
India: people versus nature or World Bank and government versus people?

In different countries of the world conflicts have arisen between the protection of national parks and the conservation of wildlife on the one hand, and the defense of the rights of people that live in those areas on the other. The hegemonic official model of conservation has a vision of nature as composed by beautiful –but empty– spaces, ignoring that the sustainable use that most local communities practice in these areas is the best guarantee for conservation. The problem is especially important in countries with a high density of rural population. Besides, generally the same governments which declare protected areas open them up for mining, dams, industries, tourism, roads, and other “development” projects. In previous issues of the Bulletin we have addressed this issue (see Bulletin 3 about India, Bulletin 8 on Thailand or Bulletin 14 on Venezuela).

Indigenous peoples living inside and in the fringes of Nagarahole National Park, also known as Rajiv Gandhi National Park, in Karnataka State, are facing a dramatic situation. At the same time nature and wildlife are threatened in this so called “protected area” located in the south of India.

Nagarahole is one of the seven Protected Areas (PAs) where the World Bank is financing US\$ 68 million to the Government of India for the so-called Eco-Development Project. The project covers a total area of 6,714 sq. km comprising other Protected Areas and Tiger Reserves also in the states of Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Kerala and West Bengal, and affecting an overall population of 48,800 tribal people. The Forest Department and the Government of Karnataka are now trying to get the more than 6,000 indigenous people, living in 58 settlements inside the park, out of this territory. Even if they have lived in the area for decades, the authorities now consider them illegal occupants. The project is also affecting the 25% of the population living in the fringes of the park, that will be eventually forbidden from entering the area. They are forbidden from entering into the forest to gather minor forest produces, they have no rights for cultivation, keeping domestic animals, collecting food from the forest, hunting small game, building houses, using roads and transporting materials and most importantly, for cultural practices and religious rituals. Both the Forest Department and the Government of Karnataka score a long history of violations of the human and cultural rights of the tribal people in Nagarahole.

But their action is not isolated: the World Bank is actively supporting it. Stating that "local people, when traditional rights and access are limited by the establishment of protected areas, often have little incentive to use natural resources in a sustainable way" (Project Information Document, March 1996) and lending the money for the project, the World Bank is backing a new forced displacement of the tribals from their ancestral lands and territories, and an impoverishment of the already increasingly endangered forests. Ironically the World Bank talks of "voluntary displacement" instead of forced displacement.

Concerned local environmental NGOs consider that the Project's stated objective of biodiversity conservation is just a smokescreen to pave the way for the expansion of industrial agriculture and tree plantations in the Park, as has happened in other cases in India and in several places of the Park itself. Nowadays only 30% of its whole area can be considered primary forest. The rest has

been devastated by logging and timber plantations.

With the Eco-Development Project the Government of India is violating several norms and compromises on indigenous peoples and forced resettlement, forestry policy, climate change as well as the Human Rights conventions, and the ILO conventions 107 and 169 on indigenous peoples rights. Furthermore, the Indian Law and the National procedures for settling indigenous rights within the National Parks have been also seriously violated. Regarding the World Bank, it has ignored its own internal Inspection Panel procedures. Even though the time the local communities had to prepare for the visit of the Inspection Panel sent by the Bank in September 1998 was very short, they presented to the visitors an Alternative People Plan to the official project. Nevertheless, their proposal was at last completely ignored. Last but not least, these kind of projects are at odds with the latest concepts on nature conservation and protection, that include as a capital point the recognition of traditional knowledge and cultural skills, as well as indigenous peoples' and local communities' rights.

Local communities, with the support of civil society organizations as the India Center for Human Rights and Law of Bombay, the Indian People's Tribunal on Environment and Human Rights, and CORD (Karnataka NGO supporting the tribals) will continue their struggle against these imposed "solutions" that, in fact, are not solutions at all but a threat to the maintainance of their livelihoods and to the conservation of nature.

For further requests of information on future actions and suggestions please contact:

Jaroslava Colajacom, Reform the World Bank Campaign – Italy.

Source: Jaroslava Colajacom.