

Minister
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Tourism project in eco-sensitive area

By P. Venugopal

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, JULY 2. The Revenue Department has decided to hand over 741 hectares of ecologically sensitive high-altitude grassland terrain lying in Elappara and Vagamon villages of Idukki district to the Tourism Department to set up a 'tourism resort of international standards'.

The terrain forms part of over 1,100 hectares of grassland which used to be known as the 'Vagamon Estate'. A couple of years ago the Forest Department had sent a proposal to the Government to add this region to the adjoining Idukki wildlife sanctuary in view of its ecological significance.

Further, the Forest Department had carried out a 'compensatory afforestation programme' in more than 400 hectares of the Vagamon estate. This programme was undertaken 12 years ago on the basis of a pre-condition set by the Union Ministry of Environment while according clearance for some non-forestry projects in forest areas of the State. This area should have therefore come under the classification of 'reserve forests'.

The Tourism Department had placed a request with the Revenue Department for the allotment of 1,050 hectares of land for a hill resort somewhere in Idukki district complete with a golf course and other facilities of international standards. The Idukki District Collector, upon being referred to, informed the Revenue Department that 762 hectares of suitable terrain was available in Vagamon Estate at the time of resurvey.

This terrain had been under the possession of the Kerala Livestock Development Board (KLDB) for quite some time. However, part of the terrain had been encroached upon by private

individuals. The Collector informed the Revenue Department that an area of 741 hectares was free of encroachments and could be given to the Tourism Department. As per records, the land belonged to the Revenue Department, though it was in the possession of the KLDB, the Collector said in his report.

The KLDB also has a base farm complex situated in 84 hectares of the Vagamon Estate. The Kerala Agricultural University had, in 1997, requested the Government to hand over the KLDB base farm complex to it for the purpose of starting a Dairy Science Technology College. The KLDB too had indicated its willingness to the proposal, provided that it was adequately compensated for the land and other facilities transferred.

The understanding was that the farm labourers under the base farm complex would be accepted by the university.

The Government order with respect to the transfer of the grassland terrain to the Tourism Department also states that the 84 hectares of base farm complex of KLDB would be transferred to the Agricultural university.

The order states that the Tourism Department would fence off 741 hectares of the Vagamon Estate "utilising the sum of Rs. 50 lakhs allotted by the Government of India (for tourism promotion in the State)". The Collector has been asked to take immediate measures for transferring the land to the Tourism Department.

The Government has also constituted a committee comprising the Principal Secretary, Finance, and the Secretary, Tourism, to formulate recommendations regarding compensation to be given to the KLDB by the Tourism Department and the Agricultural university.

The unanswered questions about these

Government decisions are many. Firstly, how can an ecologically sensitive area running to 825 hectares totally, adjoining a wildlife sanctuary, be taken over for non-forestry purposes? Will it not pave the way for the Government, in line with many decisions taken in the recent past, to hand over this area to private tourism companies in future? What has happened to the Forest Department's proposal to annex the Vagamon Estate to the Idukki wildlife sanctuary? What has become of the 'reserve forest' status of the area in the same estate where compensatory afforestation programme was carried out? Will it not be tantamount to breaking a commitment made to the Union Government when non-forestry projects are executed in such an area?

Starvation deaths denied

By Our Staff Reporter

KOLLAM, JULY 2. The District Collector has dismissed as baseless the reports of starvation deaths in Achenkovil.

He said here today that while one of the persons, Somankutty, cited as a victim of starvation actually committed suicide four months ago, another woman, Madathi, who was 75 years old, died of old age in June, 1997. Another person, Shanmughan, a native of Tamil Nadu, who was a chronic asthma patient died in Tenkasi two years ago and Sreedharan, who owned 200 rubber trees, died a year back.

Meanwhile, eight persons were injured when a jeep in which a team travelling along with the Collector went out of control and fell into a deep gorge at the high ranges near Achenkovil this afternoon. The injured have been admitted to the Punalur Taluk Hospital and all of them are reported to be out of danger.