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## Forests

### Resisting displacement: Why democratic conservation is essential for India's future

*Labelling resistance of tribals as 'disruptive' ignores their fears of losing their homes, disregards their role as stewards of forests*

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As India grapples with the twin crises of environmental degradation and the displacement of indigenous communities, the debate around conservation has taken on a deeply contentious tone. Over the past decade, forest rights activists have increasingly been labelled as disruptive forces by certain sections of the conservation community.

But is resistance truly a disruption? Or is it the manifestation of a democratic right that safeguards not just human dignity, but also the sustainability of our landscapes?

More than 15 years since the passing of the The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, known simply as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), its objectives remain misunderstood. The law is often dismissed as a land distribution scheme, an effort to parcel out forests to communities at the cost of wildlife. However, the FRA is much more than that — it is a governance legislation designed to offer a robust framework for conservation by recognising the rights of indigenous people and forest dwellers, and empowering them to take charge of protecting and managing forest ecosystems. This decentralised, community-led model of conservation provides an alternative to the centralised, bureaucratic model that has, in many cases, failed to deliver meaningful results.

A growing number of conservationists have come to support this rights-based approach, recognising that FRA provides an effective solution to the shortcomings of the state-led model. By empowering communities to manage their own resources, FRA strengthens conservation efforts on a large scale, ensuring that those who live in and depend on the forests are directly involved in their protection.

This is in contrast to the ongoing dismantling of forest and environmental regulations, as well as attempts to privatise forests through government initiatives like the Green Credit Program

and the Carbon Credit Trading Scheme, which often come at the expense of community forests secured through FRA.

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Recent changes to the Forest Conservation Act and Rules highlight the growing threat of privatisation. These changes advance a profit-driven model that undermines community-based conservation efforts. The focus on financial incentives for private entities disregards the rights of forest-dependent communities and stands in direct opposition to the principles enshrined in FRA and the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2006 (WLPA). Both the FRA and WLPA reinforce a conservation framework based on the recognition of rights, the empowerment of communities and the principle of co-existence between humans and wildlife.

Unfortunately, this rights-based conservation model is not consistently followed, particularly in protected areas and forest reserves, where centralised control often leads to conflict. In many of these areas, the voices of local communities are ignored or suppressed, resulting in tensions and contestations that undermine conservation efforts.

Instead of fostering co-existence, the current system also often pits people against wildlife, deepening the divide between conservation goals and the needs of forest-dwelling communities. The scale of these tensions is alarming. There are currently 24 ongoing conflicts in the conservation and forestry sector, affecting 42,180 people and 14,373 hectares of land, according to data from the independent research network *Land Conflict Watch*.

These conflicts, involving laws such as FRA and the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), demonstrate how large-scale land struggles are occurring in the very regions where communities should be empowered to manage their forests. The data highlights how ongoing attempts to centralise control and privatise forests are leading to displacement and intensifying social unrest, all while undermining conservation efforts.

Protests in tribal areas of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha, for instance, have become flashpoints of resistance against mining projects and deforestation. In these regions, communities that have lived in harmony with the forest for centuries now face displacement.

Labelling their resistance as 'disruptive' ignores their legitimate fears of losing their homes, livelihoods and cultural heritage. Additionally, it disregards their role as stewards of the land — something FRA recognises and seeks to protect.

The increasing centralisation of control over natural resources, coupled with a push toward privatisation, reveals a deeper tension in India's conservation landscape. While one side views forests as habitats that must be preserved for the sake of wildlife, the other sees them as homes. Both perspectives are valid, but to reduce the conversation to a simplistic battle

between wildlife and people is to miss the point entirely. Conservation must account for both.

The FRA's rights-based approach is now recognised as a legal and governance principle, offering a viable model for conservation that integrates both human and ecological interests. It ensures that local communities, who have historically been excluded from decision-making processes, are given a central role in managing and protecting their environments.

This co-existence framework is not only more just, but also more effective. Evidence from around the world shows that inclusive, community-led conservation efforts often lead to better environmental outcomes.

Countries like Namibia and Brazil, where local communities are entrusted with conservation efforts, demonstrate the power of this approach. These models of landscape-level conservation not only protect wildlife, but also support the sustainable development of human communities.

India's FRA and WLPA were designed with similar principles in mind, but their implementation has been stifled by top-down governance models and a focus on privatisation.

***We must move away from the outdated idea that conservation is a zero-sum game between people and nature***

The path forward requires a shift in perspective. Rather than sidelining local voices, the government and conservationists must work together with forest communities to create a shared vision for sustainable development.

Recognising that both humans and wildlife are part of the same ecosystem is key to building resilient landscapes. We must move away from the outdated idea that conservation is a zero-sum game between people and nature.

Ultimately, India's future depends on adopting a more democratic, participatory approach to conservation — one that respects both the rights of people and the imperatives of ecological protection. If we fail to do so, the growing conflicts over land, resources and rights will only escalate, leaving both communities and the environment worse off.

In this crucial moment, it is important to ask: Are we willing to listen to those whose lives are intertwined with the forest, or will we continue to dismiss their resistance as a disruption? The answer to this question will determine not just the fate of India's forests, but the future of its democracy.

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*Views expressed are the author's own and don't necessarily reflect those of Down To Earth.*