

Case study 2: Theme: Socio-economic Status

A headline that hides more than it reveals: A case study about the widely popularised claims by the Government of India about increase in forest coverage.

Case study: Forest expansion

The state of India forest report 2021, produced by the Forest Survey of India, under the Ministry of Environment and Forest claims that forest cover in India has expanded. This has been widely reported in the media. However, this claim has been refuted by many scientists and experts. This case will explore narrative building, players, public perception, and its impacts. We will also look into the larger unscientific narrative building surrounding tree planting.

Context:

Under subsequent post liberalization regimes, especially under the Modi regime, India has been trying to present itself as a business-friendly state. Big industrialists have always been a big part of the ruling ultra-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's financial support base. The introduction of anonymous electoral bonds where donors can donate money anonymously to political parties has strengthened the state-corporate nexus and crony capitalism. Facing a financial crisis, the Indian state has also been trying to attract foreign investment. One casualty of this focus on ease-to-do business at any cost has been the labor and environmental legislations. The Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change has been constantly critiqued by environmental activists and experts for diluting the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification, Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) notification, and the Forest Conservation Act.

At the same time, India has been posing as a climate change champion and advocate for environmental conservation on the international stage. In COP26, Narendra Modi pledged to achieve net-zero by 2070 impressing international and domestic audiences. Mr. Modi also received the CERAWEEK global energy and environment leadership award in 2021.

On the domestic front, there have been simultaneous attempts to wed ecology and spirituality by the right-wing leaning spiritual guru Jaggi Vasudev popularly known as Sadguru. His organization, Isha Foundation, through its ‘Rally for Rivers - Cauvery Calling’ campaign, initiated a plan to plant 2.42 billion trees along the Cauvery River. However, scientists pointed out that reasons for Cauvery’s degradation are the multiple major dams built for hydropower, drinking water and irrigation, rapid urbanization in the catchment area and rampant sand mining¹. Tree planting thus appears to be a simplistic solution that does not take into account the complexity of these problems. Additionally, if not done in a scientific and participatory manner, it can lead to adverse problems. For example, afforestation should suit the landscape and should be done using local gene pools to retain biodiversity and should not lead to monoculture plantations. D. Narasimhan, noted botanist observes as follows: “Riverbanks ought to have riverine vegetation that varies from one section of the river to the other. Grasses, shrubs and wetlands – not merely trees – are essential for the integrity of the river and riverine habitats. Tree-centered economic considerations can often conflict with ecological goals.”² (As cited by Nityanand Jayaraman). Also, tree planting on village commons and natural grasslands will have adverse social and ecological impacts.

Largely it can be observed that there was an attempt at narrative building where tree planting / tree coverage was being equated with environmental conservation while diverting attention from environmental justice struggles by farmers, fishers and Adivasis against excessive damming, mining and industrial pollution. While scientists and activists have been attempting to counter this narrative, Vasudev and his brand of environmentalism has managed to capture the imagination of the Indian middle class and elite abroad. He was awarded Padmavibhushan, India’s second highest civilian award in 2019. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) accredited his organization, Isha Foundation with Observer status to the United Nations Environment

¹ <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/01/mass-tree-planting-along-indias-cauvery-river-has-scientists-worried/>

² <https://thewire.in/environment/jaggi-vasudev-rally-for-rivers-isha-foundation-cauvery-riverbank-sand-mining>

Assembly and its subsidiary bodies³. Leonardo DiCaprio, Hollywood actor known for his environmental activism, endorsed Vasudev's Cauvery Calling campaign as well.

However, environmental activists who stood with local communities, farmers, Adivasis and fishers have not been as lucky as Sadguru with regard to their treatment by the government. The websites of Let India Breathe, a youth collective, was blocked by National Internet Exchange of India, after it initiated a letter campaign criticizing the draft environmental impact assessment legislation. Police firing against local community members protesting against expansion of a copper smelter plant in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu led to 13 deaths. Disha Ravi, a 22-year-old climate activist associated with 'Fridays for future' was arrested for compiling a google doc containing information, hashtags, suggested actions, ideas and contact in support for the 2021 farmer's protest⁴. Prominent anti mining and tribal rights activist Hidme Markam, from the Koya tribe, arrested in 2021 while protesting the death of a woman in police custody is yet to be released as of June 2022. However, it must be noted that prosecuting environmental defenders was not a post BJP phenomenon but one that is a legacy of neoliberal United Progressive Alliance (UPA) 1st and 2nd terms led by the central left Indian National Congress party.

