

Adivasis, forest dwellers joined by political leaders and other social movements to demand democratic control over natural resources

PRESS STATEMENT

NATIONAL CONVENTION ON DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OVER NATURAL RESOURCES

Groups from Across Country Attend, Joined by Political Leaders and Social Movements, to Demand an End to Resource Grabbing

More than 400 adivasis and forest dwellers gathered from across the country today at a National Convention on Democratic Control Over Natural Resources that was held at Delhi today. The meeting put forward a demand that planning, use and takeover of forests and land should be under the control of those dependent on these lands for their livelihood and survival. All laws and state action - whether in implementing the FRA, framing the new Land Acquisition Bill or amending the Mines Act - should comply with this basic principle. The main demands that were finalised at the Convention, after amendments suggested by various organisations and speakers, are annexed below.

Organisations from Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal attended along with sympathisers and representatives from other organisations. The meeting was addressed by Minister for Tribal Affairs Shri Kishore Chandra Deo, who also took questions from the gathering, as well as by political leaders from the CPI, the CPI(M), the Congress, the All India Forward Bloc and the CPI(ML) Liberation and by movement leaders from the All India Forum of Forest Movements, the National Forum of Forest Peoples and Forest Workers, the Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch and the Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights.

Representatives from each State organisation addressed the meeting and put forward their experiences and perspectives. The meeting was inaugurated by **Dr. B.D. Sharma**, who outlined the illegal manner in which resources are being grabbed by the state and argued that people's ownership over their lands and resources should be respected in all projects. The **Minister for Tribal Affairs and Panchayati Raj, Shri Kishore Chandra Deo** addressed the gathering and said that his Ministry is in full support of many of the issues raised in the demands and the process for acting on them has already begun. He stated that the Ministry has issued guidelines and amended the Rules under the Forest Rights Act to strengthen recognition of community rights, end insistence on illegal evidence, and to ensure that the Act's process is implemented correctly. He said that he has just written to the Environment Minister to reiterate that the gram sabha's consent must be taken prior to diversion of forest land. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has recently issued directions to State governments to ensure that gram sabha meetings are held at the level of actual villages and not those of panchayats. He requested that those gathered here should help ensure that people are aware of their rights. He also stated that the Ministry had taken steps to ensure provision of a minimum support price for minor forest produce. In response to questions from those gathered, he reiterated that oral evidence is admissible as proof of claims by non-ST claimants and that he is taking steps to ensure implementation of the Act in municipal areas. Finally, in response to the many incidents of illegality, violations and atrocities that were raised by those present, he requested them to submit written complaints so that action can be taken.

Shri Bhakta Charan Das (Congress), Member of Parliament from Kalahandi, Odisha, addressed the gathering and expressed his strong support for the people's struggle for rights over natural resources and against illegal takeover. **Shri SP Tiwari**, All India Forward Bloc, stated that Netaji did not fight for freedom in order to have a state machinery that expropriates adivasis and forest dwellers for private capital; he called for a united struggle to change this system.

Com. D. Raja

(CPI) stated his party is in full solidarity with this struggle and with the demands of the Convention. He committed that his party would raise these issues inside and outside Parliament.

Com. Pulin Baske

(CPI(M), and Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch) stated that the government is not concerned with the problems of forest dwellers and tribals and will not provide people with rights; rights must be fought for and won. Hence the Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch has planned actions to demand rights and to halt the handover of natural resources for the benefit of private capitalists.

Com. Kavita Krishnan

(CPI(ML) Liberation) welcomed the convention and its proposed demands, as the real issue is not one law or the other, but the fact that a democratic system of resource control should be in place. It is not people who need a land acquisition law; it is the state and the capitalists; people need systems of planning and resource use that are under their control. For this it is necessary to fight the exploiters at every level and fight for systemic change.

Among movement leaders, **Com. Smita Gupta** (Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch) noted that the Manch agrees with most of the demands of the Convention and that it is a united struggle that will produce a way forward for democratic control over resources. She raised the additional issues of people's right to food and for obtaining a minimum support price for minor forest produce.

