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Gadchiroli villages get legal right over forest

Jaideep Hansraj / DNA

Two tribal villages in the Maoist-infested Gadchiroli on Tuesday became the first in the country to get legal rights over forest and forest produce.

Mendha (Lekha) and Marda will manage the forest and water in their jurisdiction and be the legal owners of forest produce except timber, according to a document, Record of Rights, presented to the representatives of the villages by governor SC Jamir.

On August 15, the government had announced its decision in favour of the villages. The Record of Rights recognises the villagers' right to manage their forest, water, and the right to forest produce as per the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Right) Act, 2006.

The act gives land ownership rights to individual dwellers and a gram sabha community the ownership of surrounding forests for utilisation rights for cattle grazing, collection and storage of minor forest produce and management and disposal of resources.

"The government should now grant similar records to other villages and set right its mistake of denying the people their traditional rights," Mohan Hirabai Hiralal, a well-known social activist and environmentalist, said. He has been involved with the struggle of Mendha and Marda. "This is the only way with which the union government can put an end to insurgency."

It's a development that, activists say, sets precedence for other tribal villages. A village assembly has to prepare a claim in a format ascribed, refer it to the village forest rights committee and revenue officials and get a nod of its gram sabha by a two-third majority. The draft claim is sent for approval to a sub-divisional committee and district-level committee headed by the collector.

Each district collector, Hiralal said, can grant community rights to other villages on its own volition instead of waiting for the villages to submit their claims

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