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At last, fillip for tribal land rights

SANTOSH K. KIRO

Ranchi, July 30: Jharkhand has stepped up efforts to ensure that the over 8,000 tribals who have applied for land rights under a 2008 legislation of the Centre got their ownership papers by next month.

Concerned over the state's dismal record in implementing the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, that was meant to provide ownership rights to those who have been farming on forestland, state chief secretary A.K. Basu has asked all deputy commissioners to clear all pending applications and issue *pattas* (land ownership documents) for distribution on Independence Day.

Since January 1, 2008, when the act came into force, DCs have so far received 8,826 applications from villagers, against an estimated 90,000 beneficiaries in the state. So far, only 165 applications had been verified, *pattas* made and distributed. Basu now wants the remaining applications processed by August 15.

The Telegraph had reported on July 5 how the state had made little effort to publicise the provisions of the landmark legislation that would fulfil a long cherished ambition of tribals across the country.

At a review meeting conducted by cabinet secretary K.M. Chandrashekhar on June 29, he was aghast at Basu's admission that little effort had been made by deputy commissioners to spread the word about the act, that too in a state which prides itself for its tribal heritage.

"By the third week of June, only 4,900 applications had been received. However, after the cabinet secretary's review meeting, the DCs did expedite operations. But, still the performance was poor," said tribal welfare commissioner Nitin Madan Kulkarni said.

Hence, the chief secretary intervened and set an October deadline to complete the entire process.

The act was notified on January 1, 2008 though it had been passed by the Parliament on 18 December, 2006. However, the new law expected to set right the historic injustices meted out to tribals and others living in forests, was very poorly implemented here.

Several districts hadn't even bothered to set up forest rights committees that would identify beneficiaries and refer applications to further verifications.

"Implementation of the act is very slow. We have been asking officials to speed up the process, but they do not listen to us," complained Sanika Oraon of Latehar district.

Latehar DC Rahul Purwar admitted to the lapses. "We have been able to form forest rights committees in only 200 of 750 villages. Now, I am speeding things up," he promised .

Except for Dumka and Pakur where some efforts had been taken to implement the act, no other district has made any sincere effort.

According to Kulkarni, DCs had been told to hold meetings of gram sabhas in all villages on August 10. There, application forms would be verified and sent to the divisional-level committee for further verification. "The division and district level committees have been given 15 days to complete their work," he said. "The entire process has to be completed by October as per the chief secretary's order."

