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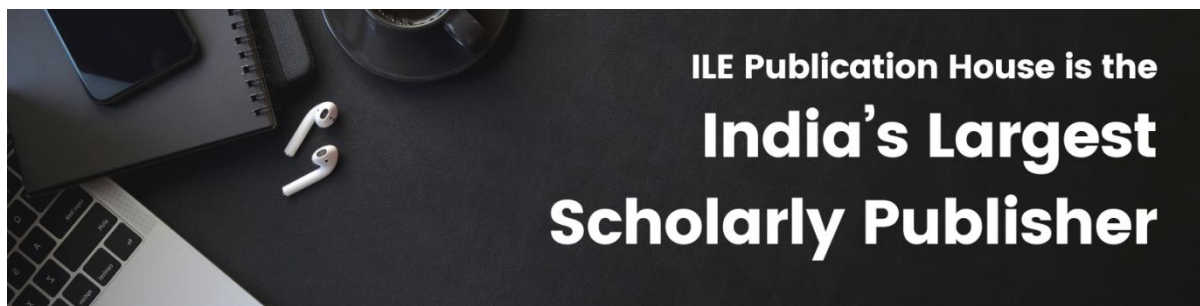
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KANCHA GACHIBOWLI DEFORESTATION: HYDERABAD'S URBAN FOREST UNDER THREAT

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ABSTRACT

The Kancha Gachibowli deforestation crisis in Hyderabad, Telangana, exemplifies the tension between urban development and environmental conservation in rapidly urbanizing Indian cities. In February 2025, the Telangana government's plan to auction 400 acres of this biodiverse urban forest for IT and infrastructure development led to the clearing of nearly 2 square kilometers of vegetation, felling an estimated 40,000 trees. Home to 734 plant species, 292 faunal species, and ancient geological formations, Kancha Gachibowli serves as a critical carbon sink, air purifier, and groundwater recharge zone. The deforestation, executed during the Ugadi-Ramzan holiday weekend, triggered widespread protests from University of Hyderabad students, environmentalists, and civil society, amplified by social media activism. Legal interventions by the Telangana High Court and Supreme Court halted further destruction, questioning the land's classification as "Kancha Poramboke" (waste land) and its status as a "deemed forest" under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. The government's subsequent eco-park proposal and cancellation of the auction face skepticism due to irreversible ecological damage. This article examines the ecological, social, and legal dimensions of the crisis, drawing on literature highlighting urban forests' role in climate regulation, biodiversity conservation, and environmental governance. The research question explores how this crisis reflects broader challenges in balancing development with conservation, with implications for sustainable urban forest governance in India.

KEY WORDS: Kancha Gachibowli, deforestation, Hyderabad, urban forest, biodiversity, ecological conservation, urban development, Telangana, University of Hyderabad, protests, Supreme Court, deemed forest, Forest Conservation Act, carbon sink, air quality, groundwater recharge, wildlife protection, social media activism, eco-park, environmental governance, legal intervention, urban heat island, IT development, land classification

INTRODUCTION

Kancha Gachibowli, a sprawling 400-acre urban forest nestled adjacent to the University of Hyderabad (UoH) in Hyderabad, Telangana, stands as a vital ecological and cultural landmark. Often referred to as the "lungs of Hyderabad," this biodiverse haven has been thrust into the national spotlight due to a contentious deforestation crisis that unfolded in early 2025. The Telangana government's decision to auction this land for IT and infrastructure development, promising ₹50,000

crore in investments and 5 lakh jobs, ignited a fierce debate over the balance between urban expansion and environmental preservation. The rapid clearing of thousands of trees, executed with alarming speed during a holiday weekend, has not only devastated a critical ecosystem but also galvanized a movement to protect one of Hyderabad's last remaining green spaces.

This urban forest is far more than a patch of greenery; it is a biodiversity hotspot hosting over 734 plant species, including 72 tree varieties, and a rich array of wildlife, from 237



bird species to rare reptiles, amphibians, and mammals. Iconic geological formations, such as 2.5-billion-year-old rock structures and vital water bodies like Peacock and Buffalo Lakes, further underscore its ecological significance. Kancha Gachibowli serves as a carbon sink, regulates the city's climate, improves air quality, and supports groundwater recharge, making it indispensable to Hyderabad's environmental health. The deforestation, which saw nearly 2 square kilometers of vegetation razed between March 30 and April 2, 2025, threatens to exacerbate air pollution, raise local temperatures by up to 4°C, and disrupt water security, with far-reaching consequences for the city's residents.

