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Funding to protect forests or ploy to grab tribal land?

Gyan Varma / DNA

Environmentalists have called India's pitch for international funding to protect forests a government ploy to grab tribal land. The stand-off between the government and tribals is over India's suggestion for an aggressive version of the UN's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN-REDD Programme), which provides funds to check deforestation.

But India suggests that funding be available not only to check deforestation but also to increase forest cover. India is pushing developed economies to pay incentives to countries that have retained forest cover and worked towards expanding it. Indian negotiators at Copenhagen are demanding expansion of UN-REDD Programme to "REDD-plus" to include incentives for countries that are increasing forest cover.

"We have systematically reduced deforestation post 1980. Earlier, 1.43 lakh hectares of forest land was put to non-forest use every year. Now, it has been brought down to 25,000 hectares," said a senior environment and forests ministry officer. The government also plans to give incentives to Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Assam and other northeastern states that have managed to protect forest cover.

But forest activists cry foul, saying India should distance itself from REDD and any REDD type programme as it will only help the government and private parties grab people's resources. The government violates Forest Rights Act, 2006 every day, say green activists. "If money is provided for protecting forests, there will clearly be attempts to grab these forests to claim this money," said Shankar Gopalakrishnan of Campaign for Survival and Dignity.

Activists alleged the government was promoting these projects through the joint forest management committees. "The parliamentary standing committee on environment and forests said in 2008 afforestation deprives forest dwellers, tribals and adivasis of some or all of their land and adversely impacts their livelihood and basic needs," Shankar said.

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