

Tribals go hi-tech to claim forest land

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Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary : Inside the Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary in Narmada and in parts of The Dangs district, 5,000-odd tribal families living inside forests are using GPS technology and satellite maps to stake claim to over 10,000 plots of land under the Forest Rights Act.

“We carry these GPS devices, turn it on and ask the claimant to walk on the border of his fields,” explained Bamanjibhai Vasava, a member of the local Forest Rights Committee (FRC) in Patholi Ganina village, where more than 500 tribals from 22 villages, all located inside the 607.70-sqkm sanctuary, gathered at a mud and bamboo long-house on Friday last for a meeting to finalise their claims.

“The data is then super-imposed on satellite maps, and we can see which areas are being cultivated by people. These maps, names of claimants and other details are then submitted to the government as evidence that we have been cultivating these lands, so we can gain possession under the Forest Rights Act,” Bamanjibhai said.

As per Forest Rights Act, a local cultivating a plot of forest land since 2005 can stake his claim for the land.

Indrasinh Vasava, an FRC member in nearby Singal Garan village, said, “The GPS has to connect with a satellite, so when there are clouds, it does not work. We carry out surveys when there are no clouds.”

Technology is not alien to the region where farming is largely for sustenance and tribals routinely migrate to Surat for daily-wage work, where none have attended college, where electricity supply is erratic and tribals have to climb nearby hills to catch fleeting cellphone signals from a mobile tower in faraway Dediapada town every time they need to make a call.

At Friday’s meeting, words like Google, satellite, image, map, plot, cultivation, GPS and BISAG (for Bhaskaracharya Institute for Space Applications and Geo-informatics, the state-owned facility in Gandhinagar) were used as commonly as jowar, toor, makai and daveda, the last being the word for “claimant” and the rest names of commonly grown crops.

The large-scale use of technology by tribals is partly because of the fact that the state government has authorised use of satellite imagery as evidence to support claims under the Forest Rights Act, and the subsequent errors it itself committed.

BISAG was tasked with acquiring satellite images and preparing maps, but a petition currently heard by the Gujarat High Court has alleged that these initial BISAG maps were “highly error-prone,” without latitude/longitude grids and with markings off by 300 metres or more on the ground. Even re-done maps were not verified with ground surveys, petitioners alleged.

The government has not denied the mistakes in BISAG maps in court, stating instead they can be revised and corrected.

Eventually, 1.13 lakh FRA claims (out of 1.56 lakh) were rejected, and mass protests have led to a review being ordered.

Meanwhile, a point of argument in the case is whether Google Earth images can be relied on by the government

instead of maps provided by its own institute.

Exercising caution, groups assisting tribals with FRA claims they have now acquired the same maps that BISAG acquired from ISRO's National Remote Sensing Centre in Hyderabad, and are marking claimed plots on these as well.

At Friday's meeting inside Shoolpaneshwar, tribals pored over the Google Earth images they used earlier and the newly acquired, lower-resolution maps from ISRO and matched data, finalising plot markings before submitting the maps as evidence to be considered for the review of FRA claims.