

SANCTUARIES

## A Sanctuary For Birds Only

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*"Thus, when any environmental issue is pursued to its origins, it reveals an inescapable truth—that the root cause of the crisis is not to be found in how men interact with nature, but in how they interact with each other—that, to solve an environmental crisis we must solve the problem of poverty, racial injustice and war; that the debt tonature which is the measure of the environmental crisis cannot be paid, person by person, in recycled bottles or ecologically sound habits, but in the ancient coin of social justice; that, in sum, a peace among men must precede the peace with nature."*

Barry Commoner, 'Ecology & Social Action'

*Six persons were killed and several injured in a police firing on November 7, 1982 at the Keoladeo Ghana National park in Bharatpur, Rajasthan.*

*A three member team was sent by Kalpavriksh to investigate into the incident. The following is their report :*

**Background :** The Keoladeo Ghana National Park has for centuries been the only grazing land for the surrounding villages since all other land is either waterlogged or saline—hence sparsely covered. The villages Aghapur and Kaproli especially are in a very serious condition. Two rivers flowing nearby, the Ban Ganga and the Gambhiri, flood their banks every monsoon. As a consequence only one crop is harvested in a year. Large portions of land have brackish water reserves which make them unsuitable for even fodder cultivation. These villages—and the position of the others is little better—are thus dependant on the sale of milk for a major part of their livelihood. In months late in the year, when food stocks were running low, the sale of milk assumed special importance. Hence, the

national park constituted an important part of the traditional economy of the surrounding villages.

The villagers have been grazing their cattle in the sanctuary for ages. Earlier it was the private hunting ground of the Maharaja of Bharatpur. When it was declared a sanctuary the government, recognising the traditional rights of the villagers, allowed them to graze their cattle on payment of a token levy. In August, 1981, the sanctuary was given 'National Park' status. As per the provisions of the Wildlife Act, 1972, it was required that the collector hold meetings with all the people who claim rights over the sanctuary and assess their claims. No meeting was held. Instead the villagers were informed that grazing would be stopped. This ban was lifted however by the forest minister after protests by the villagers.

Since then the villagers were often faced with the threat of stopping grazing, but nothing was done.

In October, 1982 in a meeting of the wildlife board,

the Prime Minister said that grazing in the sanctuary should be stopped soon. Immediately afterwards the state government decided to ban grazing.

**Incident :** This decision was to be implemented by the local district administration. Two meetings were held with the villagers to inform them about the decision. No alternatives were discussed, even though many more were suggested by the villagers. On the 6th of November the graziers were informed that grazing would be stopped from the next day. The same night the check gates were walled up. The next morning around 300 people from Aghapur and Kaproli broke the freshly built wall, let their cattle loose inside and squatted inside the gate as a mark of protest. In response to a lathi charge by the police, the villagers threw stones at the police who, gave a five minute ultimatum (in which there was no mention of firing...it just said : legal action would be taken). As the firing started the crowd began to rush back, but the firing continued (incidentally almost all injured received injuries in the back).



The police chased the fleeing villagers into the village and beat them, including those already wounded.

Later the people taking the wounded to the hospital were stopped and beaten up by the police. Those wounded were kept waiting without water or medical facilities for over three hours.

Today the villagers are in a pitiful state. The "forest land" allocated by the government (after the firing) for grazing is barren and completely devoid of any sign of vegetation. A few stall-feeding depots have been set up but they are too expensive for most villagers (the cattle also are used to green fodder and refuse to eat dry fodder). The government has given a subsidy of Rs. 30 per week per head of cattle, but only to 119 families in the area. This does not seem to be based on any study of the incomes or of the cattle owned by the families—several poor villagers with no or very little land and only a few head of cattle are not being given this subsidy, while many richer ones are. Hundreds of cattle

have died due to starvation. The villagers are faced with grave shortage of money and increasing poverty.....if this in itself was not enough, the police arrested around 30 villagers and charged them with criminal cases (including "attempt to murder").

This whole incident raises very serious questions about the nature of conservation which is being carried out in the country. The most disturbing aspect is that one does not find any concrete reason for banning grazing. Although overgrazing is known to harm the environment, grazing had been going on in this forest for over a century and no change in bird numbers have been attributed directly or indirectly to the practice of grazing. The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) has pointed out that decreasing numbers of birds of prey are due to pesticides used in neighbouring villages and the air pollution from nearby factories. Moreover, Dr. Vijayan of the BNHS informally told us that the cattle may actually benefit the health of the sanctuary and that the cattle numbers

could have been reduced. It seems now that the decision to stop grazing was a political one—perhaps to increase tourism prospects.

This act portrays the short sightedness of the governments' newly formed perspective on preservation of flora and fauna and also the definite bid to join hands with pseudo-conservationist groups bothered about nothing more than the markings on a bird's egg and, of course, having a good time in a sanctuary.

Moreover, people who are a definite part of the environmental cannot be removed from it and dealt with as a 'subordinate creature' whose existence does not alter the state of our environment. People surely cannot be alienated from the environment in which they exist. Dr. Salim Ali, the renowned ornithologist, has pointed out that officials often forget that the surrounding population should have some stake in the sanctuary i.e. that they should receive, or in some way benefit, from the revenue obtained by the sanctuary. They will otherwise always be antagonistic towards it.

*(Contd. from page 1)*

It upsets the traditional economy of the area and imposes its own culture and its own ethics. The symbiotic relationship between Man and environment, developed over centuries, is thus eroded, creating ecologically unstable situations. Moreover, it leads to a lack of concern for human health and safety standards causing pollution and industrial accidents. It leads to multinational companies flooding Third World nations with ecologically dan-

gerous pesticides (India still uses large amounts of D.D.T. despite the fact that its being harmful and largely ineffective is well known) and the very same companies or the organisations serving them transforming agricultural land into pine monoculture to serve their need for wood, or exposing workers to asbestosis by setting up asbestos industries in the Third World in view of prohibition at home.

It is this logic which builds up the elaborate structure

which enables the government to spend 1000 crores on the Asiad in a country where only 0.5% of the population has sanitation facilities, where only 31% of the population has access to drinking water of which 70% is polluted!

The close relation between economic and political power leads to a collusion of interests of the state and the vested interests operating the market. Thus the government policies are themselves meant to serve the very same econo-

*(Cont. on page 11)*