

Poverty is the cause for Environmental degradation?

Joy M. Monteiro

January 25, 2012

To address the question, it is necessary to define the terms in the statement. Defining poverty or who is poor is always a problem, and we will assume there is some 'gold standard' definition of poverty. Environmental degradation can be defined as that state where the harvesting of environmental resources occurs at a rate greater than the environment's capacity to replenish them.

Thus, the question boils down to whether the poor drain environmental resources faster than they are replenished. Any person who has visited and observed tribal settlements (the 'poor' people near places rich in biodiversity) will tell you that this is an unlikely state of affairs. The poor, especially those highly dependent on nature's bounty for their sustenance normally are careful about usage of natural resources and are well aware of cycles of replenishment.

But is also a known fact that poaching and 'illegal' logging in nature reserves is conducted by the tribals themselves, who use their knowledge of the forest for these purposes. So, how does one reconcile these two seemingly contradictory facts about reality?

The answer, to me, lies in the relationship between nature conservation in India (or elsewhere in the world) and its impacts, both natural and social. It is best to start with Indira Gandhi herself, and place her speech in a historical context. Indira Gandhi was a keen nature lover from very early on, and like most privileged, urban people, her love for nature derived from aesthetics rather than any notion of necessity.

When Indira Gandhi came to power, she had as friends and counsellors very similar type of privileged, urban lovers of nature who had very little idea about the realities of conservation at the ground level (excepting a few people like Bahuguna). For these enthusiasts, which included the noted ornithologist Salim Ali, conservation of 'beautiful' wilderness took precedence over other matters such as social justice or abuse of political power. This shows from their support of Indira Gandhi's government, even though it is now considered a black mark in the history of independent India's political economy.

Thus, Indira's statement can be viewed as concern for poor, but by placing the blame squarely on poverty, she confused the proximate cause for the ultimate cause. This can be understood from her aesthetic sensibilities about 'unspoiled nature', which she shared with many people around the world, especially in the

West, from whom she received support and accolades for her strong measures for wildlife conservation (which, regardless of what she said in Stockholm, did not really bother about social impacts. This shows that grand statements do not always translate to equivalent actions on the ground).

The aesthetic's ethos goes as follows: Man can only live in a parasitic relationship with nature. Nature should be protected for its own sake (and the enjoyment of urban trekkers!). The only way Nature can be protected is by banning all human activity and making a large piece of wilderness completely human free. This profoundly anti-human way of looking at conservation informed the early conservation activities in India, starting from Indira.

While it is true that poaching is done by tribals, it is necessary to see why it is so. It is not due to the fact that they are poor. They have been poor by whatever definition for centuries or millenia. It has however been noticed that the so-called illegal activities by tribals increase after they lose control over the land they have used for ages, simply because some person sitting in a city hundreds of kilometers away wants to see greenery and wild animals once a year. Lack of ownership leads to alienation from the land and deprives them of incentives to conserve nature.

But just these facts do not account for environmental degradation, since it is unlikely that the tribal will suddenly start consuming natural resources at a rate high enough to outstrip natural replenishment rates. This has to be accounted for consumption from external entities whose conventional rate of consumption is orders of magnitude larger than the 'poor' tribal. Thus, while the apparent poverty of the tribal is the proximate cause of environmental degradation, the ultimate cause is the growing commercialisation and consumption in the Indian urban centres, whose members ironically are the most vocal in the conservation debate.

Thus, the statement 'Poverty is the cause of environmental degradation' is not as straightforward as it sounds, and can be misinterpreted (indeed, routinely is) to call for removal of the poorest people from their natural ways of life and make them more impoverished without the free gifts of nature which used to sustain them. The focus should be on the centres of intensive consumption which lie very far from the actual hotspots of biodiversity, which on the one hand, use natural resources at unsustainable rates, and on the other, destroy the lives of those who have had nothing to do with the process of commercialization of natural wealth.