

## Increase in Assaults on Forestry Personnel: Causes and Concerns

By Dr Arvind Kumar Jha

The Culture Minister of a State of our country accompanied by a group of about 20 supporters barged into *Badgonda* Forest Office, threatened the forest staff and forcibly took away a JCB earth moving machine and tractor-trolley that were seized in a case of illegal breaking of land in *Ada Pahad* forest area. The police station did not register the case that was reported to them by the Deputy Forest Ranger. The Deputy Forest Ranger was transferred and an enquiry was ordered by the Forest Minister because the opposition raised the issue. "Some forest officials are over-enthusiastic and blowing a small incident out of proportion. It is not a big deal and such incidents often take place in villages" the Forest Minister said while interacting with the media and added "The permission from forest department in such cases is just a formality." The Revenue Department's enquiry report suggested that the land where the alleged illegal quarrying was done belonged to the revenue department. This report was rejected by the Chief Conservator of Forests and that resulted in his immediate transfer.

Within 100 kilometres of the above location and within twenty-five days of the above incidence, a forest beat guard patrolling his beat was shot dead by a country weapon by timber mafia/ poachers in the *Choti Tali* area of Punjapura Reserve Forest in the adjoining District on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021. The culprits are yet to be apprehended.

The cases quoted above, unfortunately, are not excerpts from a bollywood film. Dates are real, the Minister in the first incidence is the Madhya Pradesh Culture Minister Ms Usha Thakur and the district is Indore while Dewas is the district where the gruesome murder took place in the second incident.

Such incidents are not just assaults on the foresters. They are slaps on the forest conservation and governance in the country. Such occurrences not only expose the vulnerability of the field personnel of the forest service but also reflect typically the kind of support they get in their efforts towards protection and conservation of forests and also when they face the implications of their sincere regulatory efforts.

In India the forestry personnel in the field live and function, more often than not, in isolation away from their family, in remote areas, and under hazardous working conditions; survive on low pay, contemptibly small benefits, and pitiable facilities; operate with outdated, often non-operational, and inadequate equipment; and are expected to protect and conserve forests for you and me utilizing grossly insufficient resources. To quote the latest, the current national budget of 2021-22 has maintained the trend of allocation of funds for the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change and kept it as low as Rs 4,400 crores for the whole country.

In addition to the above, considering the fact that for any regulatory institution, human resource management issues also influence the effective strength and even the vulnerability of its personnel to assaults by criminals, the report of noted environmentalist Perna Singh Bindra brought out in late 2018 is quite relevant for the subject under consideration. According to the report "(Forest) staff shortages average about 30% across India. Vacancies, on an average, however, stand at around 50% and during the peak season, one forest guard has to do the work of two."

The history of human resource management in the forestry sector reveals that for reasons best known

to the decision makers; the regulatory character of the organization was glossed over and recruitments to field positions were discontinued for 15-20 years till almost middle of the decade of 2000 in the name of austerity/zero budgeting in most of the states. As a consequence promotion quotas were increased/ manipulated to manage numbers at various levels; under the compulsion to run the department with lesser number of personnel, keeping vacant the research, training, forestry education, and working plans was adopted as the easiest option; the training and research institutes as well as working plan wings in the states gasped for survival resulting in huge professional deficit in the sector; buildings and infrastructure of many training institutes run by the Government of India for Range Officers were transferred to the states; the age profile in different cadres in the field was completely disturbed and considering the example at the level of Range officers, proverbially called as the spinal cord of the Department, the cadre had majority of promoted officers with age above 50 years with compromised agility, strength, and dexterity. The feeder levels to this cadre had to work with similar handicaps that were further amplified due to large vacancies compelling allocation of large and unmanageable areas to each person. This team had to face the challenge of forest and wildlife protection in the wake of ever-increasing threats by criminals having the latest equipment.

