

TRIBAL RIGHTS AND NATURAL HERITAGE  
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**By Praveen Bhargav**

**If the STFR Bill is implemented, it runs the risk of destroying huge tracts of village and community forests.**

We are at a critical moment in the history of India's natural heritage which this generation merely inherited to hold in trust. This casts an important duty to act sensibly and hand over this natural heritage that encompasses our rain forests, myriad species of wildlife and sacred rivers intact to the future. In our quest for development we have appropriated huge amounts of natural resources. As a result we are now down to a mere four per cent of good forest cover. Even that is wilting under tremendous pressure from developmental and livelihood needs.

Our survival is inextricably linked to forests. Loss of forests due to encroachments has already caused ecological damage to the long-term viability of India's rivers, soils, agriculture, and biodiversity resources. As a rising economic power and with growing aspirations of one billion people, we certainly cannot compromise on the effort to secure forests, our natural life support systems.

At this juncture, we are about to enact a law — the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill (STFR). We are claiming to do this ostensibly to correct a historical social injustice that has been perpetrated on tribal communities by alienating them from forested habitats.

The underlying goal of the STFR Bill appears laudable. However, the means of delivering such justice is fraught with the twin danger of not only failing to provide social justice to deprived tribal communities but also permanently destroying our natural heritage treasure trove.

This bill, if implemented in its present form, will surely result in a huge land scam. Huge tracts of forests will be fragmented and taken over by powerful land grabbers using tribal beneficiaries as human shields. Mining and logging interests will greatly benefit from this move and cause further damage.

### **Considering losses**

We should be wiser and consider the loss of huge tracts of village/community forests which are not governed by forest laws but managed entirely by local communities, to realize the real impact of the STFR Bill. Furthermore, the extirpation of the Cheetah, the near extirpation of the wolf and the restricted distribution of breeding tigers to less than 0.5 per cent of their former distributional range show clearly that their co-existence with humans has cost them dearly.

However, the problem of tribals living in forests is a serious one. Unlike in vast rain forests of Amazon, we are not talking of primitive cultures living at low densities of 4-5 people per 100 sq km. We are dealing with entire villages, people with aspirations for carrying on agriculture, improving their economic status by generating cash incomes from virtually bottomless

markets. Essentially, these people require all services such as hospitals, schools, roads, communication, bridges and jobs.

While people from other rural communities are availing the benefits of modernity, it would be unfair to condemn tribal communities to collecting products in forests infested with dangerous elephants, bears and disease-bearing ticks. It is illogical to assume that millions of tribals can progress in the future only by collecting forest products while people from empowered communities corner all good agricultural land and opportunities.

Therefore, all the services and economic development must be delivered to dis-enfranchised tribal people but not to the heart of our protected area network. An attractive and site specific package must be provided in a transparent and participatory manner outside the protected area.

In Karnataka, such a strategy has shown considerable promise in Bhadra and Nagarahole reserves with people themselves making the right choices. When the government offered a sensible resettlement package and implemented it sincerely in a participatory manner along with NGOs, around 700 families voluntarily moved out. Using the land allotted, they are working enthusiastically to improve their quality of life by utilizing services like roads, education, health care. If this is not real social justice and empowerment, what is?

### **Win-win solution**

These case studies highlight the potential of the idea which can be adapted to suit other areas which can result in a win-win solution to this vexed issue. Therefore, the STFR Bill needs to be recast in a pragmatic manner to ensure that all wildlife reserves are protected and sensible, site specific voluntary resettlement packages are offered to people marooned inside. Fragmentation and honeycombing in ecologically important tracts of forests/wetlands which are crucial water catchments and contiguous with some wildlife reserves forming large blocks of 500 to 1000 sq km must not be allowed.

The bottom line is that we simply cannot afford to make any mistakes since the forests we propose to dismantle cannot be recreated. This mandates that we move with considerable caution and rise above ideological and political compulsions to evolve a visionary, long term solution.

*Wildlife First Features*