

SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT FORTNIGHTLY

Down To Earth


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THE SURRENDER

Eco-development is a way to combine conservation and livelihood. Government has reduced it to a funding fetish

 **Budget 2004: also interim**

 **Hilsa's fishy future**

 **Betrayed in Bawana**

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June 30, 2004: The India Eco-Development Project — a project meant to enhance the country's biodiversity and provide people living inside and around protected areas (such as national parks and reserves) with sustainable livelihoods; a project once showcased by the Indian government and external agencies such as the Global Environmental Facility and the World Bank as the acme of conservation — is officially declared null and avoidable. By the Bank itself.

But the government refuses to give up on eco-development. A new version is already in the pipeline. Once again, the World Bank has been approached for money. At this juncture, NITIN SETHI wonders: why does conservation in India veer away from its imperatives? How is it that when government thinks of conservation, it comprehends only money? Borrowed crores?

OFFICIALLY

One stove, one pot

What eco-development means to people in Nagarhole

When forest department officials find a handful of tourists staying overnight in the Nagarhole forest they put on a video show in the evening. For the last two years the same cassette has been played: Nagarhole's magnificent wild animals and forests, the backwaters of Kabini and tribals the department "saved" by relocating them outside the forest. This video cost the department and the Indian Eco-development Project (IEDP) about Rs 16 lakh; is inflicting it on tourists the department's style of cost-recovery?

It could be. Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka was one of the seven chosen IEDP sites. The project began here in 1996 (as in the other sites) and ran for five years. Then, after a year's extension (elsewhere, two years) the World Bank pulled the plug. And most tribals here are yet to recover from IEDP.

About 1,500 odd families of the Jenu Kuruba, Betta Kuruba and Yerava tribes live inside the park today in 51 *hadis* (hamlets). They survive today on a mix of running home kitchens, agriculture, hunting, gathering forest produce and daily wage labour. A total of 255 families, relocated outside the forest as per project plan, live on a patch of cleared reserved forest. Today, both sets of people seethe with anger.

Come inside the forest: Gadde *hadi*

If one is fortunate enough to avoid the morning guided tour to the forest, one can slip into Gadde *hadi* — home to 56 Jen Kuruba families; about 50 families have been relocated from

this *hadi*. It has to be done on the sly. Outsiders are not allowed to visit tribals without department permission. If one is unfortunate, and the local state bus carrying tribals turned daily wage labourers from the *hadi* to Coorg has not left, one is accosted by the young and angry leader of Gadde *hadi*. Thimma spits his phrases: "Are you from press? International, national? Documentary maker?" He mispronounces 'consultant' but knows what it means. "Are you from NGO?" The tone turns decidedly acid. "We have dealt with them all. We are still living in this hell, seven years after the project began. They are all gone. What do *you* want? None of us have anything left to say. Go!"

But persist and the fruits of IEDP in Nagarhole fly into your face along with incensed drops of saliva: "A solar lamp and a brass pot for each family. That is all. And yes, one warm blanket per family." Thimma pulls these out of his *hudlu* (thatched hut) and displays them. "The lantern stopped working a few months after it was given to us, no one came to repair it. The pot is iron rimmed and not really copper. One cannot heat anything in it."

"When the project was on, people used to visit us on official tours, as our *hadi* is the easiest to approach from the city. We always put our blankets on display," says a woman resident of Gadde. "Sewing machines, either with forest officials' families or in the department storehouse, were always returned to us when there were visitors," says Thimma. "Yet

COVER STORY

BANKRUPT

we are better off than those of us who live in *hadis* difficult to reach. Our children are at least allowed to travel in the department bus to school."

Thimma does not know the bus, now parked in the department shed, is meant for their children. At least a bus exists for Gadde *hadi*. Children of distant *hadis* cannot even dream of such comfort, however notional. Aane *hadi*, at the park's southern end, is desolate. Not one villager interviewed here knew what of an eco-development committee — the official *hadi*-level participatory agency meant to facilitate IEDP. A broken solar lamppost is the sole signifier of project presence.

The village eco-development component of IEDP was given Rs 9.74 crore. The money was meant to help tribals inside, and villagers on the forest periphery, find alternative livelihoods. The state Lokayukta, investigating allegations of corruption, found that the public exchequer had lost at least Rs 6 crore due to "misappropriation". A forest officer had stolen Rs 14 lakh.

Go outside the forest: Nagpura colony

Nearly everyone has visited the five settlements at Nagpura colony in Hunsur, Mysore, the new address for 255 families relocated. 'Voluntarily', as every official and believer in benign relocation puts it. The colony is planned in serene symmetry. It begins where a *kutchra* road takes off perpendicularly from the main road connecting the park to Hunsur city. On both sides are perfectly square brick houses, with perfectly trimmed hedge-fences. The *kutchra* road ends at the doorstep of a community hall. Beyond lie two-acre fields, prepared by chopping off reserve forest and then given to each relocated family.

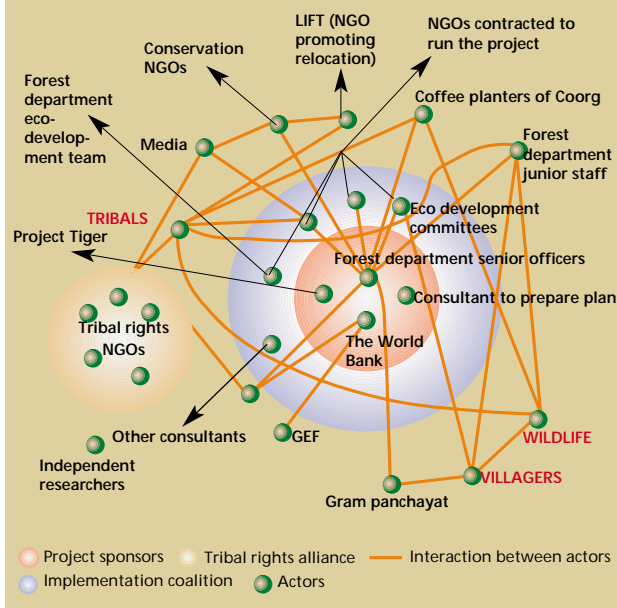
The community hall in colony number five is used to store seeds, cement and fertilisers. One house here stands out. It is larger, more ostentatious. Veena is its proud owner. She is the *adhyaksh* (president) of the eco-development committee. Sitting in her freshly constructed porch, she talks of her husband. "He works with an NGO which used to be a consultant for the forest department on eco-development." She also tells of her own work. "The department hired me to educate people about the project and make them understand why it is good for them." She is happy with eco-development. She praises it even though she admits that none of the borewells, dug in the village for irrigation, work.

