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In India, forest rights means forest conservation

Shruti Agarwal writes: There is a need and the ecosystem to support forest rights in India.



On June 14, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the UN High-Level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought. He reiterated that India was on track to achieve land degradation neutrality by 2030, citing the example of the Banni grassland in Gujarat where the region's highly degraded lands were being restored and the livelihoods of pastoralists supported using what he termed a "novel approach."

One of Asia's largest tropical grasslands, Banni is home to great biological diversity and is the lifeline of its pastoralist communities. However, climate change and the invasion by *Prosopis juliflora* – a species that covers nearly 54 per cent of the grassland – have severely impacted its unique ecology. A study conducted earlier this year recognises that unless action is taken, Banni grassland is headed for severe fodder scarcity.

This is precisely what the Banni's pastoralist communities (Maldharis) have been doing for the past few years. They uproot *Prosopis* in the pre-monsoon period and when it rains, the native grass species' regenerate from their rootstock. Their endeavour needs to be supported.

Local communities applying their deep knowledge of the local ecology to become "decision-makers" in restoring their commons is indeed novel in India. However, the mandate for them to do so is not new. Through the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, adivasis and other traditional forest-dwelling communities, including pastoralists, are legally empowered to decide on the management and restoration of their community forest resources (CFR) and stop any activity that adversely impacts biodiversity or the local ecology.

Today – similar to the Banni grasslands – our forests are grappling with degradation, an important contributor to GHG emissions. More than 40 per cent of the forest cover is open, often degraded. India has committed to restore 26 million hectares of degraded forests and lands by 2030 under the Bonn pledge. As part of its Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement, it has also targeted creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes by 2030 through additional forest and tree cover.

Forest restoration is an important climate mitigation strategy. Beyond carbon sequestration, its benefits include biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. India's potential to remove carbon through forest restoration is among the highest in the Global South as per a 2020 study published in *Nature, Ecology and Evolution*. At 123.3 million, India also has the

greatest number of people living near areas with forest restoration opportunities (within 8km).

Initiatives to restore degraded landscapes are, however, not new to India. Be it social forestry in the 1970s, tree growers' cooperative societies in the 1980s, Joint Forest Management in the 1990s or the National Afforestation Programme and Green India Mission in the last two decades, studies have found them to have limited restoration benefits. These initiatives have drawn criticism for paying little attention to the land and forest tenure of local communities, failing to incorporate traditional ecological knowledge, and not assisting communities to receive the opportunities they desire from restoration.

By assigning rights to protect, manage and restore around 40 million hectare of forests to village-level democratic institutions, CFR rights under FRA tackle these issues. There are several cases of CFR rights enabling successful ecological restoration of forests, biodiversity conservation and food and livelihood security. The recognition of these rights, however, has happened at an extremely slow pace. Less than 5 per cent of the total potential area has been brought under CFR. In Banni too, title deeds formally recognising the CFR rights of the pastoralists are yet to be issued. Institutional support for CFR remains minimal.

There are compelling reasons for India to recognise and support CFR rights. Strong, peer-reviewed evidence from across the world shows that community forests with legally recognised rights are healthier and associated with lower deforestation rates, higher carbon storage and biodiversity compared to other forests. In its 2019 Special Report on Climate Change and Land, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change also noted that "land titling and recognition programmes, particularly those that

authorise and respect indigenous and communal tenure, can lead to improved management of forests, including for carbon storage.”

Global attention is on ecosystem restoration – the United Nations theme for the decade. India’s restoration commitments are amongst the most ambitious in the world. Its potential to benefit from forest restoration is also among the highest. It also has a legal framework – the Forest Rights Act – that facilitates an approach internationally acknowledged as essential for combating climate change. All that is needed now is to recognise and support community forest rights.

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