

Essay on Forests – A Gift of Nature to The Mankind

“In Indian mythology, Forests are not known simply a source of wood or other things but it is worshiped and regarded as ‘God of forest’ (VAN DEVTA).”

Forests that cover nearly one-third of the world’s land, are the very important and invaluable gift of nature to mankind. Since times immemorial forests are regarded as the universal and unending source of many kinds of raw material by men. From eatables to cooking wood, from clothing to housing facilities, everywhere we are being directly or indirectly benefitted by the forests.

About 17 percent of India’s land area, approximately 50 million hectares, were regarded as forest land in the early 1990s. In FY 1987, however, the actual forest cover was 64 million hectares. However, because more than 50 percent of this land was barren or brushland, the area under productive forest was actually less than 35 million hectares, or, approximately 10 percent of the country’s land area. The growing population’s high demand for forest resources continued the destruction and degradation of forests in the 1980s. An estimated 6 billion tons of topsoil were lost annually. However, India’s 0.6 percent average annual rate of deforestation for agricultural and nonlumbering land used in the decade beginning 1981 was one of the lowest in the world and on a par with Brazil.

Many Indian forests in the mid-1990s are found in high-rainfall, high-altitude regions, areas to which access is difficult. About 20 percent of total forest land is in Madhya Pradesh; other states with significant forests are Orissa, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh (each about 9 percent of the total forests); Arunachal Pradesh (7 percent);

and Uttar Pradesh (6 percent). The variety of forest vegetation is large: there are 600 species of hardwoods, sal (*Shorea robusta*), and teak being the principal economic species.

Forests play a very important role in the economy of a country. In India, approximately half the population even today depend on the forests for their fuel needs. The fodder demand for the cattle is met from the forests. For the shelter of the cattle the required wood is taken from the forests. From an economic point of view, the paper manufacturing industries are mainly dependent upon the forests for the need of the wooden pulp. Soil erosion and flood control are only possible with the existence of forests. Even the rain, on which Indian agriculture depends, is possible with the forests. The eco-balance means the conservation of environmental purity is mainly done with the conservation of the forests. Forests help mankind by absorbing Carbon dioxide and exhaling the life gas, Oxygen.

Conservation of forests has been an avowed goal of Indian government policy since Indian independence. Afforestation increased from a negligible amount of the first plan to nearly 8.9 million hectares in the seventh plan. The cumulative area afforested during the 1951-91 period was nearly 17.9 million hectares. However, despite large-scale tree planting programs, forestry is one arena in which India has actually progressed since independence. Annual fellings of about four times the growth rate are a major cause. Widespread pilferage by villagers for firewood and fodder also represents a major decrease. Also, the forested area has been shrinking as a result of land cleared for farming, inundations for irrigation and hydroelectric power projects, and construction of new urban areas, industrial plants, roads, power lines, and schools.

India's long-term strategy for forestry development reflects three major objectives: to reduce soil erosion and flooding; to meet

growing needs of the domestic wood products industries; fuelwood, fodder, small timber, and miscellaneous forest produce. To achieve these objectives, the National Commission on Agriculture in 1976 recommended the reorganization of state forestry departments and advocated the concept of social forestry. The Commission itself worked on the first two objectives, emphasizing traditional forestry and wildlife activities; in pursuit of the third objective, the Commission recommended the establishment of a new kind of unit to develop community forests. Following the leads of Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, several other states also established community-based forestry agencies that emphasized programs on farm forestry, timber management, extension forestry, reforestation of degraded forests, and use of forests for recreational purposes.

Forests not only help mankind but also a source of livelihood for the wildlife and the birds. These beautiful creatures of the Almighty are given full shelter and protection by the Forests. Had there been no forests, this earth would have been destroyed for long. Nobody could have to find the Lions, the Tigers, the Zebras, the beautiful birds which have been a source of inspiration to many poets and writers.

The role of India's forests in the national economy and ecology was well emphasized in the 1988 National Forest Policy, which focused on ensuring environmental stability, restoring the ecological balance, and preserving the remaining forests. Other objectives of the policy were meeting the need for fuelwood, fodder, and small timber for rural and tribal people while recognizing the need to actively involve local people in the management of forest resources. Also in 1988, the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 was amended to facilitate strict conservation measures. A new target was to increase the forest cover to 33 percent of India's land area from the then-official estimate of 23 percent. In June 1990, the Central Government adopted resolutions that combined forest science with social forestry, taking

the socio-cultural traditions of the local people into consideration.

Since the early 1970s, it is realized that deforestation threatened not only the ecology but livelihood in a variety of ways, people have been more interested in conservation. The best known popular activist movement is the Chipko Movement. In India, in which local women decided to fight the government and the vested interests to save forests. The women of Chamoli District, Uttar Pradesh, declared that they would embrace—literally “to stick to” (means chipkna in Hindi)—trees if a sporting goods manufacturer attempt to cut down ash trees in their district. Since initial activism in 1973, the movement has spread and become an ecological movement leading to similar actions in other forest areas. The movement has slowed down the process of deforestation, exposed vested interests, increased ecological awareness, and demonstrated the viability of people’s power.

But man is the biggest enemy of mankind. Man has forgotten that his very existence in this world was once at the threshold of the forest. The present-day lust for money is reducing the forests day by day. With the advent of industrialization, the deforestation of the forests has begun. The rapid growth of population, the growth, and development of cities, the increasing need for wood have made the forests a scapegoat. The merciless cutting, the burning of many forests by the unscrupulous contractors, has caused an irreparable loss to this beautiful gift. The extinction of various wild animals, beautiful bird species is because of the deforestation being done by man. The recurrences of a flood, the drought, the famine, the scanty or no rain for years, the earthquakes, the spreading of many unknown diseases because of the polluted environment are nothing but silent revenge of nature against the men’s act of deforestation.

The merciless destruction of forests must be stopped if mankind wants

to save itself from the curse of nature. The man has now become aware of the vagaries of nature and understand the reasons thereof. The need for intensive forestry is being realized. In India, we worship the trees and treat them as alive creatures. The preservation of this precious gift of nature in the shape of the forest needs the general awakening of the common man. The preservation and conservation of the forests are essential for the well beings of every creature on this earth. The great lover of Nature, Wordsworth has rightly written:

*“One impulse from the vernal wood
May teach you more of man
Of moral evil and of good
Than all the sages can.”*