

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/forests/a-map-doesnt-reflect-the-complexity-of-living-in-indias-forest-fringes>

Forests

A map doesn't reflect the complexity of living in India's forest fringes

To understand these places, we need to look beyond maps and at people who live there, the relationships they have, and the problems they have to deal with



It is now illegal to do things that used to be normal, like gathering small amounts of forest products. Photo: iStock

[Anusreeta Dutta](#)

Published on:
13 Apr 2026, 12:40 pm

A forest has clear edges on paper. It has been marked out, measured, and put into three groups: reserve forest, protected forest, and wildlife sanctuary. But in real life, especially in India's forest fringe areas, these lines mix with real-life situations that maps often don't show. In this case, a border is more than just a line; it's a place where people negotiate, fight, and stay alive.

The forest fringe is not a boundary for millions of people who live in tribes or depend on the forest. It is the centre of life. But these are the areas where the government is most likely to fail, be challenged, and even be unfair.

The illusion of a clear line

Setting limits is how the modern state rules. Forests are divided into groups, mapped, and put under the control of the government. This idea, which came from how forests were managed during colonial times, says that land can be easily split into areas for use and preservation.

But this logic doesn't hold true for forest edge areas. You can use one piece of land for many things, such as firewood, grazing, seasonal farming, and holy places. These uses are closely linked for people who live in the area. The forest is not a resource that can be managed from a distance; it is a living ecosystem.

When the state puts strict rules on these changing landscapes, it causes problems. It is now illegal to do things that used to be normal, like gathering small amounts of forest products, getting water, or growing small plots. People now think that what used to be a way of life is now trespassing.

The politics of acknowledgment

The Forest Rights Act (2006) or Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act recognised the rights of tribes, which was one of the most important changes to India's forest management. The law said people who lived in the forest had been wronged in the past and had not been able to get to their own land.

However, just because something is formally recognised doesn't mean it will be recognised in practice. In many places on the edge of the forest, people are still fighting for their rights to be recognised by the government. Claiming rights is often complicated and requires paperwork that many communities don't have. Even if a claim is approved, it could be only part of it, take longer, or be challenged. This makes a split between communities that are legally recognised but not really included.

Recognition is not just a legal status; it is also a sign of power. Who is in charge of deciding how land can be used? Who decides who can use resources? And whose opinion is important when making decisions? Recognition will not be complete until these questions are answered.

Conservation and its problems

India's efforts to protect its environment have got a lot of attention around the world, from the growing number of tigers to the larger protected areas. But these successes often come with hidden costs in areas near the edges of forests.

Policies that protect the environment often limit what people can do, which can mean moving or losing access to resources. These policies aim to protect ecosystems, but they could upset the fragile balance that communities have kept for generations.

The main idea is that what people do is bad for forests. This way of thinking, on the other hand, doesn't take into account how important indigenous knowledge and traditions are for keeping ecosystems healthy.

A lot of the time, communities took care of forests long before there were any official rules about how to do it. Not remembering this past hurts both communities and conservation efforts.

Building on the edge

If conservation is one kind of pressure, then development is another. People are starting to see forest fringe areas as places where the economy can grow, with the possibility of mining, infrastructure, and energy projects. These programs promise to make jobs, improve connectivity, and move things forward. But they also cause people to move, damage the environment, and make society less stable.

These places have a lot of tension between growth and rights. Projects that are justified in the name of the national interest often ignore what is really going on in the area. Consent procedures can be quick or not very thorough, and the money people get for being displaced is usually not enough to cover the real cost.

Also, development can change how power works in a community. Some people may benefit from new opportunities, while others may be left out, which will make the inequalities that already exist in communities worse.

Reevaluating our operational framework from the foundation

There is no single policy or action that can resolve the issues associated with forest fringe governance. They need you to change the way you think about things.

First, governance needs to change from being about control to being about working together. This means recognising communities as partners who have useful information and the power to make decisions.

Second, policies need to be based on what's really going on in the area. Techniques that work for everyone probably won't work in environments that are different and complicated. Third, there must be a commitment to justice, which means not only protecting the environment but also treating people and businesses fairly.

This means making it easier to follow the rules that are already in place, being more open, and giving people chances to really get involved.

Outside of the fringe

People often think of forest fringe areas as being on the edge of things, whether it's geographically, economically, or politically. This idea, on the other hand, is wrong.

Some of the most important problems we face today, like climate change, protecting biodiversity, and sustainable development, are closely tied to these places. The way India takes care of its forest edges will determine the future of its forests and its democracy.

A map's lines may show official boundaries, but they don't show how complicated it is to live on the edge of the forest. To understand these places, we need to look beyond the map and at the people who live there, the relationships they have, and the problems they have to deal with.

Only then can the government change from being a source of conflict to a place where people can live together.

Anusreeta Dutta is a columnist and climate researcher with experience in political analysis, ESG research, and energy policy.

Views expressed are the author's own and don't necessarily reflect those of Down To Earth