

India's forest-planting push leaves indigenous women out in the cold

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Communities rely on forests for firewood and other natural products they gather and sell – but a government tree-planting drive is cutting them off from land and livelihoods

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By [Anuradha Nagaraj](#)

CHENNAI, India, Feb 2 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - During the bone-chilling winters of Panna in central India's Madhya Pradesh state, Janaka Bai needs at least three bundles of firewood each week to keep her family warm and another to fuel her kitchen stove every day.

Living on the edge of India's diamond mining hub, Bai has been fighting to keep on collecting the firewood she needs nearby, as schemes to increase the country's shrinking forests have shut her and others out with fences and guards.

From snatched axes to risking arrest for trespass, indigenous women are finding themselves in conflict with new Indian laws that mandate large-scale tree-planting to compensate for declines in forest cover.

"They call us firewood thieves and sometimes take us to local police stations," said Bai, 45, by phone from her village. "Or they threaten us, snatch our tools and shoo us out of the forest. And yet we go back because there is no choice."

India's Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) was set up to promote forest restoration as a way of compensating for trees cleared for other uses like mining and infrastructure projects.

But the new plantations - out of bounds to villagers - have led to the loss of both homes and livelihoods for thousands of indigenous people across India, forest rights campaigners say.

The latest government data states that 22 mining projects led to the diversion of 3,846 hectares (9,504 acres) of forest land in 2019.

India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change had disbursed 474 billion Indian rupees (about \$6 billion) to [27 states](#) under CAMPA programmes as of August 2019.

Officials say the afforestation is taking place on degraded or government land. But the programmes have become flashpoints, with campaigners arguing due process has not been followed and land rights claims ignored.

From bypassing village council approvals to not informing locals about plans, many say it is only when the fences are erected that they realise they can no longer access the land.

"Sometimes the boundary walls are being made around standing crops waiting to be harvested," said Sadhana Meena, a member of Adivasi Ekta Parishad, an NGO working on tribal rights in the western state of Rajasthan.

"People are simply told it is not their land and are literally left to fend for themselves."

Denying those allegations, CAMPA CEO Subhash Chandra said the bona fide claims and needs of local people are always considered before work starts on the plantations.

"Anyone whose rights are affected, including to fodder and firewood, has to be compensated," Chandra told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

But, he added, new tree plantations do not succeed where locals have unlimited access to the land, or if animals are allowed to graze there, which is why the areas are fenced off.

"A forest takes more than 10 years to develop and everyone has to solve these challenges together," he said.

'SELF-RELIANT'

Bai is one of thousands of indigenous women who now sneak into their native forests to collect firewood and seasonal produce.

With forests harder to access and CAMPA plantations off limits, they go in the mornings, wary of being caught by guards.

Bai said local people are being driven away from the natural areas that were once their home - firstly when the forests are used for other purposes like mining.

"The men migrate and the women manage till the CAMPA plantations displace them again," she said. "It means moving further away from the forests they grew up in and continue to be dependent on for food, livelihood (and) firewood."

India's tribes make up around 10% of its 1.3 billion population, with the majority living in remote villages.

Many are in mineral-rich regions such as Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, where everyday lives are impacted by decades of mining.



Santhibai, a 50-year old farmer, attends a protest rally demanding loan waivers and the transfer of forest lands to villagers who have farmed there for decades, in Mumbai, India, November 22, 2018. REUTERS/Francis Mascarenhas

Collecting and selling forest produce is the main economic activity for people living in and adjoining forests in about 173,000 villages, providing both subsistence and cash income to an estimated [100 million people](#), government data shows.

Between 20% and 40% of their annual earnings come from forest-derived products like bamboo, brushwood, cane, cocoons, honey, wax, medicinal plants and herbs.

Indigenous rights activists say women especially depend on gathering and selling natural resources from the forest.

"We were self-reliant, and the forest produce gave us enough income for a comfortable life," Bai said.

"Now we are forced to take loans, sometimes from mine owners who then exploit us till we pay back. There is no other work, particularly for women," she added.

RESOURCES CONFLICT

In the last couple of years, at least five villages around diamond mines in the Chhatarpur region of Panna have lost nearly 200 hectares of land to initiatives launched by the forest department, according to a report by Dhaatri.

About 125 villages are affected by granite, limestone and zinc mining in the forests of Udaipur in Rajasthan, meanwhile, with nearly 80% of villagers losing land to CAMPA plantations, Meena said.

Similar reports have also been compiled in other states.

In 2006, India passed the Forest Rights Act which recognises the right of tribes to inhabit land their forefathers settled on centuries ago.

But researchers say implementation has been poor.