Sudden opening up of vacancies also led to creation of serious problems due to the commonly adopted approach of quickly filling them just for declaring to the world that forest department's posts were not vacant! Many of the states recruited huge numbers in various cadres despite lack of availability of adequate training facilities for them; as a quick fix measure, the pedagogy was modified, training periods were curtailed and even the contents essential for creation of appropriate competencies were cut down. Semi trained young recruits were posted in the field and

were often left to learn by committing mistakes. For these young foresters, who did not possess adequately crystallized skills imparted systematically to handle unique situations that they had to face day in and day out, the changed mindset of the local people influenced as a result of indistinct interface amongst statutory instruments operationalized on the same forest resource/ produce by different Ministries like the Tribal, Revenue, and Panchayati Raj keeps throwing up formidable challenges. Their attempts to tackle them with the subjectively perceived predominant paradigm of 'expect no support from anywhere other than their own sector' also fail often due to the vulnerability of the senior levels themselves, and that often leaves these field officers at cross roads.

The top echelons of the forestry sector caught in the abovementioned imbroglia fuelled by the sensitivity that the terms 'democratization' and 'empowerment of forest dwellers' command today have found no alternative better than choosing to 'let it happen' rather than taking it head-on to provide any safe solution to the field staff. What they could do and have done is that they have kept the pressure on to ensure that the field staff continues to perform its duty of protection. The field staff who are dedicated and disciplined keep going beyond the call of duty to save forests, jump into the fire and, more often than not, hurt themselves.

The Indian Forest Service Association (Central unit) in order to get addressed the issue of vulnerability of forest staff and provision of safer working conditions submitted a letter on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2020 to the Hon. Union Minister of Forests asking primarily for increased ex-gratia support in case of unnatural death while on duty, full salary to the family of the deceased, immediate medical support to the injured, constitution of President's Green Gallantry award, providing firearms along with appropriate protection under IPC, better field accommodation facilities, and

high quality field gears in addition to formulation of a national policy and guidelines on the matter. Nothing is heard on the same till now.

**The Statistics:** According to the statistics released by the International Ranger Federation, India accounted for about 31% of all forest ranger deaths in the world between 2012 and 2017. The number of Rangers killed was 162 during this period. India, shockingly enough, was the highest ranked country in 2014 in terms of field staff mortality.

The table below gives details of assaults on the forest officers in different circumstances during the financial year 2020-21 (Till 15<sup>th</sup> February 2021) as reported in various newspapers. Duly appreciating the fact that reporting in media is often a function of the sensitivity of the journalist and the newspaper/channel and also depends on the outreach of the department to the press in that particular area; the number of cases reported, reasons and effects of the assaults are being considered for analysis. The aim is to consider

the causal factors and help the authorities to develop an institution based well formulated effective as well as efficient response system to the problem at hand.

**Analysis: Historical Perspective:** Contents of the table given above do indicate that face-off between foresters and law breakers occurs mostly in relation to cases of encroachment, illicit felling, poaching, illegal mining and removal of forest produce and that culminates into attacks and counter attacks depending on the prevailing circumstances and their handling by the forest staff. There is no two opinion that assaults on forest as also wildlife law enforcement personnel have increased at an alarming rate in the recent past although law breakers have always been the target of any State’s enforcement machinery and vice versa. The ease of culmination of the wrath of law breakers into assault, more often than not, is primarily a function of their perception about the immediate strength and preparedness of the enforcement machinery.

**ASSAULTS ON FOREST OFFICERS: 2020-21 : REASONS AND RESULT**  
(Source: Newspaper reports)

Time	Place	State	Reason/Action	Result
March 2020	Manpur forest in Jhallar Thana	Rajasthan	The Forest Guard tried to stop illegal felling of trees. The villagers reacted by using sling and pelting of stone	Forest Guard hit by axe
March 2020	Tiruvannamalai	Tamil Nadu	A forest guard was shot by fleeing poachers at Kavuthimalai Reserve Forest (RF) in Tiruvannamalai	Forest Guard injured
March 2020	Palghar	Maharash- tra State (M.S.)	A mob that had planned poaching before holi ransacked forest office and attacked the staff of the Tungareshwar Wildlife Sanctuary (TWLS) when stopped by the forest staff.	Forest Guard suffered serious injuries and Range officer and others escaped with minor injuries.
April 2020	Bheemnagar Village	Telangana	4 Beat officers attacked by villagers when they seized 2 tractors of smuggled timber	Injured due to hurling of stones & mirchi powder
April 2020	Kamarpalli Range	Telangana	Five foresters including 2 lady guards attacked by large group of villagers of Karepalli when they tried to take into custody timber smugglers	Staff suffered minor injuries

