

Plantation populism to tackle climate change!

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Started with 2.83 crore in 2016, 5.43 crore in 2017, 15.88 crore in 2018, the state is now gearing up for 33-crore plantations to achieve the massive 50-crore target under 'Green Maharashtra' mission in 2019 monsoon to tackle climate change.

Even as the state government is going gaga over the last three drives claiming survival rate between 78-88% and is confident this time too to achieve set target, experts sound a note of caution saying greening is not like a 'pulse polio vaccination' campaign. They dubbed it as a populist move to gain political mileage.

Though the forest department is claiming a very high success rate of 2 crore, 4 crore and 13 crore plantations, it is based on October 2018 count when plantations are mostly in better condition owing to rains. Secondly, the survival records pertain to only mapped plantations and not all.

The survival count is taken twice — once in October and another in May. Interestingly, the survival count also doesn't include saplings planted by other agencies and departments on non-forest area. Many departments and agencies failed to meet set targets in all the three drives and forest officials admit these departments have no protection plans like the forest department.

While claiming success, forest department is including overall target but has no record of survival of plantation by other agencies. So, is it justified to claim 80% survival? It should be by calculating both, saplings planted by other agencies and forest department too.

Take for example PWD, as per the forest portal, the department was to plant 18.62 lakh saplings during 13-crore drive, but it planted 15.42 lakh. As per October count, its survival rate comes to 52%. Similarly, other agencies too did not meet targets and their survival rate is also unsatisfactory.

The same feat is likely to be repeated for 33-crore drive where forest department will plant 12.25 crore followed by social

forestry (5.50 crore), other departments (6.25 crore), FDCM (1 crore) and gram panchayats (8 crore).

This can be gauged from the fact that of the 33-crore plantation target, 28.83 crore pits have been dug till June 23. Many departments, including forest, are lagging in set plantation target and number of pits. Some of them include urban development, which is to plant 44.63 lakh saplings but has dug only 8.92 lakh pits. Trigger-happy PWD is to plant 45.10 lakh, but has dug 28.50 lakh pits. As per the portal, similar is the condition of 50 departments which have been roped in to achieve the massive target. The forest department has to dig 17.50 crore pits but 15.22 crore have been dug.

"Pre-plantation works are not being monitored. By this time digging of pits should have been completed as, scientifically speaking, you need to give sufficient time for weathering of pits failing which plantations will not be successful. Now, if over 4.20 crore pits are still to be dug with no standard specifications, one can imagine what will be the survival rate of such unscientific plantations. They are bound to fail," says Tasneem Ahmed, former PCCF and social forestry director.

Ahmed, who had initiated tree credit proposal, added, "You have to nurse trees like children and once they grow then only they benefit ecologically. Even forest officials know 33-crore drive will be a failure, but who will speak against the minister?"

What Ahmed says reflects in forest department's own evaluation reports exposing poor survival rate of its regular 3-year-old and 10-year-old plantations.

Experts apprehend whether 50-crore plantation drive by increasing targets geometrically each year is to create record of sorts. Planting of 2 crore saplings in one single day in 2016 has already entered the Limca Book of Records. The 33-crore drive will continue for three months.

"The 33-crore target is arbitrary and unrealistic. Plantation is certainly a welcome move, but it seems the target has not been fixed after careful planning," says Rajiva Sahay, ex-APCCF (IT & Policy).

Sahay says all activities in any forest area need to be taken as per the prescriptions of working plan of that division, which gets approval from high-level committee and government of India. Working plan lists various activities in different working circles to be undertaken on annual basis. But apparently, no cognizance of prescription of approved plans has been taken while fixing the target.

"Departure from working plan prescriptions is a serious issue which needs to be addressed. Survival percentage and growth patterns of earlier plantations should have been critically analysed before setting any target under 33-crore plantations," Sahay adds.

"Another important dimension is that 40% target is set for non-forest areas with 50 departments. In those areas there is virtually no regular assessment of survival and growth

of earlier plantations making the whole exercise futile and unproductive," the ex-official says.

"When government is making use of public money on greening activities on a colossal scale it should not be target-driven, but realistically based on capacities of implementing agencies and silvicultural requirements of sites coupled with past results of survival and growth," feels another retired DFO Pradeep Kottewar.

Plantation expert Baba Deshpande said main reasons for such failures are poor planning, planting lack of site-specific species and non-compliance of evaluation report and non-adherence to approved working plan prescriptions.

As per official record, 46 crore seedlings will be required considering 20% mortality. There is still shortfall of around 10.54 crore seedlings. For better plantations, the saplings developed in nurseries should be at least one-year-old. So, it is difficult to get good stock of saplings in such a short span leading to failure. As per official record, number of previous year seedlings is 19.63 crore while current year's is 14.83 crore, which will be very small and unsuitable for planting.

The shortage of seedling can be also gauged from the fact that in six districts under Nagpur revenue division, 5.94 crore saplings will be planted as announced by forest minister Sudhir Mungantiwar on May 29 in Nagpur. But availability of seedlings is 5.30 crore. "Most of these seedlings are not even one-year age," said sources from the field.

TOI talked to several RFOs who admit when the target is huge, planting cannot be done scientifically. Sites are randomly selected to complete targets without following approved working plan norms. "There is no time for weathering of dug up pits, which is a must for better results," they say.

To add to their woes, territorial wing has been burdened with additional plantation target of 4.96 crore as social forestry, which was to plant 7.29 crore seedlings, will plant 5.50 crore, while FDCM, which was to plant 4.17 crore, will plant only one crore. This target was revised on December 22, 2018.

The additional 4.96 crore target to territorial wing will be difficult to meet with at least one-year-old saplings for worthy plantations. "Social forestry department was harping on agroforestry plantations while FDCM on turnkey and highways projects but the response was poor. Now we will achieve the set target by motivating others," a senior forest officer told TOI.

A section of social forestry RFOs said as the target is huge saplings will be planted in 2mt x 2mt distance deviation from earlier 3mt x 3mt. "Under the 2mt x 2mt model there is no provision of watering in the budget. Such saplings are bound to die after a certain period," they said.

"However, number doesn't matter. It's question of how you protect plantations from grazing, fire, and illicit felling," says environment lawyer Manish Jeswani.

"If government is serious about green cover, it should order offenders to be booked under Prevention of Damage to Public Properties Act, 1984. Secondly, forest department must stop tree felling permission for 'khasras' for at least 5 years," feels Eco- Pro chief Bandu Dhotre.

In Gondia many plantations fell prey to forest fires in last two years," says Sawan Bahekar. Amid all the debate, greens feel though taking plantations is good but protecting existing old trees is also necessary. Environmentalist Debi Goenka says, "Planting crores of saplings is great but their survival is a big question mark. Unfortunately, in the single-minded focus of huge target, department has failed to protect existing tree cover and forests."

However, subsequent reports on forest cover will only reveal if the massive drive was a real success.

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