

Uttarakhand forest fires: The Need to Encourage Local Participation



Source: Indian Express

In This Issue

LEAD ESSAY:

- Uttarakhand forest fires: The Need to Encourage Local Participation

HEADLINE OF THE WEEK:

- US Religious Freedom Panel Slams Modi Government for India's 'Minority Policy'

SECTION 1: GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

- **Education:** Researching Education
- **Environment:** Permanently Fighting Drought; Climate Change to Shrink Economies by Mid-Century as Water Woes Grow
- **Agriculture:** First Make Farmers Part of the Value Chain

SECTION 2: INDIA AND WORLD

- **East and South East Asia:** Why is Poverty on the Rise in Japan?
- **Americas:** Why Stop Trump Movement is not Working?

SECTION 3: OPINIONS/ BOOKS

- **Opinions:** For Statesmanship and Sanity

Lead Essay

Uttarakhand forest fires: The Need to Encourage Local Participation

Forests have become a central issue in the Indian political economy in the last one year, spanning a range of issues including India's climate change commitments at Paris and the issue of alienation of local communities from forest land. All of these areas, combined with the laxity of policymakers and systemic irresponsibility, have played a role in the recent forest fires in the state of Uttarakhand. The need of the hour is to acknowledge the deeper causes behind such disasters, undertake political responsibility and search for long-term solutions.

Forest fires in India

Forest fires are caused as a result of a chemical reaction between oxygen, fuel and heat. In themselves, forest fires do not have the negative connotations they have come to acquire today. For a long time, they have been used by local communities, globally, to clear land for fresh crops. The fires would get extinguished naturally. In case of forest fires, oxygen, especially in summer months during high temperatures, reacts with plants to cause wildfires. Increasing dryness due to rising temperatures compromises the ability of trees to retain moisture and also causes changes in the kind of trees that grow, thereby leading to forest fires. The natural process is directly linked to soaring temperatures. It is set to keep worsening as a result of climate change.

With exacerbating climate change scenario, this will increase sea levels and hasten the melting of glaciers, especially the vulnerable Himalayan glaciers bordering India. According to a UNEP report, global warming will increase the likelihood of forest fires, as intensified occurred about a decade back in Russia, southern Europe and California. A survey of forest conditions in Russia suggests that a 2°C rise in temperature could increase the area affected by forest fires by a factor of between one and a half and two.¹ Last year alone, by September 2015, forest fires had consumed nearly 9 million acres of land in the US.²

In India, the prevalent drought conditions throughout the country have worsened the onset of forest fires. Uttarakhand has not witnessed rains since the last monsoon. This leaves very little moisture in the soil and helps to kindle fire at the very first instance, like even leaving behind an un-extinguished cigarette.

In India, the overall condition is worsening, with the year 2016 being witness to the maximum number of forest fire incidents since the last four years. In December 2015, the environment ministry released the India State of Forest Report. According to the report, India's forest cover is 701,673 sq. km which is about 21.34% of the country. As per the Forest Survey of India data, almost 50% of India's forest areas are fire prone. The major forest fire season in the country varies from February to June, with estimates that about 6.17% of Indian forests are subjected to severe fire damage annually.³

¹ UNEP 2009.

² Arnold 2015.

³ Agarwal and Mehta 2016.

Lead Essay

Forest fires in India



Scroll.in

Data: Ministry of Environment Source: Scroll.in

Recently, forest fires engulfed the states of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and, to a lesser extent, Jammu and Kashmir, with the worst loss of lives and property being reported from Uttarakhand. Of the 13 worst-affected districts of Uttarakhand, Pauri, Nainital and Tehri are the centres of destruction.

These areas, besides the other forests of Uttarakhand, are covered with the inflammable chir pine trees, whose needles when burnt, even accidentally, cause raging fires. This is so because pine, according to experts, quickly overtakes the entire area around itself. Its resin-rich leaves are like fire traps in the heat. With its needle-like leaves are acidic, not adding to the moisture in the soil and preventing other plant life to grow around itself.

