

Whither the Wilderness ?

*“There was a time when meadow, grove
and stream,
The earth and every common sight
To me did seem Apparell’d in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.*

*It is not now as it had been of yore;
Turn whereso’er I may,
By night or day, the things which I have
Seen I now can see no more.”*

- William Wordsworth

I am tempted to quote here an extract from Civil Original Jurisdiction I.A.No.670 of 2001 . In Writ Petition (C) No.202/1995 [K.M. Chinnappa (Applicant) in T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad (Petitioner) Versus Union of India and Others (Respondents):

“About one and half century ago, in 1854, as the famous story goes, the wise Indian Chief Seattle replied to the offer of the great White Chief in Washington to buy their land. The reply is profound. It is beautiful. It is timeless. It contains the wisdom of the ages. It is the first ever and the most understanding statement on environment. The whole of it is worth quoting as any extract from it is to destroy its beauty.

"How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?"

"Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man."



Bababudan Range, The Western Ghats, Karnataka

"Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed."

- Mahatma Gandhi

The wilderness scene is getting murkier and murkier. We have a billion population and even if an iota of this great mass could see the consequences of our rash attitude towards nature and its destruction and consequences, may be we will live in a better world. But nature is treated as a gold mine to be exploited for enriching the few.

To quote Valmik Thapar "Forests in India are a treasure house. Everyone wants to grab a bit. There is the timber mafia; I know thousands of cases where tribal people were employed to cut down trees. There is the land mafia, out to grab forest land and encroach. There are miners - mining for marble, uranium, diamonds, whatever available. It is in their interest to have forest land denotified".

TRIBAL BILL

Now the Tribal Bill is hanging over the country's ecological future like the Democle's Sword. The Bill is a politically motivated and ecologically suicidal proposal. It will mandate that each nuclear family of a forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribe receive up to 2.5 ha of forest land. This would really harm the Adivasis rather than helping them. Much of India's remaining forests, protected areas, and wildlife would be highly decimated. This will have serious effect on country's water sources as nearly 600 rivers originate from our forested regions. Much of India's remaining forests will end up in the hands of land mafia and industrial companies with short-term financial gains. The Bill also proposes to reverse current laws. It would override the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), 1980 and the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) 1972. Enforcement powers would rest with Gram Sabhas (Adivasi Community Leaders) and not with MoEF. The JPC has recommended that the Act be placed in the 9th schedule of the Constitution, which would make it immune to judicial scrutiny and review.

GLOBAL WARMING

The effects of Global Warming on the wilderness are quite unpredictable but with the rapid melting of the Himalayan glaciers which will first increase the volume of water in rivers, causing widespread flooding. But in a few decades this situation will change and the water levels in rivers will decline causing massive eco and environmental problems in northern India. Apart from human miseries, the effect of it on vegetation, forests and wildlife will be very drastic.

As a result of sea level rise, the massive flooding and submergence of the coastal areas will also mean submergence of vegetation and forests of the coastal areas. The unpredictable weather patterns will also see erratic Monsoons affecting the whole subcontinent and its ecology.



Soliga Minstrel, B.R.Hills, Karnataka

DECIMATION OF THE WILDERNESS - A brief history

The protection of wild life has a long tradition in Indian History. Wise use of natural resources was a prerequisite for many hunter-gatherer societies which dates back to at least 6,000 B.C. Emperor Asoka's edicts of the third century B.C. depicts one of the earliest conservation laws.

Centuries later, the Mogul emperors, sportsmen, men of action and born observers that they were, displayed a deep interest in the animal life of the country. The ethos of conservation and reverence for nature and wildlife as reflected in some of the exquisite images depicted in Indian art, painting, sculpture and architecture and use of animal fables from early literature like Panchatantra and Hitopa-desha are more relevant today than they were centuries ago.

Pre-colonial rulers had set up hunting reserves in many parts of India. In later years some fine sanctuaries were established in what was then British India, and in a few of the princely states. Well known examples are Bandipur in Karnataka, Corbett Park in Uttar Pradesh, Vedanthangal in Tamil Nadu.



