



A fight for the forest

Posted at: 07/03/2019

Conservationists should protect the welfare of both wildlife and forest dwellers and stand up to bigger players

- The Supreme Court stayed its order on the eviction of lakhs of Adivasis and other forest dwellers whose claims were rejected under the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA).
- The court has asked State governments for a detailed report on whether due process was followed by gram sabhas and authorities under the FRA before claims were rejected.
- For millions of Adivasis and forest dwellers, the stay offers only a temporary relief.
- But it provides an opportunity to figure out how conservation movements can advocate both nature and social justice in India.
- The petitioners had expressed concern over reports that showed deforestation and fragmentation of land after FRA implementation began.
- But there is a lack of peer-reviewed studies that quantify the extent of deforestation caused by marginalised communities in comparison to large industrial and infrastructural projects.
- It is vital that scientists and conservationists take up this task, as it is well known that the state is bestowing large companies with kindness and second chances despite severe legal violations during the planning, construction and operation stages of projects.

Ignoring the bigger players

- Objections to the FRA are often framed as an issue of wildlife conservation versus people's rights, with no mention of these bigger players who might benefit from this framing.
- In 2012, the Ministry tried to remove critical tiger habitats from the purview of the National Board for Wildlife, purportedly to make diversion of forest land easier.

- Indeed, one must repeatedly question who gets access to forests when forest dwellers are evicted.
- We have seen instances of forest dwellers protecting these lands from destructive industries and negligent state forces.
- This is not to claim that forest dwellers have no impact on forests, but the FRA provides for that through critical wildlife habitats (CWH), spaces that can be demarcated to be inviolate as long as people's rights are settled elsewhere.

Conservation rooted in justice

- However, for conservation to truly be effective in the long run, it must also be rooted in justice.
- The court's original eviction order had the potential to perpetrate injustice.
- There are serious concerns about the rejection process, unfamiliarity with the language of the FRA, and outdated forest maps.
- The eviction order would not only have alienated marginalised people from their lands, but made wildlife conservation a symbol of an oppressive state.
- We are not ready to handle the failure of shared spaces as a country, when only 5% of area is protected for wildlife and there is rampant land reallocation for non-forestry uses in other areas.

The Hindu

