

The Greening of the Aravallis.

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The greening of the Aravallis is a dire and immediate necessity to restore the natural productivity of this eco-region as the home of millions of India's citizens and human beings with an inalienable right to a decent life with dignity. Beyond this, the Aravallis as the Great Western National Watershed controls the water regimes and hydrological health of Gujarat, Rajasthan and Western Madhya Pradesh with impact upon the livelihood and economy of these areas. Perhaps most critically, the Aravallis as the eastern rampart against the Great Afro-Asian Tropical Desert has the capacity to prevent the desertification of the sub-continent.

Beyond a mere slogan and wishful thinking, the Greening of the Aravallis means a highly complex and intricate movement involving identification, protection and regeneration of what remains careful land and water management, restoration of people's confidence in their own capacity and a stake in what exists and what can be recreated, grassroots community action with appropriate and adequate educational, administrative, financial and technological support, effective control and curbing of the destructive processes and provision of alternatives.

The whole of the ARAVALLIS REGION covers 100,000 sq.km with a population of 4 million directly dependent on it and another 25 million under its hydrological influence. As a hilly region 60-70% or 60-70,000 sq.km of the region should be under vegetation cover for proper ecological health. Today less than 10% is so protected. The difference defines the magnitude of the problem and the task of regeneration. This is not a static position. Deterioration - deforestation, soil erosion and desiccation - is proceeding at an alarming rate. Beyond a certain point the process will become irreversible and the result will be more or less permanent desertification. Perhaps we have a decade or so, till the end of this century to turn the tide of destruction.

It has to be recognised that the present situation is the consequence of three decades and more of greed motivated, profit-oriented planned and unplanned development in Rajasthan. During the course of which, the local and regional ecological balances and social modes of access, usage and control were disrupted. Communities were alienated from their resources which were taken away from them by statisation and privatisation and ruthlessly exploited for the short term benefit of a profligate elite. The local people thus dislodged became the cheap labour for this depredation and later themselves joined the predatory onslaught for sheer survival. These processes continue unabated.

This is the peculiar and vicious dilemma of the Aravallis as an inhabited region where now an adverse people-livestock-natural resources ratio poses a threat to its future. Yet people are a reality that cannot be wished away and they are too numerous to be shifted and resettled elsewhere or provided for by urbanisation-industrialisation. Their future has to be visualised in terms of the revitalised and regenerated resources base - land, water, vegetation - of the Aravallis and they have to become primary, forefront, grassroots actors in this restoration. This is the peculiar opportunity of the Aravallis whereby the seeming liabilities - degraded

resources and poor people - can be converted into assets. Even though there is over exploitation the people have not lost their sense of worth about their land. They are not prepared to abandon it. They still have capacity for disciplined, cooperative and controlled use of the resources. With proper stakes and inputs, they can make beginnings towards ecologically responsible and economically viable development for their own basic needs.

A people based 'Greening of the Aravallis' would require concrete measures in the following areas:

- a) Legislative and administrative action to restore the wastelands to the communities of the poor to be managed and developed by them.
- b) Adequate financial resource input as investment/reparation to enable repair, restoration and regeneration of the lands and for the provision of minimum livelihood, health and education needs.
- c) Network of support agencies and workers for initiating and promoting people-based planning and action using their own and new knowledge and technology in accord with the criteria of full employment, enhanced productivity, long term viability, local need satisfaction, ecological soundness and self-manageability.
- d) A monitoring and coordinating mechanism to ensure adherence to these criteria and timely action on various fronts.
- e) Enactment and strict enforcement of measures to prevent further wasteland formation, including fuel-wood saving and alternative fuel arrangements in ecology critical areas.

What can be done to make this happen and who is to do it? Clearly the above package requires action at different levels by a host of agencies and forces in society and in the state and business-industry sectors. There are no indications that on their own any of the organised mechanisms are willing or capable of reformulating and redirecting policies. Even though there is fragmented and sporadic awareness amongst individuals and agencies, and some initial planning has been carried out to define the character and magnitude of the Aravallis crisis, there has been no hard political or public commitment, sense of urgency or the social-ecological insight. This commitment, sense of urgency and crisis insight can be crystallised amongst a group of capable individuals who are deeply concerned and determined to address the problem until a solution gets under way. Such individuals are there in different professions and in different walks of life within and outside the state. They need to come together as an independent entity and address the issue in a deeply involved yet objective manner. They are the beginning and their thinking, studies, communication, policy reformation and pressurising can help to change the modes and direction.

Science and technology re-conceived in broad ecological, humanitarian and people-based terms have a crucial role to play in the Aravallis' greening. This task offers a unique opportunity for the re-discovery, revalidation and revitalisation of people's indigenous knowledge and techniques in agriculture, animal husbandry, land and water management, conservation, health care on family as well as a community basis. These practices and systems can be integrated with appropriate new technologies and scientific understanding. It must be understood that massive engineering and technology solutions, market oriented production and quick profit investment systems are not the answers to the Aravallis crisis.

Aravallis regeneration will result from myriads of small but sound protective, restorative and nurturing action in thousands of mini-watersheds by millions of people with their hands and with their head and heart.

In this people's movement a critical role has to be played by supportive field-based voluntary agencies who create awareness of the crisis, arouse a sense of hope and possibility, organise self-management arrangements, ensure initiate recovery of indigenous knowledge and techniques and introduce scientific understanding and new appropriate technologies. Very few existing agencies have this orientation and capability. One of the important early tasks is to bring these into being with the involvement of the new generation of educated professionals in partnership with local young people.

As indicated earlier in this crisis time is not on our side. We do not have eternity to solve this problem. History of the old world over the past 2500 years bears ample witness that Aravalli situation may become beyond redemption. The Shelian calamity of Africa may extend to Rajasthan and Gujrat which after all are the eastern Sahel. So we have to get moving. We who understand, are concerned and care about leaving a future with some hope for the coming generation.

Can it be done, is there a chance? No one knows, no one can know. But we can get started, work at it with all the will, the intelligence and resources at our command and leave the rest to that which has created us, taken us astray, given us the sense to see the danger and the ability to rectify.