Local ecology and politics of development

Despite its many disadvantages, the forests of Uttarakhand are increasingly becoming peopled with the commercially-viable pine trees. Unlike the earlier decades, where local villagers used to clear land for agricultural purposes and the forest fires would be a part of the natural ecosystem process, the forest fires of today are a direct result of human greed. Globally, countries of South-east Asia, especially Indonesia, have seen the worst kind of such fires in recent times, due to its interest in palm-oil cultivation and other forest-clearing agricultural practices.

Forest fires ensure the release of immense amounts of black carbon into the atmosphere contributing to emissions, while the destruction of forests destroys the green sinks that absorb the carbon dioxide, fuelling climate change. This is an entirely intentional man-made process, which has resulted from natural-resource exploitation for commercial purposes.

In the state of Uttarakhand, this process has played out in the name of development, through both legal and illegal means, involving timber mafia, commercial builders, and the collusion of local villagers. Illegally, timber mafia has found a viable way, through forest fires, to ensure the killing of trees so that villagers are forced to sell their timber. Commercial builders and prospective home-owners find a convenient way of clearing the land of forests so that they can build their commercial and residential buildings. Villagers, though to a much lesser extent and out of necessity and lack of awareness, seek to use dead fuel-wood for cooking and warming purposes.

According to resident experts of the state, the regular man-made fires were a direct consequence of a 1981 policy ban on felling of trees that are 1000 meters above the sea-level, leading to increasing destruction of forests.

This has encouraged the extermination of wildlife over a period of time, the gradual destruction of the traditional humid and evergreen broadleaf forests of Uttarakhand and given way to chir pine forests instead, leading to the drying up of several water springs and local lakes in the areas near Nainital. This year, particularly, the water level has been exceptionally low, and with the added necessity of IAF helicopters lifting water from lakes to douse fires, the water scarcity has reached acute proportions. The phase-out of broadleaf forests has also led to unmitigated flood disasters, like the one in the state in 2013, due to excess monsoon.

Lead Essay

For, broadleaf forests had traditionally provided the dense canopy of leaves that filter the inrush of monsoon rains and helped to reinvigorate lakes and water springs as well. They also provided humus to the soil, besides being the source of fodder, food, fuel, medicine and other local requirements. This is no longer the case.

According to a local expert, “all this changed with the growing population and European ideas applied to the exploitation of Himalayan forests. A rising population meant greater pressure on forests and European forestry meant entire hillsides were cleared for timber and replanted with commercially useful species, generally chir pine.”⁴

Unviable policy solutions

The policy solutions that have been advocated for the protection of forests have, so far, been unviable. They reflect the imprint of ideas that remain unengaged with the local ecosystem. It is akin to the government policy on Compensatory Afforestation through the CAMPA bill –a mere technical measure that shows, on paper, that Afforestation is being undertaken, even as the forest land rights of numerous local and tribal communities are being violated, by forcibly planting trees on that land. Similar is the case with a global initiative like REDD+ (Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation), which has violated the rights of innumerable indigenous people world-over, especially in the rich forests of the Amazon.

All this is being done in the name of achieving of climate change targets. India’s climate policy prominently spells out that it plans to increase the forest cover to create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 Gigaton of carbon dioxide equivalent. But what kind of Afforestation is being done? There is only a sporadic increase in forest cover in some states, like MP and Chhattisgarh, and a decline in others, like Uttarakhand. The reason for this random coverage is the lack of a central policy on sustainability of forests. Being undertaken so far are only sporadic Afforestation efforts. Since 1995, the funds being channeled for plantations in Uttarakhand are more than sufficient to ensure an adequate forest cover.

Yet, the policy is indiscriminate –or deliberately obtuse –on what kind of plantations should be done. It only encourages pine tree plantations that neither help in times of floods nor prevent forest fires, besides encroaching upon the land of local villagers for commercial ends. As an expert points out, “the government tries to pass off plantations as forests”⁵, while the actual generation of traditional forests would require no funds at all.

