

India's environmental roller-coaster ride



ENVIRONMENT

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Environmental news making newspaper headlines is no longer a rarity. On July 15, the Prime Minister's meeting on India's response to climate change was on the front page of many newspapers. Not so long before that, the shocking news of the decline in tiger numbers had displaced the usual sordid stories of political intrigue. Pesticides in cola bottles, mass protests against dams and Special Economic Zones, and other such stories have become regular features of our morning breakfast read.

In sharp contrast to its greater front page occupancy, however, the country's environment is in fact in a state of severe decline. While our natural resources take a beating, the institutions and agencies that are supposed to safeguard them, including the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), are on the run or themselves turning predators.

It was not always like this. The rapid decimation of forests and wildlife, and the spread of pollution in the first two decades after Independence, gave rise to serious concern. Amongst the first voices to make themselves heard were the Chipko women of Uttarakhand, organising themselves to stop the felling of the forests their lives and livelihoods depended on. In the 1970s and 1980s, several legal and policy measures (for example, for wildlife protection and pollution control) were brought in by the government, which set up a dedicated Ministry to deal with environment.

Mass movements

Many of today's prominent mass movements and civil society organisations were born during that period. Silent Valley, where the Kerala government proposed a hydel dam, became a rallying point for the struggle to save India's last rainforests. By the mid-1980s the proposed Narmada dams gave rise to one of the world's most prominent anti-dam movements, and brought the "environment vs development" debate into middle class living rooms. Environment education became

a respectable subject. And so on... Those were heady days, and environmental groups could be forgiven for believing that the battle was being won.

It was, but not the war. While forest and wildlife destruction distinctly slowed down, the worst was yet to come. In 1991, a massive momentum was given to the forces of destruction. The new economic policies that ushered India into the era of globalisation, began to reverse the environmental gains made in the decade before that. A boost to the export of products such as fish and minerals, the welcoming of foreign capital into sectors like mining, the simplification of licensing procedures for industry, and the opening up of regions of India previously restricted owing to cultural or ecological sensitivity, were all condoned in the bid to leapfrog into the 21st century.

Of all the forest land diverted for non-forest purposes since 1980, over 50 per cent has occurred in the last six to seven years, a result of the rapidly increasing demand for such lands by industry and infrastructure. Of the 95,000 hectares of forest land given to mining since 1980, 63 per cent has been given in the period between 1997 and 2005. India's most biologically and culturally sensitive areas in Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand, Meghalaya, and other States are being opened up, with catastrophic impacts on indigenous tribes and wildlife. A new wave of internal colonialism is sweeping the country.

And so here we are today, on one of the steepest descending curves of the environmental roller-coaster ride we have been on since Independence. Worse, many of the brakes put into place earlier are being dismantled. In the last three to four years the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) under its previous Minister and Secretary (both now replaced), has presided over the dilution of a number of crucial environmental regulations.

A 10-year old notification on Environmental Impact Assessment, designed to



SCARRED LANDSCAPE: The new economic policies that ushered India into the era of globalisation in 1991 reversed much of the environmental gains made in the previous decade. Biologically sensitive areas in many States, such as Meghalaya, have been opened up, leading to extensive deforestation. — PHOTO: RITU RAJ KONWAR

make development projects ecologically sensitive, has been "re-engineered" to make it easier for industry to get licences. The Coastal Regulation Zone notification, which has helped save many of the coastal ecosystems on which depend the lives of a third of our population, is being changed to provide commercial activities much easier access. Many institutions set up to involve citizens in ensuring sustainability in development, such as Ecologically Sensitive Area committees, are proposed to be dismantled.

Equally serious is how the MoEF has made a mockery of participatory processes. Expert committees set up to provide independent advice on development projects are stocked with yes-men (yes, mostly men). An analysis in 2004 revealed that there were only two wildlife ex-

perts and one non-governmental organisation amongst 64 members of six expert committees. Consultations for the formulation of the National Environment Policy and the remaking of the EIA notification were mostly held with government agencies and corporate houses, with a few token NGOs being called in as a greenwash. A nationwide participatory process to produce a national biodiversity action plan, earlier facilitated by the MoEF itself, was unceremoniously dumped. Of course, the MoEF itself was being sidelined by a government intent on catching up with a double-digit growth rate, no matter what. Whether the recent change of guard at the MoEF can help it perform its key function of safeguarding India's environment, remains to be seen.

As we head towards the

second decade of the millennium, does India have reason to be proud of its environmental record? At first glance, not really. Decades after the subject was first mooted, we still do not have a basic land use plan for the country, which could help safeguard the regions that provide us water and food security. A decade after agreeing with the world that we needed to chart a course of sustainable development, we do not have any parameters or indicators in place, to tell us if we are headed anywhere in that direction.

Our global warming emissions show no sign of slowing down, and now we have our own multinational companies like the Tatas doing to other countries what the West's MNCs did to us — buying up land for mining or setting up destructive industrial plants despite proof that they

will be socially and ecologically devastating. Back home, more than half of our population that depends directly on natural resources, is facing a serious crisis of survival as these resources get sucked up by the industrial and urban juggernaut.

Signs of hope

And yet, there are signs of hope. One of the brightest is the increasing resistance of people affected by destructive development: traditional fisherfolk against commercial fisheries and aquaculture, Sikkimese monks and NGOs against mega-dams threatening sacred landscapes, villagers forcing Coca-Cola plants to shut down, farmers refusing to let their lands be taken up for the SEZ madness.

Another is the quiet but revolutionary work on alternatives: the spread of organic farming networks such as in

Maharashtra, decentralised water harvesting providing succour in drought-prone areas such as Alwar in Rajasthan, self-initiated forest and wildlife conservation by thousands of villages in Orissa, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Nagaland, and other States. Even some corporate bodies are considering different ways of conducting business, though the much-touted Corporate Social Responsibility remains mostly a sham. The rude shock that climate change is giving us is itself a sign of hope, especially if the Prime Minister really means it when he says public transport and energy saving need a big push, and if India's financial capital realises that it may soon be under water unless drastic action is taken on a global scale.

Despite our failures, India remains one of the countries

from where the answers to our troubled planet will emerge. We still have many communities with age-old traditions of wisely living with the earth. We have some of the most innovative thinkers and doers of the modern era, creating truly revolutionary technologies and institutions. We have the ability to organise peaceful mass movements that can shake the strongest of oppressive forces. Our experiments with decentralised governance could still be made to work. In the next few decades taking us to the first centenary of our Independence, we will, hopefully, have the foresight to combine all these into an ecological and social revolution that will restore our harmony with nature.

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