It is the government and the corporates who are aware of the land and resources available; the poor and the deprived are ignorant of their rights

Rajesh Sinha / Jharkhand

AS THE government gears up to battle the Naxalites, aka Maoists, an unfortunate aspect is the complete diversion of attention from the more real problems affecting the people’s daily lives in Naxal-affected areas.

Naxalism is only one – and an extreme reaction to what is happening, and being done, to the people in these areas. Despite talk of development and the arguments about Naxalism being a hurdle to it, the actual situation on the ground gives the lie to government’s claims.

Take the example of Forest Rights Act, as "The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006" is commonly called. Touted as a shining example of government’s ‘aam aadmi’ oriented approach, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) aims to restore the rights of forest-dwelling communities to land and other resources which were denied to them under the continuing colonial forest laws which do not take into account the ways of life of tribal communities. It provides for recognition of individual family rights over land it traditionally used which was treated as "encroachment," as well as community rights over land and forest, such as for grazing and forest produce.

Over two years after the FRA came into force, a visit to Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh – two of the Naxal-affected states – showed that instead of getting the promised benefits, tribals and forest dwellers are, on the contrary, engaged in a desperate fight to save their home, hearth and source of livelihood. A large number of them face displacement as the land they have lived on for generations is in danger of being handed over to various industrial and mining companies.

The FRA, in effect, has remained on paper. It has conferred much too little to far too few: a maximum of about half an acre to less than one per cent of the families covered by the Act. As for village community rights over pastures and forest produce, these are yet to be taken into account.

So far, a total of two persons have "benefited" in Latehar district of Palamu division from the Forest Rights Act. These two adivasis from Durnag village were allotted between 0.2-0.4 acres of land – barely enough for sustenance. The actual, average size of land villagers have is between 1.5-4 acres.