States fall short of targets to improve forest cover, quality

Centre had approved a target of increasing tree cover by 53,377 hectares but only 26,287 ha has been achieved; similarly, forest quality improved in only 1,02,096 ha against target of 1,66,656 ha, RTI query reveals

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National Mission for a Green India (GIM) is one of the eight Missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change. File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

India is lagging behind in the targets to increase the number and quality of tree- and forest-cover plantations set in the Green India Mission, according to data accessed via the Right To Information Act.

National Mission for a Green India (GIM) is one of the eight Missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change. It aims at protecting, restoring and enhancing India's forest cover and responding to climate change. The target under the Mission is 10 million hectares (Mha) on forest and non-forest lands for increasing the forest/tree cover and to improve the quality of existing forest. Improving tree cover is critical to sequester carbon and bolster India's carbon stocks as part of its international commitments to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.

From 2015-16 to 2021-22, the Centre - based on submissions from 17 States - had approved a target of increasing tree/forest cover by 53,377 hectares and improving the quality of degraded forest by 1,66,656 ha. However, in response to queries by Kerala-based RTI campaigner, Govindan Nampoothiry, the Environment Ministry this month responded with figures from 17 States noting tree/forest cover had increased by 26,287 hectares and forest quality improved in only 1,02,096 hectares as of December 31, 2022.

For executing these projects, the Centre had allocated ₹681 crore but only ₹525 crore had been utilised, the Ministry revealed.

States with significant shortfall in tree cover include Andhra Pradesh, with a target of 186 ha but having only achieved 75 ha; Uttarakhand with a target of 6,446 ha but only 1,505 ha achieved; Madhya Pradesh targeting 5,858 ha but delivering 1,882 ha; Kerala committing 1,686 ha but furnishing 616 ha; Punjab, unusually committed to 629 ha but having delivered 1,082 ha.

As per the India State of Forest Report-2021, forest and tree cover in the country increased by 2,261 square kilometre since the last assessment in 2019. India's total forest and tree cover was 80.9 million hectares, which accounted for 24.62% of the geographical area of the country. The report said 17 States and Union Territories had more than 33% of their area under forest cover. Madhya Pradesh had the largest forest cover, followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra. The top five States in terms of forest cover as a percentage of their total geographical area were Mizoram (84.53%), Arunachal Pradesh (79.33%), Meghalaya (76%), Manipur (74.34%) and Nagaland (73.90%).

However critics have pointed out that the increase in green cover was almost entirely via commercial plantations, that – in an ecological sense – couldn't compensate for natural forests and their biodiversity and, being monocultures, were susceptible to pest attacks.