

# PEOPLE WHO LOOTED OUR FORESTS

**I**t was in early 1990 March when Valley was already in throes of a sweeping popular uprising and militant violence that Bitta of Mansbal found himself even without the job of a daily wage labourer. Not only had every government activity stopped but there was also no private work to be done. Participating in daily Azadi processions only postponed the urgency to earn for living by a few days more. The depleting ration at his mud-house only helped bring him to senses sooner than later. It was then that the already thinned out hills in distance appeared alluring and came as an instant refuge. Of course, he had occasionally been there even previously as a cutter in a timber smuggling group but the effort, low-wages and the risks involved had made the occupation of a construction or agricultural labour more safe and secure.

But now the collapsed law and order offered a rare opportunity. Forests, for once, were free to exploitation. Besides, in the changed situation Bitta thought he could operate more independently and thus earn more. In no time he formed a group of equal

Riyaz Ahmad

*Story of vicious  
smuggling nexus  
that fed on turmoil*

desperate youth and started smuggling wood.

Bitta's group continued to operate in abandon for the better part of nineties until the government regained grip on the situation after 1996 elections.

However, it is not that the group remained insulated from the situation around. To survive the potential dangers of the prevailing situation, the group even associated itself with the militants operating in the area. And to security forces they posed as harmless timber smugglers who had nothing to do with the militancy. And when J&K Ikhwan, the army backed counter-insurgency outfit led by Kuka Parray emerged on the scene in 1994, the group also became a part of it. Now Bitta expanded his operations from the difficult forests to readily available government and private plantations in plains.

Of course, the spoils were being always shared, earlier as a donation to the group of militants operating in the area and later with Ikhwan which now used to corner the lion's share of the booty.

In fact, Bitta's group formed only an insignificant part of a large organised network of the groups under Ikhwan which were assigned the job of plundering the government and private plantations and felling forests for the benefit of the outfit.

Haigam rakh in district Baramulla or the plantations around Wular lake are a case in point. The latter which covers an area of 8900 hac is a wetland of international importance and has been designated as Ramsar site. Says Muhammad Shafi Buccha, the then wild life warden (North), "About 50 per cent of the rakh was felled by the timber contractors sent by Parray".

This despite the fact that he had approached everybody from the then sub-divisional magistrate Sopore Asghar Samoon, Brigadier Katoch of nearby army camp at Palhalan and Kuka Parray himself. Samoon, now Deputy Commissioner Srinagar, had failed to stop the plunder despite informing higher civil and security authorities.

It was during this period that bandsaws across the valley used to be stacked up with smuggled wood. The illegal timber was also sold freely in open market. There were "timber bazars", in Srinagar itself at Karan Nagar near National School, Narbal etc. It is this easy supply which fed the construction boom of nineties in Srinagar and helped the expansion of several new residential colonies.

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However, timber smuggling in J&K did not only follow this linear path. It had become much more diverse and complex. In the words of a top government official, it was simultaneously being driven by "three powerful factors". One was the socio-economic situation created by the onset of militancy. Second the collapsed law and order which helped create a broad nexus of vested interests and induced even those people into the activity who would have normally avoided it. This nexus even included forest officials and the common people.

And third was the strategic. That is, the deforestation was used as a weapon to fight militancy, which is incidentally even admitted by the minister for forests and fisheries Ghulam Mohiudin Sofi. Free hand to Ikhwan to fell forest trees and plantations comes under this category. "To motivate Ikhwanies to fight militancy, government had to make some concessions to them. So it gave them freedom to fell forests for timber", he said.

However, while the existence of the first factor was eminently understandable in the wake of the prevailing situation, it was the organised nexus which developed as a result of the latter two factors driven by a sheer profit motive that did the real damage.

It is this nexus which was responsible for the killing of 58 forest officials. "After security forces and police, forest department has sustained the maximum casualties", said Mian Javed, the conservator of forests, Baramulla.

The killed officials included a conservator Parvez Ahmad Qadiri who was shot dead at Duksum Kokernag in early 1990 when militancy had only just erupted. Another was a deputy conservator, the 36 year old Muhammad Ashraf Mir killed in Kupwara in 1994. Besides, there were a number of foresters, guards and watchers among the killed.

In many cases forest officials on duty have come under fire from smugglers. Ishtiaq Tanga, a range officer and some guards had a miraculous escape in 1993 when armed smugglers fired at them during a patrol in J V Division Baramulla.

However they were saved by the timely rescue effort of security personnel from the nearby camp led by one major Iqbal. However while army, Ishtiaq said, had saved his life and also helped his effort to prevent timber smuggling in the area, he alongwith the then DFO JV Division Nissar Hussain Hakim had seized

wood from a security vehicle.

