

Telangana : Adivasis

[History of oppression and desire for self determination]

With reference to the items 1 of terms of reference of the committee as notified and announced in the public, we would like to submit to the committee certain matters pertaining to the Chenchu Primitive Tribal Group in the Nallamala forests of Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh as per items 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of terms of reference.

By doing so we would like to assist the committee in preparing the report and issue certain immediate directions as per law.

We would like to bring to your notice some developments in telangana part of Nallamala, pertaining to chenchu community & request you to take appropriate action in the interest of poor tribal communities. To assist & enable to committee, we would like to submit certain concrete details in the form of communication as sub divided below as per items mentioned in the terms of reference of the committee.

1) Present demand for Telangana state and Chenchu inhabited Nallamala area

As the movement for the formation of the separate state of Telangana gained momentum, even in Nallamala forest areas of Mahaboobnagar and other parts of the Telangana, Chenchu men and women in villages also are actively participating in the movement as they also shared a strong desire and memory with the past Telangana movement and due to their present vulnerable conditions in the unified state of Andhra Pradesh

2) Historical account of chenchu community in the Nallamala forest and impact after the formation of the state of Andhra Pradesh

Chenchu community is known to be a foraging & hunting tribal community living in the Nallamala forest for ages. Many anthropological studies also have drawn conclusions regarding their relationships with many aboriginal communities & recognized them as primitive tribal community in the world. As forest dwellers, they have been depending on hunting & gathering forest produce for their survival. Their material, non-material culture & civilization are built around the Nallamala forest. Their relationship with the local pilgrim centre Srishailam is also well documented in oral & literary traditions. Nallamalai means good hills. History tells us that the area was not intervened heavily by any rulers and Chenchus were living there in autonomous environment.

Later with the entry of British in India, Nallamala has been divided into Madras presidency & the state of Hyderabad. Nallamala forest in Guntur, Prakasham & Kurnool were brought under Madras presidency and Amrabad taluqa of Mahaboobnagar came under Hyderabad state. With the advent of the British forest policy of 19th century, the chenchus were treated as encroachers & criminals of the forest and many atrocities were committed by the then colonial state on them. Instead of respecting and legally recognizing their forest rights, colonial state even constructed a jail in deep forests of Nallamala in the 19th century. All chenchus who were accessing forest for various individual & collective survival needs were branded as destroyers of forest and criminals & were sent to jail. After Heirambach, an Austrian anthropologist who visited the chenchu areas and recommended to both governments in 1930-40s to declare chenchu inhabited forest as "Chenchu reserves", both governments notified them so. Amrabad taluqa of Mahaboobnagar was declared as "Chenchu reserve" allowing various forest rights of chenchus & regulating the entry & movement of non-native people into the reserve. But taking advantage of their innocence, the forest bureaucracy had been harassing Chenchus for accessing forests through illegal extractions of money and materials.

In the Telangana peasant struggle of late 40s to early 50s chenchus also actively participated to assert and protect their forest rights. Post Independent Indian police & forest departments disrespecting legally declared "Chenchu reserves" started harassing them further. As a response Telangana movement recognizing their forest rights and basic survival needs, protected against the atrocities of the forest dept & demanded the provision of essential food needs to vulnerable communities like chenchus.

Formation of the State of Andhra Pradesh - Impact on chenchu community

Due to national forest policies of the Indian govt and enactment of Andhra Pradesh forest act 1967 hitherto recognized rights of chenchus in the Hyderabad state were denied. Subsequently the Govt of AP constructed Srishailam hydro electrical power project which caused forceful displacement of chenchus and other local people. As part of rehabilitation, Chenchus were settled at another place which caused decline of their population due to lack of access to forest and new environment. At the same time the local non-Chenchu population were rehabilitated in the forest area with sanctioned development & welfare programmes. This caused enormous pressure on the forest, wild life & chenchus. Added to that, the unilateral declaration of parts of Nallamala forest as Nagarjunasagar - Srishailam tiger reserve [later which was re-named as Rajiv Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary] also caused increased restrictions on accessing forest rights for chenchus & increased smuggling of forest wealth. Comptroller and Auditor General

(CAG) report of 2006-07 also confirmed the above mentioned points. Instead of recognizing this deteriorated situation and restoring forest rights to chenchus, the AP forest department blamed the local community for the loss of wild life&forest. As a consequence, it is also said that the Naxalites gained base by protecting forest rights of chenchus from forest dept. As a reaction, increased anti-naxal operations of the govt led to the further physical displacement and loss of rights for chenchus. This impacted their mortality rate&caused high incidents of malnourishment, under nourishment and starvation deaths. Now the community is on the verge of extinction. It is submitted that all this adverse impact was caused on forest, wild life& Chenchus due to the anti people development, conservation, forest&displacement policies of unified state of AP. Earlier healthy relations between adivasis& non tribals of plain areas and legally recognized forest rights in chenchu reserves of the Hyderabad state were uprooted by the state of Andhra Pradesh. Village forests which were recognized under **the Hyderabad state forest act** in all forest areas of Telangana guaranteed all communities in the village to meet their grazing, firewood and other needs. It increased the pressure on forests, where traditional forest dwelling adivasis like chenchus, koya, kolam, gond etc. were ensured their forest rights. With the enactment of 1967 forest act, this village forest provision of Hyderabad Forest Act was removed. Local non tribal poor population started accessing these forests for their basic survival needs. This opened doors for various external forces to unsustainably extract forest and wild life for market needs. In 1970s, recognition of Lambadas as schedule tribes by AP govt caused extensive migration &spread of that community from Maharastra, where they are recognized as Backward Classes (BCs). All this adverse impact on Telangana in general& chenchus/adivasis in particular is the result of insensitivity, ignorance and vested interests of political rulers of unified state.

