

## Conservator writes to PM about Kerala's largest-ever forest loot

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The massive deforestation drive in Kerala's fragile forests that saw large scale illegal felling of rare varieties of trees recently took a new turn on Tuesday as a highly respected conservator of forests in the State known for his passion towards preserving nature writing to Prime Minister Narendra Modi asking for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into the controversy.

Every day in the State is marked by disclosures of how priceless and rare breed of trees that command premium prices in global market are cut down by a cartel consisting of politicians, bureaucrats and brigands. The politicians consist of many CPI leaders who act as environmentalists during day time and change their roles to that of forest brigands during night hours, according to P K Ramachandran, former head of the Kerala State Bio Diversity Board.

James Mathew, a Conservator of Forests who hang up his boots in 2019 and has more than three decades of experience in the forests of the State have written a heart rending letter to Prime Minister Modi asking for a CBI probe into the massive illegal felling of trees from the reserve forests as well as from de-notified forest land which was offered to the tribals on the condition tat they would not touch the trees in the concerned land.

The CPI Ministers who were holding the forest and revenue portfolios in the previous Pinarayi Vijayan led Government (2016-2021) got government orders issued on 17-8-2017 and 24-10-2020 giving permission to cut down any trees from these patta lands as well as forest land. "These Government Orders were against the prevailing Act and Rules which are in force since 1964. According to the law of the land, patta for revenue lands are issued as per Section 9 of the Kerala Land Assignment Rule 1964 which states that the Right of the Trees is vested with the Government. Though it is against the law to cut down any scheduled trees, the Government Orders permit to fell all trees except sandalwood," pointed out Mathew in his letter to Modi.

He further pointed out that even the payment of seigniorage as per section 10(3) of the Rules was only for the trees specially mentioned in the Act and not for the four trees mentioned in the schedule. This, Ramachandran, says is a slap on the face of the Government as its excuses and explanations have fallen like a pack of cards.

The Kerala Preservation of Trees Act 1986 restricts felling of trees in notified areas and there is restriction for cutting any trees in patta lands. Mathews explains listing all rules that as per Promotion of Tree Growth Act, lands assigned to Tribals and Cardamom Hill Reserve will not come under the definition of Non Forest Area. "Even mangroves , coffee and cardamom plantations are notified areas and this makes the Government Order illegal," said Mathew.

"Further the Government Orders carry an unwarranted threatening sentence to facilitate the illegal felling by demotivating the implementing officials. Large number of trees were felled across the State and actual figures are only coming, A large number may go unreported," said the conservator.

He says that the inquiry cannot be limited to lower level or mid-level. "Kindly initiate a CBI inquiry so as to bring out the conspiracy at Department Heads level and at Government level to bring out the corruption and fraud in issuing an illegal order which caused extensive financial loss and environmental damage to the State. Standing trees are of great ecological and environmental importance. It is our National wealth. Inquiry by State Agencies may not bring the higher level conspiracy. Hence in the interest of the nation I humbly request to initiate a CBI inquiry so that this type of nonsense will not occur in future," Mathew wrote to the Prime Minister.

Source:<https://www.dailypioneer.com/2021/india/conservator-writes-to-pm-about-kerala-s-largest-ever-forest-loot.html>