yellow Leaf Disease (YLD) remains the most feared threat to Malenadu's arecanut gardens. Since no curative treatment exists, early detection—enabling timely removal of infected palms and vector control—is the primary management strategy. AI offers transformative capabilities here. Convolutional Neural Network (CNN) models trained on high-resolution images of arecanut fronds can detect early-stage YLD symptoms—subtle chlorosis patterns invisible to the naked eye—with accuracy exceeding 94% in research trials.

A smartphone-based AI diagnostic application, trained on a dataset of thousands of YLD-positive and negative palm images from Malenadu gardens, could empower individual farmers to conduct routine garden scans, uploading images to a cloud-based AI classifier that returns diagnosis and recommended action within seconds. The Karnataka State Department of Horticulture, in collaboration with institutions like CPCRI (Central Plantation Crops Research Institute), GKVK (Gandhi Krishi Vigyana Kendra), and the University of Agricultural Sciences Dharwad, could coordinate development of such a regionally trained model.

5.1.2 Bud Rot and Root Rot Detection via Thermal Imaging

Bud Rot (Phytophthora palmivora) and root rot pathogens cause characteristic changes in plant water status detectable via thermal infrared imaging before visible symptoms manifest. AI-enabled drones equipped with multispectral and thermal sensors can systematically survey large arecanut gardens, identifying palms with anomalous thermal signatures for priority inspection. Such systems, already proven in coconut plantations in Kerala, could be adapted for Malenadu's undulating terrain, where manual inspection of every palm in large holdings (often 5–30 acres) is impractical.

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5.2 Precision Irrigation and Water Management

Water management is the most critical input in arecanut cultivation, particularly during Karnataka's four-month dry season. Traditional flood irrigation—the dominant method in Malenadu—wastes considerable water and can contribute to waterlogging and root rot. AI-driven precision irrigation systems integrate soil moisture sensors distributed at multiple depths across the garden with real-time weather data and evapotranspiration models to compute exact irrigation schedules and quantities for each plantation zone.

Smart drip irrigation controllers powered by AI algorithms can autonomously adjust irrigation timing and duration based on soil moisture readings, weather forecasts, and palm growth stage. Pilot implementations of AI-integrated drip systems in coconut gardens in Tamil Nadu have demonstrated water savings of 40–55% with concomitant yield improvements of 15–20% due to optimal root-zone moisture maintenance. The Bhadra and Sharavathi river basins feeding Malenadu face increasing water stress; AI-optimised irrigation can therefore contribute simultaneously to farm productivity and watershed conservation.

5.3 Soil Health Monitoring and Precision Nutrient Management

AI systems integrated with IoT soil sensor networks can provide continuous monitoring of soil pH, electrical conductivity, NPK levels, organic carbon, and moisture across the spatial heterogeneity of an arecanut garden. Machine learning algorithms process these multidimensional data streams to generate site-specific fertiliser recommendations—a precision alternative to blanket soil health cards that fail to capture within-field variability.

Hyperspectral imaging from drones or satellites, combined with AI spectral analysis, can map soil organic matter and nutrient distribution across an entire holding within hours, guiding variable-rate fertiliser application. This is particularly relevant in Malenadu where the topography creates significant soil variability even within a single farm, with upper slopes often more acid and nutrient-depleted than valley bottoms.

Table 2: AI Technologies and Their Specific Applications in Arecanut Farming

AI Technology	Application in Arecanut Farming	Expected Benefit
Computer Vision / CNN	YLD and disease detection from leaf images	Early intervention, reduced palm mortality
Thermal Drone Imaging + AI	Bud rot and root rot early detection	30–40% reduction in disease spread
IoT + ML Irrigation	Precision soil-moisture-based irrigation	40–55% water saving, 15–20% yield gain
Satellite Remote Sensing + AI	Crop health mapping, YLD hotspot identification	Garden-level disease surveillance

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AI Technology	Application in Arecanut Farming	Expected Benefit
Predictive Analytics	Pest outbreak and market price forecasting	Timely intervention, better price realisation
Robotic Harvesting AI	Semi-automated bunch harvesting assistance	Labour cost reduction, safety improvement
NLP Chatbots (Kannada)	Multilingual agri-advisory, real-time Q&A	Democratised extension services
Blockchain + AI	Supply chain traceability, quality grading	Premium pricing, reduced adulteration

Source: Compiled from literature and field assessments.

