

7. CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE KARNATAKA WESTERN GHATS

7.1 Looking Ahead

However valuable a forest is in bio-diversity or other environmental values, if production does not satisfy the local demands for bio resources, conservation of forests is impossible in India. If lops and tops are not available for use as firewood, young trees in the regenerating pole crop will be cut. If grass is not available, cattle consume regenerating trees. Complex economic and behavioural valuation are no substitute for biomass supply.

Meeting today's needs today is more important for the conservation of the forests than a share in tomorrow's gains. Yet, in some cases the immediate needs may be reduced or practices altered if the proffered gain is a rainbow of fortune. The rainbow should not turn out to be a mirage. Often we tend to oversell the idea of incremental gains and the future share to the people and if reality falls far short of what has been promoted and is anticipated, the result will be worse than the prevalent indifferent approach of villagers to the forests.

7.2 Demands on the Forests

An interesting illustration from personal experience provides a good example. I was a member of the Swedish International Development Agency team to evaluate the Social Forestry Programme in Orissa and toured the Tribal belt of the State in 1992. The total involvement of the people in the new philosophy of sharing the gains from the forest which they help to protect, was impressive. Each village would depute two persons everyday to "tenga parai" or patrol, the reserve forest attached to it. This encompassed a stretch of contiguous forests, protected in this manner through involvement of all the neighbouring villages. I asked the villagers in one hamlet the need to tenga parai, if people of all the villages were committed to forest protection. My question was, protection from whom? This question disturbed the leader. He was surprised at the ignorance of an outsider. What about our firewood? The small timber for the ploughshare? Bamboo for repairing the hut? We have to have these and we secure it from the forests attached to other villages. And other villagers steal it from ours. That is why we have to have tenga parai!

What is the gain? The wasteful use, may be reduced compared to the situation when the forest is treated as no man's property. However, the minimum need itself could be way beyond the recuperative capacity of the

Forest. Unless and until the resource to meet this need is built up in the forest, our reliance on technology only to rejuvenate the forests is futile.

7.3 Demands on the Foresters

Another revealing experience, was during a visit to Honduras in 1987, when I had the opportunity to see their Social Forestry program. On the first day I was surprised to be taken to a showroom on the side of highway, set up and maintained by the project staff. Earthenware curios were on sale there. I was puzzled at the link between SF and sale of curios. I was told that the artifacts were the enterprise of unwed mothers living in interior villages on steep hill slopes at the mercy of middle-men. The SF programme had correctly identified their economic condition as a key to forest protection and secured their goodwill by arranging for the sale of earthenware curios at far higher prices. The foresters had gone beyond their normal duty of planting trees and other departmental targets. I was delighted to learn that they had correctly identified forests as being an integral part of the local economic livelihood, and their conservation linked to the needs and well being of the people.

A forester is disciplined by training. He is usually also the only Government official who lives and moves with the people living in or around the forests. Today, unfortunately, his assigned task is of protection of forests and he has nothing more to offer to the locals. Drinking water; a school room; an approach road; loan for buying a bullock; even bamboo to rebuild a burnt shed? These are responsibilities of other departments, yet it is the forester who is in most frequent contact, and is able to deliver a response to the needs of the rural people. Cannot foresters be given the voice to speak on behalf of the dwellers in and around the forests, in seeking a share of the development programmes? Until this happens will the forester be accepted as a partner by the villagers merely because he has now offered a share of gains from forests, while the whole was theirs earlier for use or misuse? Joint Forestry Project Management is certainly a step forward. But will it be enough? Indian forestry has gone into a vicious circle of low investment, low yield, low income leading to further low investments. The innovative approach now being taken in the forests in the Western Ghats can prove the fallacy of this situation.

Half of the gains from JFPM areas go to the participants, of which half the amount will be constituted as a fund to ensure planting, to sustain the programme. The possibility of converting this fund to promote rural credit through refinancing (from National

Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development) should be considered. This would support forest produce based cottage industries, and alternative enterprises like poultry farming, dairying, apiary, silk rearing, eco-tourism, etc which would bring about economic benefits of the forest dwellers and reduce their dependance on forests.

One good feature of the approach to management under the project is a lack of rigidity in the prescriptions, and decisions to make changes can be made in the light of field experience. The lessons of the past show the importance of such flexibility, in adapting to the present changed situations, and in planning to meet the needs of the future.