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Political representation of STs can lead to improved forest cover — study establishes link

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Increasing the formal political representation of Scheduled Tribes (ST) enhanced the average tree canopy and reduced the rate of deforestation, according to a new research.

The Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) and other rules that recognise the Scheduled Areas where STs live play a crucial role in protecting their rights and forest conservation, noted the findings of the study.

However, the Panchayati Raj institutions in non-scheduled areas that blindly mandated ST representation did not have any impact on conservation, noted the research titled *Representation and Forest Conservation: Evidence from India's Scheduled Areas*, published in journal *American Political Science Review*.

The implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006, did not have a visible impact beyond the benefits of PESA, the research added.

Nearly 66 per cent of the total population in India resides in rural areas, of which 275 million depend on forest resources for livelihood, it noted. A 100 million of this population are Scheduled Tribes; these communities, both economically most vulnerable and politically excluded, live near heavily forested areas.

With PESA, the ST communities could pursue better economic interests and translate them into better forest conservation, the study established. Political representation can enable them to push away deforestation spearheaded by industrialists and collect and sell non-timber forest products, thereby improving the overall health of forests.

Enhanced representation of ST communities also helps them to oppose mining and other large-scale commercial projects. Before PESA was implemented, areas near mines experienced high deforestation rates; introducing PESA led to a greater reduction in deforestation in such villages, the document found. “Using new data from Land Conflict Watch (2022), we present causal evidence that introducing PESA increased the incidence of conflict around mining. Taken together, these results suggest that the primary channel of change is organised protests against large-scale mining operations,” it added.

The researchers used the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s vegetation data for 1982-2016 and the Global Forest Cover data for 2001-2017 to establish the evidence. The analysis showed that the tree canopy increased by 3 per cent after the introduction of PESA.

Governments in Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal allowed corporate houses to mine, build dams, establish steel plants, aluminium refineries and sponge-iron factories and displace tribal people, it added.

However, PESA has empowered the communities to thwart such efforts, the researchers noted, citing instances. They described how tribes in Odisha’s Kodingamali hills joined hands to stop bauxite mining by highlighting issues such as deforestation, the impact on their livelihood opportunities and pollution of water and air.

In Maharashtra, the Gond tribes opposed iron ore mining in Zendevar village of Gadchiroli district as the entity involved in it failed to procure approval from the Gram Sabha and violated the FRA provisions.

The communities often take steps to protect their livelihood from human activities that lead to decreased vegetation cover and composition, increased deforestation and forest fragmentation. Such activities make the inhabitants suffer from respiratory illnesses and poor employment opportunities.

Displacement due to mining is another factor noted by the authors. In India, about 2.55 million people were displaced between 1950 and 1990.

The implementation of schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which guarantees 100 days of minimum work and mandates the inclusion of ST communities, improved their income and helped in the development of assets such as rural roads and other local public goods.

Source:<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/forests/political-representation-of-sts-can-lead-to-improved-forest-cover-study-establishes-link-90650>