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## Despite PM push, MoEF looks to block tribal rights in parks

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NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh might have talked of the importance of implementing the Forest Rights Act in its letter and spirit in the Naxal-affected tribal areas but the Union environment and forests ministry is instead trying to curtail the Act's provisions.

The MoEF has pitched for an amendment of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1976, that will, contrary to the provisions of FRA, ensure that the rights of forest dwellers and tribals are denied in the existing 661 national parks and sanctuaries.

The FRA provides for handing back the rights over forests to people who have traditionally lived or depended on them -- mostly tribals. The legislation was passed by the UPA in its last tenure recognizing that successive governments since independence had usurped forest lands and turned them into forest department's property without recognizing that people had been living in these forests.

The Indian Forest Service largely remained opposed to the Act till the last possible moment and retired forest officials even tried to block the legislation in different courts across the country.

The wildlife conservation lobby too fought tooth and nail demanding that the national parks and sanctuaries covering roughly 4% of the geographical area of the country should be kept out of the purview of FRA. They lost the battle at that point as the Act passed by Parliament required the rights to be settled in all kind of forests regardless of their protection states. But they seem to have won the battle now.

The FRA enacted in 2008 has a provision that allows the creation of critical wildlife habitats to be created where the rights of the people could be bought out if the people and the experts agreed that the area was important for conservation.

The environment ministry in haste set up a committee to identify the critical wildlife habitats wanting to give a cloak of protection to almost all the national parks and sanctuaries under this FRA provision as well. But the committee never concluded its work.

Now the ministry in its latest amendment to the Wildlife Protection Act has instead put in a rider that the district magistrates are required to recognize rights under FRA only in national parks and sanctuaries that are created after the enactment of the Act.

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