

A PLAN THAT IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST PLANTING TREES

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'Beyond the environmental benefits, there is the human dimension that is at the front and centre'
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Last month, about 100 women, employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), were seen digging pits, planting trees and watering them in Nangal Khurd village, in Mansa district in Punjab, just in time for [World Environment Day](#) that is observed every year on June 5. Working alongside them were over 50 young people from a local club. The district administration was involved too. It was an example of community effort.

Let us move to this month. It is also time for Van Mahotsav, which literally means “celebrate the forest”. The history of Van Mahotsav Day goes back to July 1947, when it was first organised by the Punjabi botanist, M.S. Randhawa. Subsequently, in 1950, Kanaiyalal Maneklal Munshi, an environmentalist and Union Minister of Agriculture and Food, expanded its reach and national scope. In today's world, forests need to be celebrated more than ever before. Simultaneously, more forests need to be created and restored. However, there is much debate about the efforts around tree planting. Is there a right way to do it? Are there dos and don'ts when it comes to mass tree-planting? Let us step back for the bigger picture.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), deforestation and forest degradation contribute around 12% of global greenhouse gas emissions. The total area occupied by primary forests in India has decreased by 3.6%.

Typically, governments have relied on afforestation and reforestation as a means of establishing trees on non-treed land. These strategies have now evolved. The focus is now on forest landscape restoration — the process of regaining ecological functionality and improving human welfare across deforested or degraded forest landscapes.

This approach keeps in mind multiple land uses and people's needs in the short and long terms. Forest landscape restoration seeks to involve communities in the process of designing and executing mutually advantageous interventions for the upgradation of landscapes. Nearly two billion hectares of degraded land in the world (and 140 million hectares in India) have scope for potential restoration as forest land.

A crucial aspect of this process is to ensure the diversity of the species while planting trees. Natural forests with diverse native tree species are more efficient in sequestering carbon than monoculture tree plantations. Planting diverse species is also healthier for local communities and their livelihoods. An international study published earlier this year in the journal, *Science*, found that diversifying species in forest plantations has a positive impact on the quality of the forests.

In Punjab, for instance, the community is proactively planting native species such as Jhand (*Prosopis cineraria*), Desi Kikar (*Acacia nilotica*) and Pharwan (*Tamarix aphylla*), which are resilient and acclimatised. And most of these saplings have a high survival rate of 90%, a vital requirement for sustainable reforestation activities.

Tree planting comes with varied environmental and ecological benefits. Forests are integral in

regulating ecosystems, influencing the carbon cycle and mitigating the effects of climate change. Annually, forests absorb roughly 2.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide. This absorption includes nearly 33% of the carbon dioxide released from burning fossil fuels.

But beyond the environmental benefits, there is the human dimension that is at the front and centre. Millions of lives and livelihoods are intertwined with our forests. Forests are a boon for local communities and their livelihoods by functioning as a resource base for goods and services. India is an agrarian economy. According to academics from the World Resources Institute, forest ecosystems enrich soil fertility and water availability, enhancing agricultural productivity, and in turn the rural economy. Tree planting prevents erosion and stems flooding. Sustainable forest crops reduce food insecurity and empower women, allowing them to gain access to more nutritional diets and new income streams. Agroforestry lessens rural-to-urban migration and contributes to an increase in resources and household income. Planting trees is deeply linked to the 'wholistic' well-being of all individuals, the community, and the planet.

The span 2021-2030 is the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, emphasising efforts to restore degraded terrestrial ecosystems including forests. In 2011, the Bonn Challenge was launched with a global goal to restore 150 million hectares of degraded and deforested landscapes by 2020 and 350 million hectares by 2030. India joined the Bonn Challenge in 2015, pledging to restore 26 million hectares of degraded and deforested land by 2030. An additional carbon sink of 2.5 billion-3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent through forest and tree cover is to be created by 2030.

There are a myriad government programmes such as Compensatory Afforestation, the National Afforestation Programme, the National Mission for a Green India (Green India Mission), the Nagar Van scheme and the Forest Fire Prevention and Management Scheme to name a few. There is a spotlight on youth via the Green Skill Development Programme for youth who aspire to attain employment in the environment and forest sectors. State governments are not far behind either, a case in point being Telangana, which has initiated a large-scale tree planting programme called 'Telanganaku Haritha Haram'.

However, forest restoration in India faces hurdles in terms of the identification of areas for restoration, a lack of importance accorded to research and scientific strategies in tree planting, stakeholders' conflicts of interest, and financing.

So, what is the right way to undertake tree plantation drives? To be successful, forest landscape restoration must be implemented proactively, bolstering landscapes and forest ecosystems to be durable and adjustable in the face of future challenges and societal needs. It also needs the involvement and the alignment of a host of stakeholders including the community, champions, government and landowners. The restoration of natural forest ecosystems can be strengthened through participatory governance by engaging stakeholders —as in the Punjab example. Vulnerable forest-dependent communities should be factored in, and any effort should be tailored to the local socio-economic context and landscape history of a region.

The women and youth of Mansa district are securing the future of their communities and their well-being while maximising the rewards of tree-planting. Let us pledge to truly celebrate the forests by doing it the right way. That is the maha utsav our forests need.

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