The crisis erupted when over 50 earthmovers descended on the forest, felling an estimated 40,000 trees under the guise of developing "Kancha Poramboke" (grazing/waste land), as classified in revenue records. This move, timed during the Ugadi-Ramzan holiday weekend, sparked immediate outrage from UoH students, faculty, environmentalists, and civil society, who argued that the land, under UoH's custodial care since 1975, is a "deemed forest" protected by law. Protests, detentions, and viral social media campaigns amplified the issue, drawing intervention from the Telangana High Court and, ultimately, the Supreme Court, which halted further destruction on April 3, 2025. The court's ongoing scrutiny, alongside public pressure, has forced the Telangana government to reconsider its plans, proposing an ambitious eco-park while facing accusations of irreversible ecological damage.

The Kancha Gachibowli saga encapsulates the broader struggle faced by rapidly urbanizing cities in India, where development often comes at the expense of natural heritage. As legal battles and restoration efforts continue, the fate of this urban forest will shape not only Hyderabad's environmental future but also set a precedent for how India navigates the delicate balance between progress and preservation. This article delves into the ecological, social, and legal dimensions of the

crisis, highlighting the urgent need to protect urban forests in an era of relentless urban growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on Kancha Gachibowli's deforestation highlights urban deforestation's ecological, social, and legal implications. A 2023 *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* study by IISc notes urban forests' role in sequestering 15 tons of CO₂ per hectare annually, warning that Kancha Gachibowli's loss could raise Hyderabad's temperatures by 1–4°C. A 2024 Telangana Pollution Control Board report underscores its air quality benefits, filtering 30–40% of particulate matter. Biodiversity studies, like UoH's 2022 *Biodiversity and Conservation* paper, document 734 plant and 292 faunal species, including eight Schedule-I species, with a 2025 WWF-India report estimating 40,000 trees lost, disrupting bird and mammal habitats.

Socially, Kumar and Gupta's 2024 *Environmental Politics* article compares Kancha Gachibowli's student protests to Mumbai's Aarey movement, noting social media's role, as Sharma's 2025 *Media and Communication* study confirms with trending #SaveKanchaGachibowli hashtags. Politically, Reddy's 2023 *Economic and Political Weekly* piece critiques Telangana's IT-driven model for bypassing environmental regulations, a view echoed in a 2025 *Frontline* report on legal ambiguities in land classification.

Legally, Menon's 2024 *Indian Law Review* article cites the 1996 TN Godavarman judgment, defining Kancha Gachibowli as a "deemed forest" under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. Nair's 2023 *Journal of Environmental Law* study highlights state reclassification tactics, while Ghosh's 2025 *Economic and Political Weekly* commentary praises the Supreme Court's suo motu action but warns of restoration challenges. Gaps remain in long-term restoration strategies and enforcement, necessitating further research on urban forest governance.

Focuses on:



How do the ecological, social, and legal dimensions of the Kancha Gachibowli deforestation crisis in Hyderabad, Telangana, reflect the broader challenges of balancing urban development with environmental conservation in rapidly urbanizing Indian cities, and what are the implications for sustainable urban forest governance?

BACKGROUND

Kancha Gachibowli, a 400-acre urban forest adjacent to the University of Hyderabad (UoH) in Hyderabad, Telangana, has long been a cornerstone of the city's ecological and cultural identity. Known as the "lungs of Hyderabad," it encompasses a rich tapestry of biodiversity, geological heritage, and hydrological significance. The forest's history is intertwined with Hyderabad's evolution from a princely state to a modern IT hub, reflecting the broader challenges of urban expansion in India. In early 2025, this vital green space became the epicenter of a contentious deforestation crisis, driven by the Telangana government's ambition to transform the area into a hub for IT and infrastructure development.

