

All trees are not woods

The latest [Forest Survey of India report](#) has changed the calculation methods for India's forest cover to include plantations on private lands. It is common knowledge that private plantations of teak, eucalyptus and poplar are undertaken to earn incomes. Such plantations can't be substitutes for natural forests with their wildlife and immense biodiversity. Natural forests have multiple ecosystem functions, none of which can be provided by commercial plantations.

Classifying tree plantations as forests is naïve and deceptive — naïve because it ignores reams of research and evidence which show otherwise, and deceptive because this dangerous definition comes from a forest bureaucracy that projects itself as the sole guardian of India's forests and is very aware that plantations are not forests. Forest officials are trained in ecological sciences and obviously understand this fallacy. There seem to be other considerations at work in including plantations this way. Revenue generation seems to be an objective, but perhaps more important, the scope to siphon off a large amount of money in the name of plantation. There's hardly any accountability in such projects.

In Odisha, the State from where I come, an unprecedented heatwave in 1998 claimed 2,048 lives. Temperatures are only increasing with climate change. Government measures have successfully reduced deaths due to heat waves, but the numbers are still alarmingly high. Climate change is the daily lived reality not only in Odisha but throughout India in the form of heatwaves, floods, droughts, and unseasonal rainfalls. The situation is getting worse as global temperatures continue to increase.

Protecting and restoring natural forests is one of the best ways to mitigate climate change. In this perspective, replacing forests with plantations raised by the private sector, as proposed in India's just-circulated Draft National Forest Policy, is a terrible strategy. There is no need for profit-seeking private investments in forests as more than \$7 billion of public compensatory afforestation funds are lying unused.

Thousands of tribal and peasantry communities in Odisha have painstakingly protected forests for decades. Like their counterparts across India, they are now bringing claims to legally conserve and govern these forests under the Forest Rights Act of 2006. To marshal people to tackle climate change through forests, we need to work with these communities and turn protection and restoration of India's forests into a forest rights-based movement of gram sabhas and local communities. The \$7 billion compensatory afforestation fund should be given to the gram sabhas of the forest dweller and tribal communities empowered to protect and restore forests through the Act. This will help restore forests and mitigate the impact of climate change, while also meeting India's international climate obligations.

The writer is Convenor, Combat Climate Change Network, India. Views expressed are personal

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With limited resources and time, it is crucial for States to assess which skills policies will make the biggest impact

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