

2012: A year for transformation?

2012 has been predicted by many cultures as landmark for massive transformations. May this be a year when we witness many more alternative grassroots initiatives that will help us push back the forces of destruction unleashed by the blind pursuit of economic growth, writes **Ashish Kothari**



Will 2012 bring happy tidings for those concerned about the future of human beings and of planet earth?

Four years ago, when I started this column, I asked if we had reason to celebrate the coming of a new year (see [‘Happy new year’, Infochange, January 2008](#)). The first two days of 2008 had started with four stories, related to:

Several new critical tiger habitats being notified across the country.

The operationalisation of the Tribal Forest Rights Act.

Environmental clearance for uranium mining in Meghalaya.

Scrapping of all special economic zone (SEZ) projects by the Goan government.

This medley of news relevant to the environment (and to communities dependent on natural resources) could be seen as good and bad. A mix that characterised much of the year that had gone by, and could be seen as a sign of things to come.

Four years later, how do we stand? Is the news generally better, or worse? There are of course many events from 2011 that one can assess to get an answer. But the ones above, in some form or the other, continue to hit the headlines, so let’s look at what these have to tell us for 2012.

Tigers

In the last few years the government has gone on overdrive to declare new tiger reserves, the total now being 40 (from 28 in 2008). Sounds good for the tiger. But only if we are to believe that the number of reserves is by itself a guarantee of the tiger's survival. Figures put out by the Wildlife Institute of India and the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) suggest that since the last count, tiger populations have gone up; some conservationists dispute this, questioning the methodology, and pointing to the large number of cases of poaching and detection of tiger skins. I'm no expert to put my money on either of these views. What *is* cause for worry, however, is that there is a rise in poaching in what were earlier some of the best-protected reserves, like Corbett in Uttarakhand and Kanha in Madhya Pradesh. How wise is it to keep adding a spate of new reserves where there is hardly any sign of tiger presence, rather than paying more attention to the areas that contain the bulk of India's remaining tigers?

More important, however, is that the strategy for tiger conservation remains top-down and exclusionary. Decisions are taken by a small coterie of bureaucrats and forest officers, with even non-governmental members of the NTCA being left out of crucial processes. These decisions include the relocation of villages from within areas to be designated core or critical tiger reserves; relocation that is supposed to be voluntary, but is coercive in a number of ways. In reserves like Sariska and Ranthambhor (Rajasthan), Tadoba and Melghat (Maharashtra), Udanti (Chhattisgarh), Simlipal (Orissa), and Nagarhole (Karnataka), villagers have been told that they cannot have rights to use resources or access basic facilities inside, and that they may as well take the Rs 10 lakh relocation package being offered and move out. In every one of these reserves, forest-dwellers are not being allowed to claim their rights under the Forest Rights Act (more on this below), or if claims have been made, they are being ignored. Except where, as in Simlipal, people have organised themselves (with or without NGO help) and refused to move. For a few families or villages, relocation may offer new opportunities for livelihoods and development, especially where NGO involvement pushes the administration to be more sensitive and responsive. But these are exceptions; for several thousand people displaced or facing displacement, 2012 is not going to be a happy new year.

And if people continue to be disprivileged and angered by such strategies, what future does the tiger have? How can it survive with an impoverished, hostile population surrounding it (see '[Conservation suicide](#)', [Infochange, March 2011](#))? And is it always true that people and tigers can't 'co-exist'? What then of the fact, recorded by the forest department and scientists, that tiger populations have been stable or increasing in the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary (Karnataka), even while 65 *podus* (settlements) of Soliga adivasis continue to live inside? A tiger population important enough for the government to notify the area a tiger reserve, without any consultation with the Soligas and in fact ignoring their strident protests?