The state of India Forest report

The India state forest report (IFSR) 2021 was ⁵published by Forest Survey of India (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change). Forest cover as reported in IFSR includes all patches of land with a tree canopy density of more than 10% and with the area having more than 1 hectare, irrespective of land use, ownership, and species. It was assessed by remote sensing followed by ground-truthing.

To cite the report, "the current assessment shows an increase of 1540 sq.km (.22%) of forest cover, 721 sq km (.76%) of tree cover and 2261 sq km (.28%) of forest and tree cover together, at the national level compared to previous assessment, IFSR 2019".

³ https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement/accreditation/list-accredited-organizations?field_major_group_target_id=All&field_associated_region_target_id=61&field_country_target_id=218

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/18/disha-ravi-the-climate-activist-who-became-the-face-of-indias-crackdown-on-dissent>

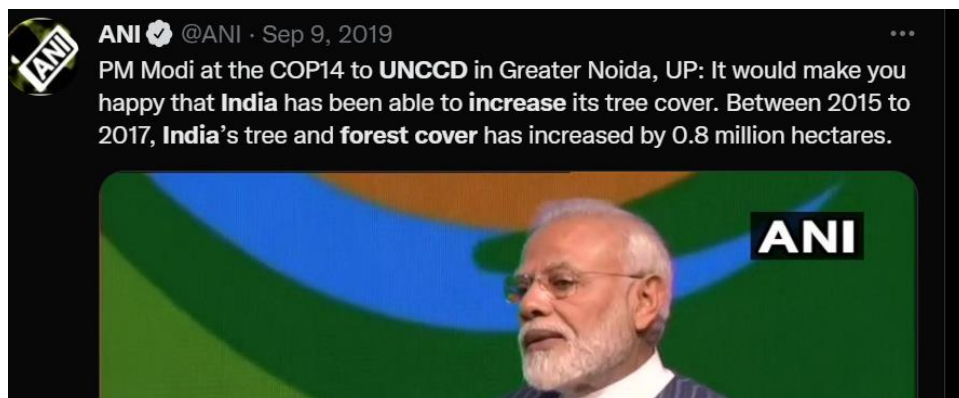
⁵ <https://fsi.nic.in/forest-report-2021>

This was highlighted as a major achievement by the government. For example, see the press release dated 13 Jan 2022 ⁶by Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change that claims ‘Forest Survey report 2021 released; increase of 2,261 sq km in the total forest and tree cover of the country in last two years’ and it further claims that ‘Total carbon stock in country’s forest is estimated to be 7,204 million tones, an increase of 79.4 million. Total mangrove cover in the country is 4,992 sq km, an increase of 17 sq Km observed’

PMO India also proudly tweeted this.



The same narrative was repeated at the international forums to show India’s commitment to environmental conservation.



A union minister even claimed that India exceeded Aichi targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

⁶ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1789635>



The same narrative was also repeated by spiritual gurus close to the government such as Gurudev Sri Sri Ravishankar.



IFS (Indian Forest Officers) association also repeated the government narrative



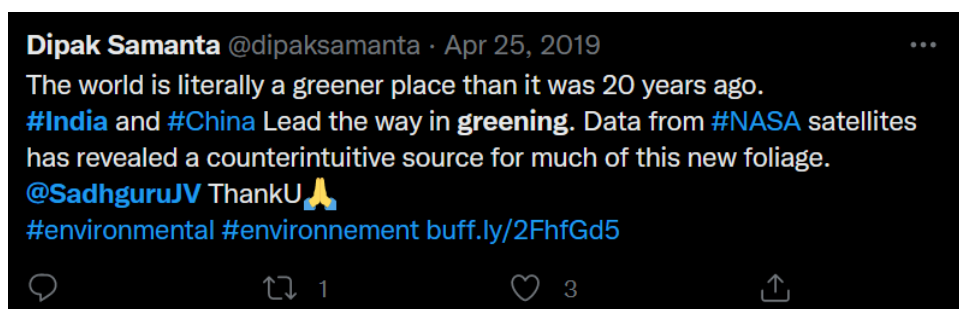
This narrative was spread by right wing aligned social media users as well. The tweet below by an influencer with 226.2K followers also takes a not-so-subtle dig against public protests.



Another tweet by a former union minister with 261.8 K followers equates increase in forest coverage with increased protection of biodiversity and wildlife.



