



PEOPLE'S UNION FOR CIVIL LIBERTIES (TN & PUDUCHERY)

191, First Floor, Aadi Street, Coimbatore - 641018

R. Murali
President
9443852788

D. Sekar Annadurai
Gen. Secretary
9486240994

P. Kanmani
Treasurer
9786497685

Vice Presidents: **D. R. Barathi Vijayan & Mukesh Thangavel**

Joint Secretaries: **Sudhir Kumar & Saravanan K**

14-06-2026

PRESS STATEMENT

**DEMOCRATIZATION OF LAND & RESOURCE GOVERNANCE
TO PROTECT COMMUNITIES ENGAGED IN SUBSISTENCE CUSTOMARY
LIVELIHOODS FROM RAMPANT LAND GRAB**

The last frontiers of natural wealth of Tamil Nadu - which include its hills, forests and scrub lands, coastal waters and lands, sand dunes, salt pans and brackish water ecologies, agricultural fields, tanks, ponds, canals and other wetlands, grazing and other commons - are under severe threat from large-scale land monetization, extraction and environmental destruction. This involves the forcible removal of communities, whose customary livelihoods in forestry, fishing, farming, pastoral and craft and cottage industry have continuously sustained countless generations from time immemorial, while at the same time, preparing, nurturing, protecting, conserving and reproducing these landscapes and their ecologies for their subsistence needs and the greater common good. Concrete action is urgently required to halt and reverse this widespread and accelerating land and resource grab, denying and crushing their democratic and customary rights and resulting in coercive displacement and extensive violence and destitution, besides environmental collapse and ecocide.

These landscapes include 26.35 lakh hectares of forests, 9.03 lakh hectares of wetlands, 5-6 lakh hectares of village commons (of which 1.08-1.11 lakh hectares are permanent pastures and grass lands), and 4.50 lakh hectares of coastal lands, besides 47,501 sq. km of territorial and contiguous waters along a 1,068.69 km coastline. Excluding coastal waters, these account for about 35% of the total geographical area of the State. These landscapes have been traditionally managed by communities whose customary livelihoods are deeply intertwined with the health of these ecologies. Therefore, these communities are best positioned to protect, conserve and sustainably manage their customary landscapes and ecosystems by deploying their accumulated expertise and wisdom. They are 29% of Tamil Nadu's workers who are engaged in agriculture, forestry, fishing and pastoral activity as a primary occupation, and a further 18% in construction who may be seasonally engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. These vast numbers inhabit some 79,395 hamlets in 12,525 village panchayats across Tamil Nadu: a potential force for democratization on a scale hitherto unimagined.

FORESTS & FOREST RIGHTS ACT 2006

The Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA), a flagship governance law, recognised and vested forest rights - both individual and community rights - on Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers. The habitation-level village Gram Sabha determines, demarcates, verifies and approves the vested forest rights. FRA introduced village self-rule and self-governance over the forest lands empowering the Gram Sabhas to protect, conserve, and manage forests, wildlife and biodiversity, making it the premier forest conservation and governance law in the country. Tamil Nadu is one of the most laggard states in FRA implementation due to the resistance of the forest bureaucracy compounded by the apathy of the Tribal Welfare department - the nodal agency for the law - and the Revenue department.

- With the Panchayats defunct since January 2025 except in some districts, the Sub-Divisional and District Level Committees under FRA who are to process, recognise and title the Gram Sabha approved forest

rights claims, are also defunct as 3 of the 6 members forming each committee are to be nominated from among those elected to the District Panchayats. This has prevented the processing of Gram Sabha approved claims from 2025 and renders the titles issued post-term of the Panchayats, legally questionable. **Hold panchayat elections and reconstitute the Sub-Divisional and District Level Committees under FRA immediately.**