Says A R Muthana of LIFT, a Coorg-based NGO which favours relocating tribals to Hunsoor instead of Coorg (where

The web of lucre

The India Eco-Development Project (IEDP) at Nagarhole national park in Karnataka was designed to benefit three entities: the park, the villagers and the tribals. But as IEDP unfolded, many other interest groups began to pop up.

IEDP here — or was it World Bank money? — became an occasion to contest ideologies, garner lucrative consultancies. Sanghamitra Mahanty, a researcher at Deakin University, Australia, has mapped out this increasingly complicated web: those who spun it, and those who got caught in it



Source: Adapted from Sanghamitra Mahanty 2002, "Conservation and Development Interventions As Networks: The Case of the India Eco-development Project, Karnataka", *World Development* vol 30, no 8, 2002, Elsevier Science Ltd, The UK, p1369

many tribals prefer to move; for more on this see: p 30): "The tribals can get developed outside the forest. Inside they were living inhumanly. Here they have proper houses to live in. The houses have clear fences and the place is clean. Their children here can go to a proper government school. They can be civilised and live in families. Inside the forest anyone used to sleep with just about anyone. Isn't this what we mean by development?" Muthana wants to help the relocated Kuruba. LIFT is associated with the Kodagu Ekikrana Ranga, an NGO which promises to protect Coorg's forests from destruction. Muthana's views on the project are as radical as that on tribal development. "The project corrupted the forest department; relocation could have been done better had the project not injected money." At Nagarhole, IEDP was to benefit the park and tribals. They are the only two not to have benefited. All kinds of interest groups made the park their happy hunting grounds. Now that the World Bank has gone, they have vanished (see graph: *the web of lucre*).

At Veeranhosahali check post, an exit point from Nagarhole, an empty 'interpretation room' (it is supposed to introduce the visitor to park biodiversity) and an inverted artificial tusker's head — it is artificial — wishes the visitor a safe journey. Wasn't that exactly what IEDP was meant to be?



Imagining IEDP

A US \$67 million question: how would the eco-development project money be spent?

The India Eco-Development Project (IEDP) was a much-lauded experiment, and the World Bank and government's pet. But it was not a 'first', so far as eco-development was concerned. Beginning 1994, another World Bank-funded project, the Forestry Research Education and Extension Project (FREEP), had tried out an eco-development component at the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh and the Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu. Before that, the union government since 1991 had run a centrally funded (that is, without external loan or grant) eco-development project in several protected areas (PAS) of the country.

When IEDP was being prepared in 1991-1992, FREEP's eco-development work was taken as a model. IEDP took one-and-a-half years, and numerous consultations, to come into being. The Union government hired the Indian Institute of Planning and Administration (IIPA), New Delhi, to chalk out an 'indicative plan', a proposal submitted by the government to the World Bank to launch formal negotiations, which the department of economic affairs took up with the Bank in 1994.

The government finally selected and proposed seven sites for IEDP. All but two were tiger reserves (see map), receiving more money than other PAS under Project Tiger, a project of the Union ministry of environment and forests. The exact purpose of IEDP was delineated in the Bank's Staff Appraisal Report formalised by the contract cleared by the cabinet committee on economic affairs and finally signed between the government and the Bank (but see: *Before bust*).

The project had five basic objectives:

IMPROVE PROTECTED AREAS MANAGEMENT: to strengthen forest department capacities and increase people's participation in PA management

VILLAGE ECO-DEVELOPMENT: to reduce negative impacts of 'local people' on PAS and vice versa. This involved participatory microplanning of activities at village level, to help villages and



■ Area (in hectares) ■ Number of beneficiaries ■ Release of fund to parks (in lakh)

the forest department decide a set of reciprocal promises. The forest department would provide alternative livelihoods and the people would commit to help the department in better managing and protecting the forest. Eco-development also meant so-called special programs, including the 'option' of voluntary relocation and other 'investments' to benefit people and biodiversity

GENERATE SUPPORT FOR PA MANAGEMENT AND ECO-DEVELOPMENT: environmental education and visitor management at the parks. But more importantly it promised funds for impact monitoring and goal-oriented ecological and social science research.

OVERALL PROJECT MANAGEMENT: a standard module. To administer projects, implement guidelines and review implementation as well as policy and strategic frameworks

PREPARE FUTURE BIODIVERSITY PROJECTS: the premise here was that IEDP could spawn similar practices across India. One



PRADIP SAHA / CSE

1982-83

Central government task force recommends eco-development in and around protected areas

1991-92

Union government initiates eco-development scheme with small national budget

1994

Government submits indicative plan to the World Bank & GEF. Parallel to this, eco-development component takes off in Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve and Great Himalayan National Park

1995

Simlipal Tiger Reserve in Orissa is excluded from the project for relocating tribals, despite assurances to the contrary

1996

World Bank/GEF Project Document on the India Eco-development Project (IEDP) is ready, as is the World Bank Staff Appraisal Report. September 6: World Bank approves credit for the IEDP

optimistic Bank document put the possibility of more than 200-300 of India's 500-plus PAS replicating the experience.

A whopping Rs 288.79 crore

The money came from five sources. In official jargon, this was an externally aided Centrally Sponsored Plan Scheme. It was



NITIN SEHJ / CSE

IN: Source of funds for India Eco-Development Project

Funding agency	US \$ (million)
International Development Agency	28
GEF Trust	20
Project beneficiaries	4.59
State government	9.01
Union government	5.36
Total	67 (Rs 288 8crore)

OUT: Projected expenditure for India Eco-development Project

PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT	
Planning	3.68
Protection	41.35
Amenities for field staff	3.80
VILLAGE ECO-DEVELOPMENT	
Micro-planning and its implementation	18.00
Funding the alternative livelihoods	81.09
Special programmes	19.63
PROMOTING ECO-DEVELOPMENT	
Education and awareness campaigns	3.95
Impact monitoring and research	12.60
PROJECT MANAGEMENT	18.52
PREPARE FUTURE BIODIVERSITY PROJECTS	81.88
Others	77.97
Total project costs	288.79

Source: Anon 1996, Staff Appraisal Report, World Bank, Washington

partly financed by an International Development Association (IDA) loan, and partly by a Global Environment Facility (GEF) grant. The Union government added its share, as did states where the seven sites were located (see table: *In...Out*).

The project envisaged its beneficiaries — people as stakeholders — would contribute 25 per cent of the money for the village eco-development component. The total cost of IEDP was US \$67 million. A whopping Rs 288.79 crore.

