

A forest policy on today's terms

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change as well as all State Forest Departments are guided by the National Forest Policy, 1988, which states: "The basic objectives that should govern the National Forest Policy are the following: Maintenance of environmental stability through preservation and, where necessary, restoration of the ecological balance that has been adversely disturbed by serious depletion of the forests of the country."

This laudable aim is obscured by the unfortunate fact that there is no such thing as an 'ecological balance'. The term originated as 'the balance of nature' in ancient Greece and was quoted off and on through the Middle Ages. However, with a better understanding of the functioning of natural systems, the concept was completely rejected by the beginning of the last century and does not find mention in textbooks of ecology. Similarly, the concept of 'environmental stability' is questionable because it is evident that natural processes are never stable or stagnant but are always in the process of change and succession. Therefore, environmental stability is a myth.

It is interesting that there is no official definition for the term 'forest' yet, despite ministries and government departments being named after it. In order to couch the laudable goals of the 1988 National Forest Policy, in valid terms, we would first need to define the term 'forest'. This is not a difficult task, since a forest is a self-sown and self-regenerating community of plants that supports a community of creatures dependent on those plants, and on each other, for food and shelter.

The 'self-sown' bit is important in the Indian context, since vast amounts of public money have been spent on 'planting forests', which is an oxymoron. Naturally there are no results to show for these 'planted forests', and Haryana has recently shown the way by practically stopping 'forest plantation' in favour of protecting and permitting existing vegetation to grow.

Having defined a forest, we can now state the primary aim of the 1988 National Forest Policy in the following valid terms: "Maintenance of a healthy natural environment through preservation and, where necessary, restoration of the original natural ecosystems that have been adversely affected by over-exploitation of the forests and other natural resources of the country."

It may be noted that the term 'original natural ecosystems' refers to the state of affairs prior to their exploitation by humans.

The second point of the policy states: "Conserving the natural heritage of the country by preserving the remaining natural forests with the vast variety of flora and fauna, which represent the remarkable biological diversity and genetic resources of the country."

Perhaps this should include grasslands, wetlands, and other ecosystems, and could therefore be stated as follows: "Conserving the natural heritage of the country by preserving natural forest and other ecosystems with their vast variety of flora and fauna, and encouraging such ecosystems to expand into areas they had formerly colonised, but from where they have been extirpated." This would suggest that degraded lands be protected so that original ecosystems can re-establish themselves on those lands. When land has been thoroughly degraded, the usual succession is grasses, shrubs, bushes and, finally, trees. By planting trees directly in such areas, we try to jump the gun, but the build-up of top soil and soil microorganisms that proceeds from a succession is missing, hence the large-scale failure of such plantations.

The third point needs some modification, too. It states: "Checking soil erosion and denudation in the catchment areas of rivers, lakes, reservoirs in the interest of soil and water conservation, for mitigating floods and droughts and for the retardation of siltation of reservoirs."

It does not suggest how this is to be done and why this point fits in, in the policy. Perhaps if it were stated in this way: "Protecting the catchment areas of rivers, lakes, reservoirs to enable natural vegetation to grow back unhindered to conserve soil, help groundwater recharge, for mitigating floods and droughts and for retardation of siltation of reservoirs." The justification for this wording is that the natural vegetation of an area has evolved over millennia to adjust to the rainfall regime, soil conditions, and the subsurface water systems of an area. In places where catchment areas have untouched natural vegetation, rainfall percolates into the soil and is released over a period of months, resulting in perennial streams and rivers. Where this has been damaged, the streams, rivulets and rivers have become seasonal, as in peninsular India.

The final point that needs modification is 2.2 of 'basic objectives': "The principal aim of Forest Policy must be to ensure environmental stability and maintenance of ecological balance including atmospheric equilibrium which are vital for sustenance of all lifeforms, human, animal and plant. The derivation of direct economic benefit must be subordinated to this principal aim."

This is a laudable point, but the terms of reference are not valid. Therefore, it might be better to state this in the following terms, so that the spirit of what is being stated is not lost: "The principal aim of Forest Policy must be to ensure a healthy natural environment and the maintenance and healthy functioning of life-support systems, including the water cycle and nutrient cycle, by protecting natural forest and other ecosystems native to the area. The derivation of direct economic benefit must be subordinated to this principal aim since the indirect economic benefit of healthy life-support systems is incalculable."

The remainder of the Forest Policy document is stated in valid language and needs no modification.

Couched in these terms, the Forest Policy document develops an overarching responsibility for the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change towards restoring and maintaining the health of India's surface and sub-surface water systems, since both are largely governed by forests and other natural ecosystems. The protection of healthy natural ecosystems in catchment areas should be a vital national goal, given the challenges of failing freshwater systems facing the nation at present. The State Forest Departments are the entities that can do the most in this context, by stopping invalid practices like planting forests and instead use that money in sensible ways to directly and indirectly protect natural ecosystems in sensitive areas like watersheds, catchment areas, and coasts, as has already been envisaged in the National Forest Policy, 1988.

What is worrisome, however, is that in the 30 years since it was formulated, no officer of the Indian Forest Service has pointed out these shortcomings. There is clearly an urgent need to review the curriculum of the Indian Forest Service since it seems to rely on concepts that have been discarded more than a century ago.

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