

DownToEarth

Agenda: Forests for real

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The big picture from the *India State of Forest Report 2021* (ISFR 2021) is this: India's forest cover has increased between the last assessment in 2019 and the latest in 2021 by a minuscule 0.16 million hectares — a rise of mere 0.2 per cent. This is not boast-worthy, not even noteworthy.

The increase in forest cover has happened outside recorded forest area, or forest land under the control of state government's forest department.

This growth has also happened mainly in forests that are categorised as “open” — forests with canopy cover between 10 and 40 per cent.

This shows that forests are growing because people are planting trees on their individual lands, and are planting non-forest species, since there are huge restrictions on planting and felling trees listed in the Indian Forest Act, 1927.

These forest lands would thus include plantations of rubber, coconut, eucalyptus and even tea and coffee, which have tree cover of 10 per cent or more in any hectare of land.

The area “outside” the recorded forest is now a substantial portion of the green cover of the country. The forest cover “outside” recorded forest area is 19.72 million ha or roughly 28 per cent of the total forest cover.

Now, add to this the tree cover count of 9.6 million ha. It aggregates to 29.32 million ha, which is as much as 36 per cent of the green cover of the country.

This land outside recorded forests also contributes to 38 per cent of the forest sinks in the country, according to the Forest Survey of India.

The tree cover (trees outside recorded forest area) — scattered in individual plots — is close to 10 million ha, which is equivalent to the area under the very dense forests in the country.

Mango, neem, mahua and tamarind are most important trees — species that provide livelihood benefits to their growers. Very dense forests, with canopy cover of over 70 per cent, are now just 14 per cent of the forest cover (or 3 per cent of the country's land area). Of this, 70 per cent and more are found in districts classified as tribal.

Most importantly, vast areas of the country's recorded forest does not find any mention in the report. This area is as much as 25.87 million ha — one-third of the land under the state forest department. The biggest takeaway is, therefore, that forests with forest departments are not growing; and one-third of their land is not even fit for assessment. Forest cover is growing in spite of the government, not because of it.

Reinvent forests for future

ISFR 2021 should make it clear that we need to rework our forest strategies urgently. We need fifth generation forest reforms (5-G forest reform), which will secure forests for growth and livelihood.

Forest management started in India with the colonial British government, which took away community lands and nationalised them. The forests were meant for extraction to aid the colonial government's economic exploitation of the country's resources.

The first phase of post-Independent India continued this extractive system. The second phase started in the 1980s, when the Forest Conservation Act and its subsequent amendments were passed, centralising the “diversion” of forest land. The push for this was the growing awareness of the rate of deforestation in mid 1980s.

The third phase came with the mission for afforestation — first it was about growing trees outside forests, in the wastelands that were thought to exist across the country. Soon it became clear that the real wasteland was in the lands controlled by the forest department. It also became clear that survival of the trees required people to keep their livestock out of the afforested wasteland — it required villages to protect the land and to be partners in afforestation.

Thus started the Joint Forest Management (JFM), under which local communities would get usufruct rights to forest produce like grass and would guard the land in return so that forests grow. JFM did not succeed because it was a scheme in which state forest departments remained unwilling participants. The forest department showed up only when the trees, protected over the years, were ready for harvest.

As part of the agreement, money was to be transferred to the village community. But as has been documented in cases from across the country, the final cheque paid for the forest produce was for such small amounts that it was a joke on the community. It broke trust of people. It destroyed a movement to grow trees and then to fell those so that they could be grown again.

The fourth phase continues till today where forests are a permanent battle ground. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006, has corrected a historical injustice, giving communities rights over land they have been living on.

According to data from the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, till February 2022, some 1.71 million ha of forest land was “settled” as individual rights to people. But there is little attention to the need to afforest these lands and more. This in spite of the fact that we have all the grandstanding announcements of Green India Mission and the funds collected through payments for compensatory afforestation.

In reply to a Parliament question in 2020, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change said that the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority, that works under the ministry, has transferred close to ₹50,000 crore to states for planting trees.

There is no report card on the trees planted and their survival rate. IFSR 2021 should make it clear that little “forests” have grown on these governmental lands.

So, it is time for reworking and reimagining the forests for the 5-G reforms. This in times when, on the one hand, there is a need for enhanced protection of the remaining forests for ecological security, and on the other, there is a crucial need to build resilience of communities who live in these habitats — all in the times of increased risk because of climate change.