- Even as rights recognition continues to be denied, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) asked the Tamil Nadu Forest Department on 19 June 2024 to speed up the 'relocation' of some 4,701 families in 63 villages in 5 Tiger Reserves. Some 614 families in 6 villages have been illegally 'relocated' from Mudumalai Tiger Reserve so far. Leave alone rehabilitation, even the monetary compensation due to them was looted by a gang that includes forest officials, for which FIRs have been filed under the Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989. Moreover, all the 5 Tiger Reserves in question, were themselves notified violating the relevant provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. **Ensure that all the forest rights are recognised in these villages immediately, and any relocation is strictly voluntary, fulfilling all relevant provisions under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013 (LARR 2013).**
- Evictions of so-called 'encroachers' are pursued despite FRA prohibiting any eviction of Scheduled Tribe & Other Traditional Forest Dwellers dependent on the forests, pending finalisation of FRA claims by the District Level Committee, in order to determine whether the claimant is an 'encroacher' or not. A number of Madras High Court orders directing the eviction of 'encroachers' ignores this, notwithstanding the Supreme Court order of February 2019 keeping on hold the eviction of rejected FRA claimants. The Supreme Court itself is guilty of ignoring the extant law, as demonstrated in its 29 May 2026 order on the Manjolai case, accepting the legally untenable figures on 'encroachers' provided by the

Forest Department to the Centrally Empowered Committee and converting the latter's recommendations to directions issued by the Court. This will lead to the eviction of at least 4,595 people and the removal of government public facilities from the concerned areas within 6 months. **State Level Monitoring Committee under FRA should direct the Forest Department that 'no forest dweller shall be evicted or removed from forest land under his occupation until the recognition and verification procedure as per FRA is complete'.**

- The Global Environment Facility's (GEF) 2025-30 project grant of USD 4.88 million for 'Strengthening Institutional Capacities for Securing Biodiversity Conservation Commitments', has been operationalised over 173,260 hectares in Mudumalai and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserves and Wildlife Sanctuaries (besides in three Protected Areas of Meghalaya), most of which - if not all - falls within the purview of the FRA. The project is designed to empower the Biodiversity Management Committees constituted by the Tamil Nadu State Biodiversity Board with the Forest Department in overall control. But as the habitation-level Gram Sabha is the statutory authority to protect, conserve and manage the biodiversity in these areas under Sec.5 of FRA, the GEF project is in direct conflict with the law. **Ensure that the GEF project is reviewed and made to comply with the FRA 2006, as legally required.**

REDEFINING THE 'VILLAGE' AND EMPOWERING ITS 'GRAM SABHA'

The Government of Tamil Nadu should put in place a land and natural resource governance framework similar to the FRA - through law or suitable amendments to/repeal of extant laws - enabling the habitation-level Gram Sabhas of farming, pastoral, fishing and other coastal communities besides other traditional communities engaged in customary livelihoods embedded in their landscapes, to take control over their commons to protect, conserve, manage and regulate the use of the land and resources therein, after determining, demarcating,

verifying, approving, recognising and titling the landscapes over which the individuals and communities concerned may lawfully exercise their customary rights.

For this:

- **A ‘village’ should be redefined to legally mean a habitation-level unit and its general assembly, to be its ‘Gram Sabha’,** abandoning and replacing the unwieldy and unworkable, nominal Gram Sabha at the Gram Panchayat level, as defined in the Tamil Nadu Panchayat Raj Act, 1994.
- **This habitation-level Gram Sabha should be the statutory authority to manage the village commons as per the decisions of the customary rights holders in these commons.** No land acquisition or diversion and land use change of these demarcated village commons shall be undertaken until and unless all customary rights to these commons are recognised and settled, the Gram Sabha approves of the proposed project/activity and provides its free, prior and informed consent for the transfer or transformation of use of such lands for the said purpose, subject to such conditions as the Gram Sabha may deem fit to impose. **Relevant TN State laws should be suitably enacted, amended or repealed to give effect to this within the next six months.**
- The TN Land Consolidation (for Special Projects) Act 2023, which claims to protect water resources by granting Government land to replace private land lost to the naturally changing course of a river or stream, is in fact designed to facilitate the wholesale appropriation and conversion of water bodies to infrastructure, industry and commercial uses by designating any project – public or private – of extent 100 hectares (247 acres) or more, a ‘Special Project’. Such a ‘Special Project’ cannot be rejected but must instead be granted the land it wants, regardless of whether these are water bodies, other commons or wetlands – excluding only forests – with the imposition of some conditions on the

