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OPINION

Inaction defines India's Story



Ashish Kothari wonders about New Delhi's credentials for hosting the biodiversity meet

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THIS OCTOBER, India will host possibly the largest environmental gathering in its history. Over 10,000 representatives from different governments, civil society and other sectors from 200 countries will discuss matters relating to biodiversity, at the 11th Conference of Parties (COP11) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), in Hyderabad.

The Indian government is gearing up to showcase itself as one of the world leaders in biodiversity conservation. Publications and exhibits are being prepared to prove how India is doing much in these arenas. At this juncture, it is instructive to look at both history and current events to ask ourselves: are India's claims to global leadership in biodiversity really valid?

Between 2000 and 2003, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) received a million dollar grant from the Global Environment Facility (GEF), through

the UNDP, to prepare the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). Such NBSAPs are a requirement for every country that is party to the CBD. The MoEF commissioned the civil society group Kalpavriksh, to coordinate the process, which in turn set up a Technical and Policy Core Group (TPCG) consisting of civil society and government experts for guidance.

Over the four-year period, the TPCG coordinated one of the world's biggest environmental planning exercises. Through more than 100 organisations and individuals across the country, it elicited participation from local communities, scientific institutions, government agencies, students and teachers, the armed forces, corporate sector, journalists and lawyers, and other walks of life, through workshops and seminars, public hearings, yatras, biodiversity festivals, student events, and media outreach. Over 50,000 people took part in the process, providing inputs on the biological, social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of biodiversity. Detailed action plans were not only produced for every state and union territory, but also for 20 local sites (villages, towns, river valleys), 10 eco-regions (large landscapes cutting across states), and 14 themes (such as wildlife, agricultural biodiversity, health and biodiversity, economic values, cultural values). All these were synthesised into the

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draft national plan (labelled the Final Technical Report). This plan also took into account all previous related documents, such as the Macrostrategy on Biodiversity (1999), and the National Wildlife Action Plan (2002).

Through the four-year period the MoEF was gungho about the process, showcasing it proudly in international circles. The UNDP cited it as a model for other countries to follow. And then, suddenly, there was a complete volte-face.

In early 2004, the ministry said the Final Technical Report (NBSAP-FTR) could not become the NBSAP. At first, it gave no reason. When repeatedly pressed, it said that in mid-2004, a committee under Dr Raman Sukumar (Indian Institute of Science) had found the NBSAP-FTR "for the major part scientifically invalid". When asked by Kalpavriksh, Dr Sukumar denied this, saying he had only found some factual errors and pointed to a couple of recommendations that appeared biased. In response to a Parliament question, the ministry said the NBSAP-FTR's statements and recommendations could be 'embarrassing' in international circles.

Since 1991, Indian policies on economic reforms have sidelined environmental concerns. The hard-fought gains of the 1970s and 1980s (including new policies and laws on forests, wildlife, environment protection, water and air pollution, and the creation of a dedicated ministry) have been increasingly diluted, or sidestepped, in the blind pursuit of economic growth. The rates of mineral and seafood extraction, and diversion of forest land, have dramatically shot up. Land grab has become commonplace everywhere in the country, mostly benefitting the rich and the corporate sector. Studies have shown how we have already crossed the limits of ecological sustainability, and are now exploiting other countries (indicated by the increasing colonisation of lands in Africa by Indian companies, aided by the Indian government, such as 3,50,000 hectares by Karuturi Global in Ethiopia).

IN THIS scenario, any document questioning the model of growth is going to be anathema to the government. Especially, when it advocates fundamental changes in economic planning and political governance to give communities much greater say. In a detailed 300-page document, the NBSAP-FTR laid out actions for integrating biodiversity into all economic sectors, for providing communities powers and capacities to manage their biological resources, for converting rural and urban areas into sustainable and equitable, and so on. The same 'neoliberal' logic has come in the way of India taking any kind of bold leadership role at the just-concluded Rio+20. There was little evidence that the 100+ heads of state gathered in Rio felt alarmed by the ecological crisis that we are witnessing (having crossed the limits of what the earth can provide and absorb, and pushing thousands of species to the brink of extinction). Each was concerned more about its own narrow nationalistic interests, and very few displayed to the global consciousness so desperately needed to save the earth. India could have. But it did not. As an Open Letter issued by several civil society organisations at Rio stated, the Indian prime minister could have risen to the occasion, he could have taken a global lead in urging for bold actions towards a saner future for both nature and humanity, but of course in order to do so his government would have to demonstrate similar action back home.

The MoEF is reportedly producing a revised NBSAP to present at COP11. I am told it will focus on how various economic sectors can integrate biodiversity issues. This is undoubtedly a worthwhile exercise, but unless it builds on what the NBSAP process already did, it will be yet another wasted exercise. In charge of the revision is the Chairman of the National Biodiversity Authority, P Balakrishna, a serious fellow with genuine intent. But will his bosses, from MoEF up to the PMO, allow anything of concrete significance to emerge? We can only wait and see. It does not inspire confidence that forest-dwellers, fishers, pastoralists, craftspersons — those sections of Indian society that should have the maximum say in any such planning — have so far not been involved in any meaningful consultations relating to the COP11.

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