

DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

FREE ARTICLE

Forest policy: Activists write to PMO on tribal community rights

Civil society groups say the Environment Ministry has weakened the Forest Rights Act while supporting corporate interests over tribal communities.

Published : Jul 07, 2025 16:00 IST - 6 MINS READ

VEDAANT LAKHERA

COMMENTS (0)

SHARE

READ LATER



Tribal people protesting outside the Odisha Assembly house in Bhubaneswar on March 18, 2025. | Photo Credit: BISWARANJAN ROUT

On June 28, more than 150 civil society organisations and activists wrote to the Prime Minister’s Office, alleging that the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) had subverted the **Forest Rights Act (FRA)**.



READ THE LATEST ISSUE!

ASSAM ON THE BOIL — T

Assam enters the danger zone

Sushanta Talukdar



ASSAM ON THE BOIL

Editor’s Note: The Assam template

Vaishna Roy

+ SEE ALL STORIES

Insightful Reads

The letter criticised Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav for a statement he made during a media interview, calling it “totally false and misleading”. Yadav had held the **implementation** of the FRA “responsible for the degradation and loss of prime forest areas”.

Jairam Ramesh, former Union Environment Minister and Congress general secretary in charge of communications, endorsed the letter. In a post on X, Ramesh said the Modi government’s track record on environmental protection did not inspire confidence that the issues would be discussed and resolved. “The issues that have been raised are of profound significance, especially to tribal and other communities residing and earning their livelihoods in forest areas. They are also of fundamental importance to ecological security,” he wrote.

Also Read | [Can Van Mahotsav’s billion saplings save India’s forests?](#)

The MoEFCC countered, stating that such criticisms “reflect a gross misunderstanding of facts”. It asserted that the ministry remained “committed to protecting forests, India’s green cover, and communities dependent on them or living in the vicinity of said areas”.

In a detailed post on X, the MoEFCC said “the statement of the Minister of Environment, Forests,



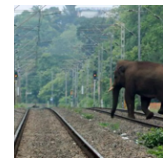
Is the MoEFCC encroaching into the domain of Tribal Affairs Ministry?

Rishika Pardikar



2006: Forest Rights Act

TEAM FRONTLINE



Missing forests: Govt report makes tall claims

Frontline



Sanjida Khatun (1933-2025): Bangladesh cultural warrior

Basudha Banerji



Vikram Sampath in plagiarism row

Frontline

and Climate Change as quoted in the social media has been grossly misrepresented, distorted, represented in a piecemeal manner and is totally out of context”.



The Ministry clarified that Yadav’s comments during the media interview referred to the “net increase in the forest cover in the country as per the latest State of Forest Report, wherein degradation in some forest areas has also been observed due to a variety of reasons... The statement (Minister’s) underlines that such degradation in the forest cover can be addressed by adopting protection measures that are implemented with effective community involvement”.

The government dismissed allegations surrounding amendments to the Forest (Conservation) Act and subsequent Rules, asserting that criticisms were made “without an in-depth knowledge and understanding” of the law’s provisions. It maintained that amendments were introduced “as

per laid down Constitutional processes” and followed “due Parliamentary procedures”.

Enacted in 2006, the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), is a landmark legislation that corrects historical injustices faced by Adivasi and forest-dwelling communities in India. It recognises their legal right to reside in and use forest land they have traditionally inhabited and depended on for generations.

The Act acknowledges individual and community rights. Individual forest dwellers can claim rights over forest land they have been cultivating or residing on, while communities can assert collective ownership over forest resources—grazing areas, water bodies, and minor forest produce.

Specific interventions

The activists’ letter outlined five specific interventions by the MoEFCC that allegedly sought to undermine the FRA’s provisions illegally.

It pointed out that the [India State of Forest Report 2023](#) had wrongly attributed the loss of forest cover to the FRA’s implementation. The report, while outlining reasons for the decline in forest and tree cover, listed “titles given to beneficiaries under the Forest Rights Act, 2006” as one contributing factor. Bhupender Yadav echoed this assertion in a media interview in June.

The signatories referenced a June 2024 order that led to the eviction of nearly 65,000 families from tiger reserves, claiming that the Ministry had submitted

“legally untenable” data to parliamentary fora and the National Green Tribunal. They asserted that the 2023 amendments to the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, were “bulldozed through Parliament”, and criticised the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, 2023, for “adversely impacting both the quantity and quality of forests”.

“If the government genuinely cares about the well-being of Adivasis and farmers, it should work to strengthen the Forest Rights Act by introducing complementary legislation—not weaken it.”

Dev Desai

Human rights activist and member, ANHAD

Dev Desai, a human rights activist and member of ANHAD (Act Now for Harmony and Democracy), told *Frontline* that the current Central government had taken measures to “systematically weaken protective legislations as the Forest Rights Act”.

“It’s not that tribal people didn’t face issues before 2014. But the Forest Rights Act introduced processes that had to be followed—clearances, consultations, consent. This became an obstacle for big industrialists who want to enter forests, mine, cut down trees, or take over land.... But now, they’re actively trying to weaken it—not just the FRA, but other protective laws as well. Look at how the RTI Act

is being diluted, how labour laws are being eroded. By weakening these frameworks, they are essentially handing over our collective resources—the resources of common people, of Adivasis, of the people of India—to multinational corporations,” Desai said.

He stressed the urgent need for comprehensive land reforms, arguing that without a robust and uniform land allocation system across all States, any data on land use and ownership would remain unreliable and misleading.

“For example, almost every village has grazing lands, but as cities expand, these lands are being encroached upon—by large builders and even the government,” he said. “People who are landless and depend on these commons for their livelihoods, where are they supposed to go?”

Complete disregard for FRA

Desai explained how tribal lands were being handed over to private companies under the guise of development, with complete disregard for the Forest Rights Act.

“I believe that if the government genuinely cares about the well-being of Adivasis and farmers, it should work to strengthen the Forest Rights Act by introducing complementary legislation—not weaken it.... If that concern is real, that’s the way forward. But what’s happening on the ground is the opposite. There is a systematic effort to dismantle the Act. In fact, in some official statements and reports, the FRA itself has been blamed for forest degradation.”

Also Read | [Frontline Explains: India’s climate emergency](#)

Desai pointed to large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Bharatmala Project and the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor as examples.

“Much of the land being acquired for these projects lies in rural and tribal belts. Forests are being cleared in the name of road development. In some areas, roads are being built at a height of 8–9 feet to allow easy passage of heavy vehicles. But what happens to the composition of forest land there? Across the country, we’re seeing ancient trees—hundreds of years old—being cut down in the name of progress,” he said.

CONTRIBUTE YOUR COMMENTS (0)

GET OUR NEWSLETTERS

SHARE THIS STORY



Stories that help you connect the dots



Tribal group in Nagarahole fights for forest land

The Jena Kuruba fight to settle inside a tiger reserve while conservationists dismiss it as a romantic notion.

Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed

June 9, 2025