"There is a clear conflict between how communities have managed their resources for decades and new plans formulated by officials," said Satya Ranjan Mahakul, assistant professor at the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj.

"The law gives communities the right to decide how their area should be developed but this right is rarely exercised. There are loopholes that get exploited routinely. Ownership of every resource is slowly being taken over by the state."

According to a 2020 report by Land Conflict Watch, an India-based data research network, about half of mining-related conflicts violated the Forest Rights Act.

From people evicted from protected areas to officials forging or failing to obtain the consent of village councils to carry out activities on their land, the research found [norms were not followed](#).

"What do you do when your home and resources are both taken away?" Bai asked, adding most locals do not receive proper compensation because they lack documents to prove land ownership. "We have totally lost our way of life."

(\$1 = 74.9780 Indian rupees)

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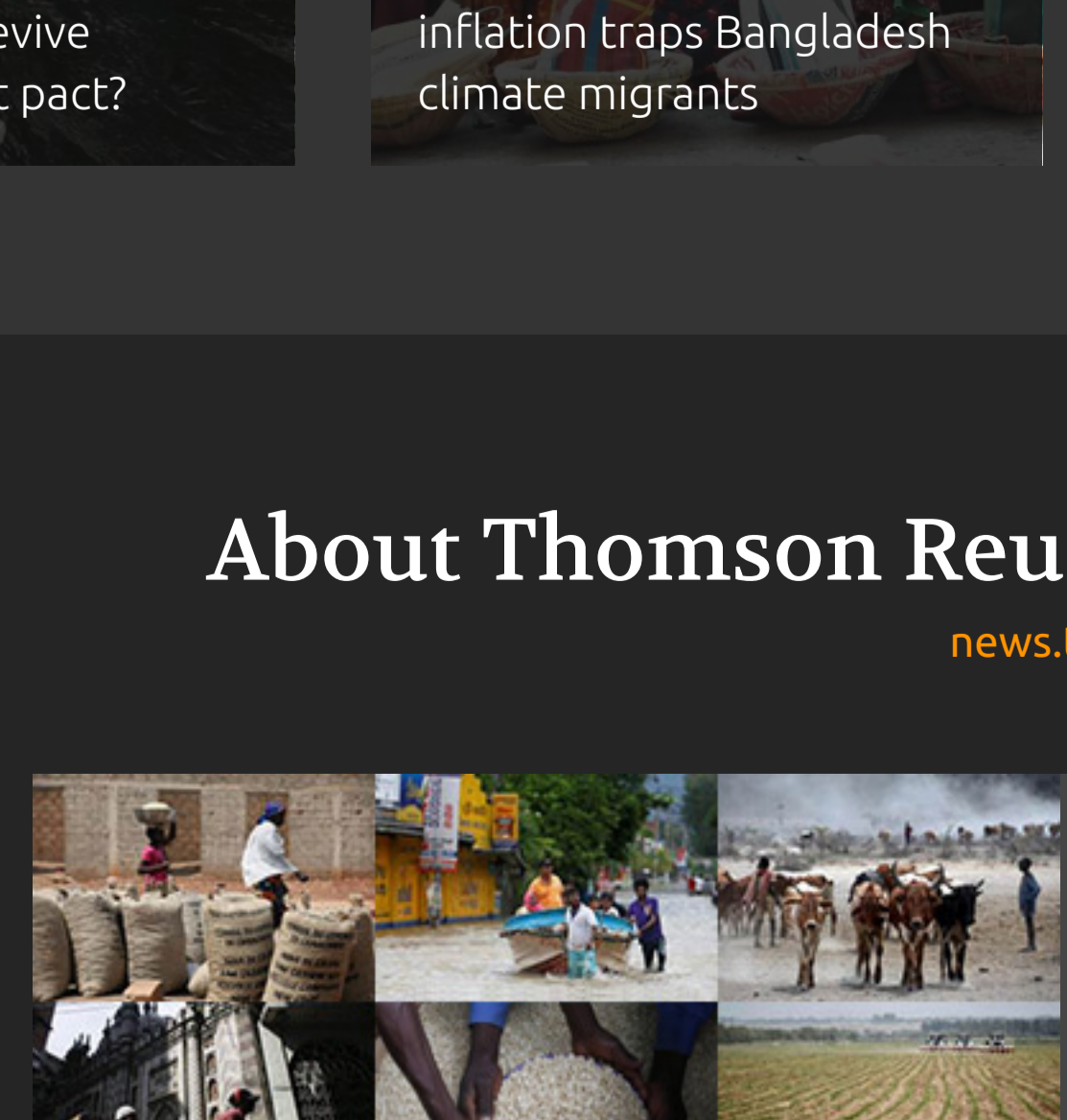
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