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Tribals yet to benefit from forest dwellers act

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VARANASI: Delay in restoration of the status of tribal population as Scheduled Tribes and lingering process of identification of tradition forest dwellers in Chandauli district continue to be major hurdles in proper implementation of ST and Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 in the district.

When the joint secretary (ST) of government of India, Bachittar Singh, was reviewing progress in the implementation of this act in the districts of Chandauli, Mirzapur, Sonebhadra, Bhadohi and Varanasi at a meeting of officials at Circuit House on Saturday, the same facts surfaced. Apart from Varanasi district magistrate Ravindra, divisional forest officers and social welfare officers of all those districts participated in the meeting.

Singh was informed that as per the act, a total of 14,072 claims had been made on forest property in Chandauli district. However, against such a high number of claims, formalities of patta allotment had been completed in nine matters only in the month of May. Singh was apprised of the ground realities and the practical problems coming in the way of proper implementation of the act in the district. Due to repetition of the process of separation of Chandauli from Varanasi district, merger and re-separation, the forest dwellers of Chandauli had lost the status of Scheduled Tribes (ST) some eight-nine years back. Due to the same reason, process of implementation of Tradition Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 could not be started in Chandauli and the forest dwellers remained deprived of the benefits of the act.

As many as 10 castes, including Gond, Kharwar, Dhunia, Nayab, Ojha, Pathari and others, have not got the status of ST in Chandauli as yet. The proposal for recognising them as ST is pending with the Centre. Also, no record is maintained in land revenue department after 1942 to prove the claim of forest dwellers that they had been living in the forest for the past three generations or over 75 years. As per this act, the patta of maximum four hectare land was to be allotted to those ST people who possessed any forest property by December 13, 2005 or those forest dwellers who were utilising any forest property for three generations or not less than 75 years. The officials made it very clear that as the issue of restoring status of ST of tribal population had to be finalised by the Centre, the state government could do nothing.

After becoming aware of those ground realities, Singh assured that the issue would be solved on priority. But, he asked the officials to show liberal and sympathetic attitude while handling claims regarding reorganisation of forest rights. He asked the officials to accelerate the pace of work for the proper implementation of the act as it was also helpful in checking the spread of Maoist support base.

The reason for the instructions could be known by going through the records of Sonebhadra and Mirzapur districts. Despite having no problems as were being faced in Chandauli district, the process of patta allotment have been completed only against 900 claims out of the total claims of over 25,000 in Sonebhadra while only 772 claims have been disposed out of over 16,000 claims in Mirzapur district so far.

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