

## Anti-forest, anti-forest dweller

The Keonjhar forest department has chosen dense forest in Rangamatia village as the site for compensatory afforestation projects, sparking conflicts with the community. | Photo Credit: [Chitragada Choudhury](#)

Last month, Minister of State for Environment, Forests and Climate Change Mahesh Sharma informed Parliament that his Ministry has collected over 50,000 crore in a Central compensatory afforestation fund (CAF). This money is to be used through the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act, 2016 or CAF, a purported mechanism to offset forest loss. Before issuing forest clearances to a mine, dam or industry, the Ministry fixes a monetary value for the forest that is to be destroyed and collects this as “compensation”. The funds are to be then used to “afforest” alternative land.

### Indicator of destruction

The fund's growth over the past decade is a measure of the forest destruction under way in India. It is also a potent indicator of the scale of resource appropriation from some of India's most marginalised citizens, namely Adivasis and other communities, living in and around forests. The CAF Act is a deeply flawed piece of legislation because it reduces their displacement, hardship and loss of livelihood and food sources to a monetary value — to be paid to the state. The law, and now its draft rules, spells further capture of Adivasi lands in the name of compensatory afforestation. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) was enacted in 2006 to provide forest-dependent communities with resource rights via individual and community forest land titles. It also recognised long-standing knowledge systems and community efforts in protection of forest resources by formally establishing the authority of the gram sabha in forest stewardship.

### 40,000-cr. forest fund in limbo

A decade on, the FRA remains grossly under-implemented, and its vision of devolving power to rural communities stonewalled. The CAF Act and draft rules institutionalise this stymieing by placing a huge fund at the unilateral disposal of the forest bureaucracy, giving it unchecked powers to undertake plantations on private and common property resources. This flies in the face of numerous government and non-governmental reports showing the poor ecological and social consequences as well as the corruption which result from this approach.

The rules provide no meaningful safeguards against the forest bureaucracy implementing compensatory plantations on dense forests, and where FRA claims have been issued, are pending or have to be filed. The rules provide for mere “consultation” with communities in the planning of compensatory afforestation: a clear step backward from the consent provisions in the FRA and the 2014 Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act. Consultations are not stipulated for all afforestation projects, and need not even involve the affected gram sabhas. This indicates a wilful blindness to conflicts under way across forested landscapes.

### Afforesting forests

Take the case of Rangamatia, a village of the PVTG (particularly vulnerable tribal group) Juang community in Keonjhar, north Odisha, which has been at loggerheads with the forest department since 2016. This is when the department unilaterally demarcated dense community-conserved forest in the village for a “compensatory afforestation” project, tied to forest clearance for an iron ore mine by the Tatas in the district. Visiting Rangamatia in July 2016, I came across a forest department board in the midst of a splendid sal forest which said: “Site for Compensatory

Afforestation in Village Rangamatia”.

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Rangamatia is not unique. An ongoing study of 2,479 compensatory afforestation projects across 10 States by forest rights groups has shown that over 70% were on existing forest land, including dense forests. The study chronicled multiple forms of state violence against villagers protesting against such plantations (including beatings, arrests, criminal cases, food insecurity and forcible takeover of land).

As Biswajit Mohanty, an Odisha-based wildlife activist, says, forest departments are taking over village resources, which includes existing old-growth forests, because there is a severe paucity of land to service the thousands of afforestation projects that have been floated. “But forest officers have to come up with afforestation proposals, without which forest clearances cannot be issued,” he says. The result is a deeply violent and dishonest mechanism in the name of afforestation.

Since the CAF Bill was floated, forest rights advocates report that over 2,500 gram sabhas across India have opposed it. But resource rights movements by Adivasi and forest-dwelling communities are marginal in our public discourse, except during momentous events like the recent Nashik-Mumbai march. The government’s ongoing policies do not address such demands for justice and dignity. Instead, they prepare the ground for a fresh chapter of the violent denial of rights and ecological damage.

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