

Tribals to defy ban on collecting minor forest produces

Dec 21, 2012, 05.17AM

COIMBATORE: Giving a new dimension to their struggle against declaring Sathyamangalam wildlife sanctuary a tiger reserve without meeting the provisions of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, over 10,000 tribals living in Thalavady and Kadambur hills that fall within the sanctuary limits have decided to defy a ban on their entry on January 2 and collect minor forest produces (MFPs). A tribal convention held in Sathyamangalam on Wednesday decided to break the year-old ban on collecting MFPs like honey, gooseberry, wild ginger, shikakai and various types of herbs from the sanctuary.

Bhavani Sagar MLA P L Sundaram and many forest activists are expected to join hundreds of tribals in Arepalayam village when they move into the forest on January 2.

"Article 3 (c) of chapter II of the Forest Rights Act allows tribals to gather over 28 types of non-timber produce from the forest, including wild honey and gooseberry. In fact, we were enjoying the right for generations and it was partially discontinued only when forest brigand Veerappan became active in the region. After Veerappan was killed in 2004, 28 village forest committees with 4,300 beneficiaries were set up to collect MFPs from the sanctuary. Between 2004 and 2011, the committees used to collect and sell forest produce from 23,000 hectares and earn an average of a crore rupees annually. After paying wages to the collectors, we could save up to Rs 29 lakh every year, which would then be deposited in bank accounts maintained by the committees. But the committees were disbanded as a prelude to declare the sanctuary a tiger reserve," says P Dorai of Tamil Nadu Pazhamkudi Makkal Sanghom, a forum of forest dwellers.

Sundaram, CPI leader and local MLA, says the move to declare Sathyamangalam reserve a tiger reserve at the cost of the traditional rights of forest dwellers was initiated by a forest conservator who has since been suspended from service for indecent behaviour. "In a bid to gather more funds, the department forsook the rights of tribals to access the jungles to collect forest produce and graze cattle," he says.

The MLA warned that the January 2 agitation would be the first major direct action against the self-seeking officials who have denied livelihood to hundreds of tribals. Residents from the villages of Thalavadi, Thiganare, Thinkalur, Panakkalli, Naithalpuram, Igalur, Thalamalai, Bainapuram, Hassanur and Germalam village panchayats are expected to participate in the public action.

Dorai says that the tribals and their cooperatives were the pride of the forest department until they mooted the tiger reserve project with the support of Union ministry of environment and forests. "We depend entirely on livestock and there is no land for us to graze them. The department is now forcing us to sell our goats and cows," he says.