The origins of the crisis trace back to February 2025, when the Telangana government, led by Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, announced plans to auction 400 acres of land in Kancha Gachibowli, part of Survey Number 25 in Kancha Gachibowli village. The government projected that the development would attract ₹50,000 crore in investments and create 5 lakh jobs, aligning with Hyderabad's reputation as a global IT destination. The land was classified in revenue records as "Kancha Poramboke," a term denoting grazing or waste land, which the government argued gave it legal ownership and the right to repurpose the area. However, this classification was contested by UoH students, faculty, and environmentalists, who asserted that the land had been under the university's custodial care since its establishment in 1975, forming an integral part of its campus ecosystem.

The ecological significance of Kancha Gachibowli cannot be overstated. The forest hosts over 734 plant species, including 72 tree species such as the rare Marking Nut Tree (*Semecarpus anacardium*), and supports a diverse faunal population, including 237 bird species, 32 reptiles, 13 amphibians, and 10 mammals. Notable species include spotted deer, Indian rock pythons, star tortoises, and the endemic *Murricia hyderabadensis* spider, with eight species protected under Schedule-1 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. The area also features 2.5-billion-year-old rock formations, such as the iconic Mushroom Rock, and critical water bodies like Peacock and Buffalo Lakes, which serve as groundwater recharge zones and habitats for aquatic species. These features make Kancha Gachibowli a biodiversity hotspot and a vital component of Hyderabad's environmental infrastructure, regulating climate, improving air quality, and acting as a carbon sink.

The deforestation began abruptly on March 30, 2025, when over 50 earthmovers and bulldozers descended on the forest, clearing vast swathes of vegetation over a few days. The timing, coinciding with the Ugadi-Ramzan holiday weekend, was widely criticized as a strategic move to minimize public scrutiny and resistance. Satellite imagery analyzed by environmental groups revealed that nearly 2 square kilometers of forest cover were destroyed between March 30 and April 2, with estimates suggesting the loss of over 40,000 trees. The scale of destruction was unprecedented, with reports of displaced wildlife, including peacocks, deer, and snakes, flooding social media and fueling public outrage. The operation was carried out without prior environmental impact assessments or public consultations, raising questions about compliance with environmental regulations.

The University of Hyderabad community was at the forefront of the resistance. On March 30, students and faculty confronted the earthmovers, attempting to physically block the clearing operations. This led to 53 detentions



and two arrests, escalating tensions between the university and the state government. The protests were not limited to the campus; environmental organizations, such as Save City Forest, and civil society groups joined the movement, organizing rallies and online campaigns. Posts on X, with hashtags like #SaveKanchaGachibowli, went viral, drawing national and international attention to the crisis. The public outcry was further amplified by 67 former IAS, IFS, and IPS officers, who issued a joint statement urging the government to declare Kancha Gachibowli a bio-heritage reserve or national park, akin to Hyderabad's Kasu Brahmananda Reddy National Park.

The legal response was swift. On April 2, the Telangana High Court issued an interim stay on tree-felling, responding to a public interest litigation filed by environmental activists. However, reports indicated that clearing continued in defiance of the order, prompting the Supreme Court to take suo motu cognizance on April 3. The apex court described the situation as “alarming” and halted all deforestation activities, demanding explanations from the Telangana government on the absence of environmental clearances, permissions for tree-felling, and measures to protect displaced wildlife. The court also ordered the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to inspect the site by April 16 and submit a report to determine whether Kancha Gachibowli qualifies as a “deemed forest” under the Supreme Court's 1996 TN Godavarman judgment, which defines any land with forest characteristics as protected under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

The Telangana government's initial defense rested on the land's revenue classification and its economic potential. However, the Supreme Court's scrutiny, coupled with public pressure, forced a policy shift. On April 3, Chief Minister Reddy constituted a ministerial committee, comprising ministers Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka, D. Sridhar Babu, and Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy, to engage with stakeholders. On April 9, the government canceled the auction plan,

proposing instead to convert 2,000 acres, including UoH land, into one of the “world's largest eco-parks.” The plan included relocating UoH to a “Future City” and developing the eco-park with global experts and a governing council to preserve biodiversity using a “micro-ecosystem” model. While the proposal was presented as a compromise, it met with skepticism from students, activists, and environmentalists, who cited the irreversible loss of 100 acres and questioned the feasibility of relocating a major university.

The crisis also exposed deep political fault lines. The opposition Bharat Rashttra Samiti (BRS) accused the Congress-led government of environmental negligence, while Congress countered that the BRS had overseen the felling of 12 lakh trees during its tenure. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) criticized both parties, labeling Telangana a “deforestation mafia” hostage. These political exchanges underscored the broader challenge of aligning economic ambitions with environmental sustainability in a state heavily reliant on IT-driven growth.

