

Tossamaidan forests facing broad-day plunder



Hundreds of logs of timber extracted over five years ago from Tossamaidan forests are lying unused in the sprawling highland pasture. The entire quantity of timber has been rendered useless as the decay has already set in. The least the forest department could do is get the decaying timber out of the forest and sell it as fuel wood.

Riyaz Ahmad

Tosamaidan (Budgam), Jul 21: The picturesque highland pasture with dense lush green forest cover spread over hundreds of square kilometers and divided by a ferociously moving perennial stream Sukhnag is called Tossamaidan. Located in the extreme west of district Budgam, this extensive forest cover is destined to doom in a decade or two should the government and the people just ignore what is happening here.

Over the past fourteen years, the acute poverty and unemployment has forced the people from the foothill villages to prey wholesale on the forests. Shockingly enough, they don't give even a distant indication of the fear of forest officials, let alone that of police or for that matter security forces.

It is not only that the illiterate youth are involved. The educated youth, who mostly couldn't find any other worthwhile job have become a part and parcel of this organised devastation and without so much as a qualm about the nature of their job.

"What if we are killed in the process of felling trees, our second generation would do the same as do we. We have no other means to sustain ourselves", said Abdullah Shah (name changed) of Sitharan village. There was a strong conviction in his tone which, in a way, brought out in stark relief the existential necessity that drove the organised network of groups and gangs behind the ongoing largescale felling.

Each group comprises around 20-30 people. There is Bhat group (name changed), Sattar group, Dar group etc. At

4 in the morning, they start from their villages with saws, axes, ropes etc alongwith a huge caravan of mules, fell trees, make these into logs measuring 7'x1'x1' and carry these back into the villages late into the evening. Each mule carries two logs.

According to Shah, the mules cost Rs 33000 each. They buy them from Poonch. On an average, 300-400 mules carry timber everyday.

However, they have been told by the "agencies" behind them not to cut trees at the fringes but "to go deep into the forest". Besides, there is also an irresistible logic behind the gameplan. That is, the receding treeline would make the deforestation more visible and ugly than the gradual thinning out at the centre.

The timber thus brought down is taken to destinations

like Zogoo, Sitharan, Drung etc where the load is transferred to another set of ponies which in turn take the timber to the destinations like Shariefabad, HMT, Galvanpora Sebdan, Galvanpora Hyderpora, Bemina, Wanabal etc in the very suburbs of Srinagar.

"We sell the timber to smugglers at the rate of Rs one hundred a cubic foot of kail, Rs 50 a cft of fir, Rs 150 a cft of Deodar, which at market rate fetches Rs 600, Rs 250 and Rs 550 per cft respectively to the timber traders", added Ghulam Mustafa, also from Sitharan. The smugglers involved in loot and plunder of the precious forest wealth have no regrets about their nefarious activities.

The activity begins in April and continues till November, about nine months a year. The smugglers carry out the activity with impunity as there is no fear of any action from the so called

Forest Protection Force, police and even army. While FPF is nowhere visible in the area, the police does not dare to act for fear of reprisals from the smugglers. Checking timber smuggling is not a mandate of the army. The only forester in Sitharan, a minister's kin, is alleged to be a facilitator of the smuggling.

A trail of destruction of forest wealth is visible from Bras village, the takeoff point for Tossamaidan from Drung side as one out of every three trees has been felled. The cut or half burnt stumps of trees stand witness to the havoc wrought by the smugglers in the area.

The smugglers have now shifted their extraction work to areas deep in the forests across the Sukhnag Nullah. The barks of trees and shavings are strewn all along the track to

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Tossamaidan. These shavings and barks if harvested put together could keep all the valley's mosques warm for atleast two winters.

Talking to *GK* on a strict condition that his identity will be kept secret, Abdullah Shah said, "we are forced to eke out a living by resorting to felling of trees and extracting the timber, as our demand for developing the area as a tourist resort has fallen on deaf ears".

He also talked about the rampant unemployment among their youth which, he added, forced them to take to the criminal activity.

Under the aegis of centre for science and environment

News-in-Brief

Tossamaidan report

Srinagar: Swiftly acting on the report on extensive timber smuggling at Tossamaidan carried by this paper Tuesday, the government has directed principal chief conservator of forests, director forest protection force and managing director state forest corporation to personally visit the area and submit report within 10 days.

According to sources, the minister for forests and fisheries Ghulam Mohiudin Sofi has termed the news as "shocking" and said whoever was involved in the activity would be taken to task.