

## **Turn to nature for jobs, say experts**

BHUBANESWAR, Dec. 24. " The Employment Guarantee Act, which is about to be tabled in the Parliament, could provide us with an immense opportunity to realise our target of full employment. This was the topic for debate at the two-day workshop for mediapersons held here recently on the issue of Ecology as a Source of Sustainable Livelihood. Participants debated and discussed the subject of how sustainable use and management of natural resources could provide India with all the employment that it needs. They opined that with its proposed reach, the Act could be turned into an ecological regeneration programme in order to create sustainable livelihoods in villages. But to do so the government needs to overhaul its policies and laws drastically.

The workshop was organised by the New Delhi-based research and advocacy organisation, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) and Manav Adhikar Seva Samiti (MASS) of Sambalpur. A CSE study revealed that 25 per cent of India's work force is unemployed" and most of these jobless youths are in our rural areas. Between 1993-94 and 1999-2000, India's employment growth fell from 2.7 per cent to 1.07 per cent per annum, despite the gross domestic product (GDP) having grown significantly in the same period " from 5.2 per cent to 6.7 per cent.

The study points out that India is suffering from a growth without jobs syndrome and finds that despite the targeted eight per cent growth in the economy during the 10th Five Year Plan, unemployment would double by end of 2007. Speakers at the workshop pointed out that there is a virtual drying up of all conventional sources of employment. The organised sector " industry, both private and public " contributes only eight per cent of jobs. One of the worst areas to be hit is the agriculture sector, where increasing numbers are being forced to relinquish farming and turn into daily wage labourers. The government's gargantuan employment generation schemes have not made much of a dent in this crisis of employment.

There is, therefore, a clear need to look beyond growth-induced employment generation " towards rural-based non-organised sectors such as forestry and related activities," said Mr Richard Mahapatra, head of CSE's poverty and environment unit. Land and forests form the basic renewable sources of livelihood. With the right policy initiatives and resource allocation for raising their productivity, they can generate and ensure livelihood for the 57 million rural households in India, contends the CSE study.

Besides Mr Mahapatra, the workshop was addressed by Mr Ranjan Panda, secretary, MASS and Mr Manoj Patnaik, head, forests and governance, Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC), Orissa. Bamboo can generate millions of jobs in Orissa. But government regulations and misplaced policy have blocked people from accessing such a source of livelihoods," said Mr Panda. Mr Patnaik, pointing out that given the forest resources of Orissa, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand and in face of declining agricultural growth, said: Natural resources form the axis of economy now. Each and every tree can give employment if we have the right policy incentive.

The workshop has suggested that the government should use the Employment Guarantee Act as the vehicle to generate employment using the ecology. The CSE study has analysed a few sectors such as bamboo, gum and sal leaf to establish that every bit of natural resources could be used to generate sustainable livelihoods. " SNS