

TAMIL NADU

Jawadhu tribals continue to tread dangerous path



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In 2015, as many as 20 woodcutters from the State were gunned down in Seshachalam forest

Tribal men of Jawadhu Hills continue to leave their homes to fell red sanders in Andhra Pradesh. Despite knowing the dangers involved, the men, particularly youngsters, tread the risky road. While police say they choose to go for the huge money it paid, activists are of the view that this was the outcome of a deep-rooted problem and call upon the State government to address the core issue.

THE HINDU

Inside the Deshaichalam forest and scores of arrests has not stopped the tribal men from being involved in the illegal activity.

A senior police official in Tiruvannamalai said that despite being aware of the dangers involved, the tribals continue to go as it fetches them huge money. "The agents offer them plenty of cash for a week's job. This is a big network. There are several involved in between the agents and the buyers. The tribals are coolies" he said.

The Police department, in a bid to prevent them, has been creating awareness in villages, and conducting frequent raids.

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"Our informants are geared up, and we are acting with intelligence. We have also taken up rehabilitation measures along with the revenue department," he said.

But despite creating awareness, the flow of men has not stopped. R. Ponni, Superintendent of Police, Tiruvannamalai, said, "The district Collector and I have decided to go and meet these 42 men from Jawadhu Hills. We will ask them directly how their quality of life can be improved, what they wanted and what problems they faced."

'Deep-rooted problem'

As C.R. Bijoy of Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a national coalition of forest-dweller organisations, observed, "Unfortunately, despite previous incidents, tribals continue to go to fell trees in AP forests. This is a deep-rooted problem that does not lie in AP or with the AP government or AP forest department. We should look at what causes these people to move to AP forests to take the risks."

"It is ridiculous to say that people are enticed by money. It has been proven repeatedly that they are liable to get arrested or killed but still people go, so there is something seriously wrong. The problem lies with the Tamil Nadu government. Until, the tribals are provided with better living and better opportunities, this will continue. For people in hill areas, forest resources and land are primary means of livelihood."

"As far as I know, Tamil Nadu is the only State in the country that does not have protective laws regarding Scheduled Tribes," he said. He pointed out that The Forest Rights Act was passed in 2006 and became operational in 2008. But it is still not implemented in TN. "Only in the last two to three months, a few titles have been given in a few places and that too, in a totally absurd manner."

He said according to 2011 census there were 88 villages with forest as land use with an area of 79,677.32 hectares in Tiruvannamalai and 34 villages with 1,66,261.13 hectares in Vellore district. This is the minimum potential area that should be titled to the villages and its

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Government of Tamil Nadu had not taken any meaningful, effective steps to ensure that large section of tribal populations and their livelihood issues are attended to seriously”.

“Tribal families are responding only because their livelihood is not attended to by the State of Tamil Nadu,” he said. He called for efforts from the State and District Legal Services Authority to ensure that senior lawyers are engaged to take on bail more than 750 persons from Tamil Nadu who are in AP prisons.



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