

INDIA'S INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES ARE THE BEST PROTECTORS OF FORESTLANDS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Soul connection: Women hug trees in Odisha's Jhinkargadi as part of a mass movement to save the forest, in November 2018. | Photo Credit: [Biswaranjan Rout](#)

On a fine morning in the spring of 1974, a small girl ran to Gaura Devi, raising an alarm that loggers had come to cut down trees in the mountain forest. On that day (March 25), there were no men present in the remote village of Reni in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. Gaura Devi gathered the women in the village and rushed to confront the contractor.

An argument ensued. The men with axes refused to budge. But the women of Reni were not to be cowed down. In a flash of inspiration, they decided to hug the trees and the loggers had no option but to leave. It was a high point in an epochal environmental movement that resonates even today, at a time when new moves are afoot to separate India's forests from her people.

Best custodians

The Chipko Andolan was a watershed for more reasons than one. The tree-hugging incident had happened the previous year in Mandal, another village in Uttarakhand, under the leadership of environmental activist Chandi Prasad Bhatt, but it was in Reni for the first time that women alone showed that they have the grit to halt loggers from harming the forest they called their mother.

The grassroots movement to conserve forests that nurtured the people living around them led to the government imposing a 15-year ban in 1980 on cutting trees in Himalayan forests. Many other communities across India were inspired by the Chipko movement to start campaigns on their own to stop deforestation. The primary learning from the Chipko Andolan was that local communities were the best custodians of forests. That lesson needs to be relearned today.

The people living in and around India's forests are the most marginalised in our society. They are often the first to be dispossessed from their habitats, often in the name of development and conservation. To right the historical wrongs of our country's forest dwellers, the government in 2006 enacted a law, popularly known as the Forest Rights Act, which for the first time vested the rights and powers to manage forest resources in local communities.

The Act provides for recognising some forestland as community forest resources to be governed and managed by communities. Local communities now manage more than 1.1 million hectares of forestland and there's potential to bring another 30 million hectares of forests under the purview of the law.

A decade earlier in 1996, the government enacted the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, also known as PESA. It empowered tribal communities, a large proportion of whom lived in and around forest, to be governed by traditional village councils. Together with the Forest Rights Act, it tried to ensure that tribal and other forest-dwelling people are no longer easily evicted from places they have been living in for long.

Fighting back

These gains made in the past few decades to reconnect people with forests are now in danger

of being reversed. The Supreme Court has ordered the forced eviction of more than one million forest-dwelling households in 16 States, based on the authorities (mostly forest officials) rejecting traditional claims to forestlands. The apex court has since stayed its order, but the fate of at least 5 million people still hangs in balance. On top of this, the environment ministry has proposed amending the Indian Forest Act of 1927 with rules that are even more draconian than colonial-era laws. It provides unprecedented powers and immunity to forest officials. The proposed modifications allow foresters to cancel or restrain the rights of forest dwellers and forcibly relocate them.

These retrograde developments come at the time when resource-rich forestlands are already under siege from the demands of so-called development that could see irreparable harm done to ancient forests such as Saranda, Hasdeo Arand, Dandakaranya and Mahan.

The British considered India's forests as merely resources to be exploited and, therefore, guarded from the people. Our present administrators seem to have inherited that mindset and seem hell-bent on expelling people from our forests. This must not be allowed to happen.

It has been proven time and again that India's indigenous communities are the best protectors of forests. The only way we can save our forests is to let local communities manage them because they are the ones who have a stake in preserving them. We have seen this happen across India, from Odisha and Chhattisgarh to Kerala and Uttarakhand.

Or, we might just want to let our forests die. Separating the people from the woods would be the way to guarantee that.

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