FORESTRY: RECONCILING POVERTY AND EQUITY CONCERNS

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Out of India's land mass of approximately 329 million hectares (m ha), it is estimated that half is degraded, in one form or another. Out of 143 m ha of agricultural land, at least 40 m ha are degraded. In the forestry sector, out of 75 m ha, 30 m ha are without tree-cover and another 10 m ha have sparse shrubs only. Grazing and pasture lands have largely disappeared. In a country where more than half the population, the poorer half, depends for its subsistence needs, on forest and common lands, it has become amply clear that the poor have become poorer. Deforestation and land degradation has led to greater poverty, just as greater poverty has increased deforestation and land degradation. Fuelwood and fodder shortages are acute. In the last two decades the price of fuelwood has gone up between 500 and 700%. Fodder studies indicate that shortages vary from 50 to 80%. Tribal and rural women seem to be the most affected by these shortages. In the Himalayas, women walk between 6 to 10 hours to collect fuelwood and fodder. In many other places, women find only leaves to burn. Poverty, women's drudgery, deforestation and environmental degradation, are all inextricably linked with each other and with the question of development and its direction, of policies and institutional mechanisms which can reach the poor. It concerns equity and efficiency in a society.

Historical Perspectives

In pre-colonial times, Indian societies, in the greater part of India, consisted of tribes, living in the hilly tracts and settled agriculturists in fertile river valleys. The management, of both types of society, was based on a community's control of its natural resources and on equitable systems of resource use. Cultural traditions evolved to ensure equity and sustainable use of resources (Gadgil).

With the coming of the British and colonial control of land and forest resources, the picture in India changed radically. The utilisation of land and forests was largely directed toward fulfilling Britain's needs for growing industrialisation. Agricultural lands which had been used for subsistence needs, were diverted to cash crops such as, cotton, jute, tea etc., for export. The Himalayas were denuded to provide logs for ship building, railways and other uses. Teak trees, on private lands, were also taken by the East India Company. Communities lost all control of the uncultivated lands and, to some measure, of their cultivated lands as well. Britain's colonial motives were made clear by Cecil Rhodes, the founder of Rhodesia. He said, "We must find new lands from which we can easily obtain raw materials and at the same time exploit the cheap slave labour that is available by using the natives of the colonies. The colonies would also provide a dumping ground for the surplus goods produced in the factories."1

Dispossession and enclosure was the favourite means of securing land for the colonial economy. Control, of forest resources, was achieved through the establishment of the Forest Service. As pointed out by The Ecologist, the State imposed "scientific forestry" regimes, with the objective of maintaining a constant annual yield of timber for its purposes. Traditional methods of forest management have been denigrated as "inefficient," "irrational," "untidy," "unruly" and "destructive" for the environment. By contrast, "scientific forestry" is lauded for putting the forest to work, for bringing order to chaos, for its efficiency and for the progressive use of science and technology for the public good, thus justifying further encroachment by the State or private interests.

Forested areas were divided into protected and reserved forests. The protected areas were meant to meet the biomass needs of village people and the reserved forests, meant for conservation, were consequently inaccessible to villagers. Substantial areas were declared reserve forests which had earlier been used by village communities. Madhav Gadgil has pointed out how, in Uttar Kannada, the area of reserved forests increased and the area of minor forests, meant for the use of the people, decreased over time. Thus, the area of minor forests in Uttar Kannada decreased from 780,288 ha in 1880 to 718,592 ha in 1890, to 256,000 ha in 1990, and was already only 35,328 in 1910!

With the advent of British colonial rule, the basic purpose of forest management changed from providing the sustenance needs of tribal and village communities, to largely benefiting the needs of the Empire. Along with these new uses, new rules and organisation were also required. The Indian Forest Service was given control and community management became redundant. Placing forest management in the hands of "outsiders," whose allegiance and source of power lay outside the community, excluded their knowledge and understanding of local concerns and values. As Ivan Illich notes, "Enclosure...is as much in the interest of professionals as it is of State bureaucrats...For, as local ways of knowing and doing are devalued or appropriated, and as vernacular forms of governance are eroded, so State and professional bodies are able to insert themselves. Enclosure allows the bureaucrat to define the local community as impotent for its own survival." In 1947, India became independent and, under Nehru's leadership, moved towards modernisation and industrialisation. It was hoped that with speedy economic growth, poverty would be eliminated and that this would result in greater equity and efficiency. Forests were cut for cash, to invest in development activities or were cleared for the expansion of agriculture, dams, mining, and other such projects. Fuelwood, fodder and other

subsistence needs for the poor did not receive the attention or priority they deserved.