April 2020	Niwaskhar village, Surhi Range, Achanakmar Tiger Reserve	C'Gad	Forest guards humiliated, beaten up, and forced to do sit-ups by the mob when they went to enquire into the trapping of tiger. A local MLA visited the village and made the community to register atrocity case against the concerned forest officials. Villagers apologized to police for damaging their vehicle.	FGs sustained serious injuries and three staff hospitalised. Later Police Van was damaged and some people hurled stones on the police thinking them to be of forest dept.
April 2020	Mastan Iliapur village	Telangana	RFO and Beat Officer Attacked by timber smuggler	Hurt due to stone pelting
May 2020	Ghatigaon, Gwalior	Madhya Pradesh	Shot by a poacher who was hunting a blue bull	Death of Forest Guard
May 2020	Gandigopalpur, Khanapur	Telangana	Gandigopalpur villagers went on a rampage and ransacked the Udumpur forest office under the impression that a shepherd committed suicide because of beating by forest staff after detaining him for setting fire to the forest.	Ransacking of the Udumpur forest office
May 2020	Pipariya Santosh village, Pilibhit	Uttar Pradesh	FGs assaulted by a mob while trying to rescue a sloth bear that had entered village	Forest Guard hit with sticks
May 2020	Mehla Beat, Chamba	Utthara-Khand (U.K.)	10 persons beat Forest Guard while he was enquiring about freshly felled timber used by a person for the construction of his house	Forest Guard beaten by Mob
May 2020	Mt Abu Wildlife Sanctuary	Rajsthan	Five men attacked the Dy Conservator of Forests with axe, hammer and sticks.	Dy Conservator of Forests hurt
May 2020	Kalwa Mumbra, Thane Dvision	M.S.	Encroachers attacked the Forest staff and pelted stones on the staff having three-woman guards	Injuries to three of the officials.
May 2020	Purbadih village, Gola, Ramgarh	Jharkhand	Tractor seized in Korambe village for involvement of illegal stone mining	The traders at Purbadih attacked the staff
May to Sept 2020	Khandwa Dist. Kalwa Forest; JhirpaComp 853 Jai Bai Forest near Kotwaria; and Talyadhad	Madhya Pradesh	Encroachments: The leader allowed encroachers to have 10 acres for Rs 2.5 to 3 thousand. 4000 ha between May to September 2020	Dy. Ranger and Forest Guard beaten up. Violent clashes between encroachers and forest personnel
June 2020	Etapalli, Gadchiroli	M.S.	Naxals allegedly vandalised an office of the forest dept. and assaulted two guards	Assaulted 2 Forest Guards
June 2020	Pilibhit	Uttar Pradesh	Killing of a man by tigress of Pilibhit Tiger Sanctuary,	the locals attacked a team of forest guards and set ablaze a picket