The Kancha Gachibowli deforestation crisis is a microcosm of India's urban environmental challenges, where rapid urbanization often outpaces conservation efforts. The forest's fate hinges on the Supreme Court's final ruling, expected after the CEC's report, and the government's ability to deliver on its eco-park promise. The episode has highlighted the need for robust environmental governance, transparent land-use policies, and greater public participation in urban planning decisions.

Ecological Significance

Kancha Gachibowli is a biodiversity hotspot, hosting:

- **Flora:** Over 734 plant species, including 72 tree species like the rare Marking Nut Tree (*Semecarpus anacardium*).
- **Fauna:** 237 bird species, 32 reptiles, 13 amphibians, and 10 mammals, including spotted deer, Indian rock pythons, star



tortoises, and the rare Murrucia hyderabadensis spider. Eight species are protected under Schedule-1 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

- **Geological Features:** 2.5-billion-year-old rock formations, such as Mushroom Rock, and lakes like Peacock and Buffalo Lakes, critical for groundwater recharge and wildlife.

The forest acts as a carbon sink, regulates Hyderabad's climate, improves air quality, and serves as a catchment area for reservoirs supplying drinking water. Its loss could raise temperatures by 1–4°C, worsen air pollution, and exacerbate water scarcity.

Protests and Legal Intervention

The deforestation triggered massive protests from UoH students, faculty, environmentalists, and civil society. On March 30, students confronted bulldozers, leading to 53 detentions and two arrests. Public outrage grew as videos of displaced wildlife, including peacocks and deer, circulated online.

The Telangana High Court issued an interim stay on tree-felling on April 2, but clearing continued, prompting further action. On April 3, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognizance, halting all deforestation activities and calling the situation "alarming." The court demanded explanations from the Telangana government on environmental impact assessments, permissions for tree-felling, and wildlife protection, ordering a Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to inspect the site by April 16.

On April 16, the Supreme Court criticized the state for clearing 100 acres without permission, emphasizing the need to restore the forest and protect displaced animals. Justice B.R. Gavai warned of "temporary prison" for officials if restoration was opposed. The court also questioned the government's claim that the land was not a forest, citing its ecological characteristics.

Government Response

Facing backlash, Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy formed a ministerial committee on April 3, comprising ministers Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka, D. Sridhar Babu, and Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy, to consult stakeholders. On April 9, the government canceled the auction plan, proposing instead to convert 2,000 acres, including UoH land, into one of the "world's largest eco-parks," with plans to relocate the university to a "Future City." The eco-park would involve global experts and a governing council to conserve biodiversity using a "micro-ecosystem" model.

However, students and activists remain skeptical, citing irreversible damage and questioning the feasibility of relocating UoH. The government's claim that the land was not a forest has been contested, as the Supreme Court's 1996 TN Godavarman judgment defines any land with forest characteristics as a "deemed forest," potentially subjecting Kancha Gachibowli to the Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

Political and Social Context

The controversy has fueled political tensions. The opposition Bharat Rashttra Samiti (BRS) accused the Congress-led government of environmental destruction, while Congress countered that the BRS felled 12 lakh trees during its tenure. The BJP also criticized both parties, calling Telangana a "deforestation mafia" hostage. Social media posts on X amplified public anger, with users decrying the loss of Hyderabad's green cover and alleging strategic timing to evade scrutiny.

Civil society groups, including Save City Forest, and 67 former IAS, IFS, and IPS officers have urged the government to declare Kancha Gachibowli a bio-heritage reserve or national park, similar to the Kasu Brahmananda Reddy National Park.

Current Status and Future Outlook

As of April 18, 2025, the Supreme Court has barred further tree-felling and directed the Telangana Wildlife Warden to protect affected



wildlife. The CEC's report, expected to determine if Kancha Gachibowli qualifies as a deemed forest, will shape the Supreme Court's final ruling post-April 16. The Union Ministry of Environment and Forest has also sought a factual report on alleged violations of the Telangana Forest Act, 1967, and Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

If declared a forest, the land cannot be auctioned without central approval, potentially thwarting development plans but preserving Hyderabad's ecological balance. The eco-park proposal offers a potential compromise, but its success depends on transparent execution and genuine restoration efforts.

