

Forest and Humanity

Empowering the Tribals to Deal with the State

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A sustained efforts for a decade by SAKTI - a voluntary organisation - in successfully dealing with issues of law and administration of land, forest and human rights in the tribal areas of East Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh in India, became a mass movement when the organisation extended its activities into the tribal areas of West Godavari and Khammam districts, where the tribals asserted that unlawful encroachers on lands should be evicted, land records should be distributed to them in advance, the title deeds of non-tribals should be scrutinised in their presence and they should be allowed as party in the adjudication process.

Senior officials at Hyderabad agreed to their demands and instructed the district administration to distribute the land records and complete the process in a participatory manner. The High Court allowed the implementation of SAKTI along with them. But the Revenue Department, that is holding the information for centuries and deciding the rights vested with quasi-judicial powers, distributed a few papers only and declared that the verification process was over. The enraged tribals launched an agitation withstanding police harassment and criminal cases foisted by non-tribals. Village-by-village, the tribals approached the High Court to obtain the records. They are facing teething problems in understanding the land records and village maps that are put up first time for the public scrutiny in India. Under heavy police surveillance, SAKTI was unable to conduct the training uninterruptedly in the field. The left parties, who joined the movement at a later stage gave up the exercise of verification and land education, but the tribals, supported by SAKTI have acquired some knowledge and skill in finding faults in the records and titles of non-tribals. With the harvest on the lands distributed to them, they continue their learning and agitation. The hostile situation forced SAKTI to limit its activities; this enabled the tribals to directly handle the issues with police and revenue officials.

SAKTI has been motivating women to speak and plead for themselves in the courts against the husbands deserting them and participate in the village courts deciding the status of tribe and land restoration. But in 1995, the ITDA, East Godavari, floated a free legal aid committee and converted this process into a lawyer's business and distanced the tribal women from the participatory process.

The Twist in East Godavari

A twist to the entire situation was given by the strategy adopted by non-tribals in East Godavari, who obtained false certificates testifying that they were tribals. On this basis, they acquired and continued to hold land. During 1987 and right through 1990, the District Collector discovered this fraud and cancelled hundreds of such false certificates. However, the holders these false certificates approached the courts and obtained stay on this action. In some cases, the orders were also reversed. SAKTI discovered this situation in 1993 and started filing cases seeking judicial review of all these cases. It also

successfully pursued the cases of 20 powerful families where 5,000 acres of land were locked up. Those have been finally remanded to the District Collector for final disposal and are still pending. During the last three years, through the collection of information from the office of the Registrars located outside the scheduled area at Korumkonda and Pathipadu, SAKTI discovered that a number of transfers of land in the Scheduled had been registered against LTR. Immediately, SAKTI proceeded to file cases through the landless poor tribals to annul these transfers that covered an area of about 2,000 acres. These cases have been through the initial inquiry and are now before the authority for final disposal. Along with these cases, the cases of genuine tribals who were denied tribal certificates by the authorities are also being pursued.

In a democracy the final decision has to come either from the court or the government, SAKTI is able to move these forums successfully, but to make it function, the people's power is the most important criterion. For more than a decade, the government and NGOs are training the SHGs in managing their accounts and in PRA exercises. The Left parties lost the hope of getting into power, but continue with the same old strategy of mobilising people for political solutions of bargain for trickle-downs. The ruling parties don't want to disturb the status quo. In such a situation, involvement of local groups by building up their capacities to deal with the State is the only lasting solution and NGOs can provide support for their efforts within the space provided by the institutions upholding rule of law.

Tribal Partnership in Forest Management

With the experience gained from exhaustively dealing with the forest issues in East Godavari, with sustaining the tribals' agitation in West Godavari and Khammam districts - the SAKTI launched efforts to make the Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) Chenchus as partners in the wild life sanctuary management of Nagarjuna Sagar - Srisailem Tiger Reserve (NSTR). Involving the tribals as knowledgeable partners in the sanctuaries had not been attempted so far. Here SAKTI is trying to improve the skills of tribals in articulating their knowledge on the habitat, wildlife biodiversity and motivating them to push for a frame of co-management regimes in the sanctuary and in the economy of eco-and-pilgrim tourism.

Sustainable Agriculture

The traditional agriculture of tribals reached a climax in the Visakha district uplands in the terraced bunds growing cash crops - turmeric and pepper longum - to meet market needs, a variety of pulses, cereals, and oil seeds for ensuring food security. Instead of sustaining this agro system, the government seems deter-mined to disrupt it by introducing the plantation of coffee, silver oak and the package of green revolution, i.e. high-yielding seeds, chemical fertilisers, etc. SAKTI is conducting a study to highlight the potential of their agricultural systems and helping the tribals to earn more to meet the growing demands through proper management methods.