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OPINION

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Into The Woods

Targetting forest-dwellers to save the environment is harmful

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GIVEN THE rapid decline in the state of the environment and biodiversity, it seems obvious that we must direct our energies towards the most significant threats. But, are conservationists addressing the biggest threats to biodiversity? Or are they influenced by issues such as charisma and contingency? On the one hand, some conservationists give undue attention to large, attractive animals and to immediate threats. On the other, they are constrained by what they, as a socio-political sub-group, can achieve. In a politically hierarchical world, conservationists tend to be low on the totem pole of power. Thus, many of their battles are fought against the marginalised.

Nothing exemplifies this better than recent battles over the environment. Some conservationists have gone to battle over the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2006, pitting themselves against forest dwelling communities across the country. Without doubt, some of these communities impact their environment negatively, but surely no more so than the conservationists who are fighting the Bill. And certainly far less than industrial interests in many natural areas. And, while many conservationists are fighting these interests, so are forest-dwelling communities, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Much of the opposition to the Bill has come from conservationists who favour inviolate pristine areas at any cost and are strong advocates of relocation (henceforth protectionists). Besides volumes of vitriolic press and misinformation about the extent of 'prime forest' that will be lost, at least three things are wrong with the protectionist opposition to the tribal bill.

Firstly, the alternative to allocation of land and continued ambiguity over current tenancy is relocation. It is not clear that relocation helps conservation. There are few examples where it has been carried out fairly and effectively. Bad relocation almost invariably results in social and political disempowerment and further marginalisation. Relocation studies from Southeast Asia show that once people are moved out of an area, it becomes open to the entry of vested interests.

Secondly, one cannot expect large-scale public support for protection of the environment without sensitivity to it. The same groups that are opposed to this Bill spend considerable time and money educating the public about the importance of environment and conservation. This is a job they see as important and do very well. And yet, strangely enough, it does not seem counterproductive to them to oppose the legitimate interests of forest-dwelling communities, who actually have the most to gain from environmental protection, and have sensitivity born of necessity; protectionists seem not to realise or care that this will only turn millions of people against nature or conservation.

Therefore, thirdly and most importantly, the tribal Bill presented an unprecedented opportunity, and a political-administrative framework, for conservationists to join forces with forest-dwellers. Yet, protectionists have chosen to join issue with them. Instead of gaining thousands of supporters, this has created a rift between people and the environment, supporting the idea that conservation is really for and of the elite. For a group that is, on a national scale, low on the agenda of politicians and bureaucrats — they do not believe that environmental conservation helps growth — there is a need to build different constituencies of support.

Conservationists and natural resource-dependent communities have a common goal — the longterm survival of resources. Both practically and philosophically, industrial development does not. Industry's philosophy is that supply-side problems have technological solutions. Unfortunately, no technology can replace the ecological and social values of biodiversity. As protectionists have repeatedly said, without doubt, many forest-dwellers are on the same economic and social path as urban- and rural-dwellers. In the long run, surely many forest-dwellers will choose to move from forest areas and produce and consume carcinogens like the rest of us. However, studies have shown time and again that tenurial rights play a significant role in the sustainable use of resources. Thus, the terms on which they leave the forests and the sharing of ownership and benefits may be critical.

While protectionists in wildlife-related non-governmental organisations have been viscerally opposed to the Bill, the response from many other conservationists, both academic and activist, has been more guarded. While they have criticised the Bill's content, they have not been opposed to it in spirit. And many natural and social scientists and activists have attempted to contribute constructively to ensure that the Act has positive consequences for both forest-dwellers and the environment.

These conservationists genuinely believe that the goals of conservation have much in common with the livelihoods of local communities and that, by working together, these common goals can be achieved. •

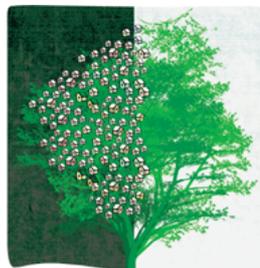


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