CONCLUSION

The Kancha Gachibowli deforestation crisis serves as a stark reminder of the precarious balance between urban development and environmental conservation in India's rapidly urbanizing cities. The loss of nearly 2 square kilometers of this biodiverse urban forest, home to 734 plant species, 292 faunal species, and ancient geological formations, underscores the irreversible consequences of prioritizing economic gains over ecological sustainability. The crisis, triggered by the Telangana government's plan to auction 400 acres for IT development, revealed systemic issues in environmental governance, including inadequate impact assessments and questionable land classifications. The destruction of an estimated 40,000 trees and displacement of wildlife, such as spotted deer and Indian rock pythons, have compromised Hyderabad's climate regulation, air quality, and water security, with potential long-term impacts on the city's livability.

The robust response from the University of Hyderabad community, environmentalists, and civil society highlights the power of collective action in challenging unsustainable development. Protests, amplified by social media campaigns like #SaveKanchaGachibowli, and the intervention

of 67 former civil servants demonstrate a growing public demand for environmental accountability. The Supreme Court's suo motu cognizance and ongoing scrutiny, particularly regarding Kancha Gachibowli's status as a "deemed forest" under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, reaffirm the judiciary's critical role in safeguarding natural heritage. However, the government's eco-park proposal, while a step toward reconciliation, faces skepticism due to the irreversible damage already inflicted and the logistical challenges of relocating UoH.

This crisis offers valuable lessons for urban planning and environmental policy. It emphasizes the need for transparent land-use policies, rigorous environmental assessments, and inclusive stakeholder engagement to prevent similar ecological disasters. Declaring Kancha Gachibowli a bio-heritage reserve or national park, as advocated by civil society, could ensure its long-term protection while serving as a model for urban forest conservation. The outcome of the Supreme Court's ruling and the Central Empowered Committee's report will be pivotal, potentially setting a precedent for how India addresses the tension between progress and preservation. Ultimately, the Kancha Gachibowli saga underscores the urgent need to prioritize sustainable urban forest governance, ensuring that cities like Hyderabad remain resilient, livable, and ecologically vibrant for future generations.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATION**

SL.NO	ABBREVIATIONS
1.	BRS: Bharat Rashtira Samiti
2.	BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party
3.	CEC: Central Empowered Committee
4.	CO2: Carbon Dioxide
5.	FCA: Forest Conservation Act, 1980
6.	IAS: Indian Administrative Service
7.	IFS: Indian Forest Service
8.	IISc: Indian Institute of Science
9.	IPS: Indian Police Service
10.	IT: Information Technology
11.	PIL: Public Interest Litigation
12.	SCC: Supreme Court Cases
13.	TSPCB: Telangana State Pollution Control Board
14.	UoH: University of Hyderabad
15.	WWF: World Wide Fund for Nature
16.	WPA: Wildlife Protection Act, 1972

INDEX OF AUTHORITIES**Statutes**

- **Forest Conservation Act, 1980** (India). Defines the legal framework for the protection of forests, including restrictions on the diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes.
- **Wildlife Protection Act, 1972** (India). Provides protection to wildlife, including species listed under Schedule-1, relevant to the fauna in Kancha Gachibowli.
- **Telangana Forest Act, 1967** (India). Governs forest management and conservation within Telangana,

applicable to the Kancha Gachibowli deforestation case.

Case Law

- **T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India, (1996) 2 SCC 226** (Supreme Court of India). Established the definition of a “deemed forest,” critical for determining Kancha Gachibowli’s legal status as a protected forest.

Judicial Actions

- **Telangana High Court, Public Interest Litigation (PIL) Order, April 2, 2025.** Issued an interim stay on tree-felling in Kancha Gachibowli in response to environmental activists’ petitions.
- **Supreme Court of India, Suo Motu Cognizance, April 3, 2025.** Halted all deforestation activities in Kancha Gachibowli, demanded explanations from the Telangana government, and ordered a Central Empowered Committee inspection.
- **Supreme Court of India, Order, April 16, 2025.** Criticized the Telangana government for clearing 100 acres without permission and emphasized restoration and wildlife protection, with warnings of penalties for non-compliance.