

[Forests](#)

Fight for forest rights: Why these Dhamtari Adivasis gave up over 100 acres of cropland to plant trees

Forest dwellers of Karipani and Budra villages were put through a trial by fire to prove they care about conservation

By [Zumbish](#)

Published: Wednesday 07 September 2022



Last week, residents of Karipani and Budra villages in Chhattisgarh's Dhamtari district carried out a massive afforestation drive over 100 acres. The villagers had invited the district forest officer (DFO) and collector to the 'Van Mahotsav' and the event was praised by the local media.

But the episode was not as 'feel-good' as it was made out to be — it was the last-ditch effort of the villagers to secure rights over their forest land.

The two villages, which are in the core zone of the Udanti Sitanadi Tiger Reserve were scheduled to receive Community Forest Resource Rights (CFRR) titles on Adivasi Divas observed on August 9, 2022.

The rights would enable them to lawfully use the forest land & produce for consumption & commercial purposes.

As many as 10 villages in protected areas of the state — seven in core zones and three in buffer zones — received the titles on August 9. But Karipani and Budra were not among them.

In July, DFO Varun Jain suspended their CFRR claims following a field inspection of the forest land within their traditional boundary over which they wanted the rights. He cited encroachment on 250 acres of land as the reason.

"The dwellers of Budra and Karipani were asked to let go of the encroached land in their villages — which forms a part of the land area they are claiming under CFRR if they want the right," Jain said.

The villagers *Down To Earth* spoke to admitted that some of the encroachment allegations — which probably took place over portions of land before 2005 — may be true. But they failed to understand the grounds on which they were denied CFRR.

Pushed to a wall

Days after the suspension, Jain said, he challenged the villagers to prove that they realise the importance of forest management. The afforestation drive, during which the villagers planted 3,500 saplings over a week, was triggered by his challenge, he added.

The saplings were planted on land they otherwise use for crop cultivation, the villagers shared. But they didn't mind because the rights are crucial to their existence. "The struggle for the right is a struggle for our villages to liberate ourselves from the 'core zone' label," said Vijay Netam, a resident of Budra. He added:

Living in a protected area, we are denied access to electricity and face difficulties in easy access to civic amenities, hospitals and schools. These challenges get compounded with the geographical situation of our village surrounded by nullahs on each side. This makes commuting a hardship.

During the Van Mahotsav, the villagers said, the DFO repeatedly asked them whether the plantation drive is a temporary move to get CFRR or if they have indeed realised the importance of conserving forests.

"No department has supported us to buy seeds or saplings, no government is helping us pay for it," said Omprakash Netam from Karipani village. We are just defeating the allegations by planting thousands of trees."

There are too many restrictions on using forest produce because they live in the core zone, he added. "Even if we have to lose more agricultural land and give them further proof of what forest conservation means to us, we will somehow add up money and plant more trees."

A state government officer who was part of the Van Mahotsav told *DTE*:

Through their determination towards afforestation, it seems that the villagers will defeat the DFO's belief that "giving CFRR to villagers will make way for more encroachments."

Unnecessary & unlawful

But this trial by fire for granting CFRR is beyond the norm, said experts.

The law mandates that the forest department as well as the district- and sub-divisional-level committees have to rely on the recommendation of the Gram Sabha during the CFRR claim process, said Tushar Dash, an independent expert on forest rights. He added:

There is a CFRR claim that includes 250 acres of area and even if it is disputed, a move from the forest department to put such pre-conditions for grant of CFRR is illegal. The said language being used by the department is illegal.

This approach of the forest department does not empower the Gram Sabha to deal with encroachment, he said, but is disempowering. "If the approach is still getting support from the state government authorities, it raises the question: Who are you empowering — forest bureaucracy or Gram Sabha?"

The process of claiming CFRR is already so long that the beneficiary communities are not able to do it without guidance from civil society groups, observed Benipuri Goswami, who has led the fight for forest rights across Dhamtari for over a decade. “On top of that, if such challenges set by the forest department at Gram Sabhas become the norm, it will damage the CFRR implementation process in the state and excessively delay it.”

The language being used by the forest department is not in good taste and not according to FRA, he added.

“The Act doesn’t support any intention of the authorities to seek proof from Gram Sabhas on whether they are capable of protecting forests. The language used by authorities should be challenged, said Alok Shukla, forest rights activist from the Chhattisgrah Bachao Aandolan.

He welcomed the Van Mahotsav but added that such initiatives shouldn’t be used to put “unnecessary” conditions.

Testing the forest dwellers’ love for forests may be counterintuitive, said Dash. “If control comes under forest communities, it will accelerate conservation and regeneration of forests.”

The state has identified 12,500 of its 20,000-odd villages for granting CFRR, of which it claims that 3,646 villages have been awarded titles in the last four years.

On August 9, 2022, the state granted CFRR to four villages in the core zone of another tiger reserve — Achanakmar, according to a press release by the Government of Chhattisgarh. Three more core-zone villages in Dhamtari also received the titles the same day.

[Forest Resources](#) [Forest Conservation](#) [Forest Rights Act 2006](#) [cfrr community forest ...](#) [adivasi](#) [forest dwellers](#) [Forests India](#) [Chhattisgarh](#)



We are a voice to you; you have been a support to us. Together we build journalism that is independent, credible and fearless. You can further help us by making a donation. This will mean a lot for our ability to bring you news, perspectives and analysis from the ground so that we can make change together.

POST A COMMENT