The ugly incident in which ruling party leaders mercilessly attacked Kagaznagar Forest Range Officer Chole Anitha and some other personnel, brings into sharp focus the issue of podu lands or the forest lands which are under cultivation, especially by tribals. The latter are demanding rights to cultivate forest lands under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, claiming that they were tilling the lands since long.

While individual rights on 1,35,311 acres were given to tribals under the Forest Rights Act, claims for rights on about 88,478 acres were rejected in erstwhile undivided Adilabad district. Those who support the demand of poor tribals for rights on forest lands maintain that it is this extent on which they want a positive decision.

“The fact, however, is quite different,” asserted a forest official on conditions of anonymity. “As politicians continue to promise to get them the rights, gullible tribals and non-tribals have taken to clearing forests afresh,” he pointed out the futility of the effort as operation of the FRA has been closed long since.

Kagaznagar Forest Division is a case in point where villagers try to occupy abandoned clearings and illegally fell trees to expand the area of their fields on which they enjoy rights under the FRA. The incident in question is an example of occupation of forest clearings by villagers allegedly at the behest of ruling party leaders who harbour malafide intentions to occupy reserve forest lands.

The total extent of forest land in the division is 91,719.31 hectare of which 16,123.12 hectare is under encroachment. Rights under the FRA have been given only on 2,020.939 hectare which leaves about 14,000 hectare as pure encroachment according to Forest Department.

**Scientific evidence**

There is, nevertheless, no consensus on the issue of encroachments. If the tribals and others insist that they are in cultivation since long Forest Department produces scientific evidence of the areas being clearings of recent origins.

“There is a serious threat to environment thanks to the acts of irresponsible leaders. They should stop making promises on tilling rights to poor villagers in order to get their votes,” an environment activist in the area observed as he suggested a possible solution to the problem.