Indian Forest Struggles: the quest for alternatives

The world over, social movements resisting the neo-liberal aggression on nature and on the various forms of common property regimes, have to grapple with the thorny question of ‘alternatives’. The clamour for such ‘alternatives’ is provoked most often by proponents of the free-market economy and even a section of the mainstream left, as if the neo-liberal model of economic development is always a given, by default meant to inform and control the idea that nature, including forests, is there to be used and appropriated. This short article will look at the issue of ‘alternatives’ in the limited context of Indian forests to better understand three things: 1. What meaning(s) one could reasonably attach to the word/concept of ‘alternatives’, 2. Whether grassroots resistance appreciates and internalizes such alternatives as ‘alternatives’, and 3. Whether such alternatives, singly or collectively, offer some form of politics for social transformation, by overwhelming the capitalist production relations on the ground where such alternatives are being practised, and also, on a more general level, posit a transition to a more egalitarian and post-capitalist economy, society and political order.

What is an alternative?

In the Indian context, the prevailing meaning is that of an ‘independent village economy’, which mainly derives from the Gandhian concept of *Gram Swaraj*. This, in essence, implies a return to pre-capitalist (and also pre-colonial) social formations, where both forests and land usually did not have private property rights. This also means, in the case of indigenous *adivasi* (1) peoples, a return to a more ‘natural’ state of society, where the cycles of nature shape the production system, and hence the social and economic order. More often than not, this return is intrinsically linked with the religious belief systems of the communities.

Going back to the ‘Independent Village Economy’ or Forest Commons

Both have roots in history. However, there are doubts whether forests and uncultivated areas like pasture and scrub in pre-colonial India were ’commons’, which Marx termed as ‘communal’ properties, over which there was a ‘possession in common’. These were not private properties in the sense that no person using those commons had exclusive or private rights, codified or not, over them (2) This is important because there is a tendency among both scholars and activists to see all forests in pre-colonial era as communal or common properties, which the colonial state took over and commercialized (3). However, in recent years, this notion of unchanging commons regimes in forests has faced serious challenges, including a range of historical evidences showing conclusively that commercialization of forests and generation of surplus were both present in pre-colonial societies (4).

Perhaps it would be prudent to say that because pre-colonial India was a vast and a sparsely populated geo-ecological space, many social and ecological variations could co-exist, without being overwhelmed by each other, or becoming entirely extinct under pressure.

Defending/Reinventing Forest Commons

Another popular meaning to ´alternative´ emerges out of struggles which continue to defend forests/nature as *de facto* commons, irrespective of their present ownership/tenural status. Many forest struggles in central and eastern India against large-scale projects (mainly mining and hydro power projects, but also official 'forest conservation', which increasingly opens up these areas to tourism and other forms of ecosystem services trading) believe in this mainly because these projects threaten the forests that support their livelihood activities. This alternative is 'in-situ' or already there: if the community successfully defends the forests from outside invasion, it posits an 'alternative': forests alive in place of forests dead or destroyed.

Reinventing forest commons within the state framework is relatively a more recent phenomenon. It derives mainly from state-sponsored schemes such as 'joint forest management', and more recently, the 'forest rights act', which legitimises the notion of communal ownership over forest commons. Theoretically, the existence of state-recognized common properties is a paradox, since it is the same state which systematically hands over large chunks of forests to corporations also allows community institutions the freedom (legally speaking, the ground reality is different) to reject such transfer of forest areas.

In recent years, taking advantage of the 'forest rights act'(popularly known as FRA), several social movements in India have focussed on creating/reinventing new forest commons, which, they expect, in addition to securing existing livelihoods, will provide new economic opportunities to people. In a way, this is also a call for creating 'independent village economies'. However, most of these new initiatives have too much dependency on state institutions and processes. The experience of Menda-Lekha villages in Maharashtra (see below) provides a good example.

Alternatives to what: how the movements perceive them

These meanings of 'alternatives' are largely hypothetical. It is doubtful how many of the contemporary forest struggles in India see themselves as 'alternative providers'. While for most it is a struggle for survival (communities threatened with displacement by large projects) or for immediate and achievable economic gains (state-recognized community forest resources), for others it is an issue of both biological survival and spiritual/cultural integrity (the Niyamagiri struggle in Odisha) (5). Despite this, though often not properly articulated and still in an extremely limited way, forest movements are also being seen as struggles against a coercive state and various feudal and capitalist forces.

