

# Who are the Conservators of the Forest? Who are the Destroyers?

The BJP government at the Centre and their 'yes men' have been indulging in various kinds of malicious propaganda against adivasis who live on forests for their livelihood - that forests are being encroached upon, trees are being cut down indiscriminately and the environment is being polluted due to hill farming (podu) and that wildlife is endangered due to poaching. Adivasis are being portrayed as culprits for the destruction of forests and environment. Central govt is conspiring to throw adivasis out of the forests and hand over forests mineral and natural resources in the forests to the corporates and big imperialist institutions.

As part of this, the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, the Indian Forest Act, 1927, the forest-wildlife related laws and the environmental laws have been amended in the name of protecting forests, survival of wildlife and protecting the environment. But the words and deeds of the Central rulers are mismatching with the indiscriminate grant of permissions for non-forest activities in forest lands. As a result, wildlife will be extinct, animal and plant species are being destroyed; the environment will be severely damaged.

Union Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav had recently revealed in Parliament that 3 lakh hectares of forest land has been diverted for non-forest activities in the last 15 years. Of these, the data revealed that the highest forest land diverted is for mining - 58,282 ha, road construction - 45,326 ha, irrigation - 36,620 ha, transmission lines - 26,124 ha, defence - 24,337 ha, hydel projects-13,136 ha, railway-9,307 ha, thermal power - 4,107 ha, wind power infrastructure - 2,181 ha and other non-forest activities.

At the same time, he revealed that 3,67,214 ha of the reserve forest was encroached. On March 17, a few days after the corporate forces requested the Centre, it issued a circular for leasing out captive mines in the reserve forests. 13,000 hectares of forest land has been allotted for the 'Township and Development Project on Great Nicobar' in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Many projects that are yet to be considered for were approved.

In this way, the Centre is indulging in destruction of forests and environment by allowing projects in forest areas. In the matter of clearances for these projects, the approval of the local grama sabhas and the PESA Act have been severely violated without heeding to the provisions.

Indiscriminate destruction of forests and severe violation of environmental norms have resulted in increasing soil degradation, desertification, flood wrath in the Himalayan states, environmental changes, extinction of wildlife, species, vegetation and water resources and

especially the survival of local tribes. The amendments to the laws that put the country's future in question to further aggravate these dangerous situations are a cause for concern. The appeals, suggestions and protests of environmentalists, former civil servants, former government employees, Adivasi organisations, social activists, intellectuals, democrats and adivasis have been ignored. Environmentalists are outraged that the laws, policies and actions taken by the government are seriously disruptive to the targets announced in the preamble of the FCA, 2023 Act, to bring total emissions to zero by 2070 and create carbon deposits equivalent to 2.5 to 3.5 tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030.

The center says that for the forest lands lost due to the projects, compensatory forests are being maintained in 9,34,380 hectares of land and crores of rupees have been allocated for the increase of compensatory forests. In April 2016, the govt. accepted in parliament that compensatory afforestation cannot substitute for natural forests. And experts criticised compensatory afforestation as an "unscientific" and "flawed concept". Samarprita Roy, PhD Scholar in Environmental Science from Pune University said "the loss of forest is not a loss of trees alone but the collapse of an ecosystem. The govt. may claim planted trees compensate for forests lost, but that does not mean complex flora and fauna destroyed have been restored".

However, the Centre has no plans or policies for the adivasis who have lost their everything due to the projects, their rehabilitation or about ensuring their livelihood. The government does not have a proper data of how many people have been displaced and become destitute due to these projects.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests & Climate Change (MoEFCC) on January 24 issued guidelines that forest land can be diverted for residential projects up to 1 hectare "in exceptional circumstances". These guidelines do not mention what the "in exceptional circumstances" are. It is for the farmhouses, residences, guest houses, villas, gated communities of the rich and not for the residential accommodation of tribals and poor people. For example, last year, Haryana, a BJP-ruled state on the outskirts of Delhi, has demolished 10,000 shanties and residences belonging to the working class on forest land in Goregaon. However, the farmhouses of the rich in the same area were not even touched. The claims filed by the tribals through grama sabhas for land titles and permanent rights were either rejected or been kept in pending for decades. But it is making changes and orders effortlessly and stubbornly in all the laws that are an obstacle to the corporates and the rich.

According to the Indian State of Forest Report, 2021 (ISFR), forest covers an area of 7,13,789 sq km and 21.71 percent of the country's geographical area. However, the size of these high density and medium density forests has decreased. Analysts say that the dense forests have remained intact in areas inhabited by adivasis as a result of their constant agitations. "Deforestation rates are significantly lower in indigenous and tribal territories, where governments have formally recognized collective land rights, according to a new report" (Down to Earth, 30-03-2021).

For adivasis, Shift cultivation (Podu), hunting and forest produce are the main source of livelihood. According to a report, nearly 6 lakh families in India are cultivating through Podu, and in about 1.73 million hectares, it is done mostly in the north-eastern states. Due to the expulsion of the adivasis from the forests due to projects and mining and due to the lack of interest of today's generation on podu, the area under podu cultivation is reduced. Though Podu cultivation is done in an area for some time and a new podu started elsewhere, the forest grows naturally in the earlier podu land again after sometime. There is no place where adivasis do not agitate against deforestation in the name of timber contracts and projects. It is also not correct to say that wildlife is becoming extinct due to hunting by aborigines; many studies show that they are becoming extinct as wildlife habitats are destroyed for non-forest purposes.

Illegal arrests and killings are being carried out against the tribals and tribal activists who are fighting against mining in Hasdeo Arand Forest in Chhattisgarh, Mahan Forest in Madhya Pradesh, Talabira Forest in Odisha, Forest in Aravalli Mountains and Buxwaha Diamond mining. It is the adivasis who have been fighting and protecting since time immemorial against the destruction of forests that are treated as equal to their God!

The above are just a few of the points based on which we can say that the government's lip service of forest conservation is a big fraud. Also, it is very clear who are the protectors of the forest and who are the destroyers. The main reason is the policies of the rulers and exploitation. Therefore, all the people should fight together against the nefarious and anti-people policies and laws of the central government, which are destroying forests on a large scale and causing environmental destruction, pushing the adivasis out of the forests and handing over them to the corporates and imperialist institutions to loot the forests.