

CHANGING PLACES: TRIBAL WOMEN PROTECT THE FOREST WHILE THE FOREST DEPARTMENT PROTECTS THE [ILLEGAL] STATUS QUO

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In this critical era of global warming, those who preserve the forest and prevent illegal logging and deforestation should be hailed as heroes. But in Dharamgada reserve forest of Boipariguda in Koraput district, the opposite is true.

On 17 March 2010 some of the women from Minarbali Village observed the illegal cutting of trees nearby and sent a message to all the women federation members of the eight villages of Doraguda GP to alert them and organize a response. The next day a large group of federation members gathered on the road to stop the transportation of the timber. Around 7 p.m. a full truckload of timber came and they blocked the truck and sent word to the Forest Range Office of Boipariguda. Nobody came on that evening so they guarded the truck and driver throughout the night.

On the next day, 19 March, DFO, ACF of Jeypore and a range officer and police officer came at 11 a.m. to the village. The women were confident that action would be taken against the smugglers and the officers took the truck to the range office as well as transported another of the six or seven loads of cut timber remaining by forest department vehicle. Villagers rejoiced that they were able to protect their forest and looked forward to severe consequences for the thieves.

They were sorely disappointed. On the next day, the forest guard along with the smugglers and some thugs came to the village and threatened the women that if they persisted in pressing the issue against the thieves that they would "see" them on market day at Boipariguda. The rest of the village joined in a heated protest and the visitors withdrew but on the following day some petty politicians came to the village and offered 50,000 Rs to the women to keep them quiet. But, heroes that they are, the women refused to take the bribe and demanded action against the smugglers and the forest officials involved.

On 22 March, a group of women traveled to the district headquarters to raise the issue with the Collector and the Forest Conservator. The conservator was absent on that day but they submitted an application in the office and also informed the Collector of their application. On the 26th there was a Jana Sampark health camp in the Boipariguda area and again the women submitted a memorandum to the District Collector present there.

Still, after 27 days there is neither action against the smugglers nor against the forest officials involved. Instead, the sarpanch, other officials and thugs are threatening the women that they will file complaints against them if they enter the forest, there are still many truckloads of timber in the forest and the truck parked in the forest range office still there. Nevertheless, the tribal women have not buckled to the pressure and continue to press for justice.

The sad truth is that often tribals are blamed for destruction of the forest when they cut modest amounts of wood for agricultural purposes or housing materials, and are arrested, jailed, or harassed by the Forest Department. But when the Forest Department protects the interests of illegal loggers who are helping themselves to truckloads of timber, they appear to be immune to prosecution and instead take part in intimidation and coercion.

In this age of global warming there are many schemes that have been put forth under the guise of reforestation through plantations of commercial timber. The government of Orissa has taken out a huge loan from Japan Bank for this purpose and in Koraput, the Forest Department has spent crores of rupees for plantations under different programmes and schemes with the objective to increase forest cover in the state. But increased forest cover, though badly needed to control erosion, reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses and provide non-timber forest products will not be achieved if Forest Department Officials are not held accountable to serve as protectors rather than exploiters.

When the protector of the forest turns to greed and destruction, there is no hope for the forest or the people who enjoy the benefits of a cool and green world. And that amounts to every citizen of India.