Grassroots Struggles for the Commons: Medha-Lekha, Niyamagiri and others

It is uncertain how many social movements are currently active in Indian forests: besides some groups/processes that are already part of the various known alliances, there are many local movements sometimes limited even to a single village. The twin villages of Menda and Lekha in Maharashtra provide the most famous example of the struggle for commons. A *Sarvodaya* (Gandhite) worker (6) and his team worked for years with the villagers to develop a functional commons regime, a practice of collective functioning and decision-making borrowed from the *adivasi* past, while also remaining strongly rooted in the present. It created (or restored) the forest commons and used the FRA strategically to obtain state recognition for this practice. This was the first case of state-recognized common property in Indian forests. One reason for giving this permission was the presence of Maoist guerillas in the Gadchiroli forests where Menda-lekha is located :the state has a

declared policy of using pro-poor legislations like FRA in containing what it considers as Maoist insurgency.

The questions of surplus

Menda-lekha villagers have to face considerable opposition from a section of state officials(forest department), the powerful Ballarpur Paper Mills which had monopoly rights over local bamboo forests, and even the Maoists, who threatened the villagers and other *Gram Sabhas* (7) in the vicinity with dire consequences if the bamboo was not given to the Paper Mill, from which it used to extort fat taxes (8). But the irony of the situation lies in the fact that the Menda-Lekha commons worked and survived because of the surplus(in form of revenue) that came from selling bamboo in the open market. Only a small fraction of the sales proceeds is used by the *Gram Sabha* for paying the wages of the *Gram Sabha* members who work as forest guards or in other capacities. The rest is kept in the general fund for development works and a host of other purposes, as decided by the *Gram Sabha*. The villagers decided to do away with private ownership of land—they donated all their lands to the *Gram Sabha*, to make the common property regime stronger.

Similar tales are now common in Maharashtra, Orissa and West Bengal. Communities are now waking up to the monetary (in other words, surplus generation) potential of their communal property. In some places it is *tendu* leaves, while in others even the sand and gravel in the local rivers, much in demand as construction material.

Wherever there is a surplus that can be sold as marketable commodity, there has to be an owner who controls the production of the surplus—how can the entire community own it, particularly in a market economy? Won't the ownership over the surplus and the control over production relations turn into major discordant issues over time and enhance (or create) new inequalities and disparities even in a 'commons' situation, with large sums of money at stake? Won't the market take over and create a new class of privileged people? (9) These questions become very relevant when looking at the diverse spectrum of communal properties that exist to this day. In North Eastern states of India for instance, communal rights and ownership often allow the selling of community-held resources in the marketplace. The market has found an ally in the financially mobile elite within communities (clan leaders, village chiefs) and the result is not only environmental degradation but also growing class differences within the erstwhile 'community'.

One way to preventing this might be development of local markets or participating in larger markets under communal supervision. Another answer might be outright rejection of outside market altogether in the face of all odds. The "Niyamagiri struggle" provides such an answer when the *Dongria Kondhs,* an *Adivasi* community, prevented a concerted assault by the state and corporate power on their communal swidden cultivation land and forests (and also, their sacred hill called Niyamagiri—the abode of the Niyama *Raja*) in the Eastern Ghats mountain range along the east coast of India (10).

Perhaps there is no single answer to the questions, doubts and paradoxes that keep on surfacing as new struggles emerge and newer forms of movements come into being. One can only wait, but not passively. Despite ideological confusions and dangers of both co-option and repression, the movement for the commons as an 'alternative' to capitalism and class oppression is gaining ground in India.

Despite many unresolved issues and contradictions, the task of re-establishing or reclaiming the 'commons' is gaining centrality in Indian forest movements.

The call for Revolution: A New Path

Sometime in early 2013, four constituent groups from the social movement alliance Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD), which campaigned for FRA, came out with a 'manifesto' for a new organization called 'New Path', with the goal of furthering the revolutionary process in India (11). The 'manifesto' highlighted the need for linking the people's struggle and the revolutionary transformation in the Indian context. It claims that, "New Path is not and does not aim to be a traditional revolutionary party. Rather, it is a political formation that seeks out opportunities, through struggle, to weaken bourgeois hegemony in this country".

Though before this National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW), a now defunct alliance overtly tilted towards the left, interpreted forest struggles as class struggles of primary producers against capitalism, caste and ethnic oppression, and against state's hegemony over natural resources, the New Path 'manifesto' however is by far the most direct and 'left' political message to come out of a social movement in India. The 'manifesto' gives a somewhat generic call for establishing 'a society of free associated producers': "The revolution…must transform the entirety of society as well as the producers themselves….the revolutionary process has to focus on the demolition of ruling class power, including the state, but not only the formal state... it would seek to smash ruling class power and to build the collective power of the producers". This echoes the political objectives (more forest-centric, though) of the NFFPFW (12): "Through the struggles, NFFPFW will try to establish social control of the primary producers on forests and other natural resources of the country. By social control NFFPFW means equitable and totally decentralized resource management by all primary producers… The equitable social control of resources will also lead to the end of class exploitations, the ultimate dissolution of the caste system and the end of gender discrimination against women…". Even though many things were left unsaid, the 'manifesto' is indeed a historic document. By questioning the rationale of seizure of state power in a capitalist regime, it also indirectly questions the Maoist war for establishing a new state in place of the old.

