

# VISHNUIAS.COM

*WE PROVIDE A PATH FOR YOUR SUCCESS*

## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-311**



**(Welcome To Vishnu IAS online )**

(Research and Training Institute for the best civil services preparation in India)

<http://vishnuias.com/>

## How COVID-19 made forest rights battle tough for Tharu women



The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown spelled disaster for and paralysed several communities – the Tharu Adivasi community in eastern Uttar Pradesh’s Lakhimpur Khiri district near the India-Nepal border was among those affected hard.

The Adivasi villagers alleged the forest department prevented people from entering the forest during the lockdown. “They did not even allow us to collect firewood. In the past, we would mobilise our sangathan if any such thing

happened,” said Sahvaniya, a young woman from Surma village.

She alleged in Kajaria village, the forest department tried to “take over our land”. “The department has built a huge trench around the forest land. People cannot access forests. The move has created conditions for flooding as well,” she said.

The women of the community, however, have been at the forefront of battle for forest rights. Over the years, they have come together as a people’s front – the Tharu Adivasi Mahila Kisan Mazdoor Manch – to fight for legal recognition of forest rights.

But the lockdown added to the events that delayed the legal recognition of community forest rights, which shifts power from the forest department to the village assemblies / Gram Sabhas on decision making.

## **The Tharu community**

The Tharu community belongs to the Terai lowlands, amidst the Sivaliks or lower Himalayas. This is a region of alluvial floodplains, marshy grasslands and dense forests with plenty of wildlife. Tharu families survive on wheat, corn and other vegetables grown close to their homes.

The region was ruled by queens and kings in the 19th century. Some Tharu people were forced into bonded labour, while the majority lived off the forest. In 1864, the British, who were by then in control of much of northern and central India, established the forest department. The department reserved some forest land and considered itself the rightful owners of these lands. In 1927, the British made forest laws that gave supreme power to the department and its bureaucracy, thereby creating a violent home ground for Tharu Adivasi community. The community was made to work in oppressive conditions on British plantations.

In 1978, the struggles intensified when the government drew out plans to create a

protected area for tigers and other critically endangered wildlife species – the Dudhwa National Park. Tharu Adivasi forest villages in this area led the battle for their land and rights. The same year, at least 43 villages were relocated and granted revenue village status, meaning that they would be officially recognised by the state and be eligible for government services.

Three villages were left out: Surma and Golboji, along with the non-indigenous but forest dwelling communities in Devipur, were to fall into the buffer zone of this national park without any official status. The villagers were pressured by the forest department and threatened with displacement or eviction.

### **The battle**

When the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act [FRA], 2006 was enacted, these three villages (backed by the other 43) filed for revenue village status.

In 2008, they were granted revenue village status. Since then, the community has been working tirelessly for the legal recognition of their community forest rights.

Anita, a woman community leader, said: “Earlier, we used to be scared to enter the forest and collect forest produce. We were often harassed. But ever since we became aware of our rights, several families go to the forests together and take our bullock-carts along.” In 2012, in defiance of the forest department, more than a thousand villagers led by women went inside the forests along with bullock carts. While this was a path-breaking day, the women were allegedly attacked in retaliation. A woman leader, Nivada Rana, was reportedly seriously injured.

In 2019, a group of women going for fishing were allegedly attacked by the department. According to FRA, however, it was their right to access and use forest.

The women then organised themselves, surrounded the local police station and

demanded that the forest department be held responsible for the violence. As they moved their forest rights claims through new offices, they demanded written responses from authorities with clear reasoning.

Operating through a 'rational logic' and written language of bureaucracy, Tharu women activists are making it clear that they are caretakers of the land on which they live. The FRA acknowledges historical injustices to indigenous and forest dwelling communities, and also gives power to women in the community in different ways; a third of the Gram Sabha, for example, should comprise of women.

“The plants in forests around our villages have more diversity than those on forest lands managed by the forest department. We are positive about getting legal recognition of our community forest rights,” said Sahvaniya. She added that community was fighting for all 46 villages. “We know that on the other sides of the Dudhwa National Park, several Van

**Taungya** or plantation working communities have not yet been recognised so far. We know that we live in one ecosystem; there is no question of us marching ahead without any of them,” Sahvaniya said.

This Adivasi women-led struggle, though prolonged, has impacted the community positively in many ways. Many youth would migrate to Himachal Pradesh or Maharashtra for work earlier; over the last few years, the number of people doing so has marginally decreased. Women have assumed leadership in Gram Sabhas, forest care and in interactions with officials. Therefore, despite the perils of the lockdown, the future does not look as bleak.