According to an estimate done by the forest department, about one lakh thirty thousand and four hundred and fifty trees were illegally cut down from 1989 to 1996. "This is the highest recorded damage of forests in J&K in as many years", said Shafat Ahmad, the chief conservator of forests.

However, there are people who doubt the accuracy of the number. According to them, the number does not include the deep forests ranges along the Line of Control where forest officials cannot go for security reasons but the smuggling goes on nevertheless. Says A R Kemma, conservator of forests (North), "We can't manage the forests of north because of the Disturbed Act. It is not

possible to make markings of trees, enumerate them or assess the damage due to smuggling or natural reasons".

Kemma added for good measure that while security forces checked the entry of forest officials into jungles, they had reports of people and smugglers being allowed freely. He even accused security forces of being involved in the smuggling which forest officials were unable to control.

"We can't check a security vehicle", said Kemma adding his officials even couldn't deny the No Objection Certificate to a moving unit when it was sought from them. One forester in Langate who had refused giving NOC was allegedly threatened

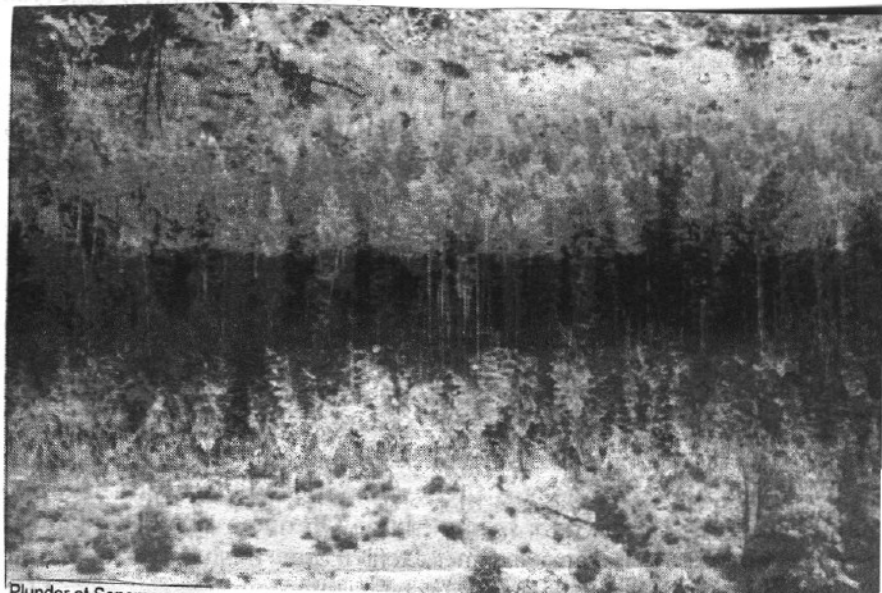
by the shifting unit, Kemma added. Similarly, one Ghulam Nabi Malik,

range officer control room Sindh Division was severely beaten by the security forces stationed at Preng when he allegedly tried to prevent felling of trees by the unit. Worse, the local police station refused to register his FIR.

Kemma was also supported in his claim by his boss. "Our staff is barred from entering forests in many pockets but the smuggling takes place nevertheless", said P Patnaik, the principal chief conservator of forests. He, however, added that the senior officials were not involved in the practice.

Similar is regarded as the case with militant involvement in smuggling. While at organisational level various outfits always expressed themselves strictly against illegal felling of trees, it were according to a former top militant commander, "some black sheep in some areas" which abetted it for their personal benefit.

Patnaik pointed out another adverse fallout on the forests of the concentration of security forces in the state. The forces, according to him, build roads or occupy space in forests, without seeking permission from the department. "They use bulldozers, cut trees without taking the department into confidence", said Patnaik adding the forces had built roads through many forest areas in Kupwara and Baramulla. For Patnaik, constructing roads without a proper plan had not only resulted in unnecessarily felling large number of trees but also made forests easily accessible for exploitation. "Besides, security agencies were also not compensating the department for the loss", he added.



Plunder at Sonamarg.



This fact is supported by Syed Noorul Hassan, the former chief conservator of forests. "Out of 90.80 thousand hac of encroached forest land only 0.3 per cent has been brought under cultivation and rest has been encroached by army", said Noorul Hassan during a recent seminar on forests.

Past fourteen years also witnessed a new trend in encroachment of forest areas. That is, the conversion of forest area into cultivable land by the people. There are reports of large areas along forest fringes in Kamraj and Jehlum Valley, Sindh divisions having been encroached by villagers. In Kandi Khas in Kupwara, one villager has occupied 15 kanals of forest area. Similarly a lot of forest area has been encroached in Wangat block in Sindh division.

