
India: The need for community control over natural resources

"Nature can never be managed well unless the people closest to it are involved in its management and a healthy relationship is established between nature, society and culture. Common natural resources were earlier regulated through diverse, decentralized, community control systems. But the state's policy of converting common property resources into government property resources has put them under the control of centralized bureaucracies, who in turn have put them at the service of the more powerful."

"The process of state control over natural resources that started with the period of colonialism must be rolled back. Given the changed socio-economic circumstances and greater pressure on natural resources, new community control systems have to be established that are more highly integrated, scientifically sophisticated, equitable and sustainable. This is the biggest challenge."

When over 50 of us from across the country --scientists, activists associated with people's movements for environment protection-- signed the above statement of shared concern in the Second Citizen's Report (1984-85), we were both describing the genesis of the problem of environmental degradation and alienation of local people from natural resources and the challenge of establishing community control over natural resources. The process of alienation began around 1860, during colonial days, when the British began to 'reserve' the forests as source of revenue for the state and for their commercial and industrial needs back home, and established the Forest Department in 1894.

This policy adversely affected the close and living relationship between natural resources, the tribals and rural poor who are critically dependent on them for their survival. While the so-called 'scientific management' may have served the strategic needs of the colonizer, it led to the destruction of the forest wealth of the people, adversely affected a wholesome lifestyle and culture on one hand and hit at their very survival base and a great civilization that had established a healthy relationship between nature, culture and society, on the other.

This paper (available in full at the web address below) deals with the above broad issues of common lands (all lands except private lands) from our grassroot experience of over two decades to the difficult fight against the forest mafia and changes in the policy and legal arena for meaningful people-centred management of natural resources.

It also addresses the greater challenge of re-establishing, in the present context, community control and management of natural resources like water, forest, land and minerals on one hand and self-rule on the other. This can be achieved by adopting a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to the issues of forestry and common lands that takes us to the core of our notions of 'progress' and 'civilization'. What we need is a second freedom movement to place the issues of people's control over livelihood resources and 'self rule' on the national agenda, a task unfinished by our freedom movement.

Article based on information from: Introduction to "Community control", by S.R. Hiremath, published in magazine "Seminar", Issue No. 499, March 2001 ;

