

Green India Mission: India's REDD+ Action Plan to disempower and evict forest communities from their own homelands

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The Government of India announced its first ever National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in June 2008 to identify measures and steps to advance climate change-related actions in its domestic sphere. One of the eight missions is the Green India Mission (GIM), which was 'launched to enhance eco-system services including carbon sinks to be called Green India.' This paper highlights the international political agenda motivating the agenda of the Mission as well as how it impacts communities, forest governance and therefore access to forest rights.

Background

Government of India announced its first ever National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in June 2008 to identify measures and steps to advance climate change-related actions in its domestic sphere. Eight National Missions in the areas of solar energy, enhanced energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, sustainable habitat, water, Himalayan ecosystem, increasing the forest cover and strategic knowledge for climate change were incorporated under the Plan by the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change.¹ reflecting India's vision and domestic strategies for sustainable development and the steps it must take to realize it.

In its overview, the NAPCC document says, "Recognising that climate change is a global challenge, India will engage actively in multilateral negotiations in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in a positive, constructive and forward looking manner. Our objective will be to establish an effective, cooperative and equitable global approach based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, enshrined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)."

The overview also makes it clear that NAPCC will be guided by the following principles:

- Protecting the poor and vulnerable sections of society through an inclusive and sustainable development strategy, sensitive to climate change.
- Achieving national growth objectives through a qualitative change in direction that enhances ecological sustainability, leading to further mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions.
- Devising efficient and cost-effective strategies for end use Demand Side Management.
- Deploying appropriate technologies for both adaptation and mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions extensively as well as at an accelerated pace.
- Engineering new and innovative forms of market, regulatory and voluntary mechanisms to promote sustainable development.
- Effective implementation of programmes through unique linkages, including with civil society and local government institutions and through public-private-partnership.
- Welcoming international cooperation for research, development, sharing and transfer of technologies enabled by additional funding and a global IPR regime that facilitates technology transfer to developing countries under the UNFCCC.



National Mission for a Green India

According to the NAPCC, the Green India Mission, being one of the eight National Missions, was 'launched to enhance eco-system services including carbon sinks to be called Green India.'

"The Mission on Green India will be taken up on degraded forest land through direct action by communities, organized through Joint Forest Management Committees and guided by the department of forest in state governments", the NAPCC document stated.

The Mission has two focused objectives – increasing forest cover and density as a whole of the country and conserving biodiversity and recommended implementation of the already announced Greening India Programme.

An initial corpus of over Rs.6,000 crores was earmarked for the programme through the Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) to commence work.

NAPCC and Green India Mission (GIM): lack of public participation and limited consultations

To the civil society in general, and those groups in India working on climate change issues, in particular, the announcement of NAPCC came as a bolt from the blue. The process through which NAPCC was drafted was not inclusive and the draft was not forwarded for wider public consultation. In a letter dated June 27, 2009, around 20 national level organizations wrote to the Prime Minister saying that "There was no participatory or transparent process in formulation of NAPCC or even the specific mission plans. When this issue was raised before the joint secretary, Union Ministry of Environment and Forests in September 2008, he said that participatory process should be taken up during formulation of the mission plans, but that too has not happened. This cannot be an acceptable situation in any democracy."² The same letter was sent to the PM's Council on Climate Change, Ministers and Secretaries of concerned Ministries, Members of Planning Commission of India and a large number of Members of Parliament.

Continuing with the exclusionist policy on climate change, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India, put the draft Green India Mission (GIM) document on its website on 23rd May 2010 calling for limited public consultations and comments on the draft to be sent to the Ministry. Public Consultations were organized in Guwahati, Dehradun, Bhopal, Pune, Vishakhapatnam and Mysore between June 10 and July 15, 2010. A large number of forest groups and communities were, therefore, excluded from the purview of public consultations in the States of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and the highly forested Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

The second draft of the GIM, with public comments incorporated, was submitted to the PM's Council on Climate Change on September 16, 2010. And the Mission was adopted by the Council only in February 2011. By then, without formal consultation and policy decision, the MoEF on November 30, 2010, days before the Cancun COP, in a document titled "India's Forests and REDD+", hailed the draft GIM as India's REDD+ Action Plan.