conservation of water storage capacity and drainage flows. The haste with which this statute was passed in the TN Assembly – in September 2023 – and its subsequent application to the Paranthur international airport project demonstrates that it was clearly tailored to forestall all challenges to the project on ecological, hydrological or environmental grounds! **Therefore, the anti-democratic TN Land Consolidation (for Special Projects) Act 2023 must be repealed immediately and the blanket protections given to all 'Special Projects' under the Act - including Paranthur - must be withdrawn.**

- Several lakh hectares of land and seascapes under the unbroken customary use of lakhs of people, from time immemorial, are today subject to violent appropriation by state and private capital, producing windfall profits for the chosen few and destitution for the many, and effectively depriving them of their Right to Life and jeopardizing our combined future. **All projects (see listing in Annexure) - public and private - must be put on hold until the above-named actions are completed.**

R. Murali
President

D. Sekar Annadurai
General Secretary

ANNEXURE: LAND GRAB IN TAMILNADU

A sample of the scale of appropriation underway may be discerned from the listing - by no means exhaustive - of current and ongoing threats, prepared by PUCL in September 2024:

S.No	Name & Location	Customary Practice	People Affected	Area Affected
1	Blue Economy (Sagarmala, Blue Flag Beaches, Deep Ocean Mission etc.)	Marine Fishing	10.48 lakh	52,000 Sq. Km
2	Nochikuppam-Srinivasapuram Loop Road Markets & Housing	Marine Fishing Squatter Settlements	1 lakh	5 Ha
3	Central Buckingham Canal	Squatter Settlements	0.30 lakh	11 Ha
4	Paranthur (Chennai) 2 nd Airport	Farming, Pastoralism	0.13-3 lakh	2173Ha-500 Sq. Km
5	Melma-Cheyyar SIPCOT Expan.	Farming, Pastoralism	0.09-0.40 lakh	1285 Ha
6	Salem-Chennai 8-way Exp-way	Farming, Pastoralism	(Details required)	2791-1900 Ha
7	Adani Kattupalli Port Expansion	[Farming, Pastoralism	0.80 lakh	2473 Ha
8	Ponneri Industrial Township	Inland & Marine Fishing]	1 lakh	8893 Ha
9	FRA Non-implementation in TN	ST& OTFD	(Details required)	39-15,827 Sq Km
10	Janmam Estate Lands, Gudalur	ST& Farming, Pastoralism	2 lakh	21,053 Ha

11	TANTEA Estate, Nilgiris	SC& Malaiyaga Tamizhar	0.22 lakh	5,028 Ha
12	Elephant Corridor, Nilgiris & Hill Areas Private Forests Notification, Gudalur	[SC&ST, Farming & Pastoralism]	0.20-0.36 lakh 3 lakh	2834 Ha 60,000 Ha
13	Manjolai Estates, Tirunelveli	SC& Malaiyaga Tamizhar	0.14 lakh	3,389 Ha
14	Kalakkad-Mundanthurai, Mudu-malai, Anamalai, Sathyamangalam & Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserves	ST& OTFD	0.23 lakh	(Details required)
15	Bans on Grazing - TN Forests	Pastoralism	10-20 lakh	(Details required)
16	Rare Earth Mining, Kanyakumari	Fishing, Farming, Pastoral	(Details required)	1,144 Ha
17	Kallangkadu SIPCOT, Melur	Farming (Water), Pastoral	0.3 lakh	113 Ha