Chenchus stand guard to save the forests of Nallamala

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Nimala Bayanna, long-headed and thickset, wields a bow and arrow not to hunt for food but to attack treasure hunters or trespassers in the lush green Nallamala forest which he inhabits.

While mining and land clearing continue to eat away the country’s largest remaining tiger reserves, the Chenchus, who live in 137 hamlets that dot the forest, are pushing back. Bayanna, who is in his 30s is a member of Nallamala’s Chenchu tribe has been spearheading the fight against the recent proposal of mining uranium in the area. While the Chenchu men patrol forests, e women guard their hamlets by making sure their forest and all the living beings that survive on it are safe.

“We patrol, we find intruders, we destroy their vehicles and we send them away. We’ve stopped many illegal miners and loggers by doing so,” Bayanna said.

After the in-principle clearance granted for uranium exploration in the tiger reserve, the Chenchus fear re-location and have become more protective of their forest, says Y Ballaya, general secretary, struggle committee against uranium mining.

“Lack of enforcement by the State government has forced the Chenchus to take matters into their own hands,” said Ballaya.

Tribal territories seem to be acting as the best line of control for Nallamala forests. “We know it’s risky and we have enemies. We are ready to die protecting this forest but will never let anyone take control of our lives,” said Lachamma, a Chenchu woman guarding Medimakala hamlet located 5 km from Krishna river.

Nallamala has been a permanent hunting ground for those who want to get rich quickly by digging into suspected treasure. The number of treasure hunters seems to have increased manifold after the in-principle clearance.

Chenchus caught a few trespassers suspiciously wandering near a hamlet. “We have no idea from where they have entered the forest. They looked very suspicious. We deflated
their vehicle tyres os and warned them of serious consequences if they come back again,” said Nimala Anjaiah of Medimakala Penta.

“When we asked them, they first told us that they came to do some research in the forests, but we did not believe them. If they really came for research, they would have come from the main entrance,” said Anjaiah.

“The Chenchus have increased their vigil and make sure no illegal activity takes place inside the forest,” said Ballaya.

Members of Chenchu tribe keep vigil and prevent trespassers from entering core areas of the forest.