

KUDREMUKH PARK AND NAXALS Deccan Herald, Tuesday, May 31, 2005

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Opposition to the Kudremukh National Park on the pretext of fighting Naxals will only help vested interests

There is a raging debate that the Kudremukh National Park has triggered Naxalite activity. Several intellectuals and social activists who had opposed mining are now, ironically, opposing the National Park to solve the Naxalite problem.

Under pressure, the government appears to have lapped up this rather simplistic view and is pressing the Centre to amend forest laws. But interestingly, it has been reported that the Home Secretary, Karnataka, has given a new spin to the issue by telling the Union Home Minister that there will be a spurt in Naxalism if mining in Kudremukh is stopped. So, who actually benefits from these intellectual arguments that have been cleverly utilised to support backroom manoeuvres to denotify the National Park — disenfranchised tribals or the iron ore mine?

Vested interests

Such vested interests have also launched a misinformation campaign to confuse the public. This is cleverly targeted at winning the support of well meaning intellectuals and social activists by spreading falsehood on three core issues — that the people in the National Park will be evicted; formation of the park will help MNCs; and tourism in the Park will lead to exploitation of women. We need to understand the real facts before further damage is done by such falsehood and naïve analyses.

First, the formation of the National Park has not/will not forcibly evict anybody including tribal people. This is because the final notification issued in June 2001 has left out all revenue villages and settlements including various bonafide rights of people from the purview of the National Park. Therefore the question of forcible eviction does not arise. Further, while dealing with a similar situation in Bhadra and Nagarahole, the government has established a good precedent by providing compensation and allotting alternative lands even to landless marginal farmers who volunteered to move out.

Second, the notifying of the park actually strengthens protection of biodiversity assets because the Wildlife Act clearly prohibits MNCs and mining companies from exploiting Kudremukh.

Third, the Wildlife Act prohibits commercial activity including tourist resorts within the park. This exposes the ludicrous assumptions and real interests behind the spreading of such falsehood.

What are the underlying issues? Obviously there are powerful interests who are trying to exploit the volatile situation. There are other strategic objectives as well. Kudremukh is one of the largest blocks of evergreen forests in the Western Ghats. This hilly forested area is difficult to access, particularly during the monsoons. The remoteness and hostile terrain makes Kudremukh a safe haven for Naxal elements. Even the most hardened followers of the Che Guevara manual cannot simply operate off remote jungles. Here, Naxalites are using

interior hamlets for critical food/medical supplies and cover, with hapless people either perceiving them as messiahs of social justice or just overwhelmed by fear. Strategists also know that for the government, it would be a sensitive issue to send out armed police forces since it would result in local people getting caught in the crossfire.

Other dimensions

There are other dimensions too. As compared to the dry areas of Andhra Pradesh where the still prevalent zamindari system breeds Naxalism, the socio- economic situation in the Malnad areas of Dakshina Kannada, Udipi and Chikmagalur is different. Here, extensive land reforms resulted in equitable redistribution of land in the seventies.

The daily wage offered to farm workers is around one hundred rupees. Furthermore, the literacy levels in some of these areas are high. Since Naxalism cannot take root under these circumstances, the fear of eviction from the National Park is being drummed up. Knowing the polemics of this issue, vested interests analysed that they could insidiously operate under this façade.

Around 100,000 hectares of forests, primarily in the Western Ghats, have been encroached, 80 per cent of which is by powerful land grabbers. Diluting forest laws greatly benefits them as well as miners and timber loggers. Linking the Naxalite issue to this will only help those who are attempting to establish private/commercial control over forest land and not people in need of social justice.

The biodiversity assets of Western Ghats are worth thousands of crores of rupees. Valuable genes, chemicals, medicinal plants, fibers, enzymes are locked up here. As an agrarian society we cannot gloss over the fact that biodiversity rich landscapes play a crucial role in stabilising climate, soil and sustaining several rivers which originate here.

The Western Ghats do not need ‘revolutionary’ ideas. What it needs is a long term vision for protecting the area. The government must therefore recast its poorly analysed policies that seem to be providing impetus to forces of forest destruction.

Wildlife Features