

Environment vs. The Poor ?

Ashish Kothari

The last two years have seen a spate of actions on the environment which, at first glance, are to be applauded, but which have worrying implications. Unless the urban-based environmental movement understands and deals with these implications, it stands to lose the momentum and credibility it has built up over the years.

In India, the natural environment is important not only for its aesthetic and intangible ecological benefits, but more so for being the survival base of hundreds of millions of poor people who eke out a daily living from land, forests, wetlands, and wildlife. While it is morally imperative that nature be protected for its own right, the survival rights of the poor cannot be swept aside in the bargain. Such neglect is even less justified when it is done in the interests of the recreational requirements of the urban elite.

The Supreme Court orders to relocate 1500 polluting industries from Delhi, and to throw out all encroachments from the Delhi Ridge Reserved Forest, are important landmarks. But have we considered their serious unintended consequences on the innocent poor? Over 30,000 workers employed in these industries may be rendered jobless, and cash compensations is no substitute. The slum-dwellers and villagers who are being thrown out of their current settlements on the Ridge, also number several thousand. Predictably, even as they are being evicted, government and private agencies, the biggest destroyers of the Ridge, remain relatively untouched. Since slum-dwellers have no legal standing, it is easy to summarily evict them; even villages who were earlier declared part of a panchayat and given ration cards, have suddenly been told they are encroachers since no land rights are recorded in official documents. At the same time, luxury farm-houses belonging to influential people, which are immediately adjacent to the villages, have been declared to be outside the Reserved Forest, and thus allowed to stay on!

Other examples are symptomatic of a malaise that has deep roots in elite urban environmentalism. The legitimate concern for wildlife conservation has resulted in the establishment of an extensive network of protected areas (PAs). These areas harbour some of our last natural habitats and wildlife populations, but they are also home to perhaps over 3 million rural people. Unfortunately, conservationist demands for strict protection have resulted in the forcible eviction of thousands of people, or the curtailment of access to resources used by the poor for fuel, fodder, and livelihood. In Rajaji National Park, nomadic Gujjars and rope weaving communities are the targets; in Gir National Park, the pastoral Maldharis have been kicked out; in Pench National Park, a recent petition has stopped fishing by local people in the reservoir.

Conservationists justifiably point out that outside vested interests (fish traders in Pench, the land mafia in Borivali) often benefit in the name of the poor, and that resource exploitation is often extremely destructive. But in the process of targeting these unscrupulous elements, it is the poor who are worst affected. Unfortunately, most conservationists have remained unenthusiastic about helping the poor to gain a respectable livelihood which can take them away from the clutches of commercial interests. Unfortunately too, human rights activists have ignored the fact that legally protected areas have often been the only defence against destructive industrial expansion, and that sharply divided local communities are not always the best conservationists.

Environmentalists are undoubtedly acting out of a legitimate sense of urgency and desperation. Yet, though we cannot always predict the outcomes of their actions, we seem to be very slow learners from past experience, and suffer from huge blind spots. We put full faith in bureaucratic action to save the environment or rehabilitate the poor, though we know that governments lack the willpower to do so. We feel (rather unscientifically) that any resource use inside a protected area is detrimental to biodiversity, but accept tourism (albeit "ecotourism") in the same area, and indulging in it ourselves. Most damning is our blind spot towards our own consumerist demands on resources, which give rise to many of the country's destructive developmental projects. Marble from mining in Sariska Tiger Reserve adorns our homes; our cars pollute the air which we want the Delhi Ridge to clean up. We do not want the eyesore industries which produce the products we use, but we do not mind them being relocated into some rural area where they result in forcible acquisition of agricultural land hazards to the air and water of villagers.

As urban environmentalists, we must be willing to confront the model of development which we benefit from, and which is the cause of many of the conflicts. The problems of Rajaji National Park emanate less from Gujjars and rope-weavers and more from the unchecked urban expansion of Dehradun and Rishikesh and Haridwar, the Chilla Hydro-electricity channel, and massive industrial complexes . all of which have created problems not only for wildlife but for the villagers also. In Pench, the original culprits are not the villagers of Totiadhoh who fish in the reservoir, but the Pench dam itself, to build which the villagers were brought there in the first place. Yet how many of use have asked for the closure of the Chilla channel; or for taking off private cars from Delhi's streets and replacing them by good public transport ?

Some environmental groups have begun to speak out against the above injustice. Kalpavriksh, Shrishti, Vatavaran, WWF-I, DRAG, and others have condemned the action against slum-dwellers and villagers on the Delhi Ridge, and demanded that action instead be taken against the major destroyers. Wildlife conservationists like Bittu Sahgal have joined mass movements against destructive development projects; in turn movement leaders like Medha Patkar have joined the the appeal to protect the tiger. As urban conservationists, we are realising that when it comes to the crunch, it is not we who will be blocking the bulldozers of developers. It will be villagers whose livelihoods are threatened, as in Sariska Tiger Reserve where they stopped rampant mining, local communities must therefore be involved in forest and wildlife conservation, with rights to decision-making powers and to livelihood resources.

Environmentalists and human rights advocates need agreement on some basic elements of a common platform, including; no forcible displacement of local communities from either environmental or developmental projects; no exploitation of threatened wildlife species; rejection of commercial-industrial projects in natural habitats; and equitable partnerships for conservation and livelihood generation.

Environmental *sustainability* cannot be achieved without social *equity*. Both poor people and urban environmentalists have a common enemy in the commercial-industrial juggernaut which threatens to convert every natural habitat into raw material and every rural community into cheap labour. The sooner we urban environmentalists erase our blind spots, and start seeing things from the point of view of the poor the surer will we be of achieving our objectives.

Ashish Kothari is founder-member of Kalpavriksh, and lecturer at Indian Institute of Public Administration.