

'Ignorant' officials led to poor FRA implementation

Ashish Tripathi | TNN

Lucknow: Lack of awareness among administrative officers at the district and block levels about the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 and poor supervision are some of the main reasons behind the tardy implementation of the FRA in the state.

The fact came to light during the recent visit of the National Forest Rights Act Committee (NFRAC) to forest areas of west UP. Formed jointly by the Union ministry of environment and forests and the Union ministry of tribal affairs, the committee has been given the task to review the status of FRA implementation in the country. The 20-member NFRAC, headed by NC Saxena and comprising experts from diverse backgrounds, will have to assess the situation at the ground level by visiting forest covered areas and interacting with the tribals and forest workers. A four-member NFRAC team visited west UP and Uttarakhand from May 28-31.

The team headed by member secretary NFRAC Rakesh Dogra, included FRA activist Arup Sakia, environmentalist Ashish Kothari and FRA expert Roma.

They visited the forest areas in the Shivalik range of UP and Uttarakhand and interacted with the nomadic tribes, Van Gujjars and Taungyas entitled for right on forest land under the FRA. The team found that not a single claim of over 500 Van Gujjar families in six villages of Saharanpur have been filed. These forest villages are attached with the panchayats of

neighbouring revenue villages. The district administrative officers have asked revenue village pradhans to clear the claims.

However, the FRA states that claims have to be approved by the gram sabhas, which can be formed by tribals and forest workers in their respective areas. Officers mistook "gram sabha" mentioned in the Act as "gram panchayat".

The claimants have also been asked to seek clearance from patwaris and forest rangers, although there is no such provision in the Act. "District officers said they were not aware of the facts," said Ashok Kothari. He suggested that besides training of officers, the chief secretary should hold regular review meetings to keep district officers on toes as being done in Orissa.

On the other hand, the claims of the Taungya community are caught in a legal wrangle. According to the Act, tribals residing in forests before 2006 will be entitled for the land. But other forest workers will get the benefit if their three generations are found to be living in the forests.

The time span of three generations has been put at 75 years. But, officials at Saharanpur have been able to find only 60 years record of the Taungya's association with the forests.

"Records of Taungya conferences and working plan of 1900-31 can be found in the forest department but officials seem to be disinterested," said Roma.

'Taungya' is a Burmese

SUFFERING FOR NO FAULT OF THEIR'S



- ★ The team will hold two more public interaction meetings at Lucknow and Sonbhadra. In Lucknow, forest areas of Lakhimpur and Bundelkhand will be covered.
- ★ The team found that if situation is bad in UP, it's worse in Uttarakhand. Both states have not done anything for granting community rights to tribes/forest workers under the FRA
- ★ The team suggested regular review meets, training of district level staff and awareness

programmes among tribes and forest workers with the help of NGOs

★ While at many places, work to give individual land rights to tribes and forest workers has started, nomadic tribes are not yet aware of the Act

★ In UP, around 9000 land titles have been distributed so far, of which 90% are in Sonbhadra. At the same time over 50,000 claims have been rejected in Sonbhadra on frivolous grounds. Experts feel that state government should review 'Sonbhadra Model'

term meaning planting trees between crops hill (Taung) and cultivation (Ya). Some British officers used the Taungya technique for regeneration of forests in UP's terai region which were cut down for revenue during the colonial rule.

Bonded labourers, dalits and backward were used to regenerate forests in an area for five years and then shift-

ed to another place for the same task. It continued in free India till late 70s. But thereafter, they were declared encroachers.

The Taungyas regenerated forests in one lakh hectare area but are being denied rights now. Though as per the Act, it is the responsibility of the forest department to provide proof required for granting rights.