

Why India needs stable urban forests | Explained

What role do urban forests play in combating air pollution and climate change? What is the impact of urbanisation on forests like Kancha Gachibowli? What are the areas of concern? Where do courts stand? What does the Nagar Van Yojana aim to achieve by 2027?

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Students of the University of Hyderabad raise slogans during their protest

The story so far:

One of Hyderabad's last remaining urban forests, Kancha Gachibowli, faced the threat of extinction when the Telangana government decided to give away 400 acres of its land for industrial development. Justifying its move by claiming ownership over the forest, the government alleged that protesting students were misled by real estate interests. However, the Supreme Court took cognisance of the felling of 100 acres of trees and reprimanded the State government. This issue highlighted the vulnerability of urban forests and environmentally insensitive models of urban development.

Why do urban forests matter?

Urban forests — such as Kancha Gachibowli in Hyderabad, Aarey in Mumbai, Turahalli in Bengaluru, Neela Hauz and the Ridge in Delhi, and Dol Ka Baadh in Jaipur — are significant for healthy urban living. The National Green Tribunal issued a notice to the Madhya Pradesh government against the rampant felling of trees in Bhopal. Similarly, the High Court had to intervene in the case of indiscriminate tree felling in Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh. Many such instances from across India emphasise a need to understand that the urban forests matter to public life.

Studies worldwide have underlined the importance of urban forests in coping with the built concrete environment and the emissions from automobile vehicles. They help mitigate climate change, reduce the urban heat island effect, and control stormwater runoff, erosion, and flooding. Urban forests also sequester carbon and absorb pollutants. The density of green spaces in cities ensures the longevity and survival of the endangered birds and animals.

Diminishing urban forests in India's metropolitan cities spell severe consequences. For example, in November 2024, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) reported alarming levels of the air quality index (AQI) in Delhi at 494. Other cities such as Chennai, Hyderabad, and Bengaluru had AQI levels above 100. The CPCB mentions PM 2.5 and PM 10 pollutants — mostly from vehicle emissions and construction dust — as the main causes. Urban forests can serve as a safeguard against toxic urban air. A 2006 study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service showed that one hectare of trees can remove around one ton of air pollutants.

Urban social and cultural life is otherwise fraught with speed and risk. A sense of romance, repose, relaxation, and nature-sensitive recreation is due to proximity to urban forests. The sustained preservation and consistent creation of urban forests can make Indian cities breathable and urban living beautiful.

Why are judicial interventions important?

Urban forests have featured in policies, missions, and judicial interventions in India. Both the National Forest Policy of 1988 and the National Mission for Green India of 2014 underlined the imperative of increasing afforestation and social forestry. The Smart Cities Mission and Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation, launched in 2015, integrated smart urban designs with ecological and social development.

Besides, the judicial interventions play important roles in promoting and protecting urban forests. The landmark Godavarman case in 1996 broadened the definition of forests to enhance the protection of urban greenery. Consequently, in 2004, the apex court issued interim orders to all the States in India for the identification, scrutiny, and mapping of forests across their territories. The aim was to generate a comprehensive forest inventory in order to enhance conservation efforts.

Another instance of judicial intervention was in 2015 when the Delhi High Court directed the Delhi government to notify and protect the Delhi Ridge, also known as the Aravalli leopard wildlife corridor. Similarly, the apex court issued a stay order on the tree felling in Aarey in Mumbai in 2020 in response to the petitions by the citizens who conducted the Save Aarey Forest movement. Equally significant is the

instance of the civil society and concerned citizens protesting against the felling of trees in the biodiversity-rich areas of the Baran district in Rajasthan. The Rajasthan High Court took *suo motu* cognisance of the matter in 2024.

The judicial interventions are requisite in the protection of forests and instilling awareness among the citizens. And, so are provisions in the Constitution of India, such as Article 21 (Right to Life), which includes the right to a healthy environment. Equally important are Articles 48A and 51A(g), ensuring the promotion and improvement of the natural environment.

What is the main goal of the Nagar Van Yojana?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi duly observed the importance of wildlife and biodiversity conservation on the occasion of World Wildlife Day on March 3, 2025. Such a spirit is conducive to the drive to protect urban forests, too.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) of the Government of India had rolled out the Nagar Van Yojana (urban forest scheme) in 2020. The objective was to promote and grow forest spaces in urban areas. The Nagar Van Yojna envisages developing a thousand urban forests by the year 2027. According to the India State of Forest Report 2023, the scheme has resulted in an increase of 1445.81 km of tree and forest cover.

Why is the threat to urban forests concerning?

Rapidly urbanising India grapples with the consequences of abysmal regard for environmental conservation and sustainability. The threat to urban forests is a

challenge to our biomedical, social, and cultural well-being. It is imperative that we, the people, play a role as citizens and civil society.

The Supreme Court order directing the Telangana government to restore the forested area of Kancha Gachibowli augurs well for a holistic soul searching. The mushrooming concrete jungles in the cities shall not devour the urban forests.

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