

Political & Economic Notes:

Forest Policy-2018 Grabbing Forest Lands for Private Capital

When the government announces a new policy one would expect a revision on the basis of failures of old policy or changes in the situation since then. The new draft Forest Policy 2018 released by the BJP-led NDA government not only belies this expectation, but also goes back to colonial policy

The British colonial rulers first formulated the forest policy in 1894 which gave sole authority to the state over the forest and its resources with the aim of maximizing the revenue. After the transfer of power, the forest policy of 1952 stressed the same maximization of production and revenue from forests.

After more than three decades and a half, a new forest policy was adopted in 1988. This policy, for the first time, recognized the multiple roles played by the forests – providing livelihoods to millions of people, maintenance of ecological balance, conservation of biodiversity and sustenance of many forms of life – as well as the role of forest communities in conserving the forests. Though adopted as a guideline policy and hailed as a landmark in the policy making, it was never implemented in its letter and spirit. On the contrary, the successive central governments have tried to water down the orientation of forest act 1988.

The forest policy 1988, coupled with Panchayat raj extension to scheduled areas act makes it imperative on the part of the government to devolve powers to Gram Sabhas so that they should be in charge of forest, its produce and its regeneration. Instead of devolution of powers to gram sabhas, the government created a parallel mechanism in the name of Joint Forest Management, which can only survive from the funds provided by the government and without any right over the produce.

The BJP government at the centre wanted to pass on the forest lands to private capital. In August 2015, the environment ministry sent guidelines to the states for “participation of private sector in afforestation on degraded lands”. It argued that the government investment in forestry was not enough to improve the productivity and quality of India’s forest and that was why attracting private investment was important. The guidelines laid out a process of leasing out degraded forest lands to private parties for afforestation and extracting timber through open competitive bidding. The government had planned to first lease out patches of forests with less than 10 per cent canopy cover and then extend the scheme to forests up to 40 per cent canopy cover. These guidelines were put in abeyance as they faced serious opposition and criticism.

Is the draft forest policy 2018 meant to set right these failures? The answer is emphatic no. It piously declares that “all efforts to ensure synergy between Gram Sabhas and joint forest management committee will be taken up” (4.1.1.h) and continues to deny powers to the gram sabhas.

Secondly, it talks about “production forestry” and plantations as “new thrust area”. The draft policy says in 4.1.1 (h) that “Productivity of the forest plantations is poor in most of the States. This will be addressed by intensive scientific management of forest plantations of commercially important species like teak, sal, sisham, poplar, Melina, eucalyptus, casuarinas, bamboo etc. The lands available with the forest corporations which are degraded & underutilized will be managed to produce quality timber with scientific interventions. Public- private participation models will be developed for undertaking afforestation and reforestation activities in *degraded forest areas and forest areas available with Forest Development Corporations* and outside forests.”(Emphasis added)

Degraded forests are green lands that have less than 40 per cent canopy cover, according to the government definition. According to latest forest survey of India report, India has more than 34 million hectares – more than 40 per cent of its green cover – of degraded forests. So nearly half of the forest land go to private capital to raise plantations with commercial interests.

Experts remind us that in the past, production forestry led to replacing natural oak forests with pine monoculture in the Himalayas, natural sal forests with teak plantations in central India

and wet green forests with eucalyptus and acacia in the Western Ghats. All this has decimated diversity, dried up streams and undermined livelihoods of local communities. The proposed Private Public Participation (PPP) will lead again to such a destruction while corporates line up their pockets with huge profits.

More than 300 million adivasis and other forest dwellers in India either directly or indirectly depend upon forest lands for their livelihoods. Now their lives are in peril. With the specious argument that “new challenges have emerged in the forest sector since 1988” which is characterized by “low productivity and low quality of our natural forests, impacts on climate change, human- wild life conflict, intensifying water crisis”, the government came up with PPP as the panacea.

This policy is the result of surrender to the imperialist dictates. While the US imperialism refuses to take the responsibility of reducing carbon emission – it being the largest emitter – the Paris agreement forces India to rise the carbon sink (ability to absorb carbon from atmosphere) of our forests to the tune of 3 billion tonnes. The first in the list of this sink is the carbon neutral timber. India accumulated Rs. 50,000 crore of net present value (NPV) funds under CAMPA (Compensatory Aforestation fund Management and Planning Authority). The rules to spend CAMPA funds clearly shows that state management of forests includes PPP. Thus, the Adivasis of India are made to pay with their lives and livelihoods for the crime of polluting the atmosphere by the profit driven capitalist system.

Government has been using the scarcity of timber to push its case of opening up forest lands to private capital. Anyhow only 5 per cent of timber needs are being met from the forests while 68 per cent from agro forestry in non-forest areas and the remaining from imports. By promoting agro forestry in non-forest areas timber needs of the country can be met along with utilising alternatives to timber. Instead of handing over the forests to private capital the government should look for alternatives. But it has chosen to destroy the lives of people and forest cover of India. This abominable draft policy should be opposed tooth and nail.
