

Villagers in Vadodara on fast to protest plantation by forest dept

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As many as 55 tribals from Bhilpur village near Chhota Udepur in Vadodara district have been observing an "indefinite hunger strike" for a week now, camping on a tiny hillock located at the centre of their village, demanding that the forest department officials stop carrying out plantation activity on the same piece of land.

Villagers said they had secured collective ownership of the land in November 2008 under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, which offers rights to the forest dwelling tribal communities to use forest properties. Despite this, they said, the state forest department officials were carrying out plantation activity, without ever once contacting the village community head.

"We use the piece of land to graze cattle, dump dead cattle carcass and arrange social functions, among other purposes. It has got a primary school, two temples and a pond. We had secured transfer of the land under the FRA 2006, but the forest department is still staking claim over it," said Bhavsinhbhai Rathwa, a tribal villager on hunger strike.

Villagers said the hillock is the only spot where they place cattle during rainy season, when the lower part of the village get swamped. "Nobody from district administration or forest department visited our village since we sat on hunger strike from March 26," Rathwa said.

On Friday last week, when eight of the striking tribals fainted, the local administration sent a medical unit to treat them. "One of them had to be taken to a hospital in Chhota Udepur, but that won't deter us from carrying on our strike unless," Dinesh Rathwa, another villager, said. A state reserve police (SRP) personnel stands guard at the spot.

Villagers said neither forest department officials nor local district administration officials were ready to listen to their grievances despite their threats of indefinite hunger strike.

"On December 12, we wrote to the local forest department officials to stop plantation citing the piece of land was vital for our survival. When despite our protest the forest department started plantation, we wrote to the deputy collector on March 19, asking him to intervene and stop plantation or we shall go on hunger strike. Nobody reacted, so we went on strike and plan to carry this indefinitely," Rathwa said.

Forest department officials contested their claim, saying the villagers were trying to usurp 37 hectare of land, when the collective ownership of land under FRA is limited to only 10 hectare.

"We are carrying out plantation over 15 hectare of land which belongs to us. The plantation is being carried out under a 20-year plan approved by the union environment and forest ministry," a senior forest department official said.