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Forest governance needs more than tinkering at the edges

The crisis of forest governance is not primarily one of insufficient technology or coordination at the district level, but of authority seized by the wrong hands for the wrong tasks. What is needed is not simplistic modernising but revamping forest governance

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There is growing agreement that India's forests face a crisis of governance. Sanjay Kumar, in his recent article, ('The Aravalli verdict is stayed, but its signal for forest governance is unmistakable') diagnoses the bottleneck to be the overburdening of the divisional forest officer (DFO) — the key field-level executive in the forest bureaucracy holding charge over an area comparable to a district. The DFO is indeed handling a widening set of responsibilities, including managing human-wildlife conflict, fire prevention, afforestation, recommending whether forests may be diverted for developmental projects, facilitating the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) and so on. Therefore, Kumar's call to move from slow, file-driven control to faster, evidence-driven operations has intuitive appeal. Yet, this framing distracts from the real problem: Forest governance does not fail only because it is slow or siloed. It fails

primarily because the institutional design of forest departments (FD) does not match socio-ecological realities and ignores its own colonial history.

DFOs — many roles, little legitimacy

The problem is not just that a DFO is overburdened or under-resourced. The role itself is stretched across functions that do not sit comfortably together (and, in many cases, need not sit with the FD at all). The FD, set up by a colonial regime to take over and exploit the forests of India and hence given police powers, has morphed into a colossus that also conserves wildlife, operates tourism, controls minor forest produce (MFP) trade, engages in participatory forestry and welfare schemes, while also regulating forest use, research and diversion. However, the foundation of democratic and credible governance is the separation of roles. When the same department regulates forest use, profits from it, and polices violations, conflicts of interest arise. The DFO's portrayal as a neutral crisis manager obscures this institutional reality. Many of these functions are not intrinsic to conservation or protection but have been added through bureaucratic expansionism.

A deeper problem is the institutionally embedded, technocratic assumptions about forests and forest-dependent people. India's forest lands are not pristine wildernesses or silvicultural playgrounds but were shaped through longstanding human use and modification. Beginning with the colonial takeover of forests, these interactions were heavily proscribed, forcing people to eke out livelihoods at the margins of legality. Treating the FD as the sole guardian of forests (and people as interlopers, wasteful users or welfare subjects) concentrates authority without corresponding legitimacy. It is ecologically and institutionally unviable because densely populated forest landscapes cannot be managed by centralised agencies.

The solution lies not in asking the FD to do more, or to do the same things differently, but in devolving everyday forest governance to local institutions that are accountable to the community, continuously present, and directly affected by outcomes.

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Forest Rights Act is the governance alternative

Kumar rightly observes that the FRA has changed the grammar of governance, but he vastly understates its significance. The Act did not add a task to the DFO's portfolio, but in fact has reduced it drastically. By recognising community forest rights (CFR) and vesting managerial authority in the gram sabha, the FRA devolves the primary responsibility for production and protection much below the district level. Gram sabhas can manage forests in a much more contextual and adaptive manner, enable a full share of MFP revenues to communities, and handle small offences and disputes locally, discharging the DFO from various routine and field duties. And by shifting from manager to regulator and facilitator, the department gets a narrower but more legitimate mandate of protecting the wider public interest in forests.

Even in wildlife-rich areas, where public interest is heightened, exclusionary, top-down control has endangered livelihoods without consistent conservation outcomes. Co-management — gram sabhas and the FD undertaking planning and operations at a landscape level through formal joint decision-making arrangements — is a viable

alternative, implicitly required by the FRA, and now explicitly proposed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. While a clear community role will strengthen conservation, community-managed eco-tourism can offset any necessary modifications to rights for improving wildlife habitats.

Finally, so-called developmental requirements for the diversion of forest land often constrain the ability of officials to raise environmental concerns in the face of political and economic pressures. Reforms focused merely on speed and coordination aggravate this danger. Today, community resistance is the last line of defence against environmentally damaging projects, but has been systemically disregarded. Restructured forest governance must put gram sabhas at the frontline of decision-making about the exploitation of natural resources.

Structural flaws need addressing

Kumar's recommendation of technomanagerial reforms (hotspot identification, geo-evidence protocols, dashboards, etc.) can improve monitoring, but when layered onto unchanged accountability structures, they risk becoming coercive instruments. "Proof-of-work" that is validated through upward reporting turns into defensive compliance and constrains adaptive responses. Downward accountability is, therefore, necessary and demands different metrics: Integration of community forest management plans into district strategies, pro-rata allocation of funds and resources for forest protection and management to gram sabhas, safeguarding community consent in diversion decisions, and transparent feedback loops. These changes may take longer, but they are more durable.

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Similarly, coordination across government departments is important, but it must be guided by and responsive to the priorities and decisions of the gram sabha. The issue is not about the availability of resources, but who makes decisions about how they are used. Too often, FD budgets are spent in ways that generate little local benefit, while the involvement of other departments in forest lands is strictly controlled.

The crisis of forest governance is not primarily one of insufficient technology or coordination at the district level, but of authority seized by the wrong hands for the wrong tasks. What is needed is not simplistic modernising but revamping forest governance. The forest bureaucracy must shed its resistance to CFR, create a lean but agile departmental function, less blinkered by colonial legacies, to support community forest management, and prioritise discharging its regulatory and enforcement functions in a transparent and accountable manner.

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