

# Forest Policy: Need for Integrated Outlook and People-oriented Agenda

RIYAZ AHMAD

**F**OR once in its history, the J&K is passing through a phase of serious introspection on the state of its forests. And it is the searing memory of the unbridled plunder and loot witnessed in the past decade that gives it impetus and urgency.

Though approaches to forest conservation have been reviewed and changed in the past, these have always been of a piecemeal, relative nature in the shape of a few government orders. But the way the draft forest policy is being deliberated and critically examined not only within the confines of forest department but together with other allied departments, NGOs, environmentalists and common people, the exercise this time is designed to be comprehensive and holistic. Moreover, the effort is aided in no small measure by the rising popular consciousness about the need for forest conservation. Moreso, after the "wholesale plunder" witnessed during early phase of militancy.

"Thus far and no further. Our forests can hardly sustain a decade of further loot on 90s pattern", said Dr M A Kawoosa, the project director for Integrated Watershed Development Project and the architect of the draft forest policy. Dr Kawoosa has what some call a pessimistic picture of the state of Kashmir forests. If nothing, according to Kawoosa, is immediately done to "overhaul the present forest management practices", he paints a grim, desertified picture of Kashmir after another fifty years.

However, if the mismanagement witnessed in the past century and the consequent loss of the forest cover of five lakh hectares is any guide, Kawoosa's grim prediction may well come true. Forest records show that the timber has been harvested on an average of 10-20 million cft a year without corresponding emphasis on regeneration.

From the Concentrated System of Felling which started in early 1920s to the highly exploitative lessee-system after '50s or for that matter the ill-advised forest programmes like Grow More Food, the state forests in the last century have been on the receiving end. Under Concentrated System of Felling, the extensive swathes of valley's rich Deodar, Kail and Fir forests went under axe. So much so that the rate of harvesting was far greater than that of the growth which thereby deprived these forests of the capacity to regenerate.

The management system which did a sustained damage to the forest wealth over a long period of time is the lessee system. According to a top bureaucrat, this system granted exclusive rights to felling of trees to a few influential families of the Valley. The families include Burzas, Shahdads, Bakhshis, Khans of Anantnag and relatives of Shiekh Abdullah, the former chief minister of the state. Similarly there were Wanis of Doda, Sarafs, Trehans, KCs of Jammu. The families had a stranglehold on the forests of the state to, what a top government official said, the "antiseptic exclusion" of people living nearby or inside the forests.

"The lease system evolved in such a manner in the state that the forest

lessees managed to hold on to the lease for much longer periods than was originally granted under the agreement", writes M A Kawoosa in his book *Forests of Kashmir* adding the more markings would be allowed in the form of supplementaries, road markings, rolling path markings, additional markings and other kinds of silvicultural markings.

The lease would be extended year after year and extensions could last as long as 10-15 years when the original lease period would be hardly for 1-3 years. The areal extent of the havoc wrought by the lessee system was so sweeping that at one point of time there was hardly a compartment in the state which was not under the axe of forest contractors.

In fact, the ravages of the government-lessee nexus in sixties have been beautifully captured in verse by Ghulam Rasool Nazki, a leading poet of the time in Valley.

*Wanan Dudwan Korukh, Aastan Lootikh*

*Korukh Oloodh Dol Masoom Hoorun*

*Rashidun, Shaba Zewnan, Shaba Gadun*

*Samad Panditun, Sogamik Gail Choorun*

(The rapacious group comprising Rashid, Shaba of Zewan, Shaba Gada, Samad Pandit and that timber thief of Sogam ravaged our forests, looted our shrines and outraged the chastity of innocent women).

And even when government did away with the practice in the early eighties and created an autonomous agency State Forest Corporation for a more controlled extraction of the forests, little changed by way of exploitation of forests. Though the system eliminated the monopoly of the forest trade by the contractors and their "unscientific and uncontrolled operations", it did not materially change the traditional working system. It on the other hand only helped create a new monopoly.

However, before system could be further modified, it was overtaken by the sudden eruption of militancy from 1989 onwards which led to the law and order and institutional collapse all around. For the following seven years, the Valley's forests continued to be plundered in abandon by a timber smuggler-security force-militant-lkhwan combine. And it was only from 1996 onwards that some semblance of order could be restored. However, as acknowledged even by the minister for forests Ghulam Mohiuddin Sofi, things are not hunky-dory even now. In many areas, like Tossamaidan, Zagoo, Arizal, Drung in Budgam, Akhal Najwan in Kangan block of Srinagar or for that matter Doabgah, Rafiabab in district Baramulla, an organised smuggling nexus functions with the knowledge of forest department and even security forces.