The agreement with IDA and GEF was signed in September 1996 and the World Bank made the project effective from December 1996. The project was to run for five years, but after a review the Bank decided to extend it by two years in five sites and by one year at Nagarhole National Park.

Enter secretariat

The plan envisaged a secretariat at Delhi with a board with statutory powers to overlook implementation. An advisory council was to help in technical matters. In states, the wildlife wing of the forest department was in charge. All funds to PAS were routed through state governments. The Bank reviewed the project periodically, usually sending two review missions to selected sites each year.

Everything's participatory

On the ground, the plan covered people living inside forests and those in the forest fringe. An 'impact' area, radiating two kilometres from the relevant park boundary, was taken as the project's work limit. All villages falling in this zone were targeted for eco-development activities. For which, eco-devel-

opment committees (EDCs) comprising villagers — and forester, or guard, as the officiating secretary — were formed. The president was elected from EDC members.

The EDCs, and the forest department and NGOs, had to develop a microplan, on the basis of a villagers' wishlist, to generate alternative livelihoods. The EDC would undertake these activities annually with project funds.

Each EDC member was to receive Rs 10,000. Each beneficiary would contribute 25 per cent of the costs, or Rs 2,500. The money could then generate, as the Bank and the government put it, livelihoods

reducing the impact of people on the forest. In return, EDC members had to reciprocally commit to help protect the forest: among others, helping department frontline staff in patrolling; gathering intelligence on poaching; preventing cattle from grazing in the parks, and whatever else the forest department suggested. In practice, all these could happen only after mutual agreement among all stakeholders.

On its part, the forest department would improve its functioning, so better protecting the PAS: project funds allowed purchase and construction of infrastructure and better equipment for PA officers and staff (computers, boats, GIS softwares, vehicles).

This is how...

This is how IEDP was imagined, by 1996.

How it actually unfolded over the next seven years, though, is another project in itself.

Lost in transit

A gravy train called eco-development, now derailed

Nimati Domohini village in the west of Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, is on a highway where a side road breaks off and leads to the reserve's Nimati range office seven kilometres away. But the village is miles away from realising the dreams dreamt by its 331-member eco-development committee (EDC) set up in 2001. Each committee member was allocated Rs 10,000. But the village decided, on forest department advice, to purchase community-level assets.

The village invested in tractors, pig and chicken farms, a

taken the tractors away and why farms had failed. Only one fact was beyond dispute: the project money had done village no good. The rich had got richer and the 181 poor, landless members had nothing. All villagers agreed that the project money, once an index of hope, had irreparably damaged them.

Why?

Why did Nimati Domohini go this way? This village and others like it suffered from critical defects in the project plan and

The face of a failed idea: the tractor, brought under the project in Nimati Domohini, West Bengal, tilled land only for a year



NITIN SETHI / CSE

grain shed and a fishpond. Domohini's microplan was extensive. But when *Down To Earth* visited it in September 2003, everything had fallen apart. The village had split into two rival groups: a set of very defensive former EDC executive members who had brought the equipment and set up the facilities, and disgruntled new members who had a ramshackle office and no clue of asset whereabouts. One tractor lay broken and the other stood near the porch of a previous EDC executive member. The farms and sheds were now broken buildings, shelter for landless villagers. The fishpond had been grabbed. Arguments broke out over who had cheated the EDC, who had

implementation, which created a new delivery mechanism built around the existing structures of the forest department

The EDCs were to be set up after making villages aware about the eco-development project. NGOs were to create awareness and then frame microplans in which villages were on equal footing with the forest department. In Buxa Tiger Reserve, the first attempt at setting up EDCs failed because the NGOs the department hired were new to this kind of association. "To begin with, the NGOs made three kinds of microplans and replicated them all over. Obviously, they failed and many of these plans had to be redrawn," says K C Malhotra, who has

observed Buxa closely. The department lost time: this shows up in the number of EDCs created in each of the five years of the project. The project picked up only in the third and the fourth year, by which time the project was about to close.

Other sites suffered identically. A World Bank 'Issue Paper' of April 10, 2000 — internally prepared just before the official mid-term review — recorded that a mere 20 per cent of the funds had been disbursed, while 58 per cent of the entire project time had lapsed. Considering unutilised funds parked with state authorities, a mere 15 per cent of the funds had been used up. As a result, the pressure to utilise funds led to, in PA sites such as Ranthambore, shoddy and inefficient EDCs.

In most villages, the participatory methods needed to create microplans were merely rhetorical. Had IEDP inherited this problem? For, even under the Forestry Research Education and Extension Project (FREEP) in the Great Himalayan National Park, pontificating consultants had dictatorially decided what alternative livelihoods suited the people. Villagers living at 10,000 ft were asked to set up poultry farms; those living lower were to cultivate high-value medicinal plants which grow only at high altitudes, says a development consultant working in the region.

In hindsight, Kathy MacKinnon, senior biodiversity specialist of the World Bank at Washington, says that some project sites were incapable of using the huge funds released to them in such a short period. Rajesh Gopal, project head in the Union ministry of environment and forests, agrees.

In some sites, hurriedly-formed EDCs ended up mimicking local social hierarchies and power structures. Elsewhere, artificially created user groups remained under forest department control. The open democratic forum IEDP envisaged never occurred.

A case of a heterogeneous village from Gir National Park — consisting of upper caste Patels (in majority), backward class communities and a single Maldhari family — is reported in *Lessons Learnt from Eco-development Experience in India: a Study*, a 2004 draft assessment of IEDP by the IEDP directorate. The Maldhari family was virtually steamrolled into taking LPG (upon paying 25 per cent of cost) because an influential villager also very active in the EDC had set a condition: before any household received any benefit under eco-development, it should have an LPG unit. The family soon sold off the LPG cylinder to the village schoolteacher.

In this village, as in many others, a traditionally antagonist forest department was forced to work with villagers. "We felt awkward at this new role and found it difficult to change over from the stick-wielding guards to negotiators," says a forest guard in Buxa. Some never changed.

