
[India: have Indian foresters learned nothing?](#)

According to the official viewpoint, India holds favourable climatic and social conditions for the set up of tree plantations. Forestry officials state that more than 60 million hectares of "non-forest wastelands and open scrub forest lands" can be considered available for undertaking tree plantation activities. The Ministry of Environment and Forests is promoting the use of clonal disease-resistant plants of fast-growing eucalyptus. Clones of acacia, poplars, gmelina and teak are also being included in the menu. At the International Expert Meeting that took place last April in Santiago, Chile (see WRM Bulletin 22) the representatives of India even went as far as saying that "plantation forestry has become a benefactor and friend to villagers, tribals and wood based industrial units."

However, reality counters the arguments used by plantation promoters. Eucalyptus monocultures on farm lands in India have generated severe environmental problems: drawing down of the water table, depletion of soil fertility, reduction in the land area available for the production of food, greater dependence on external inputs. In the northern region of Uttar Pradesh, for example, in the mid '80s eucalyptus plantation was rejected by farmers due to its negative ecological and socio-economic consequences. In that state it was proved that only big landowners -and not small farmers- adopted the tree monoculture model to their benefit. All over the country this afforestation scheme generated strong reactions by affected peasants, who even set tree nurseries on fire and uprooted planted seedlings.

More recent facts show that even without considering ecological aspects, the present trend of India's policy related to tree plantations is worrying. A report set up by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in late 1997 to review afforestation policies in India, suggested that forest land be handed over to industry for plantations. This means that precedence is given to secure profits to the industry over the basic need of food security for local people and tribal communities. Considering that many small farmers -seduced by the false promises of plantation promoters- have switched from agriculture to farm forestry and that large sections of the population of India (945 million inhabitants in 1996) is in urgent need of food, is it reasonable to say that more than 60 million hectares of land are practically void, waiting for tree plantation companies to make money out of them? Have India's foresters learned nothing about the real needs and desires of the people of their country? For how much longer will they insist in not listening and learning from the people?

Sources: <http://oneworld.org/cse/html/cmp/cmp23.htm> ; Saxena N.C., *India's Eucalyptus Craze. The God that Failed*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1994; Oberai C.P. et al., *Plantation forestry in India*, International Meeting on the Role of Planted Forests for Sustainable Development, Santiago, Chile, 6-10/4/99; Oberai C.P. et al., *Plantations forests. Key to sustainable Development*, International Meeting on the Role of Planted Forests for Sustainable Development, Santiago, Chile, 6-10/4/99.