In all this short history of Kashmir forests, if anything stands out in sharp contrast it is not only the absolute state control of the forests, but also that of close incestuous government-lessee nexus. Only nineties saw a "communist kind of plunder" with people across a wide social hierarchy partaking in the loot.

Infact, the zest with which the new forest policy is being pursued is due in large measure to the collective sense of shock over the indiscriminate

loot in nineties.

The new draft forest policy while it lays due stress on the participation of local community attempts also, in the words of a local journalist, Arjmand Hussain Talib, to be 'ambitiously all encompassing.'

"That is, the draft policy betrays a tendency to see forests as an exclusive subject. There is little attempt to integrate it with the larger socio-economic context of the valley," said Talib.

He added that the forest policy should stress on mechanism for a co-ordinated working among many other allied or concerned departments who usually work at cross purposes and a lot of functional overlap.

Talib is supported in his opinion by Muhammad Shafi Bucha, the senior research officer in wild life department who says only a co-ordinated functioning between several departments dealing directly or in some kind of relation to the forest could guarantee suc-

cess of the proposed forest policy. Besides, forest department, the other departments are Wild Life, Soil Conservation, Integrated Watershed Development Project, Forest Protection Force, State Forest Corporations, Geology and Remote Sensing, Forest Research Institute, Pollution Control Board, Social Forestry.

"Consult other departments before giving final shape to policy" said R K Tikoo, chief conservator of forest during a recent seminar on forests.

On the other hand, the draft policy is thought to be short on the elaboration of the forest management techniques to be employed for the conservation. "While the draft policy refers to the preservation of the major watersheds and aquatic habitats as the single most important, central and over-riding objectives, management part has by and large been left undwelted," said Humaira Qadiri, an environmental activist associated with

glings is therefore main occupation of the people and without any improvement in socio-economic lot of the people, VFCs are expected to do little to end largescale illegal felling of forests in the area.

This brings to fore the huge socio-economic dimension of the deforestation to light without whose redressal no store is set by even the best protection measures.

The draft policy is therefore criticised for not recommending the steps for ameliorating the economic lot of the people living nearby forests. "Everything boils down to socio-economic situation of the people. If forests continue to be the only means of survival for local communities, how can they even co-operate in their protection and that too for an elusive, long term incentive", said Mian Javed, the conservator of forests adding forests are an open treasury for the poor people.

"They are in a mess", said a forest department insider. This is even so when these committees have been set up only in Budgam and Anantnag in Kashmir Valley.

"The reason for their failure is that the vested interests have fast crept in", added the insider.

As with everything in Kashmir, politics has followed the constitution of the committees. The previous NC government made its own workers the chairmen of every VFC thus politicising the whole thing and thereby subverting the purpose for which these were formed. Now the new government is refusing to recognise these committees and wants its own men to head them.

"You cannot avoid political interference", said P Patnaik when asked about the development.

However some other senior forest officers like G A Malik, think the VFCs have been doomed by the lack of transparency in the forest department coupled with the lack of awareness on the part of villagers.

One comes across an altogether different complexion of the problem while talking to the people living nearby forests. Muhammad Ramzan of Sitharan in district Budgam bemoans lack of any concrete incentives from the department. Incidentally Haji Abdul Rahim Sheikh, the chairman of the Sitharan VFC has FIR slapped against him by the forest department for timber smuggling. And he is not alone. FIRs stand registered against many VFC members across Budgam.

According to Ramzan, villagers are extremely poor and have no means of income to sustain themselves. This is borne out by the 'hard situation' prevailing on the ground. Illiteracy is a meagre five per cent and in a population of 5000, only one person has government employment. Timber smug-

Similar sentiments were expressed by Ahmad Shah (name changed), a timber smuggler at Tossamaidan in Budgam who remarked grimly that even his being killed would not dissuade his progeny away from illegally cutting trees. However despite being illiterate Ahmad Shah suggested an eminently desirable way out: that of promoting eco-tourism in the area.

"If our area is turned into a tourist resort like Gulmarg and Pahalgam, it will go a long way in improving our lot", said Shah adding the residents will then have a stake in preserving the forests. Developing infrastructure in the numerous potential tourist areas of the state is contended to serve the twin purpose of protecting the forests and helping the economy of the nearby villages.

This point was even stressed by Abdul Rashid Wani, the ex-principal chief conservator of forests who in his speech during recent forestry seminar at SKICC here argued for the encouragement of eco-tourism and suggested areas like Aharbal, Shangus, the places notorious for timber smuggling, as fit spots for such an exercise.

However, while the forest department envisages an expenditure of Rs 300 crore for redmarcation of the forest area in the state, there is no concrete programme for economic upliftment of the forest communities without whose support no protection measures are likely to succeed.

The fact, however, is acknowledged by some high-ranking officers within the department also. "We have to improve the lot of people living nearby forests for our preventive effort to succeed", said Nissar Hussain Hakim, officer on special duty to forest minister.

