

Now, Kerala PSC goofs up Kannada exam for Adivasi beat forest officers



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PSC district officers across Kerala, except Alappuzha, are conducting tests to fill 500 posts of Beat Forest Officers created for Adivasi candidates dependent on the forest for their livelihood or living in Scheduled Tribe colonies on the fringes of the forest.

Topic | Kasaragod

Kasaragod: Adivasi candidates who applied for the posts of Beat Forest Officers have accused the Kerala Public Service Commission (PSC) of trampling over the special recruitment process it gazetted with discriminatory cut-off marks for male and female candidates in the Kasaragod district.

Candidates who opted to write the objective test in Kannada were sent back because the government's recruitment agency did not have the question paper in Kannada.

In the Wayanad district, candidates who did not make it to the shortlist after the written test appeared for the physical test and made it to the interview in the next round.

PSC district officers across Kerala, except Alappuzha, are conducting tests to fill 500 posts of Beat Forest Officers created for Adivasi candidates dependent on the forest for their livelihood or living in Scheduled Tribe colonies on the fringes of the forest. The minimum qualification for the post is Class 10 or an equivalent course. Wayanad,



with 170 posts, has the highest number of vacancies. Kasaragod has 45 posts.

Candidates who spoke with Onmanorama said they suspected the PSC was deliberately creating chaos in the recruitment process to favour candidates backed by political parties and officials in the Forest Department. "We don't have evidence for that. But we have enough evidence to prove the PSC flouted its own notification," said a candidate in Wayanad who works as a temporary watcher in the Forest Department.

All the candidates requested anonymity because they were applicants for other government jobs and did not want to invite the wrath of the PSC.

In February 2021, the state government created 500 posts of Forest Beat Officers for Adivasi communities in all districts, except Alappuzha.

The post with a salary scale of Rs 20,000 to Rs 45,800 will help mainstream the members of the Adivasi communities and create better-living conditions for them, said the government order dated February 12, 2021.

The recruits will help protect the Western Ghats, nurture eco-tourism projects, and stop forest encroachment and conflict with wild animals, the order said.

The government created 20 posts in Thiruvananthapuram, 10 each in Kollam and Pathanamthitta, 20 each in Kottayam and Ernakulam, 40 in Idukki, 10 in Thrissur, 60 in Palakkad, 30 in Malappuram, 20 in Kozhikode, 170 in Wayanad, and 45 each in Kasaragod and Kannur district. No post was created in Alappuzha because it does not have forest cover.

PSC takes Kannada candidates for a ride

According to the PSC's gazette notification on April 16, 60% of the posts are reserved for general Adivasi community members and 40% for daily wage workers of the Department of the Forest and Wildlife.

Of the 60% posts, the government decided to give priority to unwed mothers, their children, children of widows, and those who have completed a diploma course in handling animals in zoos and forests.

Though the posts are open to men and women, the government has reserved 80% of the vacancies for men.

The PSC conducted the objective examination (OMR test) on September 3. But candidates who opted to write the exam in Kannada were in for a shock. "We were told there was no question paper in Kannada," said a candidate in Adoor of Kasaragod's Karadka grama panchayat.

The PSC district officer asked the Kannada candidates to file a complaint.

Much later, on November 23, the PSC issued a notification saying an examination would be conducted in Kannada for "only those who have claimed Kannada as their mother tongue" on their profile page on the PSC website.

“I belong to the Marathi Scheduled Tribe community. My mother tongue is Marathi and not Kannada. But I studied in a Kannada medium school and Kannada is my first language. How can the PSC deny me the opportunity to write the exam in Kannada because my mother tongue is not Kannada?”

A PSC candidate

Candidates applying for state government jobs have to create their 'profiles' on the PSC's website. That is different from the applications they file for jobs.

The PSC's insistence on conducting a re-exam in Kannada only for those with Kannada as their mother tongue has deprived several candidates, including the one quoted above, of the opportunity to write the exam in Kannada. "I belong to the Marathi Scheduled Tribe community. My mother tongue is Marathi and not Kannada. But I studied in a Kannada medium school and Kannada is my first language. How can the PSC deny me the opportunity to write the exam in Kannada because my mother tongue is not Kannada?" he said.

To be sure, Kannada enjoys the linguistic minority status in Kasaragod and Manjeshwar taluks of the Kasaragod district. Many students in Kasaragod, Manjeshwar, and Hosdurg taluk study in Kannada medium schools, irrespective of their mother tongue, said K K Ashokan, a social activist, and resident of Panathady panchayat. "Children whose mother tongues are Urdu, Tulu, Kannada and Beary often study in Kannada medium schools," he said.

Malayali students in some panchayats also study in Kannada medium schools because there are no Malayalam medium schools there.

The Marathi candidate said he had written 14 PSC exams in Kannada for posts such as lower division clerk, fire and rescue officer, and assistant prison officer. "When applying for the post of Beat Forest Officer, the portal asked whether I would be attending the exam in Kannada or Malayalam. And I chose Kannada," he said.

Candidates who have Kannada as their mother tongue have got admit cards for the re-examination to be held on January 28. Others have not. "We questioned the district PSC officer and he said we did not get the

admit card because our profile did not mention our mother tongue as Kannada. When we explained to him the difference between the mother tongue and the first language, the officer said he could not help us," said the candidate.

Kasaragod district PSC officer Ullasan P said initially the Kerala Public Service Commission said the exam would be conducted only for those whose mother tongue was Kannada. "But then we got a few petitions from candidates whose mother tongue was different. We wrote to the PSC and it has agreed to send admit cards to them too," he said.

