



# Spectrum

Tuesday, August 21, 2007

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- Oscar Wilde

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**Soligas in Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary are a distressed lot. The Forest Departments ban on the collection of non-timber forest produce for commercial use has affected them to a great extent, writes Keya Acharya.**

It is mid-May and the rains are still awaited at Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (BRT) in Chamarajanagar district. Somewhere inside, a Nilgiri's whistling thrush spellbinds with its magical trilling.

But the enchantment is shortlived amid the palpable distress amongst the Soliga tribe living inside BRT, by the Forest Department's (FD) ban on collecting non-timber forest produce (NTFP) since 2006. Section 29 of the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act 2002 now bans NTFF collection, such as honey, herbs and fruits for commercial purposes from parks and sanctuaries, but allows it for personal livelihood use for forest-dwellers.

Approximately 12,500 (total population 30,000) Soligas live inside BRT and have been doing so for centuries, growing a little food and relying heavily on NTFF sales for daily sustenance. Their close link with the forests has given them a deep knowledge of ecology.

Till the ban, Soligas had usufruct rights to collect NTFF and sell them to their own co-operative LAMPs (Large-scale Adivasi Multipurpose Society) which in turn would auction them to the highest bidder. But families are now facing starvation.

Sitting around an old banyan tree inside Vivekenanda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK), the medical and educational institute set up by award-winning Dr Sudarshan, a group of Soliga elders hesitantly give a team from Pune-based environmental NGO Kalpavriksh, a glimpse into their suffering. Facing a livelihood loss with the NTFF ban, family members are now having to commute long distances in search of seasonal, menial jobs.

"We have to spend Rs 25 daily from our daily wage of Rs 60 to travel by bus to and from Kuntigudi if we find work there and we have no food to carry or eat," they say.

At Kanneri colony, a relocated settlement, 40-year-old Veeramma sits dully at her front door. For a while she found work as a daily-wage labourer in a coffee estate nearby, now that too has dried up. Her husband, Chikkananjegowda, once an active contributor to LAMPs, is unemployed.

In another hut alongside, 42-year-old Gowramma says her family manages one meal a day by travelling 25 km daily to cut cane. "The deputy commissioner of forests threatens us if we walk through the forests, so we have to spend money taking a bus," she says.

Earlier, she and her husband earned Rs 5-6,000 per annum from NTFF sales to LAMPs, but now even the four self-help groups in the area have no work. Gowramma pleads for Forest Department jobs to cut out the costs of commuting, but short-term work this year from the FD has been practically non-existent.

"Till now, we had no problem with the Forest Department," she says, "but this year has been different."

It certainly has. From being a relative model of good relations between the tribal community and the forest staff, BRT has deteriorated into a mutual lack of trust. Forest fires in March 2007 have been blamed on the tribals, several of them rounded up, arrested and subsequently released on a personal surety of Rs 2,000 each, making each of them need to spend a further Rs 25 per day to commute to report to the nearest forest office at Kuntigudi.

The State Wildlife Advisory Board, in its recent meeting, has taken recognition of this issue and will be writing to the Union Government to allow the Soligas their livelihood from NTFF inside BRT. But the entire process of decision making is time-consuming. Meanwhile, the distress continues.

"I think we need jobs," says C Madegowda, the first Soliga postgraduate from the VGKK school, now working with ATREE's (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment) centre at BRT. ATREE works with VGKK to help Soligas in conservation and livelihood. One of 3 postgraduates, 7 graduates and one PhD in VGKK's school alumni, Madegowda says a majority of Soligas drop out after school because of lack of finances to study further.

There appears to be no system in the FD at all to recruit Soliga youth locally

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within the department.

Dr Sudarshan says the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) scheme, absent in BRT, is "absolutely necessary to the tribals, more so because NTFP collection has been banned."

"They could easily work out 100 days of employment through desilting tanks, rainwater harvesting and watershed construction," he says.

Sudarshan is offering resources including trained youth for forest conservation, in a bid to undertake collaborative and participatory management of BRT.

"I am fully convinced that conservation and livelihood can go together. Give me the chance to show it," says Sudarshan.

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