

Death blow to Adivasis and forest Dwellers Disguised as Conservation!

Very recently Prime Minister Modi released the latest tiger population numbers and stated that the tigers in tiger reserves are doing well. This information has cheered the 'experts' who have been demanding wild-life conservation and conservation of India's biodiversity. But these 'experts' and 'activists' refuse to take the human cost and tragedy involved in this conservation into consideration.

In our country there are 655 designated areas as sanctuaries and national parks covering 160, 276 sq.km. In all these areas much before these 'protected areas' were created, people originally lived in these forests or depended on them directly for their livelihoods. These people were evicted or declared "encroachers" on their own lands and their rights to draw resources from these forests were summarily declared illegal. These people were 'let die' by the state. The state has created so-called 'pristine forests' to save the tigers at the cost of the existence of tribals and forest-dwelling communities.

The creation of artificial pristine forests and parks across the world has led to displacement and alienation of 20-50 million people according to a research.

In our country, many tribal communities have been displaced and their livelihoods destroyed by declaring their habitat as 'protected areas' and 'Tiger reserves'. Soligas is such a tribal community that has been pushed to 'let die' by the state. The living Soligas are now forced to live as second-class citizens disallowing them to enjoy the rights that other citizens in the country take for granted.

The natural abode and habitat of these Soligas is the forest in Kollegal teshsil of Chamarajnar of Karnataka state. The ancestors of the present day Soligas once inhabited these lands freely. They did a little shifting agriculture and 'cultivated the forest' with their practice of controlled fires. (a form of "PODU" agriculture practiced by tribals in different forest areas throughout our country). They hunted small animals for meat and collected and sold goose-berries, honey, lichen and other such forest produce.

But in 1974 the government identified as rich with tigers, elephants and Indian bison, and declared the area a wild-life sanctuary called Biligiri Ranganatha Swami Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve. They were ordered to stop their small game hunting, shifting agriculture and using fire to cultivate the forests. Their access to forest produce was restricted. Several were removed to the periphery or the main roads with their livelihood and freedom restricted. Their homesteads became their enclosures. Now they are reduced into lesser citizens to protect their own forest from them.

In the enclosures basic services and facilities like water, electricity, health care, child care, roads – all require special permissions and depend on the authorities' discretion. They have to use 'kucha' roads to leave their enclosures to go elsewhere. But they are expected to return before 6 p.m.

The authorities push them at every moment to leave their enclosures for good. The forest department officials force them to agree to leave their enclosures. In the past the Jenu kurbas to the nearby Bandipur Tiger reserve were forced to relocate from their forests and were given tin sheds on uncultivable lands. This made them to become labour and servants destroying their kind of forest life style. Keeping this pathetic experience of Jenukurbas, Soligas are not willing to leave their enclosure at any cost. They are demanding the authorities to be treated as equal citizens. They are demanding for roads, electricity, a School and hospital as well as community forest rights which existed to them till the Forest Rights Act came in 2006.

On the same day when the P.M. has released the report on "the latest tiger population numbers" another report called "Management Effectiveness Evaluation of Tiger Reserves in India". In this

report it is claimed that “the demands of Soligas is a constant head ache for the authorities of the reserve” and it terms the hope of the Soligas that their demands will cause them economic and physical freedoms is a “major and permanent threat”. With such an anti-tribal attitude the government and some wild life groups want them out of the enclosures where they live as lesser citizens. In the name of conserving India’s bio-diversity millions of India’s poorest are being evicted from their natural abode.

But these very authorities and conservation groups are not objecting mining and other infrastructure projects being conducted in forest areas on a gaint scale by commercial interests. It is an universally accepted fact that the presence of 400 known indigenious groups have prevented commercial interests from over running the forest lands of Amazon forest in Brazil. But in our country the government itself has given permission to commercial interests (private companies) to cut-down forests. Data for the last two decades shows more than 90 percent of proposals to cut down forests received governmental clearance. On the other hand the National Mineral development Corporation (NMDC) is made a go-between organisation to facilitate mining legally in the forests in a large scale by the multinational corporations. At the same time it grudges to permit the tribal and forest dwelling communities on their own lands in which they have been living for generations. Such has been the hypocrisy of the policy of conservation of forests, biodiversity and wild life adopted by successive governments.

Now the so called wild-life groups have been pleading and arguing with all their might in the Supreme Court to evict tribal and forest dwellers in the name of conserving forests and to revoke the temporary stay granted on the eviction of 1.8 million tribal and forest dwelling families.

This barbarity on the part of the so-called civilized sections of the society against the adivasi people is highly condemnable. The natural rights of the tribal and forest dwelling communities shall be protected at all costs. It shall be the demand of all democratic forces of our country.
