

A green wall of India is a truly well-inspired idea

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It's only at its conception stage, but this project should swell our lungs with hope. India is reportedly planning to undertake a vast reforestation exercise along the Aravalli hill range that stretches from the Ridge of Delhi to Banaskantha in Gujarat. For those of us who were bristling with anger or sighing in dismay over the recent axing of thousands of trees in Mumbai's Aarey forest to make way for a railway shed for the city's Metro network, news of this plan challenges the notion that ecological concerns always get short shrift in the country's quest for development. What the government appears to have in mind is a "green wall of India", a 1,400km-long and 5km-wide green corridor all the way from Panipat in Haryana to Porbandar in Gujarat. It would be modelled on the so-called Great Green Wall of Africa that was envisioned to run from Djibouti in the continent's east to Senegal in its west. This African green belt, proposed about a decade ago, was meant to act as a defensive flank against climate change, desertification and other forms of land degradation, but has fallen short of its targets for lack of coordination among

the countries involved. In contrast, the Indian project is likely to face far fewer hurdles.

The geographical logic behind the proposal is clear. The Delhi metropolitan region's expansion has resulted in widespread deforestation around the capital. The Aravalli range, which separates western India's Thar desert from the relatively green plains to its east, has lost so much green cover that it is losing its ability to act as a natural barrier against the heat and dust that blows in from the west. The greener it remains, say ecologists, the less likely that the desert will expand into the rest of the Indian landmass. It's not just felling that is turning greenery scarce, but other forms of depredation too. Unauthorized mining for minerals and building materials, for instance, has gone on unchecked for much too long. Just last year, the Supreme Court ordered the Rajasthan government to stop illegal mining in the Aravalli region after it emerged that 31 hills in the state had vanished. Without top-level intervention in favour of vegetation, environmentalists warn, the Thar desert's expansion could even threaten the "granary of India"—the fertile belts of Punjab, Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and the Malwa region. If this is so, then the proposed project could insure the country against a potential crisis of food insufficiency in the decades ahead.

Of course, no exercise of this scale can be expected to proceed without various local-level hitches, but it would help if it is given the status of a national mission. The very idea behind it could inspire tree plantation drives elsewhere around the country. Around 96.4 million hectares, or nearly 30% of India's total land, is estimated to have been degraded already. The country aims to restore 26 million hectares to health by 2030. While the greening of the Aravalli corridor could help us reach that goal, much more needs to be done. Two-thirds of all Indian households still live off the land, so to speak, and land degradation puts their livelihoods at direct threat. It is bad enough that global warming has begun to distort rainfall and other climatic patterns that have sustained our ecological systems for millennia. The least we can do is fend off the dangers staring at us.

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