On the brink - Lion-tailed Macaque

But for the protection given to the Lion in Junagadh State and to the Great Indian Rhinoceros in Nepal and Assam, these two animals would have been exterminated long ago. Natural ecosystems have evolved over millions of years. A remarkable feature of the ecosystems is the basic stability of populations that they sustain, providing for a natural balance. Each ecosystem sustains a variety of organisms adapted to their environment and participating in a cycle of events involving interdependence between organisms and the physical world around them. Deforestation has been one of the major causes for the depletion of wildlife. Wild animals are left with no alternative but to adapt, migrate or perish. Widespread habitat loss has diminished the population of many species, making them rare and endangered.

There was a wholesale slaughter of wild creatures during late 19th and early 20th century during the colonial period. 'In sheer numbers, over 80,000 tigers, more than 1,50,000 leopards and 2,00,000 wolves were slaughtered in a period of 50 years from 1875 to 1925' (Mahesh Rangarajan). The beginning of the Second World War in 1939 resulted in enormous pressures on Indian forests for timber in early 1940s. Contractors moved in and large tracts of forest were cut down. They had guns, they hunted on a large scale. Few accurate records exist of the slaughter that took place.

The wood was even sent to Burma and beyond for building all that the British required. The forest service was fully occupied in this task.

After independence in 1947, a spate of ill-advised developmental schemes, an uncontrolled push for agricultural land, and unmonitored hunting wrought havoc on wilderness.

A series of river valley projects sprung up in prime wilderness areas. While this habitat devastation was taking place, the elite took to more sophisticated guns and tougher vehicles like jeep to make inroads into the forest and shoot thousands of tigers and other game. It was free-for-all. The British had left but the Indian elite was on a binge to shoot tigers. Shikar companies sprang up everywhere, enticing hunters from all over the world to the killing game.

Deforestation has been one of the major causes for the depletion of wildlife. With the increase in human population and the growing need for resources, forests were cleared or encroached upon for agriculture, for human habitation, for grazing of livestock and for hydroelectric and irrigation dams. Thousands of square km of prime, evergreen forests have been submerged and destroyed for the sake of these development projects.

Industries also made heavy demand on forest resources such as wood for paper mills, exploitation of gums and resins, mining of forest land for minerals and ores, building materials, etc. Uncontrolled hunting of wildlife for pleasure, food, furs, skins, horns, tusks, etc. posed a serious threat to the survival of wildlife. The illegal trade in animal skins has been responsible for destruction of a large number of tigers, leopards, deer, fishing cat, crocodile and snakes as well as birds with beautiful plumage. Elephants were hunted for ivory. There are laws in the country to prevent such illegal trade, but these are often violated by unscrupulous elements, traders and exporters. Added to this is the practice of trade in exotic mammals, birds and reptiles and use of animals for biomedical research.

Pollution of air, water and soil due to various industrial activities apart from affecting humans affect the well being of animals also. Industrial effluents containing harmful chemicals discharged into the lakes, rivers and oceans adversely affect the aquatic life.

DDT and Dieldrin, used as pesticides also has major effect on birds, particularly sea birds. The egg shells of birds become thin, making them vulnerable to breakage due to the weight of the female while incubating them. Oil pollution is another serious problem affecting the seas through leakage from cargo ships and due to accidents.



Waterhole at Muthanga, Wayanad, Kerala

Over the past century, India's wildlife has dwindled to a mere fraction of its former strength. Reduction in the forest areas means reduction of the wildlife habitat, which due to various factors has become fragmented. Conversion of forests into plantations, roads, railways, agricultural holdings, human settlements, hydroelectric project, irrigation dams, mining and location of industries in forest areas have all contributed to a very sizeable area of forests lost. The other factors which contributed to the depletion of wildlife are uncontrolled hunting, poaching and pollution.

Less than a century ago 40 percent of India was forested. Large tracts of deciduous and tropical rainforest were destroyed over the past century as the British expanded India's railway network across the country. Then, between 1951 and 1976, some 15 percent of the nation's land were converted to cropland and much of this came from natural forest.

Forests are strained by the increasing demand of their resources. As human and livestock population swell and forests shrink, the relationship between rural communities and forest has become increasingly precarious. Nearly 90 percent of the wood taken from the forests is used as fuel. And India's forest provide fodder for some 100 million head of cattle that trample and denude under-growth as they graze.

Yet, India's natural forests provide it with some extremely vital services: They protect topsoil from wind and water erosion, regulate temperatures, replenish aquifers, store genetic diversity, offer recreational relief and provide a number of products other than wood - including medicine and food.

