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RTI applicant gets no info on forest clearance to 16 projects

Satyasundar Barik

Gram sabha resolutions have been attached only in case of four projects

Forest approval was given to 20 projects between 2008 and 2010

The applicant seeks details of forest clearance to various projects

BHUBANESWAR: At a time when the fate of the steel plant project proposed by South Korea's Posco hangs in balance due to reported non-compliance of Forest Rights Act, several small projects in Orissa appear to have been sanctioned forest clearance without 'proper scrutiny.

According to the reply furnished by the regional office of the Ministry of Environment and Forests in response to an RTI application, at least 20 projects, both government and non-government, have been given the final forest approval between 2008 and 2010.

Forestland deviation in all these projects is to an extent of below 40 ha. In 16 of total 20 projects, the MoEF's regional office had no information on FRA compliance. In the remaining four approvals, gram sabha resolutions are claimed to be have been attached.

Final forest diversion approval, however, was granted to at least seven projects after July 30, 2009 when the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests had asked all State and Union Territories to ensure compliance of FRA in case of forest diversion.

The RTI reply says the final forest clearance has been approved to diversion of 19.370 ha of forestland in village Deojhar, Kulum, and Mahadebanas of Barbil Tehsil in Keonjhar district for an iron ore mining by Adhunik Metaliks Limited. Similar approval has been given to diversion of about 15.622 ha of forestland in Bonai under Sundargarh district iron ore mining by M.G. Mohanty.

Small projects ranging from mining to irrigation and road development to integrated steel complex have been given forest approval. But the regional office did not give a clear reply on FRA compliance. The column titled 'Compliance of Forest Rights Act' in information sheet is left blank in case of most of the projects.

"There is a need of initiation and completion of right settlement process under FRA. Mere gram sabha resolution does not suffice to it," says Shankar Pani, the RTI applicant and a lawyer who takes up environmental issues.

'Letter needed'

He has said a letter is needed from the State government certifying that the complete process for identification and settlement of rights under the FRA has been carried out for the entire forest area proposed for diversion, with a record of all consultations and meetings held.

“Four projects have submitted gram sabha resolutions and out of the four, only Jindal Steel and Power Limited has submitted the gram sabha resolutions for coal mining. In most cases, resolutions were passed much before 2008 when implementation of FRA started,” says Mr. Pani.

It may be recalled that Jairam Ramesh, Union Minister for Environment and Forests, has asked the State government to ensure compliance of FRA provisions before diversion of forestland for the Posco project.

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