“The PSC had earlier goofed the recruitment of high school teachers in government-run Kannada medium schools by selecting candidates who cannot even speak Kannada. The government sends them to a language institute in Mysuru on paid leave to teach them Kannada. Such teachers end up ruining the future of at least three batches of students.”

He said Kannada question papers were not available on the September 3 exam because the PSC did not run a 'confirmation' on the candidates. Usually, candidates pick their language of choice at the time of applying for the job. "Later, the PSC seeks confirmation from each candidate on whether they are appearing for the exam and the language of the exam," he said.

For the Beat Forest Officer exam, the PSC did not run confirmation, Ullasan said, explaining why it did not print Kannada question papers. The delay in conducting the exam would not affect the final rank list, officials said.

But candidates are worried. "Now we have two exams for the same post. The PSC has already conducted the physical test for candidates who wrote the exam in Malayalam," said another Kannada candidate.

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'PSC adding names to declared short-list'

But the graver charge against the PSC is that it flouted its April 16 gazette notification that said all the documents establishing the credentials and eligibility of the candidates should be uploaded by May 18, 2022.

The notification said: "Documents establishing the eligibility of the candidates may be uploaded till the last date. There will be no opportunity after that," it said.

The notification said a committee headed by the district PSC officer, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), and District Scheduled Tribe Development Officer members would examine the applications and prepare a shortlist. A written test may be conducted if the applicants are more.

All the districts went for the written test to screen out applicants. In Kasaragod, around 2,000 persons applied for 27 open posts.

But when the results were declared on November 14, the PSC had two sets of candidates: one, those who cleared the written test; and two, those whose results were withheld because they did not submit the documents.



A candidate writing an exam. Representational image

"According to the notification, those who did not submit adequate documents should have been rejected. But here, the PSC was giving some people another opportunity to send their documents," said social activist Ashokan. "This is paving the way for backdoor entry. Those who do not fulfill the criteria will make use of the time to come up with documents," he said. "But the sad part is I know at least 10 candidates who did not apply because they could not arrange the documents before May 18. They are feeling cheated now," he said.

The documents required include an affidavit from the Range Forest Officer testifying the candidate lives in Scheduled Tribe colonies (ooru) within 2km of forest, and a certificate from the tribal extension officer if they are claiming priority as unwed mothers or children of single mothers.

After the written test on September 3, the Wayanad District PSC Office

released a shortlist with 347 men and 90 women on November 14. The shortlist also had the registration numbers of 162 men and 49 women whose results were withheld for not submitting documents.

After the physical test on November 21, the Wayanad PSC office released another shortlist with 425 men and 113 women. This list had 14 men and four women who were not on the shortlist released after the written test. Neither were they on the list of withheld candidates.

PSC officials in Wayanad said they could belong to the priority list of unwed mothers, children of unwed mothers and widows, or those who have completed a diploma course in handling animals in zoos and forests.

In Kasaragod, too, six candidates -- four men and two women -- were added to the original shortlist released after the written test on November 14. "OMR sheets are scanned in one go. So results cannot come in batches," said a candidate.

Of the six candidates added to the shortlist on November 19, one male and one female candidate do not belong to any of the priority categories, that is, unwed mothers or children of single mothers.

The male candidate turned out to be the son of a prominent CPM worker and the female candidate is the niece of an influential CPM area committee member.

Two other shortlisted candidates in their 30s -- one male and one female -- had lost their fathers but are married and have their own families. Technically, they can claim the priority given to children of widows.

The Kasaragod list also has candidates whose houses are beyond 2km from the forest. One shortlisted candidate is the wife of a government school teacher and their house is in Panathur in Panathady panchayat. Her married sister is also on the list. Both have used the address of their parents' house which is within 2km of the forest.

'Higher cut-off for women is discriminatory'

A female candidate, who is now preparing to enter the police force, is miffed with the higher cut-off for women post the OMR test. The PSC set 38.33 marks as the cut-off for men but 47.33 for women. "This is a special recruitment drive to give jobs to the most vulnerable. The job is physically demanding. So I do not understand the logic behind the discriminatory cut-off marks for women," she said. "Particularly when there are physical tests and interviews before the final list is drawn," she said.

The PSC sets higher cut-off for women candidates appearing for civil police officer posts during general recruitment, she said. "But if it is a special recruitment drive, the cut-off is kept the same for men and women," she said.

Another female candidate said the 20% quota for women itself was discriminatory. "First of all, there are only 45 posts in Kasaragod. Of them, 40% is reserved for daily wage workers in the Forest Department. From the remaining 27 posts, general ST women get only five or six

seats. And we have to share that with priority list candidates," she said.

The female candidates also accused the PSC of rushing through the physical tests soon after the results of the written tests were declared on November 19.

Social activist Ashokan, who is helping the Adivasi candidates move the court, said when 2,000 candidates had applied for such few posts, the PSC could have stuck to the original notification and screened out those who did not submit the documents within the stipulated time.

Kasaragod PSC officer Ullasan said the PSC gave a second chance to the candidates because they belong to the vulnerable sections of society.

He also said that the PSC rushed through the recruitment because the government wanted to wrap up the process before December 31.

"Both the claims fall flat," said Ashokan. "If the PSC were genuinely interested in helping the vulnerable people who were actually dependent on the forest for a living, it would not have kept the cut-off high for women. Two, the deadline of December 31 will never be met because the Kannada exam is scheduled on January 29," he said.