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Plight of tribals in agency

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

KAKINADA - Tribals in the agency areas of East Godavari district have become scapegoats. The fight between the police and the Naxalites for 'supremacy' in the agency has taken a heavy toll of the poor tribals. True to the adage, when two elephants fight it is the grass that gets crushed, the tribals suffer silently even as the Naxalites and the district administration vie to assert their 'rights'.

In fact some time ago some leaders of both the ruling and opposition parties raised funds for the construction of 'memorials' for Naxalites. The police too spared these armed 'gentlemen' when the State government 'relaxed' its attitude towards Naxalism. Instead, the police started harassing innocent people in villages. In return, the Naxalites adopted a 'soft policy' vis a vis the police forgiving the 'big people'

while mercilessly killing the children of lesser men.

That Naxalism is spreading its tentacles fastly is evident from the recent resolution of the Prattipadu mandal praja parishad demanding suspension of the police officials responsible for the Mohanapuram encounter.

Last year no official dared to intervene when the Naxalites took up the issue of a rising procurement prices of tobacco. However, the district administration intervened this year as the Girijan Cooperative Corporation (GCC) had advanced loans for the crop. But due to lack of intervention by the tobacco board, the tribals were forced to sell tobacco to private companies at nominal prices.

The GCC has stopped purchasing tamarind from tribals. They are forced to search for traders to sell their produce elsewhere. Though

the jack fruit does not come under the minor forest produce, the GCC has been allegedly collecting tax.

Of the 33,440 metric tonnes of bamboo procured by paper mills in the State, last year, 8,213 tonnes was supplied by the forest department. The Forest Scheduled Rate (FSR) per tonnes bamboo is Rs. 160 but the tribals sold the produce at Rs. 126 a tonne. The tribals in the process lost Rs. 14 lakh. The tribals could hardly make both ends meet as they were working for less than the negotiated wages.

Recently 13 tribals submitted a memorandum to the project officer, ITDA, seeking permission to cultivate their (patta) lands. Only two persons got permits. The government prepared a draft in 1987 to amend section 28B(2) of the Andhra Pradesh Preservation of Private Forest rules. It still awaits approval. The draft, if approved,

would ensure fair price to tribals and check interference of middlemen.

Transport contractors on the other hand have been poaching on the wild wealth under the cover of the Forest Development Corporation (FDC) auctions.

According to the Accelerated Action Plan (ACP) the road to Pullangi was laid. But the GCC found the road unfit for transportation. It shifted its depot from Pullangi to Booduluru, 15 km away. The tribals are forced to walk all the way to procure their essential commodities.

The district officials blame the Naxals for all this mess. But the tribals are at a loss to know who is responsible for the non-implementation of minimum wages by the paper mills, engineering and the forest departments, the tough stand of tobacco companies and the mismanagement of forest wealth