

FRA Issue of Village Rajnapur in Kalahandi district

Rajnapur is a small village in Sadar block of Kalahandi district along the border of Golamunda block. This tiny village having a population of about 80 households is at Kegaon Police Station in (Block Golamunda and Dharamgarh sub-division) though their police out post is in Borda of Sadar block and Sadar subdivision! During the rainy season the village gets cut off by the river Udanti. From among the 80 households, 35 households belong to Gond, 20 households belong to Kondha and 12 households belong to Kamar or Paharia tribe. Only about 15 households are from milkmen and other SEBC communities. The Kamar households unfortunately are not included in the list of tribals in Odisha though in Chhattisgarh they are considered as a Primitive Tribe Group (PGT).

During the state time (prior to 1948) this village was headed by a Gountia from the Gond tribe but somehow the land records were not properly recorded in the name of various tenants. Hence, after independence, most of the cultivable lands of the village got recorded as forest land and consequently the Forest Department came into a tussle with the villagers and frequently the Forest Department used to lodge cases against the local tribes and also they were getting penalized. As a record the villagers have at least two documents showing that on 30th December 1957 Forest Department had filed two cases against Late Mukunda Dharua and Late Dhanurjaya Dharua who were also arrested by the Kegaon Police Station. Along with those two persons also several others were arrested and were frequently getting harassed. Because of such harassment by the Forest Department and the Police some of the villagers gave up cultivating those lands. Following the severe drought of 1965-66 also a number of other households gave up cultivating some of those lands and once again it became shrub forest. Since 2000-2001 when the villagers felt the need to redeem those lands from the Forest Department people they once again got organized and started reclaiming those lands where some trees also had grown. The forest staff were of course not coming to interfere with the villagers this time but during 2011 a few forest officials came to the village and by motivating a handful of villagers they planned to take up plantation in some of those lands. But when the farmers were not willing to spare those lands the forest officials started to threatening the villagers of arrest, jail etc.

The forest case of November 2012;

Since 2001 to the tribal families of Rajnapur have been reclaiming some of the land in which their forefathers were cultivating prior to 1965-66. After making contour bonding and leveling 27 households have been growing a varieties of crops including upland paddy, cotton, sesame, black gram, arhar, horse gram etc. Few families are also growing rainy season tomato, brinjal, radish etc. From among those 27 households 22 belong to Gond tribe and 5 households are all Kandha tribe. Average area cultivated by them is around three to four acres.

During the year 2010-11, a few forest officials from Borda Forest Office and Kegaon Range Office started visiting the village and tried to motivate some people to leave those lands so that they will be able to take up plantation. They allured some of the villagers to provide some temporary job and some other benefit while undertaking the plantation activities. But when the villagers refused to spare the lands they started threatening them with dire consequences. But since it was a matter of their life and livelihood the villagers were not willing to spare those lands for any forestry plantation. Since 2012 kharif had a good rain fall the villagers were quite happy to see the bumper crop on those fields. A number of households also had already shifted from the main village to live closer to those lands and they had already erected houses so that they could protect the crop from wild animals and others.

On 22nd November while some people were working in those lands the Forester and Forest Guard came nearer to those plots and told them that the Range Officer wants to have a discussion with them regarding settlement of those lands. Believing the Forest Guard and Forester five persons came to the village and they also called other persons so that together they all will go to the Range Office to discuss about their land settlement. Altogether 11 persons went to Kegaon Range Office but in the evening the Range Officer did not meet them and they were asked to spend a night there. In the morning the villagers were expecting to have a discussion with the Range Officer but to their surprise the forest officials brought a vehicle and informed them that they were called by their senior officers and they will be taken to the District Forest Office at Bhawanipatna for discussion on the land issue. At Bhawanipatna after keeping them in the Forest Office they were informed that they are already arrested on charges of forest cutting and then they were taken to the court where the

Magistrate sent them for judicial custody. Only after going to the court they could know that they were arrested on the ground of cutting forest and related charges.

HOUSES BURNT BY THE FOREST GUARD: The Forest Guard and the Forester were not happy with this much of action and hence on 23rd November they came to the village again and they burnt several houses of the tribals which were in those crop lands. On this day they also seized some timbers which the villagers had kept for repair of their houses.

In protest of this incidence the women folks from those households went to report it in the Borda outpost. But the Borda outpost officials asked them to report in the Kegaon Police Station which is more than 25 kms from Borda. When they went to the Kegaon Police Station the O.I.C. refused to accept the FIR and they were once again asked to go to the Borda outpost. When the police officials also harassed them in this way finally they went to meet the Superintendent of Police at Bhawanipatna and on 7th January 2013 submitted an application by hand. However, so far the Superintendent of Police has also not taken any action on this matter.

DESTROYING THE FOOD CROPS: The Forest Guard and the Forester were not content with all these actions and they once again went to the village with a tractor and using the tractor they damaged all the ripe crop of black gram, horse gram, cotton and vegetables.

After spending 19 days in jail, 9 persons came out on bail and 2 other persons could come out on bail after 22 days.

This is the sad story of village Rajnapur. Like Rajnapur I think in hundreds of other villages the tribals must have been confronting with the Forest Department officials and getting harassed in similar way. Taking simplicity and innocence of the tribals even after enactment of the FRA the atrocities of the Forest Department is still continuing. Unfortunately the stories of such villages never get published or come to the sight of the mainstream media unless some activities of left wing extremists or that kind takes place.

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(This report is based on the informations gathered from Bihari Majhi, Arvind Dharua, Biren Dharua and few others from the same locality).