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## Victimisation of forest workers by cops, forest dept

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LUCKNOW: In the first of its kind experiment, over 500 tribal, nomads and forest dwellers from 15 districts of the state assembled at Sahkarita Bhawan on Tuesday to assert their rights before the government representatives.

Demanding implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, in letter and spirit in the state, people openly aired their grievances narrating how the original inhabitants of the forest are being denied their rightful claim on the land, jungle and its produce by the forest department.

While officials of the social welfare department and minister of state Sanjay Garg heard, one by one the representatives from various corners of the state stood up and described how they were being victimised by the police and exploited by the forest mafia. They produced a list of over 3000 people who have been booked under various charges by the forest department, which still follows the colonial law of 1927.

Organised under the banner of the National Forum for Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW), the 'Jan Sunwai' saw the collective bargaining power of the forest dwellers, who earlier were restricted to their own areas. If Daulatia from Sonebhadra talked about the police atrocities, Talif Hussain, a Gujjar nomad from Saharanpur, lamented about denial of voting right to his community even after 60 years of independence.

Mithali Lal, from Chitrakoot, narrated how forest dwellers were being exploited by mafia in connivance with police. Ram Vilas from Chandauli and Ram Das from Gorakhpur raised the issue of delay in recognising scores of tribal villages by the state government as revenue villages.

They belonged to different tribes/castes but the common demand was the right to livelihood in the forest which have been their homes for centuries. They complained that they are not even allowed to collect grass to weave ropes and to build thatched houses, forget about right on the forest minor produce such as fruits, leaves and flowers.

"The forest department has full control over 'Tendu' leave collection used for making 'bidis'," said Kalawati. They said that many officials are themselves involved in poaching and illegal felling of trees, the inhabitants are being implicated on false charges. This has forced a section of youth to take up arms and join naxalites and maoist ultra groups.

Under the Forest Rights Act 2006, the inhabitants would get community control over forest land and its produce upto some extent. Maya government has formed the State Monitoring Committee as per the Act but there are many lapses at the ground level. Sanjay Garg, minister of state, who was present as chief minister's representative, told TOI that the Act would be implemented within a year.

Social welfare commissioner RK Mittal and principal secretary Prem Narain assured people that district magistrates of 21 districts with forest cover would be trained about the new Act and for its swift implementation, the state would be divided into four regions -- Terai, Kaimur, Shivalik and Bundelkhand.

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