Where senior forest officers took the lead and spent time in the field, things were different. Kerala's Periyar Tiger Reserve, under IEDP, and Tamil Nadu's Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, under FREEP, are good examples. At Periyar, some officers went beyond their brief and tried to get loans taken

Eco-development helped Mapudadhi, of village MGR Thanganagar near the Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu, help herself. Sweetly

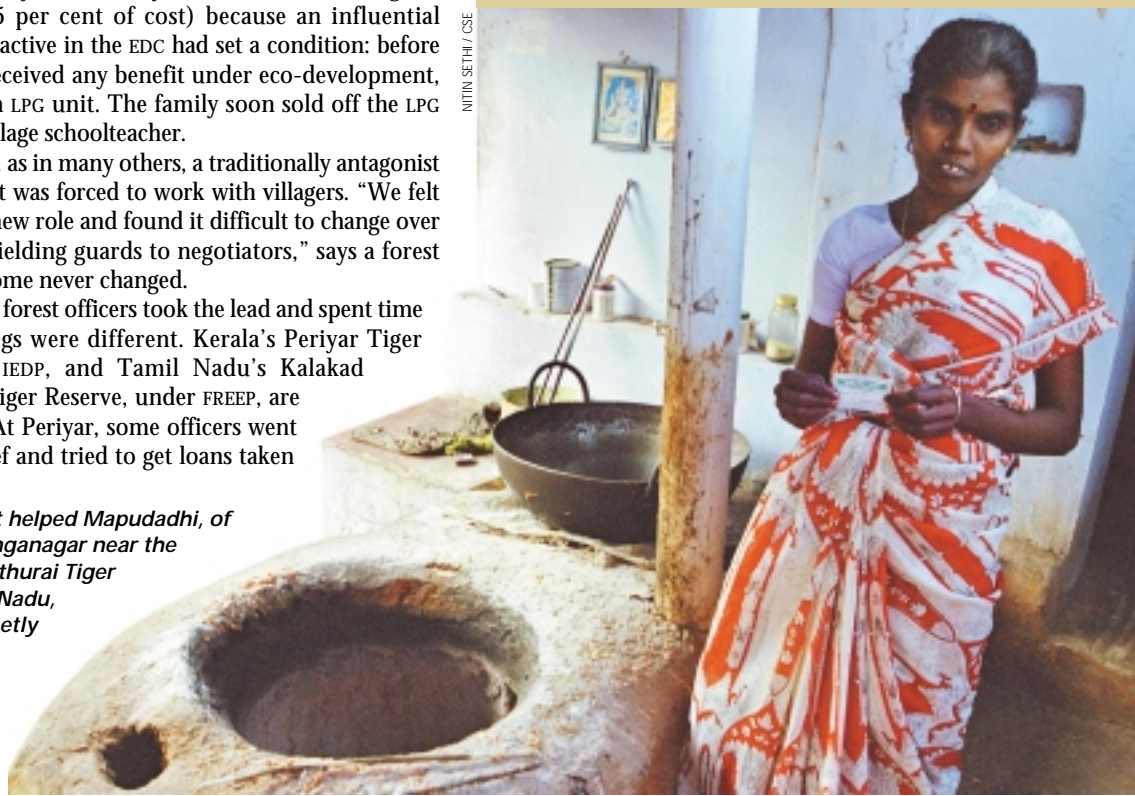
Eco-development ended in 2000

Its effects roll on

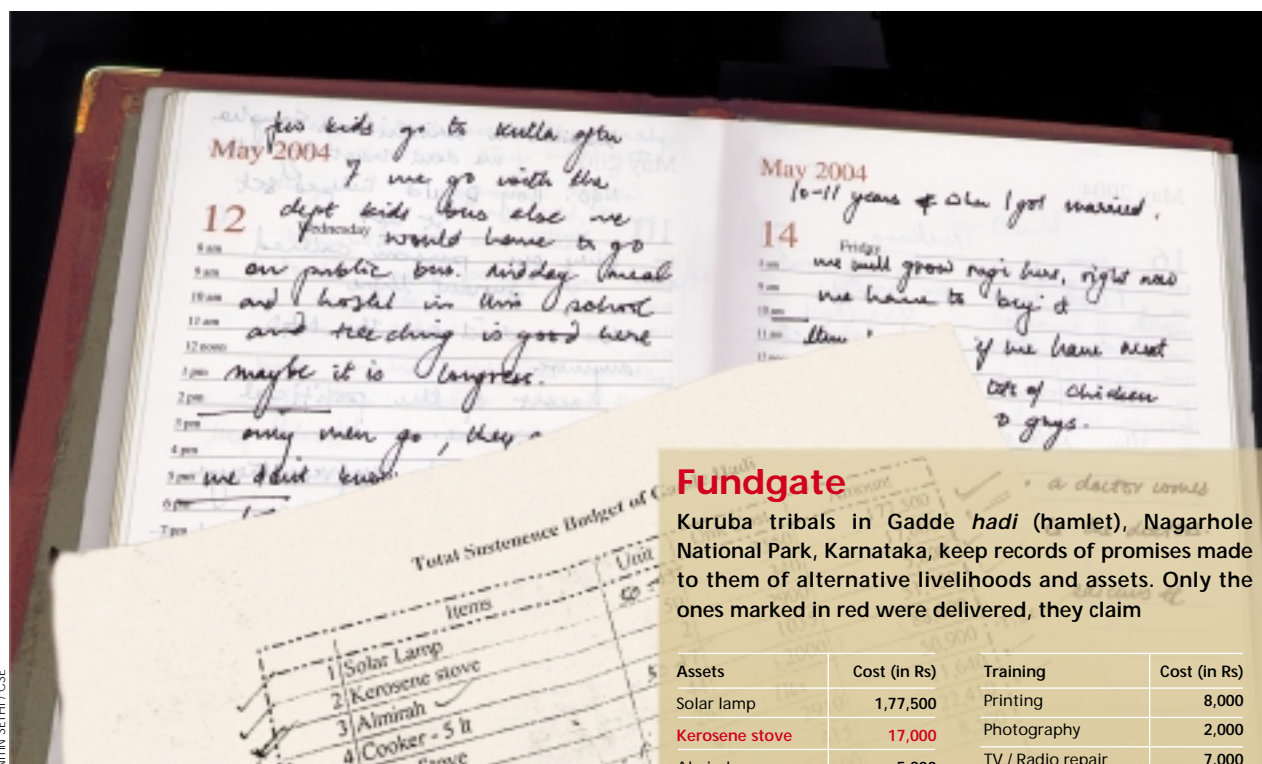
Mapudadhi offers fresh off-the-oven sweets when you reach her factory-cum-home. At M G R Thanganagar village in Tirunelveli, she is not enjoying the fruits of her hard work alone. Other women gather, taste and narrate how they set up businesses with loans from their women's self help groups (SHGs). More than 540 SHGs and 182 village forest committees were created under the Forestry Research Education and Extension Project (FREEP) in the vicinity of Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR). Today these institutions provide easy loans in villages at the reserve's periphery and help the poorest out of the clutches of the local moneylender. They do so well that they hire the services of the employees of NGOs that helped set up the forest committees in the first place to keep their accounts.

