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Tribals & forests: a corrective

THE ARTICLE on the CMP and tribal expectations (Open Page, June 8) raises very basic, long-pending and contested issues relating to our national forest policy, but needs a corrective.

Suppose the British had not concerned themselves with the forests at all. The Forest Department would not have harassed the tribals, but would the latter have continued their idyllic life unexploited? Maybe for some time, but as communications and technology improved and forests became more accessible and visible as potential profit centres, private entrepreneurs would certainly have entered the forests and exploited and displaced the tribals as they have done now. Their increasing population itself would have compelled tribals to over exploit forests for sheer survival. The result might well have been a greater depletion of forests than now.

No proactive government anticipating modern economic activity and realising the benefits of forests can have a *laissez-faire* policy on forests. Any government policy on state forests will have three broad components — one, reserving land for Nature to play out its ecological cycles and excluding humans therefrom (e.g. biotic reserves, ecologically fragile areas, etc.); two, earmarking land for planned, sustainable exploitation; and the third, other government lands, with or without tree cover, for flexible use. Such classification is neither illogical nor villainous. But tribals for whom living in the forests has been a way of life and source of livelihood long before such policy **cannot** be treated as retrospective encroachers.

In category one, even if it involves hardship, tribals may have to be resettled (not *a la* Narmada but in a real and liberal sense) in category two or three lands. Their small population relative to the forest available, poor accessibility of forests, absence of powerful technology and low level of private enterprise have all enabled tribals in the past to live inside even ecologically sensitive areas without serious disturbance. (With a population density of 4 or less per square mile, even shifting cultivation can be sustained!) It would be naive to expect this to continue when the tribal population is increasing and there is great outside pressure to enter forests and exploit them directly or through tribals. Category one areas should, therefore, be out of bounds to humans. In category two, a proper coexistential mechanism could

certainly be worked out. There may be a problem with some category three lands in the plains where the tribals may have a ready, traditional basis for livelihood.

The national forest policy requires a tree cover of 33.3 per cent for the country and not 33.3 per cent of reserved forest. In other words, 33.3 per cent includes private lands and social forestry, and envisages preserving whatever tree cover exists on government lands (forests or otherwise) plus motivating private landowners to voluntarily increase tree cover. Whether the percentage is scientific or not, surely the more the tree cover for the country as a whole the better the quality of the environment and life? Tree cover is not to be looked at simplistically as prevention of erosion alone but in terms of its total ecological benefits such as climatic influence, oxygen release, dust and noise filtering and supporting other forms of life. (One full-grown tamarind tree releases as much oxygen in a day as is consumed by a passenger car). Moreover, 33.3 per cent is spread over the entire country and comparing it with the areas of whole States is misleading.

Afforestation is no substitute

Afforestation is often proffered as a painless substitute for the natural forests we are losing. Nature alone makes forests; man makes only plantations. A three tier canopy may come about on vacant land but only if it is left alone for ten thousand years, all other conditions remaining favourable! For all practical purposes, a natural forest is a non-renewable resource whose loss we should, while being most humanitarian and just in dealing with tribals, minimise.

Should forests remain the only natural, permanent abode of tribals? Development is the widening of human choice. Granting the merits of a well-organised tribal society and the demerits of a callous, cash-nexus-based modern society, on balance the opportunities and the quality of life in the latter are way ahead of the best tribal society inside a forest. Sure, there should be no coercion, but there should be massive, irresistible economic incentives and temptations to entice them out of the forests. Early generations may suffer but ultimately, they may have to learn to play the same game (may be dirty!) as the rest of society and survive.

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