

Corporates at centre stage in forest management, not community

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The Draft Forest Policy put out for comments on 14th March 2018, invites comments from all stakeholders till 14th April 2018. This draft does not refer to the earlier draft prepared through due consultation with civil society by IIFM which has been removed. The draft quotes as its predecessor the 1988 Forest Policy. While acknowledging that forest cover increased as a result of the 1988 forest policy the draft though it says that it achieved the goal of participatory forest management, fails to mention up front that it was as a result of the involvement of local communities in the protection process which was the essence of the policy.

While explaining the need for the new draft, it talks about the new International agreements and the need to bring the policy in line with these agreements however all reference to FRA 2006 prominent in the earlier draft by IIFM have been removed. Instead the policy says ‘As far as community forest resources management under Forest rights Act is concerned, the new policy will address the same under participatory forest management and the same will be addressed through the proposed community forest management mission’. An examination of the draft will explain how and why the community will be sidelined by this twist in the interpretation of the essence of FRA 2006.

Clause 4.10.3 of the draft states as follows ‘The Compensatory Afforestation fund which is being transferred to the states would be a major source of funds for taking up Afforestation & rehabilitation works in degraded forest areas as well as for bringing new areas under forest & tree cover’. In my earlier article ‘Draft Forest Policy – A road map to capture rather than preserve the forest’, I had pointed out how CAF 2016 was cynically passed, bypassing the concerns of the Supreme Court with the intention of giving the Government a licence to spend the money as they pleased. Will take what is CAF 2016 in a later article if required, for now suffice to say that the Forest Policy 2018 provides the ‘legitimate framework’ to spend the money. It is important therefore to examine some of the clauses to understand what the money will be spent for.

Clause 4.1.1 d says ‘Productivity of the forest plantations are poor in most of the States. This will be addressed by intensive scientific management of forest plantations of commercially important species like teak, sal, sisham, poplar, gmelina, eucalyptus, casuarina, bamboo etc. The lands available with the forest corporations which are degraded & underutilized will be managed to produce quality timber with scientific interventions. Public private participation models will be developed for undertaking Afforestation and reforestation activities in degraded forest areas and forest areas available with Forest Development Corporations and outside forests’.

The cat is out of the bag, Corporates, not communities and commercial not conservation orientation are to provide the cutting edge to the policy. As we all know, it was this very need to exploit the forest for commercial purposes that gave birth to the Forest Department.

Clause 4.1.1. g says ‘Management of forests & forest plantations will be done as per the Central Government approved Working/Management plans, and also in accordance with the

guidelines issued by the Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change from time to time. Private forests/ forest plantations/tree lots will be regulated as per the management plans’.

So instead of laying out a road map where CFR become central to the policy and how to capacitate communities to play this role consistent with livelihood and sustainability goals, the ministry effectively deals a cutting blow to the 1988 Forest Policy and make the Government central to the command and management process essential if Corporates are to be given centre stage in forest management as stated above.

Participation of communities will be subordinated to needs and concerns of the Government and industry. Quite contrary to the essence of community forest management given lip service to all through the policy. Is there any choice in what we all need to do now?

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