

TN's forest land plan: 45000 in Gudalur may face eviction

According to sources, around 5,000 families living in estates and town areas will be affected by the move.



Gudalur MLA Pon Jayaseelan hoisting a black flag at his residence .(Photo | Express)

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NILGIRIS: Over 45,000 people residing in Gudalur taluk in Nilgiris district face the threat of eviction as the state government has submitted a proposal to the Supreme Court to reclassify 31,510 acres of unsettled

janmam land spread across the taluk into reserve forest area.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, several residents in the region hoisted black flags in front of their houses condemning the state government's affidavit filed in the SC in a case related to the 'Section 17 lands' (janmam lands) in the district.

The livelihood of thousands of small farmers and general public across the region, especially in O-Valley panchayat, will be affected, they said. Local traders have also called for a two-hour strike on Thursday.

On February 16, the Tamil Nadu government submitted to the SC that, of the unsettled land spanning 34,986.28 acres, it is planning to convert 3,476 acres into revenue villages and the remaining 31,510 acres into reserve forest area under Section 53 of the Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, 1969. According to sources, around 5,000 families living in estates and town areas will be affected by the move.

R Ranjith, president of the O Valley Makkal Iyakkam, told TNIE, "The state government, in its affidavit, stated that it would provide house pattas to the tribals living in the land parcels (under Section 17 of the 1969 Act) as earmarked by the state and also assured to provide protection to the those tribals

living outside the clusters. However, the government has not said anything about shifting or providing alternate sites to non-tribals and small farmers living in the estate areas.”

“We are unsure if our land will be taken over by the state government. That is why we have taken to the streets seeking justice. We have ration card and voter ID, and are also paying property tax to the local bodies,” he added.

The affidavit itself is lacking in information, and the state should reconsider its move since it would affect thousands of common people across Gudalur taluk, Ranjith said. However, for the first time, the state government has acknowledged that there are non-tribals living in O-Valley. So far, they have been calling us encroachers, he added.

Gudalur MLA Pon Jayaseelan (AIADMK) released a video on Wednesday alleging that the state government is trying to snatch away people’s livelihoods. He also called for an all-party meeting to urge the state to drop the proposal and consider reclassifying at least 15,000 acres as revenue land to protect the livelihoods of thousands of farmers and common public.

“The aim of the Janmam Act was for the state to acquire the unsettled land and provide it to small

farmers. We don't know if the officials know about this or if they are staging a drama," Jayaseelan said.

"Of the original 80,087.74 acres, 30,000 acres have already been converted into forest land, and the state government is trying to convert 31,510 acres more into forest area. This shows that the government has not considered the livelihoods of the common people and farmers. Since I am the people's representative, I am gathering public support to save Gudalur taluk," the MLA added.

When contacted, Nilgiris Collector Lakshmi Bhavya Tanneeru told TNIE that she is going to hold talks with the local representatives who have called for the two-hour strike and hear their demands.

"We will see what type of steps can be taken to solve their grievances," she said.