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Is uprooting millions of poor tribals from their ancestral homelands ethical?

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One should not have been surprised when the Centre failed to send its lawyers to the hearing on Forest Rights Act. One has seen forest lands usurped by private corporations and ecological considerations thrown to the wind under the current government.

While the government might have a clear motive of displacing sons and daughters of the forests to enable a corporate takeover of the

resources, the Supreme Court also has to bear the moral cross for displacing millions of Indian citizens, most of whom are haplessly poor and marginalised.

The Supreme Court on February 20 ordered the forced eviction of more than a million tribal and other families from forestlands across 16 states of the country after the Centre failed to defend Forest Rights Act that was ironically passed to defend their rights. The Union government failed to present its lawyers in defence of the law on February 13.

The SC order asked the state governments to “ensure that where the rejection orders have been passed, eviction will be carried out on or before the next date of hearing. In case the eviction is not carried out, as aforesaid, the matter would be viewed seriously by this court.” The next date of hearing is on July 27. So, by that day these families are going to be homeless.

The Forest Rights Act was passed by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government in 2006. It required state

governments to transfer back traditional forest lands to tribals. The 16 state governments have said over 1.1 million cases were disqualified. However, there is widespread scepticism about the veracity of this figure as implementation was shoddy and lackadaisical. Critics have said that many state governments, specifically the forest departments and local administrations, did not even care to carry out the process.

What is unnerving is that the Supreme Court has put the onus of the Centre's non-appearance in the court and non-implementation of the Forest Rights Act by the states on dwellers of the forest. As a result, going by an average family size of five, almost 6 million people are going to be uprooted from their roots and their homeland without any provision of rehabilitation. From a purely moral and ethical point of view, this can't be construed as justice.