



EDCs begin to fleece Sabarimala pilgrims

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SABARIMALA: ♦ The 300-odd Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) set up by the Forest Department on the traditional route to Sabarimala temple between Azhuthakadavu and Valiyanavattom failed in their declared goals and turned out to be the worst exploiting agency of lakhs of pilgrims.

The EDCs, set up two decades ago with the twin objectives of protection of forest wealth and livelihood for tribal families who live inside the forest and those who live in the fringe areas of the forest, have become a ♦ liability and burden for the Forest Department.

The hotels and shops run in the name of EDCs are at present not managed by the targeted beneficiaries but by the settlers who fleece the pilgrims.

The EDC shop owners, who own acres of rubber plantations, are doing business on highly commercial basis on par with the hotels at Pampa and Sannidhanam, auctioned by the Travancore Devaswom Board.

The authorities, whether the Forest Department or Revenue Department, have hardly any control over the EDCs in charging prices or the quantities of food served prescribed by the department concerned.

Manikantan, a pilgrim from Mannarkad in Palakkad district, who trek through the Azhuthakadavu route for the third time, was forced to pay Rs 20 for a cup of tea at Kallidamkunnu.

When asked the EDC licensee about the exorbitant price, he replied that the price of the tea was only Rs 10 and the chair to sit attracts another Rs 10, Manikantan said.

Ironically, the hoarding to display the number of the EDC was missing, he said. Spread across the three districts of Kottayam, Idukki and Pathanamthitta, hardly any top-ranking official of any Government department visits the 30-km forest path for many a reason.

In addition, a section of the Forest Protection Force personnel is allegedly in collusion with the EDCs for petty monetary gains at the expense of the hapless pilgrims. ♦ Hence, the situation reached such a stage in which the winding up of the EDCs is vital in the larger interests of the pilgrims, majority of whom belonging to below poverty line categories.