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THE ECONOMIC TIMES**None to protect tribal rights in panel on forest resources**

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and assess the impact of Forest Rights Act on sustainable management of forest resources. Given the lead role played by the environment ministry in this committee, concerns have been flagged off by civil society organisations about the real intent and legality of the committee.

The committee headed by former director-general of Forest Survey of India, Mr Devendra Pandey, has three months to recommend policy changes, consequent to implementation of the Forest Rights Act, in future management of the forestry sector. It will also identify the role of stakeholders and beneficiaries in forest management. It will prescribe measures and guidelines to involve the stakeholders in forest restoration. It will also recommend measures for convergence of various beneficiary-oriented programmes for forest-rights holders. The committee will define new role for the forest department and gram panchayats for forest conservation and regeneration.

Besides Mr Pandey, the committee comprises, Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education DG H S Pabla, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests G S Rawat, Tribal Research & Training Institute commissioner A K Jha, tribal affairs ministry director A K Srivastava, Kalpavrikash director Ashish Kothari and Ashoka Trust for research in ecology and environment chief Harini Nagendra.

Questioning the composition of the panel, the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, which is a national platform for tribal and forest dwellers' organisations, points out that the committee consists of seven serving forest officials, one tribal ministry representative, "who incidentally is also a forest official," and two outside experts.

Campaign secretary Shankar Gopalakrishnan said, "The conflict of interest is glaring. The committee is to look into issues of "sustainable forest management", even as the same ministry has done its utmost to sabotage the powers of people to protect their own forests under the law, which is a threat to the bureaucracy's hitherto absolute powers."

The environment ministry constituted this committee after two rounds of meeting with tribal affairs ministry on the issue of implication of the act on sustainable forest management. The first meeting of the committee was chaired by the environment minister Jairam Ramesh.

The lead role taken by his ministry has been described as "malicious and illegal". "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," Mr Gopalakrishnan said. The nodal ministry for the Forests Rights Act is the tribal affairs ministry, and not the environment and forests ministry.

In 2006, Parliament passed the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, which is known as Forest Rights Act. The law relates to the rights of forest-dwelling communities to land and other resources, denied to them for decades.

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