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MAJOR SHORTFALL IN AFFORESTATION

- A report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) states that India's Green India Mission fell short of its afforestation target by about 98% over the last decade.
- The Paris Agreement on climate change was adopted on December 12, 2015. India committed to creating an additional carbon sink capable of absorbing the equivalent of 2.5-3 billion tonnes of CO_2 by 2030.
- The Green India Mission sought to protect, restore and improve forests by planting trees in forest and non-forest areas.
- Between 2015-16 and 2024-25, the Mission set a target of developing forests over 14 lakh hectares, but the CAG found that only about 34,000 hectares had been added or improved to the intended extent.
- This represents an afforestation shortfall of about 98%. The target for improving the quality of existing forests also fell short by around 92%.
- The programme was estimated to require Rs. 40,600 crore, while the Union Cabinet approved Rs. 2,400 crore. The source states that only a much smaller amount was actually released over the decade, which it identifies as a major reason for poor implementation.
- Attempts were made to supplement funding through other schemes such as the employment-guarantee programme and compensatory-afforestation mechanisms, but these operated through separate departmental structures.
- Several States also failed to submit annual action plans on time, making monitoring difficult.
- The CAG study covered 16 States. Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are described as showing relatively better progress in building forest carbon sinks.
- In Tamil Nadu, delays in approval and release of annual-plan funds meant that planting could not always be aligned with the appropriate monsoon season. Funding was also inadequate for post-planting maintenance such as watering and weeding.
- The source further criticises the tendency to undertake afforestation mainly in easily accessible areas rather than identifying and restoring forest areas most vulnerable to climate stress.

UNION GOVERNMENT'S PETITION ON OBC CREAMY-LAYER ELIGIBILITY - SPECIAL HEARING

- The creamy-layer principle applies to the Other Backward Classes. It identifies socially and economically advanced persons within OBCs; the source cites the present annual family-income threshold as above Rs. 8 lakh for exclusion from reservation benefits.
- In 2004 the Union Government issued a clarification for cases where parents of OBC candidates work in public-sector enterprises, banks, universities or private companies and their posts have not been formally equated with government posts.

- In such cases, creamy-layer status was to be determined through an income test.
- Income from the parents and other sources, excluding the categories specified in the clarification, is examined; if it remains above the prescribed threshold for three consecutive years, the candidate may be treated as belonging to the creamy layer.
- Several candidates who qualified in the UPSC Civil Services Examination claimed OBC non-creamy-layer reservation.
- UPSC treated some of them as creamy-layer candidates because their parents worked in public-sector undertakings, banks or similar institutions under the 2004 clarification.
- Candidates challenged the decision before the Central Administrative Tribunal and the High Courts of Madras, Delhi and Kerala. The High Courts ruled in favour of the candidates, and the Union Government appealed to the Supreme Court.
- In a March 11 hearing, the Supreme Court held that OBC creamy-layer status cannot be decided mechanically on the basis of parents' monthly salary alone.
- Referring to the constitutional purpose identified in the Indra Sawhney judgment, the Court stated that the parents' post and social status must be considered along with income, and that arbitrary distinctions between children of private-sector and government employees would offend equality.

"WE ARE SITTING ON A TREASURE"

- The combined weight of passengers and cargo aboard the Titanic is stated as about 22,000 tonnes; the source uses this comparison to illustrate the enormous quantity of gold privately held in India.
- According to an estimate attributed to Morgan Stanley, Indians privately hold around 35,000 tonnes of gold, the largest private gold stock in the world.
- Between 2000 and 2025 alone, India imported about 700 tonnes of gold valued at around US$507 billion, excluding additional gold brought by travellers or through smuggling.
- The market value of the roughly 35,000 tonnes of household gold held outside the formal financial system is estimated at more than US$5 trillion.
- In the previous financial year India imported gold worth around US$72 billion.
- India's gold-import volume is stated to have doubled over the last three years.
- After crude oil, gold is described as one of the biggest import pressures on India's foreign-exchange position.
- Gold is not an essential production input; the source states that only about 13% of gold use is industrial/productive.
- When gold prices began rising from 2024, more people began investing in gold, sharply increasing demand for coins and bars.
- Higher customs duties can restrain imports to some extent, but gold imports have continued to rise.
- The source states that the effective gold-import tax under trade arrangements with the UAE increased from 5% to 14%, which reduced imports somewhat.
- It estimates that a roughly nine-percentage-point increase in import duty could save about US$9 billion in foreign exchange, while also warning that smuggling could rise.
- Two broad forms of gold demand in India - The first is social and cultural demand: jewellery purchased for weddings, religious ceremonies, Akshaya Tritiya and other traditional occasions.
- The source says this type of demand should not simply be suppressed because of its deep social and cultural significance.
- The second is investment demand through gold bars, coins and similar products, which is less connected to emotion or ritual.

