

Globalisation vs India's Forests

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Wanton usage of forest land in the name of development has destroyed efforts towards community-led measures for protection and conservation in Orissa. The laxity in framing adequate environmental laws and the flouting of even the existing laws have had disastrous effects on the livelihoods of forest-dwelling people in the state.

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There is palpable anger and frustration in the village of Lapanga, in the Sambalpur district of Orissa. One hundred years of community-led forest protection is being undermined as the state government has given two corporate entities permission to cut through the forest for laying roads and a water pipeline. Villagers' protests have not been heeded, and the companies have already begun work.

Lapanga is not an isolated case. Across India, forests conserved by local communities for decades are being handed over to powerful commercial interests. This is in the name of the "development at all costs" that accompanies the country's quest to become one of the world's fastest growing economies. At stake are lakhs of hectares of biodiversity-rich natural resource systems, the livelihoods of several million people who depend directly on these forests, and the water security of a much larger population.

Nowhere is this more stark than the forest and tribal regions of Orissa, which the state government seems bent on

converting into the raw material and labour capital of the world.

Undermining Community Initiatives

The Rasol Khesra Jungle in Nayagarh district is a predominantly sal (*shorea robusta*) forest with two adjoining reservoirs. Spread over 860 acres, Rasol Khesra is an example of community initiated regeneration of forests and wildlife. The area is a pathway for elephants, and habitat for pangolin, wild dog, mouse deer, hyena, flying squirrel, and other wildlife. Four villages depend on this forest for various survival and livelihood produce. Village forest committees (vfc) manage the forest using the 'thengapali' system. Thengapali (*thenga* = baton, *pali* = free/volunteer labour for the community), also interpreted as "turn of the baton", is an ancient practice that has attracted forest management gurus from across the world. Voluntary forest guards from the community patrol the forest against any untoward incident, and in the evening leave their batons outside the door of one or more households, who will take up the patrolling the following day. Anybody caught stealing forest produce is brought before the vfc for punishment.

Around 1984, land in the village was leased to the Industrial Development

Corporation of Orissa (IDCO) for the Dharini Sugar Mill. This included 119 acres of the Rasol Khesra forest, but IDCO signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for their continued protection with the four neighbouring villages. In 1994, villagers got the Prakruti Mitra ("friend of nature") award. In 2004, the factory was leased to Eastern Cylinders, now called Nayagarh Sugar Complex. The new owner started felling trees in 2005, without permission. It took strong protests by villagers for the forest department to take cognisance and book the culprits. The Central Empowered Committee (CEC), set up under Supreme Court directions for monitoring forest-related cases (under the T N Godavarman case) has now also taken cognisance, on a complaint filed by the Orissa Jungle Manch (a state-level association of community forest management institutions). The matter is still pending. Meanwhile, however, communities have been prohibited from collecting fuel, grasses, etc, from the forest even for domestic

consumption. Shockingly, about 1,000 sal trees were felled in 2007, reportedly at the behest of the district collector, to build a road to a godown belonging to the Food Corporation of India.

The Lapanga case in Sambalpur district also highlights the impacts of the current trend of globalisation-induced industrialisation in Orissa. This area once constituted a dense sal forest with a proud history of over a 100 years of forest protection and management by community, termed the Dalki Praja Rakshit Jungle. Two projects now threaten this. The mining company Hindalco converted a grazing path through the forest into a pucca road of two km long and 50 m wide, to transport coal from a nearby mine. Bhushan Steel (a company with a number of joint ventures with foreign firms), is laying a water pipeline through this forest. Powerless to stop these moves, there is growing passivity amongst the local community towards the forest. Human-wildlife conflicts have also increased, perhaps

due to enhanced disturbance of the wildlife within the forest, including coal dust and constant movement of trucks. Some flora species may also be on their way out, as indicated by villagers reporting the reduced availability of several non-timber forest produce (NTFP).

Globalisation threats loom large on Sundargarh district too. The area is characterised by dense forests, waterfalls, an elephant corridor (connecting Saranda in Jharkhand to Bhamragarh in Chhattisgarh), the rare limbless lizard *sepsophis* (recently discovered), and is the origin of eight major perennial streams. Sixty six per cent of the population belong to scheduled tribes. The Rs 51,000 crore investment promised by the Korean multinational Pohang Steel Company (POSCO) includes a mine at Khandadhar, a steel plant at Jagatsinghpur, and a captive port at Paradeep. Together, according to local activists, these activities could threaten over 10,000 hectares of forest land, and the mining alone could displace about 30,000 people. Despite

being components of the same project, separate environment clearances for each of these activities were sought by posco, obviously to portray relatively small impacts. It was thus able to obtain clearance under the Environment Protection Act, for the steel plant and the captive port. Clearance under the Forest Conservation Act for the steel plant is still pending.