Therein lies, however, also a story of hope, which I return to in the next section. Also of hope is the increasing attempt to broadbase conservation through Tiger Foundations which are supposed to involve NGOs and communities, and to provide more employment to local people in various operations. These, however, are very piecemeal, and do not go the distance that India is supposed to go, if it is serious about its commitments under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The Programme of Work on Protected Areas of the CBD (agreed to in 2004) commits all signatory countries to move towards fully participatory, equitable protected area systems, with full recognition of the rights of communities. It is in this context that I turn to the second story I'd written about in 2008.

Forest Rights Act

2008 was full of hope and anxiety relating to a new legislation, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006, promising to secure tenurial rights to millions of adivasis and other

traditionally forest-dwelling communities. Its Rules were promulgated that year. But as a series of reviews, official and non-governmental, have revealed, the promise has hardly materialised (see 'The Forest Rights Act is floundering', *Infochange*, January 2011). Several state governments were on overdrive in the initial couple of years to process claims to rights, predominantly focusing on individual lands for cultivation and habitation. By 2011 the process slowed down considerably, with several states claiming they had finished implementing the Act ... till it was pointed out that the most important provisions of community forest rights had hardly been processed. These include the right to collect, use and sell non-timber forest produce, to grazing, to other traditional uses of forests and forest lands, to biodiversity and traditional knowledge, and most importantly, to manage and protect forests that have been traditionally conserved by communities.

Community forest rights (CFRs) could provide a powerful incentive for villages to conserve and sustainably use forest resources, as also help them resist non-forest use of forest land (eg for mining, commercial plantations, industry, etc). Unfortunately this potential has hardly been realised, with only a couple of states just about beginning to use it in 2011. In Maharashtra, CFR claims of about 350 villages over 3 lakh hectares have been approved, but almost all of these are in one district (Gadchiroli), with claims in other districts pending for many months. In most other states, the process has hardly moved. Even in Maharashtra, many of the villages have got titles that have illegal conditions, such as being subjected to government rules. Here and in many other states the titles have been artificially restricted to boundaries set under Joint Forest Management schemes, dictated by the forest department, whereas villages are entitled to claim rights over the entire traditionally used area. And a circular issued by the ministry of environment and forests in 2009, requiring state governments to complete implementation of the Forest Rights Act and seek consent from relevant gram sabhas to divert forest land for non-forest purposes, has been violated in the vast majority of projects.

There are however many stories of hope, other than the progress in Gadchiroli. One of these pertains to the tiger issue narrated above. Soliga adivasis in 25 *podus* within the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary have been given CFR titles, and the process for many other *podus* is under way. Using this as a base, the adivasis have initiated a planning process for an alternative, community-based tiger and wildlife conservation model, with help from conservation and social action organisations like ATREE, VGKK, Kalpavriksh, NCF, and others. They have asked the forest department to collaborate in this, with no response so far. But this has the potential to become India's first full-fledged community-based or collaborative protected area management initiative.

Many groups are also gearing up for a major push to CFRs, pressurising the UPA to honour its commitment to what it had earlier projected as one of its flagship legislations. Resistance to the governance changes entailed in CFRs will of course continue, and several other hurdles will stymie progress, but 2012 will likely see breakthroughs on this front in a number of states.

Environmental clearance

For some time now environmental groups have been pointing to the disturbing trend of diverting forest lands for non-forest uses such as mining, dams, expressways, industries, and other infrastructure or 'development' projects. As I wrote in January 2008, India's period of economic 'globalisation' has seen a renewed attack on forest lands. The Forest Conservation Act (FCA) 1980 has become a Forest Clearance Act. Using the Right to Information Act, groups like Kalpavriksh have obtained and analysed official data to show that the rate of diversion has only increased of late, rather than slowing down as should be the case if the government is serious about its environmental commitments. The Centre for Science and Environment confirmed this in the latest revelation in late-2011. Mining, in particular, has taken up vast amounts of forest land (nearly 1.5 lakh hectares since 1981, of which 30% has been in the 11th Plan period alone). Clearly the

government is prioritising industrial and urban demands, and even exports to meet the demands of other countries, over the water and biodiversity security that forests provide to all of us, and particularly to tens of millions of rural communities. In the process, institutions like the National Board for Wildlife and the Forest Advisory Committee, charged with screening projects that could affect forests and wildlife, have been reduced in most cases to rubber stamps (see '[The impending extinction of wildlife committees](#)', *Infochange*, June 2011).

