
India: Women take the lead in the fight for their rights over forest

The non-recognition of the territorial rights of indigenous and other traditional peoples has been identified as one of the major underlying causes of deforestation. In India, inequalities in land tenure stemming from deep-rooted social structures as well as from disruption brought about by colonialism have resulted in the takeover of forest land by the state. The typical process has been forest being lost to a plethora of commercial enterprises that have displaced forest communities who had defended the forests from colonialist assaults and resisted several commercial exploitations in the post colonial era.

The loss of local communities of their land rights is the great umbrella inside which another inequality develops: that of women especially marginalized from access to and control over land and other forest resources.

However, awareness is growing among women that they are also main actors of change.

On the wake of Women's day and in the memory of Bharati Roy Chowdhury - a woman activist who struggled hard for the inclusion of women rights in the Indian Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 - a press release (1) informs that around 100 women leaders from 7 states gathered this year at Dumka, in the state of Jharkhand, for a consultation on women rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006 (see WRM Bulletin N° 115 for information on FRA).

The venue is a relevant place indeed. Dumka has been a land of resistance since 18th century when local communities revolted against the British imperial policies to protect their traditional rights over land forest and territory. The bloodbath of adivasi of Jharkhand and Dumka resulted into saving their land and forest. Phulo and Jhano, two tribal women leaders of the revolt were killed by the British.

The women attending the meeting discussed the new legislation on forests rights and the reason why the State is not interested in implementing the Act. They also acknowledged the need that women rights on community forest resources were recognized. They felt that "it is very important that women should come in the forefront and take the lead in implementing the community rights across the country."

As a result of the meeting, an Action Committee on Women Forest Rights was formed "in order to accelerate the process of implementation of FRA particularly on women's control and management over community forest rights and minor forest produce."

The role of the Forest Department was also analyzed critically and there was a strong voice from the consultation that the FD should be replaced by the Community forest governance led by women across the 7.5 million hectare forest land.

Various important decisions have been taken in this consultation including raising awareness among women of the FRA provisions, filing community claims collectively by women in various places where people's organization is strong, and forming women cooperatives to manage and control the minor

forest produce and oust the Forest Department from the forest.

Another national level meeting will be held with more women leaders to widen the Action Committee.

The women attending the meeting felt they are the primary producers and protectors of the forest and as such they went for their rights.

Article based on information from (1) "Announcement of formation of 'Women Forest Rights Action Committee'", sent by Roma, NFFPFW (Kaimur) / Human Rights Law Centre,
email : romasnb@gmail.com, <http://jansangarsh.blogspot.com>