

KARNATAKA

Questions over declassifying deemed forests

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

MYSURU APRIL 28, 2022 19:03 IST

UPDATED: APRIL 28, 2022 19:03 IST

Conservationists fear it may legalise large-scale encroachments

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Conservationists aver the State Government's decision to declassify nearly 6.5 lakh acres of deemed forests and transfer it to the Revenue Department will legalise large-scale encroachment by the powerful under the fig leaf of securing the rights of the poor.

Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai on Wednesday said that he signed a Cabinet decision to release 6.5 lakh acres of land from deemed forest classification and will submit an affidavit to the Supreme Court.

A section of Forest Department officials too concur with the view and said on conditions of anonymity that though the State Government has taken the decision, the status does not change on the ground unless approved by the Supreme Court.

Activists working at the ground level said at a time when there was growing global consciousness of issues such as climate change and global warming, the Karnataka Government was taking a regressive step by declassifying deemed forest instead of increasing forest cover.

Conservation activist D.V. Girish said what the Government has set out to do is to convert what is essentially public land at present to private lands. These are contentious issues as it is tantamount to legalising illegal encroachment and goes against the grain of the law.

Another conservationist said as the issue involved 6.5 lakh acres, the Government should furnish evidence of how many poor people are utilising the land and the extent of ownership claimed by them. "One cannot accept at face value that all the 6.5 lakh acres is held by the poor. There will be rich corporates and real estate tycoons apart from powerful politicians claiming ownership of the deemed forest and could be influencing Government decision", said the activist.

Citing an example he pointed out that there was a case of 200 people sustaining themselves on 400 acres of land in a swathe of about 1,000 acres of deemed forest in South Karnataka region. But the remaining 600 acres was encroached by 15 people and the second lot was not dependent on it for survival, said the activist.

Forest Department officials argued that in case 6.5 lakh acres of deemed forest was declassified, then finding land for rehabilitation of forest dwellers will be a tough proposition in future. The deemed forest land also acted as a buffer zone to protected areas and could be part of wildlife corridor. In view of escalating human-animal conflict it would be imprudent to declassify 6.5 lakh acres without ascertaining the exact location and the characteristic of the land.

A senior official said the Government decision goes against the spirit of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, which was enacted to prevent deforestation and arrest ecological imbalance. The law also calls for provisions to conserve forest irrespective of the nature of ownership or its classification.

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