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# Ministry strikes at tribal land rights bill

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**Environment Minister  
A Raja says it will  
destroy forest heritage**

THE tribal land rights bill, a pet project of the UPA government which the Prime Minister said would be introduced in the ongoing session of Parliament, is in deep trouble. The Ministry of Environment and Forest has questioned the very necessity of The Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2005.

In a strongly worded reaction to the draft, the ministry says the bill will destroy India's forest land and the failure on the development front should not be compensated by gifting away India's forest heritage. The letter, a copy of which is with The Indian Express, has been sent to the Tribal Affairs ministry, which

had asked for an opinion from the environment ministry. Environment Minister A. Raja said he had approved the letter. Tribal Affairs Minister A. Kyndiah said, "There is a strong view... Let us see how it is resolved."

The letter says, "The approach adopted in the proposed bill requiring denotification of vast tracts of forest lands and elimination of legal protection for the forest cover, will lead to irreparable ecological damage of immense proportion."

"Failure on the developmental front should not be compensated by any mechanism which leads to the ir-

reparable damage of our natural resource base. The draft bill, inter alia, proposes to compensate the failure on the developmental/welfare fronts by distributing natural resource base of the country," the letter says.

The ministry concedes there is a need to recognise the traditional rights of tribals over their ancestral heritage but not the way envis-

aged in the bill.

What the ministry finds objectionable in the draft bill includes giving the power of settlements of claims to gram sabhas/sub-divisional committees/district committees. This will result in local vested interests taking over, fresh encroachments coming up and the situation going out of hand, it says.

The draft bill envisages distribution of 2.5 hectares of forest land to each nuclear family. The ministry says this is against the goal of the National Forest Policy of 1988.