

NGO demands ST status for Uttarakhand Van Gujjars

Dehradun: A Human Rights organisation in Uttarakhand on Wednesday demanded Scheduled Tribe status for Van Gujjars in the state as enjoyed by the community in Jammu and Kashmir and neighbouring Himachal Pradesh and asked forest authorities to desist from "harassing" them.

Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK), headed by Padma Shri Avadhash Kaushal, even threatened to stage a demonstration in Delhi unless immediate steps were taken to pass a resolution to that effect in the state assembly.

Kaushal also asked forest officials to stop harassing the forest-dwelling people and passing the buck on to them whenever dead tigers/leopards were found in areas under their jurisdiction.

"From time to time, forest officials keep blaming the poor, hapless Van Gujjars of crimes they haven't committed (in order) to shift the blame (and hide) their own incompetence, inefficiency and corruption... They falsely implicate the Van Gujjars in tiger/leopard deaths that take place due to poisoning of the wild cats," he said.

"RLEK warns forest authorities (that they should) desist from harassing the vegetarian, peace-loving Van Gujjars who are the true followers of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of fulfilling one's needs and not greed," Kaushal said after the NGO was approached by a delegation of Van Gujjars.

Demanding that the Vidhan Sabha recommend ST status for the community, he said, "In case the government does not do it immediately, Van Gujjars living in Gaindikhata, Pathri and other areas, will have no option but to hold a demonstration in Delhi and meet Rahul and Sonia Gandhi and take legal recourse".

Kaushal said the delegation of Van Gujjars also told RLEK that they were being prevented by forest officials from conducting funeral rites of two community members who died after falling from trees in the forest.

"The Uttarakhand forest department should follow the National Human Rights Commission's order regarding Van Gujjars and also the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, in letter and spirit, the RLEK chairman said.

Kaushal also called for the distribution of land pattas among Van Gujjars in the state