

‘We Can’t Eat Teak’

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Villagers of Burlubaru, a tiny forest hamlet in Kandhamal district of Odisha, are waging war against plantations. The forest department has planted highvalue teak in the forest patches where they grew tubers, fruit, millets and other indigenous crops. One would think that this community of Kutia Kondhs, one of the 13 “particularly vulnerable” or “primitive” tribal groups in Odisha, should welcome the lucrative timber. But they are adamant; they can’t eat teak and now have lost access even to the little land that is their due from the Forest Rights Act 2006.

Now, the Rajya Sabha has passed a bill that will release more than Rs 40,000 crore for afforestation and wildlife protection to states. While the massive corpus for forests is good news, the bill has raised many concerns too. One, it does not so far mandate gram sabha approval to implement such projects, or whether such projects will involve and benefit forest communities. Another concern is with the nature of plantations itself, and their threat to biodiversity.

TOI had visited Burlubaru last year when Kutia Kondhs from the village filed a petition with the state government against the plantations that encroached on their subsistence farms. But nothing has changed since. The plantations still ex- medicines and water also so we will not accept these teak plantations,” Kanigalaru Majhi, a middle-aged woman from the hamlet had told TOI.

The story of Burlubaru becomes even more relevant now, with Rajya Sabha passing the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) bill, stating that the money will be used for “artificial regeneration (plantations), assisted natural regeneration, forest management and protection, wildlife related infrastructure development, supply of wood and other forest produce saving devices.” Many more plantations like the one in Burlubaru may come up on forest-dwellers’ land once the fund is made available to state forest departments. They are already common — juang tribals were displaced in large numbers from their customary land in Kadalibadi in Keonjhar, tribes in Khamman in Telengana were also allegedly affected by plantations, according to a study by Vasundhara, an environmental organization in Odisha. accumulation of money paid by user agencies or corporations for several infrastructure and other projects that involved diversion of forest land over the years. “CAF Bill violates forest rights act (FRA) by not providing gram sabhas compensation for diversion of forests vested with gram sabhas under FRA. Both the Kanchan Chopra Committee and Madhu Verma Committee recommended that a major portion of compensation should go to communities whose forests have been diverted,” says Kundan Kumar, regional director, Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI). The minister of state for environment and forests, Anil Dave, has assured opposition MPs that some concerns would be allayed when the rules are framed.