



Disempowering gram sabhas

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Sabotaging the Forest Rights Act damages democracy

- Since 1980, through the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF) has “diverted for non-forest use” (bureaucratise for destroyed) over 1.5 million hectares of forest.
- Stripping these forests has yielded thousands of crores of rupees for corporations to which a bulk of these forestlands were diverted, and for forest departments via compensatory funds.
- But how have the original inhabitants of these forests, already among the most marginalised, coped with the loss of homes and livelihoods?
- A deafening silence meets these questions.
- We cannot find answers, yet, in Supreme Court hearings on a petition by a set of conservationists and former forest officers motivated, self-admittedly, by forest protection concerns.
- On February 13, the court ordered the eviction of 1.8 million Adivasi and forest-dwelling claimants under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, to stem supposed forest destruction.

Shredding a reform to bits

- The FRA was enacted to recognise the pre-existing rights of forest-dwellers.
- Recognising them as “integral to the survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem,” the FRA gives their gram sabhas “the responsibilities and authority for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance.”
- A key 2009 regulation actualised gram sabha powers by mandating that all forest diversion proposals and compensatory and ameliorative schemes be presented in detail to the relevant gram sabhas to award or withhold its free, prior, informed consent, and also be preceded by the settlement of all rights under the FRA.
- This long overdue move created for the first time a space for forest

communities to participate in decision-making around diversion proposals, making forest governance more accountable, ecologically informed and resource just.

- A decade on, the state and corporations are shredding this reform to bits.

Fighting back

- The NDA government has effectively ensured that forest diversion is a given, and the only sanctioned role for Adivasis and forest-dwellers is that of mute rubber stamps.
- On February 26, the MoEF tried to formalise this travesty by writing to all States that FRA compliance is not needed for 'in-principle' approval for diversions.
- Violating the FRA, this damaging move eliminates gram sabhas from decision-making, and makes diversion a violent fait accompli for forest-dwellers.
- But communities are increasingly rejecting such disempowerment, evident from protests like a 30-km march days ago by villagers in Chhattisgarh's Hasdeo Arand against the MoEF's recent decision to divert over 2,000 acres of forest to a mine, despite gram sabha forgery complaints.
- A model of forest governance, forged on the back of usurping gram sabha powers, is servicing a ruthless resource grab.
- The Supreme Court should examine this sabotage of the FRA that is damaging our forests and our democracy.

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