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Suicidal strategy?



AMID the hullabaloo over the recently concluded Global Investor Meet (GIM) in Kochi, an event of national significance, which should have hit the headlines passed unnoticed — the occupation of a wildlife sanctuary by a large number of Adivasis on January 3. As part of their long and traumatic struggle for land, over 2000 Adivasis, including women and children, under cover of darkness, moved into the interiors of the protected forests in Muthanga range of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary bordering Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Forest officials watched aghast as they were far outnumbered by the "encroachers".

Soon after, Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha volunteers, led by C.K. Janu, the firebrand Adivasi leader, began constructing makeshift shelters and a temporary office in the midst of a eucalyptus plantation inside the sanctuary. Soon many Adivasi families from different parts of the highland district of Wayanad — a tourist destination and a pocket of poverty and social inequalities that also has the largest Adivasi population in the State — flooded the sanctuary.

Each family brought 25 kg rice and some cash. The agitators said that they had been getting ready for the occupation for two months and they had enough provisions to survive for two months. A small shed was raised for a school and open wells were dug. "Come what may, we will not leave the sanctuary, we are now going to cultivate the land," said Velichi, a 45-year-



The forcible occupation of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala by adivasis raises fundamental questions of survival. M. SUCHITRA looks at the issues involved.

old woman. The Adivasis have erected their own checkpost at Thakarappady, near Muthanga Forest office. Even media persons are not allowed to enter the occupied area without an entry pass from the tribal volunteers guarding the post.

The "encroachment" has naturally irked environmental activists. The Kerala Forest Department and the environmentalists point out that the encroachment is a threat to the rich biodiversity and the wildlife of the sanctuary established in 1973 with the specific objective of preserving the biological diversity of the region.

The sanctuary is one of the biggest habitats of the Asiatic elephant. "During the dry months, elephants from the neighbouring states migrate for water and fodder; and, the passage to Noolpuzha, the lone water source for wild animals, in summer is blocked by the agitators," according to Badusha of Wayanad Prakriti Samrakshana Samiti (WPSS), an environmental protection group. Besides, the adivasi would face attacks from wild animals and the possibility of fire cannot be ruled out. The WPSS functionary said the forest land occupied by the Adivasis had been a large eucalyptus plantation raised for the Mavoor Gwalior Rayons Factory. A part of this is now being cleared and reconverted into natural forest under constant pressure from environmental activists.

The Forest Department has filed a case against C.K. Janu, the Adivasi-Dalit Action Council convenor M. Geetanandan and others under the Wildlife Protection Act. The Chief Wildlife Warden, Phaneendra Kumar Rao asserts that the encroachers would be evicted from the sanctuary at any cost. Since all wildlife sanctuaries are under the Centre, the State Government cannot allot this land to the Adivasis, he said. So far, no talks have been

held with the encroachers.

The Adivasi leaders say they will discuss the issue only with the Chief Minister, AK. Antony because he had signed a seven-point pact on October 16, 2001 to end the 48-day-long agitation organised by the Adivasi-Dalit Action Council. The agitation was said to be a historic victory as the landless Adivasis had succeeded in getting a firm commitment from the Government on a provision of one to five acres of land within a year. (See box).

"We waited for a year. But, we were betrayed again. Had the Government kept its promise, we wouldn't have occupied the sanctuary," says Janu. She refutes charges that the Adivasis were a threat to the wildlife and the forest pointing out that the land where they had built huts was barren. "If this is a wildlife sanctuary, there should be a forest. Where is the forest? Where have all the trees gone? And, are we not a part of the environment? Do only the wild animals need a habitat? How long can we remain without our own habitat?" She asserts that the Adivasis have not felled a single tree and that they know how to live in harmony with the environment.

The Government initially claimed that, of the 3.3 lakh Adivasis, there were only 11,000 landless families. Later, a Tribal Rehabilitation and Development Mission (TRDM) team put the number at 53,472. To honour its promise, the Government needs over 53,000 acres of cultivable land. By November 2001, officials had identified 14,569 hectares. But the bulk was vested forestland. Assigning such lands to private persons is not permissible under the Forest Conservation Act 1980. Tribal volunteers are determined to resist any forcible *eviction*. Most of *the* activists, including women, say they are even prepared to die in the sanctuary since surviving outside the forest is virtually impossible. Due to the crisis in the agricultural sector, small-scale farmers have ceased to employ tribals as wage labourers. There is no land, no work and no food. "We don't even have a piece of land to bury the dead. We will die here rather than go out and die," says Pushparajan, a tribal activist. The activists say they will adopt the same method in other districts too, if needed.

Apparently, the Kerala Government is in a spot. Neither can it evict the encroachers nor can it allow them to stay inside the wildlife sanctuary. Either way, it will open a Pandora's box. The Antony Government is aware of this and that is why no action is being taken. And for the agitating adivasis, caught between wild animals and a betraying government, the supposedly strategic occupation might turn out suicidal.