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## Orissa govt, Posco hit by committee findings

24 July 2010

JAGATSinghpur, 24 JULY: The Posco steel plant project, considered to be the biggest FDI proposal in the country, and the Orissa government received a major setback today with a team of the National Forest Rights Act Committee finding serious procedural lapses, virtually suggesting a halt to land acquisition process in Dhinkia and disputing the state's claim of having followed the Forest Rights Act.

The team headed by Dr Ashish Kothari interacted with villagers and mediapersons at a public hearing in Dhinkia questioned the state government's claim that patti sabhas had been held and the due process had been followed.

Villagers alleged falsification of records and said doctored reports being sent by the government to the centre to obtain forest clearance for the project. No patti sabha was held, nor was any opinion sought charged the villagers.

Dr Kothari admitted that it had come to the notice of the team that FRA was not implemented and consent of forest dwellers had not been taken by convening patti sabhas. Villagers had established a right over the forest land by furnishing documents dating back to 1903. They need to be treated as traditional forest dwellers as they have been depending on the forest land, observed the team. The team observed that majority of the people were farmers, illiterate and had failed to apply for land documents or establish their rights as per the FRA. It conceded that the government had not take adequate steps to create awareness amongst the people. Dr Kothari stated that Union ministry of environment and forest had directed the committee to examine alleged violation of FRA, check whether forest dwellers had been identified and settled for the entire forest areas proposed for diversion and most importantly if such diversion proposal had been sent after seeking opinion by holding patti sabhas. As it appears, the government has not followed the entire process, remarked Dr Kothari. It is pertinent to note that the ministry has already given clearance for diversion of 1235.2 hectare forest land and also issued certain conditions to the state government to fulfill all aspects of the FRA. The team was informed by villagers that on 3rd February, this year, a patti sabha was held in Dhinkia panchayat and villagers had opposed the proposed diversion of forest land as it was a major source of livelihood for the villagers.

Interestingly, district administration had submitted reports claiming that patti sabhas had been held and nobody had objected or staked claim over the forest land. While countering this, Dr Kothari said the land acquisition should stop till the entire process of FRA is completed. He also requested the villagers to submit fresh applications within three months to stake claim to their rights under the FRA. sns

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