

Xplore

## North-East lost forest cover equal to thrice Delhi's area in last two decades

*During this period, except Assam, all other states in the region recorded loss in forest cover.*



File picture of an under-construction tunnel in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh Photo | ANI

**Pijush Kumar Dutta**

Updated on: 11 Jan 2025, 10:30 am | 4 min read | The New Indian Express

The 18th edition of the India State of Forest Report 2023 (ISFR 2023) released on December 21, reported an increase in the country's forest cover by 156.41 sq km in the last two years. The Forest Survey of India (FSI) defines "forest cover" as land with tree canopy density exceeding 10% and covering at least one hectare, which thus includes plantations. According to the report, losses in forest cover have been

recorded in the Western Ghats and Eastern States Area (58.22 sq km) and the Northeast (327.30 sq km) since 2021.

An analysis of the changes in forest cover in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura in the last two decades (2003 to 2023) suggests the situation is quite alarming. According to ISFR reports (2003, 2013 and 2023), the region lost 4,490 sq km of forest cover at the average rate of 224 sq km per year despite inclusion of the area under plantation in SIFR. Total loss within the last two decades is equal to three times the area of Delhi.

Maximum loss of 2,137.43 sq km has been recorded in Arunachal Pradesh, which is 3.24% of the forest area recorded in 2003. Nagaland, which is second, lost around 1,386.53 sq km forest cover, which is 11.34% of what was recorded in 2003. Assam and Meghalaya recorded an increase in forest cover in the last two decades (487.55 and 127.84 sq km). However, two areas under Autonomous Councils in Assam, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill recorded a total loss of around 529 sq km forest cover during the same period.

Decadal trend analysis showed that of the total loss in forest cover in between 2003 and 2023, nearly 83% of the total loss occurred in the last decade between 2013 and 2023. During this period, except Assam, all other states in the region recorded loss in forest cover. Maximum loss of around 1,439.43 sq km was recorded in Arunachal Pradesh followed by Mizoram and Nagaland where the corresponding figures were 1,063.54 sq km and 821.53 sq km of forest cover.

However, during the same period, Assam recorded an increase in forest cover by 642.55 sq km though Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hill lost around 416.47 sq km forest cover.

The accelerated rate of loss in forest cover in the last decade can be attributed largely to the push for development in the region which is still one of the most isolated and underdeveloped areas of India. In the region which has more than 60% of total area under forest with the lowest recorded in Assam (35%) and highest in Nagaland (90%), according to ISFR 2013, loss of a certain amount of forest cover for the implementation of development projects to meet the aspiration of local people of the region is inevitable. Considering the strategic importance of the region, which shares an international boundary with China, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, the government took multiple initiatives to improve connectivity, which is critical for India.

In the last decade, according to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highway, the total length of roads in the region increased from 4.81 lakh km to 6.38 lakh km. According to the Ministry of Development of the North-East Region, during the same period around 1,544 km of railway sections in the region were commissioned and 17 airports made operational. Improved connectivity contributed to moving the region along the upward trajectory of development.

Though development of the region needs to be top priority for the government, it is important to plan the 'trade-off' between the conservation of forest and development in a very judicious and scientific manner. It is important to ensure minimum damage to the unique biodiversity as the region is part of two global biodiversity hotspots, Himalayas and Indo Myanmar. The region is also known for its extraordinarily rich cultural diversity with more than 200 tribal communities inhabiting the region as their cultural identity and way of life is closely linked with the surrounding nature.

Thus, it is important to have a clear understanding of what is being lost and from where it is being lost to avoid any irreparable damage to the local ecology which has both high biodiversity and cultural significance. There is a need for a legal mechanism to support and promote local stewardship over natural resources by using the special Constitutional provisions that are available for the region to safeguard the traditional way of life of local tribal communities. There is a need to incorporate learnings from the negative impact of the development process being adopted in other mountain states of India. This can include the loss of both human life and property during the disaster in Uttarakhand in 2013 and very recently in Wayanad, Kerala in 2024. The region being highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change, it is important to adopt a green development agenda, which will ensure meeting the development goals of the region without enhancing the vulnerability of local communities in the days ahead.

**(Views are personal)**

**Pijush Kumar Dutta**

**Faculty, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru**

**Source:** <https://www.newindianexpress.com/xplore/2025/Jan/11/north-east-lost-forest-cover-equal-to-thrice-delhis-area-in-last-two-decades>