
India: Mining, Deforestation and Conservation Money

The money that the Indian Government collects from companies destroying forests, such as mining companies, is being used to harass, persecute and evict people from the so-called Protected Areas, such as the Tiger Reserves, National Parks and Wild Life Sanctuaries.

Despite persistent and loud claims about forest cover increase in India ([see article from WRM Bulletin 233](#)), the country continues to lose forests at an alarming rate. According to official statistics compiled by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, a total of 1 million 500 thousand hectares of forests were diverted between 1980 and 2019: more than 500 thousand hectares for mining, the rest for thermal power, transmission lines, dams and other projects. (1) In the last three years alone (2015-18), the Indian Government has given 'forest clearances' of more than 20,000 hectares (2), licensing destruction of mostly dense forests. **While there are many triggers of deforestation in India, mining, both legal and illegal, is perhaps the most significant one.**

Along with legally sanctioned mining, large-scale illegal mining, often allowed under political patronage, forms another major source of deforestation. A recent study of mining-driven deforestation covering over 300 districts points out that **states that account for about 35 per cent of India's forest cover -Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, and Jharkhand— also produce large amounts of coal and iron.** (3) Some of these states have consistently recorded forest cover decrease in the recent past according to official forest cover data. Districts with coal mining - Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh- have witnessed 519 km² of forest cover reduction compared to districts that do not have coalmines.

The Indian state seems **determined to keep opening the remaining forests to mining.** In February 2019, the Indian government granted stage-1 preliminary forest clearance for an opencast coalmine to the multinational conglomerate Adani group, in one of the largest contiguous stretches of the very dense Hasdeo Arand forest in Chhattisgarh that spans 170,000 hectares (4). This happened even though in 2009, the Hasdeo Arand forest area had been declared a no-go zone for mining, following submission of the Report of the governmental Committee of Land Reforms and State Agrarian Relations (CLSR) to the Government of India and the Prime Minister's Office. (5)

The Hasdeo Arand forest diversion is a typical case. **Not only are existing laws disregarded and tweaked, but pressing environmental concerns are casually ignored to benefit a private corporation owned by a close friend of India's Prime Minister.** The forest department of the Chhattisgarh state government objected to the diversion because the area is an important wildlife corridor. (6) Local communities, whose consent is mandatory for any case of forest diversion, were also opposed to mining. This, too, was ignored, as the Forest Advisory Committee to India's Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change granted the forest clearance solely based on the fact that mining was already going on in the region. Three more proposals are under consideration that would destroy forests in the Hasdeo Arand area. **This insane logic of one-mine-automatically-justifying-clearance-for-more-mines begs the pertinent questions whether the government "expert" bodies take into account environmental, ecological and social impacts of the proposed projects at all while deciding on future forest clearances.**

The answer is most likely no. But let's go back to Chhattisgarh. The landmark 2006 Forest Rights Act (FRA) requires community consent on the completion of the forest rights recognition process for granting any forest diversion permit. Thus, such **forest clearances are routinely issued on the basis of "consents" obtained largely by coercion and fraud.** (7) If consent cannot be manufactured, the concerned administrative authorities resort to more elaborate practices. For instance, in the coal mining area of Sarguja, the Chhattisgarh State Government 'took back' entitlements for community forest resources it had issued earlier, claiming that the villagers caused disturbances to mining operations in the area and that the approval for mining preceded the entitlements. (8)

While FRA gives sweeping powers to forest communities and their institutions to take back effective control of forests, besides recognising a wide range of forest rights arbitrarily and often illegally extinguished during the colonial forestry regime and also after, the Indian state has been unwilling to implement the law. However, **new movements in opposition to extractive industries and state stranglehold over forests, picking up older legacies and threads, increasingly started to mobilise around FRA's implementation.**

In the last two decades, **strong tribal and peasant movements against mining erupted in many forest areas of India.** In Niyamgiri, Odisha, the Dongria Kondh forest community mobilized successfully against a proposed bauxite mining project by the infamous Vedanta group. In Mahan, in Madhya Pradesh, forest communities succeeded to stop a large coalmine project jointly owned by Essar and Hindalco. Forest communities, including the indigenous Madia Gonds in the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, have long been opposing a string of proposed iron mines in dense forests. In the neighbouring Korchi area, communities' resistance accomplished the withdrawal of an iron mining project. And also in the Sarguja and Raigarh districts of Chhattisgarh, communities have mobilised against coal mining. (9)

In the *Pathalgadi* (erection of stones) movement that took the tribal heartland of India by storm in 2017-18, *Gram Sabhas* (community assemblies) in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Telengana, **erected stones to mark their territories and proclaim full autonomy in all matters of governance**, in accordance with provisions of Indian Constitution and legislations such as FRA. (10) It is no coincidence that *Pathalgadi* happened where most of India's coal reserves are located.

