

Failing the forest

Both human rights and wildlife rights groups have not used the Forest Rights Act as a conservation tool



BAHAR DUTT

On February 13, the Supreme Court ordered the eviction of more than 10 lakh Adivasis and other forest dwellers from forestland across 17 States. The petitioners, mainly wildlife NGOs, had demanded that State governments evict those forest dwellers whose claims over traditional forestland under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, known simply as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), had been rejected. On February 28, the court stayed its controversial order and asked the States to submit details on how the claims of the dwellers were decided and the authorities competent to pass final rejection orders.

While the Supreme Court has now made it clear that there will be no forcible eviction, what the order has succeeded in doing is resuscitating a sharp binary between the human rights- and wildlife rights-based groups that have for decades tried to swing public opinion in their favour. The wildlife groups who went to court argue that implementation of the FRA could lead to 'encroachments' and fresh clearance of forestland for human dwellings. The human rights groups have argued that the FRA was passed by Parliament and is aimed at correcting historical injustices to traditional forest dwellers who, since colonial times, have been subject to a cycle of evictions. Since colonial times, as governments asserted their control over forests, India's forest history has become a cycle of evictions from forestland and rebellions by forest dwellers.

A fundamental difference

Now, here's the problem. Both groups have been so locked in ideological debates - whether in the courtroom or on social media - that they have failed to protect what could potentially have been beneficial to their respective interest groups: the forest. The FRA was meant for forest dwellers, but it could have also been a powerful tool



"In 2013, the Supreme Court affirmed the decision-making power of the gram sabhas under the Forest Rights Act when it asked them to take a decision on whether or not they wanted bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri hills of Odisha." The Dongria Kondhs who unanimously voted no. *A. MANIKANTA KUMAR

for conservation. Sadly, both sides have propagated misinformation to garner support for themselves.

The first myth that needs to be busted for the wildlife lobby is that when a right is recognised of a forest dweller/Adivasi on a piece of land, it doesn't mean that he/she will cut down all the trees in that area. This is often the strongest note of dissonance between the two groups - the implication that recognising rights on forestland is the same as clear-felling that forest. Therefore, to argue that the rights of millions of forest dwellers have been recognised through the Act does not mean that the forest is a pie to be divided. On the other hand, when forestland is 'diverted' for big development projects, like mining or highways or roads, it is actually clear felled or submerged. If this fundamental difference

between 'recognition of rights' and 'diversion' were accepted, the groups at loggerheads would in fact find grounds for commonality.

It is in fact the Supreme Court that paved the way for this commonality in 2013 when it asked the gram sabhas to take a decision on whether the Vedanta group's \$1.7 billion bauxite mining project in Odisha's Niyamgiri Hills could go forward or not. It thus affirmed the decision-making power of the village councils of Rayagada and Kalahandi under the FRA. All 12 gram sabhas unanimously rejected mining in the hills.

Again, in 2016, it was the FRA that was invoked by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) when the people of Lippa in Himachal Pradesh were given the powers to decide whether or not they wanted a hydel power project in this area. The project would

have led to submergence of forestland and also caused heavy siltation in the river.

When wildlife groups point towards the thousands of 'bogus claims' that are being filed and that should be rejected, what should not go unnoticed is that the state in fact is not always keen to recognise the rights of people in forest areas (even if it may get them votes) as it becomes tough to 'divert' land for big projects. A case in point is the Mipithel Dam that is under construction in Manipur. Once commissioned, it will submerge 1,215 hectares (ha) of land, 595 ha of which are under forest cover. In 2015, the NGT had asked for the state to seek forest clearance for the project. To obtain forest clearance, the State government would have to prove that the rights of the tribal people and forest dwellers would not be affected. However, the State government refused to recognise the rights of the people living there since it was keen to construct the dam.

There have been hundreds of cases that offered both these divergent groups the opportunity to come together for the cause of the environment and communities. Can the two groups put down their metaphorical swords and use their powers to fight the battle that needs to be fought?

