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‘WASTELAND CONVERSION THREATENS LIVELIHOODS, ECOLOGICAL BALANCE’

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Distribution of key natural resources - Land Resources incl. Land conservation in world & India

India’s conversion of more than 14,000 square km of ‘wasteland’ — mostly dense scrub, glacial areas, sands or marshland — into productive use between 2008-09 and 2015-16, and the government’s target to restore 26 million hectares of wasteland and degraded land by 2030 risks affecting the livelihoods of pastoralists, fishermen and nomadic farmers who are often dependent on these traditional “commons” lands, caution environmental policy researchers and social activists. These ‘commons’ also act as a buffer against floods, droughts and pollution for a wider population, they point out.

The Wastelands Atlas, prepared in collaboration with the National Remote Sensing Centre and released recently by the Land Resources Department uses satellite data to measure the extent of 23 different types of wastelands and tracks the impact of reclamation efforts. While 14,536 sq. km of wasteland were converted to productive use, the country saw a net conversion of 8,404 sq. km. Over half that land lies in Rajasthan, where a net change of 4,803 sq. km was seen, with large areas of scrub and sands brought under the plough and converted to cultivated cropland. The State also has extensive solar parks set up in its wastelands, thus converting them to industrial use in the production of renewable energy. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar also saw high levels of net conversion.

The government has been encouraging wasteland conversion, pointing out that while India has 18% of the world’s population, it only has 2.4% of the land area. “In order to ensure food security, there is an urgent need to improve the productivity of existing cultivated lands and to bring additional land under plough. The wastelands which are unutilised and have potential to produce food grain and provide vegetation cover may significantly contribute in this endeavour,” the department said in the Atlas.

In a foreword, Union Minister of State in the PMO Jitendra Singh suggested reclamation and afforestation efforts, infrastructure and renewable energy projects as ways to convert wasteland to productive use, apart from conversion to cropland. Apart from government-driven efforts, simple encroachment by local residents could also result in conversion of wastelands.

However, such conversions could impact livelihoods. Pastoral communities depend on common grazing land, gatherers and nomadic farmers depend on scrub forest and open scrubland for shifting cultivation, while fishermen can make a living off waterlogged and marshy areas. These areas protect unique biodiversity resources, which could be destroyed when development occurs.

“The idea of a wasteland is itself a political construct,” said Kanchi Kohli, a senior researcher at the Centre for Policy Research. “Many of these have been common areas for centuries and to regard them as unproductive is a problem. When you classify shifting cultivation or common grazing lands as wasteland and try to convert them into crop land, plantations or solar parks, it is endorsing a hierarchical idea of livelihoods. Why is the pastoralist considered less productive than the farmer?” she asked.

In southern India, these areas have traditionally been called ‘poromboke’ land which is communally owned, cannot be bought, sold or built on. In Karnataka, the gomal lands are

common grazing areas. In other regions, village forests and pastures, or gram panchayat lands, have played a similar role from medieval times.

“It was the East India company that first categorised these areas as wasteland, as they produce no tangible revenue,” said Nityanand Jayaraman, a Chennai-based social activist. He noted that Tamil Nadu’s capital city Chennai had paid a heavy price for converting wastelands such as the Pallikaranai marsh or the Ennore creek backwaters, into industrial, built-up areas. “The flooding you have seen in recent seasons happened because marshland was treated as waste rather than a valuable buffer. The backwaters protect inland water resources from encroaching salinity and seawater inundation, as well as storing water for dry seasons.”

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