As in the colonial period, forest management, in independent India was entirely a government function, the forester representing the sovereign claim to resources and territory. Forestry management consisted essentially of schedules and extraction and administrative notices of territorial claim. By 1980, 75 m ha had been put under forest management, displacing an estimated 30 million rural users.[2] As rights of tribal and rural communities were eroded, conflicts between the Forestry Department and the people became increasingly violent and destructive of forests. By 1985, satellite imagery showed that less than 40 m ha had any forest cover left and that it was disappearing at the rate of 1.5 m ha a year. The belief that tribal and village communities were destroying the forests encouraged the custodians of forests to become even more restrictive in their rules which, in turn, resulted in greater exclusion, oppression and corruption. Verrier Elwin who worked with the tribes closely said, "There is a feeling amongst tribes that all agreements in favour of preservation and development of forests are intended to refuse them their demands. The tribes argue that if it is a question of industry, township, development work or projects of rehabilitation, all these plausible arguments are forgotten and vast tracts are placed at the disposal of outsiders who mercilessly destroy the forest wealth, with or without necessity."[3]

Further, the tribes argued, how could they (the tribes themselves) destroy the forests? The utmost that they wanted was wood to keep warm in the winter months, to reconstruct or repair their huts and carry on their little cottage industries. Their fuel needs for cooking were not much, since they had not much to cook. They explained that the zamindars, in violation of forest rules and laws, devastated vast tracks of forest and how contractors strayed outside the contracted coupes carrying truck loads, far in excess of their authorised capacity, and otherwise exploited both the forests and tribal people (Guha).[3]

In designating areas as "protected" or "reserved," forest power was redefined. It meant the taking over of public land, of natural resources, of markets, by one group, at the expense of others. It also provided a tool for control, corruption and oppression. In discussing the enclosure of common lands The Ecologist said, "Enclosure tears people and their lands, forests, crafts, technologies and cosmologies out of the cultural framework, in which they are embedded, and forces them into a new framework which reflects and reinforces the values and interests of newly dominant groups. Any pieces which will not fit into the new framework are devalued and discarded."[1] In many ways, 1985 was a turning point in the history of India's forestry and its policies. Earlier the satellite data indicating the loss of forest cover at the rate of 1.5 m ha per year had shocked the nation. The newly-elected Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in his first broadcast to the nation on January 4, 1985, said, "Continuing deforestation has brought us face-to-face with a major ecological and socio-economic crisis. This trend must be halted. I propose immediately to set up a National Wastelands Board, with the object of bringing 5 million hectares of land every year under fuelwood and fodder plantations. We shall develop a people's movement for afforestation."

The Prime Minister's statement focused on the needs of the people for fuelwood and fodder: it emphasised the need for a people's movement in forestry and opened the doors for local agencies, co-operatives, NGO's and other non-governmental agencies who could work closely with local communities. The Prime Minister's statement gave direction to forest policy, encompassing ecological concerns and giving priority to the subsistence needs of the people. Protection and afforestation was not to be achieved by policing methods, but with the participation and involvement of the people. Here was a departure from the past, a course of action based on an understanding of our past failures.

Development Alternatives and Equity Concerns: Gandhi and Nehru

The visions that Gandhi and Nehru had, of an independent India, differed from each other. Whereas both Gandhi and Nehru wanted India to be free of poverty and hunger, the development strategies they proposed were radically different. Nehru wanted modernisation and industrialisation, whereas, Gandhi wanted priority to be given to the development of India's villages. Under Nehru's leadership India achieved an industrial infrastructure and a Green Revolution, and also an impressive growth in technical and scientific manpower. But poverty and unemployment, tribal impoverishment and the drudgery of women's illiteracy, did not diminish. Forests were destroyed to create space for the new industrial projects, as well as, for the new dams and irrigation projects. Broad estimates suggest that over 30 million people were displaced and became victims of development projects.[2] The tribes especially suffered from this strategy. Not only were thousands of hectares of prime forest submerged but thousands of hectares of catchment areas were also cleared to provide for the relocation of displaced outsiders, at the expense of displacing and destroying the tribes.

