

# Laws of the jungle

by LINDSAY BARNES (The Hindu, 28 July 2002)



TEN years ago Dilip Mahato came to Ghosh *babu's* house at midnight. Jumping into the garden, he stuck his head over the courtyard wall and hissed loudly, "Ssssss! Ssssss! Ghosh Babu! Wake up! Come out here a minute, will you!"

In a hushed voice, Dilip tried the hard sell. "Look at this piece of timber, master. Just the thing you will need for your verandah roof. Thought I'd help you out a bit, you know. Came here to let you have first chance. For you, I'll let you have it for just a couple of hundred rupees."

Rubbing his eyes, Ghosh *babu* was awake enough to know where Dilip had got his piece of wood from, since there was a huge plot of government forest land next to his village. The tree had been chopped down less than an hour ago, and had to be sold off before morning. Dilip had already done a market survey, and located potential customers, usually villagers who were in the process of building houses — like Ghosh *babu*. Unfortunately for Dilip, though, his customer declined the opportunity to pick up a real bargain. He quickly disappeared back into the night, for there were plenty of buyers elsewhere, and he had little time at hand.

A few years after this incident, Dilip's wife helped set up a savings and credit group in her village. She became an energetic and enterprising group leader,

and was a regular visitor to Ghosh *babu's* house. Last year she helped organise a saplings nursery, both as an income generating activity for women as well as to plant trees on their own land. Both Adori and Dilip were kept busy growing trees instead of chopping them down.

Then one day in the middle of the monsoon, Adori and her gang came to consult Masterin on matters of importance. "Look, Masterin, our saplings are growing too well. None of them has died as we expected, we'll have several thousands left over this year. Can't we plant them on the government land in our village? There's hardly any trees left anymore and we'll have to go all the way to Koromtarn to bring fuel for our stoves. It'll take the whole day!" explained Adori.

It seemed an obvious and logical plan to Adori, her gang of women, and to Masterin. The womenfolk gathered leaves and twigs (and uprooted the odd stump too) during the day, to use as fuel. And the men of the village, led by Dilip, chopped down many of the few remaining ones that somehow managed to grow. It sounded an environmentally sound proposition if the villagers that plundered the forest would actually replenish it, without financial assistance.

Still Masterin knew that "government" doesn't always mean "public", but off she went, full of optimism, to discuss the plan with the district's officials. "You'll have to approach the forest department

for this," advised the Deputy Commissioner. "It might not be so easy though. I've heard that they lodged a case against an organisation for planting trees on their land," he warned.

Optimism waning, she approached the district's forest officer. "Now, how can we possibly help? You know we don't have any money. Our staff are idle and there's no forest left here any more," he narrated tiredly. Masterin took pains to point out that the villagers were in need of neither money, nor saplings. The forest officer was even more perplexed by this, it seemed. He seemed to view the idea with suspicion. "But why would they want to plant trees on their own? They might try and capture the land later and build on it. And who will own the trees? And what about the produce from the trees? What about the profits? Will they give some of it to the forest department?"

Masterin explained that all these obstacles could be sorted out, and if necessary they could enter into an agreement between the villagers and his department.

Surely such initiative ought to be encouraged, she argued. Ultimately the officer agreed to consider the plan, "I'll make enquiries and then I'll have to get permission from our head office."

With the monsoon nearing the end, Masterin tried to expedite things by ringing up the head office one week later. "Ah, yes. I've heard all about this," answered the officer over the telephone. "You see, we've never heard of such a thing before. We don't really know how to go about things. I shall have to find out from our office in Hazaribagh. Can you call back next week?"

With fast depleting optimism, Masterin rang back the following week. "Ah, yes. I did talk to our people in Hazaribagh. But they couldn't give us the go-ahead either. See, planting trees on Forest Department's land is quite a touchy issue. We'll have to get permission from Delhi for this," the officer sympathetically informed Masterin.

By this time Adori's saplings were over three feet high, and the monsoon — and the tree-planting season — over.

They decided to graze their cows and goats on them, so for a couple of days the cattle ate unusually well. The adjacent plot of "forest" land is now completely barren.

The village women now trek four km to Koromtanj to plunder the next plot of "jungle". And Dilip's business has dried up.

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- 1) What questions come to your mind as you read this story? If you were to interview any of the people mentioned in the story, what would you ask them? Is there anything you are confused about, that you would like explained?
  - 2) Should Adori and her group of women have been allowed to plant trees on the government forest land?
    - a) Give reasons why they should have been able to do so.
    - b) Give reasons why they should not be allowed to do so.
    - c) After considering the pros and cons, what do you think? Give reasons.
  - 3) Who was the government trying to protect when they said that people should not be allowed to use government land to plant trees?
  - 4) Why does the government have forests? Should the government have forests?
  - 5) In whose interests does the government make laws?
  - 6) Who is the government?