

plicit elaboration. It is hoped that the definition proposed here using genetic principle would provide desired clarification regarding the scope of two legislations and use of provisions under them for the protection of national heritage of useful plant biodiversity, where locals have played a significant role in their identification/development and conservation.

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Wastelands: is it time to rethink?

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Wastelands have recently been in news for a variety of reasons. When the Government of Tamil Nadu recently embarked upon an initiative to distribute 2.5 acres of land to the landless, the feasibility of 'sourcing land' was keenly discussed. Similar apprehensions were raised when establishment of satellite towns around cities like Chennai was mooted. To allay the fears, the Government declared that only wastelands and drylands would be acquired for the purpose. It was also mentioned that water resources, dwelling areas and forests would not be brought under the purview of this programme.

Tamil Nadu has 17303.29 sq. km of its land designated as wastelands, which is about 13.30 per cent of the total geographical area of the State¹, and it is rationalized that this quantum would easily meet the requirement of the Government. There are also suggestions that wastelands be utilized for establishing plantations, notably of *Jatropha*, for enhancing the prospects of the biofuel industry. While the need to move away from a fossil fuel based scenario to the more viable alternate energy initiatives is well taken, the increased focus on converting 'wastelands' into areas of biofuel plantations needs to be examined. For instance, it is being suggested that the wastelands in

Palani Hills, which is one of the last refuges for some of our endemic plants be planted with *Jatropha*, on a buy-back arrangement with the Indian Railways². In recent times, coastal areas, including those with small patches of mangroves, are also increasingly being left to be overrun by *Prosopis juliflora*, because of increased demand as fuel. These are also lands that have been classified as wastelands³. A five-year effort to protect a marsh of considerable ecological significance in south Chennai was hampered, because the marsh had been classified as a wasteland⁴.

There are apprehensions that 'wastelands' are at the risk of being reduced to a buzzword that appeals to donor agencies, along with the other well-entrenched notions such as 'involving local institutions, peoples' participation and gender equity'. But more worrying is the fact that we continue to cherish and practice the colonial legacy of land settlement and administration.

Wastelands are the remnants of the colonial construction of natural resources, which was primarily to foster an absolute control by the State over natural resources, notably land and minimize 'grey areas'. An effective imaginary disjuncture between the forest and agrarian landscapes was created by the Revenue

Settlement systems that the colonial administration enforced⁵. Strictly for reasons of management, the British used dichotomous classification and hence lands were categorized into forests and agricultural lands. Agricultural lands were further divided into productive and wastelands. An extension of this classification is reflected elsewhere too, with the ghats of peninsular India being classified as the Western and Eastern Ghats, forests being categorized into wet and dry forests, and people either belonged to castes or tribes.

Revenue settlement procedures that were followed in the Madras Presidency demonstrate this rather well. Until the advent of the British, village societies in south India were largely decentralized units, organized at the level of a *nadu*. The British however maintained that the conditions of the people was very unsatisfactory and a long series of governments, particularly under Tipu Sultan, had reduced the country into such a state that a rich farmer was nowhere to be found. It was also felt that the farmers were not earnest to pay taxes. With such assumptions, the British systematically subverted local systems of control and assumed absolute control by introducing revenue systems, chief of which were the Ryotwari and

Permanent Settlements⁶. The process of forest settlement was made possible by the enactment of the Madras Forest Act, 1882 which resulted in vast tracts of forest land being declared as reserved forests⁵.

While tracing the revenue history of Madras Presidency, Baden Powell⁵ distinguishes two periods, viz. early and modern settlements. While the early settlements were based largely on previous assessments, and encouraged territorial autonomy, the period that immediately preceded the establishment of the settlement department in 1858 witnessed the use of 'rigorous criteria' and involved the services of settlement and survey officers who mapped the lands. A broad distinction of occupied and unoccupied lands was made which, for the purposes of administration, was described as follows: occupied land was cultivated land and unoccupied land was uncultivated waste. While seemingly encouraging an increase of land under cultivation and individual ownership, the process of surveying was an exercise to claim 'wasteland' and bring it under State Control. Lands, excluding the forest tracts that were reserved, were classified into the following finer categories: patta, assessed dry and wet waste, unassessed waste and poromboke (revenue and forest)⁶. Assessed dry and wet wastelands were lands that were kept uncultivated until an official allotment was made by the Revenue Department. This category of land included a range of habitats such as marshes, seasonal wetlands, steep and rocky slopes, abandoned pasture lands, and lands under shifting cultivation. Poromboke lands were earmarked for communal uses.

At the field level, the fallacy of wastelands is well demonstrated. For instance, most wetlands that are classified as un-

assessed waste (wet) in Tamil Nadu are an inherent part of the agricultural systems, where seasonal cultivation of paddy takes place. Additionally, local people use the wetland to derive a number of benefits such as fodder, fish, raw material to make mats, baskets, etc. When such wetlands are part of the urban scenario, they are reclaimed often by dumping garbage and debris. The wastelands in the hilly areas, for instance Kolli hills or parts of Jawadi hills, are areas that are used for cultivating traditional food crops such as minor millets and beans, and in some instances, commercial horticultural crops. The agronomic practices followed for these areas are time tested and involve no significant external inputs. It is also a well-known fact that many wastelands are grazing grounds for human communities which are pastoral⁶.

The most critical aspect that we derive out of such observations is the recognition of the fact that traditionally, lands were not viewed only as service providers in a manner that is appealing to humans. That there are a host of ecological functions that these lands provide was realized in our early history. Early classification of lands by *Caraka*, *Kautilya* and *Kasyapa* was based on parameters such as soil quality and fertility, local climatic conditions, and uniqueness. A revenue system of land classification which categorized lands based on their soil quality was also in place and this is detailed in *Arthasasthra* and *Agnipurana*⁷. The much discussed categorization of landscapes in one of treatises of the Sangam literature (300 BC–AD 300), called *Tolkappiyam*, while recognizing degradation and desertification as a condition, does not attribute a non-use value to any natural resource⁶. That there was an innate recognition of

the multiple services that natural resources provide is ably demonstrated by the land classification that forest dwelling communities use. The Kurumbas of Nilgiris for instance, demarcate their lands using customary boundaries and have functional attributes to all the lands that they consider their domain⁸. Similar categorization is also witnessed amongst the Malai alis of Kolli Hills, who categorize their land based on water quality and depth⁶. The purpose of highlighting these alternate systems is not to eulogize ancient and traditional wisdom but to underpin the need to apply advanced understanding of natural resources to current land use and settlement policies.

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