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Reimagining how we protect India's forests

Civil society, government, and the private sector are all important players in forest conservation. Here's how each of them can act as stewards for India's forests.

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The Oscar for the documentary The Elephant Whisperers has happily turned the nation's focus towards our wildlife and our forests. After all, the 35,000 or so elephants in the country depend greatly on forests for their nourishment, even as they, in turn, nourish the forest. These magnificent creatures are now often in conflict with human beings, as forests merge into agricultural lands where sugarcane, banana, and grasses lure elephants towards human settlements.

If we want to conserve our spectacular wildlife, from these largest of mammals to the smallest of forest rodents like the tree shrew, we need to protect the old growth forests that we already have. But if we also want to safeguard human well-being, and meet our international commitments on carbon sequestration, we urgently need to grow our forests by at least 12% more just in this decade. A daunting task indeed.

In the past two decades, I have been fortunate enough to visit several of India's amazing, biodiverse forests and reserves. Some were field trips to see the work of environmental civil society organizations (CSOs) we have been proud to support, and some trips were because of a romance with the wild. It has been a learning journey among erudite forest officers, passionate wildlife experts and forest dwelling communities, all grappling with complex and swift change. And I have begun to wonder, who will be the future stewards of India's forests?

Forests are too important to be left only to the forest department, too fragile to be entrusted only to corporates, too complex to be left to communities alone and too precious to be preserved only by the philanthropy of the rich.

Maybe we must reimagine the role of samaaj (society), sarkaar (the state) and bazaar (markets), if we are to truly conserve what we have and rejuvenate what we had.

Samaaj

It is estimated that a fifth of the population depends directly on the ecosystem services that forests provide. | Picture courtesy: Pixahive

Tribal communities, whose ancestors knew the jungle like the palm of their hands, have lived in our forests for millennia. Even today, more than 500 tribal groups, like the Bhils and the Bodos, the Mizos and the Meenas, the Gonds and the Garos comprise 8.9% of our population.

Yet today, most of them do not live inside the forest anymore. A report released in 2018 by the union ministry of health and family welfare shows that there are fewer and fewer eyes on the forest, so to speak. More than half the country's 104 million tribal population now resides outside India's 809 tribal majority blocks.

As more migration inevitably happens away from forests, as young people take up opportunities in more modern, urban settings, how much knowledge will be forever lost as the primary stakeholders of the forest become deracinated and uprooted from it? We can't know the answer.

Clearly, tribal youngsters see little hope in and reason to remain in deep association with the lands of their ancestors. The Forest Rights Act and the Community Forest Rights Act have been painfully slow on delivering on the promise of rights to the land and to its produce.

But surely there is enough scope to do more. Some states are trying. There have been many partnerships between the forest department and local communities and CSOs, to increase livelihood opportunities for tribal people. Many have been absorbed in the forest department itself. Some small-scale efforts have succeeded in including them in ecotourism. Yet, none of this response is at the level of the problem, and none of these innovations are sufficient to incentivize the next generations to stay back.

So, if tribal communities can no longer be the primary stewards of the forest, can we imagine other positive scenarios?

First, we can support more CSOs and research institutions to generate new knowledge and practice around conservation. We have a rich history of people's struggles like the Chipko movement. But of late, the trust between CSOs and the government has broken a little bit. It is time to restore that trust and showcase hundreds of examples

For instance, Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF)'s work in Valparai, a small town in the Annamalai Hills of Tamil Nadu, is a remarkable example of how states, markets, and civil societies can collaborate to restore degraded ecosystems. Once a pristine forest ecosystem, Valparai became a monoculture tea plantation. Together with the local government and communities, NCF persevered for years to convince tea plantations owners to set aside a portion of their land for ecological restoration. Today, Valparai has successfully witnessed the return of several endemic species and measurably improved carbon storage in the area.

Second, we can do much more to include urban residents in the stewardship of our biodiversity. After all, we all depend indirectly on forest resources, no matter how far from the jungles we may live. For energy and food, for water and medicines, and for so much more. Never before has there been a stronger need to tell this story better.

The good news is that cities are being reimagined the world over. They no longer need be so separate from the idea of rural or green. There is a massive public demand for more open, green spaces, for more tree cover, for cleaner air, for better mobility. Politicians always respond to such public pressure. This can result in better public transport, more electric vehicles, more parks, more trees and so on. Alongside this development, we may see urbanites getting reacquainted with the pleasure of being with trees and birds and of being nurtured in nature. That, in turn, can nudge them closer to a new form of environmental stewardship.

