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Activists up in arms against panel to review working of Forest Rights Act

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Nitin Sethi, TNN, 12 February 2010, 02:12am IST

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NEW DELHI: The government's decision to set up a committee packed with forest officers to review the implementation of Forest Rights Act and its impact on forests has raised the ire of activists as the forest bureaucracy had been at the helm of opposing the Act in the first place.

The environment and forest ministry has constituted a ten-member committee along with the tribal affairs ministry but seven of the officials appointed are from the Indian Forest Service. While one of the seven is at present with the tribal affairs ministry, two other members are representatives of conservation NGOs. It is headed by a retired forest officer.

The committee, which is to submit its report in three months, will study in detail the implementation of the Act that UPA had hailed as one of its key pro-poor programmes in its first tenure.

The government had found it hard to first enact and then operationalise the Act with the forest service and powerful conservation NGOs largely opposing it. Even after months of delay, the programme was slow to take off with reports of conflict with the forest bureaucracy coming in from several states. A group of retired forest officials had also filed several cases against implementation of the Act in various High Courts.

The committee now set up is also meant to recommend policy changes in forest management to bring it in sync with the Act. Forest management in the country is based on the Indian Forest Act, 1927 and the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 -- both pre-dating the Forest Rights Act.

While the committee will be expected to bring the three into sync, overhaul of the colonial era Indian Forest Act -- considered radically contradictory in character to the FRA -- has been lying in limbo with the government for several years.

Concerns about the forest bureaucracy dominated committee have been raised by the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a large conglomeration of mass groups from around the country that had earlier spearheaded the push for the Act in the face of strong obstruction from the tiger lobby and the environment ministry.

"It is the forest bureaucracy that holds the land and the resources that people have rights to under this Act, and they are the ones who have denied those rights. This same bureaucracy is now to review the implementation of a law that was passed precisely to end the illegal abuse of power by its own members," the group said in a statement.

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