

Why India's Urban Forests Are Crucial for a Healthy and Sustainable Future

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Urban Forests in India Latest News

- The Telangana government's decision to allocate 400 acres of Kancha Gachibowli, one of Hyderabad's last urban forests, for industrial development sparked protests, with officials claiming the land belonged to the state and accusing real estate interests of misleading students.
- However, the Supreme Court intervened after 100 acres of trees were felled, criticizing the government and exposing the fragility of urban forests amid unsustainable urban development.

Why Urban Forests Matter

- **Vital for Public Health and Environment**
 - Urban forests like Kancha Gachibowli (Hyderabad), Aarey (Mumbai), and the Ridge (Delhi) play a critical role in maintaining healthy urban ecosystems.

- They help combat pollution, reduce urban heat islands, and manage stormwater, erosion, and flooding.
- By sequestering carbon and absorbing pollutants, they act as natural air purifiers.
- **Legal and Civic Attention**
 - Repeated interventions by courts and environmental bodies in cities like Bhopal and Allahabad highlight the increasing threat to urban forests and the need for stronger legal protection.
- **Response to Pollution Crisis**
 - Alarming air quality levels, like Delhi's AQI of 494 in November 2024, underline the urgency of preserving urban green cover.
 - With PM 2.5 and PM 10 pollutants largely from vehicles and construction, urban forests act as effective buffers, with one hectare capable of removing about one ton of air pollutants annually.
- **Biodiversity and Recreation Hubs**
 - Urban forests support endangered wildlife and offer city dwellers essential spaces for rest, recreation, and nature connection—qualities increasingly scarce in fast-paced urban life.

The Importance of Judicial Interventions in Protecting Urban Forests

- **Policy and Mission Backing**
 - Urban forests are supported by key national frameworks such as the National Forest Policy (1988) and the National Mission for Green India (2014), which stress the importance of afforestation and social forestry.
 - The Smart Cities Mission and AMRUT (2015) also incorporate ecological goals within urban development.
- **Expanding Legal Definitions and Protection**
 - The **Godavarman case** (1996) was a landmark judgment that expanded the definition of forests to include urban green spaces.
 - It led to the 2004 Supreme Court order requiring all states to map and monitor their forest areas, helping to build a national conservation framework.
- **Direct Action to Prevent Destruction**
 - Judicial bodies have intervened directly to halt or regulate urban deforestation:
 - In 2015, the Delhi High Court ordered the protection of the Delhi Ridge (Aravalli leopard corridor).
 - In 2020, the Supreme Court stayed tree cutting in Aarey Forest, Mumbai, following citizens' protests.
 - In 2024, the Rajasthan High Court took suo motu cognisance of tree felling in Baran district, responding to public outcry.
- **Reinforcing Constitutional Mandates**
 - Judicial interventions also align with:
 - Article 21 (Right to Life), which includes the right to a healthy environment, and
 - Articles 48A and 51A(g), which promote environmental protection and citizen responsibility toward nature.

Nagar Van Yojana: Greening India's Cities

- Launched in 2020 by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), the Nagar Van Yojana aims to create and expand forested areas within urban spaces to improve ecological balance and quality of urban life.

Ambitious Target

- The scheme sets a goal of developing 1,000 urban forests by 2027, promoting environmental sustainability and biodiversity within city landscapes.

Encouraging Outcomes

- As per the India State of Forest Report 2023, the scheme has already contributed to an increase of 1,445.81 km² in tree and forest cover across urban India.

National Commitment to Conservation

- On World Wildlife Day (March 3, 2025), PM Modi emphasized the importance of wildlife and biodiversity, reinforcing the relevance of initiatives like the Nagar Van Yojana in safeguarding urban ecological health.

The Growing Threat to Urban Forest

• Urbanisation vs. Environment

- India's rapid urban expansion often overlooks environmental sustainability, putting immense pressure on urban forests and natural ecosystems.

• Impact on Public Well-being

- The degradation of urban forests poses serious risks to biomedical, social, and cultural well-being, affecting air quality, mental health, and community life.

• Citizens' Role is Crucial

- Protecting urban forests requires active involvement from citizens and civil society, emphasizing collective responsibility in environmental stewardship.

• A Warning Against Unchecked Urban Sprawl

- Concrete development must not be allowed to overrun urban green spaces.
- Protecting these "green lungs" is essential for ensuring livable and resilient cities.

Urban Forests in India FAQs

Q1. Why do urban forests matter?

Ans. They purify air, cool cities, prevent flooding, and support wildlife in India's rapidly growing urban areas.

Q2. What is Nagar Van Yojana?

Ans. A 2020 scheme aiming to develop 1,000 urban forests by 2027 to enhance ecological balance and green cover.

Q3. How do courts support urban forests?

Ans. Judicial actions like the Godavarman case and Aarey Forest stay orders help protect urban green spaces.

Q4. What threats do urban forests face?

Ans. Rapid urbanisation, weak enforcement, and encroachments endanger forests like Kancha Gachibowli and others nationwide.

Q5. What can citizens do?

Ans. Active civic engagement, protests, and awareness are key to preserving India's shrinking urban green lungs.

Source: TH

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