Green India Mission: the key elements

GIM puts "greening" in the context of climate change adaptation and mitigation. Greening is meant to enhance ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and storage (in forests and other ecosystems), hydrological services and biodiversity; as well as other provisioning services such as fuel, fodder, small timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

The Mission aims at responding to climate change by a combination of adaptation and mitigation measures, which would help:

- i. enhancing carbon sinks in sustainably managed forests and other ecosystems;
- ii. adaptation of vulnerable species/ecosystems to the changing climate; and
- iii. adaptation of forest-dependant communities.



The objectives of the Mission are:

- a. Increased forest/tree cover on 5 m ha of forest/non-forest lands and improved quality of forest cover on another 5 m ha (a total of 10 m ha).
- b. Improved ecosystem services including biodiversity, hydrological services and carbon sequestration as a result of treatment of 10 m ha.
- c. Increased forest-based livelihood income of about 3 million households living in and around the forests.
- d. Enhanced annual CO₂ sequestration by 50 to 60 million tonnes in the year 2020

The Mission will have clear targets for different forest types and ecosystems which will enable achievement of the overall objectives of the Mission. The Mission targets 10 m ha of forest/non-forest lands and includes:

- a. qualitative improvement of forest cover/ecosystem in moderately dense forests (1.5 m ha), open degraded forests (3 m ha) , degraded grassland (0.4 m ha) and wetlands 0.1 m ha;
- b. eco-restoration/afforestation of scrub, shifting cultivation areas, cold deserts, mangroves, ravines and abandoned mining areas (2 m ha); and
- c. bringing urban/ peri-urban lands under forest and tree cover (0.20 m ha); and d) agro-forestry /social forestry (3 m ha).

The Mission also targets improvement of forest- based livelihoods for about three million households living in and around forests.

The key highlights of the Mission strategy are:

1. The scope of greening will go beyond trees and plantations to encompass both protection and restoration. Emphasis will be placed on restoration of degraded ecosystems and habitat diversity. The greening will not only strive to restore degraded forests, but will also contribute in the protection and enhancement of forests with relatively dense forest cover.
2. Criteria for selection of project areas/sublandscapes/sub-watersheds under the Mission will include projected vulnerability to climatic change, potential of areas for enhancing carbon sinks and the significance of the area from ecosystem services angle, such as biodiversity and hydrological services.
3. The Mission will foster an integrated approach that treats forests and non-forest public lands as well as private lands simultaneously. Livelihood dependencies, for example firewood needs and livestock grazing, will be addressed using inter-sectoral convergence (e.g., livestock, forest, agriculture, rural development, and energy)
4. Local communities will be required to play a key role in project governance and implementation. The Mission will bring primacy to Gram Sabha as an overarching institution to oversee Mission implementation at the village level. The committees set up by the Gram Sabha, including revamped JFMCs, CFM groups, Van Panchayats, Committees set up under Forest Rights Act; Biodiversity Management Committees etc., will be strengthened as the primary institutions on the ground for nested decentralized forest governance in rural areas. Similarly in the schedule VI areas, the traditional village level institution/village councils will be supported. Likewise, the Mission will support revamping/strengthening of the Forest Development Agencies to support the field institutions.
5. The Mission will invest in the development of a cadre of community-based change agents from amongst educated community youth. These community foresters will facilitate planning, implementation and monitoring of the Mission activities at the local level. This will provide skilled employment opportunity to about one lakh educated community youths.
6. A comprehensive monitoring framework at four different levels is proposed. In addition to on-the-ground self-monitoring by multiple agencies, including communities, the Mission will support the use of modern technology like Remote Sensing with GPS mapping of plot boundaries for monitoring at the input /output/output level. The Gram Sabha will carry out the social audit of the Mission activities at the village level.
7. The Mission will identify research priorities in support of the Mission aim and objectives. The Mission will set up a cell under the overall guidance of MoEF to link to REDD Plus activities in the country. The Mission will implement its strategy through a set of five Sub Missions and cross-cutting interventions.



The proposed budget for the GIM is pegged at a staggering Rs.46,000 crores.

Improving forest cover: evicting forest people from last of their habitats

The GIM talks of not only increasing the forest cover through the usual afforestation programme and plantations but emphasizes on improving the quality of forest cover in 4.9 million ha of forest and non forest areas representing diversity in forest density, tenure and ownership. This include 1.5 million ha of moderately dense forest, 3 million ha of open forests and 0.4 million ha of grasslands.

