



Big forest covers build booming economies

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Lost amidst the shrill debates of the CAA protest and other slowdown news, Union Minister for Environment, Prakash Javadekar, announced the happy tidings that the country has gained over 5,000 square kilometres of forest cover in the last two years. Releasing the biennial state-of-our-forests report, the minister said the forest cover had gone up 0.56 per cent to a respectable 21.67 per cent of India's geographical area.

Javadekar also said that there has been an increase of 42.6 million tonnes of carbon stock, when compared to the last assessment of 2017, and India was thus on track to achieving its goal of creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes as targeted under the Paris Agreement.

Considering that India's target is 33 per cent forest cover, we are not yet out of the woods (pun intended); and the jury is still out on whether or not our forest cover is depleting. Some experts have expressed concern that much like the double-counting of tigers, commercial plantations have gotten included in forest-cover figures.

Losing out to farm lands

Overall, the forest cover has gone up 3 per cent since 2011 – an increase of over 20,000 square kilometres. Let's see the break down. An analysis by the NGO, DownToEarth, shows that there had been an increase of Very Dense Forests (VDFs) from 84,471 square kilometres in 2011 to 99,278 square kilometres in 2019 – about 3 per cent of the land mass. However, in the same period, we lost around 3.8 per cent of our moderately dense forests (MDFs) from 320,736 square kilometres in 2011 to 308,472 square kilometres in 2019, a loss of 12,264 square kilometres. These are the forest zones next to towns and habitations that are constantly losing out to human communities bent upon creating more farm lands.

Wildlife photographer Steve Winter, in an interview to a national daily, pointed out that though India was the proud incubator of 50 tiger reserves, it was afflicted with the 'green measles' disease – the problem of fragmentation of these forested zones that did not have corridors connecting them. This did not allow sustainable forests and wildlife. Many of these reserves, like Panna, had no tigers left in them.

When examining the importance of forest covers, let us spare a thought for the indiscriminate destruction of the Amazon rain forests. Egged on by Brazil's right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro, whose policies tacitly support deforestation, Brazilian ranchers have been setting fire to the forests to create more cultivable land.

From August to October last year, the rainforests have been ravaged at a rate of one-and-a-half football fields per minute. Statistics gathered by Inpe, Brazil's satellite agency, suggest that at least 7,747 square kilometres of rainforest have vanished last year. To the south of the Amazon forests, the Cerrado Savannah — probably the most bio-diverse region of the world where 40 per cent of the plants and wildlife, including a population of jaguars, anteaters and macaws not found anywhere else — is also under threat. Much of the region's forests, wetlands and grasslands have already been lost, mostly to aggressive expansion of soya bean farming.

The one common thread linking the denudation of Indian forests to the clearing of the Amazon rainforests and the Cerrado Savannah is the pressure to create more arable land for food production. With the world's population set to increase from 7.6 billion to 10 billion over the next 30-35 years, and the requirement of food to balloon by another 50 per cent, the situation described above can only get worse.

Forest economy

The only way to stem the tide is to stop the diversion of forest land to non-forest use; and to develop more productive agriculture that will meet the food needs with the existing land resources.

Forests are not just a heritage we want to save for future generations. At the macro level, they play a major role as carbon sinks. Plants utilize carbon dioxide for the process of photosynthesis and store it in form of carbohydrates; and these reach the soil as dead organic matter, becoming part of the carbon sink. When forests are cleared, less CO₂ is absorbed by plants, increasing CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere. Also, with reduction in soil organic carbon, the productivity of the ecosystem degenerates. Forests govern the water cycle through precipitation that charges the sources of urban water supply, creating dams, lakes and rivers. These become the resources for fisheries and irrigation too.

On a global scale, it is proven that deforestation leads to warmer and drier climates, which ultimately triggers formation of deserts, loss in biodiversity and melting of polar ice caps; all this adding up to loss of food producing capacity. The irony is that the denudation of forests was first started to increase areas under food cultivation!

All this, and more, is known. The problem is forests as a constituency have very few spokespersons.

Source: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/business/2020/jan/05/big-forest-covers-build-booming--economies-2085172.html>

