

Forest Rights Act extended to non-tribal areas

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The state's Tribal Development Department (TDD) has extended the Forest Rights Act to non-tribal regions of Gujarat, paving the way for forest dwellers such as maldharis (pastoralists) to legally lay claim over areas they inhabit. Some officials predict that it would force other departments to act especially in terms of halting talked-about maldhari evictions in Gir, Saurashtra and revenue settlements in the Banni Grasslands, Kutch.

The Forest Rights Act has been in force in the state for more than five years now, although it has been restricted to 12 districts covering 43 talukas in the eastern tribal belt.

The government resolution issued by the TDD as Assembly elections approached last year but which was apparently kept under wraps due to the model code of conduct, says district collectors would be chairpersons of district-level committees formed under the Act, with three members of each district panchayats to be nominated members.

However, posts of member-secretaries would be held by officials of the TDD - the department's planning officer at Talala would be member-secretary of committees in Junagadh, Porbandar, Amreli and Jamnagar.

The department's vigilance officer of Rajkot will hold the post for Rajkot, Surendranagar and Bhavnagar, while his counterparts in Ahmedabad would be member-secretary for Ahmedabad, Anand, Kheda and Gandhinagar and the one in Palanpur for Patan and Mehsana. The Kutch social welfare officer would be member-secretary for Kutch region.

As for expected changes in the Gir forest, senior forest officials said the "worrisome" increase in domestic animal populations would now have to be tackled through means other than eviction, which has anyway come in for criticism lately due to evidence that most of those shifted out in the early 1980s eventually shifted back inside and either sold land allotted to them or converted it for other purposes other than traditional means of livelihood.

The maldharis had been shifted out then mainly because their 21,000-strong livestock were competing with wild ungulates for forest resources including fodder, a number established in 1970 by an internationally funded study. The Indian Express had reported last year that top forest

officials were mulling another relocation project because the domestic animal population had again reached 1970 levels, leading to the forest getting overcrowded as wild ungulate populations also increased to almost 70,000 currently.

"We are now concentrating more on promoting better breeds of cattle so maldharis would not have to increase the size of their livestock and along with that, trying to make them shift to stall-feeding instead of open grazing," said a senior IFS officer, who requested anonymity.

As for Banni, the decades-old tussle between the revenue and forest department may have to be settled sooner later than later, officials said; the protected forest has never been transferred to the forest department even as land settlements have never been made there by the revenue department, under whose jurisdiction they fall.