

Odisha tribal women start info centre to fight for individual, community forest rights, pending for several years

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In a unique move, women of Kaptapally village in Nuagaon block of Nayagarh district in Odisha have launched a new Forest Rights Information Centre, second in the region, as an important resource hub in their long drawn out battle for community and individual forest rights, recognized under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

Operating under the canopy of the forest that they have been managing, conserving and regenerating for the past seven years, the Centre will be run by women, who have spearheaded innovative community forest management practices in the area, conserving and protecting large areas of the dense forest. As a community forest management group, women of the area have a long history of protecting and managing the forest. In the 1980s, they witnessed degradation of forests under the Joint Forest Management, which forced several villages in the area to wrestle back the control of forests from the Forest Department to set up their own community forest management committees.

They harnessed their intimate traditional knowledge of the forest and plant species to increase the forest cover, brought streams back to life, and even rebuilt the natural habitat of elephants. Women particularly stood guard over the forests at night with a stick in hand against timber thieves. For them, recognition of their forest rights does not just mean conserving the forest, but is also an insurance plan for the forest against degradation. They formally claimed their rights in 2015, but are yet to gain the recognition.



Just like in Nuagaon block, in the neighbouring Ranpur block, too, there are 24 villages where the same protection process has taken shape. For nearly 40 years, they have claimed community forest resource rights. Their struggle intensified over the last two-and-a-half years, but they are still striving to get recognition. At the inauguration of the Forest Information Centre, those present at the function -- in which women from Kaptapally village and from neighbouring 20 villages

participated -- included Nayagadh district collector Arindam Dakua, member of Parliament Pratyusha Rajeswari Singh, zilla parishad members, the sarpanch and samiti members.

Ranpur women used this opportunity to remind the district collector and others present of their duty to approve their claims under the Forest Rights Act. Empowered by 30 years of community forest management, women said, they would use the democratic powers of the Gram Sabha, and even resort to the right to self-declaration of community forest resources under FRA if the forest bureaucracy does not cooperate. Already, they said, they have their own repository of Gram Sabha resolutions, claim forms, books on FRA and Rules and other resources to support them in their struggle. The district collector, on his part, assured the women that the community forest rights would be recognized within a month, and that all recognized individual forest rights title would be demarcated. Pratyusha Rajeswari Singh too conveyed her support to these women groups in their future initiatives. Meanwhile, women members are now waiting for their long pending community forest rights to be recognized. They plan to use the FRA information centre for their struggle. First published by *Counterview*