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Draft Forest Policy – A road map to capture rather than preserve the forests

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The draft Forest policy 2018 flatters to deceive, while acknowledging the increase in Forest cover as a result of protection promoted by the Forest Policy 1988 and the inputs given in the context of the need for an ecological perspective, it systematically sidelines the data and analysis that has helped achieved this result as also it ignores all threats to the forest as a result of the unbridled invitation to corporates to acquire and decimate forest land in the name of development and depositing of a fee (NPV). While acknowledging inputs from Civil Society it does not explain why a 'considered draft' has been quietly sidelined exposing its intent to hand over prime forest land to Industry on platter.

The ecological approach underlies that there is more to natural resources than productivity enhancement, this also includes a section that question the GDP method of measuring the economy in general and in this case productivity in particular. Research in different fields points to the mess created as a result of this single minded approach to development. Leave alone the commercial orientation of the British in the replacement of Oak with Pine, Sal with Teak, the decimation of forests to mine bamboo etc etc, the disasters created as a result of Eucalyptus, Prosopis, Aakashwani (*Acacia auriculiformis*) and other species are well known. The commercial/productivity orientation underlying these 'plantations' to the exclusion of everything else has been the prime cause for the growing interest in ecology and sustainability.

It therefore comes as no surprise to see that conservationists and human rights activists have slammed the draft policy for reasons though entirely different have a common thread to them. This basically being the recognition of forests as forests and not as a milking cash cow for Industry, in whatever form this may be. The Supreme Court in 2008 endorsed this concern and demanded that CAMPA funds be kept separate, pending a comprehensive approach to deal with systemic concerns related to the destruction of the forests. Far from doing that, in 2016, the government cynically passed CAF with the stated idea of utilizing the unspent money but in reality, bypassing the reason why this money could not be spent and in addition creating provisions to enhance government (forest department hegemony over the forests).

Why this reverse in the Government's vision after progressively acknowledging first the need for conservation (1972 Wild Life Act, 1980 Forest Conservation Act) and then the role and necessity of involving communities dependent on this resource in some way or the other (1988 Forest Policy, 1996 PESA, 2002 Biodiversity Act and 2006 FRA). The reason is not far to find, Conforming to International Conventions related to Conservation and green cover on one hand and need to provide an unbridled handle for companies to exploit these resources at will on the other. That a cleverly worded document favoring conservation and community involvement in the same is actually a blue print to hand over forest to industry in the name of productivity and enhancing green cover has already been exposed.

Will take this chance to highlight the need to stay focused on the essence of FRA given in the preamble namely the need to correct historical injustice done to forest dwelling and forest dependent communities? This injustice, and does not merely relate to the granting of rights (be they individual or community). This injustice relates to systematic the destruction of a whole way of life centered on the forest and ignoring the potential (of modern science and technology, particularly renewables) to address current questions consistent with the necessity for sustainable and dignified livelihoods on one hand and forest conservation as 'Global Commons' on the other.

Institute of Ecology and Livelihood Action, an ecological civil society group, continues dialogues on 'Relevance of Commons for Sustainable Development', and found there is necessity for a new look at development paradigms because current development paradigm unable to provide jobs and the ecosystems approach to development and its relevance to the development of appropriate life support systems.

Further, without an acknowledgement of the failure to implement FRA in letter and spirit it is impossible to develop the right framework for a forest policy that will focus not just on the preservation and restoration of the forest consistent with ecological requirements but also concretely addressing the concerns of forest dwelling and forest dependent communities, whose life support systems depend on the continued health and sustenance of the forest. The exercise on Promise and potential of FRA (2016) provides us with a good starting point. How can this be built upon?

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