

Deo takes U-turn, backs dilution of tribals' rights

Nitin Sethi, TNN | Apr 12, 2013, 02:51 AM IST

NEW DELHI: In a dramatic U-turn from his publicly stated position, tribal affairs minister [Kishore Chandra Deo](#) has now backed the PMO report recommending dilution of [tribal rights over forests](#) hindering industrial ventures. His ministry has written to the environment ministry asking it to overhaul its existing norms and enforce the 'entire recommendations' of the panel, which was headed by principal secretary to Prime Minister.

The PMO report of December 2012 had recommended that tribal rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) be watered down in most cases, where forestland was required by industry. The committee, driven by the PMO, had the environment and tribal affairs' secretary on board and recommended that where rights had been settled already and the project threatened to have serious impact on tribals — a vague, undefined term — it should carry a recommendation (and not consent) from the affected gram sabha.

Initially, both environment minister [Jayanthi Natarajan](#) and Deo had opposed the report. But, Deo later changed his stance to advocate that tribals' consent should not be sought in using forestland for what was termed as linear projects like roads, power lines etc that cut through several tribal habitations. With infrastructure ministry and the PMO pushing hard, Natarajan, too, agreed and the green ministry's existing regulations were diluted to permit linear projects in forest areas without the consent of gram sabhas in light of Deo's changed stance.

Now, the tribal affairs ministry has written to the environment ministry asking that a fresh comprehensive circular be put out superseding the existing one (that requires gram sabha consent for all but linear projects) following the PMO committee's recommendations in their entirety. The tribal affairs ministry's letter notes that Deo has already agreed to the PMO recommendations, and only asked for provisions of Schedule V to be applied in all cases.

The letter comes in parallel to a discussion in the Cabinet Committee on Infrastructure (CCI), where too Deo had raised the issue of change in regulations. This had led the PM to set up a group of ministers, including himself, Natarajan and finance minister P Chidambaram, to resolve any differences. Two months after the group was set up, it is yet to meet even once.