

Forestry Vision

Harsha Bardhan Udgata

Forest cover all over India has been reducing day by day. Vast forest cover has turned to islands in the ocean of human habitation. Periodic photo-imageries taken by IRS satellites have established the fact. According to Forest Survey of India's (FSI) report the forest cover of Orissa is 48366 sqkm, which is 31.06% of total geographic area of our State as against 33% required as per National Forest Policy, 1988.

FSI report says, till 1993, the dense forests have turned to open forest and open forest to scrub forest. This degradation has been caused due to several factors. Human population is increasing explosively resulting in increase in the demand for fuel wood, building materials, small timbers for agricultural implements and fodder requirement of their domestic cattle, whose population is also at par with human population. Besides, deforestation for the sake of infrastructural development like construction of roads, railways, transmission lines, irrigation projects, dams and canals, hydro electric projects have made the situation worse. However, due to enactment of Forest Conservation Act in 1980 the rate of devastation for development has been slowed down.

The National Forest Policy, 1988 envisages to identify the alternatives of use of

timber. The urban people have been acquainted with use of LPG gas for cooking, but the rural mass still indulge in consuming wood as fuel. One nuclear family consume 2 kg of fuel wood per day to prepare 2 meals a day. They do not bother to collect dry and fallen timber from forest floor, rather they hack the young poles and saplings to use them as fuel resulting in disturbance of natural regeneration of the forest. Women carry fuelwood on their heads, but men carry with the help of bicycles and bullock carts. They store these for their own use and also sell these too in villages moving from door to door in order to earn their livelihood. Use of gober gas, electric heaters, solar cookers and use of fuel efficient chullas are yet to substitute fuel wood.

Due to urbanisation, multistoried buildings are mushrooming every where. The concrete forests exploit a lot from natural forests. Door and window frame and shutters and furnitures furnished inside the newly constructed buildings are made up of valuable timbers like sal, teak, piasal, asan, ruse wood, sissoo, gambhar and halenda and Kasi. The forest brigands and timber mafias have adopted it as their profession to engage their gangmen to forcibly enter into rich forest enmass with lethal weapons to cut valuable and large size

trees, convert them into logs, drag them by animals or on bicycles or on shoulders to a loading point. Vehicles of different forms wait there to load immediately and carry them to the destinations already decided by them. A well built chain of action is already there from source to sink. The present strength of forest department is not so capable to break the chain effectively. After all the forest staff are not trained in that line.

I would like to explain the present condition of frontline staff of Forest Department, who fight the battle with forest brigands equipped with guns pistols, swords and axes. Regular recruitment has been stopped since long resulting in nearly 50% vacancy at the lower level. The staff in position have attained an average age of 50 years and are suffering from old age ailments, common Malaria as well as Cerebral Malaria. They work in an unhealthy atmosphere spending a lot towards their treatment. They feel demoralised when they are asked to face the well equipped and organised gangs of timber smugglers in the solitude of forest.

Now alternatives of building materials have been evolved. RCC frames of doors and windows have substituted the timbers. Iron grills and PVC doors have substituted wooden shutters. Plastic and iron made furniture are becoming more attractive than timber furniture and they are easy to handle. In villages people are using iron angle trusses and G.C. sheets to make roofs of their houses. Brick walls, RCC pillars and beams have replaced the use of wood and bamboo in rural house constructions. They are not only strengthening the houses but also protect them from fire hazard. So it is high time to impose ban on use of timber in building construction in urban and semi urban areas.

Legislatures should take initiatives to frame rules to this effect. This will be in consonance with the provisions in the National Forest Policy, 1988.

Joint Forest Management, Participatory Forest Management and Community Forest Management are emerging concepts to manage the forest sustainably and protect it effectively. These concepts work with active participation of the people dwelling adjoining to the forest. The sense of belonging over a chunk of forest acts as a catalyst in protecting the forest. They consume the usufructs, but in a conservative manner. Earlier when the forests were managed exclusively by the Government, the people were thinking forest as 'Sarkari mal' and for which they were exploiting it ruthlessly. Now when the same exploiters are given ownership over the woods and rights over the returns, they are keen in its protection and conservative in its utilization.

At present there are 9606 nos of Vana Samrakshyana Samities (VSS) in Orissa protecting 8628 sqkm. of forest land. Massive plantation of 50727 ha have been completed by them within their assigned forest areas during 2003-04 to 2005-06 with the financial assistance from National Afforestation and Eco development Board (NAEB) of Govt. of India, through the 34 Forest Development Agencies of Orissa. Under Revised Long Term Action Plan (RLTAP) till 2005-06, 58852 ha. block plantation and 76868 ha of RDF have been undertaken in KBK districts. 2370 ha of phasi plantations have been undertaken under Jagannath Bana Prakalpa (JBP) during 2000 to 2004. In-situ conservation and ex-situ plantation of medicinal plants have been raised over 1212 ha area during last 3 years. Besides millions of seedlings have been freely

distributed to the people by forest department to plant them in private holdings and institutions. Now the Japan Bank for International Cooperative (JBIC) has come up to finance for Forestry Sector Development in 14 forest divisions in Orissa through the VSS. So there is every possibility for increase of forest cover. Due to above plantations and active participation of people in forest protection the forest cover of Orissa as per FSI report, has increased gradually after 1993. The increasing trend implies that it is the people who can bring a significant change in the forest conservation.

JFM has become successful in places where the protecting population is homogeneous, united, smaller having dedicated natural leader and where the protectors are the only consumers. Therefore the JFM/CFM is to be encouraged in those places where above ideal conditions persist.

JFM cannot succeed everywhere. Where different groups of people / villages claim their rights over a single patch of forest conflict arises. This is to be amicably settled with intervention of Forest Department and district administration. But when well organised timber mafias and their gang operate in a forest to loot the valuable timbers, the local people also fear to face them. In that case, the government, instead of going for JFM, should opt to combat with them with equal strength and capability.

First of all the moral of the forest staff working in those vulnerable areas needs to be boosted up. This can be achieved if strong, energetic youth are engaged in protection duty alongwith the existing old but experienced staff. The forest staff will feel confident when they will be trained like police how to fight back the organised forest brigands by using

modern fire arms and with a deligated power to open fire in the forest in alarming situations to protect the valuable wealth. The police training should be in addition to the traditional forest management training. Incentives special Malaria allowances and other aminities are to be provided to the forest staff working in interior areas to enhance their moral and capability.

Recent amendments in the Orissa Forest Act and Wild Life (protection) Act during 2003 have made penal provision more stringent, but their enforcement is a problem. Once their enforcement is ensured by well trained, intelligent, strong, capable, encouraged and self confident forest staff, illicit felling will definitely come to an end.

This is high time to review the strength and weakness of Forest Department and to restructure it with need based interventions. Protection of natural dense forest is to be ensured either through people's participation or through gun points. Simultaneously the tree cover on earth can be increased with planting trees on private lands, court yards, and around the house followed by their maintenance and care.

Now 57th Vana Mahotsav is being celebrated to generate awareness among the people, administrators, politicians and legislatures on problems regarding forest conservation and the strategies to be adopted for overcoming the problems.

Harsha Bardhan Udgata is now working as Asst. Conservator of Forests, Satakosia Wild Life Division, Angul.