Mining money goes to evict people from so-called "protected areas"

The Indian Government counts such rampant diversions of forests among the "organised" and "managed" drivers of deforestation, and apparently it does not list those emissions in its greenhouse gas emissions inventory. However, **it collects huge sums of money from the companies using forested lands, such as mining companies, according to its controversial Compensatory Afforestation protocol.** This money is supposed to be used for raising plantations and "gaining value" from ecosystem services. (11) After the enactment of the Compensatory Afforestation Act in 2016 (CAF Act), the accumulated funds (better known as CAMPA funds) would now reach the state forest departments with greater ease, and as the struggle groups apprehend, **it would be increasingly used to undermine community control over forests.**

Mining hurts and destroys forests and forest communities in many ways. In India, one way is also established via the CAMPA Fund. **The Indian state is in fact using the money in this Fund to harass, persecute and ultimately evict people from the so-called Protected Areas, such as the Tiger Reserves, National Parks and Wild Life Sanctuaries. Mining and wild life conservation**

are in many areas literally concomitant. One example is the Tadoba-Andheri Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Maharashtra. A 2010 report by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and the Wildlife Institute of India shows the TATR and adjoining forest areas of Chandrapur as one of the five corridors that supports tiger 'meta-populations'. This, and another slightly later report by Greenpeace India, pointed out that rapid land use change in form of mining, roads, railways, power plants, dams and other industrial infrastructure were threatening this corridor. (12) TATR could function as a source population, from which peripheral forests could be also populated with tigers. Nonetheless, since 2000, coal mining destroyed over 2,500 hectares of forests in the Chandrapur district, excluding the land diverted for the related infrastructure, as well as the large-scale air and water pollution.

Not concerned with the evident impacts of mining in and around a legally designated "tiger" forest area, the TATR authorities have meanwhile decided to "relocate" six villages, with a total population of more than 1,000 families out of the reserve. Already in 2007, inhabitants and few other tribal families from a nearby location were relocated at Bhagwanpur colony, near Ajaypur, Chichpalli forest range. And in 2012, another relocation took place near Khadsangi village near Chimur. However, because the relocation area had no agricultural land, villagers were asked by the department to use "vacant land" in Chimur forest range.

Relocation of villages continues to secrete conflicts because the forest department keeps on pressurizing the villagers to move away, while granting permission to large mining companies to operate. The pressures have taken many forms: restricting the forest villagers' customary access to forests (ban on grazing, fishing, collection of firewood), not allowing the routine welfare schemes to come to the village, threats of legal action and finally, harassment by forest officials and police. **The department, aided by several wildlife NGOs, is trying hard to evict the villages that still refuse to be relocated.** For instance, **criminal cases** have been filed against a number of villagers at Kolsa and, to add to the inconvenience, the forest department is **denying people all access to forests** as well as **restricting their use of nearby roads** to the villages. The Kolsa *Gram Sabha* has submitted their claims under the FRA, yet, these are being ignored.

However, relocating villages is an expensive proposition. It means paying Rs.10 lakh (around 14 thousand US dollars) to each family (or land for land rehabilitation with houses and infrastructure, according to the guidelines first issued by the NTCA in 2008). The Maharashtra forest department and the NTCA, which funds relocation programmes in tiger reserves, now face an acute shortage of funds. Thus, **the National Tiger Conservation Authority sought to release more funds from CAMPA to facilitate relocation and other conservation "priorities".** In 2013, the Ministry of Forests and Environment approved a proposal from NTCA for releasing Rs. 1000 Crore (around 140 million US dollars) from the national CAMPA fund, despite protests by civil society representatives and overriding objections raised by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA). The process of villages' relocation, according to MoTA, is in violation of the provisions of both the 2006 Forest Rights Act and the Wild Life Protection Act (1972-2006), both of which make the *Gram Sabhas'* consent mandatory.

CAMPA funds continue to be used for relocation purposes, however. In November 2013, NTCA released Rs. 21.64 Crore (around 3.5 million US dollars) from the CAMPA fund to TATR authorities for relocation purposes. Before this, the Maharashtra state government released another 15.50 Crore (around 2.2 million US dollars) of CAMPA money for the same purposes. This was announced by Virendra Tiwari, chief conservator of forests (CCF) and field director of TATR. **The Maharashtra state government proudly listed such relocation programmes with CAMPA money as its "achievements."** And in order to be certain that the relocation work (i.e. eviction of forest communities) does not stop because of lack of funds, the Annual Plan of Operations for the financial

year 2017-2018 prepared by the Maharashtra Forest Department has 62 Crore (around 8.8 million US dollars) under a component called “rehabilitation of villages in Protected Areas”, while provision for another 74 Crore (around 10.5 million US dollars) has been kept in the 2018-2019 Annual Plan.

