

Putting her own troubled past behind, she strives to make the future of her community bright - Sarada Lahangir

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Anna Kujur, 47, is a popular figure among the tribals of Sundergarh district in Odisha. She not only encourages them to stand up for their rights and entitlements but also gives them reasons to hope for a better tomorrow.

Clad in a plain sari and ordinary rubber slippers with a cloth bag slung over her shoulder, this simple tribal woman from Sunajor village has spent nearly a decade spreading awareness among the forest-dwelling communities in the region about their legitimate claims on forest resources.



*Anna has helped about 2,000 tribal people obtain their rightful 'patta' in Sundergarh, Odisha (Photo: Sarada Lahangir/WFS)*

It's routine for Anna-di, as she is known in these parts, to traverse around 25 kilometres on her cycle everyday talking to people about land rights and facilitating them in securing their own 'patta' for cultivation.

In Sundergarh, the scheduled tribes make up 50 per cent of the total population of the district. For sustenance and survival, these poor, largely illiterate folks either turn to the forest or resort to some minor agricultural activity.

Since the verdant greens have always provided them with forest produce, water, grazing grounds and habitat for shifting cultivation for generations, they have not only been staying in and around forest lands but have also guarded and conserved them with a lot of love and care.

However, this integral and close-knit relationship between the tribals and the forests has rarely been recognised by the authorities. In fact, under the laws that govern forests in India - the Indian Forest Act, 1927 and the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 - the rights of people living in or depending on the area declared as a forest are to be “settled” by a forest settlement officer, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation as well as eviction.

Although the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 does restore the rights of the forest dwelling communities – and provisions for making conservation more effective and transparent – the reality on the ground has not changed much.

Anna is no stranger to tough times. As a child, she witnessed her landless parents work day-and-night to make ends meet. When she got married, her problems only seemed to multiply. Nursing a burning desire to change her own fate and that of others like her, she had always wanted to make a difference.

She elaborates, “Even as a child I had wanted to serve my people and fight the injustice I saw around me. In 2000, I set up the Athkosa Adivasi Sangathan and have been agitating for their rights under this banner. In 2003, I connected with the Campaign for Survival and Dignity (CSD), a national platform of tribal and forest dwellers' organisations, and participated in a three-day training workshop on the rights of the forest dwellers.

“This gave my own activism a sharper focus. Then when the Forest Rights Act 2006 came in place, it became slightly easy to achieve my goal. Being at the helm of organising awareness programmes among the forest dwellers of around 148 villages, I mobilised them to join forces and demand their land rights.”

It was indeed a challenging task to pursue files in various offices for the land ‘patta’ but with the help of CSD activists, she was able to move forward. “Today, it gives me immense pleasure when I see the people who got their land ‘patta’ and are cultivating their land,” she adds.

So far, Anna has helped about 2,000 tribal people obtain their rightful ‘patta’. Sugal Ekka, 44, from Gothbandha village, is one of them. Says this mother of three, “We are small farmers who are dependent on the forest. Unless we cultivate land, we have nothing to eat.

“Earlier, it was routine for our landlords, who are generally non-tribal, to threaten us and even destroy our crops. However, with the support and guidance of Anna-di, we applied for the ‘patta’ and got it in 2008. After obtaining the right over our land our life took a turn for the better. Nowadays, we grow vegetables and seasonal crop.”

Over the years, Anna has shown tremendous strength and fortitude in reaching out to those in trouble. She figured out early on that corruption by the forest officials was going to be one of the major obstacles in her way. In order to get bribe, the petty officials did not hesitate to perpetrate atrocities upon the forest dwellers.

Anna wanted to put a stop to all this. She got her chance in 2011, when she exposed the corruption and forced a Ranger to be suspended for taking bribe. Banmali Bek, a tribal from Bhalubahal village of Tangarpalli block, had been asked by the Ranger of Sanpatra Palli Forest Range to pay Rs 2,000 to get an approval on the joint verification report for his land 'patta'.

It was a demand that Banmali couldn't have fulfilled in any way. So he met with Anna to find a solution. She immediately asked him to inform the Vigilance officials. Bek followed her advice, as a result of which the Ranger was caught red-handed.

Today, thousands of tribal forest dwellers in Sundergarh believe that the implementation of the Forest Rights Act 2006 has become a great success only due to the selfless and dedicated work of Anna. They now produce different kinds of seasonal crops and live without fear.

"There is no doubt that the Forest Rights Act 2006 gives us back our customary and democratic rights over the forests. But equally true is the fact that we would not have been able to speak up had Anna-di not guided us, pushed our cases and stood by us. We wish there were more people like Anna Kujur in every village," sign off Lundu and Sadhu Tikka of Sunajor village. - Women's Feature Service

See more at: <http://www.theweekendleader.com/Heroism/2066/right-woman.html#sthash.0071Zg1z.dpuf>