

Will global forest expansion hit tribals? | Explained

What are the concerns about the Global Biodiversity Framework which aims to increase areas under forest cover, inland water, coastal and marine areas to at least 30% of the world's terrestrial area? What is the situation in India?

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The expansion of the Nauradehi Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh is set to affect 62 villages of mostly tribal people. Photo: nauradehiwls.in

The story so far: A symposium on the rights of indigenous people organised by the University of Arizona on March 21-22 put the spotlight on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and how, in conjunction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act of 2023, it will hit India's tribes the hardest. Many at the symposium foresaw doom for the country's indigenous communities already affected by the establishment of national parks.

What is the Kunming-Montreal GBF?

This framework was adopted during the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties, or COP15, to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2022 following a four-year consultation and negotiation process. It claims to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals and build on previous strategic plans, paving “an ambitious pathway to reach the global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050.” Accordingly, four goals were set for 2050 and 23 targets for 2030 toward planning, monitoring, reporting and reviewing implementation, organising finance, and drawing up strategies for capacity development, technical and scientific cooperation, and an agreement on digital sequence information on genetic resources. In adopting the GBF, all parties committed to setting national targets to implement it. Participating at the event, New Delhi-based rights activist Suhas Chakma drew the attention of environmentalists and leaders of indigenous communities to Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal GBF, which aims to “increase terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services” to at least 30% of the world’s terrestrial area. At present, protected areas (PAs) cover about 16%.

What are its implications?

Participants at the ‘Symposium on Conservation, Racism, and Indigenous Peoples Human Rights’ felt that the seemingly benign goals of the GBF tilts the scale in favour of corporate houses eyeing forest resources at the expense of the indigenous communities living with nature. This has been playing out in some Southeast Asian countries. Indigenous peoples have been denied the right to housing, health, education, electricity, and security in Indonesia’s Ujungkulon National Park while Heng Saphen living, an indigenous leader living inside the Beng Per Wildlife Sanctuary of Cambodia was convicted by a kangaroo court for cultivating on her own land. About 18% of Cambodia’s Botum Sakor National Park stand protected after much of its land was sold off to private firms, the participants said. Involving the private sector in forest conservation is a bad idea and India has taken a step in that direction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act to 2023 to include zoos, safaris, ecotourism facilities, etc., as forest activities, Mr. Chakma pointed out. Addressing the symposium, UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Calí Tzay, said the PAs were initially created “as recreational opportunities, hunting grounds for western colonial elites”. The concept, the participants pointed out, has not changed much with ecotourism or sustainable ecotourism projects reducing the indigenous peoples to animals in a zoo, made to sit in “model replicas” of traditional houses wearing traditional dresses and ornaments, and playing traditional musical instruments.

What would GBF mean for India?

About 84% of India's national parks (89 out of a total of 106) were established in areas inhabited by the indigenous peoples and meeting the GBF targets will threaten their existence, the activists said. For instance, the initiative to upgrade the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajasthan to a tiger reserve will affect 162 tribal villages located inside and outside the sanctuary while the expansion of the Nauradehi Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh is set to affect 62 villages of mostly tribal people. In Assam, the June 19, 2022, notification for the Barak Bhuban Wildlife Sanctuary will affect the Khasis, Dimasas, and other indigenous groups. The gazette notification states that the sanctuary "is free from encroachment as per record, there are no rights and concessions of any person in the area" but the Khasis possess documents showing they have been living in the area since 1914.

What can be done to protect the tribal lands?

Mr. Chakma said a multilateral agreement like the Kunming-Montreal GBF cannot be amended but the government of India needs to change its policy. First, it has to recognise the right to free, prior, and informed consent as guaranteed under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and make further amendments to the laws to make the tribals custodians of the PAs as nature has largely been protected because of their special relations with the forests and their denizens. Secondly, the government of India should not only target the tribal areas simply because they do not matter electorally. "That Uttar Pradesh and Bihar only have one national park each – Dudhwa inhabited by the indigenous Tharu people and Valmiki inhabited by the Tharus, Oraons, Mundas, etc. - speaks for itself. If tiger reserves can be created in areas where there are no tigers such as Sahyadri (Maharashtra), Satkosia (Odisha), Kamlang (Arunachal Pradesh), Kawal (Telangana), and Dampa (Mizoram), there is no reason why PAs cannot be created in non-tribal areas," he said. Finally, India ought to address human rights violations in the PAs seriously. Human rights issues of these people such as access to education, healthcare, and housing cannot be left to the Wildlife or Forest Department. Thousands of indigenous people living within the PAs must be respected and recognised for preserving the biodiversity and the ecosystem and not punished, he said.