At the root of this frenzy to divert forest lands for industrial purposes is India's quest to join the economic globalisation bandwagon. 2011 was the 20th anniversary of the economic 'reforms' introduced by Manmohan Singh when he was finance minister in Narasimha Rao's government. This brought in an era of no-holds-barred 'growth', which increasingly viewed all of nature as raw material for industry and exports, and all land as up for grabs. Despite repeated assertions about moving towards 'sustainable development', or about 'harmonising' development and environment, forests (and other ecosystems) continue to be given short shrift. So much so that even a minister like Jairam Ramesh, clearly more sensitive and dynamic than his predecessors, did little to curb the runaway rate of forest diversion, a promise he had made when taking over the ministership. Halfway through 2011 he was changed, and it is not yet clear if his successor Jayanti Natarajan will change the pattern. Somehow, I doubt if 2012 will bring better news on this front.

Another sign of the bulldozer nature of the globalisation process was the draft Approach Paper to the 12th 5-Year plan brought out by the Planning Commission. This had many more provisions for environmental measures and social inclusiveness than in previous Plan approach papers, but they did not amount to the fundamental reorientation of the economy that is required to put environmental concerns squarely at the centre of 'development' (see '[Is sustainability truly built into the 12th 5-Year Plan?](#)', *Infochange*, October 2011).

As always, there were also many signs of hope. Amongst these were the rapidly increasing movements of resistance, one of the brightest being the successful fight to stop Vedanta corporation from mining in the sacred hilltop of the Dongria Kondh adivasis in Orissa. The rejection of clearance for the Renuka Dam in Himachal Pradesh, threatening to submerge rich forests and displace many villages, was also based on dogged resistance by the local people; and a unique instance when the minister Jairam Ramesh over-ruled the Forest Advisory Committee which had inexplicably okayed the project.

What hope for 2012?

2012 has been predicted by many cultures, organisations and individuals as the year of massive transformation (ranging from complete annihilation at one extreme, to a radical shift in human consciousness for the better, on the other). It is also the year the world will see a number of global meetings dealing with environmental and social issues, including Rio+20 (the 20th anniversary of the famous Earth Summit), to be held in Rio de Janeiro in May, the Biodiversity Convention's 11th Conference of Parties in Hyderabad in October, and the Climate Change Convention's 18th Conference of Parties in Qatar in December. Rio+20 in particular is becoming a focal point for governments and UN agencies who are pushing the adoption of the 'Green Economy', which they say will bring about sustainable development, but which critics say is simply business as usual in green garb. Ranged against this vision of the future are a series of more radical paradigms being put forward by indigenous peoples, civil society organisations, and fringe academics.

Finally, and this is a theme I will return to in subsequent articles, there is the hope represented by alternative grassroots experiments. There are now thousands of initiatives towards sustainable agriculture, decentralised water harvesting, rural and urban livelihoods based on local resources and skills, collective enterprise and marketing,

producer-consumer links eliminating the exploitative middle trader, urban sustainability, decentralised renewable energy, ecologically sensitive construction, locally relevant education, community-controlled health services, and so on. Most of these are quiet, undocumented, and unrecognised, but they are transforming lives and livelihoods in a positive way. They do not yet add up to a comprehensive alternative to today's dominant 'development' model, but they provide the greatest hope of a future that will be less troubled than the present.

May 2012 witness more such initiatives, helping us to push back, even if by a few inches, the forces of destruction unleashed by the blind pursuit of economic growth and the selfish takeover of the earth by human beings. And may the prophesy of the Mayan people of South America come true, that the next few years will mark the beginning of a new cycle of the sun, ushering in peace and harmony between peoples and between humans and the earth.

Infochange News & Features, December 2011

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