

Why is Punjab's ambitious green scheme not ripe for picking?

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Figure 1The state government also conducted a survey in Punjab and found 12,821 hectare of land was available for launching plantation drive.

With an ambitious nine-year scheme to bring 15 per cent of Punjab's total geographical area under forest cover set to enter its final year, The Indian Express explains why it will miss the mark by a huge margin.

What is Greening Punjab Mission?

For the first time in 2012, Punjab launched a major afforestation initiative 'Greening Punjab Mission' (GPM) to increase its forest cover to 15 per cent. It was envisaged that 40 crores tree saplings would be planted by 2020 at the cost of Rs 1900 crore under the scheme. Also the state government signed an MoU with Forest Research Institute (FRI) and large number of farmers were to be involved in the drive. Plantation of industrial timber, medicinal plants, fruit trees like Mango, Guava, traditional trees like Neem, Sheesham, Kikar and ornamental tree species was planned.

The state government also conducted a survey in Punjab and found 12,821 hectare of land was available for launching plantation drive, including 9,800 hectare of panchayat lands in 9,145 villages, 3,021 hectare in urban areas. It decided to motivate farmers for agro-forestry to achieve the target of 15 per cent forest cover in the state.

What is the state's current forest cover? What was it at the time of GPM's launch?

Currently, 6.87 per cent of the state's total area is under 'forest and tree' cover as per Forest Survey of India assessment. At the time of GPM's launch it was 6.1 per cent. In seven years of the scheme's run, an increase of just 0.85 per cent has been achieved.

What is Punjab's forest cover requirement?

According to National Forest Policy, there should be 33 per cent forest cover in India as a whole. In plains, the forest cover should be 20 per cent of the geographical area. In Punjab, at least 15 per cent area is required to be under forest and tree cover as 84 per cent land is under agriculture and horticulture cultivation here.

Between 2012 to 2019 so far, how many saplings were supplied/planted under the scheme?

All the senior forest officials of Punjab have been tight-lipped about the number. But records show that not even 25 per cent of the total targeted 40 crore tree saplings could be planted/distributed till date. Forest Department sources revealed that in first five years of GPM, around five crore saplings were planted/distributed. These saplings were planted on the government lands and distributed to various organisations, institutes, schools and villages. Around 59 lakh saplings were planted by the department and around 35 lakh distributed to public in 2017-18. In 2018, around 63 lakh saplings were distributed under 'Tandrusat Punjab Mission' to the public. To mark the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev, 550 saplings will be planted in all the 12,700 villages of the state. Around 72 lakhs saplings are being prepared for this purpose. The cost of this will be met through GPM budget and maintenance will be done through MNREGA.

Why is the scheme so woefully off its target?

There are four main reasons for this. First, poor survival rate of plants, followed by less supply of plants against the huge target of 40 crore. The other two reasons are rampant tree felling in state and half-hearted compulsory afforestation. As per the plan, around 5 crore saplings were required to be planted and distributed per year to meet the target by 2020 but it was barely touching one crore sapling target and that too with low survival rate.

A senior officer in the Forest Department said that the survival rate of plants is 25 to 30 per cent and non-stop felling of trees is another major reason that has hit the forest cover. He said that over the past one decade, nearly 8-9 lakh trees have been axed across the five forest zones — North, Shiwalik, Bist, South, and Ferozepur — of Punjab for various development projects mainly to construct the state and National Highways.

Apart from this, the data from the Forest Department showed that 2 lakh trees were cut in 2013-14, 2.12 lakh tree felled in 2014-15, and 1.50 lakhs trees on NH-1 for six lane project from Panipat to Jalandhar in 2010-11.

Is rampant felling of trees allowed for development?

The NGT has intervened several times and directed the state to follow norms of compulsory afforestation. As per the norms of Compulsory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPAA), the state is required to cover double of the area which it gets vacated from trees for development. If the trees are axed on 100 hectares area then the state needs to bring 200 hectare under green cover, said a Forest Department official, adding that department lags majorly behind in this drive. “Not even half of the area, which is required to cover under compulsory afforestation, is covered under it and in most projects the work has yet to start,” the official said, adding that funds from Centre for the purpose were also delayed.

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