

The South Indian Adivasi Experience in the Nagar Hole National Park and the Muthanga Wild Life Sanctuary Speech at the Vth World Parks Congress, Durban September 2003

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The theme of the Vth World Parks Congress “Benefits Beyond Boundaries” suggests that the Congress will focus on addressing people’s needs and providing a stream of economic, political and environmental benefits to societies worldwide.

We, the adivasis, the original inhabitants of most of the areas that now come under the Parks and the Protected Areas, appreciate the concern shown by the Congress towards the ‘needs of the people’. At the same time, however, we have our doubts and apprehensions.

First of all, who are the people whose needs are to be addressed? Does it include us, the adivasis, the indigenous people? The name of extending benefits to the ‘people’, will the big multinational or national corporates and donor agencies such as World Bank be allowed more footholds in the forests? The doubt is valid because hitherto in the management of Protected Areas and Parks and for that matter any forest in my country, Governments had only sought to wipe us out completely or push us out of our habitats.

Despite several international conventions and even the Indian Forest Policy of 1988 recognizing the role of the indigenous people in conservation and sustenance of forests, the governments have been practising a policy of “Nature without People”. Eviction and displacement had been the reality faced by the forest people of India all through the colonial history. Even after the country gaining Independence, the threat of eviction loomed large following the promulgation of the Wild Life Protection Act 1972 and Forest Conservation Act, 1980. It has become all-pervasive and palpable now following an order of the Ministry of Environment and Forests in May 2002. As many as 10 million indigenous people in India now face the threat of eviction. In the state of Assam, more than 100,000 people have already been evicted in just three months between April 2002 and July 2003. This has been the case in the Nagarhole National Park in the State of Karnataka and again, more recently, in the Muthanga Life Sanctuary in my own state of Kerala. My presentation here will dwell mostly on my experience of the indigenous people struggles in the Protected Areas of Nagarhole and Muthanga in South India.

Throughout history, the indigenous people had fought for their rights. This is to say that we are demanding much more than ‘benefits.’ We are demanding RIGHTS over forests.

And we are also demanding that there is an urgent need to redraw the ‘boundaries’, if at all drawing boundaries protect nature.

The talk about extending ‘benefits’ is in fact a cover-up for several DENIALS, several costs borne by the people. Firstly the indigenous people have been robbed of their traditional/customary rights to land and territories. Secondly, they have been robbed of their historical role in conservation of nature. These two fundamental denials have by now turned the indigenous peoples in most part of India into victims rather than beneficiaries of the Protected Area management system and, the forest management system, in general.

The Struggle in the Nagar Hole (Rajiv Gandhi) National Park

In the case of the Nagarhole National Park in the State of Karnataka, there was indeed much talk about the ‘benefits’. And the promises were made out by none other than the World Bank.

The Nagar Hole national park is now a part of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve -- one of the 440 biosphere reserves in 97 countries where the UNESCO is implementing the Man and Biosphere program. Nilgiris was the first internationally designated biosphere reserve in India. Several ethnic groups had inhabited the area from time immemorial. They included the Cholanai, the only surviving hunter-gatherers of the Indian subcontinent, concentrated in the Nilambur area. In 2000 there were 11,600 permanent inhabitants within the biosphere reserve subsisting on the use of natural resources such as medicinal plants, agriculture and agri-horticulture.

An area of 57,155 ha in Nagar Hole had been constituted as a sanctuary in 1955. The Government of Karnataka declared Nagar Hole (which meant, Snake River, in the local language) as a game sanctuary in 1972. Subsequently the area under the sanctuary was further increased to 64,339 ha. The Nagar Hole National Park was constituted in 1983.

Over 9,000 indigenous people were residing in 58 hamlets inside what the government called the National Park. There were Jenu Kurubas, the honey-gatherers; the Hakki Pikki (bird-trappers), the Betta Kurubas who specialised in making bamboo baskets and utensils; the Yeravas who survived on fishing and the Soligas who had diversified into agriculture and herding. Apart from those who lived within the forests, there were more than 23,000 adivasis residing within 5 km distance, all dependent on the Nagar Hole forests for their survival.

Under the UN scheme for the Biosphere Reserve, the forests, the animals, the birds, the agriculture and the human being are to have been protected for their uniqueness. But the government agencies continued to violate this norm for lucrative business interests. The natural forests were extensively logged and substituted with plantations of teak, eucalyptus and rosewood. Now 15 per cent of the area within the National Park is now under plantations.

Evictions: Governments have been systematically pushing out the adivasis to the forest fringes. In 1970s, a total of 1220 families consisting of more than 6000 people were pushed out to locations 1-12 km from their original habitats. In more than 40 hamlets within the Park, adivasi lands were taken over for teak and eucalyptus plantations. People in 20 hamlets were ousted to make

way for the Kabini River valley project and the Taraka dam. Those who were evicted and 'rehabilitated' did not get anything than makeshift tents or huts to live in. They became 'coolies', menial servants, or virtual bonded labourers in estates.

