

to read and write. They tend to transpose letters in a word, or see words as an incoherent jumble of alphabets. Dyslexia has been regarded as a perceptive condition, a form of verbal colour blindness. Rubbish, say newfound sceptics who pooh-pooh dyslexia as a bona fide disability. According

women in parliament. The missal of claims by special interest groups, be they the dyslexic or the disenfranchised, is a form of social Darwinism which, in effect, tells the afflicted: Learn to swim, or sink, on your own. We are too compassionately fatigued to bother about you.

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# Environment policy under wraps

101 By PANKAJ SEKHSARIA & ASHISH KOTHARI 9/9/05

Some things die hard. Despite the widespread agreement within and outside the government on the citizens' right to information, some sections of the government persist with an atmosphere of secrecy. Baffling as it may sound, the latest manifestation is the ministry of environment and forests draft of the National Environment Policy, just finalised, but not available to the public.

In the last few months, the media debated issues related to the environment, forests and wildlife, notably the proposed Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2005 and the report of the Tiger Task Force (TTF) that was recently submitted to the prime minister. While the context and content of these two documents have been a source of serious differences, it has been heartening that these have been discussed in an open and transparent manner. The TTF in particular has come for a lot of appreciation for the open, consultative and transparent way in which the process was carried out and that the entire report made available to the public. While there was some concern initially on the Forest Rights Bill, this too was made a public document when the issue was raised by a cross-section of people working on issues related to the forests.

However, for the last few months, the ministry of environment and forests has been working on finalising the National Environment Policy (NEP). It is 'reported' to have also submitted a final draft to the prime minister nearly two weeks ago for his endorsement before it is taken to the cabinet for approval. Shocking as it might sound, not only has the draft been kept away from the public, it has even been marked secret on every page.

In October 2004, more than 90 environmental and social groups from the country had collectively raised serious concerns about the initial version of the NEP. They had approached the National Advisory Council (NAC) calling for a new and participatory process for drafting the policy. There was a feeling that NEP was too anthropocentric

and economic in its approach, and was directed at making the environment subservient to wealth generating activities and sectors. It was also felt that the NEP actually fell short of making a policy statement, did not even clearly state its long-term vision, or its relation to other policies of the government. And there was also the issue of the absence of a participatory and consultative process for its drafting.

Concern was especially raised that discussions had been held with industry groups but local communities, who are the ones most directly dependent on the environment and most affected by its destruction, were not consulted at all.

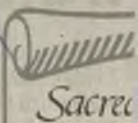
These inputs and the call for consultations were resisted by the environment ministry, particularly when it came to having discussions with the non-governmental organisations, the people and community groups. Following the intervention of the NAC, however, some consultations did occur, raising the hope that the process and the final outcome would be a more democratic one. That clearly

has been belied. That the new draft of the policy should now be marked secret only indicates that the approach of the environment ministry has only become more regressive. In fact, even the NAC has not been informed about this new draft of the NEP. A member of the NAC was recently sent a letter by the environment ministry stating that the ministry had no intentions of making it public.

One can only wonder whose national environment policy it really is. What serious threat can it pose to national security for it to be a secret document? It has once again been left for members in civil society, individuals and organisations to bring the matter to the notice of the prime minister and request for corrective action; over 60 organisations and individuals have now addressed an open letter to him to this effect.

The deepest darkness, it is said, is found right underneath the lamp that lights up the room. A government committed to the citizens' right to information would do well by starting in its very own backyard.

The writers are with Kalpauriksh, an environmental action group.



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