Roma (National Forum of Forest Peoples and Forest Workers) narrated the manner in which the Forest Rights Act has been subverted in Uttar Pradesh and the fact that everyone is attempting to undermine, bypass or ignore the gram sabha. She called for a united struggle to strengthen the gram sabha.

Ningreichon

(Naga Peoples' Movement for Human Rights) expressed her solidarity with those who had gathered and pointed out that similar issues are arising in the Naga areas.

Lal Singh

(All India Forum of Forest Movements) called for a united struggle on these matters across the country.

Com. Reddy

from the Trade Union Coordination Committee welcomed the gathering and narrated similar experiences that his comrades had had in struggling against illegal tiger reserves and evictions in Andhra Pradesh.

After inclusion of points suggested by the speakers and a discussion, the demands were agreed upon at the Convention and approved by those gathered.

Campaign for Survival and Dignity

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DEMANDS

Across India today there are struggles for forest rights, against land acquisition and against mining projects. These struggles are united by their resistance to the use of state power to expropriate natural resources in the interests of the ruling class.

In this context we believe the crucial struggle is to bring natural resources under democratic, collective control. We therefore hold that the following basic principles should be part of all laws

relating to forests, land and minerals:

- All community and individual rights under the Forest Rights Act must be recognised and respected. Rejected claims should be reopened and all deadlines on filing of claims should be lifted. Officials who reject claims on illegal grounds should be prosecuted. Gram sabhas should be called at the level of actual villages, not as per arbitrary panchayat or other boundaries. Non-ST forest dwellers' rights should be recognised, all forest dwellers should receive community rights without discrimination, and oral evidence should be accepted as evidence of eligibility. Titles that are much smaller than people's actual occupation should be corrected. Cases against forest dwellers for exercising forest rights should be withdrawn.

- Procedures similar to those under the Forest Rights Act should be put in place to recognise individual and community rights over revenue lands. State governments like Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and others that have framed Rules contrary to PESA should withdraw them and ensure that the gram sabha's powers over natural resources are respected. All tribal areas should be brought under the Fifth or Sixth Schedules. The Sixth Schedule pattern should be followed in all Fifth Schedule areas as mandated by PESA. All Ministries and all levels of the government should be mandated to comply with and respect people's rights.

- The powers of the gram sabha under PESA and the FRA to manage and protect forests and community resources, and to use all forest resources including timber, should be respected. All forest diversion in violation of the Forest Rights Act and done without the consent of gram sabhas should be stopped. Joint Forest Management should be withdrawn.

- After recording of rights, a land use plan should be prepared for each district starting from the village upwards. No projects or other economic activities that do not fit this plan should be permitted. No takeover of lands assigned to weaker sections, such as Dalits and adivasis, for homestead or cultivation should be permitted.

- In rural areas, no project involving expropriation of these natural resources should be permitted without the consent of the concerned gram sabhas of the affected villages. In urban areas, the concerned basti sabha can serve the same purpose.

- Every change of land use above a certain limit - in the case of rural areas, the agricultural land ceiling - should be treated as an acquisition and subject to requirements for consent of the community and provision of rehabilitation.

- State subsidies and projects should be directed towards cooperative projects where those in the area itself cooperatively utilise their natural resources. Harvesting of minor forest produce; small hydropower projects owned and operated by the community and feeding regional electricity grids; etc. are such possibilities. Subsidies and tax incentives for corporate expropriation of resources should be halted. Instead of acquisition and diversion of forest land, land and resources should be leased from communities.

- Where large projects are accepted by communities, ownership of share equity in the project should be provided to the community as per the Bhuria committee recommendations of 1996; there should also be provision of complete rehabilitation in tribal areas with land for land and land to landless people. Further, a white paper should be brought out by the government about the total displacement, rehabilitation and resource expropriation that has taken place since independence. Further expropriation for large projects should be halted until this is

completed.

- The state machinery should provide support to people's livelihoods through a universal PDS, provision of minimum support price for minor forest produce, etc. rather than supporting the corporate sector with subsidies.