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New Bill raises hopes; Parliament holds key

With the Union Cabinet having cleared the amendments to the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Bill, 2015, it is hoped that the green legislation will pass through Parliament and come into force. The Bill is an important piece in the Government's commitment to a sustainable development model and will be necessary to mitigate the ecological costs of the large-scale infrastructure projects that are in the works. The Bill paves the way for utilising the large amount of money that's lying with the ad hoc Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management

and Planning Authority. For quite some years now, when projects requiring diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes have been sanctioned, they have been done so on the condition that developers would pay an additional amount for planting trees in other areas so as to compensate for the loss of green cover at the first site. However, while large amounts of money have been paid up and put in to the Compensatory Afforestation Fund, they haven't been utilised in the absence of a proper implementation framework. This is the gap that the new law will plug and in the process, release more than Rs40,000 crore for the purpose of compensatory afforestation.

The benefits of compensatory afforestation are obvious, at least on paper. However, implementing the scheme on the ground is complicated, and unless the new afforestation projects are properly planned and executed, the money will fuel corruption, if not do further ecological damage. This is because the basic concept of compensatory afforestation wherein trees cut in one location are replaced with new trees in another is a delicate one. The first problem is the quality of afforestation projects. In some cases, the money has been used for secondary activities like buying computers and vehicles for the forest department. These may be important investments but they are not to be made with CAF money which is something that the new amendments make clear. The bigger problem though is that in many cases the loss of forest cover is sought to be compensated with artificial plantations. Not only are these plantations no match for the loss of bio-diversity in the forests, they often do not thrive themselves because of the use of non-native plants and also disturb the ecological balance of their surroundings. This was seen in Karnataka, where the Kudremukh Iron Ore Company Limited, to compensate for its mining in Kudremukh National Park, planted hundreds of trees in the adjoining grassland in the Bhadra River watershed. The second problem is land availability. A 2013 report by the Comptroller and Auditor-General showed that of the 1,03,381.91 hectares of non-forest land that the Government was supposed to receive between 2006 and 2012, it only got 28,086 hectares. Of this, only 7,280.84 hectares was actually afforested.

In general, compensatory afforestation has a bad track record in India, going back several decades. Even a highly-scrutinised project like the Narmada dam wasn't able to deliver on its compensatory afforestation goals. The new Bill should help navigate some of these issues but, ultimately, much will depend on how accountable and efficient the new system proves itself to be.