Farmers, forests and the future

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As India gives shape to its new forest policy, the votaries of forest conservation and tribal rights have come out strongly against commercial extraction of forests that undermines both local communities and ecology. It is a timely show of strength since the draft policy seeks to measure the productivity of our forests by the quantity of timber harvested instead of the quality of biodiversity and eco-system services they host and provide.

Historically, though, the two groups continually undercut each other even as India's appetite for growth devoured both forests and tribal land. Beneath the current truce, simmers the banal debate of rights versus conservation, fueled most recently by the historic march of the farmer and the forest-dweller from Nashik to Mumbai. Before the two resume sparring, examine this incongruity. Why did forest-dwellers join a farmers' rally? Are farming solutions to be found inside forests? Isn't a forest-dwelling farmer a contradiction in terms?

Forests promise fertility, nourish top soil and ensure ample water. But no farmer ever farmed inside a forest. Because wild animals in good numbers make farming impossible. Because it is no longer a forest when the wilderness have made way for ploughing and sowing. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 — legislated to remedy the "historical injustice" done to forest people with no ownership of land or traditional resources — empowers the tribal and other traditional forest-dwellers. While the individual land right under the Act is limited to 4 hectares of self-cultivated land, community rights may extend to entire forests.

Right to own self-cultivated land does not necessarily amount to deforestation. Not all forest land holds forests and many such plots have long become farmlands. And the "forest-dwellers" demanding ownership of those plots are for all practical purposes 'farmers'. There is no point denying either on government records. But where the forestland does hold forests, felling is required if a forest-dweller decides to plough against all odds, if only to assert her occupation under the FRA. The yield may help subsistence. But it won't be farming in the vocational or the commercial sense. Unless an entire community collectively converts vast tracts of forests into farmland.

And therein lie two ironies. The switch to agriculture marked the beginning of the end of natural sustainability on earth. It also put us on the path to surplus, capital and inequality — the pet peeves of the Left. Yet the predominantly Left-led movement justifies the demand for forest land citing the farming needs of traditional forest-dwellers who, at least in theory, are hunter-gatherers. On the other hand, most conservationists view forest-dwellers as encroachers and are suspicious of every claim over forest land. Never mind that having exploited their share of forests and prospered, the non-forest-dweller has no moral right whatsoever to object even if every forest plot sanctioned under the FRA is chopped clean or sold off.

This presents a complex scenario: Ploughing inside forests is not a farming solution. But that is no reason to deny the forest-dweller her rights over forest land, or go back to the sham of a joint forest management regime dominated by the forest department.

More than a decade after the FRA was legislated, the process of settlement of rights is still incomplete. Conservationists view this as a conspiracy to keep open the window to regularise the ongoing appropriation of forestland. Doubtless, our forests are coveted. Land is a finite resource and an overcrowded India has already exhausted most of what is not under forest cover.

For every encroachment, however, the rights activist can cite an instance of willful denial of rights. Indeed, the delay in completing the settlement process is as much due to too many false claims as it is to concerted efforts by the forest and revenue administrations against encumbering forest land earmarked for development projects or simply giving up their fiefdom.

Any which way, forest-dwellers are the victims, even when they become pawns of the rich and the powerful. It is the state's job to curb misuse of the FRA. As the principle of justice goes, its failure to screen the undeserving cannot cost a genuine forest-dweller her rights. On their part, the rights activists should realise that forest-dwellers' community rights over common resources or cultural sites extending to larger or entire forest tracts is a much stronger, non-negotiable instrument of empowerment than individual rights over a plot of forest land which can be compensated and substituted if the state proposes rehabilitation in some perceived national interest. As the Niyamgiri resistance against Vedanta showed in Odisha, community rights over an entire forest is virtually unassailable. Even if the state can afford to pay off for, say, an entire hill range, it cannot offer substitutes for culturally important sites and shift a population elsewhere. Yet, the focus tends to be on individual rights for farming.

Just as loan waiver alone cannot alleviate the farmer's plight, distributing plots of forest land to traditional dwellers, irrespective of how they utilise it, will not secure them. Systemic reforms take time. Since many farmers may not survive the wait, a loan waiver is perhaps justifiable as an SOS. If anything, the forest-dweller's lot is even worse than the farmer's. But their SOS solution involves finite forestland.

Should they need it again, the farmer may still be able to squeeze the exchequer for more subsidies. But nothing can replenish the forest disbursed under the FRA if the mandate to remedy the "historical injustice" is squandered.

The conservationist and the rights activist may still get real and dispel their mutual mistrust for good. Forests are not for farming. But the future of conservation and grass roots empowerment may lie in community-managed forests.