Recommendations

A series of solutions have been voiced and lessons learnt in the wake of the Uttarakhand crisis:

First, there should be efforts to shift chir pine trees back to hillsides, so that broadleaf forests can be allowed to re-grow.

Second, the process of re-establishing the natural ecosystem balance should be protected from the vested interests, by prosecuting the timber mafia and ensuring that only legal allowances are given to commercial builders.

Third, at the institutional level, we have only a rough estimate of the area affected by forest fires this year viz. 1900 hectares of land. India has very poor data regarding forest fire and damages caused by them. Losses like carbon sequential capability, soil moisture and nutrient losses due to forest fire are very difficult to be ascertained but are of utmost importance for environmental conservation.⁶

⁴ Smetacek 2016.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Agarwal and Mehta 2016.

Lead Essay

Fourth, encourage community participation in disaster management, through the strengthening of the Forest Rights Act. According to environmentalists, now the local communities have become so alienated from their forest land that their participation is next to nil, while earlier they would actively collaborate with the authorities to douse fires.

Finally, we need to explore if any international lessons can be learnt from countries like US and Canada in fighting the fires, since they have borne the brunt of increasingly worsening wildfires over decades. The raging wildfire in Fort McMurray in Canada is predicted to take months to fully extinguish even now. Even though the government has rejected the offer for international help, the action plan has so far engaged with deploying fire-fighters, medical aid and transport and shelter facilities to enhance coordination. These are all post-disaster management measures. But their success has been remarkable.

Even as the Indian government struggled to control Uttarakhand forest fires, the Canadian government successfully swung into action to deal with a fire that had, in less than a week, destroyed nearly all of Fort McMurray's establishments and vegetation, by evacuating millions of people through superior deployment of its armed and civilian personnel and defense technology. Indian government's response to disasters even when it has been reactive has reflected policy alienation from the ground reality. The current government has not done anything besides budgeting – mere talk of facts and figures and allocation of money. It is ostensibly planning to spend nearly Rs 41,000 crore to enhance India's green cover from the current 21.34% to 33%, with the states will getting access to 90 per cent of the money — generated from the fees paid by private companies since 2006 to the Government of India for allowing them to set up projects in forest areas⁷, such as CAMPA.

Through decades of wildfires in the US, the country has evolved an unparalleled action plant which consists of five key elements viz. clearly defined roles and responsibilities; developing and assessing capabilities; effective coordination and collaboration among relevant stakeholders; accountability and periodic evaluation of and reporting on these coordinated efforts.⁸ At the same time, researchers are also exploring the potential of natural shrub-lands that grow alongside forests and that have started developing in the wake of forest fires, but which also burn less frequently than forests.⁹

According to studies, current US efforts to develop national policies on fuels and fire include the administration's initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which the House of Representatives passed in the summer of 2003 to implement the administration's proposal. However, these efforts focus on the short-term treatment of forest fuels rather than on developing a comprehensive national policy on fuels and fire management and identifying the scientific and social elements of such a policy.¹⁰

A long-term solution that has emerged in the US is that the government should invest in the expensive and time-consuming process of managing forests by removing the dense undergrowth that makes them more fire-prone. Similar proposals, as we have seen above, have been voiced in the context of Uttarakhand. What is needed is the political will to follow through with them.

Prepared by:
Garima Sharma

Bibliography

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gandhi 2016.

⁹ Carroll 2016.

¹⁰ Franklin and Agee 2003.

Lead Essay

Agarwal, Mayank, and Nikita Mehta. *Livemint*. May 2, 2016.

<http://www.livemint.com/Politics/pzqeyf4y9sKu52DDbXMKcI/Understanding-the-Uttarakhand-forest-fire.html>

(accessed May 9, 2016).

Arnold, Catherine. *Nature World News*. September 23, 2015.

<http://www.natureworldnews.com/articles/16959/20150923/wildfires-decrease.htm> (accessed May 7, 2016).

Carroll, Matt. *Phys.org*. April 11, 2016. <http://phys.org/news/2016-04-severe-forest-shrubland-california.html> (accessed May 10, 2016).

