

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/forests/threat-to-ativasi-rights-civil-society-slams-union-environment-ministers-claim-linking-fra-to-forest-loss>

Threat to Adivasi rights? Civil society slams Union environment minister's claim linking FRA to forest loss

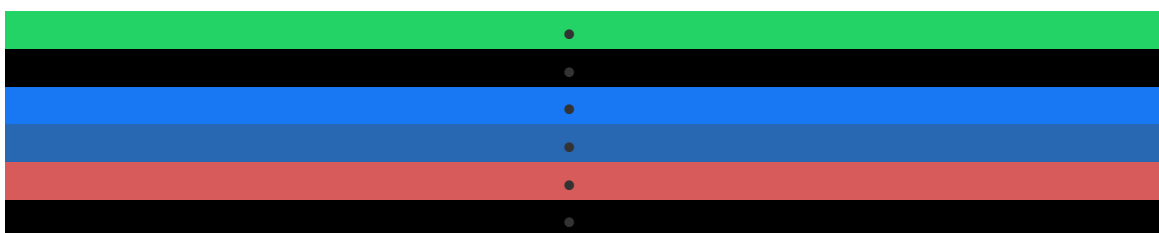
151 groups write to PMO, alleging misleading claims, executive overreach and actions that threaten the constitutional and legal rights of forest-dwelling communities

A 2009 submission by the MoEF&CC to the FAO stated that rights to protect approximately 40 million hectares of community forest resources had been assigned to village-level democratic institutions. Vikas Choudhary / CSE

[Himanshu Nitnaware](#)

Published on:

01 Jul 2025, 6:15 pm



A statement by the Union environment minister Bhupender Yadav blaming forest degradation on titles granted under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 has sparked outrage among civil society groups, who called it a dangerous misrepresentation of the law and a veiled attack on the rights of Adivasis.

[In a letter submitted to the Prime Minister's Office](#) on June 28, 2025, 151 groups accused the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) of “consistently subverting” FRA through misleading claims, executive overreach and actions that threaten the constitutional and legal rights of forest-dwelling communities.

The letter stated that the minister's comments on June 5, 2025, [in an interview](#), cited titles granted under the FRA as a cause of forest degradation. The statement was “totally false and misleading, legally untenable and an attempt to subvert the legitimacy of FRA enacted by the Parliament”, the groups claimed.

They also highlighted in the letter what they claimed were a series of executive actions by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) that consistently undermined FRA.

In the interview, Yadav was asked about how India can reduce loss and degradation of primary forests. He responded: “Although there is a net increase in dense forests in the country, there are areas where the dense prime forests have been affected with

degradation. This may be due to encroachment, illicit felling and in northeast region, due to shifting cultivation. And to a lesser degree, due to unregulated grazing, natural causes like storms and landslides and also titles given under FRA 2006. This may be addressed by taking up stringent protection measures added with effective community involvement and also by regulating shifting cultivation in case of northeastern region.”

The signatories of the letter, which included forest rights organisations like National Alliance of People's Movements and Campaign for Survival and Dignity among others, argued that attributing forest loss to FRA titles given to Adivasi and forest-dwelling communities was “irresponsible and misleading”.

They wrote that Yadav’s statement was contrary to MoEF&CC's own stand and pointed to a [2009 submission by the ministry to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations](#), which “assigned rights to protect around 40 million hectares of community forest resources to village level democratic institutions”.

The groups further highlighted that while the minister blamed the FRA for forest degradation, he overlooked MoEF&CC’s own role in “[illegal diversion](#)” of over 300,000 [hectares of forest land since 2008](#) for non-forest activities without complying with provisions of the FRA, according to a 2023 Lok Sabha response. These actions led to large-scale deforestation, they alleged.

The ministry is also submitting “legally untenable data” on encroachment in Parliamentary forums and the National Green Tribunal (NGT), the letter claimed. The MoEF&CC on March 28, 2025 informed the NGT through an affidavit that [1.3 million hectares of forest land](#) were under encroachment, as of March 2024.

“MoEF&CC has been repeatedly reporting such false data on ‘encroachment’ in both the houses of the Parliament too. In [May 2002](#), the figure stood at 1.4 million hectares (1,495,746.732 ha). [In 2021](#), the figure was 1.3 million (1,329,450.2 ha),” the letter stated.

The letter also cited a recent directive by the National Tiger Conservation Authority, a statutory body under the MoEF&CC, issued on June 19, 2024, ordering the relocation of 64,801 families from tiger reserves. The groups described this as a “complete violation” of the FRA, the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and other applicable legal frameworks and demanded the order be withdrawn immediately.

The groups alleged the risk of displacement, forced eviction, and criminalisation of forest dwellers had escalated as the order was not withdrawn, leaving millions facing social and economic insecurity.

The letter further criticised the [2023 India State of Forest Report](#) by Forest Survey of India (FSI), which cited “titles given to beneficiaries under the FRA” as one of the causes for negative changes in forest and tree cover. The groups argued that the FSI, a scientific agency, could not make such claims without providing empirical evidence.

The statements in the FSI report are even more concerning, since in 2019 it was impleaded as a party respondent in the *Wildlife First vs. Union of India* case (supra) before the Supreme Court — raising apprehensions that it may present these

submissions before the court, using inapplicable scientific tools such as satellite imagery, the letter alleged.

It concluded by criticising the [2023 amendments to the Forest Conservation Act, 1980](#) (now renamed Van Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan Adhiniyam, 1980), which the groups said further undermined the rights of forest-dwelling communities. They argued that the amendments, introduced under the pretext of promoting ease of doing business, threatened the ecological security of India's forests by diluting the definition of 'forest' as set by the Supreme Court in the 1996 *Godavarman* judgment.

The amendments, they alleged, allowed exemptions under various categories while weakening the role of central institutions like the Forest Advisory Committee and the MoEF&CC in enforcing FRA compliance. They claimed responsibility had now been passed to state governments only after Stage-II forest clearance, effectively sidelining prior recognition of rights and Gram Sabha consent. "These amendments have further diluted the integral role of the FRA and of forest dwelling communities in the conservation and preservation of forests in India," the letter claimed.

The civil society groups called on the Union government to uphold parliamentary laws and urgently intervene to protect the constitutional and statutory rights of millions of Adivasis and forest dwellers.

The forest rights groups told *Down To Earth (DTE)* that they have not yet received any response to the letter.

DTE has reached out to MoEF&CC for comment. A response is awaited.

[Read all the news related to forests in Hindi](#)

[forest rights](#)

[Forest loss](#)

[Forest Rights Act of 2006](#)

[Adivasi communities](#)

[Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change \(MOEFCC\)](#)