Hidden Chenchus and crouching tigers

Blending into natural habitat, they help conserve the big cats in Nallamala

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ONGOLE
If there’s really someone who understands tigers and help them let live and multiply, its the Chenchus. Members of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), the Chenchus toil all day in the expansive Nallamala forests manning the base camps.

Even then, the number of big cats in Andhra Pradesh has been put at 48 as per the assessment done by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), the maiden one in the State after bifurcation.

Track and record
A group of five Chenchus man each of the base camps and move into the interior forests at dawn each day conscientiously to digitally capture pug marks and other remnants left by the big cats in the sprawling Nallamala forests.

Equipped with GPS-based Garmin GPS72h equipment, the tiger trackers record the droppings and other evidence left by the wild animals overnight in the Nagarjunasagar Srisailam Tiger Reserve (NSTR), the biggest sanctuary in the country.

‘Pancha Pandavas’
Referred to as ‘Pancha Pandavas’ locally, they work unmindful of treacherous terrain to provide a safe environment for the big cats and other wild animals and generate vast data from the ground for analysis by the NTCA authorities who come out with the tiger census every four years.

“We have been co-existing with big cats and other wild animals without disturbing the natural environment in the forest for long,” says tiger watcher Kudumla Anjaiah who is well-versed with the topography and can sense the movement of fast approaching wild animals to move in time to safety.

“In all, 125 watchers are engaged in the Markapur Division of the Forest Department,” says Dornala Deputy Forest Range Officer Mukka Prasad Reddy.