

Bittu Sahgal

DECCAN HERALD

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# 'Free for all' forests

*In the Hoshangabad District of Madhya Pradesh, in a village called Tabwandi, a zamindar used the help of poor people to encroach 500 hectares of forestland. Seven years after they cut and cultivated the forest he kicked them out. Today he is in occupation of that land, though technically it belongs to the Forest Department. We must protect forestlands from being encroached, either by the rich or the poor.*

- **Rajendra Singh**, Director, Tarun Bharat Sangh, Rajasthan

**G**ROUPS of social activists are getting together across India to oppose the Supreme Court's recent instructions to evict all encroachers from forestlands. I have a point (a worry, disappointment and fear actually) that I would like such activists, including those who would have slums resettled in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Borivli, to consider.

The real displacement of forest dwellers takes place when forests are cut down. Over the past three decades have groups representing forest dwellers done enough to actually PREVENT forests from being cut down? Or have they considered their task done by championing the rights of forest dwellers to live in and access the ever-dwindling forests that OTHER groups have managed to protect from dams, mines, roads and other urban developments including World Bank-style forestry projects?

My concern is that urban social activists are so utterly, utterly convinced of the "goodness" of their cause when it comes to protecting peoples' rights over forests, that they tend to forget in some

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cases that another set of tenants also occupies, maintains, creates, embellishes, protects and in every way nurtures forests - wildlife.

Not ALL groups, but MANY social groups, imagine that "people" can look after forests by "displacing" wildlife. Ironically, even the World Bank thinks it can do this! They are dead wrong. I know Ashok Choudhury, one of the convenors of the National Forum of Forest Dwellers and Forest Workers (RSVM) very well. He is a very fine individual. With help from Justice Poti, years ago, we both agreed on virtually all issues concerning the Rajaji National Park (now in Uttaranchal) - including the creation of multiple core areas that no humans would use and

buffer areas whose biomass would be used to sustain people. Neither of us were able to convince our respective constituencies to change their mindsets. None of the patently good solutions (for wildlife and for the people) were implemented.

Now I see a free for all taking place, with chest beating all around. And in this battle between the bulls it is the calf that will predictably be most hurt once again - the forest.

If we look around India we will observe that where wildlife and forest laws have not been in force Korkus, Baigas, Bhils,

Gonds and Chenchus have been ruthlessly converted into urban migrants, rural labourers and refugees.

Robbed first of their homes and resources by dams, mines and other mega-projects, they ultimately lost even their dignity and self-sufficiency. Today they must negotiate survival with ministers, bureaucrats and technocrats who know nothing of their culture and care little for their welfare. The attempts

### GREEN TALK

**Bittu Sahgal**

of Tribal Welfare

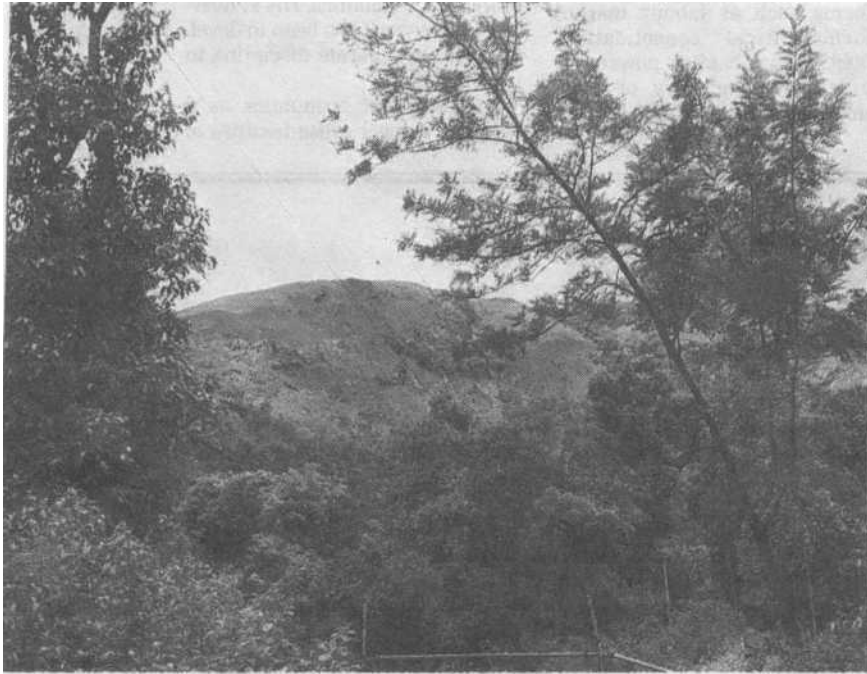
Departments to "develop" the tribal people of India merely accelerates the loss of their identity and often also causes

death and disease to strike once-proud but vulnerable communities.

It is in this context that the issue of forest protection and human rights must be considered. Hopefully everyone will come to the conclusion that the first job on hand is to ensure that forests remain forests. Only after this does the question of who should have access to the fruits of surviving forests arise.

Let me state two home truths:

1. Water security is the central rationale for the protection of India's wilderness and the waterways they nurture. Water is



also the instrument of widespread human rights abuses in India, yet few activist groups are even minimally involved in defending wildlife and the wild habitats, which alone can assure the water security of the Indian subcontinent.

2. Wildlife, forest and coastal protection laws have defended the traditional way of life and ancient cultures more effectively from the state than any other initiatives in India. Yet human rights groups have distanced themselves from environmental issues, often to the point of supporting the very agencies responsible for both environmental and human rights abuses (small and big time politicians, the World Bank, FAO and UNDP).

Food for thought: Some years ago a very vital battle was fought against a pulp mill that was destroying forests in

Karnataka. Today the view being put forward is that local forest communities should enjoy the right to sell the very same wild bamboo to the very same kind of pulp mills (not to weave baskets as is so often projected!). Where does this leave the tiger, or the deer, or the bird that was never part of human rights workshops or negotiations? I wrote to social activist S R Hiremath about this four or five years ago, but never got a response.

I continue to try and get social activists and wildlife groups to wake up and smell the coffee. They do sometimes when we sit together and talk in an atmosphere of trust. But then, when they go back to their own constituencies, the chest beating begins all over again. In the meanwhile, the "Free for all forests" perish.

### **Sanctuary Features**

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Adiwasis verses forest debate

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