Correcting historical injustice

Likewise, could not the same wildlife NGOs which filed this petition in the Supreme Court have joined hands with the local communities and used the FRA to challenge big development projects coming up on forestland instead? Human rights groups too cannot be absolved of blame. Most of them have been quick to respond when the judiciary steps in, but have been missing when it comes to the tedious groundwork of working with the gram sabhas and ensuring that genuine claims are filed. The same human rights groups did not come forward to fight cases that could have helped conservation as well as the people who live in those areas. Both groups have failed the forest. There is a chance to correct the historical injustice has been inflicted on the people and to India's forests. And it is through the FRA that India can achieve that aim.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

The difference between journalism and propaganda

Journalists should report events rather than become cheerleaders for hate politics and intolerance



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

Since the terrorist attack in Pulwama that killed 40 CRPF personnel and the subsequent military response, there have been two distinct narratives in the media. On the one hand is an uncritical group of people who constantly whip up patriotism and construct nationalism in a narrow sense. They are keen to reduce journalism to propaganda. On the other is a set of professionals who continue to retain their commitment to the core values of journalism and opt to report events instead of becoming a tool of war.

Reporting war and conflict

The reportage and headlines of *The Hindu* exhibit a commitment to facts as well as a desire to minimise tension between two neighbours. Here journalism is a public good and refuses to become an instrument of deceit. The headline of Feb. 28, "IAF plane shot down, pilot taken captive by Pak. army", was both appreciated and vilified by readers. The people who felt that the headline was not patriotic enough drew their inspiration from many broadcast journalists. I would urge them to watch senior journalist Sashi Kumar's video, "Parasites of prime time", in which he clearly establishes how dominant TV channels have become cheerleaders for hate politics and intolerance.

My friend and the founder of the Ethical Journalism Network, Aidan White, never tires of pointing out a simple fact: that journalists who work in or near a conflict zone see first-hand the brutal and inhumane consequences of war. The act of bearing witness helps them refrain from promoting propaganda based on what he calls "skewed notions of romantic patriotism or tribal allegiance". There is a huge corpus of literature on war and conflict journalism. One fact emerges from such literature and from war reporters - from the time of the World Wars to my colleagues who have covered more recent wars in the neighbourhood: those who bay for blood are far removed from the sites of violence and do not have a sense of the loss and pain experienced by families. In his insightful book, *The First Casualty*, Phillip Knightley gives us an important warning:

"The sad truth is that today government propaganda prepares its citizens for war so skillfully that it is quite likely that they do not want the truthful, objective and balanced reporting that hero war correspondents once did their best to provide."

Fact and fiction

Soon after India's air strikes in Balakot, Pakistan, many TV channels citing anonymous sources claimed that the attack across the LoC killed 300 terrorists. However, when the official version was put out, the government spokesperson refused to speculate on the number. Meanwhile, international media-persons, who have access to Balakot, visited the site. Their findings made a mockery of many of the tall claims that were being made from India's TV studios. In this newspaper, a sober and responsible analysis was made much before Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman's capture. For instance, in his comment piece, "India's options after Pulwama" (Feb. 19), Happyymon Jacob examined the option of using strike aircraft to carry out precision strikes in locations across the LoC. He presciently warned: "But such air incursions are likely to be detected and intercepted by Pakistani radars and air defence systems. If an aircraft is shot down or pilots are captured, it could become a bigger headache for the government. Pakistani retaliatory strikes cannot be ruled out either."

Writer Namita Gokhale made an important observation recently: "One of the greatest life learnings of the ever contemporary Mahabharata is the lesson of the Chakravayuh and the consequences of entering it without full foreknowledge." Her tweet doesn't apply only to governance and military affairs, but to journalism too. The very act of verification that differentiates this profession from all other forms of communication tells us not be an Abhimanyu, one who knew the entry strategy but not the exit one.

Indian journalists have made some of the most incisive arguments against the pernicious idea of embedded journalism (the practice of placing journalists under the control of one side's military during an armed conflict). The difference between journalism and propaganda lies in the language that is used in reports. Ethical journalism will report the killing of a soldier as the killing of a soldier and refrain from using loaded propagandist words like martyr.

