



Assault on farmer: Foresters say land claim documents yet to reach them

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Vadodara : A day after a complaint was filed against 20 forest guards of Halol Range for trespassing into a farmer's land in Panchmahals, Deputy Conservator of Forests M D Jani on Thursday said they were yet to receive documents to verify his claims.

According to a complaint filed with the Rajgadhpur police station, Balwant Amrabhai Baria (32) of Devli Kuwa village was tilling his ancestral land in the forest when five forest guards assaulted him on July 9. Baria was not given the opportunity to produce the relevant documents ascertaining his right on the piece of land, according to the Forest Rights Act.

On his part, Jani said the police did not file any complaint against tribals for damaging government property. "It (forest) is a government property, which was damaged by the tribal farmers in the incident that happened in Devli Kuwa. Forest guards had gone there for a plantation drive and found that these people were cultivating on the forest land. When they asked them to stop it, a fight broke out," he said. Asked if the claims of Baria that he owned that piece of land were verified, Jani said they did not receive any documents in this regard.

Forest officials from the region say that till the time claims made under the Act are not verified, farmers cannot be asked to evacuate the land. But Jani said that most of the claims made by the farmers in the region were not supported by valid documents. "When claims were in favour of farmers, there were no issues. But now after many claims were rejected as a scientific method to ascertain cultivation rights through satellite imagery is in place, the villagers are being instigated by political forces."

Contrary to this, Village Forests Committee member Kamla Naik said that not just Baria, but his brother's claim for land was also forwarded with related documents. According to the receipts (0153265 and 0153264) accessed by The Indian Express, the land belongs to Balwant's father, Amrabhai Baria. "The claims were forwarded to the higher authorities from Gram Sabha on October 10, 2008. We have not got any reply till date from the taluka office, which means the process is still on," said Naik.

Panchmahals District Collector Milind Torwane said a local mamlatdar was asked to inspect if any claim was made by the complainant on the plot in Devli Kuwa. "As per the report of local officials, their claims have not been verified. If Balwant's land claim is still under process, then he can cultivate the land as per the Act," added Torwane.