

Business Standard

Sunita Narain: Planting trees for development

Today, the poorest people of India live in its richest forested lands. We need to move beyond conservation to sustainable management of this resource

[Sunita Narain](#) April 26, 2015



Today, in India, forest protection, happens against all odds. There is no value seen in forests, but there is value seen in the development project for which forestland is required. Clearly, this is not the way to go. We need a value to be paid for standing forests; it needs to be shared with people who inhabit these lands; we need to grow trees in ways that bring money into the hands of the poor; and we need to learn how to protect, regenerate and grow, all at the same time.

The last time India seriously tried planting trees was as far back as the late 1980s. The then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had declared that he wanted to make tree plantation a peoples' movement. The Wasteland Development Board was set up and social forestry was the buzzword. But soon it was realised that planting trees was about more than digging pits - it was about institutional mechanisms that would give people right over the trees and a stake in management. It was this time that Anil Agarwal and I wrote a report on greening India, called "Towards Green Villages", where we showed how every effort to plant trees would be defeated unless people got benefits from these lands. It is important to understand that India has the highest density of livestock, and no wall can keep out goats.

All this built an understanding of the need to involve people in afforestation. We argued that village communities should be given rights over government forestland, so that they could plant and reap benefits. But there was huge opposition to this idea. Many foresters and conservationists feared that this would destroy forests; people would encroach on and take over these lands; or simply that they could never manage the business of planting trees.

The compromise was worked out: Joint Forest Management (JFM) - a scheme where trees would be planted on

forestland; and people would provide labour to plant; protect and voluntarily keep their animals out. In return, they would get usufruct rights over grass and a share of the timber revenue when the trees were cut. The forest department kept control through the village committee formed for the scheme.

There were many problems with this approach, but the final insult came when the trees are ready for harvest. In villages where people provided years of free labour to guard and grow trees, the payment turned out to be minuscule. Why? The forest department adopted a highly deceptive and ingenious method of calculating the revenue that would accrue to people - it deducted all the expenses of the department and then calculated the net revenue. The 20-25 per cent of the sale proceeds promised to people turned out to be a pittance. State after state, forest department used convoluted formulae to calculate what it would share with villagers or decided that instead of cash it would provide development funds. In this way, people lost their trust, and the country lost the opportunity to get real partnership in planting trees.

As a result, the country has swung from one extreme position to another from the pre-1980s, when focus was on extraction, and now, in the post-2010 period, when we do not want to cut any tree because we fear it will destroy forests. This fear drives forest policy, which denies

people rights to ownership or real partnership in growing trees and building local economies. We now import our wood - forest productivity is nobody's business.

Today, the Supreme Court's strict directives on forest conservation, not management, guide forest policy. There is a ban on tree cutting in forest areas without a working plan; the plans are either not made or do not focus on production. Then there is a ban on saw-mills around forest areas, which provides an excuse not to build economies from forests. The ultimate protection is that all lands with trees get classified as forests. This allows the forest department to take over these lands, even as it cannot plant or take care of lands under its charge. But what really hurts is planting a tree is now bound up in so much red tape that it is not worth the effort. Every state has its own rules to cut, transport or market trees - even if grown

on private land - because of which people prefer not to grow trees at all.

We have ended up successfully disconnected environmental management with development. Today, the poorest people of India live in its richest forested lands. We need to move beyond conservation to sustainable management of this resource. But we can only do this if we can grow trees and then plant them again. This, in turn, requires partnerships with people who will benefit from planting trees. This is what we need to discuss and what we need to work on in the coming years. Environment must become India's development agenda again. This is the imperative.

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