So far, there is limited research and information on silvicultural and management practices for restoration of moderately dense and open forests in India. In India the focus has largely been on afforestation of degraded forests, wastelands and farmlands. The State Forest Departments are familiar with routine afforestation programmes, largely dominated by the monoculture species, including eucalyptus, *Acacia auriculiformis*, teak (*Tectona grandis*), sal (*Shorea robusta*), pines, poplar, *Acacia tortilis*, etc. In that case, the GIM document does not shed any light on how the quality of forest cover and eco system services will be improved. There is no particular mention of specific scientific studies to be pursued, capacity building of the implementing agencies including the forest department or involving the expertise of any group or institute outside the ambit of the government forestry administration.

India has diverse forest vegetation types – from tropical evergreen forests to alpine meadows. Each of these forests have different flora and fauna, wildlife, biodiversity and other living species and have diverse relationships – both economic and cultural – with the forest communities. One, therefore, cannot have a single solution for all.

And, that is precisely what the GIM does. Regarding the moderately dense forest cover the document says, “these forest/ecosystems are subjected to degradation on account of recurrent fire, unregulated grazing, invasive species, shifting cultivation and illicit felling etc.” [5.2 a)] Therefore, it advocates, “Better protection, fire management (both prevention and detection and control), regulated grazing, invasive species eradication, management of insects and other pathogens, improving hydrological regime through infiltration zone identification and protection, soil/ moisture conservation (on ridge to valley basis) would form some of the key interventions.”

If we take out the scientific verbose, we are left with a scenario where the axe is going to fall on the forest communities – stop grazing and shifting cultivation and blame them for illicit felling of timber.

The eco-restoration of degraded open forests with a target area double that of the moderately dense forest cover will have more profound impact on the forest communities. The majority of the forest people in India, today, have shifted to or being expelled to these open forests which are of less intrinsic value and considered uneconomic.³ Forest communities extract fuelwood, fodder, and small timber from these forests and graze their cattle. The Green India Mission targets these areas for large scale afforestation programme with fast growing native species and closure to grazing on rotational basis thereby preparing the ground for displacing the forest communities from these last of the forest areas depriving them of their habitat and livelihood options.

At the cost of the communities, the restoration of these degraded open forests is seen to be enhancing carbon sinks substantially.

Hiding deforestation

The Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF) has emphasized largely on improving the quality of forest cover and restoration of eco-systems while being silent on the continued deforestation of our forests through mining, indiscriminate industrialization and mega infrastructure projects.

Towards shoring up the data on forest cover, India’s forest cover now includes both forest and non forest areas. In other areas it records forest cover beyond the recorded forest area. Recorded forest cover refers to all the geographical areas recorded as forests in the government records, where as the term forest cover as used in the State of Forest Report (SFR) refers to all land more than one hectare in area with a tree canopy density of more than 10% irrespective of land use and ownership. All perennial woody vegetation (including bamboos, palms, coconut,



apple, mango, neem, peepal, etc.), agro forestry plantations, fruit orchards, tea and coffee estates with trees, etc. have been included as forest cover.

While the recorded forest area in India today is 23.41% of the total geographical area, the forest cover as reported in SFR 2009 is only 21.02%, much below the recorded forest area indicating huge loss of forests within the recorded forest area. This loss is neither critically recorded nor analysed by the MoEF or Forest Survey of India in any of its documents.

According to the National Forest Commission, about 41% of the country's forest cover has already been degraded and dense forests are losing their crown density and productivity continuously. At present, 70% of forests have no natural regeneration and 55% are prone to fire.

SFR 2003 reveals a decrease in dense forest cover to the tune of 26,245 km² (6.30%) and the open forest cover increased by 29,040 km² (11.22 %). Between 1980 and 2007, 1,140,177 ha of forest land were diverted for non-forest purposes. Out of this a whopping 311,220 ha were cleared between 2003 and 2007.⁴ And this large scale deforestation due to diversion of forest land continues with another large chunk of close to 500,000 ha earmarked for coal mining by the MoEF.

The GIM does not address this large scale deforestation even though India's REDD+ Action Plan to which they have now dovetailed GIM, talks of 'compensated reduction' on account of reducing deforestation and degradation.

Under the REDD+ Action Plan, the GIM aims at increasing the forest and tree cover by taking into account tree cover on farm lands and on urban and peri-urban landscape. The SFR 2009 has already paved way for this cover up mechanism to hide deforestation in Indian forests.

