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[Back](#)

[Other States](#) - [Orissa](#)

## **Tribals, dalits picket forest range office**

Staff Reporter

BERHAMPUR: Armed tribals and dalits picketed the forest range office at Sorada in Ganjam district on Tuesday.

Following the agitation, the forest officials were compelled to pay up compensation of Rs. 12,000 to them. The ranger of Sorada forest range, Kirankanta Sahu, handed over the amount to the agitators. The compensation was paid for the brinjal plantation which was destroyed by forest officials in June.

The leader of the agitators, Basudev Mallik, said the compensation amount collected from the forest officials would be distributed among the tribal and dalit peasants who faced loss.

Mahadev Mallik and Naina Mallik, who took part in the agitation, termed it a major victory for the tribals and dalits of the area. The agitators felt their unity over the issue would now be utilised to make the administration heed to the rightful demands of their area.

On June 16, a group of forest officials destroyed brinjal plantation of tribals and dalits on three acres of land near Pipalpanka village. They had uprooted over 15,000 brinjal plants claiming that the plantation had come up on forest land. On June 19, the affected tribals and dalits along with the other villagers of the area with their traditional rams in hand gheraoed the forest officer at Asurabandha. The forest officials involved in the act of destruction of the brinjal plantation had preferred to escape out of panic. The agitators had demanded compensation for the losses and transfer of erring forest officials.

They had alleged that as per the records most of the land that was used by tribals and dalits in remote areas for cultivation since generations were still marked as forest land, which was the cause of this recent problem. They had requested the forest officials not to intervene where peasants of remote areas were continuing agriculture for generations on the so-called forest land.

### **Promise not fulfilled**

On June 19, Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF), S.D. Martha had to reach Asurabandha to pacify the armed agitators. He had promised to concede to their demands by June 30. The tribals and dalits of the area preferred to take up another armed agitation on Tuesday when none of their demands were met by the promised date. They demanded compensation of Rs. 50,000, but got satisfied with Rs. 12,000.

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