

# Protest Voices Reverberated against the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act-2023 in Visakhapatnam

Under the auspices of All India Khet Mazdoor Kisan Sabha (AIKMKS), the “All India Adivasi Convention” was successfully held in Visakhapatnam on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of September. The convention demanded the repeal of the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act-2023, which poses a serious threat to the existence, security of life, and cultural life of Adivasis.



The convention hall, named after **Dr. B.D. Sharma**, is located at Subbalakshmi Kalyana Mandapam and was filled with thousands of Adivasi people from several states, democrats, environmentalists, leaders of various people’s organizations and activists by 10 AM on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September. The program commenced with several cultural art performances by artists at 10:30 AM, greatly enjoyed by the audience. The convention began as Adivasi girls sang the tribal legend “Ramji Gondu’s” song (Burra Katha).

## **Inaugural Meeting:**

Com. Prasad from Telangana, Com. Illa Rami Reddy from Andhra Pradesh, Com. Shambu Mahato from Jharkhand, acted as presidium of the first day of convention. Sri Prafulla Samanta Roy, well known environmentalist and democrat, gave the inaugural speech. He said **“the implementation of the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act will lead to the destruction of the forests. The survival of the tribals, who are co-dependant on the forests, will be endangered. The intentions of the central government behind this Law are nothing but to remove tribals from their home and handover the natural wealth of the forests to the multi-national companies (MNCs). This Act was implemented in Odisha**

even before it became a law and the tribals who questioned, protested against this implementation for their livelihood and existence are being kept in jails under UAPA Act. People who help them in their legal issues, like me, are restricted too. This country is under the rule of leadership akin to fascism. If this Act comes to implementation, the forests will be endangered, the environment, ecosystem will be endangered. Not only the tribals but the whole country will have to face serious threat if this gets to implementation. People must unite resist this Act and fight till it's repealed."

Com. Shanti Munda, an activist in 1967's Naxalbari movement, says, **"The 75 years of independence could not make the lives of tribals, peasants, and farm laborers any better but worse. The leaders are not interested in making this condition better and are not ready to take responsibility either. Women workers and the tribals of Naxalbari tea plantations have a bit of relief from the exploitation only because they fight actively against the problems they are facing. The current exploitative system is only helpful for the bourgeoisie and multinational companies to exploit more and more, but it does not care about the well-being of the common people and tribes. There is no other way left for us than to fight in order to secure our justful natural resources."** Comrade Shanti Munda actively participated in the Naxalbari movement, and she did not let go of that spirit in her, even today, in her 80s. Her speech was moving and inspiring.

Com. Gummadi Narasaiah, a former member of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh's Ilandu legislative assembly and a leader of tribal movement, said that **tribal people have been betrayed by the both pre- and post-independence rulers, and that the present Forest Conservation Act, passed by the Central government, is equivalent to a death sentence. Thus, the Act must be repealed and these rulers throned from power.** Com. Keshava Rao, the Vice-President of the Raithu Sangham (AP), stated that **"Adivasis have a great History of Revolutions. They have always actively taken part in peasant struggles against oppression; for land, food and freedom and in struggles against the colonial rule."** He stressed that peasants, farm labourers, Adivasis and workers should fight with collective spirit in this situation. The General Secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Raithu Sangham, Com. K.V.V Prasad Rao, said that **the Central Government has always implemented many brutal laws before this, undemocratically. The peasants and various peasant organizations came under the auspices of Samyukth Kisan Morcha in the fight against the three farm laws, and they fought actively, which ultimately made the government and Modi, to step down on their policy though it was a part of an election stunt. Similarly, we must fight until this brutal law is repealed.**