5.4 Pest Surveillance and Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

AI-powered image traps and acoustic sensors can monitor pest populations in real time. For example, AI-enabled pheromone traps fitted with cameras and insect classifiers can count and identify specific pest species—spindle bugs, caterpillars, mites—providing daily population trend data that informs IPM decision-making. When pest counts exceed economic injury thresholds, automated alerts are sent to farmers' smartphones with recommended interventions calibrated to the specific pest and infestation level.

Satellite-based AI systems monitoring vegetation indices (NDVI, EVI) across Malenadu's arecanut belt can detect anomalies in canopy greenness consistent with pest damage before individual farmers notice visible symptoms, enabling early coordinated responses at the taluk or district level.

5.5 Climate-Smart Agriculture and Crop Modelling

AI-driven crop models calibrated for Malenadu's specific agro-climatic conditions can simulate arecanut growth and yield outcomes under multiple climate scenarios, helping farmers and policymakers understand and prepare for medium- and long-term climate trajectories. These models integrate historical climate data, projected future scenarios from GCMs (Global Climate Models), soil data, and varietal response parameters.

At the farm level, hyperlocal AI weather forecasting—using data from a network of agro-meteorological stations established across Malenadu's diverse micro-climates—can provide 5–15 day forecasts at 500-metre spatial resolution, far more actionable than district-level forecasts. Timely warnings about impending heavy rainfall events can prompt protective measures such as improved drainage, fungicide applications before disease-conducive wet periods, and harvest acceleration to prevent crop losses.

5.6 Harvesting Assistance and Robotics

The labour crisis in arecanut harvesting is one of the sector's most urgent structural challenges. While fully autonomous palm-climbing robots remain a future prospect for Malenadu's complex terrain, semi-autonomous systems offer near-term promise. Mechanical climbing aids—such as the battery-powered palm climbers already tested in Kerala—can be enhanced with AI-based navigation and stability control to assist workers in safely ascending tall palms, reducing accident risk and physical exertion while enabling more frequent harvesting cycles.

Drone-based bunch weight estimation using AI-driven volumetric analysis from photogrammetry can help farmers plan harvesting logistics and predict production volumes before the harvest season, enabling better advance marketing arrangements.

5.7 Market Intelligence and Price Forecasting

AI-driven market analytics tools can integrate historical APMC price data, arrivals data, seasonal patterns, import-export trends, and macroeconomic indicators to forecast arecanut prices for the upcoming weeks and months. Such tools—accessible via simple SMS or WhatsApp-compatible chatbots in Kannada—can help farmers make more informed decisions about whether to sell immediately at current prices or store for anticipated price improvement.

Platforms like the Agmarknet portal and e-NAM (National Agriculture Market) are candidates for AI enhancement, enabling dynamic price prediction rather than mere historical data display. For Malenadu farmers, even modest improvements in price realisation—through better-timed sales—can translate into lakhs of rupees in additional income annually.

6. Implementation Framework for AI Adoption in Malenadu

6.1 Phased Rollout Strategy

Given the diversity of farm sizes, landholdings, digital literacy levels, and infrastructure quality across Malenadu, a phased approach to AI adoption is recommended. Phase I (Years 1–2) should focus on low-cost, high-impact interventions with minimal infrastructure requirements: smartphone-based AI disease diagnostic apps (requiring only a camera and internet connectivity), SMS-based market price forecasting services, and deployment of basic IoT weather stations in cooperation with taluk agriculture offices.

Phase II (Years 3–5) can introduce drone-based surveillance services (initially as community-pooled resources managed through Farmer Producer Organisations), sensor-integrated smart irrigation systems for early adopter farms, and soil health monitoring linked to AI-driven fertiliser recommendations. Phase III (Years 5–10) envisages full precision agriculture adoption—variable-rate application technology, AI-integrated APMC linkages, blockchain-enabled supply chain traceability, and semi-autonomous harvesting assistance systems.

