It was March 27th, 2012. There was a huge gathering at the Gram Panchayat office of Turiguda to receive the titles over the forest land on which they are cultivating for generations. The smiling faces were very prominent on that day. Why not, for on that day their rights got recognised. The process was not easy for them. They have earned it after a long and continuous struggle of two years.

Madhapadar, Madu, Lundurubadi, Dhelapada, Panchubadi are the villages in Turiguda Gram Panchayat at Chandrapur Block in Rayagada district. These villages are tribal dominated and having dependency on forest and forest land. They have traditionally occupied the forest land in the nearby forest area for their bonafide livelihood. Like in other areas, villagers of these villages also have the usual experience with Forest Department. There are enough examples of paying bribe, heated discussions with the staff of Forest Department.

When the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 was enacted, it raised hope among the forest dwelling communities. FRA got implemented in January, 2008. Yet it took almost two years for these villagers to know about the scope of this Act.

Regional Centre for Development Cooperation (RCDC) with the support of Misereor – KZE is engaged in this area for developing a model of Bio-Resource Governance. Considering FRA as a tool for achieving this, RCDC has built awareness among the villagers on FRA. RCDC has also provided handholding support for filling up and submitting the claims.

On 20th March, 2010 all the villagers submitted their claims to the Sub Divisional Level Committee (SDLC). It took seven months for the SDLC, Gunupur to process them and on 22nd Oct, 2010 these were approved at SDLC level and forwarded to the District Level Committee (DLC) for reorganisation. However the process was held up at that level. To build pressure on the DLC the villagers visited the office of the Collector and District Magistrate, who is also the Chairman of DLC. They had handed over memorandums several times to these authorities. RCDC also helped the community approach the authorities by organising interfaces.

Finally the persistent struggle yielded result. RCDC organised a meeting on 27th March, 2012 to celebrate the success. Mr Jagadish Panda, the Welfare Extension Officer, Mr. Hota, the Revenue Inspector, Mr. Anirudha Mallick, the Panchayat Extension Officer joined the meeting along with Mrs Sunita Munidika, the Sarpanch. All the Sarpanch contestants, Mr. Sanyasi Prasakaka, Mr. Rajmani Gagaranga, Mr. Ramachandra Kansamaka and Mr Harish Chandra Mundika also attended the meeting. The objectives of forest rights were discussed and the titles were distributed.

“Now we feel that we are the owner of our land and this has increased our ability to take our own decisions on our land,” says Dhaneswara Prasakaka of Madhapadar village.
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