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Hyderabad: Claims of 6 lakh acre forest land bogus, say activists

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HYDERABAD: Excess claims to the tune of six lakh acres of forest land have been filed in what could indicate a huge mismatch between the number of claims received by the Telangana government - from tribals and non-tribals - and the forest department's database of encroached forest land in the state.

While claims for 13.2 lakh acres have been received by the government, the actual encroached land as per the ground reports and satellite imagery-based data of the forest department is only 7.27 lakh acres in Telangana. Green activists allege that all the six lakh acres of additional claims are bogus and say that even in the 7.27 lakh acres of encroached land, much of the encroachment took place after the 2005 deadline, making their claims under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional

Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 ineligible.

The mismatch assumes much significance in the wake of haggling over podu cultivation and land title deeds with both ruling and opposition parties at loggerheads over granting rights to the cultivators.

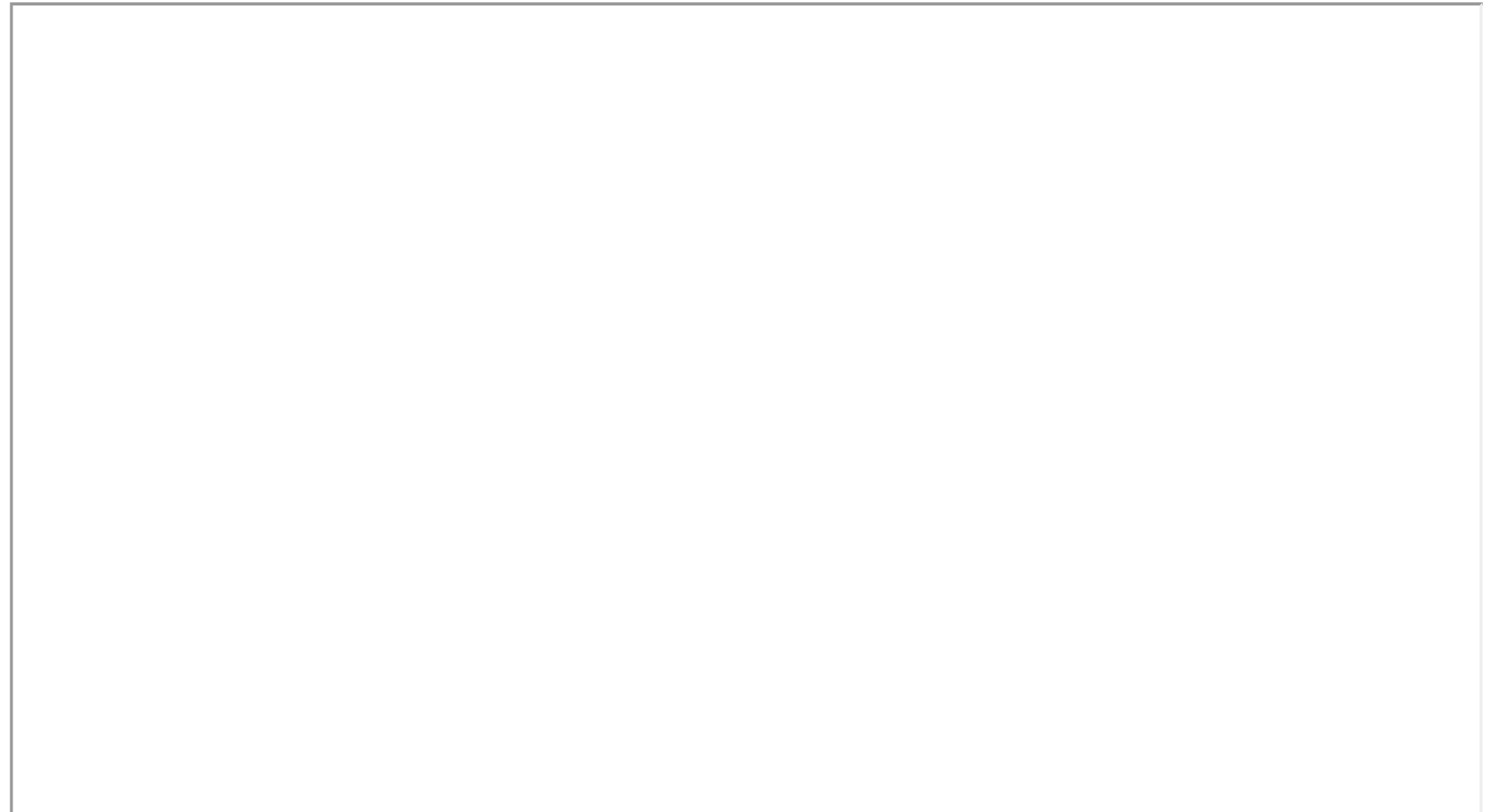
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Sources in the tribal welfare department told TOI that at least 8.1 lakh acres of land was claimed by 2.3 lakh tribals and five lakh acres claimed by 1.7 lakh non-tribals since the government started accepting claims in November 2021.

Environmentalism Donthi Narasimha Reddy suggested a ground-level land survey to overcome the mess. "Validation of claims has to be done per the law in the gram sabhas. Genuine podu cultivators should be given the rights. The forest department should rehabilitate podu cultivators instead of taking criminal action against the Adivasis," he told TOI.



Forest officials said they came across majority of claims being filed from Adilabad, Kumuram Bheem Asifabad, Mancherial,

Bhadradri Kothagudem and Khammam districts, which are predominantly inhabited by the tribals and which have large forest tracts. In recent times, there has been an escalation in clashes between the Adivasis and foresters over the latter's eviction drive.

Reacting to the July 7 incident in Koyaposhagudem in Mancheri where the foresters forcibly evicted Adivasi podu cultivators, Tudum Debba Adilabad unit president Godam Ganesh alleged that police and forest officials were hand in glove and harassing the Adivasis.

During Lok Sabha proceedings on Monday, in response to a question by Congress MP N Uttam Kumar Reddy on the Recognition of Forest Rights Act, Union minister of state for tribal affairs Bishweswar Tudu said the responsibility for implementation of the Act lies with state governments.