The 5-G forest reforms should be based on the learning from the past—we must shed reticence to plant what will be cut. The fact is that while the first phase of forest management in the country was extractive and exploitative, this 4th phase continues to be based on conservation to the extent that felling trees planted on one’s own land has become a crime.

Today, India has to import much of its wood products, and according to a recent report by the International Tropical Timber Organization, a Japan-based intergovernmental organisation, this is often sourced from illegally cut forests in Africa and other nations. This clearly does not speak well for a country that has set aside 23 per cent of its land for forests.

So, the future agenda for forests must be:

AGENDA 1

Protection of the remaining very dense and ecologically significant forests is critical

We cannot afford to lose even a hectare of this high quality and biodiverse forests. Therefore, forests for highest level of protection should be identified and this data be made available so that clearance is not granted for projects in such areas.

It is equally important to recognise that the bulk of these very rich forests are found in the habitats of the poorest people in the country. This means doing much more to build strategies for ecological payments to the communities that co-exist on these lands. They must benefit from this protection, not be worse off, because these lands are important for conservation.

The cartography of India — the map where the tiger roam, the dense forests exist, where minerals are found, where rivers come from, but also where the poorest, most marginalised live— must change. This can only happen if we make people partners in conservation and not dismiss them as “biotic pressure”.

In 2002, the 12th Finance Commission set up an incentive-based grant, as per the area of forests in the state, to reward the states for conserving forests. The 14th Finance Commission made this “grant” unconditional, which means the states are free to use it as they want, but nobody really knows where it comes or goes.

It seems the idea of ecosystem payment for conservation, has been lost. This payment needs to be given to communities that live near the protected, high-value forests. This payment is for ecological services rendered because conservation is happening in their backyard and at their cost. It also means that we need to put a real value on these forests, which are today key for biodiversity conservation as well as carbon sequestration.

AGENDA 2

Plan to cut and plant again on forest land with communities

The reason vast areas under the forest department remain degraded is that they are also habitats of people and their livestock. This is why planting trees needs involvement of communities.

FRA has a provision for community forest management and it is time the states made it work. But for this to happen, trees will need to be cut and then planted again, and this means making a business of the minor and major forest produce.

Felling of trees is not the problem; the problem is our inability to replant and to regrow them. This is what needs to be fixed. It is time we brought back the saw-mills so that wood can be used to replace cement or aluminium or steel in housing and in furniture. We need a wood-based future.

This is good for climate change and if we do this in ways that benefit the communities, then it is good for their livelihoods and for building local economies.

AGENDA 3

End the license-raj on trees outside forests

ISFR 2021 shows that people are planting trees on their lands, but what is not said is that this plantation is happening against all odds. Under the restrictive conditions that operate in India today, it is literally a crime to fell a tree even if you have planted it on your own land. People do not know if they will get permission to harvest it, transport it or sell it.

Under the Indian Forest Act 1927, timber or other produce derived from trees outside forests are treated as forest produce. This is not all. State governments have added to this through their own Acts that govern felling and transit of different tree species.

Today, it is a task riddled with high transaction costs and harassment. The fact is trees are like bank accounts. One generation plants it for exigency and another harvests it. Now this bank account has been demonetised or nationalised.

ISFR 2021 includes a fascinating assessment of the state of bamboo resources in the country. It estimates that there are 53,336 million bamboo clumps in the country, up from 13,882 million in 2019.

The bamboo bearing area is estimated to be 15 million ha — roughly 20 per cent of the forest cover in 2021. But the potential of this resource remains unutilised because of all the restrictions that come with cutting and transporting trees.

After much discussions, the India Forest Act, 1927, was amended in 2017 to remove bamboo from the definition of tree to remove restrictions on its felling and transit in non-forest lands, but the progress is slow.

