



Himalayan questions

Environmental issues have failed to dominate the campaign in an eco-fragile Uttarakhand.



Highlights:

1. In the run-up to the Uttarakhand Assembly elections, temples and development are among the issues raised by politicians.
2. Going into the elections, everyone from Prime Minister to local leaders in the BJP has touted the redevelopment of Kedarnath as among the achievements of what they call the “double engine” government in the Centre and Uttarakhand.
3. In December, Mr Modi inaugurated the start of the Lakhwar multi-purpose project and ₹8,700 crore-worth of road projects. With the Government backing major infrastructure projects, Mr Modi termed this the decade of Uttarakhand.
4. While environmentalists have raised concerns over rules being broken for the large infrastructure projects, major parties have not yet raised the environmental concerns.
5. A raft of promises, from free water and electricity to better schools, is being made. What is lacking is an informed debate on a development model that is suitable to the ecologically fragile place that Uttarakhand is.

Why India is unwilling to discuss forests at international fora

India's palm oil imports are already linked to deforestation, biodiversity loss and land conflicts in Southeast Asia. Will the same pattern be repeated in India's North East?



The Deforestation Declaration and Indian absence

1. At the 26th Conference of Parties (CoP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow, 141 countries got together to sign the Declaration on Forests and Land Use (or the Deforestation Declaration).



2. These countries, which represented over 90 per cent of forests across the world, committed to “halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030 while delivering sustainable development and promoting an inclusive rural transformation”. The signatories committed \$19 billion in private and public funds to this end.
3. India was among the few countries that did not sign the declaration. According to official sources quoted in the media, India had concerns about the linkage the declaration makes between deforestation, infrastructure development and trade.
4. Since then, analysts in India have linked the decision to a proposed amendment to the Forest Conservation Act 1980 that would ease the clearances presently required for acquiring forest land for new infrastructure projects.
5. One key perspective on the decision is that since India has recorded an increase of 0.5 per cent in its total forest cover according to the India State of Forests Report (ISFR) 2019, the country can justify not signing the declaration.
6. This perspective has been somewhat strengthened further as ISFR 2021, published recently, shows that the total forest cover has grown by 0.22 per cent, a lower yet significant growth.



Issues with Indian definition of forest cover:

1. Of course, there are issues with the way India defines forest cover, which includes lands more than one hectare (ha) in size and 10 per cent tree canopy density regardless of the tree species, ownership and land use.
2. The UNFCCC, in the past, has asked India to do a more accurate evaluation of its forests based on the delineation of lands bearing palm, bamboo and orchards as the current definition may exaggerate the forest cover by 5-12 per cent.
3. Regardless, the data based on the current definition ensures that the need for India to sign the deforestation declaration doesn't arise.

A clear pattern

1. A look at India's positions on some other recent critical pledges and decisions related to climate change reveals a clear pattern of objections or absence.
2. At CoP26, India was not part of the dialogue on Forests, Agriculture and Commodity Trade (FACT).
3. FACT, which is supported by 28 countries (including forest-rich tropical countries like Brazil and Indonesia), seeks to encourage "sustainable development and trade of agricultural commodities while protecting and managing sustainably forests and other critical ecosystems".
4. India also voted against a recent draft resolution to allow for discussions related to climate change and its impact on international peace and security to be taken up at the UN Security Council.

Flawed objections

1. Broadly speaking, all of India's objections are based on procedural issues at multilateral fora.
2. Although justifiable on paper, these objections seem blind to the diverse ways in which climate change is linked to global trade, deforestation, agriculture, and international peace, among other issues.

Palm oil and environment:

1. For context, consider India's palm oil trade. India is the largest importer of crude palm oil in the world, with a 37 per cent share in global imports of the commodity (worth \$3.1 billion as of 2019).