Interestingly, Jaggy Vasudev, another spiritual leader close to the government who also engages in environmental activism, remained silent on the report. However, some of his followers were quick to attribute the forest coverage expansion to the success of the Cauvery Calling movement.



While the Nasa report indeed acknowledges India for its greening (more than 6% increase in leaf area in a decade) due to ambitious tree planting program and intensive agriculture, it doesn't differentiate between biodiverse forests or monoculture plantations. IFSR 2019, acknowledges that plantations/trees outside forests' already account for nearly 9% of the total area under forests.

Hidden information

However, these posts mask the real loss in forest coverage. Three such factors highlighting the real state of forest coverage in India were deliberately omitted by the governmental agencies, right wing politicians and their supporters.

Firstly, IFSR improved its resolution from 1:250,000 to 1:50,000 thus enabling it to capture any land even small as 0.01 Sq km with more than 10% canopy area as forest including small, denuded forests that were not captured earlier contributing to 'forest gain'⁷.

Secondly, no distinction is made here on the grounds of land ownership, legal status, land use, ecosystem, or the type of trees. The green cover recorded by satellites as forest cover may include tree orchards, bamboo, palms and coconut trees, canal-side plantations, rubber, tea, and coffee plantations⁸.

Thirdly, from the report itself, forest coverage under moderately dense forests is shrinking, but open forests are increasing thus indicating a decline in old and protected forests⁹. The report also shows a worrying trend of decrease in forest in forest coverage in North East India which are old and biodiverse with high carbon sequestration capacities.

⁷ <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/indias-forest-cover-growing-isfr-data-masking-harsher-on-ground-realities/1809920/>

⁸ <https://factly.in/data-forest-cover-in-india-increased-by-about-22000-sq-km-between-2011-2021-the-size-of-mizoram/>

⁹ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/india-s-forest-cover-increased-during-2019-2021-is-it-really-as-good-as-it-sounds--81108>

These factors were not shared by the government agencies or their supporters while the headline ‘Increase in forest coverage’ was widely shared.

Applying the ABCDE framework

<p>Actor</p>	<p>Union ministers, Supporters of BJP (the party in power at the union level) , central government agencies; BJP/ally governed state government leaders and agencies whose states were shown an increase in forest cover as per the report</p> <p>Scientists, environmental activists and environmental journalists</p> <p>print and online media</p> <p>some of the actors acted in a personal capacity while some acted in official and political capacity</p>
<p>Behavior</p>	<p>Non-abusive, sharing information in international forums (hiding methodology and nuances in public) by state actors (element - deliberately deceptive behavior)</p> <p>And exposing the methodology and providing on ground evidence for forest degradation by non-state actors</p> <p>It appears most persons acting in private capacities shared the headline with genuine intentions believing it to be true</p>
<p>Content</p>	<p>True as per State of Forest report; verifiable; tone - self congratulatory and pride. Mostly shared by English language speaking users</p>

Degree	audience: UN agencies (UNNCD, UNEP), general public Limited coordination between governmental agencies and right-wing supporters no microtargeting or inauthentic boost could be identified
Effect	Critiqued by experts and environmental organizations but the false perception that forest cover has increased will pose difficulties for environmental conservation and would speed up forest degradation. Thus adversely impacting socio economic status and sustainable development

Category: Disinformation

Diagnosis was arrived at by looking at behaviour and content. methodology and nuances were deliberately hidden by state actors but it was verifiable)

Critical response

The claims of the government were refuted by multiple experts and environmental organisations. Chief among them being MD Madhusudan, senior scientist (on sabbatical) of Nature Conservation Foundation, a Bangalore based environmental organisation. He responded to the tweet by the IFS officers as follows and subsequently, they deleted the tweet.


← **Thread**

 **M D Madhusudan**
@mdmadhusudan

Please. You're embarrassing yourself. Greening ≠ Forest Cover Increase.

