

# Chenchus enrolled as voters for first time

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**KURNOOL, NOV. 17.** Chenchus, the vanishing tribe of the Nallamala forest spread over five districts, have at last been enrolled as voters for the panchayat elections. They will exercise their franchise for the first time since Independence in the coming panchayat elections.

The names of Chenchus living in 75 habitations of five districts do exist on the electoral rolls for Assembly and Parliament elections. But the names have mysteriously disappeared in the rolls of panchayat elections. Chenchus have been fighting for the basic voting right for the last fifteen years.

In the absence of proper lobbying or failure to take the matter to courts, the issue has persisted. The general argument of revenue

officials has been that the Chechugudems, some of them are very small with a few dozen families, were not covered by any panchayat. Only a member of a panchayat could become a voter. On this ground, Chenchus had been deprived of their voting right till now.

The tribal interest groups moved the court and got an order in favour of Chenchus, in which the court directed the State Election Commission in April last to enrol Chenchus as voters in all villages. Even then, the revenue authorities did not take it up as a special drive but treated them as "inclusions" and asked the tribals to present their representations personally in Mandal Revenue Offices. Also, a condition was placed that the representations should not exceed five or six a

day. These restrictions are applied in normal circumstances to avoid enrollment of bogus voters.

The groups supporting the Chenchus had a tough time convincing the officials that this was a special drive and they should do it by deputing enumerators to Chenchu colonies. Finally, it was heeded to. The revenue team that went to Nekkanti, Ponnalabayalu, Alattam, Guttalachenu and Nara Tadika in the deep forest had to spend five days there to finish the job.

The exercise has been completed with an estimated 5,000 Chenchus being enrolled as voters. The Integrated Tribal Development Agency at Srisailem and voluntary organisations have helped the revenue authorities in completing the job.