Gandhi's development strategy was different. Instead of modernisation and industrialisation, he focused on village development, village industries and village institutions for the management and control of resources, instead of government bureaucracies. To Gandhi, development planning meant focusing on the poorest of the poor. Gandhi was not swayed by the technological achievements of the West and wanted India to follow its own path of development, taking into account its realities and culture. Gandhi proposed gram panchayats and gram sabhas, to involve the local people in the planning and implementation of projects. Gandhi was mortally afraid of "the suffocating solicitude of the planned benevolent State." To Gandhi, the State represented "a soulless machine which can never be weaned from violence, to which it owes its very existence." Gandhi talked of the four-fold ruin that India had suffered at the hands of colonial rulers: economic, political, cultural and spiritual. The interrelatedness of these had provided the traditional and cultural modes of co-operation, of sharing and control of natural resources. With the four-fold ruin, the very essence of communal life had been eroded and, with it had gone all restraint in the exploitation of people and natural resources.

There were deep intellectual and emotional differences regarding development strategy for an independent India between Gandhi and Nehru. Nehru wrote, "is it not romantic to expect khadi and village industries to solve the long term problems of India's poverty?"4 But for Gandhi, development had a human face, the face of the poorest of the poor. Equity, to Gandhi, meant planning and development for the poor, not in the abstract, but keeping the realities of the poor, the "here and now" of their existence, in focus. "Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will it restore him any control over his own life and destiny?" (Gandhi).1 Unfortunately, in the search for speedy development Gandhi's voice was lost. Large irrigation projects, hydro projects and modern, large scale, industries were supported, and large areas of forest disappeared. Tribes and local populations, dependent on forests suffered enormously because of these projects. The resulting unrest and conflicts further eroded the forests, the survival base for millions of tribes and subsistence users. The poor paid a heavy price for these so-called development projects. As a result of deforestation, especially in upper catchment areas, soil erosion in the country increased. Estimates, of soil erosion in 1972, were approximately 6,000 m tonnes. It is now estimated at 12 m tonnes (Vohra). According to the Department of Agriculture, the country loses 30 to 50 m tonnes of food grain because of the loss of top soil. Floods and droughts have also increased in frequency, severity and extent, leading to enormous losses, human suffering and the increased poverty of rural areas. With deforestation, underground water tables too, have been affected because of run-offs, leaving large numbers of ponds and shallow wells dry, thus affecting the agricultural productivity of smaller farmers. The country has paid a heavy price for its development policies and its neglect of land use, especially in relation to the uncultivated half of India. If poverty in India is to be seriously tackled, then land use concerns such as deforestation, degraded and wasted land, soil erosion, and use of common land, should receive the highest political attention. A Land Use and Wasteland Development Council under the prime minister with chief ministers of different States as members was launched in 1985, but its lifespan was only one meeting! If we are to safeguard the interests of the poor, then Gandhi's concern and development strategy needs greater attention. We must take note of the interrelationship between deforestation, environmental degradation and poverty. The poor are caught in a vicious downward spiral. They are forced to overuse resources to survive; the impoverishment of forests and the environment then further impoverishes them, making their survival even more difficult and uncertain.

Bureaucracy, the Poor and Equity

Apart from development in terms of modernisation and industrialisation, and the lack of attention paid to land and natural resources, another element in the development strategy since independence has been that the State has become the major instrument for the implementation and delivery of services. Fifty years later we are attempting to move away from suffocating controls of bureaucracy and trying to liberalise the economy in order for it to develop.

Several schemes have been introduced to reduce rural poverty since Independence-Community Development, SFDA, MFDA, Tribal Development, IRDP etc., to deal with the problems of small and marginal farmers, the landless, tribes, etc. In general, the impact of these schemes, through bureaucratic institutions, has been negligible. The bureaucratic structures were largely unresponsive to the needs and conditions of local people. In fact experience has indicated that projects especially designed to benefit the rural poor ended up benefiting the already well off, perhaps because the rich know how to manipulate the system. The various social forestry projects funded by the World Bank and other donor agencies to assist the rural poor, with their fuelwood and fodder needs, have also resulted in the poor being bypassed. The policy of free distribution of saplings, to encourage tree plantation by the poor, was largely cornered by the bigger farmers, who would come in with their trucks and tractors and load thousands of saplings to grow commercial timber. Most Forest Department nurseries contained eucalyptus saplings, which larger farmers and absentee land lords wanted for commercial timber. The Forest Department officials preferred this system of free distribution to larger farmers since, in this way, they could fulfil their targets or sapling distribution and planting.

