

‘Thrust is to create green cover on non-forest land by involving people’

Jun 24, 2019

Praveen Srivastava (56), an IFS officer of the 1986 batch, is PCCF (production & management) and nodal officer for the 33-crore plantation plan being implemented in the state. As an APCCF (IT & Policy), Srivastava was instrumental in the integration of the forest policy with information technology to ensure seamless governance with strong internal as well as external interphase.

Digital India has mandated a strong IT platform to secure a green and clean Maharashtra. As joint secretary for relief and rehabilitation, Srivastava had played an important role during the Mumbai deluge in 2005. TOI talked to him on the plantation drive and issues related to it.

Taking up 50 crore plantations is laudable. With this plan, how much forest cover will be added to the existing one?

The addition of the forest cover is based on the survival status. This in turn is influenced by biotic pressure, bonafide livelihood needs of neighbouring villagers and adequacy of rainfall. In view of the apparent variability in these factors, it would be premature to guess the extent of the forest cover addition.

To achieve the 33% mandatory forest cover, how many saplings need to be planted in the state?

Maharashtra's geographical area is 3.07 lakh sqkm. 33% green cover means 1.02 lakh sqkm of green cover. Presently, the forest area is 0.62 lakh sqkm and an addition of 0.40 lakh sqkm is needed. This calls for bringing the non-forest area under the green cover. The number of saplings is determined by the local eco-geographical factors. The 50-crore plantation mission is a novel step in this direction. Given the wide range of variation in terms of the type of soil, water availability and the usage pattern of the land, it would not be possible to forecast the number of saplings needed.

The forest department plants 5-6 crore saplings every year. Why is this target exorbitant?

The target over and above 5-6 crore saplings intends to cover the non-forest area by engaging people from all sections of the society. The requisite thrust is there to increase the density of forests by promoting natural regeneration and assisted natural regeneration. An equal thrust is given to create green cover on non-forest lands. The idea is to develop a synergy between naturally regenerating seedlings in the forest with artificial regeneration by planting saplings.

Who is doing the evaluation of the 50 crore plantations? How is it being done?

The evaluation wing of the forest department does it in forest areas. Besides, putting the survival percentage of 2 crore, 4 crore, and 13 crore plantation drives in the public domain on the department's portal (www.mahaforest.gov.in) is a step to enhance transparency, credibility and accountability of forest governance.

Why are prescriptions of the working plan bypassed while taking up such a huge plantation project?

Green Maharashtra Mission is the ambitious and flagship programme to tackle climate change and increasing water scarcity. To address these formidable challenges, the green cover augmentation covers large tracts of non-forest areas. Working plan instructions, which are applicable to forest areas, are followed in letter and spirit. They are not applicable to non-forest areas as such.

The survival rate of forest saplings is pegged at 80%. How authentic is this figure in the absence of a public audit?

The survival rate of forest saplings is determined by the field officials who follow due procedure. The same is uploaded by using the mobile application 'Vanyukt Shivar'. The information is kept in the public domain for scrutiny.

Who is monitoring plantations by the other departments? Are they achieving the set targets?

Non-forest stakeholder departments are expected to monitor the survival of their plantations. In the current year, they are expected to achieve their targets.

What do you think about doubts being raised regarding the 50 crore plan as the past forest evaluation reports reveal a poor survival rate for plantations?

Evaluation reports pertaining to the two crore plantation drive started after 2016 are still awaited. Therefore, it may not be appropriate to compare the survival of the current plantation with findings of the past evaluation reports.

On the one hand, new saplings are being planted and on the other, big and old trees are being cut. Does it not amount to double standards?

Big and old trees felling are permitted as per silvicultural maturity. They are decided in line with the Maharashtra Felling of Trees Regulation Act by the authorized tree officers. There is no dichotomy in granting valid and authorized permission and plantation of new saplings. Plantations intend to make-up for the loss due to tree felling.

Despite so many plantations, including 2, 4 and 13 crore, why has the green cover declined?

The impact of two crore, four crore and 13 crores in increasing the green cover will be visible in the near future. This has no relation with the decrease in the dense forest area which might have happened before that.

Are you not running short of space with enhanced targets?

No. Outside forests, there is vast land tract which may be brought under the green cover. Marathwada region alone has huge potential.

What about fixing responsibility for failure of these plantations?

The survival of plantations is on top of our agenda. The performance will be surely examined. Wilful default will certainly be fixed.

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/thrust-is-to-create-green-cover-on-non-forest-land-by-involving-people/articleshow/69919110.cms>