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Telangana: 80 Koya tribal families evicted from their fields for plantation drive



The forced displacement of tribals will not only cause loss of livelihood and social distress, it would also adversely impact ecosystem restoration, activists have warned

Farmers of the Koya tribe of Satyaranarayanam of Ganugapadu in Bhadradi Khotagudem district of Telangana have complained that they have been evicted from their lands by the state government which has been undertaking plantation drives under the Haritha Haraam programme. The programme,

launched in 2015, aims at large scale tree plantation to increase tree cover in the state from 24% to 33%.

About 80 families from the tribal community say their fields – around 200 acres – have been taken over for the purpose, and their livelihoods threatened. The families have been cultivating pulses, millets and cotton. In 2019, the district collector had forwarded petitions from the villagers seeking grant of forest rights to them. This process had not been completed

Farmers said labourers engaged under MGNREGA from neighbouring villages had dug trenches to begin the plantation drive on June 17, and they were prevented from accessing their fields although they had already sown crops

Villagers said their claims under the Forest Rights Act were still pending. In 2002, a similar attempt to take over forest lands had been made by the state forest department. After that, cases were booked against 20 tribal families and these people then made several petitions to the district authorities. After the Forest Rights Act came into force, the earlier petitions were used to show as evidence that the families had been cultivating the land all these years.

Lingaraj, a Left activist who has been visiting the village often, said, “About 50 people were rounded up

and taken to the nearest police station, where they were threatened that they would be placed under preventive detention if they did not sign on a statement agreeing not to protest the plantations, so they were forced to do that.”

This is a scheduled area, and under the law gram sabha consent is necessary for such plantation in the area. No gram sabha consent was sought in this case. Villagers were also informed that podu land (agriculture land which under the traditional farming practices of the local tribes, is practiced on hill slopes; the land may be left fallow for some time and cultivated in some seasons) in neighbouring villages would also be taken over for the government for this purpose.

Using police force to evict poor tribal farmers from their lands is against the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 and Forest Rights Act, 2006. Under the Forest Rights Act, no member of a forest dwelling scheduled tribe or traditional forest dweller can be evicted till the verification and recognition procedure under the Act is complete. The gram sabha is the authority to initiate the process to determine community and individual rights under the FRA, and a final decision is taken by the district level committee.

In an appeal to Union minister for tribal affairs Arjun Munda, the activists state that there is need to review the Haritha Haraam programme of the state government which is using funds under the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) to undermine the fundamental rights of tribal communities. The forced displacement of tribals will not only cause loss of livelihood and social distress, it would also adversely impact ecosystem restoration, the activists warn.

Former CPI-M MP and leader of the Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch Midiam Babu Rao said he had intervened recently after 35 tribal families from Mulakapalli village in neighbouring Khammam district were similarly evicted, and they were later allowed to take care of their crops.

Local activists say members of the Left intervene, but since the intervention is through political pressure rather than taking legal recourse, the problem is solved only for a little while, and the threat of eviction continues to haunt tribal farmers. Forest officials of the state government could not be reached on phone for comments on this matter.