

13 March, 2008

Protest against violation of right to live in Mudumalai

The forest department officials continue their illegal activities in Nilgiri District, Tamilnadu. The Adivasis – the traditional forest dwellers, and other forest dwellers have been facing untold miseries. A large section of the people living in Masinagudi in Mudumalai Wild Life Sanctuary, Nilgiri District, Tamilnadu are Adivasis. Alongside there is another section of the marginalized, the dalits. The forest department totally disregarding forest laws and without following the legally mandatory procedures has been indulging in grabbing revenue lands where the people are cultivating small patches of land, and converting them into reserve forest. One of the major source of livelihood is grazing, an activity that is traditionally carried out by the people here. Similarly, the people are prevented from using the water for both cattle, irrigation and other domestic needs, as well as collection of minor forest produce. These too are in violation of their rights.

All these are carried out under the guise of protecting the forests and its wild life. Moreover, these are justified with the so-called research by such foreign funded NGOs as the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), an international non-governmental organization who claim that the greatest threat to the forest and wildlife is from the livelihood activities of the adivasis and other forest dwellers which are projected with much fanfare nationally and internationally. These are then used by the government and the forest officials to justify violations of peoples rights and forest laws. These are fraudulent research as the people who live in forest areas know that the real threat to forests and wildlife are from powerful people in connivance with forest officials. The continued silent support to such destructive activities by such organizations expose them for what they really are. Condemning such activities, a protest was held at Masinagudi on 12 March 2008 from morning 10 a.m to 2 p.m. Over a thousand people from Siriyoor, Anaikkatti, Sokkanahalli, Vazhaithotam, Mavanahalla, Bokkapuram, Semmnatham, Mayar, Bhoothantham, Singara, Gudalur and Pandalur participated. The protest rally started at Masinagudi bazaar and traversed through the important roads and ended with a protest meeting at the Masinagudi Forest Range office which lasted for three hours. The meeting condemned the anti-peaople and anti-forest activities of such NGOs as BNHS and WWF. They were asked to quit immediately and leave the Mudulamalai Santuary area.

M.S Selvaraj, the State Convenor of Vyavasayikal Thozhilalarkal Munnetra Sangham (VTMS), Kala (VTMS), N. Subramaniam (VTMS), P.T Varghese, leader of Vazhvurimai Padukappu Iyakkam (Livelihood Rights Protection Movement), Balakrishnan (CPM), Moideen (AIDMK), Kannaiyan (DMK) and others spoke. The speakers condemned BNHS and WWF and demanded that they forthwith leave the forest areas and demanded the implementation of Forest Rights Act 2006. They also demanded that BNHS withdraw the case in the Supreme Court challenging the Forest Rights Act 2006. It was also declared that protests would be organized against these organizations throughout Tamilnadu.

During the protest, the shops in Masinagudi closed in support of the protests and all transport within the area ceased and a total peoples' bundh was in force. The Nilgiri District Collector sent the Tahsildar of Ooty and other senior officers and held discussions with the people where the people presented their demands.

The following resolutions were passed in the meeting:

BNHS withdraw immediately the petition filed in the Supreme Court against the Forest Rights Act 2006, enacted in the parliament through a democratic process to protect the forests, wildlife and livelihood of Adivasis and other forest dwellers; Similarly WWF too should withdraw their case filed in the Supreme Court that has caused harm to the wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, and livelihood of the peoples there; Organisations such as BNHS and WWF should immediately vacate the forest areas.

The forest department should abandon grabbing of revenue lands where people have been traditionally living; The forest department should respect the Forest Conservation Act 1980, the 1990 circulars issued by the Ministry of Forests & Environment, the Wildlife Protection Act amended till 2006 and the Forest Rights Act 2006 to protect livelihood rights of people, and the protection of forests and wildlife.

Vazhvurimai Padukappu Iyakkam (Movement to Protect Right to Life), Masinagudi, Mudumalai, Gudalur, Nilgiris District, Tamilnadu

Vyavasikal Thozhilalarkal Munnetra Sangham (Peasants and Workers Progressive Organisation), Gudalur, Nilgiris District, Tamilnadu