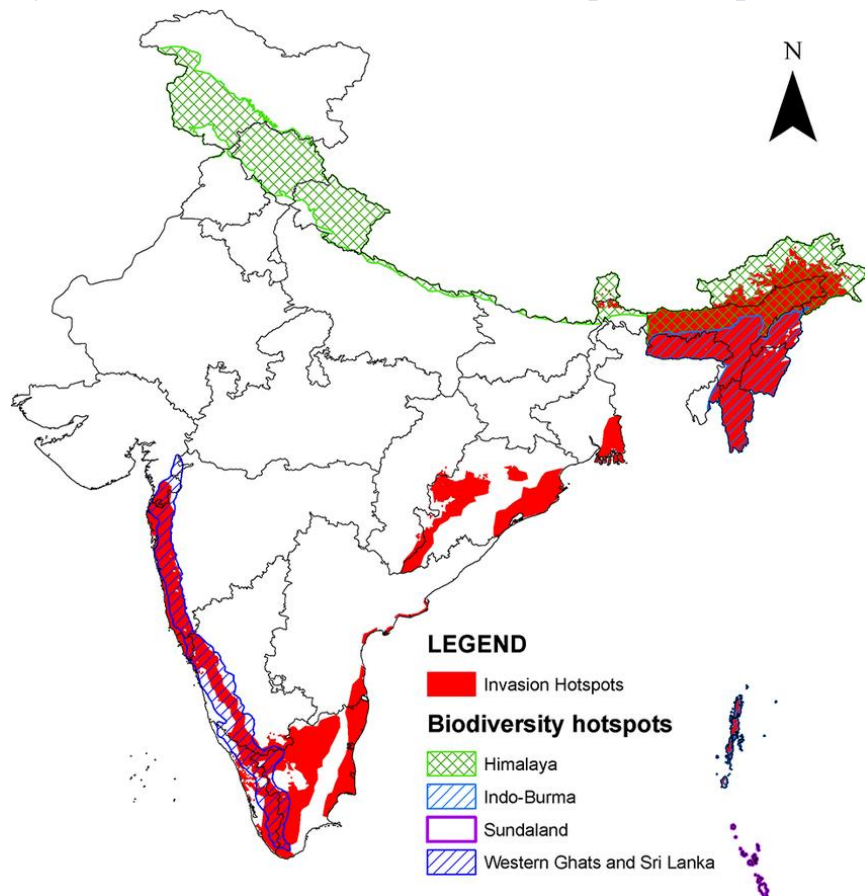
2. The country sources its palm oil from Indonesia (65.6 per cent), Malaysia (26.1 per cent), Singapore (5.27 per cent) and Thailand (2.8 per cent).
3. Large-scale deforestation threatens wildlife and indigenous communities in the two countries. Palm oil cultivation in Indonesia alone has resulted in 4,000 land conflicts between indigenous communities and palm oil companies.
4. Most often in these conflicts, indigenous communities face forced displacement at the hands of the companies, among other kinds of rights violations.
5. In addition, deforestation for palm oil cultivation also contributes significantly to global warming by not only releasing massive amounts of carbon dioxide but also reducing available carbon sinks.

6. Needless to say, any effort to combat the adverse impacts of palm oil cultivation

requires dialogues at various international fora related to trade, climate change, deforestation, etc

7. The objective of all such dialogues has to be a convergence of goals and commitments.

This is why India's recent objections to the crucial international declarations seem spurious at best.



What is India up to?

1. Data from Global Forest Watch shows that between 2001-2020, India lost 1.93 million hectares (Mha) of its tree cover amounting to 951 metric tonnes CO₂ equivalent (MtCO₂e).
2. The top five states that accounted for the highest tree cover loss between 2001-2020 are all in the North East, namely, Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur.

CABINET APPROVES IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL MISSION ON EDIBLE OILS - OIL PALM

This centrally sponsored scheme will especially focus on the Northeast region and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Total financial outlay – **Rs 11,040 crore**
Govt of India share – **Rs 8,844 crore**
States' share – **Rs 2,196 crore**

Production of Crude Palm Oil expected to go upto **11.2 lakh tonnes by 2025-26** and upto **28 lakh tonnes by 2029-30**

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3. Data from ISFR 2021 also shows that there was a net decrease of 0.6 per cent of total forest cover in the North East states compared to ISFR 2019.
4. Much of this loss can be attributed to a decrease in moderately dense forests and open forests in the respective states

Indian Palm Oil Mission and Northeast Forest Cover:

1. India's North-East accounts for around a third of the total biodiversity in the country. Part of the Indo-Burma global biodiversity hotspot, it is a fragile region where the lives of flora and fauna as well as various tribal communities, are intricately linked to its forests.
2. Despite that, the North East is one of the two regions (the other being the Andaman and Nicobar Islands) chosen by the current government for the implementation of its new National Mission on Edible Oils - Oil Palm.



3. The mission has been launched to reduce the country's heavy reliance on imports for palm oil by increasing its domestic area and productivity. The scheme seeks to increase the area under palm oil cultivation by 6.5 lakh ha to reach a total area of 10 lakh ha by 2025-26.
4. This will inevitably lead to more deforestation and biodiversity loss in the North East and given that India's forest cover mapping doesn't delineate palm plantations, such loss may not even be accounted for in future forest surveys.
5. So far, there has been no indication from the government as to whether the scheme will have any safeguards for the sustainable and responsible production of palm oil.
6. All answers to that question are only speculative at present. However, such questions need to be at least discussed in a way that accounts for the cross-cutting nature of deforestation, climate change, international trade, livelihoods and conflicts across geographies globally.

India's recent spate of objections at multilateral fora indicates an unwillingness to engage with all these issues comprehensively, explained in part by its domestic priorities regarding deforestation.