

Not a single claim for forestland in Balangir

Sudhir Mishra | Balangir

Though the district has forest dwellers, people dependent on forests and civil society organisations, besides the Forest Department is working in the sphere, not a single claim of forestland by the community or villagers, has come from the district.

Surprisingly, the Forest Rights Act 2006, for the first time in the history of India recognising the rights of forest dwellers allowed them both individual and community rights over the forest land.

The Forest Right Act of 2006 which was brought after much struggle was implemented all over the country from January 1, 2008, acknowledges that injustice has been done to tribal people and forest dwellers and provides for two types of rights to forest dwellers namely individual rights and community rights over forestland.

A tribal person staying in the forest before 2005 is eligible to get records of rights over that land which is not transferable and cannot be leased too. For non-tribal, at least three generations of people must be living there.

Out of the 1,753 villages in the district, around 350 villages are having ST dominated population and 14 per cent of the total geographical area is under forest cover and the total forest area of the district is 68,782 acres.

After the Act came into force, a district level committee and sub-divisional level committee was formed. The sub-divisional level committee should organise Gramsabha and Pallisabha.

It also should provide claim forms and guidelines and copy of it to villagers to ensure free and fair Gramsabha to facilitate the implementation of the Act.

Till today a total of 3641 individual forest claims were made. However, the sub-divisional level committee approved 725 claims and rejected as many as 708 claims.

Even though 566 Gramya jungle surakhsya samitis are working in the district for protection of forest in the district, yet not a single claim for community control over forest has come in.

The major reasons for not a single claim of community forest even though 566 Gramya jungle surakhsya samiti are functioning in the district is due to virtual non- functioning of district and sub-divisional level forest right committee to ensure proper implementation of this Act and due to unsatisfactory functioning of CSOs.

The district administration is not acting properly. The awareness among the people about the Act is very low. Even villagers do not know who its members of the forest rights committee are, pointed out a NGO activist.

Moreover, for implementation of this Act the resource allocation and infrastructure arrangement is meager and almost nil. Less number of Amins have been appointed for mapping that plot of land as a result people are finding difficult in getting the land and even getting less amount of land they demanded say from five to two acres.

Moreover, according to draft Odisha Forest Policy 40 per cent of total population of the State are forest dwellers and the State is getting 25 to 52 per cent income from forests. According to forest survey of India, out of the 51,000 villages, in and around 29,000 villages there is forest. If this Act is implemented then it would become revenue village and the villagers would get the benefits of a revenue village.

Due to the lack of knowledge and proper implementation these, people were not getting dignified life. Even as they were dwelling and were dependent on forest, other Act namely Wildlife Protection Act and Indian Forest Act restricted their entry. The access and control over resources of the community would be more and it will go a long way to ensure livelihood, besides migration would be checked.

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