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SINGLE FILE

Equally in the spotlight

Some recent Hindi films show that 'character actors' no longer have a secondary status

KUNAL RAY



'Character actor' is an annoying term that Bollywood taught me early on. Though it owes its origin to the West, it is used in a pejorative way in mainstream Hindi cinema. This coinage with its inherent class distinction sets apart a cohort of actors from the leading men and women of Hindi films. I wonder why, though. After all,

the central lead is also playing a character in the film. And what would many of these films be without the so-called character actors?

Characters do not exist in a vacuum. They are created and embellished vis-a-vis their social backgrounds. The milieu of the lead characters or a contrast is created through their association with an array of supporting characters who are uncharitably labelled character actors.

In the larger power hierarchy too, character actors are often relegated to a secondary status. We barely see them at film promotions unless they are yesterday sensations staging a comeback or if their performance has received rave reviews. For a very long time, Hindi cinema used character actors for a comic relief, or they essayed prototypical aunts, uncles, parents or friends. Very few received an independent storyline or back story unless it impacted the hero or the heroine of the film.

A new crop of Hindi films is, however, attempting to change that portrayal. In many recent films, 'character actors' successfully eclipsed the main lead and attracted more attention for their performance. There are perceptible changes at the level of scriptwriting where special attention is being accorded to the character arc of these actors. For instance, I think of films such as *Bareilly Ki Barfi*, *Masaan*, *Newton* and *Badhaai Ho* equally, or perhaps more, for the multiple stories that abound alongside the lead, sometimes to the point where one wonders who the lead really is.

In this context, Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* stands out for many reasons: its nuanced storytelling, superlative performances, luscious camerawork (Jay Oza), extremely measured editing (Nitin Baid) and effort in finding other stories of Dharavi beyond the known and the obvious. It also excels in bringing to the forefront a bunch of 'character actors' who make every bit of their screen time memorable. Vijay Varma as the unscrupulous yet humane Moeen and Siddhant Chaturvedi as rapper MC Sher are the highlights of the film. They are not second fiddles but hold their own in the plot. They are both integral to the narrative while also helping to bring about different facets of Ranveer Singh's Murad. In fact, the film opens with Moeen and then Murad appears from behind. Similarly, Murad is unimaginable without his friend and mentor, MC Sher. The hope is that this will enable new encounters in storytelling in Hindi films.

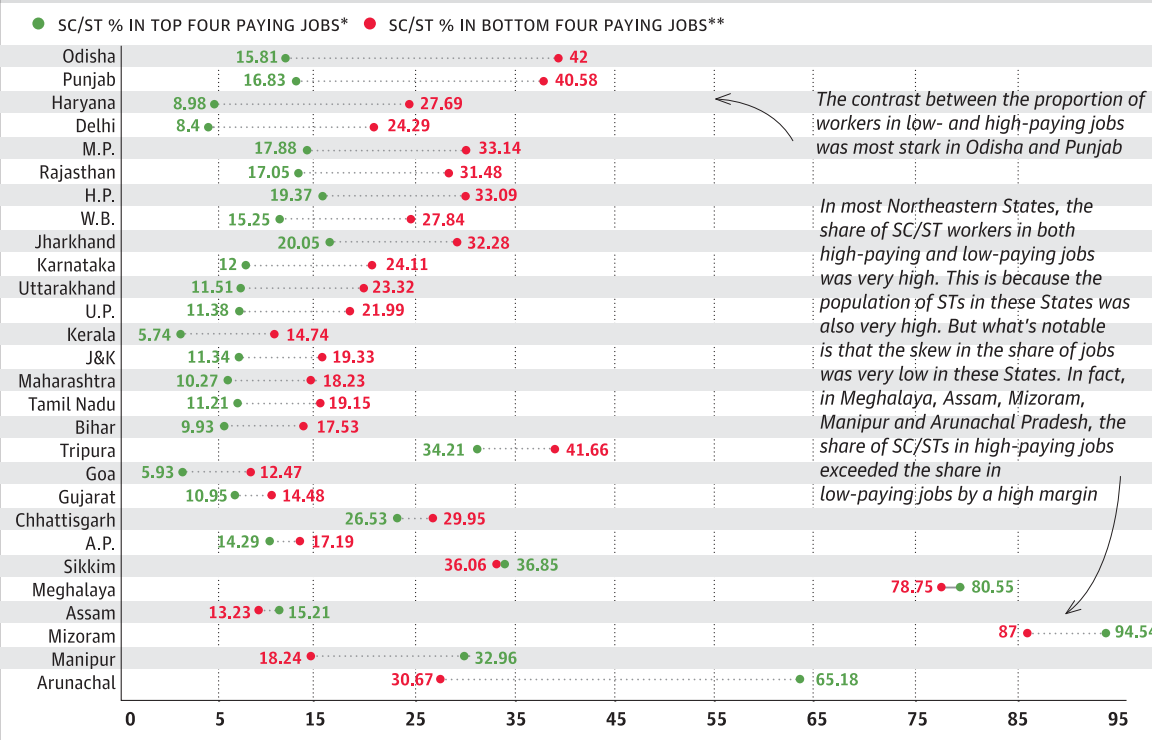
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DATA POINT

