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[Home](#) > [Content](#) > [64278](#) >

For the Malekudiyas, life in the woods is dark and deep

Ranged against them are the ANF, police and the lack of basic facilities



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Government control of the forests and the consequent Damocles sword of eviction from their traditional environment as added to their problems of basic infrastructure, thanks to negligence of the government, but the continuing harassment by police and the Anti-Naxal Force (ANF) personnel in the name of anti-naxal operation in the recent days has made life miserable for the Malekudiyas.

Although protected by two central laws - the ST and

Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities), 42 Malekudiya families, original inhabitants of the forest in Kuthlur village in Naravi Grama Panchayat of Belthangadi Taluk panchayat are in distress in many ways.

The tribals trek his way for at least six km through dense forest to reach their homes. While the Government spokesmen talk about right to education and health care for all, the nearest primary school for the Malekudiya children is situated in Arasarakatte, nearly 12 km from Kuthlur. The nearest hospital is at Naravi, also a dozen km away.

The Naravi Grama Panchayat built a bus shelter near the forest at Alamba in the village eight years ago. But no bus has ever stopped at the shelter. Udaya Malekudiya, a resident of Berengadi, a hamlet, has to walk six km carrying diesel for his pumpset.

Chandu Malekudiya, a resident of Alambe in Kuthlur told Deccan Herald said that the GP has neither provided basic facilities nor does it allow the people to do it themselves.

With collection of NTFP (non-traditional forest produce) being one of their major source of livelihood, the Malekudiyas have to work the jungles which are home to naxals who have entered the the region to organize the tribals. The hide-and-seek of naxals with forces ruthlessly hunting them have affected the Malekudiyas deeply.

"The forest officials prevent us from collecting forest produces like wild honey, nutmeg (rampatre), cinnamon (dalchini), watehuli etc. The ANF and police torment us by frequent raids," he added.

As the Kuthlur forest region is included in the proposed Kudremukh National Park project, the government has asked tribals to vacate the forest to make way for the project. The District Administration had informed the tribals that they would not be vacated from the forest but would pay compensation to those who left the forest voluntarily.

Inspector General of Police (Western Range) Gopal B Hosur said that there is no link between the anti-naxal operations and the land acquisition for Kudremukh

National Park. "Neither police nor ANF has pressured or tortured them in anyway to facilitate the Kudremukh National Park Project," he added.

However, villagers allege that the police, ANF, Forest Department and the district administration are using to coercion to evict them. Although there is no overt coercion, the denial of basic necessities is itself a form of coercion.

Jalaja Malekudiya said none of the houses in Kuthlur had electricity connection. The government had distributed two solar lamps each to 42 houses under the Naxal Infested Area Development Package. Most have gone 'kaput'.

Vittal Malekudiya, a youth said the village residents developed a six-km long road between Alamba and Kuriyadi two years ago under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS. "Recently, tribals carried out maintenance work and submitted forms to claim payment under) three months. It is yet to be paid."

Deputy Commissioner V Ponnuraj said development of the region, a reserve forest area, is difficult as prior permission had to be secured from the Union Ministry for Environment and Forest. Further, the investment would be heavy since the houses are not located close by.