Last but not the least, there is great hope that young people will step up to the challenge. India has the largest cohort of people under 35 years. Slowly but surely, they are sensing the deep connections between their survival and that of our forests. World over, youngsters are leading the movements against a particular version of modernity and materialism. India's youth will ask bold new questions, and many will take a new bend in the road towards more sustainability.

Sarkaar

Hopefully, the sarkaar will aid and abet them.

This is the UN Decade on Ecosystem Regeneration. This is the year for COP 28. This is the time to move forward on our commitments to sequester 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2030 through enhanced tree cover and restore five million hectares of degraded and deforested land by 2030.

India is somewhat unique in both its challenges and opportunities for this.

The challenge before us is to continue to develop economically as well as ecologically. No country has had to do that with such an agonizingly sharp understanding of the required tradeoffs. Not even China.

The last state of the forest report released by the ministry of environment, forests and climate change in 2021 shows that the growth of India's forest cover has slowed to an eight-year low, with only a 0.22% increase in the two prior years. The next report will tell us whether that trend has continued. We also know that the report is produced through satellite imaging, has included plantations and urban tree cover and, unlike our tiger census, is not really verified on the ground. In addition, the report reminds us that by the end of this decade, 45-64% of our forests may be impacted by climate change.

Nobody understands all this better than the forest departments at the centre and in the various states. They have had to be a voice for voiceless flora and fauna.

Yes, people talk of a colonial hangover, of too much concentration of power, of a perceived lack of trust between the

They have to continuously deal with the pressures of encroachment, poaching, increasing human-animal conflict, low budgets, lack of sufficient biologists and veterinarians and so on, while still fulfilling the demand for more trees and tigers, more rhinos and now cheetahs, too.

Plus, their responsibilities are now leaking out into farms and habitations outside their jurisdiction. They have had to innovate so that more constituencies become vested in forest ecosystems.

I have personally witnessed many such efforts. Recently, in Madhya Pradesh's Pench Tiger Reserve, deputy director Rajneesh Singh took me to see the elevated corridor created by NHAI across 29km of the core forest area. This has kept the forest intact, reduced conflicts and accidents and has left a viable corridor for animal crossings, which are abundantly proven through camera traps.

The sarkaar's role in forest stewardship cannot be exaggerated. There is much scope to re-imagine this responsibility, overhaul the structure of forest departments, and co-create something more suited to the needs of this critical human century. Governments need to integrate environment issues better across ministries. They need better data science to monitor and protect the forests we already have, and more bold policies on new, private conservation.

While trying to lift the remaining millions out of poverty, and to increase per capita GDP, India has pushed for a scorching pace of economic development. For that, we have had to make some difficult tradeoffs and dismantle some environment protection laws. Yet, we all know that India cannot cut off the very branch it is perched on. The Union government has often voiced this concern and tried to better balance growth of the economy and growth of the ecology. To succeed, it will need a deep partnership with market forces.

Bazaar

Finally, then, let us come to bazaar. How can markets and companies become better trustees of the environment?

Is it time to amend our laws and policies and allow private citizens and companies to use their lands for afforestation and renewal? Prima facie, no prior legal permission is required by the landowner to grow forests. However, there are legal consequences once a forest is grown on non-forest land. Forests are protected under complex regulations and court orders, impossible to fathom.

There is a clear opportunity for more enabling policies, as in many other countries, to allow private entities to use their lands for conservation, without attracting penal provisions or the threat of a takeover by the forest department. There will also be cascading livelihood benefits for landowners and, especially, local communities from ecotourism.

Similarly, corporations can play a big role in conservation. Many are trying for more sustainability inside their fence and across the entire supply chain. In addition, they are greening their campuses to mimic ultra-dense mini forests. With the right policy frameworks, this trend will only grow.

Very little of the approximately ₹25,000 crore of annual corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds goes into carbon sequestration or environmental research. There is a huge opportunity to change this.

It is estimated that a fifth of the population depends directly on the ecosystem services that forests provide. And there is much potential to raise the standard of dignified living for millions through conservation itself. For example, we export about $100 million of honey every year, which helps the livelihoods of thousands of small farmers and beekeepers while improving the prospects of pollination. These are investible opportunities.