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Foresters 'book' dead man for poaching

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LUCKNOW: The forest department (FD) personnel posted at the Dudhwa National Park in Lakhimpur Kheri are once again in the eye of the storm allegedly for trying to deny Tharu tribe of the Surma village the right to ownership of land under the Forests Right Act (FRA) 2006. In this process, even the dead and those who migrated long back to other places have not been spared them.

Sample this: First, 'domicile and entitlement' certificates were issued to Tharu tribals by forest personnel rejecting their claims under the Act. Now notices have been issued to 12 tribals by Dudhwa Tiger Reserve warden Ishwar Dayal on charges of poaching. Interestingly, the notices were issued on June 3, 2010. Of the 12 accused, one Budh Ram son of Santram had died seven months ago and another Chainu Ram son of Bandhu had migrated to Hardoi 20 years ago.

Cases have also been lodged against the 12 'accused' under Wildlife Act 1972. In the notices, the 'accused' were asked to appear before the warden on June 16 to put their defence, failing which an ex parte decision will be taken on the basis of the evidences collected by the forest personnel. The 'accused' tribals who went to warden's office on the due date were allegedly threatened and asked to pay Rs one lakh as fine and not to file claim for land under the FRA.

The 'accused' took up the matter with Ram Chandra Rana, a tribal leader and member of the state FRA monitoring committee. Rana when inquired found that out of 12 accused one is already dead and another had migrated to Hardoi 20 years back and is working there in the panchayat department. Their families told TOI that they had reported the matter to the Lakhimpur Kheri district administration. Other tribals booked in the case have also filed a written complaints.

After failing to get a positive response from the district administration so far, Rana has shot off complaints to the chief secretary. He told TOI that forest officials are scuttling the state government's efforts to provide land rights to tribals under the FRA. He claimed that under similar circumstances a villager was murdered in 2008 and the magisterial inquiry had then found eight FD personnel guilty but no action has been taken so far by the police.

Tribals claimed that it was not the first time that they had been implicated in false cases. "It's a routine affair," said Prem Shankar, a tribal resident of Surma Village. Thalu Ram, another tribal, said that last month illegal certificates were distributed among tribals by FD officials rejecting their claims under the FRA. Though two forest guards had been suspended, the tribals want a high-level probe suspecting role of some senior officials in the case.

When contacted, Dayal rubbished all allegations. He said that as a warden of the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve it was his duty to inquire into every complaint of poaching reported by the lower staff. Accordingly, he said, he had called the tribals named in the case to present their defence. "If found innocent, the cases against them will be withdrawn," he said. He also said that tribals of the Surma village had been levelling such wild allegations in the past as well.

"The Surma village is situated in the core area of the tiger reserve. The FD had provided over 500 acres of land for resettlement of people outside core area in 1986. The high court in 2003 endorsed the resettlement decision" he said blaming Lakhimpur Kheri district administration for the mess. "Despite our repeated request for resettlement, the administration has done nothing. As per Wildlife Act, tribals cannot claim right on the land in core area," he said.

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