Deforestation leads to several changes in the landscape. The degradation and fragmentation of forests, which generally precede deforestation, considerably affect the biodiversity of the region. For example, in the Western Ghats, low elevation evergreen forests dominated by Dipterocarp constitute the most threatened habitat. Its continuum along the Western Ghats has been fragmented due to selective logging, increase in permanent settlements, and rubber plantations. Consequently, several typical low-elevation species have almost become extinct, several have become rare, and some species have taken refuge in the sacred groves.

With a growing concern for the fast dwindling wildlife, the Government of India in 1952 set up the Indian Board of Wildlife, as also state wildlife boards. Wildlife together with forestry, has traditionally been managed under a single administrative organisation within the forest department of each state or union territory, with the role of central government being mainly advisory. There have been two recent developments. First, the Wildlife (Protection) Act has provided for the creation of posts of Chief Wildlife Wardens and Wildlife Wardens in the states to exercise statutory powers under the Act. Under this act it is also mandatory for the states to set up state wildlife advisory boards. Secondly, the inclusion of protection of wild animals and birds in the concurrent list of the constitution, has proved the union with some legislative control over the states in the conservation of wildlife. The situation has since improved; all states and union territories with national parks or sanctuaries having set up wildlife wings.

The adoption of a National Policy for Wildlife Conservation in 1970 and the enactment of the Wildlife (Protection) Act in 1972 lead to a significant growth in protected areas network, from 5 national parks and 60 sanctuaries to 87 national parks and 485 sanctuaries in 2000.

The network was further strengthened by a number of conservation projects, notably Project Tiger, initiated in April 1973 by the Government of India with support from WWF and the Crocodile Breeding and Management Project, launched in April, 1975 with technical assistance from UNDP/FAO.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi was a keen environmentalist. She promoted Project Tiger and brought in two vital conservation legislations - the Wildlife Protection Act(WPA) 1972 and the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) 1980. Both these Acts helped the country's conservation efforts a great deal. Project Tiger at one stage appeared to be a success story as the Tiger bounced back and had doubled its population by 1990s.

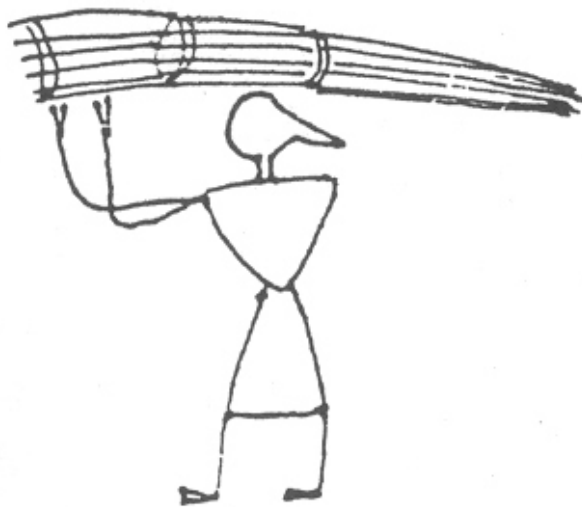
But from then on, the wilderness of India suffered a complete neglect under Congress rule during Narasimha Rao's tenure. There was total apathy and the political will to save forests had faded. The situation which continues till this day.

It was at about this time that the Supreme Court of India stepped in. As a result of two writ petitions that the Supreme Court was triggered to issue notices to all the states and union territories of India about a series of related issues concerning forests. The Apex court orders have been passed, beginning with the well-known orders of 1996 where forests were redefined to prevent any loopholes in the law from being exploited which could result in the felling of trees or encouraging any other exploitative activity.

Felling was stopped throughout India except in accordance to a working plan approved by the central government. All non-forest activities on forest land such as mining, sawmills and wood-based industries were stopped pending approval of the central government and clearance under the Forest Conservation Act. In subsequent orders the removal of any tree or even grass was prohibited from national parks and sanctuaries. The definition of forest land covered all wildlife habitats of the country, be they privately protected or not.

The Supreme Court had come to the rescue of India's forests and wildlife at time of total political apathy and any sign of a political will. But now, who knows what the future holds !

The latest Tiger census is just out with a head count of 1411 tigers. Which means more than 2000 tigers have vanished during the last seven years. All the tigers had disappeared from Sariska Tiger Reserve by 2005. The Government appointed the Tiger Task Force which proved to be of no real help.



Acknowledgements: Valmik Thapar, Mohan Pai (The Western Ghats)