Severe restrictions were placed on indigenous people who continued to live within the forests. They were seen and labelled encroachers. Trenches were dug in their fields and paths. No cultivation of any kind was allowed. This was so, despite the fact that the adivasi method of cultivation did not clear any trees, now ploughing or sowing was done, no chemical fertilisers or pesticides used. Hunting, even ritual hunting, was banned. No livestock or dogs were allowed. No wells could be dug. The houses could not be renovated. A total ban on collection of minor forest produce such as tubers, mushrooms and wild vegetables was imposed. Adivasis were not allowed entry to the sacred sites and burial grounds within the forests. The government even sought to put a ban on traditional music and dance forms. The adivasis were constantly harassed. Several adivasi women were molested. Many were put behind bars on fake charges of forest offences.

The indigenous people had to suffer all this while several non-advaisi encroachers were allowed to remain within the forests cultivate nearly 660 ha of forestlands on payment of yearly taxes. Many among them managed to get title deeds for nearly 1000 ha of forestland.

Eco-tourism and the World Bank's Eco-development project

The worst of such preference shown to the non-advaisi and the rich pleasure-seeking people at the cost of the indigenous people came about when the Government in 1994 entered into a lease agreement with Taj Group of hotels and a little later the World Bank supported eco-development project was proposed to be started in Nagarhole. The lease agreement with the group, one of the richest business groups in India, was to lease 10 ha of forestland at Murkal in Nagarhole to build and operate a three-star tourist resort. The agreement was in total violation of the Forest Conservation Act and the Wild Life Protection Act. The agreement was also a contradiction of all tall claims of protecting the ecological balance and the biodiversity in the National

Similarly, the eco-development project negated the World Bank's own norms of "not carrying out any involuntary resettlement of people," not eroding the "customary tenure rights over land and other assets of tribals living in the Protected Areas" ensuring "prior informed consent and participation" and "compensating the people relocated". Nevertheless, with the Rs. 295-crore (1 crore is 10 million) eco-development project promising a huge bounty, the Government intensified the pressure to evict the remaining Indigenous People from the Nagarhole forests. The project intended to wean away the adivasis from the forests by nominally "training" them in subsistence occupations such as pig rearing. This enterprise will be shown to be viable by pumping in massive subsidies. With this the indigenous people could be resettled outside the forests. The World Bank would have its hands clean. The plan of the Taj group was also interesting. Once the IPs are thrown out, the forests would be opened up to visitors interested in biodiversity research a euphemism for bio-prospecting.

But organised resistance from the adivasis with the support gained from various quarters made these plans difficult. When the adivasis blocked the construction of the "jungle Lodge", the authorities arrested them, men women and children. The adivasis launched an "enter the forest campaign" on the Independence Day of 1995 and declared Self-Rule as their goal. After several waves of protests, the number of arrested people rose to 200. The campaign continued through the years. The adivasis called a general strike in Nagarhole on December 29, 1996 and it turned out to be a total success. All the six roads leading to the lodge were blocked. Subsequently, a writ petition was moved in the High Court of Karnataka by Nagarhole Budhakkattu Hakku Sthapana Samithi (Nagarhole Adivasi Rights Restoration Forum) and others. On 20 January 1997, the High Court ruled that the assignment of forestland to the Taj Group was in gross violation of several national laws for conservation of nature and wild

Subsequently, the World Bank officials were stopped during their visit to Nagarhole and told in no uncertain terms that with the indigenous people declaring Self-Rule in the area, the imposed eco-development project would be doomed. Soon the World Bank withdrew from implementing the Eco-development Project in Nagarhole.

An important fall-out of the Nagarhole struggle was that the indigenous people took over the leadership. The adivasis donned the mantle with confidence and élan. And more importantly, they evolved their own plan for the regeneration of the forests, based on the deep wealth of indigenous knowledge of the forests.

The struggle for Self-Rule in Muthanga Wild Life Sanctuary, Kerala

The indigenous communities pre-existed the State. The rights to manage their own affairs, to appropriate forest resources and redress disputes had all along been the customary rights of the indigenous people in India. In the past, kings did not dare to interfere with the adivasi communities, nor could the British colonialists conquer them fully. However, these rights suffered serious erosion when the colonial rulers went on turning the natural forests into "reserved forests". Post-Independence Government in several States including Karnataka and Kerala have only perpetuated this practice, despite the Indian Constitution under Article 243 providing for bringing indigenous peoples' villages under Schedule V areas ruled by Self-Governing institutions. Hence, to this day, Self-Rule has remained the abiding goal and demand of indigenous people all over the country. As in Nagarhole in the struggle in the Muthanga Wild Life Sanctuary in Wayanad last year was motivated by the goal of Self-Rule.

