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Defiant

The Bilirangan Temple Sanctuary in Karnataka bristles with angry Soligas. Their sustenance denied, the tribals deliberate their next move

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Defiant



"What shall we do if all our protests fail?" asks C Madegowda, a

leader of the Soliga tribe from district Chamrajnagar, Karnataka. "We shall protest yet again," responds B Jadegowda, president of Zilla Budakattu Girijana Abhivradhi Sangh, Chamrajnagar -- a Soliga association. Jadegowda and Madegowda are among five Soliga leaders discussing an impending threat to their community's livelihood: a ban on collecting non-timber forest produce (ntfp) from the Bilirangan Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (brt), Karnataka, is on the state government's anvil (See *Down To Earth*, 'Stop Trade,' Vol 13 No 9, September 30). More than 7,500 Soliga families make a living by collecting honey, lichen, and other ntfp from the 540-square kilometre sanctuary.

Back at the meeting, Jadegowda looks around for approval. There is none coming, so he remarks again: "We shall go on a hunger strike." This time, the others shake their head gently in approval. Jadegowda betrays a grimace, which quickly melts into a frown. He is a budding politician, but has never lead 'his people' in a crisis such as this. Not surprisingly, Jadegowda -- like the others -- is a little unsure about the next move.

On deaf ears "We have been to the forest department (fd) in Bangalore once, written several letters to government officials, held a rally and even protested in the streets of Chamrajnagar," says Madegowda. "The deputy chief minister even promised to take up our case with the fd and our legislators assured us that a question would be put up in the assembly." "But they never did that and the assembly session is over now," retorts an angry C Madappa, convenor of Rajaya Mullnivasi Budakattu Janara Vedike -- another Soliga political association.

Why have all petitions fallen on deaf ears? Venkat -- who works with the BRT-based non-governmental organisation (ngo), Vivekananda Girijan Kalyan Kendra (vgkk) -- explains later: "They'll never get politicians to work for them. The Soligas are distributed over several assembly constituencies and so are not a solid vote bank."

Back again at the meeting, Madegowda reworks the tribe's plan. "We'll have to approach the courts. Go to Delhi. Have you heard of Wyanad (wildlife sanctuary)?" he queries. " ntfp collection has been banned there as well. The tribal people there are going to the Supreme Court. We should join them," he asserts.

But Venkat has his apprehensions: "The court verdict, whether in our favour or not, will be final. If it goes against us, there will be no alternatives. I must convince them to look for other avenues." He is worried for the Soligas. After all, the vgkk has worked for two decades, building up capacities and institutions in the region: the primary health centre, the higher secondary school and a honey-bottling factory.

The wedge between The impromptu meeting in the courtyard of Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment's (atree, another ngo which works in the sanctuary) field station breaks off for tea. Siddapa Shetty, the lead researcher at the station for the last eight years -- and a very vocal supporter of the Soligas -- sends the tea over, but shies away from sitting with the group -- this despite being Madegowda's colleague at atree. "Let them talk in private, they might voice apprehensions that they won't while I am there," he says. What fears? "Well, doubts were sowed in their minds that atree submitted research results forcing the government to ban collection," he says sadly. "It's preposterous. We never asked for any ban. My research clearly shows that the extraction levels of *amla* and honey are sustainable if you look at regeneration rates," he declares.

But a section of the fd doubts the ngo. " atree is up to mischief. I am not sure what their research is for," says B K Dixit, deputy conservator of forests, in-charge of the sanctuary. The fd under Dixit has so far bought the ntfp collected by Soligas and then sold it in the market -- making nearly Rs 60 lakhs annually. atree, with the fd's help and permission, has been monitoring the impact of this activity on the forest. And vgkk has been working to ensure that the Soligas get a fair share of the proceeds. Quite a unique collaboration in India, believe many. But now the air is rife with distrust.

"First we believed that atree had backstabbed us, then we rethought; it couldn't be them, they have always helped us," says Tambade Jadegowda, a resident of the Yerakanagade *podu* (Soliga hamlet) in the sanctuary. "It must be the government, I am told it was the Union government which banned our work. Do you think they will actually enforce the ban?" he asks plainatively.

The short lease

What's given every one a short lease of life is a letter by Dixit to his higher-ups in the fd. It justifies ntfp extraction by Soligas as merely a form of sustenance, and not a commercial venture -- so not meriting a ban. Nitin Rai, another atree researcher, says, "The letter has helped. It was quite bold of Dixit to write it."

The tribals, though happy about the letter, are a little unsure of its ramifications. "We cannot just sit and wait for the government's decision," contends Madegowda. "The uncertainty has forced some of us to randomly collect as much ntfp as we can, forgetting the age-old Soliga method of limited extraction," he adds. Shetty agrees: "What else do you expect? If I knew the opportunity will not exist tomorrow, I shall try to make the best of it today."