The compartment no 39 of Gutlibagh in Manasbal range which had no habitation until 1990 is now home to a village. Forest there, as a result, has thinned out. Similarly in Baramulla town itself, a whole forest area has been turned into a congested residential colony wiping out the forest in the process.

The forest department has still to make an assessment of the land so encroached let alone initiate a process of recovery. However, when contacted the forest minister said the "identification process of the encroached land was going on". The government, he added, would launch a drive to vacate the encroachers from November this year.

M A Kawoosa, the project director Integrated Watershed Development Project (IWDP) and former chief conservator of forests writes in his book *Forests of Kashmir* that about 4000 hac of forest are lost to encroachment annually. However, he adds, it is a 'modest official figure'.

One of the main reasons for the encroachment in Kashmir, Kawoosa says, is the removal of demarcation line by the people in the past decade. Besides, what, according to him, makes the recovery of encroached area difficult is the non-availability of land records with the forest department. "Now re-demarcation will need a massive investment of Rs 300 crore", writes Kawoosa.

During turmoil, some forest areas have become notorious for smuggling. There is Rafiabab belt along Magam range and Doabgah in JV Division of district Baramulla; Tossamaidan, Beerwah, Zagoo, Arizal, Khag, Drung in Pir Panjal division in Budgam; Akhal, Najwan, Gutlibagh in Sindh

## DEFORESTATION TARGET

Inspite of the fact that 85 per cent of the forest areas in the state are deficient or completely lacking in regeneration, government continues to see these as one of the major revenue generating resource. And for the past four years fixed targets, both for timber and non-timber produce, are set for the income from the forests of state.

The trend started in 2000-01 when the previous NC government set a target of Rs 45.91 crore for the timber extraction from natural forests alone. In 2001-02 it was fixed at 39.04 crore and in 2002-03 it was revised to Rs 42.51 crore. For the current financial year, the target is

"The tragic thing these have to be said a senior official adding the trend has malpractices in the

According to

department, shortfall in the achievement of target is usually compensated by additional markings and thereby additional fellings. Sometimes after exhaustion of the stock of dry fallen and dry standing trees, even green trees are felled to meet the shortfall", the senior officer further said adding that often the green trees are carved to speed up their drying process.

The fact is even admitted by the forest minister Ghulam Mohiudin Sofi who said despite Supreme Court restricting the felling of trees to the extent of 80 lakh cft annually, the previous NC government had been extracting about 10-20 lakh cft in excess of the limit.

When asked why even his ministry had then fixed the revenue target for the timber extraction, Sofi said he was not serious about the target but preferred accountability instead.

"I am not bothered about the achievement of the target. All I want is accountability", said the minister. And to underscore his seriousness about the conservation of the forests, Sofi added, he had even banned the felling of dry standing trees by the state forest forest corporation, the agency responsible for exploitation of forest resources and their management, maintenance and development.

On the other hand, P Patnaik, the principal chief conservator of forests said the department was trying to persuade the minister to bring the target for this year further down.

YEAR	REVENUE TARGET
2000-01	Rs 45.91 crore
2001-02	Rs 39.04 crore
2002-03	Rs 42.51 crore
2003-04	Rs 42.51 crore

again at Rs 42.51 crore. about the targets is that met, come what may", of the forest department given rise to some gross extraction of timber. sources in the forest

division of Srinagar district and Zowra, Karewa, Yarwan, Kellar in Shopian. While traveling from Shopian to Aharbal one comes across what a local there said, "a graveyard of forests". Forest after forest presents a picture of thickly scattered stumps of felled Deodars. Fewer trees standing across make the scene all the more poignant.

In the deep forest at Akhal Najwan, the smuggling is known to be going on unabated. The forest department has suspended around 20 officials in the area over the past decade which includes two foresters. However, the forest officials in the area blame the shortage of staff and "sheer inaccessibility" of the range for their inability to prevent smuggling.

It takes twelve hours to trek from base to the peak of Najwan forest which according to them gives plenty of time to smugglers to flee. "The rugged terrain and difficult topography makes it a nightmare", said Muhammad Sultan, the forester. At the same time they complain that army stationed in the forest checks their entry whileas smugglers don't face any such restraint. On the other hand, the camp of Forest Protection

Force raised three years ago to police the forests has been stationed at a distance of twenty kilometers near Fatehpura.

Their dilemma is acknowledged by the chief conservator of forests Shafat Ahmad. "One forest guard oversees five to six sq kilometer which makes it difficult to keep a round the clock watch and ward". But in some areas it has been seen that forest guards do not attend their duties at all. In Kupwara range, one forest guard posted at village Kawari, Compartment 83, had engaged two youth for Rs 300 each to "look after" the forests on his behalf.