(Under the aegis of CSE Media Fellowships)

\*Rashid, Shaba Zewan, Shaba Gada were officially patronised goons during the reign of Bakhshi Ghulam Muhammad, the former prime minister who incidentally launched the Grow More Food programme which permitted the clearing of the substantial portion for forest land for cultivation. Samad Pandit, on the other hand, was a prominent businessman of the valley and the forest contractor and Sogami (Ghulam Nabi) was the illiterate forest minister from Sogam, Kupwara. ■

Nature: A Society for Sustainable Development, an NGO.

This view is shared by many other environmental experts who say that the incorporation of the joint forestry management does not get the desired emphasis in the draft. "Involvement of local people is must and deserves to be given due importance," said R K Matoo.

The environmentalists allege an institutional reluctance on the part of the forest department to give an effective say to the local people. While the policing of forests as a protection measure is discounted even by P Patnaik, the principal chief conservator of forests, the present functioning of the forest department hardly reflects this change of perception.

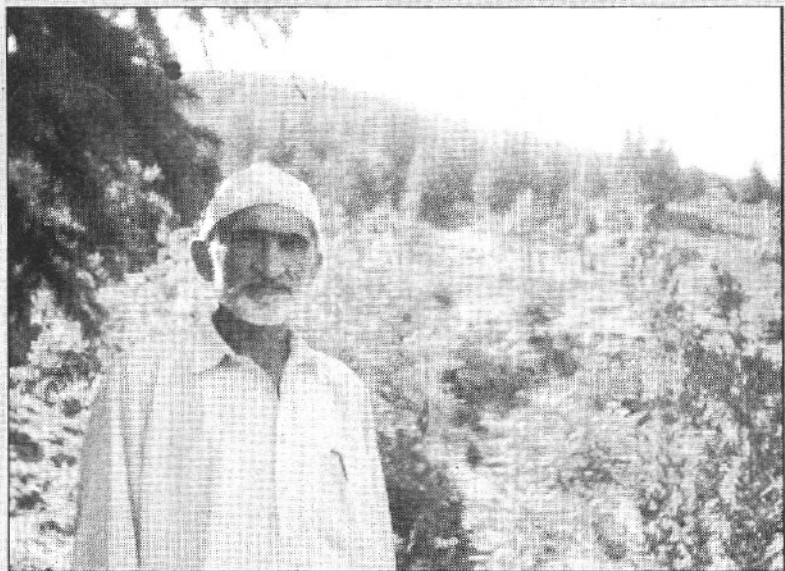
On the other hand, the formation in 1997 of forest protection force, a full fledged department for policing of forests is seen as contrary to the very concept of the involvement of people. "The two departments have not only become mutually-interfering but their function also overlap," said a senior forest department official pleading anonymity. However, one comes across the mutual suspicion and rivalry even at the level of lower staff in two departments.

Besides, if one needed any further disappointment on the score of the institutional readiness for the involvement of the local people, it is in the functioning of the Village Forest Committees.

# GARURA SUCCESS

**Srinagar:** Despite serious doubts being raised about the environmental consciousness among the rural people in Valley, some voluntary forest conservation initiatives in remote villages mock at the label. Garura is one such village in Bandipora tehsil of district Baramulla. Through the eighties, the deforested, barren mountain over the village had become a real menace for the inhabitants. Even a little rain caused huge mud-slides which came straight down into the midst of village. It was then that Lal Lone, a village elder brought the residents together to think out a solution. They resolved on afforesting the mountain.

In early nineties, the villagers fenced the mountain and made it out



**Hassan Shah of Kawari, Kupwara in front of the forest his committee helped develop.**

of bounds for grazing. To strictly enforce the discipline, the village even appointed two forest guards and their monthly salaries were paid from the fixed donation from each family.

A decade after, the result is there for all to see. A thick growth of young deodars and pine is spread out beautifully across the mountain.

"Mudslides are now a thing of past", said a villager.

Similarly, about a 100 km away from Garura is Kawari, a village in district Kupwara. The compartment 82-83 over the village was similarly naked two decades ago. A voluntary forest committee formed under the presidentship of one Abdul Khaliq Shah stopped extracting firewood and grazing in the forest.

"We used firewood from orchards and willows and grazed our cattle both in orchards and open pastures", said Ghulam Hassan Shah, a member of the committee.

The villagers' sacrifice has borne fruit. Hassan Shah now proudly points towards a thick young forest overlooking the village. Only recently when some villagers from the neighbouring Batapora tried to collect firewood from the village, cutting some newly grown trees in the process, Hassan Shah at once telephoned forest minister Ghulam Mohiudin Shah and got them arrested.

"Cases have been registered against 19 persons", said Hassan Shah.