

GO spells doom to forests

13-8-90
Express

Express News Service

Hyderabad, August 12: An order issued by the State Government last month will open up a Pandora's box and help raze thick forests to the extent of 3,500 acres in East Godavari district.

In a strange reversal of an earlier decision, the State Government issued orders allowing a power of attorney holder to fell trees in 209 hectares [over 500 acres] of thick forest.

This action of the government gives credence to suspicion of large amounts changing hands as the move benefits a few private forest landowners and timber merchants. The Opposition too has charged the Government with shady deals to benefit the holder of the power of attorney.

The government order [GO] Ms.185 of 9.7.90 which goes against GO Ms. 210 of 20.7.88 will spell doom for forests in about 1400 hectares in Chintalapudi, Perikavallasa, Jangalthota, Pydiputta and Kota villages of Y Ramavaram mandal of East Godavari.

The forests in these areas are believed to be about 75 years old and the area is full of slopes and streams.

The irony of the latest government order is that it grants permission to the power of attorney, V Sankar Reddy, which was denied to him by the High Court.

Sankar Reddy had filed a writ in the High Court challenging the government order No.210 of July, 1988, which nullified execution of a power of attorney. The order also banned felling of trees whose value exceeded Rs.5,000. The court struck down his writ while upholding the Government order.

The power of attorney then approached the Supreme Court and while the matter was pending with the highest court in the land, the government silently issued orders granting permission to Sankar Reddy to fell trees in survey numbers 51/1 to 51/11 of Chintalapudi village of East Godavari district. Sankar Reddy reportedly assured the Government that he would withdraw his special leave petition pending with the Supreme Court.

✓ The G.O.No.210 was issued to protect tribals and forests in the agency areas from exploitation by non-tribals and timber merchants. It was based on a similar amendment made by the Madhya Pradesh Government in 1984 to the "protection of Aboriginal Tribes [interest in trees] Act".

The 1988 order amends chapter III-A of the Andhra Pradesh Forest Act and states that any power of attorney or authority letters, or bond, or similar deed executed or a contract, licence or any other transaction entered into before or after January 1, 1970, by the land owners

in favour of or with a person to act on his behalf or to do any job shall be null and void. Furthermore, no permission shall be granted in a year to cut trees of the value exceeding Rs.5,000 unless the district collector is satisfied that the value of the trees proposed to be cut exceeding the said limit is necessary to meet the urgent expenses of such owner.

The order helped curb the unscrupulous felling of trees in private forests. The private forests in the area are held by non-tribals who have managed to obtain settlement pattas. There are stated to be over 300 such illegal settlement pattas in the name of non-tribals.

Sankar Reddy and 18 others, whom he represented as power of attorney, went to the High Court challenging the 1988 order. The writ was struck down.

While the issue was pending in the Supreme Court, Sankar Reddy made a representation to the State Government on March 6, 1990, by which time the Congress-I was in power in the State.

He stated that the Chintalapudi pattadars had been granted ryotwari pattas by the settlement officer in 1975. The pattadars were non-tribals and while some of them had been permitted to fell trees, others were denied permission on the ground that the G.O. of 1988 did not provide for it.

The order of July 9 directs the principal chief conservator of forests

to instruct the divisional forests officer of Kakinada "not to interfere in the matter of felling of trees and issue of transit permits to the pattadars referred to".

Many of the non-tribal pattadars in the area have obtained pattas illegally. Most of the cases were detected in 1978 in a joint survey by revenue and forest department officials. Many more cases came to the fore during the "Telugu Girijana Magani Samardhana" programme launched in 1987 by the then chief minister N.T. Rama Rao. The programme envisaged granting pattas to the landless Girijans.

So acute did the problem of exploitation of tribals become that the collector of East Godavari, Mr. M.V.P.C. Sastry, wrote to the government in 1987 seeking an amendment to the Forests Act to safeguard the interest of tribals. It was after a detailed study of the problem highlighted by him that the 1988 amendment was made.

The government had now by the fresh orders given scope to the pattadars to fell trees on a large scale which will denude rich forests in the district.

Meanwhile, a voluntary organisation called "Sakti", which is working with tribals in Ramapachodavaram in East Godavari district, had challenged the last G.O. in the High Court, terming it a "colourable exercise of power" to benefit an individual.