"Choosing the right livelihood option was painstaking. In the beginning we met as many people as we could for six months, asking what they wanted from the project. The first work under the project was done by pooling money from our own pockets as the money for the project was yet to arrive and we couldn't wait," says Venkatesh, a former eco-development officer at KMTR. Such efforts paid off. Ten years later, the villages have a financial base of Rs 3.04 crore that revolves to create credit worth Rs 10.98 crore. People have chosen their own path to becoming rural entrepreneurs.

The effect on the forest has been salutary. Firewood collection by headloaders, once a major pressure, has dwindled. "Official records say by more than 90 per cent but I would say by about 60-80 per cent," says a circumspect Venkatesh. "Now we have to work with them on fiscal responsibility and other such second generation issues," says H Malleshappa, the new eco-development officer at KMTR. Development doesn't stop: eco-development, too, carries on beyond a project that ended in 2000.



NTIN SETHI / CSE



Fundgate

Kuruba tribals in Gadde hadi (hamlet), Nagarhole National Park, Karnataka, keep records of promises made to them of alternative livelihoods and assets. Only the ones marked in red were delivered, they claim

Assets	Cost (in Rs)	Training	Cost (in Rs)
Solar lamp	1,77,500	Printing	8,000
Kerosene stove	17,000	Photography	2,000
Almirah	5,800	TV / Radio repair	7,000
Cooker 5 litre	51,750	Nursing	8,000
Copper vessels	50,900	Masonry	5,000
Solar stove	88,000	Motor driving	6,000
Sewing machine	11,640	Tailoring	6,000
Woollen blankets	22,410	Medical aid	10,000
Petty shop	8,500	Candle making	4,500
Total	4,33,500	Borewell installation	20,000
		Total	76,500

by beneficiary villagers from moneylenders written off. This paid rich dividends, and won the department the trust of these villages.

In Buxa, villagers who once fought with forest officials over crop depredation, began co-operating with the department. Forest officials remember how they would not go to villages for fear of being beaten up. Since the project began, EDCs have greatly mended relations. Says Neitro, a resident of Pumpu Basti: "Many of us patrol the forests along with the department. We have even helped catch poachers and timber smugglers. The EDC reprimands any person caught for any unlawful activity in the forest. Community policing managed what the forest department could not have ever achieved."

Yet such attempts depended solely upon a few right-minded forest officers. IEDP had no mechanism for such ingenuity.

Macro relocation plan?

The forest department did help agricultural non-tribal communities, but it failed tribals, especially those inside forests. Indeed, in Nagarhole, tribals have suffered.

Was this due to entrenched mentalities? That wildlife could be saved only by shifting communities out of the forest? Yes. At a June 2004 meeting held in Delhi to evaluate IEDP lessons, H S Panwar, a project consultant and former director of the Wildlife Institute of India, candidly said: "We must realise that the lifestyle of many of these tribals has become incompatible today (and they need to be relocated)." Did politically correct forest officials keep mouthing the right words? For, while IEDP wanted to make people-PA relations non-antagonistic, forest officials kept relocating tribals at certain sites (Nagarhole, Buxa). The Bank, on its part, washed its hands off: relocation at any site should be 'voluntary' and 'according to guidelines'. IEDP did not fund relocation; it cer-

tainly came to, indirectly and sometimes directly, support it.

Nagarhole gained notoriety when, in 1999, 50 Jenu Kuruba families were shifted out from the park to the Hunsur division, on reserve forestland. Protests broke out, NGOs intervened. So great was the brouhaha that in the same year the Bank sent an inspection panel, an independent ombudsman-like. The panel found gross violations of the Bank's universal policy on tribals and relocation, but never made the panel report public at that time. All it did was warn the Karnataka forest department that the project would be stopped at Nagarhole if relocation didn't follow Bank guidelines.

The controversy soon died. But 2000-2002 saw park officials relocating another 200 families. In this round, the protests fizzled out, for the project came to a close. Says Shrikant of Development through Education, a Hunsur-based NGO that works with tribals: "We ran out of steam and went into other constructive activities, for the administration's pressure on us was mounting." The media, too, forgot Nagarhole and its tribals.

The Nagpura resettlement colony became a model for 250 families. Some tribals prospered at the cost of others. They became agents, hard-selling department dreams. Today, at least more than half the relocated tribals (some estimates put it at 80 per cent) have sub-let their (project-given) two-acre field

and work as daily wage labourers. "The land on this side of the forest is not fertile, and after some basic support for 10 months the families were left to fend for themselves," says Roy David of Coorg Organisation for Rural Development, an NGO that works with Nagarhole tribals. Families cannot sublet the land, as it is leased to them and ownership remains with the forest department. Officially, tribals have the land, but David says: "Most rehabilitated families have leased it to outsiders. Glossy pictures of the maize and cotton they have grown are shown as if it were the productive efforts of the tribal people." P M Muthanna, of Hunsur-based NGO Living Inspiration for Tribals, grudgingly admits, "Yes, about forty per cent rent out their lands. But many do till their fields themselves." Many relocated tribals wanted land on the Coorg end of the park. "It is more fertile and we usually work in the coffee plantations there. We wanted to go there but the department said the land is only available at this side. We finally relented," says

Residents of Nagpura resettlement colony number 5 at the periphery of Nagarhole National Park, Karnataka: roped into a circus called voluntary relocation



Thimma, Jenu Kuruba leader in Gadde *hadi*, Nagarhole.

Yet another 200 families are now to be resettled in Hunsur division. Forest officials say land was selected in Coorg, too, but coffee planters encroached upon it. These 200 families are now 'voluntarily' waiting for two-acre plots the government says is theirs but which they can't call their own. "Planters don't want us to take that land because it is fertile, but they would have us stay near the forests so that we work their fields at low wages. The forest department plays along," says Thimma.

The trouble at Nagarhole came to light because of the high-pitched campaign. At some other sites, relocation is more tardy, not necessarily 'voluntary' or 'well managed'. In fact nearly all the groups — those working for tribal rights as well as conservationists — in Nagarhole feel good that the controversy is dead. With the project over, both groups believe they can carry on doing what they want to. One wants the tribals left inside, quietly collecting honey and other forest

produce to eke a living; the other wants to quietly shunt them out. What the tribals and the forests need are incidental.