After the rules for the Compensatory Afforestation Fund were notified, things became easier for the Forest department and its allies. States were handed out bulk moneys according to their forest sales proceeds. **Not unexpectedly, the mining states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Jharkhand were among the largest beneficiaries. After all, this is their reward for all the hard work that had gone into opening up dense forests for mining.** In August 2019, Prakash Javadekar, the Minister of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, officially released the accumulated Compensatory Afforestation Fund money to the state forest departments. A mindboggling 47,436.18 Crore Rupees (around 67 billion US dollars) were distributed among the states for “afforestation” purposes, which in reality this will very likely mean “relocation” and industrial monoculture plantations.

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(1) E-Green Watch, FCA Projects, [Diverted Land, CA Land Management](#). It has often been pointed out that so-called development projects are forcing India's forests to disappear. See Government of India (2009): [Report of the Committee of Land Reforms and State Agrarian Relations](#)

(2) According to [information presented in the Parliament](#), Telangana topped the list with 5,137.38 hectares, followed by Madhya Pradesh with 4,093.38 and Odisha with 3,386.67 hectares.

(3) Ranjan. R(2019): [Assessing the impact of mining on deforestation in India](#), Resources Policy 60 (2019) 23–35

(4) See: Hindustantimes, [Adani closer to mining in green zone in Chhattisgarh](#), February 2019, also Down to Earth, [Central panel opens up forest for Adani mine despite Chhattisgarh's reservations](#), February 2019

(5) Government of India (2009): [Report of the Committee of Land Reforms and State Agrarian Relations](#) (CLSR),

(6) See Chaturbedi. S (2019): [Allocating forest land in Chhattisgarh for coal mining is cause for alarm; deforestation has risen significantly in recent decades](#).

Kaushalendra Singh, principal chief of wildlife management and biodiversity conservation, pointed out that there are already two coal mines operating in the area, besides a 75-kilometre-long railway line to transport coal, all of which disturb elephant corridors. The additional chief secretary (for forests) of the state government had also suggested that a more detailed site inspection is required before a decision is taken for diverting the forestland. However, the January 15, 2019, Forest Advisory Committee's meeting minutes evidenced how the Committee decided against this, noting that “no additional information is expected to be obtained by one more site inspection”. See Government of India (2019): [Minutes Of The Meeting Of Forest Advisory Committee Held On 15th January](#), 2019 /Agenda No. 2/F.No.8-36/2018-FC

(7) [See Greenpeace article from 2014](#). In March 2015, the Ministry of Environment refused clearance for the Mahan project. Subsequently, Ministry of Coal [announced that the Mahan coal block would not be auctioned for mining](#).

(8) Sethi 2016; Kohli 2016

(9) In Korchi alone, 12 mining leases were proposed, impacting over 1032.66 hectares. See Neema Pathak Broome. N.P, Bajpai. S and Shende. M(2016): [Reimagining Wellbeing: Villages in Korchi taluka, India, Resisting Mining and Opening Spaces for Self-Governance](#). See also <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/mining/experts-panel-red-flags-power-mining-projects-in-western-ghats-37201> and

<http://cat.org.in/portfolio/tribals-oppose-cluster-of-4-iron-ore-mines-in-zendepar/> ; See also Sethi. N: [Five coal blocks in Chhattisgarh might see land conflict](#), January 15, 2015; and interviews with activists from All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM).

(10) Singh. A (2019): *Many Faces of the Pathalgadi Movement in Jharkhand* in *Economic and Political Weekly*: 54(11) 16 Mar, 2019

(11) Ghosh. S (2016): *Selling Nature: Narratives of Coercion, Resistance and Ecology*, in Kohli. K and Menon. M (eds.): *Business Interests and Environmental Crisis*, Sage, Delhi

(12) Jhala Y.V, Qureshi., Gopal, R., and Sinha, P.R. (Eds) *Status of Tigers, Co-predators and Prey in India*, 2010. National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), Govt. of India, and Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun; and Greenpeace India Society, '*Undermining Tadoba's Tigers: How Chandrapur's tiger habitat is being destroyed by coal mining*', a fact-finding report, 2011.