

Tribals — a cry for justice

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Kalahmandry, Feb. 26: Any number of police outposts created will not solve the basic issues of the tribals. Not even the conversion of police outposts into regular police stations will be of much help to the tribals.

The tribal's basic problem is land. He should get back his land which has been occupied by non-tribals. The extremists are trying to help the tribals in this issue. There are instances when the government failed to do justice to tribals, the extremists took possession of the land from the non-tribals and handed it over to the tribals. Despite several laws, the tribal is not able to enjoy the benefits from his own land.

On one side the extremists are educating the tribals about their ideology, on the other the tribals are harassed by the police for giving shelter to the extremists. There are a number of police camps in the Agency area of East Godavari district.

The police stations in Agency area of East Godavari came into existence in 1800 to protect the interests of the Rampa zamindar and murtadar from the rebellious tribal chiefs of the interior. Killing the police, kidnapping and threatening the officers had become part of the mutiny.

Some of the documents available reflect the atrocities committed by the police. Engaging tribals as bonded labour, sexual exploitation of the women and beating and killing of the tribals are some.

That was why Alluri Seetaramaraju had attacked the police stations and gained popularity making the police demoralised and weak. These acts were applauded as a saga in the history of Andhra Pradesh.

In the post-independence period the Naxalite movement of Srikakulam had a chain reaction in Kondamodalu of Devipatnam mandal. Under the leadership of Tarimela Nagireddy, the tribals occupied 100 acres of a non-tribal who had an estate patta and a police outpost for the first time was established in the Agency area in 1970 to protect the interests of the pattadars and to keep the tribals under control.

In the resulting fights between

tribals and non-tribals, tribals were shot dead by the police but they were successful in occupying the land and still it is in their possession under the leadership of the Organisation for Protection of Democratic Rights (OPDR).

Later Naxalites had switched over to the wage-issue in forest work. One outpost was established in the far interior Tunnuru village to protect the paper mill's interests and one more was established in Chilakalamamidi to control tribals groups fighting for the community land.

Pyla Vasudeva Rao group has underground cadres under the leadership of one Ramesh in Kakawada, Kontanna in Maredumilli, Rajanna and Lakshmi in D.V. Kota and Tadeipalli areas have theirs. In addition in the Nellipuri mukhasa of Gangavaram mandal the group is supporting the Harijans occupying the land of the mukhasadar. Demanding right wages from forest department paper mill is the basis for the group. The group is organising a front organisation Rytu Coolie Sangham in every village.

The PV group has secured the seat of mandal president, single window president in Maredumilli and is competing in the general elections for legislature seat of the Agency area.

Taking advantage of the police's soft attitude and the vacuum prevailing in the dry areas of the district the PV group is extending its network in the drylands of the district keeping its base in the forest for survival and 'resources'.

Mobilising their cadre of Rytu Coolie Sangham with the support of liquor shops the group organises meetings and takes to task the tribals not subscribing to their terms. The incidental violence and infights among tribals is treated as an internal problem of the PV group by the police.

Radicals are successful in erstwhile Addateegala taluk comprising Rajavommangi, Addateegala and Y. Ramavaram mandals with the underground groups of Tandava, Sabari and Krishna Dalams. Apart from wage issues they organise people on the issue of land. Arrack is a source of fund raising.

One T. Suryaprakasa Rao sup-

porting the cause of non-tribal landlords was murdered in Kona-lova and the hand of a tribal sowcar, sarpanch Manikyam, was cut off at a public meeting of tribals. Two more sarpanchs, alleged to be police informers, were shot dead. Five police men were killed in Daragadda. The radicals are active in Sankhavar-am mandal where tribals are more in number.

To suppress these momentary police out posts have gone up to 20. The non-tribals are king-makers, and vote banks.

The leadership, to strengthen its position, always needs the prop of the police to hold their sway in the villages. The traditional kula panchayat system has been shattered. The villages are divided into political factions Rytu Coolie Sanghams etc. Everywhere a non-tribal holds the key. Police outposts intervened even in family disputes.

But their intelligence network and outposts were of no use in critical times. So the outposts were withdrawn in October last year. Now CRPF is stationed in the forest. In its presence future may be worse for the tribals.

Previously the collectors who had multifarious jobs to do used to visit the tribal area very rarely. The tahasildars ruled the roost on the side of the government. It is a convention that all those unfit elsewhere were transferred to the Agency Area. Joining hands with non-tribals they smashed all the records which were in favour of the tribals, tampered the registers and implemented protective legislation according to their favours and prejudice. All development had benefited to bogus tribals. An example is the maddigadda reservoir irrigating lands of bogus tribal families.

For the past two or three years young officers are being appointed for tribal welfare. In endearing themselves to the tribals they visit frequently their villages. But when people come up with complaints against police these officers are helpless.

In mitigating the prevailing bitterness towards the government among the people the district collector began conducting tribal

meets involving the district forest officer and the police officers. At such a meet at Kakodu-Gurtedu-Komapuram, and Nelakota tribals used to express their grievances.

A systematic survey of land holdings and investigation of non-tribal assets is nearing completion—the survey reports were put to wider debate in the village. The social forestry scheme for tribal welfare is getting massive support.

The kidnap drama of the IAS officers has thrown all these 2 to 3 years of efforts of the young officers into an insecure environment.

There are several constraints on the administration in undoing the injustice on these two fronts. The prerequisite is political will, the lack of which was come to surface when Mr Shankaran was transferred from the post of Principal Secretary for not yielding to the relaxation of land regulation measures in tribal areas.

One more retrograde step is the government's move to take away the magisterial and judicial powers from the revenue department—that is MRO's and sub-collectors and collectors are having judicial powers.

The government has recently added three more revenue divisions—Rampachodavaram, Paloncha and Eturunagaram to the earlier divisions like Bhadrachalam, Paderu Asifabad etc. The sub-collectors being executive officers have the opportunity of knowing the problems in the field and the tribal perception and moreover they have the responsibility of implementing the protective legislation of tribal welfare of the government. There is no bar for them in holding the courts in the village.

This is viewed by non-tribals as centralisation of powers in the hands of the sub-collector and collector, who are the agents to the government. The non-tribals feel that they do far better in the courts of judicature since they feel collectors have a bias for the tribals.

The government should reflect before the tribal areas in the state become another Tripura and Assam and Darjeeling.