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Nothing straight about this line

Environmental issues

It is stark irony that the UPA government, which instituted an award to make gram sabhas in villages function more effectively, has now decided to disempower many of them and steamroll ahead with infrastructure projects in forest areas. The goal of empowering gram sabhas as the voice of the panchayats through Article 243 A of the Constitution was to provide a democratic basis to decentralised decision-making. When the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 became law, it strengthened that objective. That the government has little conviction in what it does in the name of the weak, however, is amply borne out by the decision to cut the gram sabhas out of the picture, when it comes to sanctioning what are being called linear projects — construction of roads, canals, laying pipelines, transmission lines and so forth. The Ministry of Environment and Forests, in the face of sustained pressure from the Prime Minister, has acted in unseemly haste to modify a circular it issued in 2009 and allow building activity in forest areas without the need for gram sabha consent. Not long ago, the Minister for Panchayati Raj and Tribal Affairs, V. Kishore Chandra Deo, reaffirmed the Centre's commitment to strengthen the role of gram sabhas, and asked that States make a full video and audio record of proceedings of these grassroots bodies when they convened to discuss sensitive, contentious and controversial issues including those relating to land acquisition, mining and use of natural resources. Now Mr. Deo's ministry has also turned turtle.

It needs to be emphasised that the Forest Rights Act is an empowering legislation, which seeks to strike a delicate balance between the need to conserve the meagre forest cover in the country (most of which exists only in degraded form) and recognise the right of communities to live in their traditional homes. To treat citizens as obstacles to development and disenfranchise them from voicing their views in the name of administrative reform is undemocratic and oppressive. The modified regime agreed to this week makes an exception in the case of a few primitive tribal groups and pre-agricultural communities, but the vast majority of India's forest dwellers stand to lose. At work here is a development model that ignores democratic rights when it comes to appropriating natural resources. It builds on the woefully weak national record of compensating communities who have been displaced, often violently, in the quest for resources. The Environment and Tribal Affairs Ministries should restore the powers of the gram sabha and stop diluting due process.