According to SFR 2009, tree cover refers to tree patches of size less than 1 ha outside the recorded forest area as represented by the 'green wash' area on the Survey of India toposheets. It further calculates an increase in forest cover to 22.26% if the geographical area above the tree line (approx.4,000 m height) is reduced from the total geographical area of the country. To this forest cover if the tree cover is added the total forest and tree cover in India reaches 25.25%.

This calculation fulfills the objective of both the GIM and India's REDD+ Action Plan to show an increase in carbon stock and thereby enhancing carbon sinks.

Undermining FRA and community forest governance

As part of democratic decentralization, the GIM emphasizes on the centrality of the Forest Rights Act 2006 and its compliance as a pre-condition for release of funds for implementing GIM. The Gram Sabha Committees under FRA have been regarded as part of the institutional landscape within the GIM.

But, taking umbrage to its reform agenda, the MoEF and the forest bureaucracy defines their concept of decentralized governance to include revamped Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) under the Gram Sabha and the revamped Forest Development Agency (FDAs) as part of the implementation machinery. The GIM also pitches for legal standing of the JFMCs under the Gram Sabha in the Forest Rights Act. It further talks of including SHGs, Forest User Groups and creating jobs for a pool of 100,000 community youth as foresters.

The FRA has no provisions to include JFM and JFMCs or such other bodies which do not emanate out of the decision making process of the Gram Sabha in its institutional mechanism. JFM has no legal standing and participatory regime that it represents is very different from that promoted and facilitated by the FRA. Where as the FRA moves towards a decentralized regime of community forest governance, the JFM is dominated by the centralized forest department and the JFMCs are controlled by the officials of the forest department. In a recent National Consultation in Delhi organized by the Council for Social Development and National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW), Shri V Kishore Chandra Deo, the Minister of Tribal Affairs categorically stated that the Ministry has no intention to include JFM or JFMCs within the ambit of FRA and any amendment to FRA can only be initiated by the nodal Ministry of Tribal Affairs under Section 11 of the FRA 2006. MoEF has no Constitutional Standing as far as FRA 2006 is concerned.



In the name of decentralized forest governance, the MoEF and its forest bureaucracy, therefore, want to impose JFM, JFMCs and such other bodies controlled by the forest department, giving lip service to FRA and completely undermining the Gram Sabha. The GIM and its institutional framework, thus developed, is not only to subvert FRA but to continue with the control of the forest bureaucracy and centralized governance in Indian forests. Resorting to FRA 2006, Gram Sabha and participatory governance regime is a façade to promote REDD+ and garner funds globally.

Up for sale: Carbon market and forests as tradable commodity

Green India Mission represents an institutional mechanism to promote India's REDD+ ambitions. REDD+ "has specifically opened the possibilities for the country to expect compensation for its pro-conservation approach and sustainable management of forests resulting in even further increase of forest cover and thereby its forest carbon stocks."⁵

Indian government feels that through its sustained efforts for conserving and expanding the country's forest and tree resources there exists a possibility of being rewarded for providing carbon service to the international community and estimated that a REDD+ programme for India could provide capture of more than 1 billion tonnes of additional CO₂ over the next 3 decades and provide more than USD 3 billion as carbon service incentives under REDD+.

India's submission to UNFCCC indicates that "carbon is saved through reducing deforestation and degradation' and 'carbon is added through conservation, sustainable management of forests and increase in forest cover (A & R)'. It expects annual payments in lieu of maintaining baseline stocks of carbon through not deforesting its forests and thereby foregoing its development opportunities and carbon offset money from the global carbon market for enhancing its carbon stocks. India also advocated reduced tariffs for forest product exports for undertaking REDD, SFM and A&R action in line with the forest carbon stock maintained and change in flow of forest carbon.

It has already been openly stated by the ICFRE (Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education), in many international forest meets and recent UNFCCC meetings that from 1995 to 2005, carbon stocks stored in India's forests have increased from 6244.78 to 6621.55 million tonnes (mt) registering an annual increment of 37.68 mt of carbon which is equivalent to 138.15 mt of CO₂ and this annual removal by forests is enough to neutralize 9.31% of India's total annual emissions of 2000. The countdown to sell our forests had already started.