June 2020	Bambarde Village, Sindhudurg	M.S.	Bombay high court order declared the Dodamarg-Swantwadi belt as a no tree felling zone. Forest officers attacked by locals when they went to assess the damages due to illicit felling in 2 acres	Range Forest Officer and staff injured
June 2020	Sarasala village, Kumram Bheem Asifabad District	Telangana	Attacked by Zilla Parishad vice-chairman and his supporter villagers when the lady Range Officer Ms Anitha went for plantation programme under 'Haritha Haram' programme.	Range Forest Officer and Beat Guard seriously injured
July 2020	Laokhova WLS Nagaon	Assam	Mysterious death in the sanctuary	Death of Forest Guard
July 2020	Chaibasa	Jharkhand	Twelve buildings of the Jharkhand forest department blown up by suspected Naxalites	12 buildings of the Jharkhand FD blown up. Several employees were also beaten up.
July 2020	Burhanpur	Madhya Pradesh	Large group of encroachers armed with guns, catapults and axes encroached forest land and attacked forest staff when they tried to intervene	Six forest officials injured.
July 2020	Gundalpadu village, Kothagudem	Telangana	The irate villagers forcibly stalled construction of a wall around the reserve forest near Kothagudem. Later, five staff, including a woman Beat officer were attacked by a group of Gutti Koya tribals when encroachment in Res. Forest by tractor ploughing at 2 AM was opposed.	The staff suffered contusions and minor injuries.
Aug 2020	Sariska Sanctuary	Rajasthan	Stopping illegal mining of minor mineral	The mowed down Forest Guard dies
Aug 2020	Salaiyah village, Damoh	Madhya Pradesh	Retaliation against forest offence filed by the FGs for illegal cutting of trees	Forest Guard injured
Aug 2020	Sringrampur beat	Madhya Pradesh	On questioning about the source of timber being loaded for transportation, the offenders abused the officials and attacked them with axes and sticks	The Forest Guard was seriously injured
Sept 2020	Ballarshah, Compt. 494	M.S.	Sand mining and smuggling	RFO, Forester, FGs threatened with weapons, seized Tractor taken away
Sept 2020	Sarmeshwar Beat, Sarmeshwar Handia Road, Khandwa	Madhya Pradesh	Encroachment: 90 tribal encroachers from Badwani equipped with bows and arrows, slings, axe came to Khandwa forests	Dy Ranger and Forest Guard threatened.
Sept 2020	Dantewada	C'Gad	Hit by a vehicle while the FGd was chasing a vehicle smuggling forest produce	Forest Guard killed

Sept 2020	Baran	Rajasthan	Forest Guard run over by a tractor and dragged some 200 metres by 5 to 7 people who attacked his patrolling squad during an anti-encroachment drive	Forest Guard run over by a tractor
Sept 2020	Bijapur district, Bastar division	C'Gad	Maoists abducted the ranger and took him to school in the village and then killed him with a sharp-edged weapon.	RFO killed
Sept 2020	Khanapur Range, Adilabad	Telangana	Family members of a poacher vandalised Range office and hurled stones on staff	Govt property destroyed and one staff injured
Nov 2020	Bodlijhira area, Pench Tiger Reserve	Madhya Pradesh	A group of 60 to 70 men attacked the Special Tiger Protection Force team engaged in patrolling to stop illegal fishing.	Patrol boat hijacked and burnt, solar panels and documents destroyed.
Dec 2020	Karadabani forest, Dhenkanal Forest Division	Odisha	Stone mafia of 25 people attacked the Patrol party while they tried to stop the illegal stone-mining	7 staff injured. One seriously. Service revolver of forest officer snatched
Jan 2021	Badgonda Forest Range, Indore District	Madhya Pradesh	State's culture minister along with her 15-20 supporters entered the Badgonda forest office premises and forcibly took away the earth moving JCB machine and tractor-trolley deployed for illegal excavation in Ada Pahad forest land after threatening the forest staff	The forest staff was threatened. Forester made police complaint, transferred. Complaint against Ms Usha Thakur and her supporters not registered by the police. Forest Min. constituted a high-level inquiry.
Jan 2021	Totladoh,	M.S.	Local people were stopped from illegal fishing and setting fire to the forests. Firing was resorted to for stopping heavy stone pelting and attack.	Minor injuries to staff.
Jan 2021	Namkoda village, Malkangiri FD	Odisha	The forest staff had gone to rescue Pangolin. They were attacked by the villagers	10 forest officials sustained injuries. Police case lodged
Feb 2021	Choti Tali area, Punjapura reserve forest, Dewas District	Madhya Pradesh	While patrolling the Forest Beat Guard shot at by poachers/timber mafia who accosted them	Forest Beat Guard died. Case registered under IPC (sec.302)
Feb 2021	Basani Tribal Village, Poynad, Raigad	M.S.	Tribals were selling snakes. Range Forest Officer and team apprehended them. Attacked by the offenders.	Range Forest Officer injured.
Feb 2021	Chirangwadi, Umarked	M.S.	While preparing records regarding poaching of Blue Bull (Rohi in M.S.) Forester and Forest Guard attacked by offenders	Forester and Forest Guard suffered injuries
Feb 2021	Chandrapur	M.S.	While the Range Officer and Team were removing the encroachment, the Nagar Sewak threatened them.	The Forest officers were threatened by the Nagar Sewak.

