
India: Forest dependent Vangujjars harassed by local government

Vangujjars, a distinct nomadic tribe with a very rich cultural heritage has been living scattered in the Indian upland forests of the Uttarakhand since the last three centuries. They still maintain nomadic life with their buffaloes and travel between higher reaches of Himalaya in summer to lower Himalaya in winter. They have always received step motherly treatment by all the governments whosoever ruled Uttar Pradesh or Uttarakhand. But from October 2008 the attack on vangujjars has become more intensified and blatant. More than 100 hutments were totally smashed by the Rajaji National Park administration.

The Scheduled Tribe and other Forest Dweller (Recognition of forest rights) Act 2006, popularly known as Forest Rights Act was enacted by the Parliament on 15th Dec 2006 and enforced on 1st Jan 2008. All the states were bound to enforce this act in their respective states by passing Government Orders to all the districts. But no such enforcement of the act has been done by the Uttarakhand government. No Government order has been issued and neither the government is showing any political will to implement this act despite the fact that Uttarakhand has more than 65% forest cover and around 80% of its population is entirely dependent on the forest.

Now the Rajaji National Park, which is the famous tourist spot for the middle and upper class people of Delhi and Dehradun, has become the battleground of forest dwelling communities versus the forest department. The forest department planned to evict around 500 families this October and targeted the “deras” (hutments) of the leaders of vangujjars who were active in forming their organization and fighting a legal case against eviction by forest department in High Court. The goons of forest department have attacked and smashed their “deras” scared little children and women, looted their belongings and thrown them out of the forest mercilessly. Even four youth were arrested on false charges, while they were grazing their animals.

The vangujjar community of the Rajaji national park has been fighting a very long battle since 2004 for recognition of their rights. The park authorities have only recognized 512 families and have resettled them in Pathri, Hardwar which is not built according to the needs and environment of this tribal community.

The National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPFW) on behalf of vangujjars filed a public interest litigation. The Honorable High Court in a historical judgment ordered the Uttarakhand State government to implement the forest rights act 2006 within 60 days by forming the forest rights committee so that the rights of the vangujjar could be settled according to the act.

The delay in enforcement of the act created lots of problems for the vangujjar community as the new park director S.S Rasily was much more ruthless than the one before. His only mission was to throw the vangujjars out of the forest without settling their rights. Even after all such orders in their favor, the vangujjars faced the worst eviction ever in October 2008.

The forest department staff with the local police stations used massive police force to evict the tribal community.

On 3rd November 2008, thousands of vangunjars, forest villages and other forest dwellers from 11 districts of Uttarakhand challenged the State government and protested in front of the State Secretariat at Dehradun to stop such illegal evictions, implement the forest rights act immediately and reestablish all the 110 evicted families in Rajaji National Park. The forest communities have announced that if their demands are not met they will start the movement to reestablish their “deras” in their original place from 16th November 2008 onwards. Ashok Chowdhury the founding member of NFFPFW observes that “If the situation is not handled properly by the State government then it may turn into a serious conflict between the forest dwelling communities of Uttarakhand with the State”.

Resumé from the longer article by Roma, at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/India/roma.html> ,
NFFPFW (Kaimur) / Human Rights Law Centre, Purab Mohal, Email : romasnb@gmail.com /
hrlkaimoor@gmail.com