



**To Combat Organised Crime
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with Armed Police Units of States**

Pathikrit Payne

To Combat Organised Crime Syndicates Plundering Forest Resources, India Must Adequately Arm its Forest Personnel at Par with Armed Police Units of States or Centre

The whole country needs to emulate the Assam Template for arming Forest Officials for the purpose of countering organised crime syndicates ravaging India's forest resources

The success of Assam Government in fundamentally altering the dimensions of securing its forests from armed syndicates, by massively arming its forest personnel with cutting edge weapons, and by setting up Anti-Poaching Special Task Force, is also a classic example of collaborative work between Government of India, Government of Assam, as well as between Forest Department and Police Department of Assam.

India's total forest and tree cover stands at 80.9 million hectares as per the Forest Survey Report released in 2021, which is 24.62% of the total geographical area of India. This is a summation of total forest area which is 21.71% of the total geographical area and total tree cover which stands at 2.91% of the total geographical area.

When compared with 2019, India's total forest and tree cover has increased by 2261 sq km. As per the

report, 17 Indian states and union territories have more than 33% of their geographical area covered with forest, which is indeed a great sign amidst stories of deforestation, environmental degradation that one hears from across the world. India being home to several hundred unique species of mammals, and thousands of species of birds, maintaining India's forest cover is no doubt a matter of priority.

Forests are Key National Assets and thus Deserve to be Fiercely Protected like Critical Infrastructures

India's vast repository of flora and fauna are not just its ecological assets but ideally should be considered key economic and national assets as well, that deserve to be protected with as much vigour and ferocity as India's critical infrastructures are protected. The laws to punitively punish those illegally plundering India's forest resources, and bodily harming forest officials, should be as strict as it is for those who harm

India's civilian population. In other words, India's reserve forests and ecological resources should be treated as living beings and secured accordingly.

Securing Forests is of Critical Importance for Maintaining Sustainable Development Matrix

Purely from the perspective of sustainable development, the job done by forest guards/ rangers is of immense value to the society given the enormity of the green house emissions that are absorbed by forests, and which stands at around 11.25% of India's total greenhouse emissions. Its quantified value in terms of its positive impact on the ecology, nominally termed as 'ecosystem service' is estimated at around \$120 billion. Therefore, vigorously protecting the forests is a necessity and not just a mere social service for environment.

Every state in India has a considerable number of forest guards in a well-defined administrative architecture who do a commendable job in their efforts to secure the forests and all kinds of forest related surveys, often at the cost of tremendous risk to their personal safety.

However, Sadly, Modernising & Properly Equipping Forest Guards Have Rarely Been a Key Priority of States.

Over the years however, just as the dimensions of threat to India's security have undergone massive transformation with India's

internal stability being perpetually threatened by a hydra-headed hybrid war scenario, the same is true for India's forests as well.

Just as the hybrid war India faces includes dangerous fangs of radicalisation, narcotics, money laundering, illegal infiltration, religious conversion, orchestrated anarchy triggered by disinformation and funded by nefarious vested interests, the same goes for India's forest cover which are facing relentless ambush by organised crime syndicates in the form of encroachers, smugglers, poachers and illegal miners. Also, organised cross-border drug cartels often use forest routes to transport their



Lathis not enough to combat organised crime syndicates

consignments,

With time, these crime syndicates have not only become organised, with many having external linkages with global cartels, but also are mostly armed to the teeth with sophisticated weapons and are ruthless in their approach. Not only they don't mind indiscriminately looting forest resources or killing endangered animals for ulterior motives, but also often have no qualms in brutally killing forest guards who confront or resist them. It would also not be surprising if a part of the illicit money generated by crime syndicates through nefarious plunder of India's forest reserves, are used in funding anti-Indian activities.

In contrast, for most states of India, modernising and equipping forest department officials with modern assault rifles, communication and mobility devices have never been a major priority. In fact, if one looks at the tardy pace of police modernisation in many of India's states, with tendency to seek help from Central Government through deployment of Central Police Forces at the drop of the hat, it goes without saying the modernisation of forest department is perhaps not even in the bucket list of work, leave alone being a priority.

India's Forest Rangers Though Keep Fighting a Valiant Battle Against a Better Equipped & Ruthless Adversary

In reality, India's forest guards, though far from being adequately

equipped, are waging a valiant war against the crime syndicates that are threatening India's forest resources. Even though the increase in India's total forest and tree cover is an encouraging figure, it is also a fact that India has one of the highest incidences of fatalities faced by forest personnel for any country.

As per reports, during the period of 2012-2017, a shocking 31% of the total number of fatalities of forest rangers globally, 161 out of 526, were attributed to India as per International Rangers Federation. There are several instances of forest rangers being either hacked to death or shot or lynched by poachers, timber smugglers, encroachers and miners. Also, forest rangers often get killed by wild animals while doing census jobs.

