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New house, new land, new future?

Jayashree Nandi, TNN, Mar 11, 2011, 08:50am IST

Not bird calls from thick foliage, hundreds of Kuruba tribals of Nagarhole wake up to the silence of a concrete colony these days, attuning themselves to a new livelihood and way of life far from the familiar forests. It is a tentative beginning.

While environmental activists, conservationists and forest bureaucrats battle it out in Delhi over how and why to move people out of national parks and sanctuaries, tribals are being relocated across the country. A healthy compensation package of Rs 10 lakh (up from the earlier Rs 1 lakh) has seen many taking the offer, as in Nagarhole National Park, where tribals are slowly but steadily being relocated to a colony.



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2

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Elephants in Nagarhole National Park

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For the forest department, it is quite a feat to have convinced some tribal families of the benefits of relocation. It dismisses charges by tribal rights groups that the Forest Rights Act has been violated and therefore, the relocation is illegal, and argues that families have moved out willingly. But what lies ahead for conservation and for the tribals in a new setting is not clear yet.

The struggle in Nagarhole mimics that of tribals in other key protected areas across the country. By law, the forest department is required to determine the rights of each individual who files a claim for their traditional forest lands. They are supposed to encourage the process to educate tribals to do so. They are meant to ensure community rights are also given to tribals such as the Kurubas. The government is required to get the assent of the gram sabhas before they relocate anyone. But the reality seems to be very different.

Tribal leaders and NGOs

say hardly any aspect of Forest Rights Act seems to have been followed while relocating the Jenu Kurubas of Nagarhole. Neither the forest rights committee or the gram sabha was consulted before relocating the residents.

"None of us was consulted before the relocation took place. This has been happening since 1998. Tribals fill the claim forms for settlement of their rights but they are urged to relocate by the forest department even before those rights are settled," said J K Thimma, a forest rights committee member. "Even this time, they relocated these families without consultation. It is in violation of the forest rights act."

The forest department, in turn, claims it was the Rs 10 lakh package that has led to people choosing to move out.

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