

Amritmahal Kaval Hitarakshana Samiti

Complete opposition to illegal takeover of Amritmahal Kavals by IISC, DRDO and other central agencies

- Public hearing brings out wide range of evidence of economic, social and cultural dependence of several villages on Kavals. Residents speak of how the Kavals have contributed to their economic development and general wellbeing.
- Residents condemn takeover of the grazing lands without prior consent
- Restriction of access to Kavals has caused distress sale of livestock and migration
- Large scale loss of livelihoods and destruction of Indigenous culture feared
- Anger and fear about plans to set up uranium enrichment plant in Kavals
- Elected representatives including several Gram Panchayat Members, Taluk Panchayat members ask for Kavals to be restored; MLA of Molkalmooru constituency backs peoples demands for the Kavals to be restored.

In pursuance of the directions of the Hon'ble National Green Tribunal (South Zone) of 21st March 2013 issued in Applications filed by the Leo F Saldhana undersigned and Environment Support Group (details here: <http://tinyurl.com/qhxx8p3>), the Expert Committee consisting of Dr. S. Ravichandra Reddy and Dr. K. V. Anantharaman visited the Amritmahal Kavals and dependent villages at Challakere Taluk, Chitradurga district to interact with local communities and assess the cumulative impacts of the various projects proposed due to the diversion of these ecologically sensitive grassland ecosystems. During the spot inspection, the Committee found clear evidence of endangered species like blackbuck. It also became apparent that the area is rich in biodiversity and wildlife. In just a few hours, the committee was also witness to the thousands of sheep, goats and cattle being grazed in the area. The committee also interacted with weavers, pastoralists and farmers and witnessed the inconveniences they were subjected to because of the diversion.

Subsequently, public hearings were held on the 24th and 25th of May at Dodda Ullarathi, Bharmasagara, Nayakanahatti and Neralagunte where people of surrounding villages were invited. More than a thousand people including GP members, ex-GP Presidents, TP members and ZP members, men, women, members of various castes and tribes, young and old, people spoke at these hearings. It is noteworthy that there was not a single voice in favour of the projects.

Kavals important for development and for preserving the indigenous culture of the region

Speaker after speaker spoke of how in this arid district where land-holdings are also small, people were heavily dependent on livestock rearing for a living. Every speaker stressed that every single household in these villages had at least a few livestock which they will have to sell without access to grazing lands. Many people here have more than 30-40 sheep and goats and more than 5 heads of cattle and they said it is impossible to buy feed for these many livestock and grazing in the kavals was the only option. Onkarappa from Dodda Ullarathi spoke of how he was educated only till the 8th standard and that he depended on sheep-rearing fully for a living. He said that his land holding was very small and with no rain this year, he really could not depend on agriculture to support him for a yearlong living. He said that there were many young parents like him who are depended fully on sheep rearing for a living.

The fact that grazing would be hit hard was evident when even the committee members acknowledged in the hearing at Nayakanahatti that they were well aware of the severe impact the diversion would have on livestock rearing. People shared how even in dry summer, the sheep graze on dried grass and also other small plants and shrubs.

Thimma Reddy of Chenniganahalli spoke of the entire economy around the sheep that are grazed in the kavals, how wool of the sheep is sold as far as Davangere, Shimoga, mutton in Chitradurga and Challakere. The wool is used to make the famous Challakere Kambli and thousands of families especially of the Kuruba community are dependent on this for a living.

A GP member from Nayakanahatti said that in just their hobli, thousands of women made their living collecting *Kavale Hannu* and *Kaare Hannu*. Members of the Dalit communities also shared that many of their families are dependent on the Kaval for firewood and other minor produce. The Lambanis mentioned how they had to use fronds of *Eechala Maraa* (*Phoenix Sylvestris*) to make baskets and other products. At the public hearing at Dodda Ullarathi, the residents brought several freshly accessed medicinal plants from the kavals and exhibited them to the committee. They shared how they use a variety of herbs to treat themselves and also the livestock.

Ramanna from Yadalagatte expressed his outrage that people from his village and surrounding villages now no longer had access to their sacred shrine, Boredevara gudi, inside these kavals. People spoke the festivals they celebrated from several generations inside the kavals and how this was no longer allowed.

People were also clear that development did not mean allowing IISC, DRDO etc to occupy the Kavals where they would work as cleaners, drivers and security personnel. To them development is to be able to rear livestock on their own and earn an income with dignity. Dasara Boraiah of Kudapura spoke of how rearing sheep has helped his family immensely. The son of a poor small farmer, he is illiterate and has been rearing sheep since a young age. He has seven daughters and has been able to educate them up to B.A just from his income of rearing sheep.

The fact that the indigenous culture and way of life of this geography revolved around the grasslands and the diversion would destroy an entire way of life was stressed at all locations.

Anger at Illegal, uniformed diversion of Kavals

The fact that not a single gram sabha was held or a single gram panchayat member was consulted before deciding on the diversion was condemned by different speakers. People specifically mentioned that when the project was started, they were misled by the project proponents and other authorities that this project would bring many jobs and much development and that the kavals would be blocked was not really highlighted. One of the Gram Panchayat members from Obbayannahatti, Maripalayya said that the diversion was against the 73rd constitutional amendment and also the Forest Rights Act.

Impact of Diversion

In at least 3 locations, people shared how they were beaten up by the police and security personnel for grazing in the Kavals and had cases foisted upon them. There were also *Go-shaalas* and *Go-Kattes*(water source) inside the Kavals for which access has now been blocked.. Even during the drought period, people would be able to sustain themselves by having the sheep graze in the Kavals and they would also collect various nutritious greens (e.g Aale soppu, Kaare soppu) and use it as food. With no access to fodder and water for the livestock, the result has been distress sale of livestock and migration. People have been forced to go to coolie work, pull children out of school etc.

Leaders from the Lambani community stated how they now had to travel to Andhra Pradesh to get the raw material to make baskets since the Eechala mara from the kavals was now no longer available. Residents also expressed concern that DRDO and other agencies had dug borewells which were almost a metre wide and 1000 feet deep. The blocking of streams, filling up of tanks and the concrete poured into the area has reduced water seepage has adversely impacted the water table in their area they alleged.

Bhootaiah, from Kaluvehalli spoke of adverse effects on the wildlife here. Because of the the walls, fencing, the sound due to drilling of the deep borewells and the bombs dropped by DRDO, several peacocks, blackbucks and hares had been killed. Raitha Sangha leaders also expressed concern over the upcoming uranium enrichment plant at the kaval.

What should be noted with immediate and deep concern is that many speakers spoke of how people of at least 60 villages will have to commit suicide if access to kavals was permanently blocked.

MLA supports residents

The MLA of Molkaalmooru, in whose constituency most of the affected villages occur also attended three of the hearings and submitted a memorandum to the committee and asked them to submit to the NGT. He endorsed the concerns of the residents and said that they faced tremendous difficulties because of the diversion of the kavals and said that the local communities rights to the kavals must be preserved at any cost.

The public hearings have shown how the life here revolves around the kavals and any decision to divert all these kavals will hit very hard, the lives of lakhs of people and the Indigenous way of life in this region. We hope that the NGT takes cognizance of the several concerns in this matter and that justice is delivered.

Leo F Saldhana

Co-ordinator, Environment Support Group
leo@esgindia.org ; 9448377403

Vinay K Sreenivasa

vinay.sreenivasa@yahoo.com; 98805 95032