

Coronavirus: Firefighting without prevention

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We are neck deep in the fight to contain and manage COVID-19. How much attention have we paid to make sure that diseases like this do not recur?

Nipah virus, Kyasanur forest disease, scrub typhus, Japanese encephalitis, even the more common rabies: all of these share a commonality with the COVID-19 virus, SARS-CoV-2. These are all zoonotic diseases, created when viruses, bacteria or fungi cross over from animals to humans. Over 60% of recent emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic. The vast majority of these can be traced to crossovers between wild animals and humans. Such crossovers are most likely to take place when encounters between humans and wild animals increase. When people cut down forests and destroy wildlife habitats -- for instance, by cutting down trees where bats roost, as misguided people did in Mysuru recently -- then the animals that once lived undisturbed in these areas are forced to move out, and into areas where there is a greater density of people.

Keeping undisturbed stretches of forests removed from human disturbance is an important part of future planning, to prevent the emergence and spread of new zoonotic diseases like the COVID-19. In other parts of India, we see an increase in “empty forests” -- forests with trees, but where activities such as hunting, mining, industrial expansion and logging have led to the loss of all large mammals. This disrupts the ecological balance between disease pathogens and their natural hosts, causing zoonotic microbes to jump from one animal to another, eventually encountering human beings as they make their way deeper and deeper into forest areas.

A recent study by Stanford University in Uganda, for instance, found that the clearing of tropical forests increased encounters between people and primates, leading to an increased danger of zoonotic viruses crossing over from wild primates to humans. It is no surprise that scientists recommend that the few remaining large forest areas we have should be left undisturbed, and protected by encouraging tree farms and reforestation projects around these forests, to act as a buffer against interaction with people.

India is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of its naturally endowed forest cover. India contains some of the world’s biodiversity hotspots, including the Western Ghats and eastern Himalayas. Our commitment to the Paris accord for climate mitigation includes large-

scale reforestation across India. Activities such as these, if well-planned, could be the way to limit the chances of future life and economy-threatening outbreaks like the one underway.

This seems eminently sensible. What are we doing, though? Just the opposite. Let's take some recent examples. The Forest Advisory Committee has recommended the automatic extension of a number of forest clearance permissions for government-owned mines whose leases were due to expire, categorising mining as an essential service. Not just this -- all previous environmental clearances that were due to expire have been automatically extended until the end of June. The new draft of the Environmental Impact Assessment rules proposes to dilute a number of existing environmental safeguards, permitting many projects that are in violation of rules to 'regularise' violations. The mandatory process of public consultation, an important protection that helps activists prevent the indiscriminate industrial exploitation of forests, has also been weakened.

Our response to the economic crisis brought about by coronavirus has been to push through industrial expansion and development activity in forests. On April 7, the National Board for Wildlife approved wildlife clearance for developmental projects submitted by 11 states. Closer home, the Karnataka State Wildlife Board approved the Ankola-Hubballi railway line project on March 20. This project will destroy close to 600 acres of rich biodiverse Western Ghats forest cover, and uproot over five lakh trees.

Pandemics do not just happen, without warning. We create the conditions for them to occur when we fray the interconnections that keep ecosystems stable. To persist and scale up our ongoing destruction of forests at a time when we can see the terrifying consequences of a pandemic on the loose, is willful blindness. While we fight the fire that surrounds our homes today, we need a plan to fire-proof our future as well.

NEXT STORY



Eshe

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