

INDIAN EXPRESS (BOMBAY)
27 NOVEMBER 2004

In the closed kingdoms of experts

VIDEH UPADHYAY

THE first reaction to the Draft Environment Policy recently put up by the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) on the web was to understand its contents and then to quickly build a critique, so as not to miss the two-month time line for comments invited on the draft. Accordingly, I focused on the substantive principles and premises of the draft policy and found that the draft sees environment as a "subset" of the larger "sets" of poverty and development and addresses sustainable development from an essentially anthropocentric and utilitarian view. But it is now obvious to me that the more important issues the policy throws up emerge from the way the draft itself was prepared and its aftermath—specifically in the way civil society, including advocacy groups and NGOs, has responded to it.

The draft to the policy was prepared for the ministry by a well-known Delhi based NGO which claims to be, and is repeatedly accepted by the government to be, an expert institution on natural resource management issues. More critically, it cut out a draft policy in circumstances where, apart from the expert and the organisation hiring it, nobody knew about it. Thus, understandably, some of the NGOs including "counter experts" (those not accepted as "experts" and who can provide a counter in the same language!)

criticised the draft through an open letter to the ministry pointing out that the draft arose out of a process that "so far has been opaque and undemocratic" and where "NGOs known for their environmental record, or communities with maximum dependence on the environment, have not been part of the process of formulating the NEP draft."

The policy-making "non process" raises critical questions. First, what is the nature of conferences that the ministry seeks to carry out with the draft? Note, here, that having conferences with a prepared draft is increasingly the only strategy of policy making com-

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ing from the central government. The new National Water Policy in 2002 technically worked on this strategy and now there are reports that the proposed National Tribal Policy to be finalised early next year would follow the same means. Conferences, post a draft, ease the conscience of policymakers by giving the impression that a participatory process has been adhered to. However, a closer look reveals a different picture.

First, typically, these conferences rope in experts and institutions accepted as such by the governments in the past and at best some enlightened counter-experts

in NGOs and advocacy groups and no one else. They respond to a semi-final draft generally couched in a language that most in these conferences relate to. With a little bit of preaching to the converted, and recording some notes of dissent from a few, the policy gets finalised.

The big question is that on a subject like environment, even defined by law as including the "inter-relationship of man with air water and land..." (much to do with local information base and values), is there any role that the common man can play in shaping a policy which, if it at all it works, is going to affect him directly? To dispel cyni-

cism, some suggestions on conferences could still be made.

First, even while translations of the draft in a language apart from English need to be carried out, these conferences ought to be taken out of New Delhi to as many places as possible. Second, in all these places the conferences should be preceded by adequate advertisements and publicity through the local media with the specific aim of bringing in a sizeable number of citizens and indeed "citizen experts" who without doubt know more about the local environment and even solutions for them than people like

you and me. These consultations should be totally open and transparent and — unlike the conference rounds at the time of finalising the Water Policy — be recorded in camera. The reports from these consultations should then be made available to the public, including parliamentarians, local elected representatives, experts, counter experts and NGOs. All of this would not suit the clock and the purse, some would say, but over time it will ease both the formulation and execution of the policy and is bound to save time and money. However, it is too late to suggest even this process for the environment policy as all these conferences should ideally happen without a draft policy and arguably with only some pre-identified points that could set the framework for deliberations.

Some nations in the world have adopted such policy-making processes and I can't think of one good reason why we should not. However, chances are that the suggestion here would not cut much ice with anyone who matters. This is because in the hidden hierarchies of experts, counter experts, citizen experts and the common man, India's democracy doesn't seem to have the space to genuinely accommodate the latter three.

*The writer is a senior
Supreme Court lawyer*