Already of serious concern is the pollution caused by 48 sponge iron units in the area. Coal mining in Sundargarh district has already devastated many forest areas and villages. This situation will only be exacerbated if the posco projects are allowed to proceed.

At each of the sites mentioned above, communities have vehemently protested. At the proposed posco plant site in Jagatsinghpur, for instance, thousands of villagers have effectively blocked any work, and villagers at its proposed mining site in Khandadhar are mobilising themselves to do the same. The access road to the proposed Tata Steel Plant at Kalinganagar, where several protesting villagers were earlier killed in a brutally repressive action by the state, has been blocked by the Visthapan Virodhi Manch for nearly 15 months, and all work at the plant is halted.

In many cases, local villagers have been joined by state and national NGOs. In some cases such as the proposed mining by Vedanta/Sterlite in the biodiversity-rich and culturally sensitive Niyamgiri hills, conservation and human rights NGOs have helped file cases in the high or Supreme Courts. The Orissa government, however, has bent over backwards to provide subsidies and facilities to the corporate companies, often overlooking their violation of environmental laws and human rights.

Environmental Deregulation

The above case studies were amongst several that were discussed in a recent workshop on Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation, held in Bhubaneswar, January 26-28, 2008. This was organised by Kalpavriksh and Vasundhara, NGOs working on environment and development issues, under the sponsorship of the Global Forest Coalition, an international network of civil society organisations working on deforestation issues. Examples

from across Orissa, by researchers of Vasundhara and some other conservationists or academics, were put into the national context of macroeconomic and environmental policies by researcher-activists like Aseem Srivastava, Kanchi Kohli of Kalpavriksh, and Kishor Samal, professor of Economics at the N C Centre for Development Studies, Orissa.

There is a close link between processes of globalisation that the Indian government has followed, and the ecological and livelihood crisis witnessed in Orissa and elsewhere. Spearheaded by Manmohan Singh as finance minister in 1991, under the IMF and World Bank influence, India adopted far-reaching policies of economic liberalisation. This included export-led growth with breaking of barriers to cheap imports as also foreign direct investment, delicensing of industry, and so on. Significantly enhanced mining, exploitation of marine resources, commercialisation of agriculture, and other processes have been the direct result of trying to rapidly increase export earnings. The logic of the current phase of globalisation, dominated by profit interests is based on externalisation of environmental and social "costs" of development. Rarely do business interests bear the responsibility of the damage they cause. Interestingly, states like Orissa continue to focus on the primary and secondary sectors for economic growth, as witnessed in the spurt in mining and industries. Foreign investments are high, such as those by posco, and Vedanta/Sterlite (highly controversial for wanting to mine in a sacred landscape of some of India's most vulnerable tribal groups, and illegally starting operations without necessary permissions).

The push for such predatory economic growth, does not spare even existing environmental norms and policies. Recent changes in relevant laws and notifications have tended to help ease the licensing process for industries and mines, regardless of their ecological and social impacts. A stark example is the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) notification of 1994, issued under the Environment (Protection) Act 1986. This notification made it mandatory for development and industrial projects to undertake studies of their environmental impacts, and based on this

obtain clearance from the union ministry of environment and forests (MOEF). This system was meant to bring some degree of sustainability into developmental decision-making, as also provide an opportunity to local people and civil society organisations to make their voices heard.

Implementation of the EIA notification has always been problematic. In the period 1986 to 2006, 4,016 projects were granted environment clearance by the MOEF. A much larger number, however, operated without the clearance; noting this, in March 2005, the Supreme Court ordered the closure of all such illegally running units. Soon after, in July 2005, the MOEF set into motion a process of seeking temporary working permissions (TWPs) and post facto (i.e., after the construction and operations have begun) clearances through an amendment to the EIA notification. Subsequently, the EIA procedures were overhauled in 2006. Almost none of the suggestions made over a decade to improve the regulatory process enhance the quality of information for decision-making, or extend public participation and transparency, were taken on board. Instead, the reforms focused on speedy clearances. They now allow only those with "direct stake" in the project or its impacts to participate in public hearings, effectively robbing civil society organisations who may have been able to study the project proposal, the chance to participate other than in writing. In any case, even overwhelming public opinion against a proposed project in a public hearing can be disregarded as there is no necessity to take this into account in the final decision.

The logic of economic globalisation is now playing out fully. In recent years there has been a massive increase in forest clearance for dams, mines, industries or infrastructure projects like roads, as brought out in documents obtained by Kalpavriksh from the MOEF using the Right to Information Act. Out of a total of 11,40,177 hectares of forest land cleared since 1980, approximately 3,11,220 hectares has been cleared since 2003; thus over a quarter of the total clearances in 26 years of implementation of the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980, has been in the last four years. In Orissa, forest diversion doubled in the post-liberalisation era: from 9,800

hectares in the period 1982-91, to 19,247 hectares in 1992-2004.

Though touted as the magic wand for local people's development, small farmers, adivasis, fisherfolk and other poor in the state have hardly benefited from Orissa's industrialisation policies. Most of the new development is capital-intensive rather than labour-intensive. In fact, deprived of their forest resources and water, these "ecosystem people" have only suffered. According to a study conducted by K C Samal, one immediately observable indicator is the average distance required to be travelled to collect one 'vara' (shoulder load) of firewood, from about four kilometres in 1995 to 7.36 kms in 2000.

Ironically, even schemes of the government that should have helped communities with securing livelihoods, have sometimes done the reverse. For instance, Joint Forest Management (JFM) was meant to create spaces for vulnerable sections of the community to benefit from regenerated forest resources. Certainly in several sites this scheme has helped. However, very often the participation of local people has remained on paper; in any case, the governance framework of JFM is not conducive to power-sharing between the forest department and communities. Worse, in many cases JFM has undermined or threatened a much older phenomenon, that of self-initiated community forest management (CFM). It is estimated that there might be over 10,000 such CFM areas in Orissa. But with no official recognition, it is not difficult for the state government to give mining or industrial leases in such forests. In addition to this, JFM has in many cases been superimposed on CFM, undermining existing institutions that communities have created.

Is There a Way Out?

Orissa's forests and forest-dwelling communities are reeling under the impacts of rampant industrialisation and some state-sponsored environmental schemes. What can be done to reverse this trend? Participants at the Bhubaneswar workshop recognised that there are no easy answers. Clearly grassroots struggles to resist destructive projects, and sustain community forest initiatives, were the most crucial

immediate strategy. In the long run, however, there was a need to pressurise and convince decision-makers about the following:

(1) The state (and the country) has to move away from fossil-fuel based, unsustainable "development" processes, and adopt alternative sustainable processes that provide basic livelihood and social security to all people; this could be done by adopting a clear set of indicators of sustainability (for example, clean air and water, public transport, non-conventional energy sources), and moving towards technologies and processes that meet these indicators. In any case, with climate change impacts looming large, a move away from fossil-fuel based development is a global imperative.

(2) All leasing of the state's remaining forest areas, to mines, industries, and other large-scale commercial or "development" projects, must halt immediately.

(3) The government must recognise and give legal backing to gram sabhas for community forest management initiatives; in this it can make use of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and the new Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, while safeguarding against the misuse of such laws by vested interests to take control of forest lands.

(4) All attempts to super-impose JFM or

other state-controlled schemes on CFM initiatives, must be stopped; any partnership between government and communities must be on the basis of sharing decision-making power, and communities deciding the benefit-sharing arrangements. (5) Government agencies and NGOs need to urgently facilitate communities to derive sustainable forest based livelihoods, and provide other sources of employment and livelihood including through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

(6) Simultaneously, there is need to identify alternative health, education, and other such amenities, that do not end up destroying the forest; this can best be done by building on existing traditional knowledge and processes of learning rather than completely replacing them.

(7) For all development and conservation projects, public hearings with affected people must be mandatory, giving full responsibility to gram sabhas to organise such hearings, and ensuring that the voices heard are factored into the final decisions.

None of the above is going to come without struggle. But before this struggle becomes desperate and possibly violent, the state and central governments would do well to take note of the increasing signs of unrest and hostility in the regions where unsustainable "development" is being imposed.



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