The missing plan

As the facts of relocation remain muddled in state government files one never can reach, only a visit to each site and thorough research can throw up the truth. At Buxa, the state forest department has been able to shift only one village, Bhutia basti, in seven years. Many of the relocated villagers are happy, for in the forest their crops were often damaged. This relocation was tricky for villagers as well as the department. In politically charged rural West Bengal, Bhutia Basti was divided into groups supporting the Indian National Congress and Communist Party (Marxist). Each group wanted to settle villages that supported its political affiliation. It took the department several years to find 'politically correct' cultivable land!

At another level, there is no clear national policy on relocating tribals from PAS. While news trickles in of protests from one or the other PA, the ministry of environment and forests has never thought it wise to clear its stand on relocation. The fear of large-scale regional and national protests drives the ministry into its shell.

No wonder, then, that IEDP remains mired in Janus-faced ministry games, where solar lanterns and brass pots are first held up as livelihood alternatives to tribals, who are then cajoled and pushed to move out. The tribal communities, therefore, always remain wary of the department's overtures. This is evident in the case of the five Kani tribal settlements in Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve as well. Here, the contrast between the tribal and non-tribal's participation in the project is stark. While non-tribal agriculturists at the periphery of the forest have taken to the project with great élan, the Kani settlements, always threatened with eviction, remain uninterested.



Conserve or pickle?

Eco-development in India had no clue

Both the Forestry Research Education and Extension Project (FREEP) and its later, larger avatar, the India Eco-development project (IEDP) had a single objective: conserve biodiversity. What also made it a different form of rural development, quite unlike anything government had hitherto done, was the equal emphasis on improving the lives of people in tandem with the forest. But, to date, the impacts of village eco-development on the ecosystem, in both the projects, remain elusive. Worse, the *a priori* assumption that villagers and tribals are the primary consideration in any PA that needs to be eco-developed remains contested. Kalakad Mundantharai Tiger Reserve, a FREEP site, is affected by an entire colony of government officials living inside the forest, 28 other enclaves of human habitations and a large network of dams providing water to the parched Tirunelveli district. While this project did tackle the harm done by headloaders and cattle to the forest, it refused to fight uncontrolled tourism and an entire township in the heart of the park.

Park authorities often never look beyond the obvious. Critics say this is due to a lack of understanding — or a failure to acknowledge — how informal economies flourishing at forest fringes work. In Nagarhole, honey collection continues though the forest department claims to have reduced the pressure of non-timber forest produce. Cattle foraging, driven by the coffee planter's demand for dung as manure, is happily degrading the forests. The cattle, and the dung they produce, may be too lucrative for cattle-owning villagers to forgo in exchange for any sop the forest department offers, says M D Madhusudan, a member of Mysore-NGO based Nature Conservation Foundation who has studied the impact of Coorg coffee prices on the adjoining Bandipur sanctuary due to change in cattle grazing levels.

In fact, in the Great Himalayan National Park, the entire initiative to reduce pressure on the forest by providing alternative livelihoods was negated when the state government

permitted work on the Parvati Hydroelectric project in Sainj valley on the park fringe. The people in the valley now find it easier to be daily wage labourers. The pressure on the forest is now more devastating: "The population at the worksite has almost trebled from about 2,000 to about 6,000," says Vijay, a resident of Sainj valley.

Both sites prove a simple point: the zones of influence that impact PAs vary with location and, more importantly, with time. The artificial two-kilometre baseline, which IEDP drew and works with, became a bad surrogate to work with. As with headloaders or honey collectors, preventing the mere frontline agents of multi-million rupee trades from actual field collection is bound to fail. Very few rural — and informal — economies remain ex-cluded from the market-based economy today. So government needs to distinguish and discern before it prescribes. If demand persists, someone will supply. The key therefore lies in managing the supply, rather than stifling it naively.

A case for baseline

Both projects needed to, and on paper promised to, first show the negative impacts people had on forests. For this, what was required was a way to measure — in real time; before, during and after project-based intervention — such effects. In short, an ecological baseline of clearly laid down parameters. These would have shown the status of the forest's health before project intervention, also allowing the change in the value of these parameters to be monitored. In most parks, the benefits of village eco-development and PA management remained fuzzy because no parameters were drawn up and shared with people. At best, indirect or anecdotal information acted as proof. "The assessments were not as good as we would have wished," says Kathy Mckinnon of the World Bank. The government claims that the regular census studies and surveys were ample measures of success or failure. But Ravi Chellam, a wildlife biologist and programme officer at United Nations Development

Programme's India office, rejected such claims at the June 2004 IEDP conference. "The usual census studies and surveys conducted are not of use here; they are, to say the least, of doubtful quality," said Chellam.

IEDP project director Rajesh Gopal claims the data exists but has been lost in the PAS and states. "It has not been accessible centrally, I agree, and that has been a problem. But the management plans of each site were updated using the latest technology, and GIS mapping was done to create baselines."

But critics claim the absence of public records on these supposedly-listed parameters allows project proponents to pat each others' backs and conclude that the work was well done. "As long as there is no clear measure of success, anything can be passed off as great," says a consultant involved in reviewing the work for the project.

Empirical criteria would have made it impossible, for example in Nagarhole, for IEDP managers to claim there was significant benefit in such work as clearing 2,000 ha of lantana or hoeing 5,877 ha of bamboo. These are just two of several wasteful and useless activities, says K M Chinnappa, former forest department ranger and now a critic of the corruption that hit Nagarhole after IEDP's massive money injections.

In Gir too, Chellam questions incessant check dam building. "Have we really assessed what will be the consequences of turning shallow ponds into deeper water bodies and a semi-arid landscape into a moisture-laden one? We need to look beyond the lion and beyond just tomorrow." If scientific evaluation had been conducted, PA managers' universal fetish for civil engineering would have been questionable, but in the absence of data they build culverts, check dams and water holes, much as builders like to construct business centres in cities.

Research, quality

Not that research was lacking. A bibliography compiled by the Indian Institute of Planning and Administration shows that

The government accedes forestland to the Parvati Hydroelectric Power Project at the Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh, reneging on a livelihood promise that, ironically, the power project provides people: they also carry cement bags



SURIYA SEN / CSE

Sample of studies done in Gir

- Impact of tourism in Gir Protected Area (PA)
- Man-animal conflict in and around the Gir PA
- Study on lesser known fauna of Gir particularly with reference to invertebrates
- Satellite populations of Asiatic lion outside Gir
- Assessment of people's attitude towards park resources
- Assessment of water quality in major streams, rivers; groundwater charge in the Gir PA and siltation rate in four major reservoirs
- Inventory and conservation status of major plant taxa of Gir PA
- Impact of economic development, with particular reference to industrial/mining activities, on lion habitat of the Gir ecosystem

more than 100 different reports were published for the two projects. Each park, Ranthambore excepted, spent money on research. Nagarhole, the most controversial site of all, carried out the most studies: 22. But a 2004 draft report assessing IEDP, by the IEDP directorate, states: "Many (of these) studies were of no direct significance to the mandate of the project and quite a few were of equivocal quality." This is mildly put. Studying mites and mosquitoes in the Nagarhole park as part of IEDP points simply to the fact there has been no peer review of the research done. Ergo, there is no accountability for mediocre work or mere bad choice of studies.

