

Hands off forest land as court foils conversion plan

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Forest land in urban areas is always susceptible to encroachment or conversion into revenue land

Court orders criminal case against Revenue officer for converting forest land into revenue land; environmentalists applaud first such case

The Metropolitan Magistrate Traffic Court, Mayo Hall, has ordered the registration of a criminal case against Assistant Commissioner (Revenue) Bengaluru North and Bengaluru East Tahsildar for converting 17 acres and 34 guntas of forest land into revenue land in violation of the Forest Conservation Act. Billed as the first such case in the annals of Karnataka, environmentalists hailed it and urged the authorities to take measures to retain the forest land that is either encroached upon or converted into revenue land.

The Metropolitan Magistrate, based on a private complaint lodged by Deputy Conservator of Forests, Bengaluru Urban, on November 29 ordered a criminal case against the accused and adjourned the case to December 29. The land (17 acres and 34 guntas) is located in Kothanur village in Bengaluru East Taluk.

The Magistrate stated that it is not out of place to mention that, accused no. 1 and 2 being revenue officials, having knowledge of the order of Honourable High Court of Karnataka in respect of the land, changed the entry. “It amounts to disobedience and contempt. Indeed sanction accorded against the accused no. 2 by competent authority. However, accused no. 1, who is Assistant Commissioner, being a revenue official expected to have knowledge of the settled position in respect of the land. When the honourable Division Bench elar and unequivocal terms held that land belongs to forest department, he would have enquired passing any order. Accused no. 1 and 2 not only violated and disobeyed the order of the honourable High Court of Karnataka but also not considered Section 2 of the Conservation of Forest Act,” said the magistrate in the order.

The magistrate said the land in question is forest land, the duty of preservation of which is thrust upon every citizen and more specifically the court of law. “Taking note of the fact that there is blatant violation of honourable High Court’s order and also considering that no hardship would be caused to the accused if cognizance taken and summons issued against them. This court is of the considered view that it is a fit case to

take cognizance and summon the accused,” the magistrate said in the order.

Kudos to DCF

Environmentalists have appreciated the Deputy Conservator of Forests for lodging a private complaint against the Assistant Commissioner (Revenue) and Tahsildar of Bengaluru East Taluk. They also demanded that the forest department initiate similar action against those responsible for encroaching or transferring forest land across the state.

“I thank the DCF for lodging a private complaint against the revenue officers who are responsible for converting forest land into revenue land. I am very happy with the Magistrate Court ordering a criminal case against the accused persons,” said Dr AN Yellappa Reddy, an environmentalist.

I thank the DCF for lodging a complaint against the revenue officers responsible for this conversion

—AN Yelappa Reddy, environmentalist

Stating that it is encouraging that the government has taken stern action against revenue officers for fabricating land records, Joseph Hoover, an environmentalist, said that environmentalists will be more happy if the government ensures that there is coordination between the revenue and forest departments. “This synergy will help to save reserve forests and discourage the rich from building ranches and home stays in the midst of the elephant corridor. It will help to mitigate human-animal conflicts and save both man and elephants,” said Hoover.

Meanwhile, Forest Minister Eshwar B Khandre said that he has already directed the forest officers to take measures to recover the forest land. “I welcome the court order on registering criminal complaints against the revenue officers. It will convey a strong message to those responsible for converting forest land into revenue land,” the minister said.