"If the ban is finally imposed, we shall collect ntfp ourselves and sell it directly at the local market, for whatever price we get. We have no alternatives. I will not become a bonded labour," asserts Jadegowda, even as Madegowda remembers the times when private contractors enjoyed extraction rights in brt and the Soligas were paid less than one-twentieth of what they get now. That was before the fd set up societies to collect and sell ntfp and pay the Soligas a reasonable daily wage; before atree came in to assist; and, before vgkk came in to create a working relation - not replicated elsewhere in the country.

"Right now the forest guards have been asked to not stop us from extraction. But it's a matter of time; once the final orders come we shall be their sworn enemies," rues a Soliga elder.

The meeting at the atree complex is among the several Soliga deliberations held in the wake of the ban. At another such meeting, someone makes a reference to a recent incident, when some tribals, abused and beaten by forest guards, retaliated by burning down a large chunk of the forest.

Gatherings such as these usually take place in evenings; the days are for tough work. Even these gatherings do not last beyond a few hours. The bleakness of the discussions gets to everyone; people break away, very often, in guffaws after someone cracks a joke at their plight -- their 'officially-recognised backwardness'. "Our youngsters want 'development', they want work in cities. But right now we have to find ways to remain 'backward,'" Madegowda chortles. He knows that Dixit has pleaded their case claiming Soligas are destitute. The Soligas wince at this description, but justify it in front of 'outsiders'. "Maybe this is social development," Madegowda remarks bitterly.

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Rural holiday



To commune with the rugged beauty of a hilly terrain with a touch of the

pristine about it, from the snug comfort of rustic dwellings -- a tourist's dream, one could say. Kewzing village in Ravangla sub-division of south Sikkim brings this image to life with its Village Home Stay programme.

Under the programme, launched in 2003, foreign tourists can stay with a village family as guests. The villagers have set up an elected, registered body - the Kewzing Tourism Development Committee (ktdc) -- that charges us \$60 per foreign tourist per day and later pays the host families.

The ktdc regulates tourism, ensuring the profits are evenly distributed among the 20 families participating in the programme. The ktdc has set strict tourism rules. No hotel or resort is allowed in the village, nor can a family allot more than two rooms to tourists. Charges are fixed for various tourist activities and giving tips to host families is not allowed.

Says ktdc general secretary Jigme Womchuk, " ktdc makes all travel bookings. All tourists have to come through ktdc, which ensures financial regularity. We want the whole village to develop and flourish as part of our programme, hence the thrust is on community participation." In the first year of the programme, Kewzing attracted about 90 foreign tourist families, which raised the annual income of each participating family by Rs 6,300.

What sets Kewzing apart from other villages trying similar experiments is that its villagers have not divorced their earlier lifestyle to promote tourism. The tribal Bhutia community village continues to grow organic vegetables, which are supplied to nearby states; and also grows organic cardamom that is exported to the Middle East. "Tourism is seen just as a means of supplementing the village income," says Womchuk, who is also a primary school teacher. The programme is run through the year, though the best time to visit the village is from October to June.

Rural thrust The idea of integrating tourism into the rural economy of Kewzing came from Sikkim Development Foundation (sdf), a Gangtok-based non-governmental organisation. "As tourism was gaining ground in Sikkim, we felt that rural areas were not benefiting from it. All the money remained in the hands of urban people. Also we wanted tourists to understand that Sikkim is

more than just Gangtok and Peling," says sdf executive director Karma P Takapa.

But developing this model of tourism was not easy. In 2001, 3-4 villages were identified for simultaneously launching the Home Stay programme. The idea was that villagers will not go for new construction, but will utilise an extra room in their house for the programme. Unfortunately, all the villages identified were found unsuitable on closer inspection -- either they had insufficient infrastructure or were difficult to access. The sdf then contacted an expert in Nepal who has done similar work in Sirubari village near Pokhara in the Himalayan kingdom. He helped sdf identify Kewzing and conduct capacity building exercises in the village. "Kewzing is located on the main road and has basic infrastructure. All we did was to organise local people and guide them to keep their area clean and well-sanitised. The idea of this programme is to treat tourists like family guests. Serve them nicely without becoming artificial," says Takapa.

The programme is also helping revive interest in the local culture. Every evening, the villagers organise a cultural programme for the guests. "Earlier we could not even sing a Bhutia song, but now we sing, dance and practice regularly," says Womchuk.

The programme has been a boon for the village youth. Take the case of Chong, an avid bird watcher, who is now the official guide of the village and earns Rs 1,500 a month. ktdc is sending Chong to Gwalior to study for a Bachelor's degree in tourism. Other unemployed people have also been roped in. ktdc has also tied up with travel agents in Gangtok, who send tourists to this Bhutia village. "Sikkim government is promoting tourism but it should look at our model. Haphazard construction will spoil the original beauty of our state," says Womchuk.

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