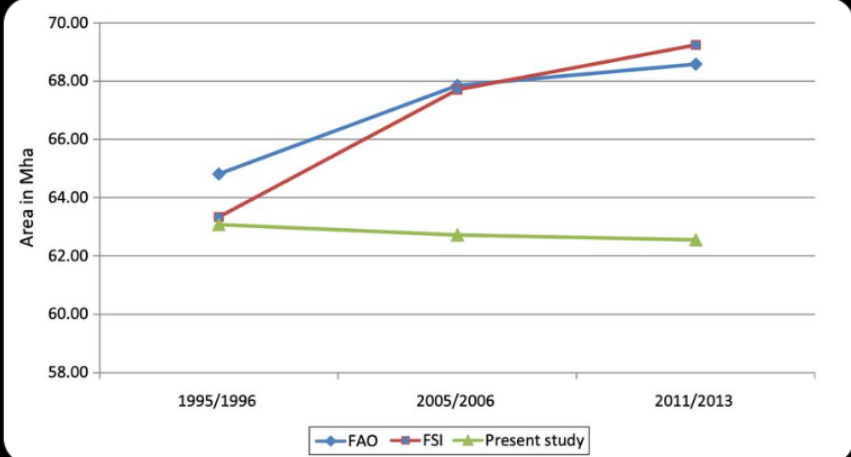
Here's what the paper cited is actually saying: "The greening in China is from forests (42%) and croplands (32%), but in India is mostly from croplands (82%) with minor contribution from forests (4.4%)".
[twitter.com/Centralfs/sta...](https://twitter.com/Centralfs/status/1458888888)

He further presented evidence supporting his claims.

 **M D Madhusudan** @mdmadhusudan · Dec 8, 2021

The challenge and exasperation of parsing government data on **forest cover**, in one graph.

Over the same period, the FSI reported a sharp 6 million hectare 'increase' in India's **forest cover** (red line), while a 2015 NRSC-led study (green line) reported a gradual decline.



Year	FAO (Mha)	FSI (Mha)	Present study (Mha)
1995/1996	64.8	63.2	63.0
2005/2006	67.8	67.8	62.8
2011/2013	68.5	69.2	62.5

Madhusudan's arguments were further supported by other environmental organisations and scientists. Twitter users pointed out how residential green cover was covered as forest.



Articles were also published in print media refuting the claim with an environmental magazine observing ‘India is losing its existing natural forest cover and compensating it with mere plantations’¹⁰ Global Forest Watch (affiliated with World Resource Institute) reports also refuted the government claims

“Data from GFW suggests India also lost a larger area under tree cover in humid primary forests in 2020 (20.8 kilo hectares) compared to 17.3 kha in 2019. From 2002 to 2020, India lost 349 kilo hectares of humid primary forest, making up 19% of its total tree cover loss in the same time period. The total area of humid primary forest in India decreased by 3.4% during this period.¹¹”

A report from Hindu¹² observes as follows:

“Starting in 2001, the ISFRs made some big changes to the way they classified and counted pixels in a satellite image as forest. They began using finer-scaled satellite imagery and an entirely digital workflow to analyse them. In addition, the ISFRs also changed their definition of a forest. They now explicitly included any lands of at least one hectare area and with 10% or more tree cover, regardless of the tree species on the land, or the purpose for which it was grown, or its ownership, as forest. So, all of a sudden, tea estates, coconut plantations, mango orchards, homestead gardens of suburban housing developments, and even tree-lined avenues in densely built-up cities

¹⁰ <https://india.mongabay.com/2022/01/analysis-indian-forests-around-the-size-of-nagaland-thinned-down-in-two-years/>

¹¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/environment/rainforest-destruction-went-up-by-12-in-2020-says-report-101617170691972.html#:~:text=Data%20from%20GFW%20suggests%20India,in%20the%20same%20time%20period.>

¹² <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/is-indias-forest-cover-really-increasing-official-maps-dont-tell-you-the-whole-truth/article38412109.ece>

were being classified as ‘forest’. In one stroke, just between 1999 and 2001, this redefinition helped raise India’s forest cover by over 38,000 sq.km., the size of Kerala.”

Media platforms that gave comprehensive coverage to the issue included environmental media such as Mongabay, Wire Science, and Down To Earth

Concluding remarks

This false narrative that forest coverage has increased would enable governments to go ahead with diversion of actual forest for dams, mines and mega industrial projects at the same time appeasing international environmental organisations. These diverted lands often belong to Adivasis, fishers and other marginalised communities.

Popularisation of these narratives also portrays afforestation as a single solution for environmental issues. This is problematic as India government’s compensatory afforestation program itself has been critiqued for planting monoculture plantations and grabbing land belonging to local communities¹³. Additionally, new forest saplings cannot compensate for the loss of carbon stocks or ecosystem services provided by old forests.

This focus on forest coverage can also be used to divert attention from other issues like massive erosion faced by India’s coasts, landslides due to infrastructure projects in north east India, suppression of grassroots environmental justice movements and anti-environmental legislations.

¹³ <https://india.mongabay.com/2021/08/compensatory-afforestation-unlikely-to-make-up-for-the-loss-of-carbon-stocks/>

