



# TIMES OF INDIA

## Turning back times to grow natural forests

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NEED FOR GREEN: Elephants at Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Nilgiris

### There Is A Pressing Need To Give A New Lease Of Life To Forests In TN

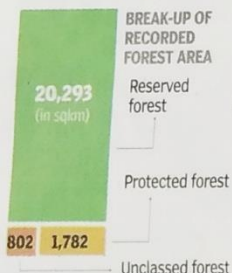
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#### STATUS CHECK

Forest cover (including trees outside forests) in Tamil Nadu is 26,364.02sqkm. This is 20.27% of its geographical area. It should be 33% as per National Forest Policy

Recorded forest area in TN

22,877sqkm



RARE FIND: Ficus retusa, an evergreen tree in Dharmapuri

Forests support 80% of all species on land, but efforts to protect them have been largely wrong, leading to further degradation. Forest management today needs to be a priority and more importantly requires a revamp. It needs to be about conserving biodiversity with scientific focus and involvement of indigenous tribal communities rather than about artificial afforestation that promotes monoculture and is only about timber and firewood.

This year's theme on World Forest Day, observed on March 21, was forests and biodiversity. In recent years, Tamil Nadu has focussed on protecting forest landscapes, similar to the Bonn Challenge—a global effort to bring 150 million hectares of degraded and deforested land under restoration by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030. The Bonn Challenge lays emphasis on landscape approaches—a model aimed at improving the ecology of a landscape as a whole to benefit local livelihood and conserve biodiversity. India has pledged to restore 8 million hectares by 2030, of which Tamil Nadu has committed to work on about one million hectares. To achieve this, a vibrant mechanism will have to be put in place in Tamil Nadu to plan, execute, continuously monitor and follow up genuine, active, participatory forest management to achieve zero deforestation

and ensure a forest with an improved variety of tree species.

Till now, the management of Indian forests and Tamil Nadu, in particular, has been about limited protective functions and mostly focused on production forestry, where focus is on produce such as timber and firewood.

This flawed forest management, a colonial legacy, deals with growing stock, increment and yield regulation for commercial purposes. It is called classical forest management which tries to convert the forest into stock one. For instance, forests have been cut down and in their place eucalyptus plantations raised, under the pretext of afforestation. But in nature no such forests exist. Afforestation in this case is a misnomer, since a forest is about a diverse range of species and not a single one.

The objectives of forest management in Tamil Nadu are elucidated in National Forest Policy 1988 and the state forest Policy of Tamil Nadu 1918. The forest management in Tamil Nadu is at a crossroads and lacks clear strategy and action to achieve the objectives of these policies. The classical forest management followed till now to achieve the objectives are inadequate. Therefore, the forest management strategy and action must be completely transformed to meet the present and future ecological needs of Tamil Nadu.

A brave and bold decision to revamp the forest management in Tamil Nadu is long overdue and must be attended to at the earliest for conservation of biodiversity and better ecological security of the state. It must be conservation oriented, nature based and community

centric. Preservation of the forest with all their ecological, social, and productive functions with active participation of people must replace the commercial, classical forest management in practice, for more than a century.

It is obvious from the state of forests, that the traditional forest management has become scientifically obsolete and it has been having deleterious effects on remaining forests. The new approach should be a forest management based on nature and led by people (FMNP).

The National Forest Policy, 1988, envisages that the area under forest and tree cover should be enhanced to 33% of the geographical area of the country. The State Forest Policy, 2018 of Tamil Nadu also stipulates that it will formulate strategies for increasing the forest and tree cover from the present level of 23.8% of the geographical area of the state to 33%.

While the forest cover in Tamil Nadu is estimated to be 26,281sqkm, the tree cover outside forests is 4,671sqkm. The possibility of increasing forest cover is impossible. It is the tree cover outside forests in private lands which can be improved. The challenge is to increase the tree cover to an extent of 9,000sqkm. We must take action to plant and maintain 40 crore seedlings in private and common lands in another eight years to achieve 33% forest and tree cover in Tamil Nadu. The need of the hour is a brown revolution, on lines of green and white revolution, provided tree management is taken outside the Forest Act 1882.

The writer, a former IFS officer, is currently the chairman of United Nilgiris Conservation Society

#### SAVING LIFELINES