Calculations based on saplings distributed (8,550 million) and their estimated survival rate indicates that India's 329 m ha should be densely tree planted by now! In Gujarat alone, farmers, in one year, planted as many as four times the number of total existing tress in the State! Here is another example of how a project, meant to help the rural poor with their fuelwood and fodder needs, became a successful commercial forestry project for large farmers, bypassing the rural poor. Again, in the various parks and sanctuaries established by the Forest Departments the government took over the grazing lands of thousands of villages, leaving the villagers angry, bereft and helpless. Violence over access to resources keeps erupting in many sanctuaries.

The Forest Departments in various States have long-term contracts with forest-based industries to supply raw materials at highly concessional rates. The Forest Department allocated forest land to Forest Development Corporations, subservient to the Forest Department, to promote fast-growing commercial timber, and in the process cut the supply of variable trees to the poor. The late Salim Ali, a noted environmentalist, called these Forest Development Corporations, the Forest Destruction Corporations. And yet, when it comes to leasing forest land on an usufruct basis to the rural poor, the co-operatives and NGO's for afforestation activities, there has been strong resistance by forestry officials. The Tree Cutting and Transit Rules were enacted by the Forest Department to prevent illegal felling of trees in forest areas, as well as and their transportation. But these rules have been extended to private land as well. Administrative permits to cut and transport trees are slow and cumbersome to get and involve several visits and inevitable bribes. The poor suffer, especially, because they do not know how to handle the system and their prices fall, as a result of the use of intermediaries.

Exploitation seems to have become a way of life for both the exploiter and the exploited. To stand up against exploitation, to refuse to give a

bribe, to unite for protest or a change, all such actions require self-confidence, an asset which the poor and the deprived do not possess. Professor Ravi Matthai tells of a marginal farmer who wanted a small loan and required, for his application, a record of his land holding size. The marginal farmer went to the taltai, a junior government functionary in charge of land records in a village. The taltai wanted a bribe. The marginal farmer was advised that there was strength in numbers. He collected a group of 20 other marginal farmers to march to the taltai's office to protest. Just before they reached the taltai's office their courage failed them. Having only a marginal existence, it was difficult to take a step which would earn them the displeasure of the taltai, a petty officer who wields enormous power as a keeper and manipulator of land records. The rural poor are ill prepared to deal with the taltais of their world. Bureaucratic structures, as constituted, are grossly inadequate for development activities for the poor and call for solutions at the local level.

In a recent workshop on Law and Resource Distribution,5 the participants agreed that the most readily identifiable reasons for access difficulties centre on bureaucracy. Case after case, country after country, cited rebuffs and anxieties suffered by the poor, at the hands of arrogant officials, imbued with a superiority complex with regard to the poor. The uneasy client is curtly told to wait, often for hours, even days, or is shouted at, and pushed around. As far as possible, the poor avoid going to bureaucrats with their problems. Equity and efficiency can only be assured if the beneficiaries are involved in the control and management of resources. Experience, in a number of joint projects in forest protection involving village communities, has resulted in a wealth of experience. Measures of forest protection, where resources are enclosed and people kept out, are being abandoned in favour of more participatory methods and mutual sharing of benefits. The concern for equity means that people matter. Most development programmes, projects and policies seem to include people only as an awkward afterthought. If only development, including forest development, can be understood as a process of empowerment, in which people are liberated from forces that prevent them from making decisions that concern their livelihood and lives, then programmes aimed at the poor will work.

Protection of forests, parks and sanctuaries only works when measures of protection and benefits are mutually decided in a participatory manner. Given the unequal power relations between the Forest Department and villagers, it is important that the identification and definition of the problem is also openly shared and discussed, for "reality" seems different when viewed from the perspective of the "official" or the "oppressed." Much violence and destruction of forests has resulted from policies of keeping people out, as if they were enemies of the forests. The very assumption, that people are enemies of the forests, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy! Paolo Freire in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed writes, "the truth is that the oppressed are not marginal, are not men living outside society. They have always been inside-inside the structure which made them 'beings for others'. The solution is not to integrate them into structures of oppression but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'."6

The Joint Forest Management Programme, initiated in West Bengal and now introduced in several other states, is a first step in recognising the mutuality of benefit when the relationship is one of partnership. At present the power relationship between the Forest Department and village protection teams is very unequal, so are the benefits shared (25% or so of the sale of timber to village protection teams), but at least the first step has been taken. The village communities are participating in forest protection measures, in defining what constitutes a fair share and, in determining, who should benefit. Women are taking an increasing part in determining their role and share. The Joint Forest Management Committees are moving towards processes that enable the tribes, villagers and women to become "beings for themselves." There is a long road ahead but the first step, that of shared responsibility, will make it irreversible.

