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'Govt should step in to prevent another Narayanpatna'

RAYAGADA: After Narayanpatna it may not be long before the Left Wing groups take advantage of the government's callous attitude towards settlement of rights of the forest dwellers in the neighbouring district of Rayagada. Nearly 56.04 per cent of the 8.31 lakh population is tribals who reside in the hilly tracks and forest areas.

According to information, 24,401 applications were submitted to the district authorities for settlement of the rights under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

After scrutiny at various levels, around 7,000 applications have been disposed of, out of which only 1,754 were found eligible to get pattas involving 2,547 acres. Still about 17,000 applications are pending disposal. The problem lies in poor coordination and the requirement of manpower. The process begins at the palli sabha in the presence of a revenue or forest official. Then during the identification of land at least five persons should be present from the revenue, forest, block, palli sabha besides the applicant himself. Such a time consuming process in a district covered by hilly terrain and inaccessible areas could only help the ultras in achieving their mission. At such a critical stage the Forest Division office here is woefully short of field staff like foresters and guards.

Against the need for 58 foresters, there are only 50 and against 157 forest guards only 109 are on the job. To add to the problem, 75 per cent of these are above 50 years and can't undertake rigorous work and at least one of them retires every month, said DFO Bijoy Ketan Acharya.

Acharya, however, admits that the settlement work was delayed a bit because of the elections but now it would go full steam. "We are putting some trained forest guards for field verification and preparation of maps," he says with confidence.

On non-eligibility of so many applicants, he says the forest land has been identified by the District Level Committee and the list has been filed with the Supreme Court in 1997. The claimants might be tilling hilly lands or un-surveyed ones, claiming as forest land. However, the matter is with the High Court, which however permitted to process the applications and await verdict.

Whatever be the reason unless the government beefs up its revenue and forest manpower and takes up the matter seriously, it will not be ready when the High Court may grant leave for any reason, feel experts.

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