The General Secretary of the Vizag Steel Plant Recognized Union, Com. Adinarayana, expressed his delight at the success of the convention as thousands of Adivasis attended from various states, despite all the hurdles. He expressed solidarity on behalf of the working class to the Adivasis fighting against the Forest Conservation Amendment Act. **Visakha Steel Plant created employment for thousands of people, which has enabled their children to have a better education and life. This shows that proper employment could bring better changes to the lives of people, but the government chose to take all the development back by making the Steel Plant a private industry, which is a despicable act. He appealed to support the fight against the privatization of the Steel Plant.**

All India Secretary of AIARIA, Com. Ajay Kumar, stated that **tribal people have some rights given by the Constitution, but they are not being implemented. The current Forest**

**Conservation Amendment Act will only curb the rights of Adivasis, and we all must condemn it.**

The AIKMKS leader, representing Jharkhand, Com. Shambu Mahato, said that **“the process of surrendering the mines and valuable mineral resources to the MNCs has been an ongoing act for ages. The rulers are not bothered even a bit, even though many protests emerged against these undemocratic policies. We must understand that the problems faced by the tribal people have their roots in this system, whether before or after the transfer of power. We must formulate our tasks according to this understanding in order to work effectively. Even though many tribal leaders, environmentalists, and Democrats are trying to make the present rulers understand the new FCA amendment as a great threat to whole country, they have turned a blind eye to it. We have no option other than a strong willed struggle.”**

Presidium of the Inaugural Meeting, Com. Prasad, AIKMKS leader and Telangana Raithu Coolie Movement leader, **condemned the Telangana ruler’s unjust distribution of “Podu Land Pattas”**. He said that the government has completely turned deaf to the insights and suggestions of Democrats and has been implementing every cruel law brought forward by the Central Government. This will only make it clear to us that all of these leaders are pieces of the same fabric when it comes to exploiting people. He said that everyone must condemn and fight against the implications of this law. The inaugural session was closed by the Presidium thanking the audience for attending the meeting.

**Public Meeting:** As the police denied the permission for Rally thousands of Adivasis, Peasants and farm laborers steadily reached the public meeting maidan in small groups and after reaching the maidan held the red flags high. They separated into two teams and performed two different traditional tribal dance forms and captivated the venue with their dance and songs. Com Varma, State Joint Secretary of RCS (AP) presided over the public meeting held in front of the local Women’s Degree College in Visakhapatnam. He strongly condemned the Govt’s denial of permission to the Adivasis rally. All India President of AIFTU (New), Com G. Vijayakumar in his address said that, amendment to the Forest Conservation Act at the time of general elections is despicable which puts the survival of the Adivasis in question. He said Adivasis, workers and peasants have to collectively fight against the anti-people policies of the ruling class. Com Vetla Vijaya, Kondamodalu Sarpanch in her address demanded a scientific and comprehensive rehabilitation for Adivasis displaced due to the Polavaram project. Com Kunjum Ramarao, Leader of Agency Girijana Sangham and Com. Uyaka Mutyalu, District Leader of Parvathipuram Manyam in their speeches said though President Droupadi Murmu is a Adivasi woman she does nothing to the Adivasis. She did not even utter a word about the brutal attacks on the Manipur Kuki Adivasis nor about the Kuki women paraded naked. This reiterates the fact that she is not a representative of Adivasis or Adivasi women. Com. Shanti Munda, Veteran leader of the Adivasi Movement said the rulers and the bureaucracy talk high about Constitution and questioned what is Constitution doing when laws are being made against the People. Adivasi leader Com Gummadi Narsaiah said the fascist rulers should be dethroned. Com S.Jhansi, RCS (AP) State President and AIKMKS Co-Convenor in her speech exposed the exploitative policies of the ruling class. She said forests in Visakhapatnam are being destroyed, Ports are being privatised and Visakhapatnam steel plant is put out for sale. The hills are deforested and put for sale and the wealth of the people is being exploited. She called upon the people to

be prepared for an organised struggle to safeguard our natural resources and for the repeal of the Forest Conservation Amendment Act which is against the Adivasis and the people. In this meeting, Com J.Kishore babu, State Secretary, AIFTU (New)

and Com Ganesh Panda, State Vice President, AIFTU (New) addressed the gathering.

