

Time to review our Forest Policy

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I have travelled several States of India and while almost all have reasonable forest cover, the most dense are seen in Madhya Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh.

There are several forest products that are collected by locals, contributing to the revenues of the State. These include fuel wood, architectural wood, gums, fruits like *Amla*, oilseeds like *Toli*, etc. Madhya Pradesh, for example, produces a good quantity of *Chironji*, an interesting seed that villagers collect and sell in the open market for up to Rs. 1,000 per kg, which, in turn, is sold by traders to retailers at up to Rs. 3,000 per kg. In Maharashtra, to cite another example, the processing of cashew heavily depends on the efforts of the villagers who collect up to 100,000 tonnes of shells, which is the primary raw material for cashew nut shell liquid (CNSL).

While these efforts may appear to be making a good contribution to the productivity of the States, the reality is that they are very poorly managed. If

one were to consider productivity of the forests (Rupees earned per acre), it is dismally low, even if exact details are not available.

While thousands of square kilometres of land are designated as forests in India, we see very poor density of trees in most. This is due to a few reasons.

Absence of fencing

There are large areas where the government is trying to increase green cover by planting trees on fallow lands. The result is, however, very poor. While traveling by road in the interiors of Maharashtra, very often I found villagers carrying firewood. Guarding forest land to prevent cutting of green trees is not practical. So, on the one hand while the government is spending money on planting new trees, on the other, due absence of fencing and guards, these are being cut down for firewood. We need a serious review of this policy.

The Government has provided LPG connections to nearly every household in India in the last four years and distribution of LPG cylinders is also efficient (setting aside the current supply crises which is temporary). In such a situation, there is no need to permit every person to carry one head-load of dry firewood every day. For the same reason, there is no need to keep all the sides of the forest land open.

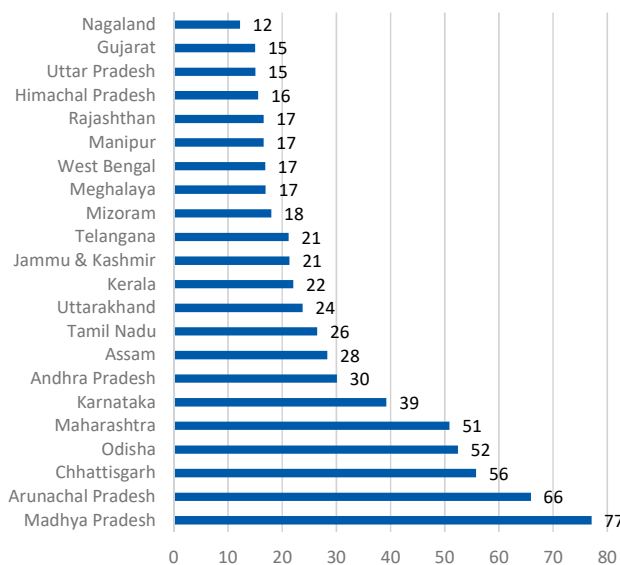


Fig. 1: Forest cover in Indian States, 2024 [thousand sq.km.]

The forest department should, without



delay, fence all forest lands, and provide entry & exit gates. These can be manned, since the requirement of forest guards will be much lower. I have observed that if an area is fenced, the number of trespassers falls drastically, as most people do not want to jump a fence. Height of the fence should be enough to make trespassing difficult.

Near Valsad, a large chemical company owns 1,200+ acres land and has grown million trees around the factory. The entire area is fenced and thick forest grows inside the premises. Just outside the fence, however, there are no trees more than 3 feet tall. The fencing is not very robust or tall; in fact, at many places, it is only symbolic. Still, no trespassing happens. In spite of the fact that there are many fruit-growing trees, including mangoes, and the fruits keep falling on the ground, no one enters to collect the fruits.

Another advantage of fencing forests is that wild animals will not crossover to nearby towns and villages.

Illegal occupation

Another important issue is illegal occupation of forest lands. I remember

a story narrated by a friend some years ago. He manufactured some chemicals and used to have a tar-like byproduct. He could not safely dispose it, and so he accumulated the waste in small metal drums. Once enough drums were collected, he found a scrap dealer who offered to take them away at almost no cost. Soon it became a routine: the man would come every month and collect the containers for a pittance. Once, my friend tried to find out what the man did with the drums. He replied that all he did was take the containers to a deep forest and use it for fencing an unoccupied piece of land. Over a period of time, the area expanded and the man took 'possession' of the land.

We hear many such cases where land parcels have been occupied by trespassers. If the forests are not fenced and no adequate watch is kept, this is the most expected outcome.

All States must start fencing their forests. This will help to improve the green cover, add revenue to the kitty of the States, and provide employment to rural population.

Plantation of fruit-bearing trees

Some time ago, the company I was working for was looking to invest in an agro-forestry project, and I studied the conditions of land allotment. One was that no fruit-bearing trees would

be planted. I looked for the reasons. The logic was that if the fruits are not gathered, they will rot, and contaminate water bodies. So, no fruit-bearing trees were allowed. The allotted land was also to be returned to the government after 15 years.

No land could also be allotted to a public limited company. This law appears to have been made by erstwhile rulers more than 100 years ago, when the population of undivided India was 25-crores. Given the country's size, it was then possible for fruits to remain uncollected, left to rot and contaminate water bodies. Considering, the country has lost 20-25% land by partition and the population has grown over six times, there is today an acute shortage of fruits. There is hence immediate need to do away with these provisions; allottees of agro-forestry land should be allowed to grow trees that bear fruits. They must also be allowed to keep the land for 15+ years as most trees become productive only after 15 years.

I live in a large complex with 12 multi-storey buildings, and monkeys are frequent visitors. Ordinarily, monkeys stay in the forest, but these days most cities have this problem of uninvited visitors. They enter houses and destroy fruits and food kept even inside a refrigerator. If there were enough fruit-growing trees in the forests, there would be no need for the monkeys to visit homes in search of food!

Expanding mango cultivation in Konkan

India has about 700,000-sq.km of designated forest lands, with Maharashtra alone having about 50,000-sq. km. Of this, about 35,000-sq.km is in the Konkan area. This is land squeezed between the Arabian Sea and the Sahyadri range, and divided in seven districts. Due to its geographical location, the land has some interesting

features that are absolutely unique in this country.

This coastal belt grows arguably the most coveted fruit, the *Alphonso* mango. Over a period of 50 years, its price has risen nearly 300 fold. The government of Maharashtra has made efforts to motivate farmers here to increase plantation of this mango, which is popular all over the world. So much so that one mango fetches as many as \$5 in the US, and even locally prices remain in the range of Rs. 75-100 per piece all through the season. If fallow lands are allotted to willing individuals to raise *Alphonso* plantations, Maharashtra should be able to grow a few million tonnes of this mango.

To support this, there is a need to urgently establish large number of tissue culture labs that can generate a million saplings of pure breeds that can be planted on the forest lands. Research must be directed to raise a large number of plants with high degree of certainty of maintenance of the breed. (I planted 40 *Alphonso* saplings five years ago in my farm at Badlapur, and this year three of them bore fruit. To my surprise, these are not *Alphonso*, but a poor substitute, *Kesar*. I will have to wait a year or two to find out what the balance 37 trees would turn out to be).

The large quantity of mangoes so produced can generate huge employment by way of gathering and vending the fruit, setting up processing facilities to produce pulp, slices, packaged fruit, concentrates and other fruit products for local and export markets. It would also generate employment for production of tools for farming, packing and transportation of fruits.

All out efforts must be taken to increase production 100-fold so that even the poorest of residents can taste this wonderful fruit.