It is in this respect that Supreme Court of India in January 2021, asked the Government of India to consider equipping forest officers with arms, bullet proof vests and bullet proof jackets. Justice Bobde stated,

"Forest officers above a certain rank need arms for self-protection, bullet-proof vests, helmets and vehicles... the situation is serious. They are helpless and in danger, while poachers take undue advantage to carry out their nefarious activities. It is difficult to imagine how any law can be enforced by forest staff who are unarmed against heavily armed poachers,"

The Chief Justice also stated, "Forest officers have larger



Poorly armed forest guards are often attacked by poachers, smugglers and illegal miners

responsibilities than police officers in cities. They patrol large tracts of uninhabited forests. A forest guard is alone in his duty, unlike a police officer in a city who can call for back-up,”

After Massive Modernisation Push for Armed Forces & Central Police Forces, Perhaps it is Time to Focus on Capacity Building of Forest Protection Forces.

In the last eight years, a humongous effort has been put by Modi Government in terms of capacity building of India’s Central Police Forces and Armed Forces as well as in modernisation of State Police Forces. Therefore, there is no doubt that the Centre would not hesitate to do the needful in terms of adequately arming the forest personnel of India if the states seek support and a roadmap is jointly worked upon.

However, it has to be remembered that forest falls in the concurrent list and thus it would require a coordinated approach with both Centre and States needing to work together in terms of developing the framework for capacity building of forest officials for adequately dealing with existing and emerging challenges.

Union Home Ministry Must Take the Lead

In this respect, it is also important to remember that capacity of building of forest protection units across India, and bringing them at par with state armed police units or central armed police forces, is too complex and critical a project to be left to the Ministry of Environment alone to deal with. Given the intricacies involved in modernising any uniformed armed force, and given its huge experience in managing and modernising Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF),

whose total strength today is almost around a million, assistance of Union Ministry of Home Affairs would be crucial for Union Ministry of Environment & Forest to execute it in collaboration with its state level counterparts.

In India, since only the Indian Forest Services personnel are directly recruited by Central Government, while the rest of the officials of forest departments of respective states are recruited by state governments, capacity building of forest officials would invariably be at the level of states only.

Need for a Uniform Policy in Capacity Building of Forest Officials

One of the biggest problems that India has faced, so far as capacity building of forest officials is concerned, is that there is sheer lack of uniformity in the policy framework. Some states have taken cognizance of the existing challenges and emerging exigencies much earlier than rest, and have adequately armed their forest officials, while many others have a deplorable level of lackadaisical approach towards forest protection and have done precious little to take up the cause of capacity building of forest officials with required seriousness.

As a result, while forest officials of some states are armed to the teeth with the most sophisticated assault rifles, in the other end of the spectrum, there are states, in fact most of them, where forest guards

wander without any navigation or communication equipment or back-up, and needless to say, while wielding a mere lathi or a mere 12 bore double barrel shot gun while being pitted against heavily armed poachers.

Therefore, India needs a national level uniform policy for capacity building of forest officials, as well as recalibration of the rules of engagement. Fortunately for the respective state level forest departments, there is the time-tested and successfully-implemented Assam template or roadmap to follow in terms how capacity building of forest officials is needed to be done.

The Success of Assam Template

Assam for long had a massive problem of poaching, especially of that of one-horned rhinoceros. The profundity of the rhino poaching problem in Assam could be gauged from the fact that as per reports, between the year 2000 and 2015, a whopping 153 rhinos had been hunted down by poachers for their horns.

To address the mammoth challenge of organised crime syndicates involved in poaching and smuggling of rhino horns, Assam Government took some major transformational policy decisions that had a major positive impact in terms of drastically reducing instances of poaching, especially of rhinoceros, in the state.

The First was of arming the



In 2018, Assam's BJP led Government Procured Modern Weapons for Forest Guards

forest guards of Assam with sophisticated assault rifles to take on the poachers head-on. In 2018, Assam Government handed over 954 units of Self Loading Rifles (7.62mm calibre), 272 INSAS Rifles (5.56 mm calibre), 133 units of 12 bore pump guns, 91 units of Ghatak Assault Rifles (5.56 mm) and 20 units of 9mm calibre pistols. The Forest Guards of Assam henceforth were no longer needed to duck or be at the receiving end when confronted with heavily armed poachers. It was time for the poachers in Assam to be on the run.

Further, in 2019, the Special Rhino Protection Force was activated with the first batch of 82 constables passing out after rigorous training almost at par with special units of civilian police forces.

Also, in June 2021, the Anti-Poaching Task Force (APTF) was constituted by Government of Assam under direction of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The Anti Poaching Task Force has been extremely ruthless in dealing with the poachers and the results are for everyone to see with massive reduction in incidences of rhino poaching in Assam. In the year 2021, Assam lost only one rhino to poachers, a major milestone in terms of reduction of rhino poaching when compared to how grim the situation was between 2000 and 2015.

The success of the Assam Government in equipping its forest officials and setting up of dedicated special units to counter the poaching syndicates is a tried and tested template for other states to implement.

