

[Home](#)[Latest](#)[Trending](#)[My Reads](#)[Companies](#)[Budget 2019](#)[ITR Filing](#)[Start-ups](#)[Markets](#)[NRI Investment Queries](#)[Money](#)[Mutual Funds](#)[Insurance](#)[Technology](#)

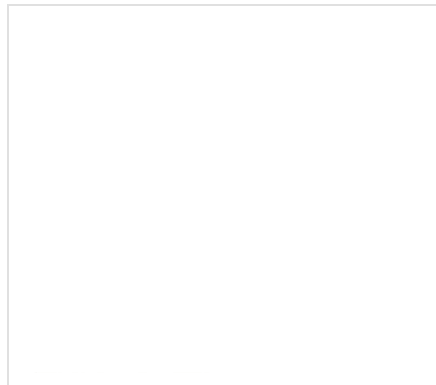
The draft NFP reverses the earlier policy objective by promoting forestry at the cost of local livelihoods. (Mint.)

Opinion | Forest policy: state control, privatization or decentralization

2 min read . Updated: 19 Jun 2019, 01:08 AM IST

[Sharachchandra Lele](#)

Understanding the logic behind democratic decentralization is an essential first step



Topics

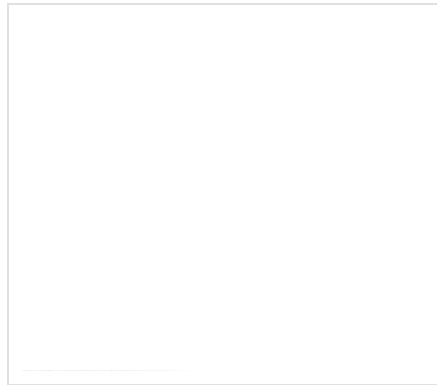
[Forest Policy](#)

The Indian Forest Act, 1927 (IFA), is proposed to be amended. So, can we conclude that the forest sector in India is waking up to the much-needed reforms? Unfortunately, not the right kind of reform. The sector has been in ferment since the 1990s, but these recent moves smack more of ‘empire strikes back’ than of *mile sur mera tumhara* (meeting of minds)

One must start by recognizing that IFA was a tool for a colonial takeover of India’s forests. The IFA created two main legal categories of forests—reserved forest (RF) and protected forest (PF)—and empowered the forest departments (FDs) to take over, manage and protect them. It was implicitly for timber and softwood production. Single goal, two levels of protection, and

single manager-cum-protector: The Imperial Forest Department. After Independence, the need to redefine forest sector goals and restructure its governance was overlooked. The states largely copy-pasted the IFA to create their respective state acts and the Imperial FD became state FDs, run by the IFS.

What's wrong with state control of forests, some may ask? Aren't forests a national treasure, providing public goods such as watershed protection, biodiversity and carbon sequestration? Alternatively, if forests are only for timber production, then the logic of the 1990s economic reforms suggests privatizing them, with the state acting only as a regulator. South Asia's forests are, however, complex socio-ecological entities: highly diverse and settled by Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities. They are thus best managed as common property. They do provide wider positive environmental externalities—biodiversity, carbon or hydrological benefits—which may justify some external regulation, but not hands-on state management, nor corporate ownership.

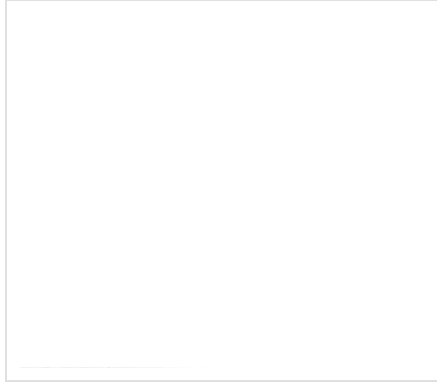


Ultimately, forest-dwellers have a fundamental democratic right to manage their immediate environment. And any external regulation must be transparent and accountable.

The colonial takeover, thus, deprived forest-dwellers of their livelihoods. Giving forest officers police powers in a landscape populated by marginalized and illiterate communities also led to much harassment.

The Forest Rights Act of 2006 emerged in the context of unsettled land rights, but it also offered Gram Sabhas' control over forests through community forest rights. Moreover, it further empowered communities the right to say no to forest diversion. This Act has been resisted tooth-and-nail. Retired foresters have filed writ petitions challenging its constitutionality. Serving foresters have mostly obstructed the granting of forest rights. A much needed forest governance reform has been blocked. The proposed policy changes point in exactly the wrong direction. The draft NFP 2018 goes back to promoting production forestry at the cost of local livelihoods and environmental goals, and ignoring the FRA. The draft amendment, without waiting for NFP 2018 to be ratified, goes many steps further: strengthening police powers without strengthening public oversight, promoting a new category

called production forest without justifying its need and not replacing the outdated categories of RF and PF with CFRs. A bureaucracy that has been the biggest landlord in the country will not give up these sweeping powers willingly. Perhaps a beginning can be made if they recognize the colonial heritage that they inherited. Democratic decentralization can, however, only come about through wider pressure, and a public understanding of its logic is an essential first step.



Sharachchandra Lele is distinguished fellow in environmental policy and governance, ATREE, Bengaluru. Views expressed are personal.

Topics

Forest Policy



Niti Aayog asks scooter, bike makers to draw up plan for EVs

2 min read 22 Jun 2019

Niti Aayog officials met with executives from companies including Bajaj Auto, Hero MotoCorp and TVS late on Friday

The think-tank had recommended that only electric models of scooters and motorbikes with engine capacity of more than 150cc must be sold from 2025

[Read Full Story](#)