Franklin, Jerry f., and James K. Agee. *Issues in Science and Technology*. 2003. <http://issues.org/20-1/franklin/> (accessed May 10, 2016).

Gandhi, Rohit. *Daily News & Analysis*. May 9, 2016. <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/column-will-forest-fires-continue-to-burn-and-pollute-india-2210477> (accessed May 10, 2016).

Smetacek, Peter. *Scroll.in*. May 2, 2016. <http://scroll.in/article/807517/the-uttarakhand-forests-werent-always-burning-this-is-how-we-started-the-fires> (accessed May 8, 2016).

UNEP. *Vital Forest Statistics*. UN Report, Nairobi: United Nations Environment Programme, 2009.

Headlines

US Religious Freedom Panel Slams Modi Government for India's 'Minority Policy'

(Abantika Ghosh, *The Indian Express*, May 01, 2015)

The 2015 annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has slammed the NDA government for its "minority policy" and expressed concern about "Ghar Wapsi" incidents. However, it has conceded that PM Narendra Modi's statement on religious tolerance at a Christian religious meet is a "positive development."

In its recommendations, USCIRF has said: "Integrate concern for religious freedom into bilateral contacts with India, including the framework of future Strategic Dialogues, at both the federal and provincial level, and encourage the strengthening of the capacity of state and central police to implement effective measures to prohibit and punish cases of religious violence and protect victims and witnesses..." It also asked the US government to urge the Indian government to press states that have adopted anti-conversion laws to repeal or amend them to conform with internationally recognised human rights standards.

Read More: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/us-religious-freedom-panel-slams-indias-minority-policy/>

Date Accessed: 02.05.2016

Governance & Development

EDUCATION

Researching Education

(Anurag Behar, *The Livemint*, April 28, 2016)

How can a teacher be effective as an educator? How does she tackle the issue of multiple languages? How does she provide required support to those children facing the most acute deprivation? What are her struggles in doing all this, day after day, for years? What support does she require and how can we make that happen? How can she deal more effectively with the local community? These are some of the most important questions. That's because education in India will improve or stagnate in the reality of the teacher and her students.

Read More: <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/bYZZrRAoW6ZLJrw5mWcpMN/Researching-education.html>

Date Accessed: 28.4.2016

ENVIRONMENT

Permanently Fighting Drought

(Sunita Narain, *Business Standard*, April 24, 2016)

I write this as the country once again reels under crippling drought. But this drought is different. In the 1990s, it was the drought of a poor India. This 2016 drought is of richer and more water-guzzling India. This classless drought makes for a crisis that is more severe and solutions more complex. But it is also clear that drought in India is not a new phenomenon, nor is it going away soon. The fact is that the severity and intensity of drought is not about lack of rainfall, it is about the lack of planning, foresight and criminal neglect. Drought is man-made. Let's be clear about this.

In today's India, water demand has increased manifold. Today, cities drag water from miles away for their consumption. Industries, including power plants, take what they can from where they can. The water they use is returned as sewage or waste water. Then farmers grow commercial crops - from sugarcane to banana. They dig deeper and deeper into the ground to pump water for their irrigation needs. This modern day drought of rich India has to be combined also with another development: climate change. The fact is that rain is becoming even more variable, unseasonal and extreme. This will only exacerbate the crisis. It is time we understood that as drought is man-made, it does not have to stay. It can be reversed. It can be managed. But then we really need to get our act together.

Read More: http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/sunita-narain-permanently-fighting-drought-116042400687_1.html

Date Accessed: 02.05.2016

Climate Change to Shrink Economies by Mid-Century as Water Woes Grow

(*Hindustan Times*, May 04, 2016)

Economies across large swathes of the globe could shrink dramatically by mid-century as fresh water grows scarce due to climate change, the World Bank reported on Tuesday.

Global warming can cause extreme floods and droughts and can mean snowfall is replaced by rain, with higher evaporation rates, experts say. It also can reduce mountain snow pack that provides water, and the melting of inland glaciers can deplete the source of runoff, they say. Also, a rise in sea level can lead to saltwater contaminating groundwater.

