

Satire | Greening India (quickly): some suggestions to improve the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023

PREMIUM

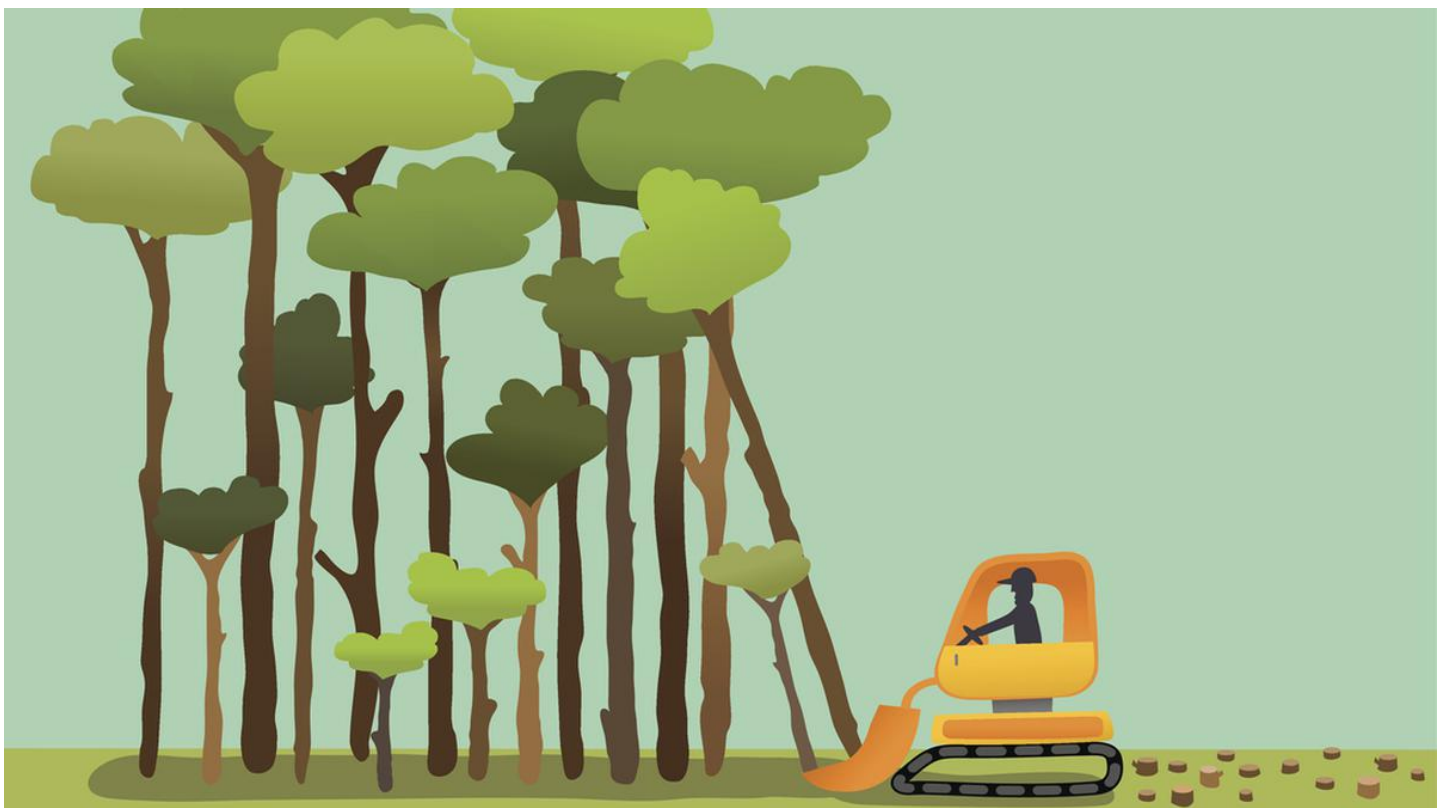
‘We need carbon sinks such as forests to compensate for the petrol we use to drive to Leh-Ladakh for no good reason’

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'I completely endorse the idea of destroying forests for public utility projects.' | Photo Credit: Getty Images
I have a very old and very special relationship with the environment. My very birth happened in an environment. Not just that, I spent my growing years in an environment. I went to college in an environment, and got married in an environment. Therefore, I love the environment deeply. So I was expecting a lot more from the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023, which is currently before a Parliamentary committee, awaiting inputs from the public.

I have gone through the draft Bill carefully. I must admit it is brilliant in patches. I completely endorse the idea of destroying forests for public utility projects. As the government says, this is a must in locations where national security is involved, such as border areas and non-border areas. (Maoists do more damage in non-border areas, as we know.)

I also like the Bill's approach of replacing forests, which often contain forest-dwelling communities, with pure 'green cover' sans communities. After all, why do we need forests in the first place? Because we need carbon sinks to compensate for the petrol we use to drive to Leh-Ladakh for no good reason. Then why not just re-create the lost green cover somewhere else? Why should the nation miss out on all the goodies that forests offer, such as mining projects, wind energy farms, seven-star tourist resorts, eleven-star luxury villas, and fourteen-star convention centres where we can host G-20 delegates and entertain them with exotic dances from the same forest-dwellers who had volunteered to be evicted from their development-unfriendly homes in national interest?

Size control

Where the Bill goes haywire is in capping the size of the lands that can be exempted from the protection of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. For instance, why exempt land only up to 100 km of 'the international border or the Line of Control or the Line of Actual Control or the Line of Totally Out-of-Control'? Why not extend this up to 20,000 km so that the rest of the country can also be protected from China and Pakistan?

This column is a satirical take on life and society.

Also, why a limit of 10 hectares for “constructing security-related infrastructure”? We have seen how even Olympic medal-winning wrestlers created a security problem in the national capital during the Sengol Parliament inauguration. Tomorrow, if marathon runners start a protest, they will easily cover 10 hectares, and if they combine with Olympic shotputters, hammer throwers, boxers, fencers and javelin-throwers, they can create havoc. Hence there should be no limit on how much land can be exempted for national security. With all these concerns in mind, I offer three suggestions to improve the draft Bill:

1. Define ‘forest’

The Bill in its current form contains no definition of a ‘forest’. I propose the following definition: “A forest is whatever the Environment Ministry declares as a forest.” For instance, if tomorrow national interest demands that the government declare all coal mines, power plants, airports, garbage dumps, and ministers’ bungalows as “protected forests”, they would automatically enjoy the full protection of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

2. Digital afforestation

The Bill subscribes to an outdated model of “afforestation” that is linked to planting trees in hard copy format. Thanks to rapid advances in digital technology, today a country can expand its green cover without resorting to physical trees, which not only take a lot of time to grow but are also vulnerable to being felled. Instead, as part of Digital India, the Bill should promote expansion of green cover through Photoshop. Most people don’t actually look at anything other than their phones, and this includes time spent in forests. Therefore, the Bill should recognise and reward afforestation done through Photoshop, provided the soft copy forests are shared widely on social media.

3. Use green paint

Anti-nationals have given ‘greenwashing’ a bad name. But it is no different from whitewashing, which everyone does in their own home. Plus, it costs a fraction of what it costs to preserve existing forests. The Bill should make it compulsory for the state and for all citizens to paint every wall, every roof, every surface and every vehicle green.

Through this three-pronged strategy of redefinition, Photoshopping, and green painting, India can quickly become the greenest country in the world and win the UN Gold medal for Green Environment.

Not only that, it will also generate a collateral benefit of expanding green cover on a planetary scale as environmentalists, normal people, and even NRIs in every other country are bound to go green with envy every time they think of India.

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