Officially, the Muthanga forest forms a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve and is a designated Elephant Reserve. Until two decades ago, Muthanga was a forestland with rich biodiversity. More than 3,000 diverse species had made this area qualify for protection. However, disregarding the importance of the biosphere, 77 sq. km of the Muthanga Range was opened up for commercial plantations for feeding a single pulp factory of the Birlas, an Indian multinational business group. Soon there were no natural forests left in nearly 40 per cent of the forest range. More than 3,500 ha of forestland became completely barren. The water stream that separated the Bandipur Reserve of Karnataka and the Mudumalai Reserve of Tamil Nadu from the Muthanga Range in Kerala locally called Mamana halla -- completely dried up as a result of the spread of eucalyptus plantation. The river is now nothing but a stretch of white sand. The marks of elephants trying to dig holes in the sand in search of water were evident in the dried up riverbed. Elephants frantically searching for water and crossing the Muthanga Range to reach the

Noolpuzha River located east of Muthanga is what makes the Wild Life Sanctuary qualify as an Elephant Reserve and an elephant corridor. The plight of the elephants in the Wayanad Wild Life Sanctuary presents the other side of the saga of the disrupted lives in indigenous people in Muthanga as well as the whole State.

Following a series of starvation deaths, the adivasis in Kerala had launched a struggle in August 2001 by setting up 'Refuge Camps' in front of the State Chief Minister's residence. The struggle continued for 48 days forcing the Govt. of Kerala to pro disbursement of land and other rehabilitation measures for the adivasi people in the state. However, as the government did keep its word even after a year, we were again forced to take to the path of struggle. And, as in Nagarhole, the indigenous people of Kerala decided to "Enter the Forests," our homeland, under the banner of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS). The Muthanga forest where we put up huts was the homeland of different adivasi communities in Wayanad such as the Par the Vetta Kurumas, the Kattunaikkas, the Adiyas and the Mullukuruma etc. Our sacred groves and burial grounds still exist in Muthanga. Several adivasi families had been forcibly evicted from Muthanga during 1970s and '80s, first while declaring the as a sanctuary and then for establishing the eucalyptus plantations. Those who were evicted were compelled to live a wretched life in several tribal 'colonies' where starvation deaths were rampant.

The adivasi families who entered the forestland had only sought to assert the traditional right over the Muthanga forests. They erected huts in the barren area and reorganised the Adivasi Oorukootams (hamlet-level self-government institution). Along with subsistence agriculture, we re-started our gothra pooja (collective ritual worship). A minimum programme for Self-Rule in accordance with the spirit of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 was drawn up. The regeneration of the eco-system, primarily the water sources and the vegetation was an important objective in this. The Adivasi Oorukootam reorganised in the Muthanga were determined to achieve this through community management and the application of traditional knowledge. We were convinced that there was no need for huge donor agency funds for achieving this objective.

At no point during the struggle in Muthanga, did the Govt. authorities conduct a discussion with the protestors. The authorities never issued any notice in accordance with eviction procedures. The police or the District Collector did not gather any information from us. Throughout the AGMS occupation of Muthanga, the Forest Department, however, resorted to unlawful covert means to evict the adivasis. Twice they sent domesticated elephants fed with alcohol to attack the adivasi huts. On two occasions, some unknown persons, obviously hired by the Forest Department, set fire to the forests and the grassland.

All the authorities, and a few fake conservationists with vested interests, concealed the truth regarding the actual status of the Muthanga forest and the indigenous people who had a right over it. Instead, they churned out false reports claiming that Muthanga was the breeding ground of elephants and a core area of the sanctuary. Most of the biodiversity of Muthanga has been sucked dry by a parallel economy that thrived on illegal ivory and sandalwood trade that went on unabated with the connivance of the Forest Department. Despite the fact that the adivasis did not do anything that could be construed as criminal or destructive of the ecosystem, the State Chief Minister Antony and the Forest Minister Sudhakaran propagated that the occupation in Muthanga was an "armed struggle waged against the State".

With the backing of this false, malicious propaganda, the state authorities first resorted to setting fire to the forests and then days later, opened bullet fire on over a thousand adivasi men, women and children who had 'occupied' the Muthanga forest. An assault on innocent adivasis was completed by the armed forces, by marching on to the hamlets and booking hundreds of innocent adivasis and throwing them into jails several weeks. This has been one of the most criminal incidents in the history of Kerala. "Moments in the life of a society when something happens to put its moral fibre on public display," as writer Arundhati Roy put it. "The Muthanga atrocity will go down in Kerala's history as a government's attempt to decimate an extraordinary historical struggle for justice by the poorest, most oppressed community in Kerala"

Despite the harrowing experiences that followed the brutal eviction in February last year in the Muthanga forest, the decision of the indigenous people is to go back to Muthanga and assert our rights. There is no other way but to return to the locale and roots of the primordial conflict with the rulers of the land who had usurped our forests and turned us into the wretched of the earth, bereft of rights over resources and rights over even our own life.

In such a context, the challenge for the 10th World Parks Congress would be to explicitly recognise indigenous peoples' right to forestland and our role in conservation of nature as not just that of equal partners but as the key players.

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