Regenerating Forest: Equity and Empowerment

For over two centuries the instruments of management and control of forests, as well as other common resources, have been exploitative. The colonial rulers' mission was to dispossess the local communities of their common land. At a stroke, local communities were denied access to land they had traditionally set aside as fallow and to forests, grazing lands, streams etc. In independent India too, dispossession was the favoured means of securing land for development projects. There is inherent violence in such a strategy of development and violence is created by those affected by these projects. As far as the poor are concerned, India had only moved from one colonialism to another.

The enclosure of common land into protected and reserved forests, over which communities had no say as to their conservation and management, had a chain reaction of "dispossession." The Forest Department too was finally "dispossessed": half the forest area had been turned into treeless wasteland over a period of time. Enclosing forest land in which tribes and village communities become "outsiders" had other implications. Control over resources shifted from the community to government officials. Enclosing land redefined how the resource was to be managed, by whom, and for whose benefit. Decisions which had been made by a community listening to the community's own views, were now being made and forced upon it by delegated officials.

It is becoming increasingly evident that protection and regeneration of forests must take into account, people's participation and the concerns of equity and empowerment of the people. The famous Chipko Movement was essentially an uprising of local women to protect the forests, to protest against government policies for the diversion of timber to making sports goods, ignoring local subsistence needs. From the success of Chipko emerged Mahila Mandals (Women's Groups), to deal with firewood, fodder and other issues relevant to women. These Mahila Mandals have shown a real capacity for taking the management of village common lands into their own hands, effectively opposing forest pachayats, where their activities have threatened the well-being of the community. By ensuring the equitable distribution of grass and

firewood, the Mahila Mandals have ensured that there is co-operation among all families in the village. There is a quiet revolution taking place in these villages, a sense of empowerment for, besides dealing with fuelwood and fodder, they have taken up issues of the well-being of their families, villages, and even of the hill economy.

If we are to return to, and give new life to, the concept of people taking development into their own hands, new institutional mechanisms independent of the power of government will have to be encouraged. In 1986 the National Wastelands Development Board jointly with the National Diary Development Board set up a National Tree-Growers Co-operative Federation with the objective of "contributing to the restoration and protection of the ecological security of the country by creating self-sustaining village co-operatives that will work for the improvement of marginally productive and unproductive degraded lands and establish fuelwood and fodder plantations primarily to meet villagers' needs." Through the NTGCF, co-operative societies have been established in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Orissa and Rajasthan, with a membership of 17,626, of whom 30.8% are women. The project has also helped women install 43,050 smokeless stoves and 1,017 family bio-gas plants. The tree-growers' co-operative societies are rapidly spreading to other States and villages.[7]

The joint protection and regeneration of forest and common lands offers the best opportunity for introducing equity concerns and empowering local people. The logic of self-reliance is the logic of place, people and resources bound into locally self-sustaining systems. Rajiv Gandhi's decision to "halt continuing deforestation," to focus on people's needs for "fuelwood and fodder," and develop a people's movement for afforestation has become a national forest policy. In announcing the Joint Forestry Management Programme, the government of India issued the following guidelines to the various states: "Meeting the requirements for fuelwood, fodder, minor forest produce and small timber of the rural and tribal populations," and "Creating a massive people's movement with the involvement of women to achieve these objectives."

The JFM programme is opening new windows and doors to equity and empowerment concerns. With equity has come success. And with success, greater empowerment. Whether that empowerment was having your voice heard, or getting something, it allowed the people to have greater control to be vested in the community, not in the State or local government, but in those who rely on the forests for their sustenance and survival needs. Success is also seen as promoting other strategies that meet other local needs, thus ensuring greater control over their lives. Equity, efficiency and empowerment are becoming powerful ideas in sustainable forest development. People-centred approaches cannot be mere slogans, techniques or technologies. They are embedded in moral and ethical concerns. Bureaucratic approaches will have to give way to people-centred and people-managed systems.

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