



December 5 and 12—the three days the felling operation was conducted. The Forward Bloc, part of the ruling Left Front alliance in West Bengal, has announced it will fight the local panchayat polls alone in 2008. Bhunia, however, denies the allegations. "I started the campaign to return villagers their ancestral lands at Hetasole, 7 km from Khorikashuli, two years ago," he says, pulling out news clippings of 2005 to prove his point.

Bhunias says that in the past four years the state forest department has taken over large tracts of land under the pretext of social forestry projects. Official records verify this claim. According to a 2002 MOEF report, the total area under encroachment in West Bengal was 16,940 hectares (ha), while state forests department records for 2005-06 show encroachment at 13,300 ha. Forest rights activists say social forestry has failed in West Bengal and land should be returned to the villagers.

"If we didn't intervene, this place would turn into another Amlasole (also in West Midnapore) where villagers died of starvation in 2004," Bhunia says.

Forward Bloc is planning similar reclamation drives in the rest of the state to force the centre into implementing the Forest Rights Act by early 2008. "If the forest department files charges against the villagers, we will file a countercharge asking how they could take over land being used by tribals before first settling their rights," says Bhunia.

Given the union government's delay in implementing the Forest Rights Act, incidents such as the one in Khorikashuli are bound to happen, says Madhu Sarin, a Chandigarh-based policy analyst on natural resource management. She adds that the Lodha tribespeople are the most marginalized lot in West Bengal and according to the Forest Rights Act, they have a right to the land if they have been cultivating it before 1980.