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India's forest-planting push leaves indigenous women out in the cold

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CHENNAI, India, Feb 2 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - During the bone-chilling winters of Panna in central India's Madhya Pradesh state, Janaka Bai needs at least three bundles of firewood each week to keep her family warm and another to fuel her kitchen stove every day.

Living on the edge of India's diamond mining hub, Bai has been fighting to keep on collecting the firewood she needs nearby, as schemes to increase the country's shrinking forests have shut her and others out with fences and guards.

From snatched axes to risking arrest for trespass, indigenous women are finding themselves in conflict with new Indian laws that mandate large-scale tree-planting to compensate for declines in forest cover.

"They call us firewood thieves and sometimes take us to local police stations," said Bai, 45, by phone from her village. "Or they threaten us, snatch our tools and shoo us out of the forest. And yet we go back because there is no choice."

India's Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) was set up to promote forest restoration as a way of compensating for trees cleared for other uses like mining and infrastructure projects.

But the new plantations - out of bounds to villagers - have led to the loss of both homes and livelihoods for thousands of indigenous people across India, forest rights campaigners say.

The latest government data states that 22 mining projects led to the diversion of 3,846 hectares (9,504 acres) of forest land in 2019.

India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change had disbursed 474 billion Indian rupees (about \$6 billion) to [27 states](#) under CAMPA programmes as of August 2019.

Officials say the afforestation is taking place on degraded or government land. But the programmes have become flashpoints, with campaigners arguing due process has not been followed and land rights claims ignored.

From bypassing village council approvals to not informing locals about plans, many say it is only when the fences are erected that they realise they can no longer access the land.

"Sometimes the boundary walls are being made around standing crops waiting to be harvested," said Sadhana Meena, a member of Adivasi Ekta Parishad, an NGO working on tribal rights in the western state of Rajasthan.

"People are simply told it is not their land and are literally left to fend for themselves."

Denying those allegations, CAMPA CEO Subhash Chandra said the bona fide claims and needs of local people are always considered before work starts on the plantations.

"Anyone whose rights are affected, including to fodder and firewood, has to be compensated," Chandra told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

But, he added, new tree plantations do not succeed where locals have unlimited access to the land, or if animals are allowed to graze there, which is why the areas are fenced off.

"A forest takes more than 10 years to develop and everyone has to solve these challenges together," he said.

'SELF-RELIANT'

Bai is one of thousands of indigenous women who now sneak into their native forests to collect firewood and seasonal produce.

With forests harder to access and CAMPA plantations off limits, they go in the mornings, wary of being caught by guards.

Bai said local people are being driven away from the natural areas that were once their home - firstly when the forests are used for other purposes like mining.

"The men migrate and the women manage till the CAMPA plantations displace them again," she said. "It means moving further away from the forests they grew up in and continue to be dependent on for food, livelihood (and) firewood."

India's tribes make up around 10% of its 1.3 billion population, with the majority living in remote villages.

Many are in mineral-rich regions such as Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, where everyday lives are impacted by decades of mining.

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