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India is Counting Trees When It Should Be Restoring Forests

 **THE HINDU**

18 August 2026

ENVIRONMENT**GS3****GS2**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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 The Hindu

18 August 2026

GS3

GS2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"The editorial argues sapling-counting is a poor proxy for actual ecological restoration. What metrics would better capture genuine forest-ecosystem health, canopy density, native-species survival, soil quality, over a metric as simple and gameable as "saplings planted"?"

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A tree planted is not a forest restored. The CAG audit's under-8% figure is what happens when a programme is measured by what's easy to count rather than what it actually set out to achieve.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This editorial gives a concrete, audited example of the output-versus-outcome measurement problem in government schemes, a reusable evaluative framework relevant to GS2 governance answers and GS3 environment-policy answers alike.

GS Paper 3: Environment and ecology, forest conservation, ecological restoration.

GS Paper 2: Government policy evaluation, performance audits, CAG's role.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Green India Mission	A National Action Plan on Climate Change mission targeting forest and ecosystem restoration	The specific scheme under audit
Output vs outcome metrics	Activity counts (saplings planted) vs actual ecological results (restored ecosystems)	The editorial's core analytical distinction
CAG performance audit	An independent institutional check on whether a scheme achieved its stated objectives	The evidentiary basis for the editorial's claim

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The **Green India Mission**, one of the eight missions under India's **National Action Plan on Climate Change**, aims to protect, restore and enhance India's forest cover and respond to climate change through improved ecosystem services. A recent **CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General) performance audit** examined the mission's actual ecological restoration achievements against its stated targets over roughly a decade of implementation, finding a stark shortfall despite extensive sapling-planting activity reported during the same period.

THE ANALYSIS

- 1. The CAG audit's institutional weight is significant.** An independent government auditor's finding of under-8% target achievement carries more evidentiary force than a journalistic or activist critique, making this a well-substantiated case study rather than a contested claim.
- 2. Sapling-planting counts and ecological restoration are analytically distinct outcomes.** A planted sapling that fails to survive, or survives without restoring functioning ecosystem processes, does not constitute genuine forest restoration, yet planting counts remain the most commonly publicised metric precisely because they are easy to report.
- 3. Invasive species and mining-related degradation are identified as the actual, addressable stressors.** These are structural ecological problems that tree-planting alone cannot solve, requiring active removal or management interventions distinct from simply adding new saplings to degraded land.
- 4. The metric-choice problem has a self-reinforcing political logic.** Visible, easily reportable metrics like planting counts are politically attractive regardless of their connection to actual outcomes, creating an incentive structure that can persist even when audits reveal the underlying restoration goal is not being met.
- 5. This reflects a broader governance-evaluation principle.** Any programme measured primarily by activity-level outputs rather than outcome-level results risks reporting apparent success while its substantive goal goes unmet, a pattern relevant well beyond forestry to welfare and infrastructure schemes generally.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Green India Mission: one of eight missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change

CAG performance audit found: under 8% of ecological restoration targets achieved

Identified restoration stressors: invasive species, mining-related degradation

WATCH THE TRAP: THE EDITORIAL DOES NOT CLAIM SAPLING PLANTING IS WORTHLESS; IT ARGUES PLANTING COUNTS ARE AN INADEQUATE PROXY FOR THE MISSION'S ACTUAL ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION OBJECTIVE.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR continuing large-scale planting drives. Even with imperfect survival rates, planting contributes some carbon sequestration and green cover, and remains a visible, popular form of climate action worth sustaining alongside other measures.

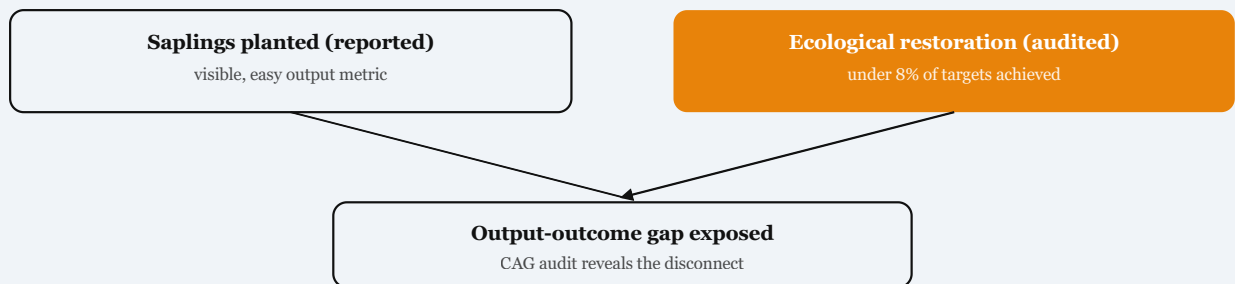
Argument AGAINST treating planting as sufficient (The Hindu's position). The CAG audit demonstrates that planting activity alone has not translated into genuine ecological restoration, and continuing to rely on it as the primary metric obscures the mission's actual shortfall.

