

Forests, A case that Development and conservation is possible with the integration between latest developments in renewable energy technology and the scientific principles embedded in traditional knowledge

Current development relies on two basic methods namely

- corridor form of development to ensure transportation of goods produced at development nodes. This includes the Sagar Mala, the ports and import/export orientation.
- large infrastructure projects to provide electricity, water, mining for raw materials and transportation of the produce.

This is then combined with urbanisation with the agenda for urbanisation of more than 50% of the population and the resultant demand for amenities. The model is primarily based on transportation from a to b and then reverse from b to a, the result being use of petrol/diesel and its implications for foreign exchange.

The destruction of the forests as a result of this development is sought to be countered by the declaration of critical wildlife habitat and blaming the local populace for the destruction or potential destruction, removing them from the scene. Recent developments like the SC order on eviction and its subsequent stay, draft forest policy, CAF 2016 and draft amendments to the IFA 1927 are indications of this.

The upshot of this is curtailment of rights of rural communities in general and forest dwellers and forest dependent communities in particular. In Sundarban of West Bengal and Sariska in Rajasthan, FRA has not been recognised even as the Forest Department claims to use its provisions to initiate the process of resettlement and rehabilitation away from the forest. In Himachal Pradesh, the provisions of the Forest Rights Act are being used to give fast track clearance for tree felling even as the FRA is sought to be denied on the grounds that the rights of communities have been settled earlier.

The talk outlines the relevance of the FRA and the developments in renewable energy technology as a way to develop an alternative paradigm for development and talks of an entirely different kind of effort and infrastructure needed to bring such a plan to fruition.

The issue of forests, forest dwellers and their rights and development have to be viewed in the modern context as forest dwellers cannot be excluded from modernity on the ground of their traditional lifestyles and livelihoods which is ostensibly what the forest rights act is about. The very fact that the Act counters patriarchy by giving equal rights to women indicates that recognition of historical injustice is not about restoration of the past but with an eye to future. Hence the issue and question of forests and life support systems dependent on it cannot be viewed in isolation of the global questions related to climate change, conservation of the biodiversity and the minimum standard of livelihood to be enjoyed by forest dwellers and forest dependent communities.

Technological advancements in renewable energy made decentralisation without displacement possible if the state of the art in scientific knowledge and related principles of participatory informed governance are applied. This implies and engagement with the significance and relevance of local knowledge as upgraded in the modern context and relevance in the latest scientific discoveries and application in the field of technology which can be adapted and modified by local communities to suit their local ecological, livelihood and cultural context.

In the absence of taking this into account, the paradigm of development as usual and its dependence on transportation and coal proves to be not only destructive of the environment but also the potential for livelihood generation as well. The relevance of decentralised development potential (taking into account the potential for value addition by application of relevant renewable energy technology) for reduction in transport, related reduction in petroleum and energy budgets reducing the demand for foreign exchange has to be counter-posed as an extremely relevant paradigm to the present one.

The case studies of the fishers of Sundarban , pastoralists of Himachal and forest dwellers in Central India indicate the livelihood potential that is being destroyed by non-recognition of the knowledge harnessed over centuries on the correct application and its appropriate up-gradation acknowledging the significance and relevance of people's knowledge as verified by modern day scientific state of the art in knowledge.

Will conclude with a narration of the journey traversed by Adivasi Jan Utthan trust in Chhota Udepur district of Gujarat after they realised the folly of their belief that the Sardar Sarovar Dam would bring them prosperity and the limitations of the Joint Forest Management model for protection and restoration of the forests of the region while continuing to keep the Forest Department as the custodian in chief of the forest resources of region. A limitation prompted by the commodification approach to development which fails to recognise the relevance of the historic relationship between the biodiversity wealth, livelihoods and culture of the people.

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