Truth is, India has never known why these national parks were created in the first place, what conservation values government wanted to protect. Where the landscape was the territory of large mammals like the tiger or the elephant, the government demarcated it as their fiefdom, not paying attention to, or prioritising ecological aspects. Should it, say in a park, preserve or improve the hydrology, even at the cost of some amphibian species? As all ecologists and conservation biologists will tell: there is no such thing as conserving biodiversity at large.

It was not just ecological studies that were conducted without any peer review. The social science research carried out in many sites, with a couple of exceptions, was also dubious. In Nagarhole, social science researchers got away with asking questions like "do you (tribals) have a cinema or television inside the park?" and concluding that life would be better outside the park than inside. Some Kurubas of Gadde *hadi*, hired to get the questionnaires filled, even today remember how the records were filled, at times, sitting in forest department offices and how the report was all 'managed' to ultimately claim that more than 75 per cent of them wanted to get out.

After dosage

Will the idea of eco-development survive?

IEDP's larger monitoring mechanism, too, seems to have been primarily meant for the government or Bank consumption. The Bank sent its supervisory missions and its supervisors wrote 'aid memoirs' on whether project sites conformed to project conditions. Their memoirs were not made public, and shared only with the government.

The IEDP directorate, on the other hand, commissioned project reviews that — even the Bank was forced to admit, at a select gathering — failed at times. Instead of feeding into the project, reviews became just reams of paper generated because the project demanded so. And everything remained locked inside official drawers. Nothing was denied, but nothing was made public; an 'independent' scrutiny remained a pipe dream. Forget the average project beneficiary in the forest village, not even researchers and policy analysts were able to get these reports, unless government wanted them to. The right to information existed, just as the reports, only on paper. In Nagarhole, some groups had to file a petition in court and use the state's right to information act to get the forest department to divulge data.

Lacking intent

Even the Centre showed a lack of will to institutionalise a project whose benefits everyone acknowledged, could flow much beyond its life. The Union ministry of environment and forests was to set up an eco-development wing, but it never materialised. It had to set up an eco-development project steering committee to guide the project on policy; this was formed but rarely met. There was to be an eco-development project implementation board with full financial and administrative powers; the board was never given these. Finally, a panel of three independent experts was to independently review performance; it was never set up. Why? Claims Gopal: these bodies would have gone against the union government's stated policy of downsizing ministries!

Regional coordination committees were to be formed in PAS, to stave off threats — from the surrounding area — the forest department could not control. District collectors were to be designated chairpersons of such committees, to influence and moderate land use near PAS. The committees never functioned, except in Palamau Tiger Reserve.

Lacking legality

As EDCs gained in resources or money, they often initiated works that made them vulnerable to co-optation by vested interests, or *panchayati raj* institutions. But Buxa and Periyar apart, EDCs were not supported by the state's legal framework.



The Periyar model

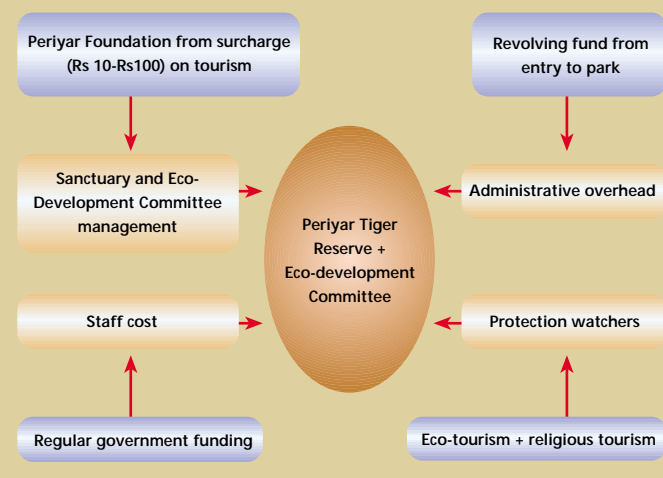
Can't it be replicated elsewhere?

Eco-development in Periyar Tiger Reserve has spun its own web of sustenance beyond the project. Its successful creation of three different types of Eco-development Committees (EDCs) has brought it to a second generation of challenges beyond the June 30, 2004 deadline for the project to end. People have a headstart here: Rs 2 crore in a community development fund collected by EDCs from their activities. The money has come from turning threats into opportunities, like the influx of nearly 5 million people to the Sabrimala shrine.

Four EDCs are now allowed to manage stalls and supply shops during the pilgrimage and corner money that otherwise would have landed in the laps of outside traders.

With the help of the forest department, the EDCs have devised a model already being implemented. It will help pay for conservation and generate resources for regional development. The state government is supportive and has promulgated the order to set up the Periyar Foundation, a semi autonomous legal body with elected representatives, stakeholders and specialised staff to oversee the ecological and social worth of eco-development activities. It will levy a surcharge on tourists, provide assured salaries for the poachers turned protectors of Periyar's forests. Similarly, a revolving fund will help bear the administrative costs of the eco-development project.

Looks simple, yet it's the only park to have done it, out of the nine on the India Eco-Development Project roster. Why does it take the forest department large foreign loans and grants to devise plans for protected areas?



Lacking sustainability

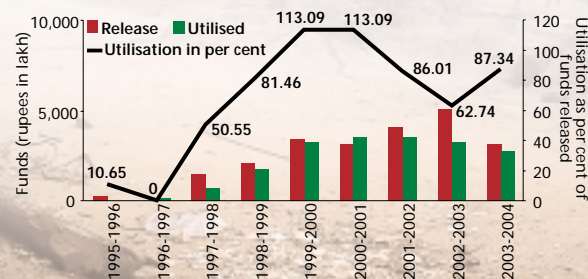
The larger question is: can these institutions, created at a cost of Rs 288 crore, survive beyond the project life? The government's answer is that it has carried out a study on this aspect. Truth is, Buxa and Periyar apart, the rest of the PAS have rarely thought beyond the next day. The question is not of mere survival but fulfilling the function — conserving biodiversity by selecting a development path for people who live inside or on the fringes. Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, which successfully created a network of self help groups (SHGs), is already morphing. The 540 SHGs, which turned Rs 3.04 crore into Rs 10.98 crore by circulating credit, were meant to give primacy to the poorest, those most dependent on the forest (the villages were clearly demarcated on the basis of their dependence on forests). In the first round of credit lending the poorest were preferred. But today the money has become large enough for *satraps* to get involved and take over in some villages. Whether a person can return a loan, rather than his need, has become the criterion for giving loans. It is difficult to assess how much of this economic activity now helps reduce pressure on the forests and conserve biodiversity.

