The Pandemic in Forests in India: Escalated Attacks on Communities

Funds from the Compensatory Afforestation scheme have been allocated for Covid-19 relief measures. The scheme has funded plantations that invade community land and has led to illegal evictions where "Protected Areas" have been declared. This has not stopped during the lockdown. Now, such attacks are set to escalate.

Around mid-May 2020, the Finance Minister of India announced that Rs. 6000 crores (around US1 billion dollars) would be allotted under the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF), better-known as CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority), as part of the government's much-awaited Covid-19 relief package. It is important to point out that since 2014, when it came to power, this government has made the overwhelming majority of India's citizens, particularly the *adivasis* (indigenous peoples), *dalits* (caste-oppressed), religious minorities, peasants, workers and the urban poor, only more vulnerable and insecure. Insane economic policies such as the 2016 demonetization (the government suddenly decided to withdraw currencies of certain denominations from the market, plunging the people into untold distress) and shameless pampering of certain corporate interests have already brought the economy to a halt. People in India, are being hounded and harassed routinely in the name of development, national security and religion. The poor and the working people of the country are literally under siege when the Prime Minister declared Covid-19 as a 'national disaster' in late March and put the country under a stringent and abrupt lockdown.

Let's look at forests and forest communities. Ignoring all objections and protests from social movements and rights activists, the Indian government went ahead with its agenda of commoditising India's forests: in 2014 the Draft National REDD Plus Policy (it has since then been finalized) was announced, followed by the 2015 Guidelines for handing over 'degraded' forests to private players mainly for raising plantations (1), Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act of 2016 (or CAMPA), Draft National Forest Policy in 2018 (2) and finally, the Draft Amendments to Indian Forest Act of 2019, which haven't been withdrawn yet. Together, these constitute the policy architecture for enclosing, monetising and selling the still vast forest commons in India. The Covid-19 pandemic and the related measures taken by the government are yet another threat, the latest addition to a generally grim scenario. Unfortunately, this new threat appeared at a time when the all-pervasive deprivation persisting in tribal areas has not been addressed: a crippling lack of public healthcare that severely limits the capacities to curb the spread of the virus, tens of thousands of migrant workers stranded in cities, lack of institutional mechanisms and access for procurement and distribution of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) (3), rampant deforestation in the name of forest land diversion without the consent of the communities, violations and non-implementation of progressive legislations like the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 and the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA).

Instead of respecting the autonomy and dignity of India's tribal and other forest communities, the Covid-19-relief funds have been approved under the old Compensatory Afforestation scheme (4). This scheme has been contested by forest rights campaigners and tribal organisations in India and internationally ever since the controversial Compensatory Fund Act was first mulled back in 2015. It

has been pointed out that Compensatory Afforestation is largely a scam and at best an attempt to greenwash the trail of organised and licensed deforestation in India. Also, channelling unlimited money to the colonial forestry bureaucracy has the potential to destroy the livelihoods of millions of forest dwellers, causing great ecological damage and aggravating further displacement and exploitation of forest communities.

The Fund has also been questioned by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs of the Indian Government. In a letter to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) written in March 2018, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) had argued that the draft CAF rules dilute the provisions of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

The announcement of releasing Compensatory Afforestation funds to the states for 'employment generation' ignores the concerns raised by movements and activist groups about the ongoing violations of forest rights by CAMPA plantations on the one hand and by large-scale denudation of forests on the other. The movements/groups who oppose the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act and rules, oppose the present move too. Compensatory Afforestation allows organised deforestation through diverting forested land for non-forest purposes without community consent. Such consent is supposed to be legally mandatory under FRA. This results in a general loss of access to the forest Commons traditionally used and conserved by communities, whose lives depend on physical and cultural sustenance provided by forests. Moreover, Compensatory Afforestation activities, which were originally intended to be on lands not registered as forests, routinely emerge on forest Commons, village pastures and common land. The later include lands of various tenure categories such as village forests and village commons (both widely known as *nistar*), old *zamindari* forests (forests owned by landlords during the colonial era) and government lands, all of which support a wide range of rights to access and use, recorded or unrecorded, legal or customary, for collecting fuel wood, grazing animals and so on. Under the FRA, such rights were supposed to be duly recorded, and entitlements given to forest dwelling people. Raising Compensatory Afforestation plantations on forest Commons and common lands only undermines the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and ultimately help perpetuate the historical injustice that the FRA promises to redress.

Since the CAF bill was tabled in 2015,social movements and rights activists have consistently demanded the transferring of Compensatory Afforestation funds to the *Gram Sabhas* (village assemblies) and ensuring that activities are taken up only with free and prior consent of the *Gram Sabhas*, as mandated by the FRA and the PESA legislation. This demand has been raised again in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, so that the *Gram Sabhas* can utilise the funds which currently stand at a huge 55,000 crore (around 7.3 billion US dollars) (5). This would ensure the funds respond to the diverse geographic and community-specific needs of forest communities in India.

Nonetheless, going by past experiences, the forest officialdom has kept on using Compensatory Afforestation funds to raise plantations (mostly of monoculture and commercial species) on lands cultivated by forest communities and also inside community forests, leading to transgressions on autonomy and rights. Monocultures have also destroyed biodiversity, Non-timber forest produce (NTFPs) and forest foods used by communities. Compensatory Afforestation Funds are also being used to illegally evict tribals and other forest communities from the Protected Areas such as the Tiger Reserves, National Parks and Wild Life Sanctuaries.

Knowing well that the Compensatory Afforestation funds in the hands of forest officials can only exacerbate the distress situation that forest communities are mired in, the Indian government is now advertising Compensatory Afforestation money as a “tribal-friendly” and distress-relief measure. This is not only ironic, but also smacks of the present government’s total disregard of realities and

common human decency. Besides, the use of Compensatory Afforestation funds is legally mandatory, and allotment of money from that fund cannot be treated under any circumstances as part of an economic package meant explicitly for Covid-19 pandemic relief.

On top of all of this, it has been reported that the forest department is carrying out plantation activities during the lockdown period as well as evictions of communities. To date, these include: forest officers cutting down forests in Odisha allegedly to raise plantations (6), eviction notices were served on forest dwellers in Sikkim (7). In Madhya Pradesh (8), Gujrat (9), Manipur (10) and Odisha (11), communities were forcibly evicted, their houses burnt and demolished during the lockdown. With this fresh liberation of funds, such attacks on people are set to escalate.

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(This article is largely based on a Press Release issued jointly by Indian social movements and activists on 17 May and a Press Release by All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFFM) on 25 March 2020)

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