Bottom of the job pyramid

Data from the 2011 Census show that the proportion of SC/ST workers in low-paying non-farm jobs was relatively high compared to their share in high-income profiles. A State-wise analysis by Faizi Noor Ahmad and Vignesh Radhakrishnan



The contrast between the proportion of workers in low- and high-paying jobs was most stark in Odisha and Punjab

In most Northeastern States, the share of SC/ST workers in both high-paying and low-paying jobs was very high. This is because the population of STs in these States was very low in these States. In fact, in Meghalaya, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, the share of SC/STs in high-paying jobs exceeded the share in low-paying jobs by a high margin

- *Top four paying jobs include professionals; clerks; technicians and associate professionals; and legislators, senior officials and managers
- **Bottom four include plant and machine operators and assemblers; craft and related trade workers; skilled agricultural and fishery workers; and elementary occupations
- The job profiles are classified based on the monthly per capita consumption expenditure of workers available in the National Sample Survey Office's reports. For further reading, please see <https://bit.ly/2Gemivk>

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 4, 1969

China clash figures in Delhi talks

The Sino-Soviet border clash yesterday [March 3], involving an unspecified number of soldiers killed on both sides, is believed to have figured in the two-hour long talks to-day between the visiting Soviet Defence Minister, Marshal A. A. Grechkov, and the Indian Defence Minister, Mr. Swaran Singh. The clash coinciding with the arrival of the Soviet Defence Minister here [New Delhi] on a week-long goodwill visit naturally came up for reference at the talks. In the absence of detailed official reports, maps were understood to have been consulted on the basis of news agency reports that had come in late last night and this morning. After the Soviet delegation left, the members of the Indian delegation stayed back in conference for about half an hour. The incident and the motivations behind the Chinese provocation which could not be considered in depth in the absence of details are, however, likely to come up at an informal level when the two Defence Ministers meet again.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 4, 1919.

Mechanical Engineering: Lord Ronaldshay's Speech.

Presiding this afternoon at the prize distribution of Sibpore Civil Engineering College [in Calcutta, March 3] His Excellency [Lord Ronaldshay, the Governor of Bengal] said that the Bengalee child hitherto was given no chance of developing any aptitude for mechanics, which he might possess. Something must be done to develop the boys' attitude for manual work in school and institutions. A beginning had already been made in this respect and manual training class had been introduced in about 30 Zilla and high schools and proposals were being made for extending this form of instruction. This was the means of finding out whether the boy had any bent for engineering before he actually came to the college.

CONCEPTUAL

Hygiene hypothesis

MEDICINE

This refers to the hypothesis that certain allergic reactions may simply be the result of the lack of exposure of individuals to germs during childhood. It is believed that exposure to microorganisms during childhood can help in the sufficient development of the body's immune system and also in establishing a beneficial symbiotic relationship with microbes. The hypothesis was first proposed by British epidemiologist David P. Strachan in his 1989 paper "Hay fever, hygiene, and household size". Strachan proposed that children growing up in small families with better amenities may actually be more susceptible to various allergies due to insufficient exposure to germs.

MORE ON THE WEB

World Wildlife Day: Organisations which help India's untamed

<http://bit.ly/WorldWildlifeDayVideo>