

**EDITORIAL**

## **Conserving the Country's Biodiversity Hobbled by the Frightening Insistence**

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Who knew the term biodiversity 20 years ago? Hardly anyone. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was opened for signature at the now famous "Earth Summit" at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. For the first time, world leaders acknowledged that biodiversity was a valuable asset for both present and future generations, while also recognising the increasing threat of human induced extinction of species and destruction of biodiversity. "Biological diversity," or the more commonly used biodiversity, was arguably first defined in the text of the CBD, having a very broad and all encompassing meaning, that includes all life forms and ecosystems. It is one of the most widely accepted international treaties, with 193 nations being a party to it. India ratified the CBD in 1994, and is now the host nation for the 11th Conference of Parties (COP 11), currently underway in Hyderabad. The "high level segment" is on the last two days. The working groups are discussing various technical issues from the last COP in Aichi, Japan. Civil society groups are organising side events at the venue. One of the most important issues is the operationalisation of the biodiversity targets decided on at Aichi. India chaired the discussions, and led the global discussion until the next COP in two years.

### **Some success stories**

Considering India's role, it is worth examining the efforts at conserving our own biodiversity. There have been some well known success stories for critically endangered species. The only population of Asiatic lions in the world, in the Gir National Park (GNP), have more than doubled its numbers, moving from "critically endangered" to "endangered." The Chambal river Gharials are doing well. The one-horned rhino has made a spectacular comeback, from about 200 to nearly 3,000 today. But, are these stories representative of what is happening in India? The major problem with "biodiversity" is its all encompassing, immeasurable nature, especially with the CBD definition. According to researcher David Takacs, "though it has considerable technical and scientific resonance, it defies precise scientific definition." There is the "Linnean shortfall" of knowledge, where we have been able to document only a small proportion — about 1.4 million of the 12-18 million species that exist on the planet. Exciting new species are being identified every day, some even becoming extinct before they are formally named and identified. The Wallacean shortfall refers to the incompleteness of our understanding of geographical distribution of species across the globe. With this huge gap in our knowledge of biodiversity, the approach taken across the world is to identify and protect important landscapes as well as "flagship" or "umbrella" species, covering large home ranges.

This is where things start to go badly wrong. Though the marine realm is the largest repository of biodiversity, far larger than the terrestrial landscape, we barely consider oceans worthy of conservation. All our efforts focus on the terrestrial world. India is home to three of the world "biodiversity hotspots," the Western Ghats-Sri Lanka region, the Himalayas and the Indo-Burma region. The Western Ghats are currently being ripped apart by large-scale legal and illegal mining, large development projects and even private hills stations like Lavasa. The hills have recently witnessed a very comprehensive conservation prioritisation and planning exercise by the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), which suggests an intelligent and democratic zonation plan with varying levels of exploitation. But most politicians object to the recommendations of the panel, arguably driven by kickbacks from the extractive industries or a short-sighted approach to "development." Vast tracts of the Indo-Burma hotspot will be submerged by a series of dams, supposedly to cater to India's ever expanding power needs. Next, is the species based approach. India's two main flagship programmes — "Project Elephant" and "Project Tiger," have been in place

for a few decades now. Though their success is debated, they have been doing a reasonably good job of protecting these two species. But India Inc is now catching up with our charismatic beasts. Central India, globally recognised as one of India's best metapopulation of tigers, is being carved up for coal mining. A proposal for an Elephant reserve in Chhattisgarh never saw the light of day since there is coal under the elephant forests. India's Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) and the Minister of Environment and Forest (MoEF) have been fighting desperately to stop the indiscriminate industrial expansion into India's natural forests. But both the FAC and MoEF were chastised for "slowing down India's galloping economy."

A 1,000-year-old Sal forest in Mahan was denied clearance for a coal plant because of the rich biodiversity and tiger presence. But with industrialists requesting the Prime Minister's intervention, the clearance is now likely to go through. The needs of biodiversity conservation versus development must be carefully balanced. Especially for India where almost half the population has little access to electricity and lives below the poverty line. But frighteningly, there appears to be no balance. There is no understanding of the CBD's Aichi mission of "*sustaining a healthy planet and delivering benefits essential for all people.*" The "National Investment Board" (NIB) proposal, by which the government seeks to bypass laws and constitutional provisions, is an environmental disaster. Projects with large investments of above Rs.1,000 crore will be exempt from social and environmental clearances. This will be decided solely by the head of the NIB.

### **Rarely alleviate poverty**

Ironically, the "development" plans rarely alleviate poverty. The policies cater to the corporates and urban elite, on the assumption that a "trickle-down" will happen to benefit the grassroots, though evidence shows otherwise. Across the country, the masses are at the forefront of the protests against the takeover of their forests and livelihoods for "development." A group of villagers from the 1,000-year-old Sal forest in Mahan are currently at the CBD COP 11. They are trying to tell the world they want to protect their forests from shining India. Biodiversity is under threat from a range of sources, but the very first Aichi strategic goal is to "*address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society.*" The question now is whether India is going to honestly identify what this underlying driver is and make a serious effort to balance the development versus nature battle. Both the Minister for Environment and Minister for Tribal Affairs appear to be making serious efforts to level the battlefield. They have taken strong stands against the NIB proposal. Perhaps there is still hope. [Courtesy: ThekaekaraT, Biodiversity Conservation Researcher, The Shola Trust, The Nilgiris; *The Hindu*, 135 (249), pp. 9].