

Taking Collective Responsibility for Environmental Catastrophes

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The tinder for the forest fire that raged over three mountain states of India recently was set in place over a century ago.

It can be traced back to a narrative that created the persona of 'the ignorant forest dweller'. This narrative was necessary to justify the state taking control over community-held forests and their resources, ostensibly for their protection. No one bothered to point out that those who built this centrally-controlled model of forest management - the early foresters, were also the timber magnates fattening themselves on the proceeds of the industrial revolution with its seemingly relentless appetite for wood.

The science of forest management was thus born, introducing ways to measure the wealth of forests in terms of girth and wood quality, as opposed to firewood and water sources.

This led to many changes to forests in different parts of the world, such as replacing natural broadleaved trees with more lucrative, but fire-hazardous pine, with the dangerous consequences we see unfolding.

The narrative of the destructive forest dweller began to be challenged in the 1980s, as ideas of community participation in forest management began to influence forest policy. Yet this image lurks somewhere in the background, and leaps out fully formed on to our front pages when communities are referred to as arsonists who, for reasons no one can fathom, stupidly set fire to forests in the mountains.

The fact remains that even in a state like Uttarakhand, with its community-involved forest management committees or van panchayats, the final say on forests rests with the state, for the most part. In doing so, we have alienated a people from their immediate environment. Studies by scholars like Arun Agrawal find that it is communities that have actual control over forests, maintain and protect them. People who no longer feel kinship with the forest they live next to will treat it just like the state treats it - as a commodity.

This is what Elinor Ostrom notes in her rebuttal to Hardin's famous treatise on the tragedy of the commons. Hardin argued that any property which is community-held will be ultimately destroyed because no one is charged with the responsibility of maintaining the property, unlike in the case of a private property, where this role is discharged by the owner or master.

Nobel laureate Ostrom points out that we mistakenly refer to resources like forests as common property or commons, when in fact the community nature has long been torn away when the resources began to be owned or controlled by the state or other similar authority. This is the real tragedy - the exclusion of the original users.

This tragedy is magnified on a national scale when we look at national policy with regard to the 11 Indian mountain states stretching from Jammu and Kashmir to the northeast. These states comprise 16 percent of India's geographical area of India and four of the population. They are the nation's biodiversity hotspots, with their average forest cover being 65 per cent, which is thrice the national average of 21 per cent. In fact in some of the states, over 80 per cent of the land is covered by forests.

The forests in the mountains operate as vast carbon sinks and play a vital role in recharging ground-water aquifers by capturing essential atmospheric moisture, thus regulating the flows of the great rivers of the plains. The Indo-Gangetic Basin, in turn, feeds much of the country.

These mountain states, which are categorized as 'special category states' by virtue of their developmental difficulties, get tax concessions and additional financial assistance from the central government. Myriad government-appointed committees and studies have found that these states lag behind the rest of the country, and a 2013 study by the Planning Commission found that the existing fiscal assistance to these states are inadequate for them to conserve their resources or build essential development infrastructure.

As a result of the large forest cover, these states are developmentally constrained as time-consuming clearances are required for the creation of basic social and economic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools and hospitals. Consequently, many of these states have weak economies and job markets, which result in their people having little option other than to migrate to the cities on the plains in search of opportunities and medical support.

These demographic changes further impoverish these states and there is an increasing trend in some states of entire villages emptying, sometimes leaving behind only the elderly and infants. Verily, there is no one left to douse the fire.

This is not to suggest that these states should encourage felling of forests - most definitely not. However, given the public goods these states and their people provide to the nation, it is only fair that they be awarded compensation, which some refer to as a 'Green Bonus'. Its purpose would be to create economic and social assets for mountain states and people, because in their prosperity and well-being rests the fate of a vast chunk of the nation's environmental resources. Creating these assets in a sustainable manner will limit the migration of forest-dependent communities and create an environment for the protection of forests.

And lest we bask in the convenient glow of having the state machinery to blame for all our ills, let us take a good hard look at ourselves. They may have started the fire. We in our air-conditioned homes and vehicles, who think nothing of throwing away a perfectly good piece of technology for the thrill of upgrading to the latest device, who buy that additional flat in the upcoming neighbourhood for 'investment purposes' - it is we who keep the fire blazing.

Let us hold ourselves as well as our governments accountable. Let us pay heed.