The Alienated Are Rising

Faulty implementation of the Forest Rights Act, meant to give tribals land security, is stoking rebellion in Jharkhand, reports RAJESH SINHA from Ranchi

In Keradari block of Jharkhand’s Hazaribagh district, 1,300 acres of about 1,400 acres that have been given to a corporate house is forest land. Not one villager in the area has yet been given any “patta” or piece of land under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), says activist Dayamani Barla. In contrast, the government has rushed through Mols (memoranda of understanding) with corporate entities, awarding them nearly two lakh acres, much of it forest.

Many have not even heard of the FRA, even within 30 km radius of Ranchi. A few who have, are awaiting the administration’s response after filing their applications over a year ago. They are routinely and regularly called 30 km away for meetings that do not happen because one or the other government functionary is unable to attend.

The net effect of the government’s approach would, instead of securing the tribals and forest dwellers in their habitats, uproot and displace a large section of these people. This, without meaningful resettlement or rehabilitation, because that policy is still not in place. According to human rights activist Gladson Dungdung, the plans for land would displace approximately a million people.

Moreover, Operation Green Hunt is on in areas where the government has promised land to industrialists: not in Palamau-Latehar region, a Maoist stronghold, but in areas like Singhbhum.

This state of affairs has created wide-spread misgivings and spawned a spate of protests in the region. As a tribal at a meeting on the issue said, “The government is entitled to carry out this Green Hunt to eliminate the Maoists, but why is it trying to evict us from our land?”

Barely a day passes without a meeting or demonstration by those already displaced and others likely to be. Mithilesh Dangi, a campaigner against displacement and whose village is a victim of this developmental process, says those who oppose or protest are often branded Maoists and put behind bars.

Maoism is only the most extreme of the outcomes of government policy. There are several different organisations and banners under which people are getting organised.

As things stand, if there was unrest already due to years of neglect and exploitation, the government’s “developmental measures” seem set to add fuel to the fire. The widespread impression is that the compensation offered is paltry and does not reach everyone. The struggle against displacement has spread across the state. Slogans like “Looha nahi aayaj chahiye” (We want grains not iron), “Jal, jungle aur zamin kamara hat” (Land, forest and water belong to us) and “Jaan deng, zamn nahi deng” (We will sacrifice our lives but not land) are being raised.

Past experience weighs heavy on their minds and it has created deep distrust in the policies and promises of the govern-