

## **Kol's Struggle For Their Identity In Uttar-Pradesh**

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There are hundreds of communities in India particularly those who are indigenious but have become victim of our political system. Kol is an adivasi community but the governments in Uttar Pradesh have not considered it fit to give them the recognition of an adivasi community under Scheduled Tribe category. This demand for identity has long been raised by the community in Bundelkhand but the governments so far have remained mute.

Kol adivasis resides in the forests of Bundelkhand regions of the states of Uttar-Pradesh & Madhya Pradesh. The districts like Sonbhadra, Mirjapur, Chitrakoot, Satna and Reeva. In all these adjacent districts Kols can cross over and have family relations yet the tragic divisions created by the authorities haunt them. The government of Madhya Pradesh acknowledge them as scheduled tribe and hence they are entitled to get all the facilities in that state which a tribal should get particularly rights over minor forest produce as well as access to forest. In Uttar-Pradesh, in the absence of this, the forest department has become the biggest violator of their forest rights. They cannot get dry wood to sale in the market. Neem, Anwala, Mahua, Bamboo and many other forest produce cannot be planted or used without permission from forest authorities. Thousands of hectares of land given to landless Kol people under the land redistribution programme by the government's revenue department, has been rejected by the forest authorities. In fact, they refuse to accept the entitlement given by the revenue department which resulted in a dangerous situation. The successive governments have not taken note of it and it is continuing and one of the biggest reasons of harassment of Kols. It need to be noted as how can one department reject the valid papers given by other department and if they have dispute over the said land, then the department

should resolve those issues and not the people. Why should people be made scapegoat and pay price for no fault of them.

Forest Right Act 2006 came into being with great hope but these hopes are dashed by the bullying tactics of forest department which refuses to accept the claims of the Kols in Uttar-Pradesh for land. Actually, in the entire Uttar-Pradesh, the process of Forest Right Act being implemented is highly skeptical and dismissive of the claims. Under the Act, other forest dwelling communities who are not scheduled Tribe will have to furnish proof of presence in the forest of 75 years. If you are recognized as tribal then this burden of proof of 75 years residence is not required. Now, this has actually divided the forest dwelling communities and resulted in internal division among them in many places as many forest dwellers who have been staying for years have not got any land from the forest department.

The clause is dangerous as at least the authorities should have focused things in the aftermath of India's independence. How can you ask for proof of 75 years when technically the modern Indian state has not come into being that time. It was an attempt to displace the people and divide them and create anarchy. In India, many of the communities have become victims of the bureaucratic negligence and pay price for it. We harp too much on technicalities that we forget the reasoning and relations of community with the forest.

The Kols in Uttar-Pradesh are victim of that 75 year clause in the Forest Rights Act 2006. They are a tribal community but not recognized as tribal and hence have to furnish proof of 75 year residence. Now the government must give us explanation as what were the mean of proof 75 years ago. The people even 30 years back did not have anything as proof. The voter ID cards and other cards are recent phenomena. The other important fact is the virtual absence of state in these regions. It never tried to go there and hence there were no Primary Health Centers, no schools for children, no ration shops, and no electricity supply. When the essential things have not been provided to tribal in their regions then what kind of proof the forest dwelling communities could

provide to the government. Even the Panchayats were defunct before the 'historic' 73rd and 74th amendments came into being. Hence, it is hypocrisy to seek the proof of residence for 75 years.

The forest officials have been making money out of these regions. It is the tribal who have protected our forest resources as forest water and land is their life and it is impossible to alienate them from the nature. The simplicity of tribal has been considered as 'foolishness' by our political class which treated them not even a vote bank like others as they were scattered in the forest and did not demand much except the right over minor forest produce and access to forest. A large part of their habitats have now been declared as 'Sanctuary' resulting in their displacement and threat to existence. Suddenly, their own land has become stranger to them. A land which they groomed and lived their whole life is being snatched from them.

It is not ironical that when Parliament was passing the Reservation in Promotion bill, Kols were demanding for their status as tribal in Uttar-Pradesh. The local MP of Samajwadi Party came to express his support to the cause but shocked everyone saying that if Kols are declared as tribal, they would lose their political rights particularly the seats which are reserved for them under Scheduled Caste category. He then asked that they should also demand for political reservation. It is not paradoxical for Samajwadi Party or politicians to play this game because if the seat is reserved for tribal then the honorable member representing the constituency would lose their chances and they actually visualize it much before others. The identity of Kol as tribal cannot be made handicapped just because they would not have a Lok Sabha MP. Once they are declared as tribal, thousands of people who are not getting land under the Forest Right Act will get the land. Moreover, they will get access to forest produce which is more important for them at the moment than a representative MP seat. Once, they are acknowledged as scheduled tribe, the government will have to arrange the political reservation for them in the region. And nobody has stopped Uttar-Pradesh government in doing so if it really

sympathize with the Kols but it cannot be fool people that tribal status would make them lose their political rights.

Our Political system is manipulative and I have written that so many time. Many of these most marginalized communities have rarely got representation in our state assemblies and parliament. The non-representation of our indigenous people and their representative in our decision making bodies has resulted in their complete marginalization. It is equally important for our political class to think and make special amendments to people's representation act to enable the representative of diverse tribal communities in our highest decision making bodies so that their issues are raised in Parliament and assemblies and they get a fair deal.

Tribal have felt betrayed by the current developmental process. When companies are coming to forest, reaping benefit and destroying them, our authorities have little time to ensure that those who build forest and protected our resources should also be looked after. We have enough lands to handover to the companies who destroy our nature and environment but no commitment to honor our indigenous communities who groomed our forests and protected them.

Kols are a very peace loving tribe of Central India and they demand justice from the government. Their patience should not be seen as weakness as there are forces which can use this disenchantment with law in future. It is wake up call for the government to act and ensure justice to Kols in Uttar-Pradesh. It will be shameful if we continue to allow their resources handed over to others while making them landless and homeless. We must acknowledge their great contribution to protect our vital forest zones and use their commitment and convictions to strengthen the forest further so that each one of them live life in dignity and self-respect without being hounded by the petty forest officials. It is time both the Uttar-Pradesh government and Central government to sit together and ponder over this issue by granting Kols a tribal status so that they can enjoy the benefits of forest rights act in Uttar-Pradesh.