



The need for an integrated land use policy in India

By Praveen Bhargav

The issue of encroachment of government or public land is again under active debate in Karnataka. Strange as it may sound, while the demand for recovery of encroached government land is gathering momentum, yet another round of regularisation of forest land encroachment is being demanded by the legislators. A meeting of elected representatives has already discussed this issue. Even though forest land is legally considered public land, it appears the government is pursuing contradictory strategies.

If one looks at this objectively, it is abundantly clear that there is an underlying common factor which is that public lands have been encroached and are being converted legally or surreptitiously into private ownership. Why then are we seeing an emerging discourse that appears to be completely contradictory? And should we analyse this only in terms of current monetary value or are there other imperatives in terms of long term value of such lands, its contribution to society and principles of inter-generational equity that must be

considered?

In order to evolve a robust solution we must first look at the causative factors. Fundamentally, there is no integrated land use policy which is extremely vital in a country like ours with a population of over 120 crore and where human densities already exceed a staggering 10 per sq km even in many forests that are to be managed as 'inviolable' wildlife reserves.

The impetus for such encroachment primarily comes from the repeated cycles of 'akrama' and 'sakrama' that successive governments have followed for political expediency and the abysmal failure to check the deep-rooted nexus between the land mafia and people in positions of power. The other contributing factor has been the failure to muster political will and consensus for pursuing equitable land reforms in order to empower the landless.

It must be recognised that vicious cycles of regularisation fuel further encroachment without fear of punitive action. Also, it demoralises sincere officials and frontline staff, some of whom fight a daily battle to protect public land at great odds.

While reports of the AT Ramaswamy



and Balasubramanian committees have diligently documented that more than 10 lakh hectare of Government land has been grabbed, the situation with respect to forest land is equally alarming. It is estimated that between 1950 and 1980, (before the enactment of the Forest Conservation Act) nearly 50 lakh hectare of forest land was diverted across the country for various non-forestry activities, a vast majority of it being for increasing agricultural land. In Karnataka alone, during the last round

of forest land regularisation in 1997 which was categorized as pre-1980 encroachments, close to 15,000 hectare was regularised. Now under the new Forest Rights Act, individual and community rights over a whopping 14 lakh hectare of forest land has been created in various States including Karnataka till May 2011.

Pursuing myopic policies

Such populist but myopic policies are still being pursued ignoring peer-reviewed scientific findings which have documented that fragmentation or shrinking of forests into smaller patches honeycombed with human settlements, highways, dams, mines or developmental projects are the most serious threat to biodiversity and forest conservation. Our mountains, wetlands and forests which provide innumerable ecosystem services including sustenance of rivers that form the very basis of survival of human society are being rapidly lost as a result of such policies that lack vision and to poor enforcement.

Apart from forests, even other public lands which comprise gomals, kavals, devarakadus, lakes, public parks etc also

should not be distributed in a haphazard manner as has been routinely done. Even though new Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has reportedly issued instructions to all Deputy Commissioners to recover such encroached public lands, it remains to be seen how it is going to be accomplished since the task is monumental and needs to be achieved in the face of massive pressure from the powerful land mafia and entrenched vested interests. The failure to evict mining company Karnataka Iron Ore Company Limited which is holding on to 1,400 hectare of Government land within the limits of Kudremukh National Park even eight years after the permission granted by the Supreme Court ended, starkly illustrates the point.

Surely, a State like Karnataka which has been a pioneer in science and technology, can apply the best knowledge in geographic information system and use the latest techniques in satellite imagery analysis to ensure that important tracts of forests are not fragmented further by ad-hoc regularization of forest encroachments.

At another level, it would be absolutely necessary to ensure that the Government

proactively moves forward based on the encouraging model of voluntary resettlement in Bhadra and Nagarahole Reserves to resolve the genuine issue of disenfranchised people occupying and claiming land in interior forest areas. This will not only ensure that fragmentation and honeycombing in large forest blocks are minimized or eliminated but will also deliver real social justice through incentive-driven resettlement outside with a good package of land, housing and access to healthcare, education and other social services which forest dwellers are demanding.

While the decision of the CM to recover encroached public land deserves welcome, it is equally important to ensure that the same principles (of recovery and not regularisation) must apply to encroached forest land. For, the value of forests in sustaining agriculture, ensuring water security, protecting endangered species and mitigating the impact of climate change is far greater to society than encroached public lands in urban areas.

(The writer is a trustee of Wildlife First and served on the National Board for Wildlife)