In addition to the above, another constantly operative and important determinant, although in the background, is the general perception of the public and miscreants also about the overall strength as well as vulnerabilities of the enforcement agency. For appreciating this aspect in the context of the forestry sector it is necessary to analyse the evolution of the overall environment in which the forestry sector has to perform its regulatory role today.

The participatory forest management programme most commonly called as Joint Forest Management (JFM), duly prompted by the National Forest Policy 1988, attempted to share the responsibility as well as authority of the Forest Department with the local institutions so far as protection and management of earmarked forest area in the vicinity of the villages were concerned. This attempt however got projected over time by the leaders; in their compulsion to nurture and suitably exploit their constituencies; as a means to put the local people and institutions at a pedestal higher than the machinery of the forest Department through which the Government fulfils its constitutional obligation of providing to each of its citizen a continued supply of eco-services. The forest field staff, in the process, began to, de facto, lose out on its regulatory role as also its confidence as the representative of the Government authorised to take action against crimes pertaining to forests. The local level institutions, with a smart tweaking of their corresponding provisions to provide statutory basis to the concept of JFM, acquired a major role in handling the JFM as a committee under the Panchayat. In the process the forester who was earlier the member secretary of JFM Committee, was effectively edged out so far as his professional as well as regulatory roles were concerned. This situation got further pronounced in scheduled areas areas after the PESA 1996 came into being. The unique statutory provision regarding putting to vote even the contents of the technical document viz. micro-plan

(for example under Maharashtra State's PESA Rules 2014), that too with the open option of complete rejection of his professional opinion, has brought the field forester to a situation where his total learning and experience of forest management suddenly seems to be of no relevance. This is a matchless instance of exclusionary approach and apparently doesn't have any parallel in any department e.g., the Police which also exercises regulatory authority in scheduled areas. The resultant effect has been a de facto quietly progressing dis-empowerment of the field staff on one hand and a consequently increased offensive stance of people against their legally assigned authority.

The next onslaught resulting in irreversible damage to the forest resources, its protection mechanism and management practices was unleashed by the widespread and blatant misuse of the provisions of the Forest Rights Act 2006. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) has handled the implementation of FRA in the country and issued guidelines and executive directions on all matters related to FRA but have not taken cognizance of lakhs of ineligible cases including post 13-12-2005 encroachments that have been illegally recognized as Individual Forest Right (IFR) despite MoTA's monitoring and superintendence. This has grossly changed the relational matrix between the forest offenders and the implementers of forest and wildlife related Acts, the latter progressively becoming disillusioned and despondent. The morale of the offenders, in contrast, has gone up.

Similarly, The Ministry of Tribal Affairs are not taking any action on the large number of cases of Community Forest Rights (CFRs) and Rights to Community Forest Resources (RCFR) which have also been cleared illegally by the District Level Committees in clear cut violation of the eligibility conditions as also those mentioned under sections 3(1)(c), 3(1)(i) and 4(3) of the Forest Rights Act 2006 in almost all parts