Balanced verdict. Planting drives retain some value as a component of restoration strategy, but the audit is correct that they cannot substitute for outcome-focused metrics addressing invasive species and land degradation, and future programme design should weight these harder, less visible interventions more heavily.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when evaluating any government programme's success, distinguish carefully between activity-level output metrics and the actual outcome the programme was designed to achieve, since easily reportable outputs can persist as the public narrative even when independent audits reveal the substantive goal is unmet.** This applies across environmental, welfare and infrastructure programme evaluation alike.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



The Green India Mission’s easily reported saplings-planted output is contrasted with its audited ecological-restoration outcome, revealing a large, CAG-verified gap.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A tree planted is not a forest restored. The CAG audit’s under-8% figure is what happens when a programme is measured by what’s easy to count rather than what it actually set out to achieve.

Green India Mission (under NAPCC); CAG audit finds **under 8%** ecological restoration target achievement; stressors: **invasive species, mining**.

should government schemes be required to report outcome metrics, not just activity metrics, and what accountability mechanisms would enforce that shift?

UPSC has tested the National Action Plan on Climate Change and forest conservation (GS3); this editorial’s output-vs-outcome framing strengthens any such answer.

“Afforestation activity and forest restoration are not the same thing.” Discuss with reference to the Green India Mission’s CAG performance audit.

Sources: *The Hindu, Comptroller and Auditor General of India*

Source: India is Counting Trees When It Should Be Restoring Forests — Ujjayari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The Hindu covers a CAG performance audit finding the Green India Mission achieved less than 8% of its ecological restoration targets despite extensive sapling-planting drives, exposing a decade-long gap between the mission's stated ambition and actual ground reality, and argues genuine forest restoration requires tackling underlying ecological stressors like invasive species and mining rather than simply counting saplings planted.



SUPPORTING

- The CAG audit provides an independent, official verification of the gap between reported afforestation activity and actual ecological restoration outcomes, lending institutional weight to a critique that might otherwise be dismissed as anecdotal.
- Sapling-planting drives are visible, easily reportable, and politically popular, making them an attractive metric for governments to publicise even when they do not reliably translate into restored forest ecosystems.



COUNTER

A counter-view holds that large-scale sapling planting, even with imperfect survival rates, still contributes some carbon sequestration and green cover, and that dismissing planting drives entirely risks discouraging visible, popular climate action in favour of slower, less publicly legible restoration work.



WAY FORWARD

The Hindu's position is that the Green India Mission and similar programmes should shift their core metrics from saplings-planted counts toward genuine ecological restoration indicators, addressing invasive species, mining-related degradation, and long-term ecosystem health, even though these are harder to measure and less immediately visible than a planting count.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Discuss the gap between afforestation output metrics (saplings planted) and genuine ecological restoration outcomes, with reference to a CAG performance audit of the Green India Mission. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

The Hindu covers a CAG performance audit exposing a stark gap between the Green India Mission's ecological restoration targets and its actual achievement, arguing the mission's reliance on sapling-planting counts as its primary visible metric has obscured the mission's failure to address underlying ecological stressors.

BODY

The Green India Mission, part of India's National Action Plan on Climate Change, set ambitious targets for restoring degraded forest landscapes over roughly a decade. The CAG audit found actual ecological restoration achieved less than 8% of these targets, a stark shortfall that had been masked in public reporting by an emphasis on saplings planted, a metric that is easy to report and politically visible but does not reliably indicate whether restored land actually recovers functioning forest ecosystems.

The editorial's core argument is that genuine forest restoration requires addressing specific ecological stressors, invasive species that outcompete native vegetation, and mining-related land degradation that planting alone cannot reverse, rather than treating tree-planting numbers as a sufficient proxy for restoration success. This distinction between output metrics (saplings planted) and outcome metrics (functioning, restored ecosystems) is the editorial's central analytical contribution, and it argues that continuing to prioritise the former allows governments to claim success on paper while the underlying ecological degradation persists largely unaddressed.

CONCLUSION

A complete Mains answer should distinguish between afforestation as an activity and forest restoration as an outcome, since conflating the two allows programmes to report strong activity-level numbers while failing on the actual ecological goal they were designed to achieve.

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