

Foreword

This monograph on the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 of India was prepared by Dr P J Dilip Kumar, IFS (Retd.), on a Senior Fellowship of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, during 2013-2015. The author, who served in the Indian Forest Service for almost 39 years and retired as Director-General of Forests in the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, has obviously drawn on his long and varied experience in preparing this report.

The central issue addressed in the monograph is, how does a nation make the choice between preserving its green wealth in the form of forests, grasslands, wetlands, water bodies, coastal zones and beaches, marine resources, and wildlife habitats and meeting the ever-increasing demands from the development sectors? One response was that of the British administration in India, by putting the extant tracts of good forest under the stewardship of a cadre of trained officers and field staff, called the Forest Department. Thanks to this law and the process of reservation of forest lands, India today can be justly proud of the fact that in spite of having less than 1% of the world's forest area with 15% of the world's human population and 19% of the world's cattle, there is still some 69 million hectares of forest cover standing today, which amounts to some 21% of the land area. With the rising consciousness of the environmental value of the forests and an awareness that they were balanced precariously on a knife-edge, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, was enacted during the Prime Ministership of Indira Gandhi, which has been lauded by conservationists as a landmark act of political bravery and practical sagaciousness in ensuring the safety of India's forests.

However, environmental activists, on one side, feel that the government is too sympathetic to the demands of the industrial lobbies, and the forest department's approach is too top-down and unsympathetic to the needs and rights of the local communities. On the other hand, development protagonists complain that the Forest Conservation Act is slowing down the national development programme, increasing costs and introducing too much delay and procedural complications. The whole process seems to be arbitrary and unpredictable, because the processes and criteria are not consistent or clearly enunciated. Hence efforts are continually being made to dilute the Act in its operation, and the forest department is made the villain from both ends of the whole environment-versus-development debate.

The author himself recognizes that there is a need to explain the working of the Forest Conservation Act in all its complications, so that the

public and the interested stakeholders are better informed and equipped to deal with it in the spirit in which the law was made. It is hoped that the present monograph, by a senior and now retired member of the Indian Forest Service, will also contribute in its own small way to this building up of public understanding.

In conclusion, I could not do better than to quote a few lines from one of the paper's reviewers:

“What makes this exposition very useful is not so much the discussion of the Act itself, but of the manner it is administered through the various Rules, and over time, how this practice has been shaped by various Court decisions. For example, how do we define forest? So much depends on this. I, for one, learned a great deal from the detailed discussion of this simple question. What are ‘cut offs’? What is a ‘Go-No Go’ classification? What are the different groups with an interest in the outcomes of each of these? The book has many such insights to offer.”

I am happy that ISEC could support the author in his efforts to “think, ruminate and write” on this crucial topic, and hope that it will suggest avenues for further studies into the political economy of natural resources conservation and sustainable development.

*December 2015
Bangalore*

*K S James
Acting Director, ISEC*