No Entry For Women To Agasthyamala! The Reasons Given Are An Insult

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To

Shri K Raju
Minister of Forests and Wildlife
Govt of Kerala
Honourable Minister,

It is unfortunate that the Kerala Forest Department is continuing the practice of denying entry for women to the Agasthyamala. The Forest Secretary gave an explanation referring to somebody’s fancy religious sentiment and you have explained it as due to the lack of toilet facilities and the threat of wild animals which only amounted to adding insult to injury as it is oblivious to the fact that women visit and stay even in dense forests as researchers, photographers, foresters or as tourists, and that numerous women have scaled Everest. This is besides half of the 200 people who inhabit India’s forests. I often have women colleagues in my work in the forests in different Indian states as well as abroad and I have found that women have indeed better survival instincts in forests than men. It is unfortunate that this whole issue of denying the Constitutionally secured right is happening in the wake of the categorical Supreme Court ruling against the Mumbai counterpart of our forest bureaucrats who have been denying women entry into the Haji Ali Darga.
The Forest Dept's decision is a breach of the fundamental Constitutional provision of equality enshrined in Articles 14 and 15 and it is unacceptable that a minister sown in to abide by the Constitution is breaching it and publicly defending the breach. You may note that the Agasthyamala is inscribed as both a Unesco World Heritage site as part of the Western Ghats serial site and under the Unesco MAB as a Biosphere Reserve. Unesco places highest importance to the issue of gender justice and both the World Heritage Convention process, its Operational Guidelines and MAB and its MAB Strategy 2015-25 capture this universal principle. You may also note that the Convention on Biological Diversity, to which India is an important Party, affirms ‘the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation’ in its Preamble itself. You may remember that these multilateral commitments India has made are binding on every level of government in India as required by Articles 51(c ) and 253. Your action has thus breached not only the Indian Constitution but also the multiple treaty obligations of India. It is unfortunate that a minister from a communist party is being steered by obscure bureaucrats in such a manner.

In the light of the above I would earnestly call up on you as follows:

- Remove the unconstitutional restriction imposed on women to enter the biodiversity rich site of Agasthyamala and punish the bureaucrats who have taken such a decision
- Remove the closed season for the site. Even sites such as National Parks and Sanctuaries declared under the WLPA have closed season only during the monsoons or breeding period of some keystone species, there is absolutely no logic in keeping the area closed for a whole year except a month or so. It is in comprehensible and objectionable. This is only to promote someone’s obscurantist agenda. This Reserve Forest area can be kept open for most of the year except for the monsoons and turn this as a great educational opportunity for the people about the importance of nature conservation.
- Hand over the management of the tourism of the area to a society of the Kani tribes of the area, this can be a federation of the EDCs and JFMCs of the area, and the Forest Dept should have only a support role.
- Currently the group size of each trekking team is 15. This is already a crowd and therefore reduce it to a max of 7 plus a guide.
- Increase the daily fees of a trekking guide to a minimum of Rs 2000, and the service of guide should be made mandatory for all the days of trekking. Guides should be recruited from the EDCs and JFMCs in the area.
- Protect the Budhist/tribal legacy of the shrine in the peak. No person other than members of the Kani tribe should be allowed to manage this.
- Although the CPI and CPIM have played a crucial role in having the Forest Rights Act (FRA) enacted by the Parliament in 2006, in Kerala the CPI ministers of forest have disregarded the enforcement of the Act as they were misled by the forest bureaucracy. The Kani tribes have historical rights over the forests of these areas even during the colonial regime and these must be recognised under FRA as a priority. Any forest official impeding the implementation of FRA in the area should be prosecuted under Section 7 of the FRA.

With the best regards

Dr S Faizi

Copying this to Unesco directors on MAB and Unesco WH Centre

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