



Azim Premji University Colloquium Series

"The Future of the Mangar Bani Sacred Grove and the Aravalli Hills of Haryana"

Speaker

Chetan Agarwal, Senior Fellow, Centre for Ecology, Development and Research, Dehradun

Date: March 31, 2017 (Friday)

Time: 2.00 pm to 3.30 pm

Venue: Seminar Hall, 10th Floor, Pixel A, Azim Premji University

About the Lecture

Mangar Bani is a sacred forest grove facing considerable odds. It is located in the Aravalli hills between the capital city of Delhi, India, and the neighbouring suburbs of Gurgaon and Faridabad, a rapidly urbanizing area. The grove is reputed to be several centuries old and is protected by the local pastoral Gujar community of 3 villages, who hold that the spirit of an erstwhile saint protects the grove, and have numerous rules restricting extraction of biomass. As a result, and like many sacred groves, it is biodiverse and habitat for numerous trees, shrubs and herbs as well as avifauna. However, despite virtually complete unanimity for protecting the sacred grove in the Mangar village, urbanization and the pressures of real estate interests pose a challenge to its existence, and present a slippery slope for the commons' stakeholders. The state government has recently declared a 677 acre area of the grove as a no construction zone. Despite the notification, the Mangar bani sacred grove faces numerous challenges. Despite its dense vegetation it is not officially a forest and the draft master plan does not acknowledge the grove. About a third of the sacred grove is owned by a real estate firm whose beneficial owner cannot be tracked and which has claimed to be growing wheat on land falling in the sacred grove. Thus land tenure, the forest and zoning regulations, and the privatization have all been stacked against the grove, and reflect the broader threat to the Aravalli hill commons in the state of Haryana, India. The presentation will walk the participants through the numerous challenges faced by the sacred grove and its stakeholders, in the face of creeping urbanization. It tracks the land tenure changes, the regulatory and zoning processes from the 1960s to the

present with a focus on the period from 2010-2017 when many of these threats matured and a few stakeholders in city and village attempted to address some of these threats. It uses the analysis to provide a window to broader questions of what is a forest, what is aravalli hills, what is a sacred grove, and how these seemingly simple questions have been hanging fire for decades in India.

About the Speakers

Chetan Agarwal is an independent environmental analyst and Senior Fellow with CEDAR (Centre for Ecology, Development and Research). He does research and consulting related to Ecosystem Services – the benefits of nature to society, such as biodiversity, groundwater recharge, etc. In Gurgaon and Haryana he has undertaken research and advocacy related to the Aravalli hills in general and the Mangar Bani sacred grove in particular. The presentation today is based on some of this work.