A register by the people

India recorded a marginal increase in forest cover, according to the India State of Forest Report 2017. Around the same time this report was released, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change released a draft National Forest Policy, 2018, which calls for increasing forest cover, involving communities in forest management, and creating plantations for industrial use. Before formulating such a policy, a question that needs to be asked is, how much forest cover does India actually have?

The State of Forest Report says that forest cover had increased in India by 0.21% in 2017 from 2015, and that some areas had become 'Very Dense Forest' in this period. At the same time, the Ministry itself admits that between 2014 and 2017, India lost, or legally diverted, 36,575 hectares of forest area towards 1,419 development projects. So, two things are clear: even if forest cover is being increased, it is also simultaneously being lost, and new forest may also be subsequently lost.

Crucially, the claim of new forests being created is questionable. In several consecutive forest reports, an absence of ground truths has meant that areas that look green, such as tea estates and commercial plantations, have been counted as forests. Environmentalists stress that it is difficult to believe that India's forest cover has become more dense in the last two years simply because this process takes much longer. The point is that there is a need to create mechanisms to calculate our actual forest cover and natural wealth, and this should form the basis for a forest policy. For this, we need a more rigorous integration of the forest policy with other existing environmental legislation and policy. This, in turn, will help decentralise information on forests.

The Biological Diversity Act, 2002, calls for setting up a Biodiversity Management Committee in each local body. The Committee will prepare People's Biodiversity Registers (PRBs), with tribals as members or people living in natural areas not classified legally as forest. The Registers entail a complete documentation of biodiversity in the area — plants, food sources, wildlife, medicinal sources, etc. They are meant to enable the creation of local biodiversity funds for conservation, and aid in decision-making.

A good PBR will not just be a powerful text, it can also help to trace how habitats are changing, and to understand and estimate parts of our forests. Being a bottom-up exercise, it is also a means of understanding the overlap of cultural and natural biodiversity. For instance, several Endemic Birds Areas, like in the Western Ghats, are those where tribals like the Todas live. These communities have specific ways of interacting with the environment and have helped conserve it in a sustainable way. Outside protected forest areas which are under immediate threat, PBRs will help identify forests that require conservation.

A golden chance of setting up a system of efficient natural area monitoring will be lost if PBRs and Biodiversity Management Committees are not integrated into the heart of the draft Forest Policy. The policy should take forward an existing legislation to achieve that elusive blend of tradition and modernity and also create digitised maps with truths from the ground.

Traditionally, the view of forests in India has been that of a natural resource which requires management and effective commercial use. This is a largely centralised, government-run exercise. Forests are managed by forest departments, and their estimation and range is calculated by government agencies. While the draft Forest Policy talks about increasing forests, including for commercial purposes, through public-private partnerships, it does not create a mechanism for including those who live around forests.

The draft identifies threats to forests but does not provide systems for community involvement. It says: "The various threats to Forests due to encroachments, illegal tree fellings, forests fires, invasive weeds, grazing, etc. will be addressed within the framework of the approved Working Plan/Management Plan and also by ensuring community participation in forest management." A major concern is that existing forests should not be used for industrial use, as diversion is one of the biggest threats to forests. A move towards decentralisation of forest wealth — wealth which is beyond commerce and embraces cultural values and oft-forgotten knowledge — will provide transparency as well as an actual and felt recognition of our heritage.

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