



Growing together: A birthday planting pledge to nurture environmental responsibility in kids for a greener earth

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ABSTRACT: *Trees play a vital role in sustaining life by providing ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, and climate regulation. However, rapid deforestation and inadequate post-planting care have reduced India's green cover, leaving only 28 trees per person, which is far below the global average. The proposed initiative, "Growing Together: A Birthday Planting Pledge," encourages children aged 5–15 years to plant and nurture a tree on their birthdays each year. With 63.4 million children in India, this movement could potentially add 3.78 billion trees in 15 years, assuming a 70% survival rate. The initiative aims to instill environmental responsibility in children while supporting national programs, such as Mission LiFE and the GROW initiative. By linking personal celebrations with ecological action, the campaign offers a simple, scalable, and socially engaging model to promote environmental stewardship and contribute to India's afforestation and climate resilience goals.*

Opinion

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Trees are undoubtedly a vital source of nature and life. They harbor a large proportion of biodiversity, capture carbon emissions, and provide countless ecosystem services, including water quality, soil health, food and timber. Therefore, tree planting has been a prominent and holistic activity throughout civilization, with a long tradition and history in India. Planting trees is an immediate action plan to protect Mother Earth against ongoing climate change adversities. However, in the past two to three decades, millions of trees have been cut for various developmental activities. Between 2010 and 2020, the net global forest loss was 4.7 million hectares annually, while the UN FAO estimated that 10 million hectares of forest were cut down each year; and as per the Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020, the world has lost 178 million hectares of forest since 1990, an area about the size of Libya. Another study of Crowther and his team in 2015 reported that over 15 billion trees are cut down each year, and the global number of trees has fallen by approximately 46% since the start of human civilization. For instance, many cities in India have lost their greenery due to tree cutting in face of development. A study by the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, found that Bhopal's green cover was 60% in 1992 but dwindled to 11% by 2018. If this trend continues, the green cover will be a mere 4% by

2026. This is a point of concern, as the continuation of this trend could drastically affect the landscapes of major cities and the country as a whole.

In this context, many initiatives have been started by the Government of India to plant trees, such as Van Mahotsav, celebrated every year from July 1-7 by planting saplings during the rainy season. Additionally, state governments, private institutions, NGOs, and government institutions conduct planting drives annually to increase green cover with a target of one-third of its total geographic area. Mega tree planting campaigns in states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Delhi have resulted in millions of saplings being planted. On July 14, 2024, Madhya Pradesh's Indore set a Guinness World Record by planting over 11 lakh saplings in 24 hours. Despite these efforts, the number of trees per person in India is only 28, far below the global average of 422. Countries like Canada (8,953 trees per person), Russia (4,461), Australia (3,266), Brazil (1,494), the United States (716), and China (102) have significantly more trees per person. Experts emphasize that simply planting trees is not enough; proper planting practices and post-planting care for 2-3 years are crucial for tree survival. However, the current government machinery and common mindset do not seem to be addressing this effectively. This indicates that India lacks a strong tree population, necessitating immediate and innovative measures to increase tree numbers.

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One effective approach is to motivate and guide children aged 5-15 years about the importance of planting trees, how to care for them regularly until they are established, and the benefits of planting trees for nature. According to the Government of India, about 25.31% of the Indian population falls into the 0-14 year category, with 63.4 million children (UNDP, 2017). Parents often celebrate their children's birthdays with parties, charity, and other activities. A simple and cost-effective initiative to make children more nature-responsible citizens is to encourage them to plant a tree on every birthday and care for it until it becomes independent. Children aged 5 and above can take care of tree seedlings planted on their birthdays until they turn 15. This initiative not only increases the number of trees but also instills a sense of responsibility in children, aligning with the idea of "growing together to make the earth green and beautiful" and adding meaningfulness to their birthday celebrations.

This initiative requires no additional investment, only public and policy attention to change our lifestyle for the environment. If 63.4 million children plant one sapling on their birthdays, with a 70% survival rate, India could gain an additional 3.78 billion trees in 15 years. There by present per capita tree availability in the country could be increased from 28 to 31, with increased rate of planting in future. This children's movement would support government initiatives like Mission LiFE, which promotes an environmentally conscious lifestyle. Today, we need to unite and advance Lifestyle for Environment as a campaign, turning it into a mass movement. Similarly, the village of Piplantri in Rajasthan plants 111 saplings every time a girl child is born. Such initiatives should be replicated in other parts of India to promote tree planting as a celebration.

Currently, about 24.62% of India's total land area is under forest, but the government aims to increase this to 33%. This goal seems distant given the current rate of tree-cutting for urbanization. According to the World Economic Forum, the global average number of trees planted per capita per year is 0.2, but in India, it is only 0.03. Thus, there is need to gear up the action plans. Children whose birthdays coincide with the rainy season (June/July to September/October) can plant directly in the field, while those with birthdays in other months can plant seeds in polybags and care for them in their kitchen gardens or balconies until the rainy season. This birthday planting movement can complement government efforts to increase tree planting.

Recently, the Government of India launched the Greening and Restoration of Wasteland with Agroforestry (GROW) program to restore degraded land, creating additional carbon sinks of 2.5-3 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent by 2030. This innovative initiative could support international afforestation efforts like the Billion Trees Campaign and many more. A recent study by Brandt *et al.* (2024) reported that over 5.6 million large trees, each with a crown size of about 67 square meters, disappeared from farmlands between 2018 and 2022. Major trees such as mahua, coconut, sangri, neem, babul, shisham, jamun, and jackfruit were cut down. As responsible citizens of India, we should protect these heritage trees and promote planting on occasions like the birth of a girl child, birthdays, and marriages to increase tree cover. We should also remember the Chipko movement, where the Bishnoi community risked their lives to protect the *Prosopis cineraria* trees from being cut down. We often hear about saplings being distributed at weddings; such initiatives should be encouraged not only for planting but also for nurturing these trees for at least a couple of years.

To safeguard our future, we must act responsibly. A birthday planting drive can instill social and environmental responsibility in children and combat climate change, requiring social and policy attention for immediate implementation. Government initiatives to support this could include:

1. Encouraging and appreciating school children by identifying suitable common places for planting trees.
2. Urging private schools to establish mini child forests (food forest or Miyawaki forest) for biodiversity by selecting degraded areas, or roadside space for planting.
3. Raising awareness in children, and parents about the importance of trees, tree planting guidelines by the experts through regular planting events and post-planting care.
4. Launching a public mega drive similar to the "Swachhata Abhiyan."
5. To promote at least planting trees in kitchen gardens on every birthday or donating to organizations that plant trees.

"A birthday planting drive can be a potential and novel solution to instill social and environmental responsibility in children, promote a greener earth, and combat climate change, requiring social and policy attention for immediate implementation".