
India: Adivasis shot for claiming their ancestral homeland

A longstanding land conflict by the Adivasi indigenous people gave rise in January this year to a toll of some 15-20 (unconfirmed) Adivasis killed and some 32 injured by armed police. The attack was allegedly a response to armed action by Adivasis on wildlife officials with traditional weapons such as bows and arrows. The authorities say they have cleared a wildlife sanctuary which was illegally occupied.

Over 1,100 Adivasi families had occupied 5,000 acres in the Muthanga forest, in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary on January 4, 2003, declaring the region as a self-governing area --for them, their ancestral homeland. They demanded implementation of the agreement between them and the government, reached in 2001 after mounting a campaign for their landlessness situation and denial of the rights to resources and land.

The Adivasis have intimate knowledge about the forests since they are organically linked to them. However, as in other places in the world, the present "development" pattern throws indigenous people away. They are brutally dispossessed in the name of conservation, or they are deceived in the name of development.

Commercial logging, mining, road building, plantations, hydroelectric projects, irrigation dams and similar ventures have decimated the forest cover, much against national policies and even laws. While profits have flowed to the coffers of the urban, upper caste elites, the Adivasis, uprooted and impoverished, have nurtured the patches of forests they have been pushed into. As a general rule, they use the forests just enough for their survival. Like bees collecting nectar from flowers. They respect the seasons, the scarcities and abundance in nature and the patterns of animal population dynamics. They don't hunt a carrying doe, they don't trap a breeding fowl, they don't uproot a medicinal herb, and when they farm they use the principles of what we call ecology (albeit in areas that have remained out of reach of the green revolution).

Many Adivasi herbalists can identify more plant species than many university-trained plant taxonomists can do off-handedly. An Adivasi is organically linked to the forests in ways that we cannot easily comprehend. In contrast, the forest staff the government recruits struggle on a daily basis to find a posting outside the forests.

For some Indian people, handing back the forests to the Adivasis for their sustainable management is the most logical and pragmatic solution to protect what is left of the forests. When will the government accept this fact and begin to work with --and not against-- the Adivasis?

Article based on information from: "Return their patch of green", S. Faizi, http://www.indianexpress.com/full_story.php?content_id=21943 , sent by Peter Jackson, e-mail: peterjac@indiatimes.com ; "Tribals cleared from elephant reserve", Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, BBC, Adivasi Tee Projekt, <http://www.rkfrie.de/ATP/02-11/MAIL-04B.HTM>

