

VISAKHAPATNAM, April 11, 2013

CMs urged to implement Forest Rights Act sincerely

Batting for the rights of the tribals who are dispossessed of their lands, Union Minister of Tribal Affairs V Kishore Chandra Deo has written a strongly worded letter to all the Chief Ministers asking them to recognise the rights of forest dwellers.

Calling for a concerted effort to ensure effective implementation of the Forest Rights Act, he has pointed out how the forest department officials zealously implement the provisions of the Wildlife Act and other laws of the land but are unwilling to recognise the rights of forest dwellers, which is against the very concept of inclusive growth.

Notwithstanding the revised and updates changes in the Forest Rights rules to make the recognition of community forest resource rights mandatory for all forest dweller settlements, all the state governments have been unable to take up this matter, he noted. Ironically, walls are being constructed, under MNREGS, around the forests denying tribals access to the forests and forest produce.

Citing the case of Dindori in Madhya Pradesh where the forest dwellers who were trying to protect the forest from being cleared by the Forest Department were facing arrests, police cases and raids, he emphasised the need to respect the power of gram sabha to protect its community rights. The governments are wrongly equating the joint forestry management groups (VSS) with the gram sabhas, he noted and urged the governments to take steps to rectify the issue.

Further, the governments need to demonstrate to officials, particularly from the Forest Department, that violations of the Forest Rights Act are punishable not only under the Act but also under the SC, ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

He lamented that the governments were unwilling to look at proposals for amicable settlement of rights of tribals and forest dwellers and cited the example of the State Government which was not considering alternatives in the case of the Polavaram project. He reminded the Chief Ministers that they were public servants and should have service to the poor and underprivileged persons top on their list of priorities and quoted Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Tryst with Destiny' speech.