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## Parliament panel holds final meet on draft forest bill ahead of monsoon session

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The joint committee of Parliament scrutinising a draft legislation that aims to modify India's forest conservation law will meet for the final time on Tuesday to approve its report amid dissent notes by at least four opposition members, people aware of the development said.

The contentious Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023, is likely to be tabled in Parliament during the monsoon session scheduled to begin on July 20.

"The final meeting to approve the report is tomorrow. We have heard concerns raised and suggestions made by various quarters," said Rajendra Agarwal, a Lok Sabha MP of the Bharatiya Janata Party who heads the parliamentary panel. "No proceedings of the committee can be divulged until the report is approved and tabled."

The modifications to the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, could jeopardise vast tracts of ecologically important forests and leave out several so-called deemed forests that constitute some 15% of India's total green cover, a report by a working group of independent think tank Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy said in May.

Several state governments, environmental groups and opposition parties are said to be opposed to some provisions of the draft legislation that they say would dilute safeguards to protect forests in the country.

"Four opposition MPs have written notes of dissent. Others have also raised their objections verbally during the previous meeting held on June 26," an parliamentarian from an opposition party said on condition of anonymity. "These will have to be addressed at the meeting tomorrow. Apart from accepting some minor modifications, the major concerns associated with the bill remain."

In June, the committee held informal discussions with the state governments of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Tripura, Sikkim, Nagaland, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, and Union territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, and organizations like Border Roads Organization, Border Security Force, Defence Research and Development Organization, Army Northern Command, Directorate General of Hydrocarbons, Oil and Natural Gas Company and Indian Bureau of Mines.

There are two major concerns with the bill. One of the proposed clauses exempts prior clearance for strategic developmental projects of national importance on forest land situated within 100km along international borders. Almost all of the northeast falls in this category. The bill would also cover only land that has been declared or notified as a forest under the Indian Forest Act, 1927, or under any other law. It also seeks to recognise only forest lands that were recorded as forests as on or after October 25, 1980.

"Any relaxation of the Forest Conservation Act will facilitate further exploitation of forests. There are several clauses which give the decision-making power to the Centre in the amendment bill," another opposition MP had said last week, declining to be named. "Forests are in the concurrent list and we have a federal structure. So, we have asked this issue to be addressed in the Act not only when the rules are made. Finally, many of us have problems with the change of title of the Act to Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam."

"The bill seeks to change forest governance completely. It will completely overhaul what forests are to be protected and what can be diverted," another MP said on Monday, wishing to remain unnamed. "It

also makes changes in plantation norms. I have a problem with the preamble itself. Naturally, these questions have come up.”

The proposed modifications reflect the central government’s prioritization exercise of offsetting the impacts of economic aspirations with forest-based carbon sinks, according to Kanchi Kohli, legal and policy researcher. The parliamentary panel has before it a diverse set of amendments and a divergent set of opinions to reconcile, she said.

“It will be crucial to see if the joint parliamentary committee has introduced any caveats in response to the comments that have raised questions of constitutional validity, social disenfranchisement and ecological blindness of the proposed amendments,” Kohli said.

Source:<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/final-meeting-to-approve-controversial-forest-conservation-bill-amid-opposition-dissent-india-parliament-scrutiny-101689014874611.html>