Chenchus of Nallamala

Why in news?

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- Chenchus tribe have always been caught at the cross fire between Maoists and the anti naxal forces of Andhra Pradesh police.
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- The recent order National tiger conservation authority has put them yet again in an uncertain phase.
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Who are they?

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- For Chenchus Nallamala forest is their home.
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- Every day they enter the deep forest of Nallamala found along the Eastern Ghats in search of leaves, tubers, roots, soapberries, honey and gum.
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- The Devadari Kura (Cedrus deodara or native cedar) plant which is believed to ward off liver, urinary and respiratory infections and gastric ulcers is there source of food.
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- The Telugu-speaking food gatherers and hunters of the Nallamala hill range will have a brunch which is a cocktail of curries made of leaves and fruits, mainly custard apple and gardenia which are found in plenty here.
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- There are armed with axe and bow for their self defence and mostly accompanied by their pet dogs.
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- Their goddess is Malalamma Vana Devatha (the goddess of honey).
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- They brew their own liquor “Thummachakka” with acacia bark, mahua flower and jaggery, which is consumed after a hunt.
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- They are among the oldest living aboriginals of south India.

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What is the issue?

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- Chenchus who live deep in the forest of Nallamala (tropical dry deciduous scrub with trees of axle wood, teak, Hardwicke) is also host to India’s largest tiger reserve, the 3,728-sq.-km Nagarjunasagar Srisailam Tiger Reserve (NSTR).
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- The recent order of NTCA means Chenchus will no longer be able to claim Nallamala as their home.
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- The fact that Chenchus enjoy a symbiotic relationship with the Nallamala was recognised early by the British.
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- The British gave them rights not just to stay inside the forest but also do subsistence farming and grazing.
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- In the skewed tiger versus tribal’s debate now rekindled, will the Chenchus lose out again?
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- Will they be edged out of the CTH and thrown into the plains in the name of rehabilitation?
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- And what will happen to those who were already given land rights in the Nallamala forest?
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- The order has come at a time when the Chenchus thought the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 commonly called the Forest Rights Act or FRA had come as a huge relief providing them the forest land rights they deserved.
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- Census 2011 puts the Chenchu population at 64,227 in habitations spread over five districts, three in Andhra Pradesh (Prakasam, Guntur and Kurnool) and two in Telangana (Mahbubnagar and Nalgonda).
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- The gender break-up is 32,196 males and 32,031 females, the child sex ratio is 988/1000 and literacy is 40.6%, (47.3% among males, 34% among females).
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What are the other problems faced by them?

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- Between 1990 and 2006 the Chenchus were caught in the crossfire between Maoists and Greyhounds, the elite anti-Naxal force of the Andhra Pradesh police.
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- With the Maoists shifting base to Chhattisgarh and the Andhra Pradesh-Odisha border Chenchus heaved a sigh of relief.
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- But the recent NTCA order puts them into yet another uncertain phase.
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- Chenchus in fact protect the tiger population inside the tiger reserve from poachers.
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- There was not a single case, reporting the death of tiger due to this primitive tribe.
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- 200 Chenchus are placed as tiger protection watchers all round the year and 200 more as forest fire watchers for six months inside NSTR.
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- Neither do they have the skills to cope in the plains nor can they return to the forest due to recent orders.
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- The rehabilitation plan by government will only rob of their century old livelihood and their relationship with the forest.
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- The rehabilitation policy envisages concrete one-room tenements replacing the traditional conical bamboo and thatch huts.
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- The officials of NSTR deny coercion and spells out the process of rehabilitation.
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- They say that there is a process and a monetary package for relocation and options are giving to them.
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- And it is purely voluntary and only after all Chenchus in a particular gudem (village) has given their consent.
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What is the ground reality?

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- The NTSR has a core area of 2,444 sq. km and a buffer zone of 1,283 sq. km.
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- The ‘Status of tigers in India, 2014’ report released by the NTCA put the tiger population in the reserve at 65, the tiger density being 1.9 tigers per 100 sq. km.
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- Survival International, a global movement for tribal peoples’ rights, reported in December 2015 that tiger numbers have increased rapidly in the first tiger reserve in India where local tribes (the Soligas in this case) have won the right to stay inside, the Biligiriranganatha Swamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary or BRT Wildlife Sanctuary in Karnataka.
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- The tiger population doubled between 2010 and 2014 from 35 to 68.
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- This increase is far higher than the national rate at which the tiger population is growing.
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- Many like the environmental NGO Kalpavriksh see the NTCA order as a direct violation of the Forest Rights Act.
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- NGO say this is a conspiracy to stop implementation of the FRA in tiger reserves thereby denying forest rights to a large population of Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) living in these reserves.
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- The FRA clearly defines ‘forest land’ under Section 2 (d) to mean forests of all categories including the protected areas such as Wildlife Sanctuaries, National Parks and Tiger Reserves.
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- Section 4 (1) provides for recognition and vesting of all kinds of forest rights of STs and OTFDs as mentioned in section 3 notwithstanding anything contained in any other laws for the time being in force.
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- Further, Section 4 (2) requires recognition and vesting of rights in critical wildlife habitats and similarly Section 38 V of the Wild Life Protection (Amendment) Act of 2006 mandates recognition and vesting of rights of STs and OTFDs in the critical tiger habitats.
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- Therefore, the NTCA order has no legal basis and is seemingly aimed at

obstructing implementation of the FRA in the tiger reserves.
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Source: The Hindu

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