

Who rules the forest?

WILDLIFE & DEVELOPMENT Following the decision to accord the tiger reserve tag to Biligiri Rangana Temple (BRT) Wildlife Sanctuary, tribals are apprehensive about rehabilitation packages. **Rajesh Srivana** examines the successes and failures of rehabilitation schemes in the context of Nagarhole and Bandipur.

The Centre has recently decided to accord the tiger reserve status to the Biligirirangana Forest region. This will mean that there is no more provision for tribals in the nearby areas to live within the forest. The tribals here are apprehensive that they will be displaced from the region.

They could be justified to feel threatened owing to several government rehabilitation schemes not having served their purpose in various contexts in the past.

It is important to analyse the situation of tribals who had to be displaced and "rehabilitated" from the Bandipur and Nagarhole forest regions.

The tribals who resided in the 940 sq. km-large Bandipur National Park were rehabilitated in the 1970-80 decade successfully. There are no tribals in the Bandipur region today. They were provided rehabilitation in Melukamanahalli, Brahmagiri and Sollepura villages and have joined the mainstream of society. Their quality of life has improved too, according to Bandipur's Deputy Conservator of Forests K T Hanumanthappa.

A quarter of the tribals who lived in the 643 sq. km-large Nagarhole National Park have been rehabilitated. There are still families living inside the forest.

When a census of tribals was held in 1989 at Nagarhole Forest Reserve, it was revealed that there were 1,550 tribal families residing in 55 hamlets. When another census was held in 2000-01, it was revealed that there 1730 families. The rehabilitation package for tribals of Nagarhole was passed in 1997. According to the 'Beneficiary Oriented Tribal Development' (BOTD) scheme chalked out by the Central Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), those tribals who were willing to be evacuated out of national parks or reserves were to be given five acres of land and amenities worth Rs one lakh (including a home, electricity, water). As many as 50 tribal families volunteered to step out of Nagarhole back in 1999. In 2001, as many as 45 families agreed to give up on their forest homes. In 2005, the government brought minor amendments to the scheme. Accordingly,

every family would henceforth get three acres of land and amenities worth Rs one lakh.

Under this scheme, 30 families opted out of the forest land in 2006, and 60 families were rehabilitated in 2007-08.

More people-friendly package

When there were reports that tigers were dwindling in Rajasthan's Sariska Reserve in 2008-09, the government laid greater emphasis on tiger conservation in protected forests. As a consequence, the entire rehabilitation package was given a new dimension. The compensation of Rs one lakh was hiked to Rs ten lakh. Thanks to this, rehabilitation became easier and more people-friendly. Also, the scheme was made applicable to any family (even non-tribal) living in national parks or protected forests. Also, the new package meant that they could opt for either more compensation in terms of cash or land.

The Forest Department has provided such facilities to nearly 150 families at Shetihalli near Nagarhole's Lakkapatna.

In 2008-09, under the cash compensation scheme, as many as eight non-tribal families and one tribal family opted out of the Nagarhole National Park.

Between 2003 and 2005, over 400 families volunteered to move out of the Bhadra Tiger Reserve.

Even in one of the most controversial national parks in the state, the Kudremukh National Park (where Naxals have accused the government of arm-twisting tribals and rehabilitating them by force), as many as 1200 families have sought the government to provide them a good package so they can join the mainstream.

Also, 700 families in Uttara Kannada's Anashi National Park and the Dandeli Sanctuary have sought the government to provide them with a good package.

Unfortunately, the departments concerned with rehabilitation lack enough experience or commitment towards handling the rehabilitation conundrum.

Myopic policies

The myopia of the state government is one



LORDING OVER The move to make BRT Wildlife Sanctuary a tiger reserve comes as a shot in the arm for tiger conservation. GETTY IMAGES Below: Tribals living inside the Nagarhole National Park. PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

“EVEN IN ONE OF THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL NATIONAL PARKS IN THE STATE, THE KUDREMUKH NATIONAL PARK (WHERE NAXALS HAVE ACCUSED THE GOVERNMENT OF ARM-TWISTING TRIBALS AND REHABILITATING THEM BY FORCE), AS MANY AS 1200 FAMILIES HAVE SOUGHT THE GOVERNMENT TO PROVIDE THEM A GOOD PACKAGE.

of the reasons for this lack of experience in diplomatically dealing with the issue of rehabilitation. Karwar's Seabird, Mangalore's MRPL, rehabilitation of flood victims in North Karnataka are all cases in point. It seems that the government has not learnt its lessons. Rehabilitation should not always be limited to providing cash compensation or land, but should also be extended to provide social security to the displaced, and also extend employment opportunities. But our rehabilitation schemes seem to lack the human touch.

The revenue department, the social welfare department, the Zilla Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat and other local bodies should be roped in to implement government schemes in a comprehensive manner. The focus of these departments should ideally be about providing the human touch and solving people's day-to-day problems.

It has been noticed that the Forest Department has no political support at the local level; neither is it backed adequately by other departments. Still, it has taken up rehabilitation programmes in a big way.

There are exclusive schemes and departments such as the Social Welfare Department that are meant to cater to the well-being of the tribals. There is also an integrated tribal development plan in place. But there are hardly 25 examples of families being rehabilitated by this department.

The Ganga Kalyan scheme chalked out for the welfare of tribals and Dalits seems to have failed too.

Way back in 2002-03, when SM Krishna was the chief minister of the state, a mini-Cabinet meeting was held in the districts of Chamarajnar, Mysore and Kodagu, dominated by tribal populations. Data was collected on whether tribals had adequate facilities. Also, action plans were drawn to provide housing and other basic amenities to tribals. But, all these schemes seem to have bitten the dust now.

It is important to examine the rehabilita-



tion of tribals in the BRT Tiger Reserve in this context. It is pertinent to ensure that the tribals who volunteer out of the reserve get social security and are absorbed in the mainstream of society, without many glitches.

Explains Madegowda, secretary of a tribal welfare association in the region, "Not many tribals are keen on volunteering out of the forest, because they have a cultural and emotional bond with the forest they live in." The forest area covers 15 to 20 per cent of the state. The real tribals of the state live in this chunk. The protected forest area (including national parks and reserves) amounts to three per cent. Less than one per cent of this is under the tiger project. Lessons that Sariska and scientific research have shown is that there should be no human habitation in this region.

Emergence of the plantations

Till a long time, tribals lived in harmony with the forests. It was during the British rule that the commercial angle started to emerge. In order to feed the European markets, the British started to chop down timber from our forests. They replaced forests with plantations. In the middle of

these plantations, efforts were also made to sow ragi. Thus began attempts at agriculture inside forest areas. The tribals were given employment opportunities in the forests. It was this system that gave way to minor forest produce being marketed too.

This system continued even post-Independence and went on to gain great proportions.

Later, the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act brought sweeping changes in forest and wildlife laws. Under the forest protection laws as part of this Act, there is no provision to gather timber from the forests. But, if tribals have to live in protected areas, they need employment. So, they take to agriculture, sometimes even within forests. This in turn makes an impact on wildlife. It therefore becomes important that they are gainfully employed outside the forests in agricultural and labour-related activities. This means that they need to be rehabilitated elsewhere.

Meanwhile, other questions arise. Is it possible for man to live without conflict in the forests anymore? Will human habitation not affect wildlife or vice-versa? (Translated by Savitha Karthik)