

# A.P. tribal group denuding forests

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**T**HE Samanthas, a primitive tribal group, living in the forests around Koyyaru, in northern coastal Andhra Pradesh and doing "podu" cultivation were reported in newspapers of guarding the recently abducted MLA by naxals.

The project officer of the Indian Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), Paderu, in a pamphlet, on "podu" shifting cultivation, which is considered detrimental to environment and forest growth, had advocated weaning the tribals from the clutches of the group.

The Samanthas, also known as Khonds, Kodhu or Kondu, have mongoloid features with prominent cheek-bones and are called Basollu people. Their hamlets are characterised by long dormitory-like houses, resembling railway carriages with coupes, due to their strong family ties.

They rear goats, pigs and occasionally cattle. They keep dug-out trunks of trees, resembling canoes, to store water and provide feed to their cattle. The sanitation is very poor. Recently five people died in a hamlet near Chintapallia after consuming stale meat.

Their womenfolk wear bright yellow saris in a tribal fashion.

They carry their babies slung over their back.

While one approaches the Samantha hamlets one can see neatly terraced fields along the hill slopes. The tribals are experts in terrace cultivation and they do

ing crop by locusts.

An area of over 250 acres was covered with boulders when there was a landslide at Gurupalli near Paderu around the time a cyclone hit the coastal AP in May, 1990. Deforestation by the Samanthas



A Samantha tribal fetching water

this on the fields owned by another tribe known as Bhaktas.

They are good at agriculture particularly in raising commercial crops like the *rajma* beans. The ferocity and speed with which they clear the forest for "podu" cultivation is compared to the swarming of a stand-

was cited as the reason for the landslide.

Many tribals lost their habitats due to the starting of Machkhand, Balimela and Sileru hydel projects and the governments of Orissa and AP had neglected their rehabilitation in the 1950s.

Under the "podu" farming two

or three varieties of millet and a couple of varieties of seeds are raised in a clearing. Usually the land is not tilled. The seeds are ready for harvest at various intervals.

Manyam, a forest tract in north coastal Andhra, came under severe pressure with further waves of "podu" cultivators and hostility from foresters. The "podu" cultivators tended to stay put in their fields and took up conventional farming. The tribals displaced by the hydel projects found work for some time in the project works. Thereafter they turned to forests and resorted to "podu" cultivation.

Industrialisation in Koraput district of Orissa, led to a fresh wave of migration by the tribals. At one stage, the AP forest department realised the futility of trying to evict the tribals who had no skills and knew only "podu" cultivation and provided work to some people in coffee plantations.

The Samanthas were blamed for destroying forests and harbouring extremists. When the Telengana armed uprising was crushed 40 years ago, some communist leaders found sanctuary in these parts. Later on, when the tribals had trouble with the foresters they received support from the tribals had trouble with the foresters they received support from the communist leaders (several tribals refer to naxals as communist leaders). The most traumatic experience they faced was the burning of 600 houses by the forest staff and the police in 1987. Entire villages/hamlets were razed to the earth.

However, the AP government has shown no discrimination in extending the benefits to them offered to other tribals. Many Khonds have improved their economic conditions by their hard work. Now they have started paying attention to education. Mr Sanyasirao, a teenager in Kodisingi hamlet near Gudem, remembers having walked three miles to attend school. He was the only one from his hamlet to do so. Four 'gobar' gas plants have been provided by a voluntary agency, Chaitanya Sravanti at Gudem.

The residents of Neredabanda hired a teacher on their own initiative and later the Mandal revenue officer of Gudem arranged to have the teacher's salary paid by the government.

But the difficult exercise of creating environment awareness and making the tribals adopt practices like raising trees instead of crops along the slopes, has yet to be executed on a large scale.