Framing the problematique: the crucial political questions

However, the new path manifesto contains little on action strategy and programme: it is silent on how the diverse and extremely localized movements will reorient themselves as catalysts of social and political change beyond their niche focus and geographic boundaries, and also, more importantly, whether such movements have decided perspective on state and capital. Also, questions about organisation-building and decision-making remain unaddressed. How will the local struggles for commons come together and coalesce politically? What will be the organisational process followed that will retain the local nature of such struggles and yet be effective beyond the local level?

Trying to identify the main organizational and political issues, another alliance formation, All India Forum of Forest Movements**(**AIFFM), which recently emerged from NFFPFW, makes the point that all engagements (including probable negotiations) with the state on any issue have to be politically and strategically assessed before the movement commits itself. A draft political paper being circulated within the alliance emphasizes the inter-relationship between the organizational process of any mass movement with its politics, and raises pertinent questions: If forest movements **attempt a Marxist interpretation of the production process in forests, do they discuss how to use this**

interpretation in the battle for greater social transformation? Or how can the grassroots groups look forward to a bigger and unified battle against capital? Such issues are seldom in the agenda, the paper points out, and the alliances could not successfully communicate the political ideas beyond those who have a shared Marxist/socialist past. Commenting upon the NFFPFW/AIFFM process, the paper says that only after a decade of struggle people have started taking a position: there is now an increasingly shared realization that the battle for forests is a political one and that people's power need to be built through a protracted and pitched battle with the state, capital and other forces. The Paper concludes**: "**Now, we are in a more coherent position to say that this is not a position shared by a few of us, but by the grassroots movements as well**….it becomes important to decide how we view this forum: a broad, organizationally anarchic democratic alliance will not carry us forward to our political vision. On the contrary, this will hold us back** (emphasis added) …we realize that for days to come there would be uncertainties in organizational and political issues….in a country as complex and plural as ours, people's and hence movement groups' perceptions and practices vary widely. We will try to accommodate these plural perceptions and practices while trying to reach at some broad political understanding".

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(1) *Adivasi* is a generic term for heterogeneous indigenous peoples in India

(2) Habib. I, *Marx's Perception of India* in *Essays In Indian History*, Delhi, 1995.

(3) Ibid, also Rangarajan. M and Sivaramakrishnan. K, *Introduction* to *India's Environmental History*, supra note 2. See also Guha.S, *Claims on the Commons: Political Power and Natural Resources in Pre-Colonial India*, ibid. In a thought-provoking study of folklores associated with Kerala's sacred forests: *Folk Models of the Forest Environment in Highland Malabar* in Volume 2 of *India's Environmental History,* Rich Freeman suggests that indigenous communities' in the Malabar highlands perceived their forest environment not as ecological paradises—deep caste and class divisions within the society guided both the actual usage and perception of forests.

(4) Habib, ibid and also *Ecological History of India*. Singh. C: *Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India*, in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, Edited by David Arnold and Ramchandra Guha, Delhi 1999

(5) http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/india-forest-struggles-at-the-crossroads/

(6) Gandhians in post-independence India who strive to ensure that self-determination and equality reach all strata of Indian society

(7) As defined in 'forest rights act', the *Gram Sabha* is the open assembly of all adult residents in a '*gram'* or village. Though it is notionally convened by the *Gram Panchayat*, a local self-government institution at the village or small town level in India, the *Gram Sabha* in the 'forest rights act' is an independent body. It can come up in all forest areas with a population of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and/or other traditional forest dwellers, irrespective of whether such forest settlements are officially recognized as villages.

(8) Pallavi. A, *Don't Say Bamboo*, in Down to Earth, May 24, 2012, http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/don-t-say-bamboo. See also, Pallavi. A, *Mendha Lekha Residents Gift all their Land to Gram Sabha*, in Down to Earth, September 7, 2013. http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/mendha-lekha-residents-gift-all-their-farms-gram-sabha

(9) For instance, *Gram Sabhas* in Orissa are finding to tackle the market over which they have no effective control an extremely difficult task. See Mahapatra. R and KumarSambhab. S, *Bamboo Rising*, Down to Earth, January 31, 2013. http://www.downtoearth.org.in/content/bamboo-rising

(10) http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/india-forest-struggles-at-the-crossroads/

(11) http://kafila.org/2013/05/24/new-path-manifesto-of-a-new-initiative/

(12) NFFPFW, *The struggle of Forest Workers,* Nagpur, 2002