

Smoke in the woods

Government policy documents are statements of goals, priorities and strategies. If old strategies have failed or circumstances have changed, they should be revised. Given that our Forest Policy was last revised in 1988, changes are perhaps overdue. The new draft Forest Policy 2018, however, ignores the lessons from this period and returns to the state-managed forestry of the 1950s, but with a neoliberal twist.

India's diverse forests support the livelihoods of 250 million people, providing them firewood, fodder, bamboo, beedi leaves and many other products. The timber currently benefits the state treasury. Forests also regulate stream flows and sediment, benefitting downstream communities. Finally, they provide global benefits of biodiversity and carbon sequestration. However, these multiple goods and services, flowing to different beneficiaries, cannot be simultaneously maximised. Forest policy, therefore, focusses primarily on which benefits (and beneficiaries) to prioritise, where and through what process. Another focus area is to decide when and through what process to allow diversion of forest land for "non-forest" activities such as dam building, mining and agriculture.

Forest policy in colonial India focussed on maximising products and revenues for the state through the imperial forest department as sole owner, protector and manager of the forest estate. Unfortunately, post-Independence policy continued this statist approach. Forests were seen as sources of raw material for industry and local communities were simply treated as labour.

In a paradigm shift, the 1988 Forest Policy recognised the multiple roles of forests and prioritised environmental stability over revenue maximisation. It also acknowledged that the needs of forest-dependent communities must be the "first charge" on forest produce. Equally important, the policy emphasised people's involvement in protecting and regenerating forests, thus formally recognising the limitations of state-managed forestry.

Joint forest management (JFM) was initiated in the 1990s to implement the concept of people's involvement. But what began with great expectations eventually ended up as a nation-wide charade. Foresters created thousands of village forest committees but severely limited their autonomy and jurisdictions. Donor money was spent on plantations but activities were stopped once funds ran out. "People's participation" by executive order was too weak and lopsided a concept. Instead what was required was substantive devolution of control over forests.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 created a historic opportunity for such devolution. Its community forest resource provisions gave communities rights to both access and manage forests. Today, thousands of villages in Maharashtra and Odisha have received these rights, and hundreds have begun to exercise them.

The 1990s also saw the Supreme Court getting involved in forest governance. To regulate forest diversions, it introduced a high 'net present value' (NPV) charge on the lands diverted. But the court refused to assign any role to local communities affected by such diversion, not even a share in the NPV received. Again, the FRA democratised the diversion process by requiring community concurrence for forest diversion once community forest rights are recognised. The Adivasis of Niyamgiri in Odisha exercised this provision to prevent bauxite mining in their sacred hill tracts.

Does the 2018 Forest Policy draft build on the new direction of 1988 and incorporate the lessons learnt since then? Unfortunately, the answer is a no. But in the haze of poorly written text with its platitudes and confusion, one intent is visible. Carping about the decline in forest productivity, it identifies "production forestry" and plantations as the "new thrust area". Forest development

corporations, white elephants of the statist era, are to be the institutional vehicle. But in a neoliberal twist, they will now enter into public-private partnerships (PPPs) to bring corporate investment into forest lands.

In the past, production forestry led to replacing natural oak forests with pine monocultures in the Himalayas, natural sal forests with teak plantations in central India, and wet evergreen forests with eucalyptus and acacia in the Western Ghats. All this has decimated diversity, dried up streams and undermined local livelihoods. PPPs will entail more such destruction, with even the profits ending up in corporate hands.

If local communities had a say in forest governance, they would challenge this production forestry model. So there is little about decentralised governance in the draft policy though the term “community participation” is tossed around liberally. The draft talks of “ensuring synergy” between gram sabhas and JFM committees, when the need is to replace JFM committees with statutorily empowered gram sabhas, and revamp the colonial-era Indian Forest Act by incorporating FRA provisions.

So, what is the impetus behind this new draft policy? Granting the private sector access to public resources is one. But an additional driving force seems to be India’s commitment made in Paris in 2015 to sequester 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide in our forests. “Carbon neutral timber” is listed as the first benefit from forests and a subsection on integrating climate change concerns highlights its importance. Conveniently, the accumulated 50,000 crore of NPV monies (called CAMPA, or Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority, funds) provides the means to achieving this carbon target. The CAMPA Act and its recently released rules demonstrate the government’s intent to fall back on state-managed forestry to meet new “national” goals; the draft policy ropes in the private sector as well. This overlooks the ecological and social implications of carbon and production forestry and the need for decentralised democracy.

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