
India: Joint Parliamentary Committee Report - A Victory for the Struggling Forest People

The National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW) welcomes the report submitted by the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on the draft Forest Rights Bill and is hopeful that the Central Cabinet will approve it and will send it to the Parliament. NFFPFW further acknowledges the role played by the Chairman and members of the JPC, and contribution of all other social movements, struggle groups of forest people and movements in shaping this Bill through their suggestions, and submissions before the JPC.

The present United Progressive Alliance government led by the Congress Party introduced “The Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2005” in the Parliament on 13 December 2005 promising to correct the injustice meted out to the tribals in the past. Though most of the civil society groups and struggle groups and movements welcomed the move by the Government, it was pointed out by many that the draft Bill was limited in scope and restricted rights over forest land to the scheduled tribes only thereby depriving and violating the rights of non-scheduled tribe forest dwellers. The draft Bill was also criticised for undermining the role of the gram sabha [village council], bringing in a spectra of large scale eviction in having 1980 as the cut of date and keeping the option open for displacement of thousands from the National Park and Sanctuaries.

NFFPFW, fighting for rights of forest-dependent people since its inception in 1998 while welcoming the draft Bill, raised the demand for a more comprehensive legislation on forests, and was perhaps, one of the first groups in the country to publicly voice its concern on the limited scope of the Bill and demanded that non-scheduled tribe forest dwellers should be brought in to the ambit of the draft Bill.

The NFFPFW, along with its constituent groups and the North Eastern groups, also voiced the complex nature of the forests, its laws and relationship between the forest dependent and forests in the north eastern states that was not reflected in the draft. Since then, NFFPFW along with other struggle groups and movements, consistently echoed its concerns to policymakers, interacted with political parties and members of Parliament, and legislators. NFFPFW made a detailed presentation of its suggested amendments to the draft Bill before the Joint Parliamentary Committee.

This is certainly a moment of victory and reaffirms our faith on peoples’ power. However, we at NFFPFW are aware about the new challenges it throws open now. The biggest challenge will be to force both the Houses of the Parliament to pass the Bill, and in the time of implementation of the Act at the ground level as there is bound to be conflicts and enough preparations need to be done to deal with such situations.

NFFPFW believes that this is a part of the larger issue of livelihood and ownership of forest resources and there are much larger challenges hovering around implications of climate change, usurping of common property rights, destruction of natural forests in favour of plantations, and commodification of forest for global trade. Increased interventions by International Financial Institutions in environment sector in the country is taking away the space of communities and facilitating a process of commodifying these sectors.

There is a need to strengthen the collective struggle and defeat all those efforts which are in conflict with the lives and livelihoods and dignity of the forest dwelling communities. NFFPFW pledges to carry forward that struggle for the rights of forest communities.

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