

The logic of mass tree plantations

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Such plantations can succeed in India only if farmers are given proper incentive and protection to grow them



Madhya Pradesh (MP) planted six crore seedlings in 2017 in one day, Uttar Pradesh (UP) planted nine crore seedlings in 2018 in one day and is planning to plant 22 crore seedlings in one day in July 2019.

Can we really take these news reports at face value? Who is to verify the number of seedlings planted and their survival in the future? There is no third party verification of that. It is entirely the job of government agencies. They report, verify and monitor the survival of tree seedlings.

Many states such as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana achieved the target of around 30 crore trees planted even though they do not have the same number of seedlings in their nurseries. This is against the principal of natural justice. It reflects the race to carry out tree plantations for political hype, not for improving the environment and the income of farmers. Regarding UP's ambitious plan to plant 22 crore seedlings in July 2019, seven crore out of the 22 crore are to be planted by the UP Forest Department and 15 crore by farmers. There is a need, however, to have micro-planning at the village level — the names and title deeds of farmers who are willing to plant trees, along with their geo-coordinates must be noted. Only then is third party verification really possible.

Five-year maintenance of tree plantations is needed for ensuring successful plantations. If MP planted six crore seedlings in 2017 and UP planted nine crore in 2018, is there anybody who would be noting their progress over the next five years? With the current approach, it is not possible to achieve the mandate of quality plantations while also improving the income of farmers through agroforestry.

The big question is why would farmers go for tree planting? Is there any Minimum Support Price (MSP) scheme to protect the interests of the farmer which would encourage them to grow tree plantations? The answer is no, currently no state has an MSP for tree crops.

Governments must come up with MSP schemes for tree crops along with the strengthening of institutional mechanisms for procurement of timber from farmers.

India has huge potential to have tree crops on farmers' land provided the government provides quality planting material of desired tree species to the farmer, gives market protection by providing MSP and sets up appropriate institutional mechanisms for the procurement of timber in case of market failure. Without this, mass tree plantations remain nothing more than a political gambit.

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