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FRA helps Dhenkanal tribals gain land rights



ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET -44

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Their ancestors were brought in as workers nearly a century ago by the former princely state



Munda and Santhal tribals brought to Dhenkanal over a century ago by the ruler to work in its forests, recently got forest rights. Photo: Adivasi Kranti Sangathan, Dhenkanal

Descendants of Munda and Santhal tribals, brought to Dhenkanal district in Odisha from Jharkhand nearly a century ago by the then princely state to work in its forests, have finally been given land rights under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. The Odisha government issued a notification on July 10, 2020, for the conversion of five forest villages where the tribals live, into revenue ones, as stipulated under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

These five villages are Gangamunda, Khajurinali, Chalujharan, Bhalutangar in Kankadahad tehsil and Karadabani in

Kamakhyanagar tehsil.

Apart from these five villages, other villages – Khuribhanga, Kalaspur Balisahi in Kankadahad tehsil and Kankilimuda sahi, Barabharania and Kenchudi in Parjang tehsil and Deulisahi in Kamakhyanagar tehsil – are also in the process of being converted to revenue villages.

The total population of these villages is around 3,000 people.

The FRA defines 'forest villages' as those settlements that have been established inside forests by the forest department of any state government for forestry operations or those that were converted into forest villages through the forest reservation process. They include forest settlement villages, fixed demand holdings, all types of taungya settlements and lands for cultivation and other uses permitted by the government. Taungya is a system of forest management in which land is cleared and planted initially to food crops.

The tribal community was brought in as forest workers by the king of the erstwhile princely state of Dhenkanal, Shankar Pratap Singh Dev Mahindra Bahadur Vidyasagar. The princely state used to pay taxes to the colonial British government. As the state was well endowed with forests, they were exploited to generate revenue. The main forest resources for the state were timber and elephants. The animals were captured from the forests of Dhenkanal and sent to princely states in western India, which had royalty, but no royal elephants.

“The king wanted cheap labour that could stay inside the forest too. Who’s better at staying in the forest than tribals? So, through matrimonial alliances, he got the Mundas and Santhals from Saraikela from the neighbouring Singhbhum district, now in Jharkhand, to move to Dhenkanal, starting in the 1930s,” AK Pany of Adivasi Kranti Sangathan, the organisation that was involved in the process of getting the conversions done, said.

Most of the 2,474 forest villages across the country aren’t surveyed. Some, however, like the ones in Dhenkanal have been included in the Census report as ‘unsurveyed forest villages’.

These villages, on account of being on forest land and unsurveyed, are deprived of all government facilities like water and electricity. Their inhabitants were never given formal rights over these lands.

The Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs had created the guidelines for the conversion of forest villages in 2013 and sent it to all the states. “The Odisha government created its own guidelines in 2015. However, these weren’t very clear and no conversion took place. Another set of guidelines were issued in 2017 after which, the work of conversion started,” Pany said.

Following the 2017 guidelines, the first forest village to be converted to revenue in the state was Badmul in Angul district. Prior to the conversion of these 12 villages, Badmul was the only forest village to be converted to revenue in the state. “The conversion of Badmul gave us motivation and we started creating

awareness among people and also talking to the district administration since 2018,” Pany said.

“After this, the first step was the creation of Forest Rights Committees in these villages, which was done in 2018 and a map was created of the village. Once this was done, it was approved by the Sub-Divisional Level Committee and the District Level Committee and the process of conversion started,” he added.

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