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CURRENT AFFAIRS

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Windmills on lush, prime forest land, by forging papers and conning tribals. All in a day's work

BY SHAHINA KK

WHEN THE District Collector offered 65-year-old Rajamma five acres of forest land in Attappady, a major tribal belt of Kerala, she thought Lady Luck was smiling on her. It was a government project to promote farming among tribals of Attappady. She shifted to the plot, 40 km from her own small holding, but soon the scheme petered out. Left with no means of livelihood, she returned to Nalla Sinka village only to find that an outsider had occupied her land. The sale documents looked authentic.

With the support of a group of youngsters, Rajamma repossessed her land and built a hut. But her ordeal is unlikely to end there. "I have complained to all the authorities. There is nobody to help us," she says, disillusioned. "People like you are coming and talking to us. How do we know you don't intend to cheat us?"



Negative energy Windmills tower over a village in Attappady region of Kerala's Palakkad district (left) as the tribals whom the government has given rights over traditional habitat protest in vain (right)

over 224 acres, 50 acres belong to the forest department and the rest to tribals. But the land mafia has bought and sold 400 acres by double-selling the same plot. Property is changing hands every few months, bringing profit to a small circle. Banks even offer loans against such property. For instance, nine deeds were signed on a single day, August 30, 2008, and resold on September 28. Technically, none of the companies bought land from tribals. Initially, duplicate documents are made in the name of individuals/middlemen. They transfer the land to corporates and multinationals. But revenue records (which show tax receipts) prove the land really belongs to the tribals.

Attappady is home to 6,000 tribal families in 180 hamlets scattered over 745 sq km in three panchayats. From being more than 91 percent of the population in 1951, the tribals have since been reduced to a minority. The non-tribal population has increased considerably due to migration from Tamil Nadu and other parts of Kerala. There is a sharp decline in agriculture as well. "It is a slow process of effacing them from their land, culture and agriculture," says KP Sukumaran, an activist fighting against landgrab in this region.

The region has gradually suffered ecological degradation, resulting in all classes of land — private farms, forest, riverbanks, wetlands and common lands — becoming wasteland. By the early 1990s, more than 80 percent of its people had sunk below the poverty line. Attappady was stricken with rampant child labour, migration to the plains, and disease and hunger. The tribes shifted from agriculture to labour generated by welfare schemes.

Under Kerala's Tribal Land Act of 1975, tribal land can only be sold to other tribals, that too in unavoidable circumstances, and the Supreme Court has asked the government to cancel all transactions after 1986. But the law is subverted by convincing Adivasis that the land is being taken on rent. Pune-based Sarjan Realities, which arranges land for Suzlon Energy Ltd, has managed to get 623 acres in Attappady, on which 30 windmills have been set up. Most of this is in Sholayoor and Agali Panchayats. When the project was inaugurated in 2007 by the state energy minister, Suzlon announced it aimed at producing 20 MW. Demand in the region being only 0.5 MW, most of the power would be utilised in other parts of Palakkad district.

When contacted for clarifications, Suresh Kumar K, assistant manager, Sarjan Realities, told TEHELKA the media should support 'development initiatives'. On being shown forged land papers, his response was that there might be a 'print error'.



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The natives suspect this love for
wind energy might be early signs of
a gold rush

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There is another twist to the whole affair. A Geological Survey of India study of 2005 revealed that Attappady has rich gold deposits. The natives suspect this sudden love for wind energy might be an early sign of a gold rush. Judging by the number of jewellers who have acquired land in the region, there may be some truth in this. Bhima Jewellery owns two windmills built by Suzlon. B Lakshmikanthan, managing director of Bhima Jewellery, answered most questions about illegal occupation of tribal land with "We don't know" and "We don't care".

MUMBAI-BASED Asian Star Company, which is in the jewellery and diamond business, also bought three Suzlon windmills that tower over Kottathara village, clearly forest land. It has wind energy units in Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Revenue authorities do not hesitate to give possession certificates on the basis of sale deeds, original or photocopied. These are mortgaged for loans that are never repaid. The bank authorities discover the documents are forged only when they try to recover the loans.

PK Rolling Mills, a Kerala-based steel company did not admit having a windmill, though Sarjan Realities named it as a buyer. The company told TEHELKA it does not own anything of the sort in Attappady. When told we have a copy of the deed, the conversation came to an abrupt end. Poppy Umbrella Mart, Anna Aluminum and Kerala Steel Associates are other names on the list.

"The real picture of land alienation is beyond imagination", says activist Sukumaran. "Nothing will happen even if you expose it. In course of time, revenue authorities will re-survey the land and the illegal deeds will be made legal." He expects the worst despite the protests, media reports and inquiries.

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