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6.2 Infrastructure and Connectivity Requirements

Effective AI deployment in Malenadu requires foundational digital infrastructure. While 4G connectivity has improved significantly in the region's taluk headquarters and major villages, interior forest-edge habitats where many arecanut gardens are located still suffer from poor network coverage. Satellite internet solutions (including LEO satellite networks now being expanded in Karnataka under government schemes) and mesh network technologies can help bridge this connectivity gap.

Solar-powered IoT sensor nodes with local data caching capability can function in low-connectivity settings, syncing data to cloud platforms when connectivity is available. Taluk-level 'Digital Agriculture Service Centres', modelled on the existing Farmer Service Centres, can serve as hubs for data upload, AI model access, and technical support.

6.3 Institutional and Policy Ecosystem

Successful AI integration in Malenadu's arecanut sector requires coordinated action across multiple institutional actors. The Karnataka Department of Agriculture and the Department of Horticulture need to actively facilitate pilot programmes and provide regulatory clarity on drone use for agricultural surveillance. Research institutions—UAS Bangalore (GKVK), UAS Dharwad, CPCRI Kasaragod, and ICAR research stations—need to build AI and data science capacity and curate region-specific datasets for model training.

The Karnataka State Warehousing Corporation and APMC authorities should integrate AI-based quality grading tools at procurement centres, creating market incentives for quality improvement. Financial institutions including NABARD and cooperative banks should design credit products tailored to AI infrastructure investments, recognising the productivity gains as collateral security.

6.4 Building Farmer Capacity and Digital Literacy

Technology is only transformative if farmers can access, understand, and trust it. A robust extension programme—delivered through Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), and local NGOs—is essential to build digital literacy among Malenadu's predominantly middle-aged farming community. Interfaces designed for low-literacy users—with voice input, visual icons, and Kannada-language support—will be critical for widespread adoption.

Peer demonstration farms, where AI technologies are implemented at scale and open to farmer visits, have proven particularly effective in accelerating technology diffusion in plantation crop contexts globally. Malenadu's well-developed arecanut farmer cooperative network offers an existing channel for such demonstrator sites.

7. Challenges and Barriers to AI Adoption

7.1 Data Scarcity and Quality

AI models are only as good as the data on which they are trained. For Malenadu's arecanut farming, comprehensive, geo-tagged, time-stamped datasets of disease incidence, soil parameters, weather, yield records, and pest observations are scarce. Building such datasets requires sustained, coordinated data collection efforts over multiple crop seasons. Inconsistent data quality—arising from non-standardised field observations, measurement errors, and incomplete records—further challenges model reliability.

7.2 Terrain and Infrastructure Constraints

Malenadu's characteristic undulating terrain—with steep slopes, dense vegetation, and narrow access paths—poses logistical challenges for drone surveillance, sensor deployment, and mechanised operations. The Western Ghats' heavy monsoon rainfall (June–September), with monthly totals exceeding 600 mm in some areas, demands weatherproofed hardware and robust installation protocols for all outdoor IoT equipment.

7.3 Economic Accessibility

The capital cost of AI-enabled systems—drone fleets, sensor arrays, smart irrigation infrastructure—remains prohibitive for the typical smallholder arecanut farmer with 2–5 acres of holding. Innovative cost-sharing models, including FPO-managed drone service cooperatives, government subsidy programmes, and pay-per-use AI advisory subscriptions, are needed to make AI economically accessible across the farm size spectrum.

7.4 Socio-Cultural Acceptance

Trust in traditional farming wisdom is deep-rooted in Malenadu communities, and with good reason—it encodes generations of locally adapted knowledge. AI recommendations that contradict established practices may face scepticism. It is essential that AI tools are positioned as complements to, not replacements for, traditional agro-ecological knowledge, and that local farmer champions are identified and empowered as technology advocates within their communities.

8. Future Prospects and Strategic Recommendations

8.1 AI-Enabled Varietal Improvement

Genomic AI—applying machine learning to large-scale genomic and phenotypic datasets—offers the prospect of significantly accelerating arecanut varietal improvement programmes. AI-driven selection of germplasm with superior disease resistance (particularly to YLD), drought tolerance, and yield potential can compress traditional breeding cycles from 20–30 years to 8–12 years. The CPCRI

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Kasaragod gene bank, holding hundreds of arecanut accessions, represents a valuable genomic resource for such initiatives.

