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Adivasi groups slam Kerala government circular restricting research of tribespeople

The circular mandates institutions, organisations to share questionnaires for permission, study report for future permission. Overnight stay may not be allowed, it says.



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File photo of an 'ooru mooppan' of a tribal colony in Kerala. (Photo | EPS)

By **George Poikayil**

Express News Service

KASARGOD: After days of deliberation, tribes organisations have asked the state government to intervene and withdraw a 11-point circular issued by the Directorate of Scheduled Tribe Development Department restricting researchers, students, and NGOs from accessing their hamlets (ooru).

They said the circular infringed on their rights as citizens and was an attempt to isolate Adivasis from the mainstream.

The circular issued on May 12 has 11 guidelines on permitting research, field survey, organising camps, and doing internships in Scheduled Tribe hamlets.



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It says the Tribal Development Officer, project officer, or tribal extension officer may give permission for research and data collection from Scheduled Tribe colonies for up to three days; the questionnaires should be shared with the department, and the report of the study should be submitted to the office giving permission. Institutions and organisations should send applications seeking permission for research and data collection before 14 days. Those institutions that do not share their study reports with the government need not be considered again, the circular said.

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The Scheduled Tribe Development Department should initiate steps to stop any organisation or person collecting information in colonies without the department's permission, it said.

The circular said that the district officers may give permission to organise camps in Scheduled Tribe colonies for a maximum of three days. "If permission is sought for more than three days, the Tribal Development officer should send a request to the directorate with clear recommendations," it said.

It also said that there was no need to give permission for overnight stays in the colonies.

"Each of the guidelines challenges our sense of self-determination," said M Bhaskaran, district president of Malavettuvan Mahasabha. Every ooru (hamlet or colony) has a 'Ooru moopan' (colony head) and the 'Ooru Kootam' (colony forum) is as powerful as the grama sabha in the Panchayati Raj system. "How can a few officials decide who can come to our homes and who can stay with us when so much of constitutional autonomy is vested with us," he said.

This circular is brought out to keep the corruption and inefficiencies of the officials of the department under wraps, said Ratheesh R, a panchayat member of Pullur-Periya, representing the Kalliyot ward.

Ratheesh is a member of the Mavilan Scheduled Tribe community and holds a master's degree in Social Work from the Central University of Kerala.

According to a study conducted by the department in August 2021, Kasaragod has nine Scheduled Tribes -- Mavilan, Malavettuvan, Koraga, Malavedan, Marathi, Kudiya, Malayaraya, Karimpalan, and Ulladan -- with a population of 83,865 people. They are spread over 34 of the 41 local bodies and in 1,262 colonies, said Ratheesh.

"As a Kudumbashree Tribal Project Manager, I have visited almost all the Ooru in Kasaragod district. And none of the Ooru needs such an overprotective and patronising circular," he said and added: "What's the point in studying if we are not allowed to decide for ourselves".

In the last two days, representatives of the Malavettuvan Mahasabha, Akhila Kerala Mavilan Samajam, Adivasi Forum, Gothra Janatha, and Bhu-Samara Samithi, an organisation fighting for land for landless poor, were discussing the circular on Google Meet.

"All the organisations want the circular withdrawn," Bhaskaran.

The government should pay attention to providing land to the landless and homes for the homeless, not to academics studying the issues of tribespeople, he said.

'The circular an attempt at decentralisation'

Director of Scheduled Tribes Development Department TV Anupama said the circular was an attempt at decentralisation. She said she joined the department nine months ago and she found that for the past 30 years, the directorate in Thiruvananthapuram was giving permission for research and data collection in Scheduled Tribes colonies across the state. "But the officers at the district level will have a better grasp of the ground realities than those sitting in the directorate. The circular was brought out to give the district officers and the project officers the powers to give the permission," she said.

She said the circular was issued with the best interest of the tribespeople in mind and to protect them from exploitation. "We have an extra responsibility," she said.

When asked if she had come across any case of exploitation of tribespeople by researchers, she said no. "That's because they (researchers and institutions) get the permission from the Ooru moopan through an intermediary," she said.

On the need to share the questionnaire with the department, she said it was to protect the tribespeople from intimate and uncomfortable questions. She also defended the need for the researchers to share their reports with the department.

"We need to know the shortcomings so that we can make amends," Anupama said.

When asked if the department can stop researchers and organisations if they were collecting data with the permission of the ooru moopan, she said no.

Anupama said the circular kept a three-day cut-off for collecting data because 60% of the applications received by the directorate were for three days.

Ratheesh said the government cannot insist on seeing the report or the questionnaire. "The government has the resources to find the problems we are facing. But the reality is the officials do not act on our complaints unless it is discussed in the media or brought out by academics," he said.

In the future, this circular will be used to oppress uncomfortable studies, he said. "That's why we want it withdrawn," he said.

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