"Setting up institutions with funds is easy; raising the expectations of people, more so," says Pramod G Krishnan, deputy director of Periyar Tiger Reserve, who has been leading efforts to create a funding mechanism to sustain EDCs beyond June 30, when IEDP ends (see box: *Only Periyar*).

And if we cannot sustain the existing framework, can government fish for yet another loan? Krishnan admits, "This project more than anything has helped create an alternative thinking in some officers of the department, a vision where they do not look at people as antagonists." Is US \$67 million the price for getting the government to do what it should have been doing anyway, without external inspiration — helping people protect forests?

Sudden death

Forced to spend, eco-development project splurges towards project closure



Source: Anon 2004, Project Tiger Office, Union ministry of environment and forest, New delhi, mimeo

Hold tight

Behold: eco-development is here, again

There exists a document called *Linking Biodiversity Conservation and Rural Livelihoods*. It is the Indian government's initial salvo for a new eco-development project, expected to begin late 2005. It will cost approximately US \$48 million (Rs 220 crore), with beneficiaries putting in US \$2 million (Rs 9.20 crore). The remaining costs will be split three-way between the government, the Global Environment Facility/World Bank and a soft loan service of the International Development Association.

This six-year project will work on "new approaches to participatory management". It will expand "lessons" to five or six other "globally important sites" in the country, to strengthen linkages between conservation and improving local livelihoods, as well as enhance the national economy.

The new initiative has its eyes set on "landscapes" much larger than two-km PA peripheries, on areas 1,000-2,000 sq km (100,000 ha-200,000 ha) around PAS. The justification: biodiversity pools can only be managed at such large levels. "The project shall work in tandem with non-forest areas, revenue villages and other land use systems as well as corridors for biodiversity," says Michael Jansen, senior environmental specialist, World Bank, Washington DC, USA. It will work with other rural development-related departments and ministries.

Question is...

Question is: have IEDP lessons been conned? Or will the same awry vision determine how people will co-exist with wildlife? This magazine had warned that, in its original shape, all PAS could not afford eco-development. The first problem of forest-based people was not poverty, but disempowerment. The erosion of rights to use their habitat alienated people, hiking transaction costs for protection. The project would end up fattening the wildlife bureaucracy, unless there was some hard-headed thinking on how people living in forests could co-manage its biodiversity treasures and equally participate in its development.

The current eco-development mentality is quite visible in India's national wildlife action plan. In the case of communities living in and near forests, the government must do the following. One, compensate poor communities for the damage caused to life and property by wild animals. Two, make a "conscious" effort to ensure that, "as far as possible", relocation must be done in a "participatory manner". Three, people should be assisted to find alternative options, "outside the protected area".

But is this strategy adequate for a country where forests are habitats of poor communities? Or does the policy and practice need to change so that there is local control and ownership over the idea and its implementation? As *Down To Earth's* founder-editor Anil Agarwal put it: "Why is it that after undergoing all the stages of metamorphosis, the wildlife bureaucracy ends up as a caterpillar and not a butterfly?" Will this project be different?



PRADIP SAHA / CSE

Benchmark

So far, convenience rather than scientific rationale has led the process of project design, research as well as impact monitoring. This time, government will clearly have to share with all stakeholders the logic that drives the project: selecting a site, or fixing a landscape's boundary. The PAS to be invested in need strict peer-reviewed ecological baselines. The government must fit its project into what the PA needs, and not the other way around.

Doubts are already surfacing about how the new project will demarcate a "landscape" that affects a set of PAS, how it will de-limit project boundaries. The Bank says the limit will be drawn upon practicability of operations rather than theoretic landscapes. But in a liberalised economy physical boundaries rarely matter. Economic influences that affect the health of the forests cross over "landscapes" with ease.

In the selection of sites the Bank wants to work with high biodiversity zones, but those that offer only low or medium risk. "In sites where the risks are too high, we would prefer NGOs to invest their resources," says Jansen. What about government? The Bank is keen upon private-public partnerships too (corporate investments); does the government wish it too?

Vehicles of delivery

In the last two projects the government created an alternative delivery mechanism. It skirted around the existing structure of *Panchayati Raj* institutions. Does it intend to create similar vehicles of delivery under the new project, given that its "landscape" ranges over much wider ecological and social space — up to 2,000 sq km? "We shall have to work at three levels depending upon what kind of area we are working in. Gram sabhas at one level, joint forest management committees at the second and EDCs at the third stage," says Rajesh Gopal, project head of the Indian Eco-development project.

Moreover, with the low level of per unit area budget proposed for the entire project, what kinds of services does the government promise to create alternative livelihoods? Who will deliver them effectively? The government must lay its plan of action clearly in public domain for discussion. If the *Panchayati Raj* institutions and the joint forest committees are also to be involved, then at what stage will they become part of the consultations? Will they, at all?

Managing the parks

The Periyar Tiger Reserve has set an example of how active participation of people can redefine PA management: here exists a funding mechanism where people pay for conservation while generating livelihoods. Is the government willing to learn from this model? Current evidence says: no. One round of consultation has already been held with a select group and state representatives on the project in Delhi: the public remains unaware of these negotiations. Another round is slated for July 20, when a few states will try to claim their share of the new pie. But hard questions remain unanswered.

Will the new project loosen the stranglehold of a bureaucratic forest department over PAS and make people a vibrant partner? Conserving a rich biosphere is important. Equally important is people's marginalisation and poverty. The government must try out alternative mechanisms. In this respect, surely, the answer lies in building economies out of forests, in this case PAS. Economies out of park protection, nature tourism, out of making natural resources marketable in a way that profits accrue to local populations. Does the government have the gumption to help build capacities among people — so that they co-manage forests using their traditional knowledge? Does not the key lie in making local people custodians of PA management?

If the government is not willing to draw a wider agenda, it will merely repeat mistakes. Then people don't want the loan. Nor do the forests. If the experiment is not going to give people a role, then the experiment is a convenient excuse to get more funds. The government needs to make it empathically evident what it has to offer. And this time the people should decide, before the bank does, if the loan is worth it. ■

With inputs from Vikas Parashar

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