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Reserved Forest Land of Arunachal Pradesh: Tribal Rights vs. Power Infrastructure Development

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Synopsis

Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state in the northeastern region of India, with more than 70% tribal population. Because of the small number of inhabitants per square kilometer (km), it receives fewer grants from the Government of India. This resulted in poor power infrastructure. The Government of India and Arunachal Pradesh are implementing a *Comprehensive Scheme for Strengthening the Transmission and Distribution System* with a project cost of ₹6,519 crore. The scheme includes 1,600 km-long 132 kilo-Volt lines to strengthen the existing power infrastructure. The project started in 2014 and was intended to be completed in March 2024. The entire project was delayed because of the strong resistance from the tribal people, who occupy the stretches measuring about 400 km of reserved forest lands over which the transmission lines were planned. The existing Forest Act defined the people occupying reserved forest land as 'encroachers', as the state government owned the land. The Arunachal Pradesh Government might evict such people without giving any compensation to construct the transmission lines, including the transmission towers. The project is in high need owing to its importance in contributing to the socio-economic development of the tribal people of the state and the potential hydropower generation. On the contrary, these poor tribal people had been residing in the reserved forest land for generations. They would be in more trouble if they were evicted without any compensation. Therefore, it would be a challenging decision to compensate them as there is no compensation policy at present.

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