
India: A plan for the takeover of forest land by industry

In 2002, under the Tenth Plan, the Indian government set the national goal of having 33 percent of the country's geographic area under "green cover" by 2012. The plan was even presented as part of India's commitment towards the Millennium Goal on environmental sustainability. However, it is much more about industrial encroachment of forest land for tree plantations.

The proposal looks simple: India has large tracts of lands without tree cover. These are lands classified as forests but lying degraded. The country needs to plant trees. But the government says it lacks funds. Industry says that it needs raw material from forests. It has the capital to pay for planting trees and the technology and managerial ability to do massive afforestation. If trees are planted, the poor will get jobs. This is a win-win option and is called a multi-stakeholder partnership for forestation.

The proposal has been worked in close consultation with industry, in particular the wood-consuming pulp and paper sector which needs to grow -- according to estimates, in 10 years there will be a demand gap in paper and paper-board of 5-6 million tonnes. It needs 1 to 1.2 million ha of degraded forest land to grow its raw material. This will give it its competitive advantage and it can increase its share in the global market. If this happens, it will need another 1 million ha of degraded forest land to produce "surplus" for export. It wants large, contiguous areas so that it can achieve economies of scale.

The biodiesel industry is also a big player — its demand for forest land has been incessant. It is desperately scouting for large areas to grow its oil plants. Again, economics teaches it that the cheapest option is to grow captive plantations and that is what it wants. Already big players — Reliance, UK-based D1 Oil as well as British Petroleum — are lobbying hard to change laws, which will allow captive plantations on forest lands.

Also, there is the possibility of earning carbon credits, as trees sequester carbon. There is money in forests. And industry wants it.

The industry has asked for the rules to be relaxed further. For instance, it wants the criterion that the maximum parcel of land that can be bid on be limited to 50 hectares (ha) to be removed. "Economics of scale demand that industry should be given large parcels of land — 6,000-10,000 ha of contiguous lands," said David Gardner of Jaakko Poyry Consulting. In addition, the Confederation of Indian Industry wants a tax exemption on the grounds that "it is re-greening the country and bringing development". It forgets that it is getting the mother of all subsidies — free land — to underwrite its development.

There is an additional issue: Under existing laws, planting trees on "forest land" by industry is not permitted. A 'suitable' re-definition of forest land would help proposal proponents move ahead. The mission 'what-is-a-forest' started last year. A consultant to the ministry for this project proposed a definition of a forest that already promises to add new potholes in the already-bumpy road of forest management. This is the definition: "An area under Government control notified or recorded as 'forest' under any Act, for conservation and management of ecological and biological resources." In

this definition, there is no space for the livelihood and ecological needs of local communities, who live on these lands, but whose rights are often not recorded or asserted.

Many in India know that the proposal to increase forest and tree cover had been pushed, each time with some changes in the detail of the scheme, each time with bigger and bigger players in the fray -- the last was in early 2000, when Reliance Industries almost secured rights over forests of Andhra Pradesh. Each time the proposal has been rejected because it is understood that it will do nothing for poor people who depend on the forests and nothing even for the forests it aims to protect.

"The forests do not belong to the state or industry and cannot be owned or traded," said Shankar Gopalakrishnan of the Campaign for Dignity and Survival, an umbrella organisation of forest community groups. More than 40 million people depend on the country's resource-rich forest areas -- which make up around 25 percent of the landmass -- eking out a living from cattle grazing, collecting firewood and simple farming, and they will lose their homes and their livelihoods if the big corporates move in and get their way.

For people crucially dependent on forest lands, this movement of enclosure would be devastating. More and more it would lead to tensions between the richer in the village — less dependent on the commons for survival — who can afford to 'agree' to private control and those who are landless and marginalised and have no alternative but to use these lands.

Article based on: "Indian plan to lease degraded forests sparks anger", by Nita Bhalla, 29 Jun 2007, Reuters, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/DEL303993.htm>; "Defining forest in Indian context", Archi Rastogi, Down to Earth, <http://www.centralchronicle.com/20070611/1106301.htm>; "Private Affairs", Down to Earth, A http://www.downtoearth.org.in/section.asp?sec_id=9&foldername=20060415;