SC names ex-CJI B.R. Gavai to head panel on forest-rights claims in Tamil Nadu's Megamalai

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News

On 6 November 2026, the Supreme Court set up a special committee headed by former Chief Justice of India B.R. Gavai to supervise and scrutinise claims under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 in Tamil Nadu's Megamalai region (Srivilliputhur–Megamalai Tiger Reserve, Agasthyamalai landscape). A bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta passed the order in 'A. John Kennedy v. State of Tamil Nadu'. An officer of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) and Tamil Nadu's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests will assist the committee, which will report in a sealed cover. According to the State, 4,594 occupants hold 5,072.64 hectares of forest land, of which 3,637.83 hectares are under silk cotton. The Court said commercial crop cultivation cannot be recognised as a forest right, and that people living outside the forest but cultivating inside it, or staying only temporarily, cannot become forest dwellers through cultivation alone. The State must form the remaining Gram Sabhas within 30 days and decide claims within five months after that; the next hearing is on 1 February 2027.

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Order date	6 November 2026 (2026 INSC 1204)
Bench	Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta

Point	Details
Committee head	B.R. Gavai – 52nd Chief Justice of India (May–Nov 2025)
Members	A CEC officer; TN Principal Chief Conservator of Forests
Area	Megamalai (Theni district) – Srivilliputhur–Megamalai Tiger Reserve
Law	Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006
Occupation	4,594 occupants; 5,072.64 ha; silk cotton on 3,637.83 ha
Timelines	Gram Sabhas – 30 days; claims – 5 months; committee scrutiny – 2 more months
Next hearing	1 February 2027

Background

- Forest Rights Act, 2006: the Ministry of Tribal Affairs is the nodal ministry. It recognises rights of those who lived in and depended on forest land before 13 December 2005. Under Section 6, the Gram Sabha is the authority to initiate the process of determining rights, followed by Sub-Divisional and District Level Committees – a three-tier system. An 'Other Traditional Forest Dweller' (OTFD) must have resided in the forest for at least three generations (75 years).
- Minor forest produce: under Section 2(i), non-timber forest produce of plant origin such as bamboo, tendu leaves, honey and wax. Section 3(1)(c) gives the right to collect and use it. The Court took the prima facie view that a planted commercial crop such as silk cotton falls outside this; the CEC is to give its opinion.
- Earlier verdict: on 29 May 2026 the same bench ordered the Tamil Nadu government to remove, in a time-bound manner, encroachments in protected areas of the Agasthyamalai landscape (which spans Tamil Nadu and Keralam), and action against 118 government servants found to be encroachers. The Central Empowered Committee (CEC) was set up by the Supreme Court in 2002 in the T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad case; since 2023 it is a permanent body under an Environment Ministry notification.
- B.R. Gavai: from Amravati, Maharashtra; served as the 52nd Chief Justice of India from 14 May to 23 November 2025. He was India's first Buddhist CJI and the second from a Scheduled Caste after K.G. Balakrishnan.

Tamil Nadu link: The case is entirely about Tamil Nadu. Megamalai is a hill region in Theni district; the Srivilliputhur–Megamalai Tiger Reserve, notified in 2021, is Tamil Nadu's fifth tiger reserve. Megamalai's forests form a catchment of the Vaigai river. Monitoring has been shifted to TN's Environment, Climate Change and Forests Department.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

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What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Order date: 6 November 2026 (2026 INSC 1204); Bench: Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta; Committee head: B.R. Gavai – 52nd Chief Justice of India (May–Nov 2025); Members: A CEC officer; TN Principal Chief Conservator of Forests.

What is the background to this news?

Forest Rights Act, 2006: the Ministry of Tribal Affairs is the nodal ministry. It recognises rights of those who lived in and depended on forest land before 13 December 2005.

Practice questions (with answers)

1. B.R. Gavai, who heads the Megamalai forest-rights panel, was India's first Chief Justice from which religion?

A) Sikhism

B) Buddhism

C) Jainism

D) Christianity

Answer: B – Explanation: Gavai was the 52nd CJI (May–Nov 2025) and the first Buddhist. J.S. Khehar was the first Sikh CJI.

2. Under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, who is the authority to initiate the process of determining individual/community forest rights?

A) District Collector

B) State Forest Department

C) Gram Sabha

D) Panchayat Union Council

Answer: C – Explanation: Section 6(1) – the Gram Sabha receives claims and passes a resolution; Sub-Divisional and District Level Committees follow (a UPSC 2013-type question).

3. To qualify as an 'Other Traditional Forest Dweller' under the FRA, one must have lived in the forest for at least how long before 13 Dec 2005?

A) 25 years

B) 50 years

C) 60 years

D) 75 years

Answer: D – Explanation: Three generations = 75 years (one generation is 25 years). Scheduled Tribe forest dwellers do not have this time condition.

4. The Megamalai region, under the Supreme Court committee's scrutiny, lies in which district of Tamil Nadu?

A) Dindigul

B) Theni

C) Tenkasi

D) Kanyakumari

Answer: B – Explanation: Megamalai is a Western Ghats hill area of Theni district and a Vaigai catchment; it is part of the Srivilliputhur–Megamalai Tiger Reserve.

5. Which is the nodal Union Ministry for implementing the Forest Rights Act, 2006?

A) Environment, Forest & Climate

B) Rural Development

C) Tribal Affairs

D) Panchayati Raj

Answer: C – Explanation: The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (formed in 1999) is FRA's nodal ministry. Forest conservation laws fall under the Environment Ministry.

Sources: Supreme Court of India judgment; Outlook; LiveLaw; Verdictum; DT Next. © Shanmugam IAS Academy.