

Woods and trees: On the state of Indian forests

The Environment Ministry's '[India State of Forest Report 2017](#)' based on satellite imagery, may present a net positive balance in the form of 24.4% of India's land area under some form of forest or tree cover, but this is but a broad-brush assessment. According to the report, forest and tree cover together registered a 1% rise over the previous estimate two years ago. However, such an estimate listing very dense, moderately dense, open and scrub forests mapped through remote sensing does not really provide deep insights into the integrity of the green areas. The emphasis in environmental policy to raise forest cover to 33% of the geographical area will yield some dividends. There has been an increase over the baseline cover of 20% at the turn of the century. Yet, tree cover is not the same as having biodiverse, old-growth forests. The ecosystem services performed by plantations that have a lot of trees grown for commercial purposes cannot be equated with those of an undisturbed assemblage of plants, trees and animals. India may be endowed with 16 major forest types, and 221 types and sub-types based on the Champion and Seth classification, but retains very little of its ancient forests after centuries of pre-colonial and colonial exploitation. Latter-day development pressures are also taking their toll. Forest restoration should, therefore, aid the return of native vegetation.

Questions about the reported increase in forest cover

In its audit of various regions, the Ministry's report has calculated a cumulative loss of forests in Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal of nearly 1,200 sq km. The impact of such a terrible loss must be seen against the backdrop of the Northeast representing a global biodiversity hotspot. Any gains achieved through remediation programmes in Odisha, Assam, Telangana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Manipur cannot compensate for it adequately. Naturally, environmental economists have come to regard the calculation of national accounts of wealth and development as weak, because governments do not add the benefits of functions such as flood control and climate moderation to the value of forests. Such a failure erodes the gains made by many communities, because lost natural capital contributes to material losses. India must review the programmes that it has been pursuing to revive forests, and move away from monoculture plantations that are favoured by even forest development corporations in many States. Scientific reforms to bring true nature back are needed. The latest assessment categorises more than 300,000 sq km of area as open forests with a tree canopy of 10-40%. These lands provide the opportunity to bring back diverse, indigenous trees. Such a measure, combined with a policy against allowing open cast mining, can bring about a renaissance. Dedicated efforts will be required to protect the precious forests of the Northeast.

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