Though, there has been a powerful timber smuggler-militant-security forces nexus operating in the valley

over the past fourteen years, it has not been so in the absolute sense of the term. Any evidence has only been episodic in nature. At the same time, there are numerous examples when in a scenario of utter lawlessness in early nineties, militants have helped put a stop to the smuggling. Besides with the influx of foreign militants after 1995 and the decline of local militancy, there has been little evidence of the militant involvement in smuggling.

"For foreign militants dense forests act as a camouflage", said a former militant. Moreover, their little interaction with the native population is against the local militants is thought to rule out the chances of their involvement.

Similarly there are examples when security forces have aided the forest officials in the capture of timber smugglers. Besides the presence of security forces has acted as a check on the tendency of smugglers to arm themselves as by doing so they run the risk of being branded as militants.

On the other hand, the role of forest employees in the nexus has in the words of G A Malik, the DFO Kupwara, been one of "active or passive involvement". In the early nineties, when there was not even a remote semblance of law and order in place, many a forest employees not only overlooked the loot but also facilitated it. Says Ghulam Hassan (name changed) a forest guard who was posted at Sumbal checkpoint in 1995, "I gave form 25 to every truck carrying illegal timber as these belonged to Ikhwan activists (government backed counter insurgency group)". He and other employees posted at checkpoint got a share of Rs 100 each per truck.

Mian Javed, who was then DFO Pir Panjal had to suspend many of his subordinate staff to tide over an "out and out crisis", in his range. But in consequence he had to get security cover for himself and send his family to Jammu.

However, it is not that only senior officials have taken pains to safeguard forests. Some lower rung officials have also had to make sacrifices. Only last week smugglers at Beerwah gutted the house of Abdul Aziz Khan, a forest guard. Not only this, he was also threatened to leave the village.

Worst damage, however, was done during 72 day employees strike in 1991 when even already ineffective checkpoints were left unmanned. Similarly, there were no employees at depots which were subsequently looted. The people who needed timber sought permission from the militants.

It was a time when the whole Kashmir society, according to a top forest official, went "hierarchically topsy turvy". Person who could evoke more fear commanded more respect irrespective of his earlier economic or social standing. "It was a class war", says Mian Javed, the conservator of forests Udhampur adding the forests unfortunately became the economic lever to change the class equations.

*Gulmarg example*

## DACHIGAM: WHITHER NATIONAL PARK?



Sprawling habitation inside Dachigam at Mular.

Dachigam, the heart of sanctuary system in Kashmir is not in good shape. Despite being a national park and only natural home of the famous Hangul deer, Dachigam has hardly remained alien to the ravages of encroachment, illegal fellings and fire.

A detailed field study conducted by Fatima Ambreen, an environmentalist reveals a shocking tale of the ongoing interference into the eco-system of national park.

Not only has the growing population in the surrounding villages resulted in the increasing biotic pressure on Dachigam but in the last decade a full fledged colony has unauthorisedly come up at Mular.

The colony, the study says, comprises 150 families and covers a land area of 100 canal. On the contrary, in 1988, one year before the onset of militancy, there were only three families residing in the area.

Each family possesses one residential house and one cowshed. The population of the colony has now crossed 300 mark with the cattle population at 200. The government, study reveals, has sanctioned loan for the construction of most of the houses.

During the dry winter of 1998-99, the colony was held responsible for causing fire to spread to Mahadev forest which took a heavy toll of the densely populated coniferous area. What was once a beautiful jungle now presents an unsightly, burnt out look.

Moreover, with nothing being done to address the needs of the people in surrounding villages, they have developed an excessive dependence on the resources of the national park. Large scale fellings have taken place at Tathbal. Besides the growing adjacent village population, the increasing arrival of nomadic Bakerwals and local Gujjars have resulted in over-grazing. This is not only resulting in soil erosion but also leading to the extinction of precious medicinal herbs.

Government's role in the nexus has, on the other hand, been one of a passive but conscious collaborator. In the mid-nineties, when the separatist militancy was on the decline, it gave free hand to the activists of pro-government counter-insurgency group J&K Ikhwan to plunder forests, plantations and even small nurseries. Both forest department and security agencies looked other way or actively collaborated as illegal timber-laden trucks moved across the land.

"Kuka Parray presided over the largest illegal forest felling in our history", said a top bureaucrat. Even now Parray's village has about seven bandsaws running there.

However more than the state government, the people here equally blame the central government for the exploitation of Kashmir forests. "New Delhi has always used the forests of Kashmir as a policy", said the

bureaucrat adding in nineties forests were allowed to be used as a weapon to fight militancy.

And if this point of view needed any further confirmation, it came from Noor-ul-Hassan, the ex-chief conservator of forests. "In Kashmir, the forests were always used for politics, not by politicians", he said at a recent seminar on forests at Sher-i-Kashmir International Convention Complex. ■

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