JK's Green Gold Needs Drone Monitoring and RFID Tagging

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Let's begin by talking about walnuts. JK UT accounts for around 98 percent of walnut India exports to the Netherlands, Germany, UAE, UK, and France. The UT produces 2.66 lakh metric tonnes of walnut grown over 89,000 hectares of land. The demand for walnuts is increasing in international and domestic markets, but the production is decreasing in JK. Despite a law prohibiting the felling of walnut trees, the same are being axed every month.

On the environmental front, in general, the environmental footprint is gouged out from Shopian, Bandipora, Kulgam, Baramulla, Ganderbal, Budgam, Anantnag, and Kupwara by the flourishing timber trade lobby. Institutional patronage cannot be ruled out.

What has further emboldened this lobby is that post-abrogation 370, the earlier Public Safety Act which was slapped on timber smugglers has lost its teeth since Jammu and Kashmir Forest (Conservation) Act, 1997 has ceased to exist. The new laws in force carry bailable provisions. The blame for this must also be pinned on erring forest officials for their gross negligence and criminal misconduct.

In May 2020, the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry pointed to the loot and plunder of its forests and categorically claimed that the forest department had failed to stop it. There are scores of smugglers active in each forest circle.

As many as 130 arrests were made, 27 horses carrying timber and 14 vehicles seized during the lockdown, apart from 62 FIRs registered for smuggling in the south circle, which is one of three

forest circles that the Valley has. But given that the smugglers bounce back, this is not the foolproof deterrence. So isn't money allocation to the department.

On June 11 this year, Centre approved Rs 105 crore compensatory afforestation plan for J&K. Most of this money is to be utilized for forest fire prevention and control and monitoring and evaluation.

Monitoring is one of the biggest challenges that we face in Kashmir's forests. Therefore, to be effective, the government can use sizeable money to deploy advanced technology to monitor progress and even track forest officials' movements. The old ways of monitoring smugglers are no longer effective because the plunderers have become even smarter than the government.

There are forest areas where no forest officials have visited since ages; as was revealed in June this year when a team of bureaucrats and policemen trekked through dense woods in south Kashmir.

When they reached 30 kilometres inside, to measure the damage to the forests, they discovered massive plunder. The fact-finding team visiting the Namblan and Anderwali forest blocks of the Sangerwani belt saw a massive massacre of pine trees. No forest official had ever got there.

Compensatory afforestation plans are nothing but dignified scams in which the ultimate beneficiaries are companies eyeing forest land for projects like mining and dams. Such companies will ruin Kashmir the way filthy rich real estate developers have ruined Uttarakhand forest cover during the last one decade.

At the same time, money allocation is not an answer to every problem; especially not to environmental problems. In order to save JK from further plunder, the Union Environment Ministry should now step in with a robust plan.

They can deploy drones to photograph the jungles and create a baseline data repository. This data can then be used to map the jungles after frequent intervals. Technology can also be used to monitor forest officials who have become silent spectators and probably many are hand-in-gloves with the smugglers.

The pride of Kashmir, Chinars, hasn't been spared too. In the 1970s, there were officially 42,000 Chinar trees in Kashmir Valley; a number that fell to just 5,000 Chinars by the turn of the century.

Chinar trees can survive for many centuries, and if Kashmir's oldest Chinar still stands tall after more than 630 years in village Chattergam of Budgam district, why and how did 37,000 Chinar trees vanish in thin air in just a matter of three decades?

Drawing rooms can do without Chinar trees, Kashmir can't. Chinars are the Valley's identity. But for Valley's own Veerapans – both within and outside of the government!

Mapping the forests, which are green gold to JK, should be done using cutting edge technology. When the forests are audited from time to time it will help make individuals and organizations accountable and help ensure compliance.

Also, why shouldn't the UT administration be able to do a census of walnut and Chinar trees in the entire Valley? It is not a difficult job; it is far easier than conducting the human census.

The best way to protect JK's wooden assets from poaching is to employ RFID tagging linked with a central monitoring system. These tags are so sensitive that even a minor blow on the tree gets recorded and transmitted, including the journey that may ensue. The digital log thus created can

also pinpoint a forest official's inaction – all this will happen in realtime. Many developed nations employ this technology to protect their forests.

Combining technology and human-led systems will help create a powerful system to contain further damage to Kashmir's forests. Since JK has huge forest cover and forest department may have a reason to shrug off capability, drone monitoring can provide realtime updates that can be fed by forest officials on a central portal.

Comparative drone footage between two periods can point out to areas vulnerable to poaching, and also identify erring officials. Forest officers can submit realtime updates on a portal to be accessed by the Environment Ministry and other officials. This will enhance coordination and also provide the impetus against the plunderers.

This technological intervention can also be combined with another systemic intervention. The Environment Ministry can create special mission teams to make surprise visits to forest offices and audit the performance of forest officials. These monitoring teams can be shuffled so as to contain any nexus. The auditing teams can be provided with in-body cameras so as to record the entire sequence of their audits in an audio-visual format.

The absence of monitoring has ensured that the trade involved ministers, their relatives, and bureaucrats as well, and during years of insurgency, separatists too. A virtual free for all feast!

Not in the distant past, the government-backed counterinsurgents and militant groups indulged in merciless chopping of forests. In 1990s, around 1.5 lakh trees were felled in Doda district alone. Absence of accountability made it an organized racket between smugglers, criminals, terrorists, ministers, and bureaucracy.

Finally, the green gold movement in Kashmir should extend to school children and citizens. School children and citizens can be motivated to become environmental warriors and report violations. Have we forgotten the advice of Sheikh ul-Alam, our reverend Nund Rishi, who said 'an poshi teli, yelli wan poshi – food will thrive only till the woods survive".

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