

## Governance

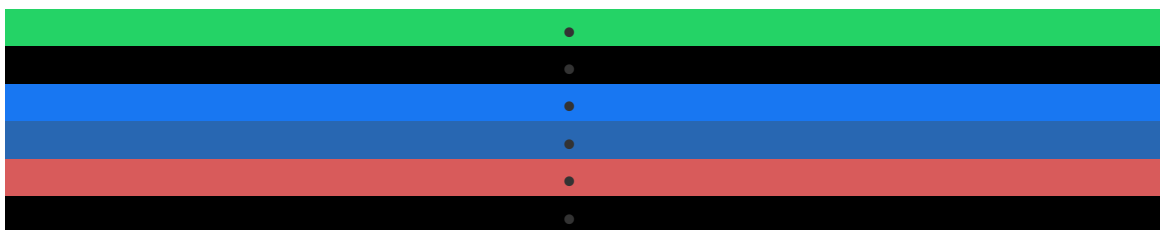
# Ahead of crucial hearing, forest rights organisations demand fair review of FRA rejections

*Organisations demanded that review process be continued and case be dismissed*

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As millions of forest-dwelling tribals in India fear eviction, 109 civil society organisations across the country have released a press statement demanding fair review and scrutiny of their rejected claims to forest rights.

They voiced their concern ahead of the Supreme Court hearing of the *Wildlife First and Ors vs Union of India and Ors* scheduled for April 2, 2025. During the last hearing on the matter on February 13, 2019, the apex court had ordered eviction of 1.7 million tribal families by rejecting their individual rights. The order was put on hold the same month after nationwide protests.

The court had also directed the state governments to review the rejection of claims.

The organisations, including Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD) and Adivasi Adhikaar Rashtriya Manch, pointed out that over 100,000 people have already been displaced due to the creation of protected areas and the National Tiger Conservation Authority has recently called for expediting relocation of 64,801 people from core tiger reserve areas. CSD was a party in some of the petitions.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) recognises 13 rights for Scheduled Tribes and “other traditional forest dwellers”, including rights over land, minor forest produce, grazing and others. It also recognises crucial rights to protect and manage forests as these forest-dwelling communities have been doing for centuries.

In the combined statement, the organisations alleged that the forest bureaucracy has sabotaged the implementation of FRA in multiple states and at the central level. This,

the organisations said, was because the law removes their power to evict and harass people and hand over forest land to large companies.

They added in the letter that a wildlife-focused NGO opposed the Act and approached the Supreme Courts and High Court against it in 2008-09 and periodically revived the case of *Wildlife First and others vs Union of India and others*, in an attempt to undermine the law.

The organisations alleged that the forest rights claims were rejected without providing adequate reasons to the claimants or concerned Gram Sabhas. They were also denied the opportunity to appeal or present additional evidence.

“This directly violated FRA mandated procedures. Rule 13 of Forest Rights Rules recognises multiple forms of evidence, including testimonies of village elders and field verification reports by the Gram Sabha, but these have been systematically ignored. States continue to ask for specific evidence,” the statement said.

For instance, the statement said that in Gujarat, satellite imagery, which cannot determine occupation of forest as required by the law, was deemed as mandatory evidence leading to large-scale rejections.

“Deeply flawed with human operators in remote offices marking plots without ground verification, errors in geo-referencing and incorrect mapping have resulted in large-scale wrongful rejections,” it said.

Further, claims of Other Traditional Forest Dwellers have seen a high rate of rejection overall. As per the records accessed from the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, until January 31, 2025, as many as 1,806,890 claims have been rejected.

However, MoTA reported that monthly data on Individual Forest Rights remained highly unreliable and often hugely exaggerated, the organisations alleged.

The statement further observed that despite FRA ensuring protection of rights of forest dwellers from evictions, large-scale displacement is reported from ground. Forest-dwellers who were cultivating land before 2005 were forcefully evicted and now face challenges in reinstating their claims over rights.

“There have been numerous instances especially in Rewa and Burhanpur districts of Madhya Pradesh where the forest department has used force, destroyed standing crops, and imposed fines,” the statement said.

The organisations further said that there has been systematic dilution of forest and environment laws, enabling forest and resources access to corporates and private entities for development purposes.

All these state-corporate driven developments are being undertaken in violation of Panchayat (Extension to Schedule Areas) Act, 1996, FRA and the 2006 tiger amendment to the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, leading to non-recognition of rights and increased displacements, the statement said.

The organisations now demand that the central and state governments must clearly inform the apex court on April 2 saying that the FRA is constitutional in its entirety and process of review must continue and the case be dismissed.

“The Ministry of Tribal Affairs must ensure the review of rejected claims follows clear guidelines that uphold the authority and role of the Gram Sabha as the primary decision-making body and as per the procedures for verification process under FRA,” it noted.

No evictions or relocation from tiger reserves or other protected areas must be held until all claims, including those under review, are processed as per the provisions of FRA, they further said.

The organisations also demanded that Gram Sabha’s statutory authority and role in claim initiation, verification and decision-making should be reaffirmed, preventing bureaucratic and technological overreach. Any rejection of a claim must be justified in writing with an opportunity of appeal, the statement said.

tribal  
forest rights  
forest dwellers  
FRA  
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