

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND ENVIRONMENT

Deccan Herald, Tuesday, May 17, 2005

By Praveen Bhargav

Four per cent wilderness and eight per cent economic growth — it's possible if we adopt an innovative approach

The era of economic liberalisation that dawned in the early 90s has played a major role in ensuring that the Indian economy is today pushing at an eight per cent growth rate. The engine for such growth has been the infusion of brand new ideas that have driven path-breaking economic reforms cutting through bureaucratic mindsets.

As a country of over 100 million people with rising social and economic aspirations, the challenge to save our biodiversity and wilderness assets in the wake of such sustained economic growth appears daunting. In this great Economy vs Environment debate, many in the industry, the bureaucracy and the political establishment quickly brand environmental crusaders as anti-development viruses who impede economic progress.

With Messrs Chidambaram and Montek Singh Ahluwalia, along with India Inc, pressing on the economic accelerator is it curtains for India's famed tiger, elephant, rhino and other endangered species that survive on just four per cent of India's landscape? Or is a vision of a biodiversity rich India with an eight per cent economic growth a realistic possibility?

It indeed would be if two fundamental conditions are met — the developmental juggernaut must not be allowed to penetrate Protected Areas that comprise a mere four per cent of India's landscape that's a species rich, biodiversity treasure trove; second, forest service officials must remain focused on actively protecting and scientifically managing these landscapes.

Cascading effect

There is mounting evidence to prove that impoverishment of biodiversity would have a cascading impact on economic development. First, we cannot gloss over the fact that we are an agrarian society and biodiversity rich landscapes that comprise a mere four per cent of India play a crucial role in stabilising climate, soil and act as carbon dioxide sinks.

Second, is the fact that several wild genes of food crops are locked up in these wilderness landscapes, which are our agricultural insurance policy to maintain self sufficiency in food production and support for future biotechnology options. Third, the hydrological contribution of wilderness landscapes is vitally important to sustain India's burgeoning population and meet the most basic human need — water.

It is therefore obvious that the need to save biodiversity rich landscapes is essentially a utilitarian one. Already, we have lost a substantial amount of biodiversity predominantly due to a populist approach bereft of good science that has hitherto driven the process of managing these areas.

Yet, we are blundering along with a myopic, short term 'exploitation' perspective which is driven by a strong contractor-corporate lobby that hobnobs with politicians and bureaucrats to push through many developmental projects without a hard diligence process. Examples like the grandiose river linking project, hundreds of mini-hydel dams in the Western Ghats,

mining in rain forests, etc, abound. Such an approach is gradually dismantling and fragmenting our invaluable biodiversity treasure house under the garb of economic development.

To make matters worse, this open treasury is being pillaged by powerful land-grabbers, poachers, miners, loggers and commercial forest produce collectors resulting in huge economic losses even as the State is aware that precious biodiversity assets cannot be recreated.

Stark reality

Considering the stark reality that biodiversity rich protected areas are now down to the last four per cent of India's landscape, we need to urgently seek and pursue powerful solutions to at least hold on to whatever that remains.

While there is much talk of sustainable development, the concept has been dissected and found that it is not universally applicable. In India, where reasonably intact biodiversity rich areas occur on a small fragment of the landscape, any attempt at sustainable development and harvest to meet the rising needs of a billion strong human population is clearly doomed to fail.

Ecologist Dr John Robinson of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) advanced a cutting edge conservation paradigm called Sustainable Landscapes. Essentially, this approach entails strictly protected landscapes for preserving extinction prone species and biodiversity assets; multiple use conservation areas for perpetuating a larger subset of biodiversity tolerant to some human impacts and intensive use of other agricultural, industrial and urban landscapes to meet growing human needs and aspirations.

This paradigm holds considerable promise in a densely populated country like India. If such an approach is adopted, achieving eight per cent economic growth and conserving four per cent of wilderness and biodiversity rich landscapes would be possible.

(Courtesy Wildlife First Features)