
India: Adivasis and forest management

India's forests, the foundation of the nation's ecological security, are being lost to a plethora of commercial enterprises at an alarming rate. The latest statistics released by the Forest Survey of India shows that the country has lost over 26,000 sq. km of its dense forests during the period 2001-2003. With over 3000 species of flowering plants and about 200 species of animals of the country having been already categorized as being threatened, this massive loss of forest is surely to have added to the decimation of biodiversity.

This is happening at a time when the whole world, sans USA, is counting down to the year 2010 by when substantial reductions in the loss of global biodiversity should be achieved through the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), to which India is a Party. India's massive failure in the sustainable management of its forests largely lies in the exclusionary and regimental nature of the forest management regime shaped by the colonial legacy and informed by the casteist worldview that regards with contempt those at the bottom of the social pyramid.

At the root of the deepening forest crisis is the displacement of the Adivasis, the country's indigenous people, as the traditional caretakers of India's forests. The Adivasis, the original custodians of our forests, who had defended the forests from the savage assaults by the British colonialists and struggled against a multitude of commercial exploitations in the post colonial political order, have been systematically disenfranchised and alienated from the forest management by the conservation regime, including the wildlife and forest laws. The proposed Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill is, therefore, not only a means to undo the historical injustice done to the Adivasis as the introduction to the draft bill rightly claims, but also provides the much-needed opportunity to win back the world's largest population of indigenous people as the caretakers of our forests.

It is not surprising that some elements have come out against the proposed law, which in some ways marks a paradigm shift. The doctrine that generates opposition to building partnership with Adivasis in the management of forests holds the autochthons and the rest of the marginalised as the Other and cannot come to terms with even an infinitesimal elevation in the status of the subaltern. Conservation is only an alibi for this doctrine. For, the world has already discarded the exclusionary dogma of conservation that characterized the approach that we had imported from the West.

The CBD, which is legally binding, is based on the triple objectives of conservation, sustainable use and equitable benefit sharing and provides for the participation of the indigenous people in the management of biodiversity. One of the three ongoing working groups established by the Convention process is to address the issues associated with the use and protection of the traditional knowledge of the indigenous people. However, India has made a mockery of the CBD by creating a national law- the Biological Diversity Act- which limits itself to addressing issues related to regulating access to biodiversity, blissfully feigning ignorance of the existence of the indigenous people (in a manner reminiscent of defeating the spirit of the innovative Man and Biosphere Program by simply redesignating some existing protected areas without reforming the management system)

The Agenda 21 adopted by the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in all its four component programs addressing terrestrial living resource management underlines the role of the indigenous people and in addition includes a specific thematic program for strengthening the role of indigenous people in the sustainable management of such resources. Further, the Johannesburg Summit, held ten years after the UNCED, in its Plan of Implementation, calls for enabling the indigenous people to contribute to the implementation of the objectives of CBD and explicitly recognises their role in conserving and using biodiversity in a sustainable way.

It has been the World Parks Congress, its 1962 session in particular, that was largely instrumental in pushing the doctrine of violent and exclusionary form of protected areas in the developing world, modeled along the US' Yellowstone National Park, in the establishment of which over three hundred native Americans were killed and several thousands displaced. In a turn around, the 2003 edition of the Congress underlined the importance of participatory and collaborative forms of protected area management, and specifically called for the restitution of the traditional lands taken away from the indigenous communities, which is what the draft bill is seeking to achieve. There has been a marked increase in the number of protected areas across the world in recent years exceeding over one hundred thousand sites, covering more than ten per cent of the earth's terrestrial area. It is pertinent to note that a large number of the recently created protected areas are indeed sustainable resource use reserves.

Addressing the 1972 UN Conference on Human Environment that for the first time put environment on the global political agenda, the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi told the West that poverty was the worst form of pollution- a statement subsequently made famous by our conservation bureaucrats in successive multilateral forums. However, a few months after her return from the Stockholm Conference she was to deepen the poverty and destitution of a huge mass of Indians, ironically in the name of conservation, through the Wildlife Protection Act that challenged the very existence of Adivasis whose life is organically linked to the wildlife, as if the havoc played by the illegitimate Indian Forest Act, 1927 that formalized the colonial appropriation of India's forests weren't enough. The tragic disappearance of tiger from Sariska, in spite of having spent Rs ten million (US\$ 232,500) per individual tiger within the reserve over the past 25 years, as revealed by the Tiger Task Force, is instructive of the failure of the regimental conservation project.

There is no reason for India to prolong the twin crises of accelerating biodiversity degradation and endangering the Adivasi population even after more than half a century of formal independence. The enactment of the Adivasi forest rights bill should be seen as the first essential step in reforming the country's forest management regime in order to seek the partnership of the most original conservationists to protect and sustainably use the country's most critical ecological endowment.

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