

# Protecting India's Protected Areas

*An official committee's recipe for forest management will, if implemented, have a disastrous impact.*

**Praveen Bhargav and Shekar Dattatri write:**

**T**he Forest Rights Act of 2006 (FRA) continues to be a matter of intense controversy. Some insist that forest dwellers should be allowed to exploit all forests, including Protected Areas (PAs) such as national parks and sanctuaries, for their livelihood. Others argue, on the basis of empirical and scientific evidence, that extractive exploitation within our small PAs cannot be ecologically sustainable at current human population densities, especially when the forests are linked to national and international markets. In this context, the recipe of the N C Saxena Committee on implementation of the FRA for redressing historic injustices to forest dwellers will precipitate an ecological crisis.

Of deep concern are two drastic measures recommended by the Saxena Committee. First, it proposes dismantling state protection of forests and progressively handing over management to gram sabhas. Second, it favours adoption of market-friendly policies and deregulation of non-timber forest products (NTFP) to facilitate their trade. The majority opinion of the committee appears to be that local stakeholders will have the innate wisdom and restraint to "sustainably" exploit forest products while ensuring the preservation of natural ecosystems and endangered species.

India's sanctuaries are the last refuges where endangered species have some degree of security. Rampant, market-driven exploitation of forest products in these ecologically sensitive hotspots of biodiversity can adversely affect the delicate balance of nature. For instance, a tiger that requires 3,000 kg of live prey a year needs a healthy herbivore population for its survival, which is only possible in a healthy habitat. What level of human extraction of forest products is "sustainable" for these species? Scientific studies have shown that most species of large wildlife decline and disappear when they have to compete with high-density human populations. In India, where forests have shrunk drastically and turned into tiny islands amidst a sea of humanity, it would be suicidal to dismantle state protection of our PAs.

It is well-documented that forests in India's north-east, largely under the control of autonomous tribal councils, are suffering from severe faunal impoverishment or the "empty forest syndrome". As starkly revealed in the documentary film *The Wild Meat Trail* by

Rita Banerjee and Shilpi Sharma, many tribal communities with enough cultivable land and livestock to meet their nutritional needs, are relentlessly exterminating wildlife from their community forests by shooting, trapping, and snaring every creature, from the smallest to the largest, for cash. The majority of this illegal wild meat is sold in local markets that cater to consumers from neighbouring towns and villages. In contrast, many wildlife reserves across the country, where the protectionist paradigm has been in place since the 1970s, such as Corbett, Kanha, Kaziranga and Bandipur, support some of the highest wildlife densities in the world. This does not mean all is well with the system of forest management in India. The tiger extinctions in Sariska and Panna, and many other failures, leave us in no doubt that forest governance is in dire need of sweeping reforms and a change in authoritarian mindsets. But the remedies proposed by the Saxena Committee may end up being worse than the maladies it is ostensibly setting out to cure.

Today there are about 600 PAs in India that together constitute just around 3-4% of our total land area. Granting land and community rights therein to growing populations of forest dwellers engaged in raising crops and livestock and commercial collection of forest products for insatiable markets, is a retrograde step. It is a matter of record that since independence, vast areas of wildlife-rich grasslands and wooded areas under the control of local communities have been decimated. While the consequences of mining and dams in forested landscapes are clearly visible, the insidious destruction caused by millions of people extracting forest products remains largely unseen. It is therefore imperative that we insulate at least the 3-4% of India comprising PAs from all incompatible and extractive uses, while allowing scientifically monitored multiple use of other categories of forests. Obviously this must go hand in hand with redressing past injustices to forest dwellers through policies that will enable them to improve their own lives and those of their children. What forest dwellers require is not a marginal improvement of their status quo but a set of proactive solutions that will provide real emancipation, such as fair resettlement outside PAs, education, and new livelihood options that can get them out of their dependence on forests.

FROM 50 YEARS AGO

## The Economic Weekly

A Journal of Current Economic and Political Affairs

VOL XIII, NO 16, APRIL 22, 1961

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### The Teaching of Economics: A Comment

Not merely economists, but anyone interested in higher education, should be grateful to Professor A K Das Gupta for his timely and persuasive plea...for raising University standards in economics. Teachers of economics would

agree that... there is an urgent need for a more complete training in economic analysis... [and] that postgraduate and undergraduate teaching are two very different assignments. One only wonders whether the proposed remedy, admitted by the author himself as "drastic", is not really too much so.

...Can all the blame for low standards...be placed on inadequate teaching? Is not the deterioration in the standard of English also responsible for this?...The widely suggested remedy is instruction in the regional language, in the first instance through the undergraduate level. In Madras at least the switch-over appears to be not too far round the corner...

[I wish] to point out the danger involved in the switch-over of further deterioration in standards... [I]t would seem only logical that the medium of postgraduate teaching would also have to change...[C]an economics – real, grown-up, postgraduate economics – be taught in India in any language other than English? If English is to continue at the postgraduate level only, can we succeed in raising and maintaining standards in the face of a growing 'language barrier'? These...are questions that ought to receive more attention from those interested in the future of economics in our country.

**Meenakshi Tyagarajan**  
Annamalai University