

# Plunderi

# ests with impunity

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EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

**HYDERABAD** -- An inert administration has been mute witness to an alleged timber smuggler cutting down about 4,000 huge trees in the thick forests of East Godavari district despite a High Court stay.

And now, the government is even permitting him to transport the spoils to a "safer" place. The best part is that the Andhra Pradesh High Court has held that the so-called power-of-attorney holder has no locus standi in the matter.

Chintalapudi in Y. Ramavaram mandal of East Godavari has some of the thickest forests in the State. Some of the forest land belongs to pattadars who have been restrained by the government from cutting down trees indiscriminately.

But several pattadars have vested one V. Shankar Reddy, a contractor, with a power of attorney and he has been chopping down the forest

with gay abandon. Despite the high court holding as null and void his holding power of attorney insofar as the forest land is concerned, he has managed to cut down at least 4,000 huge trees within the span of a week and even got permission to transport the timber.

The Telugu Desam government had in 1988 issued orders nullifying any power of attorney in regard to forest land. But the Channa Reddy government subsequently reversed the decision. Following an expose through these columns, Dr. Channa Reddy has stayed his own orders.

**Stay vacated:** The Janardhana Reddy administration, however, vacated Dr Channa Reddy's stay through a single-sentence government order. The fact that the stay was vacated was communicated to the power of attorney holder on December 27, 1991. But the AP High Court had, on a writ petition filed by a social service organisation

"Sakti", stayed the felling of trees through an order dated December 31.

Though the court orders were communicated to all concerned by noon the next day, the contractor claimed that he had come to know of it only on January 3, 1992. Thus for one week, he claimed, he had been chopping trees and had in all felled 4,000 trees.

Instead of prosecuting him, forest officials in East Godavari district wrote to the government seeking directions as to whether they should issue transport permits to Mr. Shankar Reddy or not.

Meanwhile, the pattadars, while accepting the high court judgment holding the power-of-attorney arrangement as null and void, sought permission to transport the felled timber to a safer place as Naxalites may set fire to it.

**Timber transport:** The pattadars gave the Government and the forest

department the option of transporting the timber through officials and keeping it in safe custody till the court disposed of the case.

Forest officials meekly submitted that they could not undertake to transport the timber as there was a threat from Naxals. They stated that they had no objection if the pattadars themselves transported the timber as it was "dead and felled".

According to sources, the forest department has also issued permits to the pattadars to transport the timber, which is obviously going to be sold to fetch a huge amount.

**Orders ignored:** All the while, the department chose to ignore the orders of 1988 which restrict the felling of trees in the notified areas to not more than Rs. 5,000 worth and that too with prior permission from the district collector.

The tree growth in the Chintalapudi forests is so thick that in an area of 80 hectares, there could be

at least 40,000 huge trees. The contractor has chopped down trees in this tract and in many instances the girth of the felled-trees is more than two metres.

By a strange coincidence, the present Chief Minister, Mr. N. Janardhana Reddy, was the Minister for Forests when the order rescinding the government decision was issued in 1990. Subsequently, Mr. Janardhana Reddy vacated the stay given by his predecessor.

The situation is thus: The contractor, whose power of attorney has been declared null and void by the high court, has illegally felled thousands of trees despite a court stay. And the government, which enabled him to chop down trees, has even permitted him to transport the timber, rescinding an order which protects the interests of tribals and forests.