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Implementation of Forest Rights Act: Deo writes to states

Taking note of the slow pace of implementation of various provisions of Forest Rights Act by state governments, Union Tribal Affairs Minister V Kishore Chandra Deo has written to the chief ministers flagging out issues related to its effective implementation.

In the letter dated April 4 to the chief ministers of all the states where Forest Rights Act (FRA) and Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) are applicable, Deo mentioned that FRA has to be "effectively implemented with a view to safeguard the rights as envisaged in this legislation upon the scheduled tribes and forest dwellers".

Tribal Affairs Ministry officials said the exercise has been done due to slow progress in implementation of the legislations.

Deo noted that in states like West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh, the state governments "used police and forest officials against people trying to protect their forests". He said people who tried to stop forest department officials in these states from felling trees are facing arrests, police cases and raids.

"If people are unable to stop their forests from being destroyed by forest department felling, how can they exercise their community rights in those forests? This has the effect of making community rights meaningless," he wrote.

On distorted interpretation of Joint Forest Management guidelines by some states, he said, "... Committees which are constituted by Forest Department by no stretch of imagination can be taken on part or equated with committees that are elected by Gram Sabhas under the FRA."

On ownership and control of the minor forest produces such as tendu leaves and bamboo, he said, "There is still a complete vacuum on the ground and as far no state government has fully modified its transit permit (for forest products) regime to match the amended rules.