**Delegates Meeting:** The delegates meeting started on the second day of the Convention i.e., on 13<sup>th</sup> Sep, at 10.00 am. 500 delegates from ten states participated in the meeting. Com M.S.Nagaraju, RCS (AP) State Secretary, Com Paidamma, Leader of Chashimulia Adivasi Sangham, Odisha and Com. Anand, State President of Telangana Rythu Coolie Sangham presided the session. The delegates observed paid tributes to Martyrs.

Sri Vadde Shobanadeeswara Rao, Ex Agriculture Minister and Convenor of Andhra Pradesh Farmers Associations Coordination Committee inaugurated the delegates meeting and, in his speech, said that **the BJP Govt at the Centre was bringing policies in the interest of Corporates. Similar to the three black farm laws and the Electricity bill 2020, the Forest Conservation Amendment Act is dangerous for the Adivasis, environment and the entire population. In Jharkhand, ten thousand Adivasis were charged with UAPA when they opposed the attempt to handover several acres of land to Adani owned company for Mining. However, they did not give up but resisted with determination. He urged to continue struggle till the Forest Conservation Amendment Act is repealed which is against the Adivasis and urged to put pressure on Government to repeal the Act irrespective of which ever government comes to power in upcoming elections.**

Advocate Sri Palla Trinatha Rao **who did an extensive study on the forest laws said that the life and culture of Adivasis are dependent on forests and the amendment to the Forest Law is going to pose a threat to the Adivasis and the several laws made in the past have given some rights to the Adivasis and instead of implementing them, the present forest conservation amendment act is enacted in such a way that it would curb all their rights. He further said in line with the colonial rulers, the rulers are trying to make forests as an income source and handover them to the corporates with numerous exemptions.**

Uttarandhra Teacher MLC Sri Pakalapati Raghu Varma **extended his solidarity with the Adivasis who are agitating for the repeal of the FCA.** Com S.Jhansi, State President of RCS (AP) detailed the back ground of the FCA Act brought in by the Central Govt, the struggles and the tasks and programmes taken against the government policies. **Ghasiram Soren**, General Secretary, Tribal Intellectual Forum and Com Srikant Mohanty, leader of AIKMKS, Odisha addressed the meeting. Com. Ashok Baitha, leader of AIKMKS, Bihar explained the programs going on in Bihar against the anti-people policies of rulers. He emphatically said to wage struggle against the FCA Act. Sri Madhava Reddy, leader of Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha opposed the Act and said that the amendment is brought by the rulers against the farmers. He said the farmers in Karnataka are slapped with 10 Lakhs including interest for a loan of one lakh. Thus, 54 lakh farmers are being harassed by the banks showing them as defaulters of crores of rupees. He explained about the agitation that went on for 250 days against this injustice and said there is no other option before us but to struggle. Com Uppalaiah, State Secretary of Telangana Rythu Coolie Sangham, Com Babu Rao Kumbhargao, AIKMKS leader of Maharashtra, Com Villi Krishnan, leader from Tamil Nadu, Com Rajan, leader from Kerala explained the struggles going on in their respective states in their mother tongue.

The convention unanimously passed the resolution proposed by Com Srikant Mohanty, leader of AIKMKS, Odisha demanding the immediate repeal of Forest Conservation Act 2023; Scientific and comprehensive rehabilitation for displaced people due to Polavaram project; and to roll back privatisation of Vizag steel plant.

“This Convention opposes Forest Conservation Amendment Act 2023. It also opposes Bio-diversity Act 2023; AIKMKS with other peasant and tribal organisations will fight to repeal these Anti-tribal, Anti-environmental, Pro-corporate Acts. We call upon all to build a militant movement unitedly against these Acts. We pledge to fight to protect the rights of Adivasis and protect the Jal, Jamin and Jungle. We demand the Central govt to repeal these Acts.”  
(a Jalil.)