

Letter from Dr. S. Faizi to Mr. Daniel on BNHS' opposition to the Forest Rights Act

From
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To
Mr J.C Daniel
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Sub: On BNHS' opposition to the Forest Rights Act

Dear Mr Daniel,

Greetings. At the outset I compliment you for continuing your eminent service to BNHS even after retirement.

I cherish my association with the Society as a Life Member for more reasons than one. It is not only my emotional attachment to the institution where I started my career but also the fact that BNHS remains one of the few democratic NGOs in the country having an open membership and periodic elections to leadership. Besides, I recognise the pioneering role of the Society in promoting wildlife studies in our country and even beyond which was the reason that made me (successfully) nominate the Society for the UNEP Global 500 Honour in 1989.

I am writing this to express my deep concern about the opposition to the Forest Rights Act that the Society is articulating without consulting the membership. I also wish to convey that the legal challenge that the Society has raised against the Act, in partnership with some other NGOs, does not have the consensus of the membership.

At the root of the forest crisis in the country is the systemic alienation of the historical custodians of the forests enforced by the British colonialists and continued by the post-Independence govts. The Adivasis, the indigenous people, sustained the forests for ages, but when commercial exploitation and maldevelopment were introduced in the forest areas, the forests suffered progressive destruction and the Adivasis were thrown into poverty and destitution. Undoing the historical injustice is also to contribute to checking the loss of forests.

I am sad to note that BNHS is refusing to understand the changed world of conservation doctrine where conservation, sustainable use, benefit sharing and community participation are recognised as the means to an ecologically sustainable future. The Biodiversity Convention which is central to the post-Earth Summit conservation project is built upon these elements and 'indigenous people and local communities' is one phrase most repeated in the text of the treaty. And of the 4 Working Groups established by the Convention's CoP, one is on indigenous people and another on access to biodiversity and benefit sharing. The latest edition of the World Parks Congress- a forum that has played a major role in promoting the exclusionary conservation paradigm- held in Durban had called for the restitution of appropriated conservation land to the indigenous communities and for engaging the local communities in PA management. The recently held Unesco 3rd Biosphere Congress too recognised the need to strengthen the local community involvement in the management of Biosphere Reserves and to promote BRs as learning platforms for sustainable resource use.

The exclusionary conservation doctrine that was sold to us by the west has been abandoned by its very authors, for it was a self defeating pursuit which had its origin in the sentiments, and not science, of a west that has destroyed nearly all of its primary forests. And it was readily accepted in countries

such as ours where the elite found it as a means to add another layer to the exclusion of the subaltern, totally disregarding the multiple and widespread traditions of conservation and sustainable resource use practiced by local communities, the Adivasis in particular.

And the result is, the 2003 FSI report tells us that the country lost 26000 sq km of dense forests during the reporting period of less than three years. And last year alone the MoEF gave approval for clearing over 150 sq km of forest area, not for Adivasis but for the corporate giants. And though BNHS has metamorphosed into the activist mode, considerably disregarding its original mandate of generating natural history knowledge, I did not see any report of BNHS protesting this massive destruction of biodiversity. Nor did I see the Society protesting the weakening of the EIA Notification more than a year ago. On the other hand, I was surprised to learn of the Society conferring an award (Green Governance Award) on TATA against whom the civil society is agitating for its involvement in massive environmental damage in sensitive ecosystems across the country, and now in east Africa too.

The political roots of the opposition to the Forest Rights Act lie in the reactionary right wing elitism that abhors the subaltern, and there is hardly any conservation concern. Time again it has been shown that where the local communities take control of the natural resources the resource management remains largely sustainable, and therefore a genuine concern for conservation would lead to supporting the Act and promoting its effective enforcement rather than opposing it. After all the Adivasis of the country have much more collective knowledge of the forests and wildlife than that of the ecologists of the country put together, although they don't write articulate scientific papers in English.

I once again express my opposition to the Society's protests against the Act and urge you to lead the Society to shed its reactionary politics.

With the best personal regards and wishing you good health

Sincerely

Faizi