- Demand for investment gold is described as rising sharply in the latest financial year and continuing into the current year.
- By March 2026, investment gold in India is stated to be about 115 tonnes, valued at around Rs. 1.7 trillion or US$18.5 billion.
- Such gold is imported after paying duty, insured and then stored in vaults, incurring additional storage costs.
- The article argues that mobilising even a small part of India's privately held gold for the world market could ease foreign-exchange and current-account pressures.
- Central banks around the world are said to have purchased about 3,500 tonnes of gold over the previous four years.
- Converting even 10% of the estimated 35,000 tonnes of idle private gold into foreign currency, the source argues, could eliminate India's current-account deficit.

WHO WILL PROTECT LIFE-SAVING FOOTPATHS?

» Walking is a basic right

- A recent Supreme Court judgment emphasised that a footpath is not an optional municipal amenity but is closely connected with constitutional rights and public safety.
- Safe pedestrian infrastructure is directly linked to saving lives.
- State governments and local bodies should formulate clear policies for building and maintaining footpaths.
- A city that cannot be walked safely contributes to disease. India is urbanising quickly while physical activity is declining.
- Lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity and fatty-liver disease are rising.
- Walking is presented as the simplest and least expensive preventive measure.
- WHO-related physical-activity data cited in the article indicate that nearly half of Indian adults do not achieve the recommended level of exercise, with the situation worse among women.
- Physical inactivity is also high among children and adolescents aged 11-17.
- The problem is not merely individual laziness; many cities do not provide safe environments in which people can walk.
- A footpath is described as more than a cement surface: it is preventive health infrastructure.
- Regular walking helps control blood pressure, improves insulin sensitivity, reduces body weight and supports sleep and joint health.

» Planned urban design is essential

- If cities provide safe, continuous and shaded footpaths, many people would avoid unnecessary use of cars and two-wheelers.
- Encroachments are a major threat to pedestrians, but occasional removal drives alone are not a lasting solution because the same problems return.
- Street vendors should not be treated as enemies; they too have a right to livelihood.
- Cities should therefore be scientifically planned with separate pedestrian paths, designated vending spaces, organised vehicle parking and utility corridors for electricity, water and telecommunications.
- After adequate space has been provided, persistent encroachment of footpaths should attract strict action.

» The civilisation of a city

- A city's development should not be measured merely by the number of flyovers; the real test is whether everyone from children to senior citizens can walk without fear.
- The number and quality of kilometres of safe footpaths should become a development indicator.
- Safe footpaths are investments in public health, guarantees of road safety and symbols of social justice.
- Every newly built road should include a continuous footpath of adequate width, shade trees, ramps for persons with disabilities, safe road crossings and obstruction-free access around bus stops.
- Footpaths should be wide enough for two people to pass each other and for wheelchair users to travel safely.
- Priority should be given to schools, hospitals, bus stations, markets, metro stations and other high-pedestrian areas.
- Shade, seating, public toilets and sufficient street lighting are not luxuries; they are basic infrastructure needed for women, children, senior citizens and persons with disabilities to walk safely.

» Walking as a national policy

- India needs an effective national urban-mobility policy integrating city development, transport, public health and education, with walking placed at the centre of planning.
- Every municipal corporation and municipality should publish a map of footpaths in its jurisdiction.
- An annual audit of encroachment-free footpaths should be conducted and the report made available for public scrutiny.