The Assam Template had Strong Backing of Central Government

One must also mention that there is also a considerable amount of contribution of Central Government in the initiatives of Assam Government such as that of the formation of the Special Rhino



Member of Special Rhino Protection Force, Assam

Protection Force (SRPF). As per reports, the salaries of the SRPF personnel are paid by the Assam Government but get reimbursed by National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). In fact, SRPF has also been created on the lines of Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) created by Union Government of India under the aegis of National Tiger Conservation Authority.

The success of Assam Government in terms sternly dealing with the poachers and effectively bringing down the rhino poaching cases to near zero has been praised by Prime Minister Modi as well.

Suggestive Roadmap for Pan India Capacity Building

Globally as well, especially in Africa, where countries with huge repository of wildlife have often been ravaged by ivory poachers, most of them have set up Anti-

Poaching Task Force and are armed with assault rifles to deal with the menace of poaching.

Therefore, it is now imperative for India to take some drastic measures to make sure that its forest officials are now adequately armed to deal with challenges of poaching and smuggling. The following are the steps that should be taken to address the issues.

- Government of India should ideally form a task force or committee consisting of senior officials of Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Union Ministry of Environment & Forests, as well as representatives of Ministries of Forest of all the States of India.
- The Committee must draft a National Policy for dealing with issues of poaching and smuggling, as well as dealing with organised crime syndicates ravaging forest resources of

India. In other words, 'rules of engagement' must be structured to provide adequate legal immunity to the forest guards while making lethal use of force for protection of forest assets against poachers, smugglers and illegal miners.

- Government of India in collaboration with the States should decide a policy to arm all forest guards/ forest protection forces at state levels with a combination of assault rifles, pump guns and pistols along with satellite phones and All Terrain Vehicles for Special Back-up Units.
- With both Central Police Forces as well as State Police Forces eventually opting for INSAS and AK series rifles, there is a considerable reserve of 7.62 mm Self Loading Rifles (SLR) that can be handed over to Forest Guards at the shortest notice.
- Further, Advanced Weapons & Equipment Limited, the arms production unit of OFB after its corporatisation, can easily deliver a large quantity of INSAS Rifles, Trichy Assault Rifles, Ghatak Rifles, JVPC Carbine and Pump Action Guns to equip forest guards if contracts are given.
- India's private sector arms companies may also be approached for providing new generation of arms for forest personnel
- There should also be deliberation for equipping forest guards with non-lethal anti-predation gadgets to protect them from predators in forests.
- Given its vast experience in modernising Central Armed Police Forces, Ministry of Home Affairs can coordinate with National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and respective states, to develop a roadmap for modernising and training of forest officials. The module that NTCA has developed for the Special Tiger Protection Force personnel can be the based model for training and arming all forest officials.
- It has to be remembered that often poachers have a well-oiled network beyond forests as well, through which the poached wildlife stuff is stored, packed and transported. Neutralising the same is as important as securing wildlife inside the forests.
- Therefore, each state should also create a dedicated Anti-Poaching Task Force (APTF) on the lines of what Assam has set up in its police department. Ideally it would be better if it is set up under the aegis of the State Police to hunt down the locations and bases of poachers and smuggling syndicates.
- Central Government may also set up dedicated unit, namely such as Forest Protection Group, on the lines of Parliamentary Duty Group (PDG) or Special Duty Group (SDG) in CRPF, for

assisting states in protection of reserve forests.

- On the lines of India Reserve Battalions set up in states with most of it being funded by the Central Government, it may also assist states to set up dedicated Forest Protection Battalions with forest rangers being given police grade training to lead them.
- Finally, India must also set up dedicated fast track courts to speed up conviction for forest related crimes. Crimes in forests executed by poachers and other dangerous cartels should be defined as organised crime and effectively dealt with.
- Central Government may also set up dedicated wings in National Investigation Agency (NIA) and Enforcement Directorate (ED) to conduct investigations on the cartels that are behind the crimes in forests, and for digging out the routes through which ill-gotten money earned through such activities is laundered.
- Much like the model in which locals, often tribals, have been given preference in recruitment of police units set up in states like Chhattisgarh to fight Maoists, the same model can be replicated for recruitment of armed forest guards in respective states, as they have the best understanding of local forest terrains.
- Most critically, both the Centre and States have to set up dedicated

wings in their intelligence units to track the activities of poachers.

- Centre may work with states in maximising drone application for effective surveillance and tracking of activities of poachers and smugglers.

Time to Avoid Turf War

The success of Assam Government in fundamentally altering the dimensions of securing its forests from armed syndicates, by massively arming its forest personnel with cutting edge weapons, and by setting up Anti-Poaching Special Task Force, is also a classic example of collaborative work between Government of India, Government of Assam, as well as between Forest Department and Police Department of Assam. The same if replicated across all states with active support from Central Government, can do wonders for India. Also, within the states, efforts must be made to make sure that turf war between respective forest departments and police departments is avoided as both are equally needed to counter the forest crime syndicates within and outside the forests. It is only then that India would be successful in creating the much-needed collaborative structure required to counter organised crime syndicates of poachers, timber smugglers and miners.

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