"When we look at any of the major impacts of climate change, they one way or the other come through water, whether it's drought, floods, storms, sea level rise," Richard Damania, World Bank lead economist and lead author of the report, told reporters in a telephone conference.

Fresh water shortages could take a toll on sectors from agriculture to energy, the World Bank said. "Water is of course at the centre of life, but it's also at the centre of economic activity," Damania said.

Governance & Development

Water scarcity would not have the same impact worldwide, and Western Europe and North American economies would likely be spared, according to the World Bank models. But rising economies such as China and India could be hard hit, it said.

Read More: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/business/climate-change-to-shrink-economies-by-mid-century-as-water-woes-grow-world-bank/story-WSHbqt3pfOPQXJqmYMNUoM.html>

Date Accessed: 05.05.2016

AGRICULTURE

First Make Farmers Part of the Value Chain

(S.S Gill, *The Tribune*, April 28, 2016)

The dominant reason for farmers' distress is their transformation from subsistence farming to commercial/capitalist farming and the small size of holdings. Commercial farming has induced the farmers to produce for selling in the market and resort to specialised production based on the inputs acquired from the market. One of the essential conditions for making farmers a part of the value chain is to develop farmers' groups by cooperative farming and cooperative marketing, formation of self-help groups, group cultivation and farmers' companies broadly referred to as farmer producer organisations (FPOs). It is through FPOs that farmers, especially the small and marginal ones, can be included in the value chain and their areas of activities expanded.

Read More: <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/first-make-farmers-part-of-the-value-chain/228803.html>

Date Accessed: 29.4.2016

India and World

EAST AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Why is Poverty on the Rise in Japan?

(Noah Smith, *The Livemint*, April 29, 2016)

The stereotype of Japan as a low-poverty country isn't accurate. It's true that Japan had relatively few poor people—and was a very equal society—as recently as the early 1980s. But since then, the poverty rate has risen relentlessly. Japan defies our usual stories for the causes of poverty, especially regarding the increase in the percentage of poor people since the 1980s. That means that many of the poverty solutions being suggested on both the right and the left might be of dubious efficacy.

Read More: <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/11RrvYhcGLkMH0MUtNcTTM/Why-is-poverty-on-the-rise-in-Japan.html>

Date Accessed: 29.4.2016

AMERICAS

Why Stop Trump Movement is not Working?

(Anthony J. Gaughan, *Catch News*, April 27, 2016)

So why hasn't the "Stop Trump" movement worked? The reason is because the Republican party is changing before our eyes. In the modern era, Republicans have traditionally embraced [three core ideas](#): social conservatism, libertarian economic policies, and the aggressive use of American military power abroad. But none of those ideas have resonated with Republican voters this year.

Read More: <http://www.catchnews.com/international-news/why-the-stop-trump-movement-isn-t-working-1461763588.html>

Date Accessed: 29.4.2016

Opinions / Books

OPINIONS

For Statesmanship and Sanity

(Nitin Desai, *The Business Standard*, April 27, 2016)

A narrow nationalism rooted in an upper-caste view of Hindu culture will be a disaster for a society that needs to reduce inequalities and discrimination and an economy that is increasing its global reach. Given the rich diversity of religion, language and ethnicity that is our strength, we need a civic nationalism which every Indian can espouse. To be an Indian must simply mean that you have the right of citizenship, nothing more and nothing less. The only loyalty that our nationalism should demand is to the letter and spirit of our Constitution, nothing more and nothing less.

Read More: http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/nitin-desai-for-statesmanship-and-sanity-116042701278_1.html

Date Accessed: 28.4.2016

Issue Coordinator: Ms. Garima Sharma

Connect with RGICS at: info@rgics.org; www.rgics.org



Disclaimer: This document has been prepared by the RGICS staff and has not been seen by the Trustees of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF). Further, the views presented in this document in no way reflect the views of the RGF Trustees.

To unsubscribe, please write to us at info@rgics.org