3) Impact of the recent developments in the State on Chenchus

The Indian parliament has enacted Scheduled Tribes& Other Traditional Forest Dwellers[Recognition of forest rights] Act 2006 to legally recognize historically enjoyed forest rights by forest dwellers. As per the act, earlier recognized or recorded various forest rights in the form of concessions, privileges, notifications& declarations etc. before& during the colonial period have to be respected, recognized and protected. Accordingly an enquiry into the nature &extent of forest rights granted in the declaration of chenchu reserves by the British& Hyderabad govts should be operationalised and the same should be restored to chenchu community in the Nallamala forest. But instead of doing that, the AP govt declared more than 2500 sq. kms forest area of Nallamala as 'invioble' Critical Tiger Habitat (CTH) (Details attached). In doing so the govt is systematically violating many forest &other rights

granted under Scheduled Tribes & Other Traditional Forest Dwellers [Recognition of forest rights] Act 2006 and Wildlife Protection Act [as amended 2006] (Details attached). At present in the context of peoples movement for self rule in separate Telangana, the AP govt is stepping up its efforts to evict chenchus from the Nallamala forest and relocate them in inhospitable & potentially adverse non forest environment in plain areas in the name of CTH. The govt has not respected forest rights act, not recognized, not implemented & not protecting democratically secured rights & forest citizenship of chenchus/adivasis.

4) Key issues that must be addressed while considering the matters mentioned in items (1), (2) and (3) above pertaining to Chenchus in particular and Adivasis in general in Telangana region

- a. Non recognition of forest rights in Chenchu reserves of earlier declarations and enactment of AP forest act 1967, declaration of wildlife sanctuary unilaterally violating people's rights
- b. Efforts to evict Chenchus in the name of CTH
- c. Harassment and relocation of Chenchus as part of development programmes and anti naxal operations
- d. Lack of proper governance in the area in terms of provision of health, education and other public utilities
- e. Loss of forest, wildlife etc. due to the entry and movement of non tribals in these areas.
- f. Faulty implementation of Forest Rights act and continuing with eviction drive even after the constitution of Srikrishna Committee to assess the impact
- g. Non implementation of PESA provisions in these areas and clubbing of Chenchu habitations with non tribal dominated Panchayat Raj Institutions.

5) **Consultations:** We request the committee to travel to Chenchu villages like Chenchu resettlement colony at village of Molachintapally of Kollapur Mandal and habitations inside the sanctuary of Mahaboobnagar district. It is also requested to tour other parts of Nallamala forest area in Gunturu, Prakasham and Kurnul districts where proposed relocation of villages is declared. We also recommend the committee to elicit first hand information, views and opinions from the victims as there are no proper representative bodies to present their case in front of the committee.

6) **Other organisations and groups of people for consultations:**

It is also suggested to seek opinions from the local journalists, elders living in the area, teachers and doctors hailing from the district with close knowledge of Chenchu community and the area.

7) **Appeal for immediate directions:** In the above narrated context, and since terms of reference for the srikrishna committee also include to assess the impact&present status on specific groups like SC, ST, Children, women& minorities after the formation of state of Andhra Pradesh. We request the committee to take serious and strict view of the violation of constitutional and legal mandates and rights of the people and issue the following directions.

- 1) Stop eviction and re-location of chenchus from the Nallamala forest
- 2) Enquire about violation of relevant mandates even after the constitution of the Srikrishna committee with regard to anti ST [chenchu] policies and programmes like relocation drives and recommend penal action against those responsible officials and authorities.

Recommendations: Recommend to the govt to restore the chenchu reserve as per the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes& Other Traditional Forest Dwellers [Recognition of forest rights] Act 2006.

- 2) To take up development& welfare measures for advancement as per the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes& Other Traditional Forest Dwellers [recognition of forest rights] Act 2006.
- 3) Given the above narrated impact on chenchus/adivasis during pre& post formation of Andhra Pradesh, we strongly believe that the rights of such marginalized sections would be protected only in a separate state of Telangana and facilitate chenchus to advance with dignity. So we urge you to recommend the formation of Telangana region into a separate state as it was existing prior to the formation of Andhra Pradesh.