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Villagers 'take over' forest tract - Fringe dwellers cite act for control of green patch

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Villagers put up a board in Kodal Basti area of the forest on Wednesday. Picture by Anirban Choudhuri

Alipurduar, Jan. 6: More than 500 forest villagers "took control" of a 2,985-hectare forest tract on the outskirts of Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary this afternoon by invoking their rights under a forest rights act.

The villagers brought with them boards and nailed them to tree trunks, announcing that no one would be allowed to conduct any activity in the Kodal Bon Basti area of the wildlife III forest division without the permission of a gram sabha they had formed. They invoked Section 3(i) and Section 5 of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

The act aims "to recognise and vest the forest rights and occupation in forest land in forest dwelling and Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have been residing in such forest for generations but whose rights could not be recorded".

In Bengal the act is yet to be implemented.

Section 3(i) of the act deals with the "right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource which they (forest dwellers) have been traditionally protecting and conserving for sustainable use".

Section 5 empowers the gram sabhas and village-level institutions to protect and preserve the wildlife and habitat and to regulate access to community forest resources.

The villagers celebrated today's "take-over" of the forest land, 25km from here, by bursting crackers, smearing each other with *gula* and cracking open coconuts. The residents of North and South Mendabari, Kurmai, Andu, Mantharam, Banin and Salkumarhat, assembled on the grounds of the Kodal Basti community hall at 1pm and trekked to the forest on foot. On the way, they had not been stopped by guards at the forest checkpost.

In November, the villagers had stopped the forest department from felling trees in the Bania V compartment of the Chilapata range of the same division. The forest officials had then sat with the villagers to sort out the issue, but no solution was reached and the felling has been suspended since then.

"According to the law, the forest department has to take the permission of the gram sabha to undertake any activity in the forest. In our state the law is yet to be enforced, so we decided to invoke our legal rights and took control of the forest. This is a historical moment for us," said Bandhan Minj, the president of the gram sabha.

He said traditionally the forefathers of the villagers had been the keepers of the forest. "From now on, we will regulate the entry of forest staff and tourists inside the forest. We will not allow guides from outside to escort tourists inside. Our local youths will act as guides as they know the forests better than anyone else," Minj said.

The divisional forest officer of wildlife III, Om Prakash, said the villagers had been adamant about not allowing felling of trees. "We had been assured by the villagers that they would not disturb the felling (but the promise was not kept). However, I have not received any report that they have taken over the forest and set up signboards. If they have done it, we will take legal action against them," he said.

The DFO added that according to the act, the villagers can form gram sabhas. "But under the rules, there should be a subdivisional-level committee with the subdivisional officer as its chairman and under its instructions, the members of the gram sabha will discharge their duties," he said.

In November, when the felling was stopped, forest officials had threatened legal action, but nothing has been done so far.

