



By Sarajit Majumdar

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Forest communities' right to livelihood

Never have we seen the government of India in such a hurry as while sticking to the deadline of December 31, 2009, for implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA) 2006. The Act recognises the rights of forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and 'Other Traditional Forest Dwellers' dependent on forests for their livelihood. Such communities, once recognised, would be granted heritable, inalienable right to use 2.5 hectares per family. The Act would have relieved forest-dependent communities of the long borne curse — 'the encroachers'. But the government hurried to distribute as little land as possible. The ultimate objective of the state is to free vast stretches of land and hand it over to corporate houses, which are eagerly waiting in the wings.

The FRA 2006, which came into effect on January 2008, lived just for two years. The time was too short to implement it. Note that these poor communities live on the inaccessible fringes of forests and lack formal education. They lack easy access to information. For instance, some forest dwellers of West Bengal heard about the Act, but members of the Adivasi Vikas Parishad are still unaware of it. The level of awareness is similar in Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa and Jharkhand. Consequently, of the estimated 20 million forest dwellers only 2.5 million had filed claims by the deadline. Only 5,00,000 applicants were granted rights to access the forests. This implies that out of an expected distribution of five crore hectares of forest (2.5 ha per family) only 12,50,000 hectares will be distributed across the half a million lucky ones. Thus, a vast tract of forest is freed for commercial use.

Woods are not just trees. Apart from timber, forests in Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand and parts of Andhra Pradesh contain rich mineral deposits. Chhattisgarh has 16.36 per cent (41,442 million tones) of India's coal reserves, 18.67 per cent (2,731 million tones) of iron ore and 28 per cent (1.3 million carats) of diamond deposits. Jharkhand shares 29 per cent of coal, 14 per cent of iron ore and plenty of mica. Orissa alone accounts for the largest deposit of bauxite (59.5 per cent), whereas iron ore and coal account for 32.9 per cent and 25 per cent respectively. Andhra Pradesh is also equally rich in minerals.

Economic historians observe that rich mineral pockets, be they the mining zones of Brazil, Bolivia or central Mexico or Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, are the least developed areas. They are also covered by forests, whose minor produce the forest communities use for their livelihood. No wonder the provisions of FRA 2006 did not reach the intended beneficiaries in time.

Pushed into the forest by the progress of 'civilisation' — dams, railways, roads, industries and extensive urbanisation — the forest communities live in distant, isolated pockets. These areas have also got Maoist attention. They run a 'state' within a state inside the jungle. The Indian state is set to separate the Maoists from the forest dwellers. In this context, the FRA deadline coupled with 'Operation Green Hunt' assumes a new dimension.

Green Hunt aims to flush the Maoists out of the forests. Then, there is the pressure of globalisation, which has business corporations lining up for long-term access to cheap primary resources — mines, land, water and timber. Removing the Maoists solves half the problem. So the unspoken agenda of the FRA deadline is even more vicious. It keeps the forest communities from accessing their own niche.

Obviously, the mineral deposits are a draw. But to be competitive, the corporations have to extract them cheaply. The Indian state is a willing partner of the corporations in this. Recall that South Korean steel giant Posco bought mining rights cheaply in Orissa, evicting 4,000 tribal families. So it happened with Tata Steel in Kalinganagar, where 8,000 tribal people marched the roads demanding rights on mines, land, water, forests and industry. Such examples abound in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

As for the non-mining forest areas the corporate houses have several alternatives. One is to cultivate high value timber — teak, saal, mahagani (swiecenia), as happened in Kalahandi, Orissa. The second is to build luxury resorts, like the Sahara group's failed attempt in the Sunderbans in the name of eco-tourism, caring little for the ecosystem itself.

The third involves Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) enunciated in the Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. If a potentially polluting industry reduces carbon emissions it follows the CDM norm. It earns carbon credits, which are sold to Western industrial corporations. In other words, these corporations buy the right to emit carbon, while global carbon emissions are reduced or remain constant. Selling carbon credits is a huge source of income for many Indian industries. It is not that they earn credits by employing modern emission reducing technology. Instead, they locate plants in the vicinity of forests, which are used as carbon sinks. So they can release huge quantities of carbon dioxide for the forests to absorb. Thus, cheaply obtained forestland hikes profits, as it opens new avenues of windfall income from selling carbon credits. With this logic Jindal Steel Works chose the Shalboni forest area in West Bengal, and Posco and Tata chose Orissa's forests for their steel mills. Kyoto Protocol's success story is carbon credit inflow for carbon emitters.

Given these advantages it is natural that corporations vie for access to forest with or without mines. The FRA deadline offers new opportunities to business houses at the cost of forest dwellers. Yet, perhaps all is not lost. Hopefully, mass protests by the forest communities will compel the ministry of environment and forests to extend the deadline. Or will it?

(The writer is a Kolkata-based economist and was formerly on the faculty of the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai)

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