

Jharkhand tribes people welcome forest rights bill

Tribes people of Jharkhand have welcomed the passage of a bill in the Lok Sabha that gives them rights over the land they have been living on for generations and also rights to forest resources that were their traditional means of livelihood.

Welcoming the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2006, state Welfare Minister Jobha Manjhi said: 'This will help the tribal people. They will now get the basic facilities that they were deprived of in the name of forest conservation.'

Jobha Manjhi is wife of Devendra Manjhi, one of the tribal leaders who had launched the movement of forest rights for tribal people.

'Devendra Manjhi's dream, for which he was fighting for a long time and died during the struggle, has come true.'

The bill is of special significance for Jharkhand, where the tribals started a movement in Saranda jungle way back in 1978 over forest rights. The tribes people were facing many problems when forests were demarcated as reserved areas. Their movement gained momentum in 1978 when sal trees were cut to make way for sagwan in the Saranda jungle.

The tribal movement over forest rights has witnessed many ups and down. Police resorted to firing on three occasions leading to the death of at least eight tribals. The bill will help 67 villages located in Saranda jungle and protect tribals from being targeted by forest officials.

'It is indeed a matter of great joy that tribals will get rights over forest land for which they were fighting for a long time. This will help 15 million tribals of the country who are living in 1.2 million hectares forest land,' said Bandi Oraon, a tribal scholar of Jharkhand.

'Now tribals will get rights over jal, jungle and jamin (water, forest and land) in the real sense,' said Ratan Tirkey, another tribal leader.

In Jharkhand, the tribal population constitutes 27 percent of the total 27 million population of the state. And around 29 percent of the land comes under forest coverage. Till now, the tribals were being implicated in criminal cases for taking forest wood for fuel.

The bill recognises and vests in Scheduled Tribes and traditional forest dwellers - who do not have land records as proof - the land they are living on and the right to sell 'minor forest produce'.

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