of the country. The Tribal department in its own right in Maharashtra, for example, has engaged selected NGOs and paid to them about Rs. four crores of public money to prepare micro-plans for forest lands with illegally recognized forest rights on them. The Forest Department has not been involved in preparation of these micro-plans and the situation in the field spells doom for the landscape-based management of forests and wildlife. Such instances of grant of RCFR despite non-eligibility and further exclusion of foresters from preparation of management plans are getting quoted in all other states as precedence and the system is being attempted to be copied in other places in utter disregard to the forest related laws of the land. It will be naïve to think that the field staff of the forest department is unaware of the facts on the ground. Conduct rules prevents him from openly going against it. He doesn't raise the issue also for the fear of being branded as anti-tribal and getting prosecuted under Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The sincere forester is thoroughly demoralized noticing the deterioration of management on the ground as a result of manipulations that are taking place with unabated vigour. In clear contrast, however, those who are manipulating the whole situation are increasingly emboldened by the fact that nothing happens to them, a fact that obviously enhances the danger to the strict field foresters.

If one considers all the above interventions together, it is clear that despite all above experiments of democratization conducted in the crucible of forest conservation, their benefit has not been able to reach the intended target groups. Rather, they have benefitted the rural elite, the rich and powerful. Notwithstanding the abovementioned aberration and poor quality of the implementation of the above instruments, there appears to exist a basic fallacy in the presumption on which the success of such experiments is based. The presumption is that the

local populations have traditionally conserved and are still conserving the forests. The fact remains that in the past the forests could survive and sustain the removals by locals because the population was small, people were relatively honest, there existed fear of law and also of the unanimously selected headmen or *Panchas* who were chosen on the basis of their intrinsic qualities of honesty and fairness, good roads and fast modes of transportation of forest produce didn't exist, and the methods of commercial utilization of forest produce as also market linkages were not well developed. The situation today, which is conveniently ignored to promote the much-hyped democratization and empowerment of masses, is quite different. People today are divided on caste, religion, and political lines more than ever before; leaders are elected on party lines; not only have the population and concomitant pressures on the forests gone up but there are well developed road networks that are used by smugglers and market forces alike; along with politicization and devolution of power, there has been a conspicuous growth in corruption in the local level institutions; and there exists a clear hiatus in the two types of thought processes operating in governance, one that harps on five year work duration set by electoral democratic system for earning support of the people and also revenues from the resources, and the other that considers long term management of forests for sustaining eco-services not just for the specific village but for the whole nation as such. The conflict between the local people and foresters is the resultant of fast concretization of this hiatus. Yet another reason of conflict emerges because while bringing up the sensitive issue of the 'welfare of the forest dwellers', the Tribal, Panchayati Raj, and Revenue departments side-track the issue of sustainability of forests and allow unbridled exercise of rights on the forest resources. The local populations naturally prefer the situation of absence of any regulations. The insistence by the Forest department to adhere to the ethics of conservation

is naturally not liked by the local leadership. It is interpreted as Forest department's attempt to retain its authority and is used by interested groups to create situations where the foresters are pitted against the local people.

In addition to the above, demoralization of foresters is attempted day in and day out specially by those people and sectors that, in their enthusiasm to side with the so called 'development', avoid to understand and appreciate the long-term sustainability approach of the forestry sector that is essential for conservation of forests in the interest of one and all.

**The Way Ahead:** While it was heartening to note that the Hon. Prime Minister of India touched upon the point of forest protection and biodiversity conservation in his Independence Day speech on the 15 August 2020, the Indian Forest Service Association (Central Unit) approached the Union Minister of Forests on 2<sup>nd</sup> September with specific demands related to safer service conditions and recognition of exemplary works by foresters, and the Nature Conservation Society, Amravati has filed an interim application (I.A.) in the Supreme Court on 18<sup>th</sup> September seeking justice for the forestry personnel. Getting approvals to the demands may take time and therefore it is important to at least start taking initiatives to make the staff aware of various aspects of the problems related to assaults and encourage them to take steps in the interest of the safety and security of the forestry personnel.

To begin with, the MoEFCC must, on priority, analyse and take appropriate cognizance of all the reasons that have led to the current situation of increased attacks on the forest field staff; work towards initiating inter-ministerial dialogues to create an atmosphere in which the field staff feels confident and empowered to carry out fearlessly the constitutional duties and responsibilities assigned to them; and develop and put in place an institutional framework to support the

field staff in their protection related tasks.

