



More room Relocating tribals may give the tiger a better chance

CONSERVATION: ANDHRA PRADESH

Changing Their Stripes

Tribals as first line of defence in Project Tiger? Nallamala offers a complex case.

MADHAVI TATA

Guarding Their God

- The Centre plans to relocate tribals living in the core of the Nagarjunasagar tiger reserve
- Each family member above 18 will be paid Rs 10 lakh
- The Chenchu tribals, who consider the tiger their god, will be hired as tiger protectors
- The relocation is voluntary

It's an alarming number every wildlife enthusiast knows—1,411, the number of tigers in India according to a 2009 census. To prevent the number from falling, the Union minister of state for environment and forests, Jairam Ramesh, has initiated a move to hire local tribals as trackers and protectors in the Nagarjunasagar-Srisaïlam Tiger Reserve, which at 3,500 square km is the largest in the country. Also, the forest department plans to relocate the primitive Chenchu tribals from the core area of the sanctuary and settle them in the fringes. If the tribals are readily agreeing to do that, it's because the Centre is offering them Rs 10 lakh for every family member above 18 years. "Some families," says Thulsi Rao, an assistant conservator at the reserve, "stand to gain as much as Rs 40 lakh."

The sanctuary is in the Nallamala forests, long a Maoist haven, because of which tiger conservation hasn't exactly been a priority here since the early nineties. But by 2006, the Maoists were driven out, and since then, efforts are being directed towards saving the tiger. The primitive, hunter-gatherer Chenchus are therefore in the spotlight.

The minister, who recently visited the sanctuary and met some of the tribal youth being trained as tiger protectors, says some 1,000 families living in the core area are being relocated. Similar initiatives are being taken up in other parts of the country, he says, but in Andhra Pradesh it has really taken off.

The Nagarjunasagar reserve is home to 82 tigers. The adjoining Gundla-Brahmeswaram sanctuary is likely to be added to the Nagarjunasagar reserve as an extended core area. The region is a tropical, deciduous forest with an average annual rainfall of 600 mm. "The vast expanse of the forest and the prey base keep the food chain intact," says Rao. It is a habitat teeming with panthers, wild dogs, civets, chinkaras, black buck, fishing cats and tarantulas. Altogether, there are some 80 species of mammals, 70 of reptiles, and 300 of birds.



In their land A Chenchu family in the sanctuary

The forest-dwellers in the core area are essentially from the Chenchu and Lambada tribes. "While the Chenchus are extremely primitive and live off the forest, the Lambadas also take up agriculture, which adversely affects the forest," says Rao. "We have identified two villages—Palupla and Vatavarlapalli—as the larger tribal habitations. But the relocation will be entirely voluntary."

The Chenchus, who are being recruited to the tiger protection programme, regard the tiger as a god and live in harmony with it in the forest. "You'll never come across an instance of a Chenchu being attacked

by a tiger or of him killing one,” says Rajeev Mathew of the Bio-Wild Foundation, Adilabad. “I’ve often seen pug marks outside their houses.”

The Chenchus worship the tiger and know its habitat well. They are the “ideal choice” as guardians in that sense.

Some experts, like N. Sunil Kumar, head of the Royal Bank of Scotland Foundation, which works extensively in tiger conservation, appreciate the Centre’s efforts. “In a tropical country like India, to protect the tiger is to protect the entire ecosystem. It’s not some romantic illusion,” he says. “Tigers need three things: a prey base, tree cover and undisturbed forest space. All efforts should be directed towards preserving that. The best part of this relocation initiative is that there’s no red-tapism. Funds go directly from the district collector to the concerned villager. No NGOs or intermediaries are dragged in.” He also thinks hiring the Chenchus (at salaries of about Rs 4,000 per month) is a wise move: “One look at a pug mark and they can tell if it’s a male or female tiger, how old it is, whether

it’s carrying a kill, how fast it is moving.”

But Mathew is sceptical: the conservation effort, he feels, might consume the very people being appointed its guardians. “The Chenchus are hunter-gatherers and don’t collect or stockpile food. They are not cultivators. Indigenous to the Eastern Ghats, they are likely to be decimated if they are moved out of the forests,” he says. “They’re disease-prone and have an average life expectancy of 45 years. In that sense, moving them out could perhaps help. Even so, questions remain as to whether they can survive.”

If that’s one point of view, there’s another: that there must be more done than just pull the Chenchus out and train them as tiger protectors. “The Chenchus should be enabled to make a living, not turned into just a forest guard,” says Dr P. Sivaramakrishna of Sakti, an NGO which works for conservation and tribal rights. “They can be used in tourism camps. They can show you tigers, rare birds and help conserve wildlife. We have no right to consider ourselves superior. Sometimes, tribals are relocated in colonies and not given employment, ration cards or other facilities.”

Admitting that there is opposition from local NGOs, Hitesh Malhotra, Andhra Pradesh’s chief wildlife warden, says the relocation will be “only as per the tribals’ liking and agreement.” And Ramesh has pointed out that only 3,000 of the 80,000 families living in core areas of tiger reserves across India have been relocated—an indication that no force is used. A careful biodiversity conservation programme, says Malhotra, could ensure that the tiger survives in the Nagarjunasagar reserve for some 400 years. “Ranthambore has more tigers,” says Malhotra, “but the vastness of the Nagarjunasagar sanctuary ensures a greater genetic variety—and hence hardiness—in the tigers here.”

Rao, the assistant conservator at the sanctuary, speaks of the programme as one of coexistence, one that will benefit the people and the tiger. It remains to be seen if the Chenchus, who are the key to the successful implementation of this programme, perceive it that way.

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