

Of Tribals and Forests

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The parliament had enacted the new Forest Act about a year ago but the Government is delaying its notification. One section of the Congress leadership believes the Act will lead to the destruction of the jungles; while another section believes this delay will deprive the tribals of their traditional rights. On the one hand people race the insensitiveness, cruelty and inefficiency of the Forest Department. On the other hand tribals are equally eager to cut off the jungle.

The present Forest Act requires the Forest Department to record the rights of tribals living in forest areas for many generations and to provide for continuance of those rights. Tribals undertake shifting cultivation in many forests. A part of the forest is cleared for cultivation for few years. Then it is left untouched for another 10-20 years during which it regenerates. Such rights have been recognized in the Act but the Forest Department does not usually record them and treats tribals as encroachers. Permission is being granted to fell forests for mining, hydropower, highways and industries but tribals cutting them temporarily are being evicted. More-over, the Forest Department is not able to protect and regenerate the forests after evicting the tribals. This writer had opportunity to visit the private jungle created by Jagat Singh 'Junglee' of Rudraprayag District of Uttarakhand. He enclosed his family lands and prevented grazing by goats etc. He did not cut grass and wood for a few years. A dense jungle of various species was formed spontaneously in about 15 years such that sunlight does not reach the earth in most area. Now he earns a good amount from sale of grass, wood and other minor produce. The notified 'forest' managed by the Forest Department across the road has only pine trees. It is lifeless. Income is also less. It is totally bereft of biodiversity.

The new Forest Act has been made with the objective of protecting the tribals from the Forest Department. Tribals living in forests are to be given land rights on maximum four acres of forest land. This will prevent the Forest Department from evicting the tribals who are living symbiotically with the forests and then giving them away for mining etc. This is the positive aspect of the new Act. But other experiences indicate that tribals are often no longer interested in protecting- and living with the forests. A senior IAS officer was appointed as Commissioner by the Supreme Court to examine the felling of forests in Assam. He observed that the felling had stopped in most areas managed by the Forest Department. But the Constitution provided for autonomous self-government for tribal areas. The tribal leaders were felling forests using this window. Thieves too were smuggling illegally cut timber through this route. This was stopped only with the intervention of the Court. In another instance the tribals of Dungarpur in Rajasthan happily narrated how they had cut the forests in the sixties and seventies and sold wood to charcoal manufacturers. Indeed the behaviour of tribals is different in other situations. But that does not cancel the hard reality that tribals have often become enemies of the forests. In conclusion the debate on the new Act reduces to the question: Who will fell the forests-tribals or the Forest Department? Of the two, felling by tribals is better because they are the common

man whose welfare is the objective of the State. The new Act should be notified from this point of view.

There are other aspects of the issue that lead to the opposite conclusion, however. One aspect is that tribal people get locked into tribal life with distribution of forest land. It is seen that dependence of population on agriculture reduces along with economic development. Hardly one percent population of farmers in developed countries not only feed their own people but also produce for exports. Distribution of forest land to tribals encourages them to persist in agriculture thus locking them into low incomes. Another aspect is that it is necessary to maintain forests and protect wildlife and biodiversity for protecting the environment. Third aspect is that the tiger, wild pig and neelgai too have the right to life. Developed countries are recognizing the value of 'wilderness' in its own right. These rights of animals and plants are akin to human rights. These aspects are hit by distribution of forest land to tribals. They may have lived symbiotically with the forests earlier but that may no longer be the case. They need to kill wild animals to protect their cultivated fields.

It seems there is no consensus on the role of forests and wildlife in the changed technological circumstances of the day. One section of intellectuals considers the elimination of forests and particular wildlife as part of the natural cycle. Another section holds that man must allow space to all other beings as Karta of the family provides for the weaker children.

This question is difficult. Felling of forests leads to extinction of tigers and wild pigs but also to cultivation of food grains and increase in cows and buffaloes. The entire Ganges Basin was full of dense forests at one time. Krishna and Arjuna burnt the Khandava forest for human habitation. But, other scientists argue, overexploitation of the forests in the Indus Valley Civilization led to its collapse. History provides both types of examples.

Felling of forest is acceptable if it leads to development of sustainable agriculture as happened in the Ganges Basin but not acceptable if it leads to denudation as happened in the Indus Valley. Cows are better than tigers but tigers and forests are better than denuded wastelands. Perhaps cutting of forests for mining of copper and aluminum enables the homemaker to live in pucca house and cook on LPG gas. The loss in consciousness from felling the forest to make a LPG station has to be evaluated against the gain in consciousness by the homemaker. This assessment has to be done in a very sensitive way for each particular situation. No simple formula will suffice.

One solution may be to distribute forest land to the tribals with the condition that the number of trees will not be reduced. Simultaneously, the Forest Departments should be set in order. They have been used by State Governments as source of revenue. Instead they should be given the mandate of promoting wildlife and biodiversity. The solution to the present inefficiency of the forest department will not come from blanket distribution of forest land to the tribals.

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