The Forest ministry in the States have to realize that such unjustified acts of assaults limit every officer's capacity to perform his duties and threaten officer's physical and emotional well-being. In addition, instances of assaults on field staff lead to lowering of the image of the parent organization and consume costly public resources. For these reasons State should take action to consciously address the issues that cause such instances in the field. Taking the examples from the above analysis, there should be a free and frank discussion amongst the Ministries/department before touching issues that may apparently be opposed to the policies of other Ministry/departments or that may denigrate any department in the eyes of public. In addition, it should provide adequate institutional and infrastructural support along with manpower and resources to implement in the field the safety policy proposed by the Head of Department.

Despite all actions taken at the Ministry level, there may always be a possibility of assaults on the forestry staff. The Office of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests should analyse the field situation, develop a safety policy for its staff, and organize trainings covering the same. The salient points to be covered by the safety policy should be the following:

1. The policy should stress upon prevention as the primary method and suggest ways to do that.
2. Analysis of sensitive areas and the pinpointing probable sites of assaults
3. The nature of hazards and the strategy to handle the same
4. Authorization for the use of force for self-defence and for safety of public property
5. Provision of self-defence equipment and training for the same

6. Proactive and Aggressive methods for defending each officer's safety in the field
7. Prosecution of the attackers to the full extent of law.

At the level of the Chief Conservators and Conservators of Forests holding territorial position, a further detailed analysis and action plan must be developed for each earmarked sensitive area. The basic principle behind this plan is the fact that the life and safety of forestry personnel are most important and that should contribute to the level of preparedness and response of the field staff in any eventuality especially, e.g., when a joint operation for raids/ removal of encroachments etc. is conducted. Some of the items that could be suggested here are a) assessment of the area by gathering as much information as possible b) constant maintenance of situational awareness c) all staff to be optimally equipped with appropriate equipment like communication devices, head gear, and arms (if provided) d) the team to have casualty-care supplies e) having tools and equipment to handle injured persons f) maintaining safe distance while patrolling and accosting mobs g) acting from tactically advantageous location and preparing for an appropriate response while simultaneously

deciding upon a point of safe cover too h) Keeping the additional assistance force ready i) returning fire as per need j) advance planning to assist wounded officer, if any, and k) administering Aid to all who are wounded.

The above actions have been suggested to correct the conditions under which the field staff, burdened with the regulatory as well as management functions are not able to effectively perform their duties and responsibility. Their vulnerability to assaults is sufficiently indicated by the attacks on them in recent times. The strength of any enforcement agency in regard to the safety of its personnel is perceived through the mindset of the personnel, knowledge in the public regarding availability of appropriate machinery and equipment with the staff, the presence of skills to take correct decisions in the situations of expected or actual assaults, and the ability as well as willingness of the personnel to act on that decision whenever situation demands. The decision makers in the Forestry sector have to take immediate action to address the above concerns not just to ensure safety of the life and limb of its staff but to also ensure effective protection of the ecological frontiers of our country. (The author is former PCCF & DG(SF), Maharashtra.)

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Accounts such as these indicate how consumers in many contexts are increasingly conscious of the negative consequences of consumerism and are seeking to change their habits. We are witnessing the emergence of consumer-driven de-growth. These stories also indicate how opens de-growth new opportunities: some companies and industries will certainly be disrupted, but others that are sufficiently prepared for such transitions will handily outmanoeuvre their competitors. For instance, Flygskam has been a boon for train travel, bolstered by a social media movement called Tågskryt ("train

brag"). Meanwhile reduced meat consumption has been accompanied by an explosion in meat substitutes that produce one-tenth of the greenhouse gases compared to the real thing. Accordingly, de-growth reshuffles competitive dynamics within and across industries and, despite what many corporate leaders assume, offers new bases for competitive advantage. As we continue to grapple with climate change, we can expect consumers, rather than politicians, to increasingly drive de-growth by changing their consumption patterns.