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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India's Invasive Species Crisis — Prosopis Eradication Needs a National Strategy, Not Court Orders

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

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SUBJECTS COVERED**ENVIRONMENT****GS PAPERS****GS3****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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India's Invasive Species Crisis — Prosopis Eradication Needs a National Strategy, Not Court Orders

Down to Earth 22 March 2026 **GS3**

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"The Madras HC issued 34 directions to eradicate Prosopis juliflora — but can judicial mandates succeed where ecological policy has failed for decades?"

WHY IN NEWS

The Madras High Court's March 18, 2026 order issuing 34 directions for eradication of the invasive Prosopis juliflora (seemai karuvellam) highlights a growing national crisis — India's failure to manage invasive alien species threatens biodiversity, agriculture, and water resources across the country.

The Prosopis Problem

Prosopis juliflora was introduced in Tamil Nadu in **1959** as a drought-resistant firewood source. Seven decades later, it has:

- Invaded an estimated **50,000 sq km** across Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka
- **Depleted groundwater** through taproots reaching 50 metres depth
- **Destroyed biodiversity** in wetlands including Pulicat Lake, Kaliveli wetland, and parts of the Gulf of Mannar
- **Made agricultural land uncultivable** by forming impenetrable thorny thickets

Yet **90% of rural Tamil Nadu's population** uses Prosopis as their primary firewood and charcoal source — creating an **eradication-livelihood trade-off** that no court order can resolve.

India's Broader Invasive Species Crisis

Prosopis is not India's only invasive species emergency:

SPECIES	ORIGIN	IMPACT	AREA AFFECTED
Lantana camara	Central America	Blocks forest regeneration, reduces fodder	Pan-India forests
Water hyacinth	South America	Chokes water bodies, depletes oxygen	All major wetlands
Parthenium	Americas	Crop yield loss, allergies, skin diseases	Agricultural lands
Mikania micrantha	Central America	Smothers native vegetation (“mile-a-minute”)	NE India, Western Ghats
African catfish	Africa	Predates native fish species	Rivers across India

The **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA)** has identified invasive species as a **top threat** to India’s biodiversity, but there is **no national invasive species management framework**.

Why Court Orders Are Insufficient

The Madras HC’s 34 directions — including free native saplings for landowners and phased eradication plans — are well-intentioned but face fundamental challenges:

- ❶ **Ecology cannot be mandated:** Prosopis regenerates vigorously from cut stumps; seeds remain viable in soil for years; spread through livestock dung is impossible to control by court order
- ❷ **Livelihood impact:** Charcoal makers, fuel sellers, and honey producers depend on Prosopis — alternative livelihoods must be provided before eradication
- ❸ **Scale vs. resources:** Eradicating Prosopis from 50,000 sq km would cost **thousands of crores** over decades — no state budget can absorb this
- ❹ **Ecological complexity:** In some regions, Prosopis has become part of a **new ecological equilibrium** — removal without restoration planning can cause worse degradation

What India Needs

The editorial argues for a **National Invasive Species Management Act** with:

- ❶ **National inventory:** Map all invasive species across India — current data is fragmented across state forest departments
- ❷ **Risk assessment framework:** For any new species introduction — preventing the next Prosopis
- ❸ **Biocontrol research:** Invest in biological control agents (specific insects, pathogens) that can suppress invasive species without chemicals
- ❹ **Landscape-level approach:** Instead of complete eradication, manage Prosopis density — thin to 20-30% cover, plant native species in gaps

- 5 **Community participation:** Livelihood alternatives for Prosopis-dependent communities — biochar production, activated carbon, wood-based products

The CBD and Aichi Targets

India's commitments under the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** and the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF, 2022)** include Target 6: "Reduce the introduction of invasive alien species by at least 50% by 2030 and eliminate or reduce their impacts." India is significantly behind on this target.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prosopis juliflora, invasive species list, NBA, CBD, Kunming-Montreal GBF Target 6.

MAINS GS-3:

Environmental conservation, biodiversity threats, invasive species management, judicial activism in environmental governance.

MAINS GS-2:

Role of judiciary vs. executive in environmental policy.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

PROSOPIS JULIFLORA:

Family: Fabaceae

Native to: Central/South America

Introduced in India: 1959 (Tamil Nadu)

Area invaded: ~50,000 sq km across India

Local names: Seemai Karuvelam (Tamil), Vilayati Babool (Hindi)

IUCN: Listed among “100 Worst Invasive Alien Species”

KEY INVASIVE SPECIES IN INDIA:

Lantana camara: Forest degradation (Pan-India)

Water hyacinth (Eichhornia crassipes): Wetland choking

Parthenium hysterophorus: “Congress grass” — agriculture

Mikania micrantha: “Mile-a-minute” — NE India

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK:

Biological Diversity Act, 2002

National Biodiversity Authority (NBA): Chennai (est. 2003)

CBD: India ratified 1994

Kunming-Montreal GBF (2022): Target 6 — reduce invasive species introduction by 50% by 2030

Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972: Schedule IV lists invasive fauna

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Wildlife Institute of India (WII): Dehradun — invasive species research

IUCN Invasive Species Specialist Group (ISSG): Maintains Global Invasive Species Database

India: One of 17 megadiverse countries

Biocontrol: Using natural enemies to manage pests (e.g., Zygogramma beetle for Parthenium)

Sources: [Down to Earth](#), [Mongabay India](#), [The Hindu](#)

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