

The Guardian

A huge land grab is threatening India's tribal people. They need global help

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Mon 25 Feb 2019
14.29 GMT

Adivasi have lived in the nation's forests for millennia. But now, under the spurious guise of conservation, millions face eviction



'Adivasi tribal people make up 9% of India's 1.2 billion population.' Photograph: Alamy

About 8 million indigenous people in India are in danger of being evicted from forests that their ancestors have lived in for millennia. This grave injustice follows a shocking supreme court ruling that rides roughshod over the rights of India's indigenous people, known as Adivasi, or tribals.

According to the 2011 census, these tribal people number 104 million - almost 9% of the country's then 1.2 billion population. It is the largest indigenous population in any country in the world, occupying 22% of India's geographical terrain.

A number of Indian wildlife and conservation organisations, including Wildlife First, the Wildlife Trust of India, and the Tiger Research and Conservation Trust have accused the tribal people of destroying the forests' biodiversity and have petitioned the court to clear

them from the land. Yet the 2006 Forest Rights Act gave Adivasi rights to live on and protect the land that they had been cultivating within forest boundaries.

The debate about wildlife versus forest dwellers is an old one. But most Indian NGOs understood years ago that the Adivasis were not the enemy, and they have been fighting on the same side. Having lived with my family in a forested area for three and a half decades, I know that the people live in harmony with nature and that evicting tribals will leave the forest unguarded and vulnerable - and make it a haven for poachers.

The Forest Rights Act undid historic injustices perpetrated on the communities of forest dwellers for centuries. It has empowered tribal councils to reject planning applications by mineral companies, such as UK-based Vedanta, to mine for bauxite in the Niyamgiri hills.

But under the act, tribal people had to file a claim with state governments to secure the title deeds to their lands - and thousands of claims by Adivasis have been rejected all over India. The country's highest court has now decreed they are "encroachers" and should be evicted.

States have been told to begin evictions by July if tribes cannot produce documented evidence proving ownership. How can people who did not have paper, who did not know they had to have written entitlement to live on land their ancestors occupied, be expected to produce relevant title deeds?

There was no state lawyer defending the rights of the Adivasis in court against these conservation groups. It is shameful that a government whose duty it is to defend its poorest and most vulnerable citizens failed to supply a defence attorney against the petition. Why was this? Is the government complicit in this massive land theft? It would appear so.

Fertile food-producing lands have been forcibly taken from hapless farmers and gifted at throwaway prices to billionaire industrial groups. And this isn't the first time villagers have been removed from land in the name of development.

A case in point is the infamous Narmada eviction. On 12 December 1979, in spite of widespread protests, the Indian government decided to raise the height of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river - and to construct 30 major, 135 medium, and 3000 small dams. This, they announced, would provide water to about 40 million people, along with irrigation, and electricity to people in the region. To achieve this, 200,000 people were displaced, of whom a majority were Adivasis.

Now in a total travesty of justice, the original forest-dwelling communities, with the smallest ecological footprint, face being ousted from their homelands in the name of saving the environment.

The conservation groups opposing tribal rights are misguided. They say that granting forest rights to tribal people created fragmentation and a huge threat to biodiversity. In fact, tribal people protect many plant species such as roots and tubers as a food source.

Stephen Corry, director of Survival International, the global movement for tribal peoples, says: "This judgment is a death sentence for millions of tribal people in India, land theft on an epic scale, and a monumental injustice." He adds: "Will the big conservation organisations like WWF and WCS condemn this ruling and pledge to fight it, or will they be

complicit in the biggest mass eviction in the name of conservation, ever?”

A public campaign must be started to restore the rights of the tribes people. Human rights defenders in India are furiously fighting the order. So are international groups.

Time is of the essence.

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