"Indian forests (like any other tropical forests) are part of a larger, dynamic, and ever-changing socio-political and socio-ecological discourse (or multiple such discourses). Mathematical calculations and simulated models to project sequestration of carbon in forests can never be expected to assimilate the innumerable, essentially asymmetric and 'truant' variables that such discourses contain; neither hypothetical baselines nor imaginary 'future' scenarios can explain/interpret/predict contextually related but often spatially separated sets of uncertain social, political and ecological events influencing deforestation events. This methodological impossibility, coupled with doubtful and unverified official forest cover estimates, makes an estimation of all carbon stock in the in Indian forests downright impossible."⁶ Even assuming that India's forest cover will remain constant, and in ideal conditions for over a long period of time, estimates of long-term sequestration potential of Indian forests (by different investigators/agencies) vary widely.

With this kind of a scientific impossibility around, India's obsession with forest carbon stocks and its carbon sequestration potential as promoted through GIM, reflects commodification of forests, converting people's homelands and livelihood resources into tradable commodities through the system of carbon trading. This will likely involve private companies as well, triggering land grabbing and corporate control over large pool of resources.

The carbon storage figures that are given are clearly aimed at establishing a basis for such a system. Forests do not consist of just standing trees – trees grow, fires and other disasters take place, people and wildlife consume non-timber forest produce, etc. Forests are constantly changing. An obsession with carbon storage and incentives in the form of trading will lead companies and the government to shut off forests from all use by people, on the one hand, and on the other will encourage fictional carbon storage figures.⁷



The introduction of the forest certification in the GIM “required for eco-labelling and related chain-of-custody (CoC) and legality verification, thereby promoting ethical trade and market for timber and non-timber forest products as well as socially responsible procurement policies and green consumerism” is an open invitation for selling our forest resources and commodifying its services. In 5.6 b), the GIM document states that “Certification promotes and assures Sustainable Management of Forests , taking explicit account of environmental, economic, social and cultural dimensions of forest management, conservation and development in a holistic manner.” Not forgetting that it has to keep the democratic façade of incentives for communities, it further goes on to say, ‘certification can help in securing local biodiversity and watershed services as well as social benefits of fair trade that benefit communities. Community-oriented carbon sequestration projects typically require forest certification of some sort.’

The MoEF is not ashamed to openly declare that forest certification system will ‘enable unbridled access to ethical trading and market arenas with price premiums.’ It does not matter whether the same forests and its resources belong to the forest communities or such decisions on carbon trading, forest certification cannot be taken in the post-FRA 2006 period by the ever-autocratic forest bureaucracy.

An institutional mechanism to promote and expand the power of forest bureaucracy

The institutional framework developed to implement GIM is a contradiction in itself. Beginning with the centrality of community participation and governance as envisaged in FRA 2006 and autonomy of the Gram Sabha, the framework, as it goes higher up the ladder, lands itself up at the door of the well entrenched forest bureaucracy in the Ministry of Environment & Forests. Starting from revamped JFMCs, forest user groups, revamped FDAs, strengthened state forest departments, and then through ICFRE the mechanism finally reaches its masters at the REDD+ Cell in the Ministry of Environment and Forests. In this whole framework, the Gram Sabha and the forest communities are rendered minorities while the entire policy decisions and implementation are controlled and governed by the forest mandarins.

That the forest bureaucracy is out to expand its power beyond the forests is reflected in the fact that GIM is a REDD+ Action Plan encompassing fringe forest and non forest areas, farm lands, and urban and peri urban areas also.

Conclusion

The true impact of any policy is shaped not by its ambitious rhetoric but by its institutional structure. GIM does not stand for what it professes in favour of forest communities. Neither does it support decentralised governance and rights of communities nor does it have any demonstrable mechanism for incentives going to forest communities as mandated in UNFCCC REDD.

Without addressing mechanisms to stop deforestation, the GIM sets ambitious targets to increase forest cover only to show an increased forest carbon stock and create a financial value for that.

Undermining the FRA 2006 and the provisions providing community rights to forest resources in the post FRA regime, the GIM tries to unleash the market forces in the Indian forests and ushering in our forests to a global commodity trade regime completely circumventing the all important issue of the community rights, access and ownership of the forests and its resources, and who can govern forests.

The democratic framework that GIM espouses should begin with a framework that, in particular, disempowers the forest department and the bureaucracy, and creates the space for genuine empowerment of the forest communities. Otherwise, India’s ambitious REDD+ Action Plan will only result in impoverishment, displacement, conflict and resistance.

Note:

The principle researcher for this study is Souparna Lahiri who was commissioned by EQUATIONS to do the study



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End Notes

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