

KASHMIR READER

To conserve forests and plant trees is to do Ibadat

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Forests have a significance not only for the environment but as the 14th-century Sufi saint and poet Sheikh Noor-ud-Din said, “Ann poshi teli yeli wan poshi” (Food will last as long as forests last). Forests are a treasure that nature has gifted us. Islam also teaches us to conserve trees and forests. Now global



warming has become cause for concern for every country and every citizen of this planet. The rise in temperatures everywhere has led to more frequent and severe cyclones, rains, droughts, which are a direct consequence of deforestation. Every year around the globe discussions, seminars and summits are held to

prevent climate change but the ground situation becomes only worse.

Our valley is also a victim of climate change. Melting of glaciers, long dry spells in winter, and rise of temperatures in summer are causing concern among everyone in Kashmir. Everyone knows the solution but nobody implements it. ‘Better late than never’, as they say, in recognising the importance of forests. It is a blessing that the Kashmir valley is rich in forest cover. Mountains in every nook and corner are situated in this valley with green and dense forest cover. They are the reason for our pleasant climate and beautiful seasons. Wise is the one who takes care of things that benefit him. Over-exploitation of any resource leads to its destruction. The forests in our valley benefit us in various ways, but are we taking good care of them? The truth is that our selfishness is blinding us to the repercussions of the destruction of the treasure we possess. The forest cover in our valley is getting thinner by the day. The consequences will become harsher with time. It is the collective responsibility of every citizen to help conserve forests and to stop their destruction. The title of ‘the crown of creation’ given to human beings by Allah enjoins us to act wisely and responsibly.

The Forest Department has the primary responsibility to ensure the preservation of forests. More efforts from it are the need of the hour. The DC Pulwama, Raghav Langar, recently visited the remote forest areas of Sanngarwani, Pulwama, and his on-spot inspections revealed the destruction of the natural habitat and the extent of chopping down of trees. A large area of dense forest was converted into barren land by some selfish miscreants. For the first time, drones were pressed into service and the footage is surely a heartbreaking one. This is not the story of Pulwama alone; there are many Sangarwanis in our valley where the forest cover has depleted to almost barren land. Who should be held accountable for this loss, because this is not an individual loss but a collective one. The Forest Department is as responsible as the people who mercilessly chop down the trees.

If any disease becomes communicable, we first try to stop it from spreading. Same goes with this problem of deforestation. Our efforts should begin with conservation. Administrative measures should be implemented to stop theft of timber and forest resources, clearing of forests, and construction in forest area. Then the next steps of afforestation, plantation, turning barren lands into green cover should be adopted. NGOs should be involved at different levels to plant trees in barren areas. Local people living near a forest area should be educated about the ill effects of deforestation and measures should be taken to ensure no more chopping of trees takes place.

The best guardians of the forest are those who make their living from it. That's why the forest department should partner with forest communities. It must nominate guardians from the community and task them with keeping a watch. Harsher rules should be framed and, more importantly, applied against poachers and smugglers.

There are also various loopholes in the working of the forest department that can be fixed. The FPF or Forest Protection Force is recruited to ensure the safety of forest from smugglers but they are helpless because they do not possess any kind of weapons. Instead, they have to face hardened criminals barehanded. Some of these guards have even been killed in the line of duty. It becomes, thus, a question of life and death where nobody is ready to take a risk. Another plight is that just 2 to 3 personnel are stationed to guard hundreds of acres of forest, which is quite impossible given the density and the terrain. The forest department should make use of latest technology, like drones, to stop thefts of forest resources. Where the terrain is inaccessible, the drones could prove very helpful. Also, the irregular employees working in the forest department for years should be regularised so as to boost their morale and sense of security. Sometimes these daily wagers are corrupted because greed gets the better of them, but if given regular jobs, it surely will have a positive impact on their work.

The recently held UN Climate Change conference 2019 issued the alarming statement that the last 4 years have been the hottest on record. But if there is despair, there is hope also. The recently released report by ISFR (Indian State of Forest Report) states that the forest area of J&K has increased by 371 sq km and it is now 4th on the list of states that have shown significant increase in forest cover. This

should encourage us but at the same time make us more cautious. We can't afford to live in a fool's paradise. We have to be more than ready to ensure safety of our forests. Everyone around the world is now focusing on this issue. Pakistan has launched a project named 'Billion Tree Tsunami' under which one billion trees are to be planted all around the country. In India, a project called CAMPA, 'compensatory afforestation fund management and planning authority', was launched in 2016 under which the government is trying to increase the forest cover up to 33% of geographical area. The forest department is being modernised to protect and regenerate forests and wildlife habitat. Every year, forest day and plantation day are celebrated but sadly the efforts have been confined to such days only. There should be a greater effort to ensure that forests are saved and plantation drives are held regularly. Lastly, for every person on earth there is a moral obligation to make sure this important part of our nature is protected. Planting trees must be considered as Ibadat, an act of worship. We must act now, in every possible way. The past has gone but the future is yet to come.

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