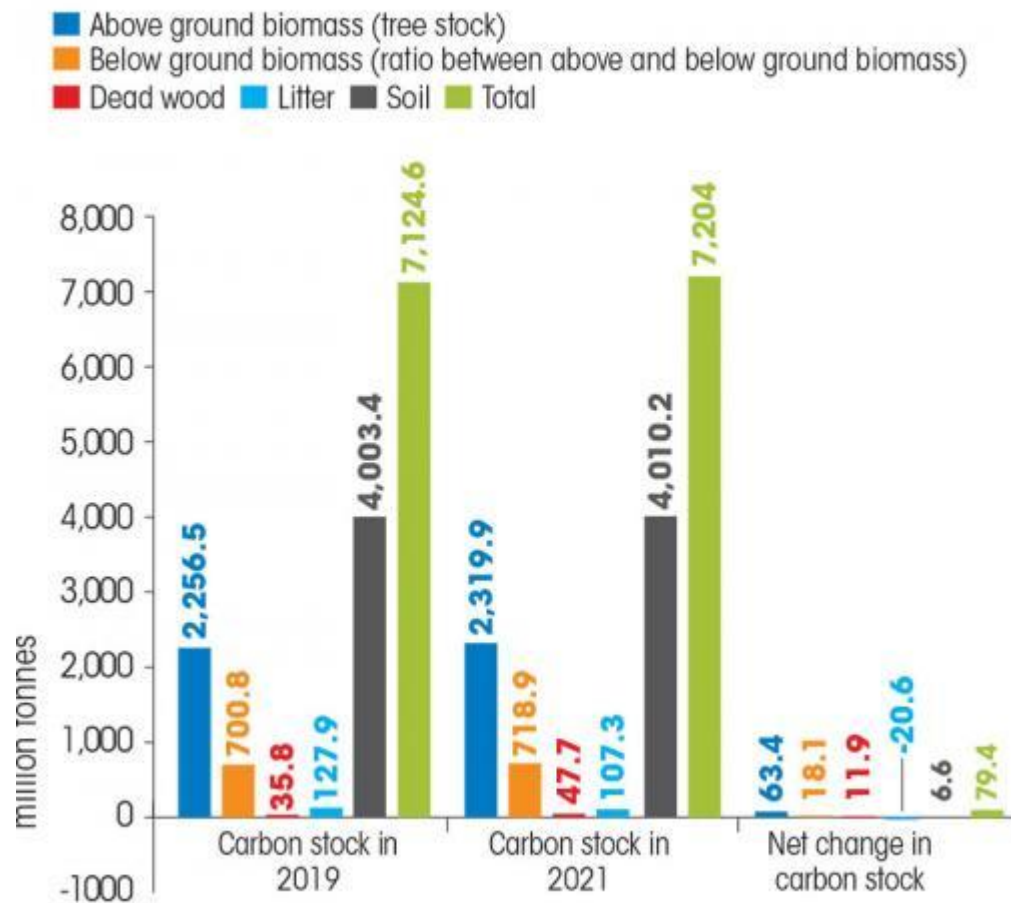
Foresters argue that this protection is needed since it is not possible to distinguish between trees grown inside or outside the forest. But as ISFR 2021 makes it clear, it is trees outside the forest that are today making the country green. It is time to rework the law to make this happen at scale.

India's tryst with forests started with the Chipko movement, when women living in the high Himalayas "hugged" trees to stop the felling by woodcutters. But we misinterpreted the movement. The women stopped the felling, not because they did not want the tree cut, but they wanted the right to decide when the tree would be felled.

They knew their survival was intrinsically linked to forests—they needed these lands for fodder and for water conservation (and even for the privacy to defecate, as they told me when I travelled to them in the early 1980s). But we heard half the message—it got truncated by the time it was relayed to the corridors of power in the plains. We heard that trees had to be protected at all costs; not that we needed to build a sustainable future that would be based on the utilisation of wood for local economies.

GROWING STOCK

India's forest cover has remained largely same



Source: India State of Forest Report 2021

So, it is time we understood that all this is only possible when protecting and growing trees becomes a business that benefits people who live on the forest lands. Otherwise, the “missing” forest land will remain forest on paper only.

Carbon stock. This is different from growing stock as it calculates the amount of carbon stored in biomass — in woody growing stock, in vegetation, in leaf litter and soil.

According to ISFR 2021, initially Forest Survey of India (FSI) had only calculated the woody growing stock and extrapolated the vegetation to estimate forest carbon.

Then for India's Second Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, it conducted the greenhouse gas inventory from the period 1954 to 2004. It estimated the greenhouse gas flux—the net changes in carbon stock over time.

Since the launch of the National Forest Inventory in 2003, FSI has been estimating growing stock and carbon stock in different carbon pools.

The carbon stock is estimated for vegetation — including soil and forest floor — in recorded forest and trees outside forests. According to ISFR 2021 there is a net increase of 79.4 million tonnes in carbon stock between 2019 and 2021.

What is interesting is that the biggest decrease in carbon stock has come from leaf litter and increase in above ground biomass. This again would suggest that the carbon stock increase is in trees outside forests.

What is also important is that the bulk of the carbon stock — 56 per cent — is in the soil as per this assessment. The report also states Trees Outside Forest (TOF) is 8.94 per cent of the country's geographical area and nearly 38 per cent of the carbon stock.

Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/agenda-forests-for-real-81595>