

Forest department's eco-tourism plan sparks livelihood fears among tribals in Araku Valley

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Visakhapatnam: The forest department and local tribals at Vanjangi near Paderu and Madagada near Araku Valley, famously known as Cloud Hills, are in conflict over rights and control. The local tribals have developed minimal facilities such as kaccha roads and parking areas at these tourist spots. They attracted tourists with the help of local unions of auto rickshaw and jeep drivers, as well as local panchayats. However, the forest department's announcement that the Vanjangi and Madagada Sunrise View point areas would be developed as eco-tourism projects in Alluri Sitarama Raju district has irked the locals. They allege they will lose their livelihoods if the forest department takes over the area.

Vanjangi, located 7 km from the district headquarters Paderu, has become a sought-after tourist destination in the winter season. Tourists, mostly youth, are attracted to witness the sunrise in the cloud-filled skies. Local youth promoted Vanjangi by filming the scenic beauty of the hills and clouds on their mobile phones around six years ago.

More than 10,000 people visit Vanjangi on weekends, and around 4,000 tourists from North Andhra, other parts of the state, and the Hyderabad surroundings visit the spot daily during the tourist season, which begins in the second week of October. Despite lakhs of visitors each year during the season, facilities such as toilets and parking areas have yet to be developed, alleged P. Nagaraju, a graduate from Paderu.

Locals developed a kaccha road for two-wheelers and four-wheelers and established small shops for their livelihood. Many rest houses and tent accommodations have also come up in the area. They even fixed an entry fee for vehicles. Now, the forest department has declared that the Vanjangi area falls under a protected forest zone, and the revenue generated from it belongs to the forest department.

The department announced that the hill area is being developed as a community-based eco-tourism project with an investment of Rs 50 lakh. It has asked residents of the local villages Pothurajumetta, Vanjangi, Doddipalli, and E Sampaala to submit objections to the Paderu forest range office, if any. A meeting will be held on October 10 at the Forest Range Office. Forest Ranger A. Prema told media that Vanjangi would be developed in partnership with people from local villages through the Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS).

Meanwhile, villagers in Madagada panchayat staged a protest at the forest ranger office in Araku Valley, demanding the cancellation of the eco-tourism project. They said around 300 families depend directly or indirectly on the area for their livelihood. They accused the forest department of attempting to seize the revenue generated at the Madagada Sunrise Viewpoint.

When contacted, chief conservator of forest (CCF) Dr B Mohamed Diwan Maydeen told TOI that both areas belong to the forest department. As per government directions, development activities under eco-tourism projects will proceed. "We should protect the forest area and also provide basic facilities to tourists. We are not disturbing the locals, but we need to ensure forest regulations and employ locals. A part of the revenue will also be spent on developing local villages. It is a community-based eco-tourism initiative. Local people will get employment through the forest department," he said.