Timber ban and its effect on the Himalayan rural women and rural energy

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Introduction
Degradation of mountain environments is a global phenomenon and the Himalayas represent one of the most endangered areas. The primary demands on the forest are precious; they include food, fuel wood, and other subsistence requirements (like timber, charcoal, resin, etc.). To protect these assets, on December 12 1996, the Supreme Court of India passed its momentous judgment with respect to the cutting of trees in Jammu and Kashmir and Tamilnadu. Later, when the extent of deforestation everywhere was recognised, this judgment was extended to include the north-eastern and other Himalayan states. Over-exploitation of forests has severe environmental consequences and in this context, the judgement banning the felling of trees and all wood based activities to conserve the country’s declining forest is a welcome decision. But it has a far-reaching impact especially on the tribal peoples of the Himalayas.

Changing forest cover
Due to over exploitation of forest assets, the Himalayan forests are failing to recover, leading to desertification (Figure 1). It was reported (Ives, et. al. 1989) that forest areas with crown cover of over 60% in the Central Himalayas accounts for only 4.4% of the whole area. Without any effective management, much of the Himachal Pradesh state in India has been heavily deforested, causing severe erosion. The Kashmir Valley also has been heavily cut down, allegedly due to cheap logging contracts awarded by corrupt bureaucrats.

It is debatable whether collection of fuelwood leads to deforestation or not. Moench and Bandyopadhyay (1986) conducted a comparative survey in Himalayan villages of the types of forest cover and land use, with the total village biomass consumption. From this, they estimated that, while total biomass productivity exceeds human consumption by a wide margin, there is a progressive loss in forest cover.

Effect of the ban on Himalayan women
For the tribal population of the Himalayan states, especially in the northeast, the ban (and its continuing operation) has caused untold misery. For indigenous communities, the forest has been an important source of livelihood, providing them not only with fuel, fodder, and timber but also food, fruit, and medicine. For thousands of years, the tribal people have lived in close association with the forest, and always considered it as an intimate companion. For poor tribal peoples, forest is equivalent to life. Many farmers used to sell trees from their forests, not only to buy seeds and fertilisers, but also to invest in houses or other assets. Rural

L’interdiction de prélever du bois et ses effets sur l’énergie et les femmes de l’Himalaya
Pour les populations tribales de l’Himalaya, l’interdit gouvernemental de prélever du bois a brusquement tari leur source de revenu. En effet la forêt leur fournissait non seulement le combustible mais aussi des aliments ainsi que des produits utilisés dans la médecine traditionnelle. La nouvelle législation a exacerbé les conditions de vie des populations qui éprouvent beaucoup de difficultés à s’ajuster au nouveau système.

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farmers had successfully integrated timber into their agricultural economy.

But a growing population and declining forest productivity has had a disastrous impact of forest sustainability. Low agricultural productivity, low incomes, low standards of living, and lack of proper infrastructure have resulted in population migration. Men moving away from the community in search of work has increased the workload on women. The womenfolk go to high pastures with the livestock, where they manage animal and plant resources. They walk further and further to collect biomass fuel, until a critical threshold is reached when more than two mandays (actually, womendays!) per week per family are needed to obtain the necessary supplies of biomass fuel. In many places, village forests have become so degraded that a woman has to spend up to several hours on a barefoot trek to haul back a day’s supply of fodder or biomass fuel weighing more than she does (Figure 2). Table 1 represents the plight of tribal women.

One of the traditional roles of hill men was timber-cutting and collection. Now they are not allowed to do this task, the burden of collecting residues or kerosene has shifted to the hill women, who are already overloaded with work. Every week women from remote villages have to undertake a long trip from their village to get kerosene for their kitchens. This in turn affects the nutritional intake of the families, as many households have been forced to replace meat and stews, which take a long time to cook, with dry foods, in order to save kerosene. Sometimes they eat only one meal per day; some hapless hill-dwelling women are pushed into road construction, a task they had previously avoided. As the availability of male labour is high, they can be exploited and there is a big possibility of getting harassed by their male colleagues.

**Effect of the ban in the northeastern Himalayan states**

It is reported that the timber ban has had a disastrous effect on access to rural energy in the north-eastern Himalayan states. Poor north-eastern Himalayan people are finding it difficult to meet their energy needs. Before the ban, wood energy was freely available to them from the abundant forest resources. Now they mainly depend on crop residues (which are scarce), and on kerosene, which is still costlier to them. Sometimes kerosene is unavailable and even when it is available, they have to travel long distances to get it. This sometimes leads to illegal felling and deforestation.

**Successful fuel subsidies**

On the other hand our research has found that the situation of Himachal, Uttarakhand, or Uttar Pradesh is quite different. Though these are wood-rich Himalayan states, the state governments are following some popular measures. Subsidies on LPG and kerosene have made them available on a large scale. Most of the villages near the main roads are well-supplied with LPG, where a good network and road conditions have made LPG available. Remote villages are not so fortunate and illegal felling and deforestation still continues there.

**Inappropriate technological solutions**

A series of measures was introduced to save wood fuel and increase energy efficiency. Passive solar energy devices, metal and ceramic wood burning stoves, ‘micro’ and ‘mini’ hydro-electric projects, and wind gener-
She requires quick meals with an affordable fuel, and to use that fuel she is prepared to endure any hardships. So the timber ban has certainly made these peoples' lives much worse. We, the authors, think these facts should be considered when energy policies affect rural women.

**The real forest exploiters**

Four years have gone by since the judgment was passed, but the Supreme Court has yet to recognise the real exploiters of the forests. The hill people themselves are really sensitive to forest sustainability and are the last ones to destroy the forest. Businessmen, with lease-holds on the forest, and who can appreciate only the needs of industry, are responsible for the indiscriminate cutting down of the forests. While the Supreme Court order has imposed severe restrictions on the cutting of trees by local communities, it has exempted contractors and companies that supply timber to government department and ministries. The Supreme Court is sensitive to the needs of industry, but it has failed to recognise the needs of local people. It is sad that still we are following the colonial legacy of revenue generation and centralization of resources.

**What should the Supreme Court or the Government do now?**

Paradoxically the Supreme Court has failed to acknowledge the tribal people's right to forest, which is their source of sustenance. In its enthusiasm to protect the environment, it has failed to comprehend the effect of its judgment. Excluding the people most affected by the judgement from any developmental policy is bound to be futile. The policy ignores the indigenous systems and especially it ignores women. Indigenous systems, in which women play a vital role, favour sustainability. Women have a vast knowledge and skills in resource use. They are particularly knowledgeable about seed varieties and storing techniques. Again, depriving the poor from using fuel wood undermines their capacity for existence. There are Van Panchayats in every Himalayan village, who are democratically elected/selected village bodies, which look after forests and the demands of specific village households. These bodies also permit/award a specific number of trees to each village household for particular requirements. ‘Van Panchayats’ are therefore the true guardians of the Himalayan forests. If the right of the forest is restored on them, then the energy problems experienced by poor hill peoples, and the plight of hill women will be alleviated.

**References**


