

Tribals up in arms over tiger reserve declaration

COIMBATORE: The Tamil Nadu government's move to declare Sathyamangalam Wildlife Sanctuary as a tiger reserve drew strong protests from tribal groups and human rights activists, who said the administration has failed to address survival and livelihood issues of over 10,000 traditional forest dwellers in the former Veerappan lair. They said the notification was illegal as it was not issued in conformity with the Forest Rights Act and the Wildlife Protection (Amendment) Act.

Declaring that they would challenge the decision in court, they pointed out that no scientific study on the need for a tiger reserve was done as mandated by the law. No public consultation was held and no effort was taken to get the opinion and consent of the affected community, they said.

Showing copies of two letters recently written by Union tribal affairs minister V [Kishore Chandra Deo](#) to chief minister J Jayalalithaa and Tamil Nadu [chief secretary Sheela Balakrishnan](#), saying no major decision on forest management must be taken without addressing the rights of forest dwellers as envisaged in the two laws, Coimbatore-based rights activist C R Bijoy said the hasty decision needs to be challenged as it would not be beneficial either to tigers or to tribals. "The forest department is saying it has honoured a suggestion from the Union ministry of environment and forests to give tiger reserve status to Sathyamangalam. In fact, it has violated clear guidelines from the tribal affairs ministry on protecting the rights of tribals and other forest dwellers," he said.

Tamil Nadu Pazhamkudi Makkal Sanghom convener S Mohankumar challenged the claim of forest officials that there would be no eviction of tribals living in the core area and buffer zone. "The notification exempts only the huts of tribals. As their livelihood is totally integrated with the surrounding forests, this concession would be meaningless," he said.

"Section 38V of the Wildlife Protection Act makes it mandatory for the forest department to consult the local community while initiating a tiger reserve project. All 19 grama sabhas in the region had passed separate resolutions last year against the plan. The Wildlife Protection Act stipulates that approval from the grama sabhas is essential before tiger reserve status is awarded to any forest area," said P L Sundaram, MLA.

"The local community is not against tigers or their protection. The authorities must consider our rights and desist from unilateral attempts," Mohankumar said.

Local tribal leader P Durai said forest officials have already started driving out tribals.

"Tribal areas are discriminated against when it comes to development. Forest officials prevent the highways department from repairing our roads. Though funds have been allotted, government schools in the region are not maintained well. We are also prevented from collecting minor forest produce and grazing cattle. In fact, we have been directed to sell our cattle and look for alternative means of livelihood," he alleged. "We were the pride of the forest department till they mooted the tiger reserve project. 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 said.