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Villagers of Megamalai Forest Range Driven Away

From the Manjanoothu check post limits in Megamalai Forest Range in Theni Revenue Division start the 12 hill villages including Vellimalai and Arasaradi. To travel between these villages, commencing from the Manjanoothu check post, one has to walk a distance of three / four miles. There are no road facilities in this region and one has to either walk or go on horseback on the mud track path in the hilly region.

Pulses, greens and varieties of millets are cultivated in between the trees for food. Apart from this the occupation of the people of this region is to grow trees and sell cotton taken from cotton trees in the Varushanadu hills. In the village of Arasaradi alone, around 300 families reside. The total population of people residing in these 12 villages is above 5000.

Until 1963 this region remained an uninhabited hilly area. It was in the beginning of the year 1964 that Manjanoothu forest range was formed, Govt. funds were allocated for it and Forest Officers were appointed.

In order to clear off the fallen leaves, debris and old trees to prevent incidence of forest fires and to plant new varieties of trees in the hilly areas that come under this forest range, people from the nearby villages of the plains and hills were brought and made to settle there.

In the initial period, these people were paid wages of Rs.1 ¼ per working day and in periods when there was no work they were allowed to earn a living by cultivating crops in between the trees of the hills. Later 3 *padis* (a padi is a measure equivalent to one and a quarter kilogram) of rice was also given to each family on a weekly basis. The amount of wages and the rationed rice have always been decided by the forest officers who have been transferred to this region at different points of time.

In the year 1976 Forest officials came to these villages and informed that these regions were to be announced 'Reserved Forests' and ordered that the residents vacate the area. The people said that they did not know any other work and if they left the place they didn't have any other place to set up their houses and remained in that region. From that time the Forest officers seem to have started torturing these hill residents. There is a single Primary School for all the 12 villages, in Arasaradi, situated in the foothills. This school too has only two teachers. Students of this school do not continue their education elsewhere after 5th grade. They go for work in the forests with their parents. No facilities have been provided in any of these villages. The villages are illuminated through solar energy.

All the hill residents have been provided ration cards. In the last elections these people were included in the voters' list and they cast votes. There is a single Panchayat President for all the 12 villages. Despite the fact that these villages have been provided such Govt. Services, the forest rangers do not allow them to stay permanently in this region and are chasing them from there.

The condition that prevails in these regions is such that no 'outsider' (person other than the residents of the 12 villages) can enter. Even the villagers are compelled to go to Varusha Nadu at 9.00 a.m. in the morning to sell vegetables and return home by 5.00 in the evening. The houses of these villagers have thatched roofs made of leaves and grass and they are not permitted to construct concrete houses made of cement and bricks. They are also denied permission to rear cattle. They cannot invite their relatives who reside in the plains or neighbouring villages for functions in their houses / village. On rare occasions when they are given work, the men are paid just Rs.30 per day and women are paid even lesser.

By not providing basic amenities and subjecting them to various means of psychological torture, the Forest Officials are trying to evacuate these people, who have been residing in these villages for the past 50 years and have become one with the soil. Recently a bear that entered a village at night mauled a person and tore his eye. The eyeball protruded out of the socket and he was carried downhill for treatment but the officials at the check post did not permit him to be carried further. Only after dawn he was taken to the hospital.

Speaking about this, Forest Officer Srinivasa Reddy says, "This Forest is Govt. owned. The residents of the hill are living on the Govt.'s *poramboke* land. So, when

the Govt. asks them to leave, they have to leave. Very soon this area is to be made a 'Reserved Forest'".

The villagers of these hills say, "We know no other job. We neither have the land to build house elsewhere nor the funds for that. So the Govt. should provide us with this land itself to build houses and thereby save us."

There are elephants in this area. Since the past 10 years elephants have never come to this area. Hiding this fact, the forest officials claim that this is an area that is frequented by elephants and hence it has to be protected. The villagers say that this is totally false.

Moreover in recent times, forest officials and local politicians have used these people to cultivate Ganja and have reaped profits through this. When Govt. pressure mounts the forest officials arrest people of this region under sections of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act and subject them to torture. The villagers of these hills are also often made victims in the struggle for power between the forest officials and the local politicians.

Although a lot of Govt. schemes like '2 acres of land for the landless poor', the Tribal Welfare Bill, 'electricity for all', 'colour television sets for people residing in huts' and 'housing plots for people who have been residing in *poramboke* lands for more than 10 years' are being talked about, this 'chasing away from govt. land' that is against these poor helpless villagers is also proceeding side by side. The Govt. should take this into account.