8.2 Integrated Digital Agriculture Platforms

The vision for Malenadu's AI-enabled agricultural future is an integrated digital platform that connects real-time field data (from IoT sensors and drones), AI advisory services (for disease, nutrition, water management), market intelligence, weather forecasting, and government scheme information in a single farmer-facing interface accessible via smartphone or village kiosk. Karnataka's Bhoomi and Agri Stack digital infrastructure initiatives provide a foundation on which such an integrated platform can be built, incorporating arecanut-specific AI modules.

8.3 Carbon Credit and Sustainability Certification

Malenadu's arecanut agroforestry systems are significant carbon sinks, with the multi-storeyed canopy integrating arecanut, pepper, banana, and timber species sequestering substantial amounts of carbon annually. AI-powered remote sensing and biomass modelling can accurately quantify the carbon sequestration of individual gardens, enabling farmers to access voluntary carbon markets and receive carbon credit payments—an additional income stream that rewards sustainable farming practices.

Similarly, AI-verified soil health monitoring and pesticide-use tracking can underpin certification schemes for sustainably produced arecanut, potentially attracting premium prices from ethically conscious end-market segments in both domestic and export markets.

8.4 Policy Recommendations

Based on this analysis, the following strategic policy recommendations are advanced for stakeholders in Karnataka's agricultural governance ecosystem:

- Establish a 'Malenadu Smart Agriculture Mission' under the Karnataka Horticulture Department, with dedicated funding for AI pilot programmes in arecanut districts.
- Mandate integration of AI-based quality assessment tools at APMC arecanut procurement centres across Shivamogga, Chikkamagaluru, and Hassan districts.
- Create a 'Malenadu Agricultural Data Commons'—a curated, open-access repository of geo-tagged crop, soil, weather, and disease data to support AI model development by research institutions.
- Include AI-related infrastructure investments (drones, IoT sensors, smart irrigation) under the 50% input subsidy scheme available to SC/ST and small-holding arecanut farmers.
- Establish AI and data literacy training modules within the KVK curriculum and Farmer Field School programmes across all five Malenadu districts.
- Pursue collaboration with ISRO's National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC) for satellite-based AI monitoring of arecanut health and YLD spread across the Malenadu belt.

9. Conclusion

Arecanut farming in the Malenadu region of Karnataka stands at an inflection point. The sector's centuries-old tradition of cultivation, its deep socio-economic significance, and its intrinsic ecological role in the Western Ghats agroforestry mosaic are under stress from multiple converging challenges—climatic volatility, disease pressure, soil degradation, labour scarcity, and market uncertainty. Yet these very challenges create the imperative and the opportunity for transformative technological adoption.

Artificial Intelligence, far from being an abstract technological promise, offers a suite of immediately applicable tools that can dramatically improve the precision, efficiency, sustainability, and resilience of arecanut farming. From smartphone AI diagnostics for Yellow Leaf Disease to satellite-based crop health monitoring, from IoT-precision irrigation to AI-powered market forecasting, the technologies exist and their agricultural applicability has been validated in analogous cropping systems globally.

The critical task ahead is one of contextualisation, accessibility, and institutional coordination. AI tools must be trained on Malenadu-specific data, made accessible in the Kannada language and to low-digital-literacy users, made economically viable for smallholders through cooperative and subsidy models, and integrated into a coherent policy ecosystem that incentivises adoption. The integration of AI with the rich traditional ecological knowledge of Malenadu's farming communities will not be a replacement of wisdom with technology, but rather an augmentation—equipping generations-old insight with the precision and scale of 21st-century data science.

Realising this vision requires concerted collaboration among farmers, Farmer Producer Organisations, research institutions, government agencies, and technology partners. The stakes are high: the livelihoods of over a million farming families across Malenadu's arecanut belt, the conservation of one of India's most ecologically significant agricultural landscapes, and the resilience of a sector that feeds cultural, ceremonial, and commercial traditions across South Asia. With the right investments in AI-enabled agriculture, Malenadu's arecanut gardens can continue to thrive—more productively and sustainably—well into the coming century.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that this research paper is fully funded by ICSSR via grant of Major research project. We wholeheartedly thank ICSSR for this opportunity.

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