

20 JUNE 2005

# Missing the woods

**T**IGERS versus Tribals: this is how the debate on the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2005, has been framed. If you are for tigers, you shouldn't recognise forest rights of tribals. And if you are for tribals, then it *ipso facto* means that tigers are not important to you. This is a completely false dichotomy.

It is precisely to protect tigers (and trees) that we must take back our forests from the forest department and put them in the stewardship of forest dwellers. The reliance on the forest department, pre- and post-independence, has proved to be misplaced. The case involving Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi highlights the problem. This is true not only in India but in much of the world. And the world is looking for an alternative.

The conventional approach to wildlife conservation is premised on separating humans from ecology. This translates into declaring more and more areas as national parks or sanctuaries, clearing them of all human habitation, and then installing guards with more and more powerful guns. This Western, or 'green' approach — also called the guns and guards approach (gugu approach) — turns forest dwellers from friends into enemies of wildlife and forest resources. Studies and surveys have shown that the poachers are typically the local people. The traders in wildlife are outsiders (may be foreigners), but the poachers are the people living around our parks and sanctuaries.

The gugu approach has turned the very people who protected our forests and wildlife for centuries into its destroyers. It is also a typical urban approach, which sees the tiger as endangered while the tribals see themselves as endangered by the tiger! The costs of the gugu approach are born by tribals — in their evacuation, loss of habitat and livelihoods — but the benefits accrue to people like us —



## We need to remember forests are for forest dwellers, not foresters

PARTH J. SHAH

mostly urbanites who take pride in 'saving' the tiger and going on an occasional family safari.

The gugu approach imposes the costs of protecting wildlife primarily on forest dwellers. Despite that (or because of it) the approach has failed universally. This has prompted many countries to try a different route: put forest dwellers and not forest departments in charge of these precious resources. They have adopted a terracotta approach — incentive-based integration of people to sustain wildlife and forests as well as livelihoods. People are made stewards of natural resources; they manage and often own these resources. The forest departments become advisors and facilitators.

**Take the success of Nepal's community forestry management. From almost complete decimation, its forest cover doubled in the last decade with forest user groups taking charge**

The terracotta approach is old wisdom. Before the advent of modern governments, the commons — grazing pastures, forests, lakes and rivers, and fisheries — were managed by local people through local norms and customs. Ever increasing demand for these resources due to a growing population, accelerating economic development, and improving technologies, began to put pressure on the informal norms and customs that managed the use of these resources. Instead of building on the informal arrangements that had worked well, unfortunately, the state took over the ownership and management of com-

mon resources. Many thought that the state would be more rational and egalitarian in the use of these resources and would be a more effective and vigilant protector. However the nationalisation of our natural resources has been the real tragedy. The nationalised resources become collective resources and suffer overuse and neglect. Only de-nationalisation and de-collectivisation will address the problem.

Take the example of Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources) programme of the eighties and Nepal's community forestry management of the nineties are classic examples of the terracotta ap-

proach of denationalisation and communitisation. Under CAMPFIRE, the government gave the forests, along with the elephants, to forest dwellers. The result? Zimbabwe's elephant population has grown at a rate higher than that of any other country — even countries with mightier guns and many guards. This is despite the fact that its tribal-owners sell licences to hunt elephants. Yes, one can buy a legal licence to hunt an elephant in Zimbabwe. At a price of more than US\$ 10,000! Only the marked elephants are allowed to be hunted, who are well beyond their reproductive age. Hunting li-

ences have become a significant source of revenue to enhance the living standards of tribals as well as provide more resources to care and expand the elephant population and their habitat. The great success of Nepal's community forestry management is right in our backyard. From almost complete decimation, Nepal's forest cover has doubled in the last decade with forest user groups taking the charge from the ministry of forest.

In addition to all the utilitarian or efficiency arguments, it must be remembered that local communities have a prior claim — a moral claim — on these resources. They have been using these resources for generations and centuries. It is on the premise of prior use that the ownership of resources has been settled in any civilised society. The privately-owned land today was at some point in time a forest. Some people cleared those forests for agricultural, residential or commercial use, and they received property titles to the cleared land. But some did not clear the forests and continued to live in them. These forest dwellers are now refused the same process of land titling that we enjoyed. The people who kept the forests intact are being penalised for not clear-cutting them in the past as we did. It is a gross injustice not to recognise the rights of forest dwellers. The most efficient as well as ethical resolution is to take our forests from the foresters and put them in the hands of forest dwellers.

Let there be no mistake: the framing of the debate on the Scheduled Tribes Bill as tigers versus tribals is completely misleading. It is a smokescreen. The real issue is about saving tigers and trees by making forest dwellers the custodians of our forests. We have given enough time to foresters; let's give forest dwellers a chance. They are our only hope.

*The writer is president, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi*