

The Promised Land

In order to create a tiger corridor in Madhav National Park, tribals in nine villages were displaced. While some were compensated, others are still waiting for the two hectares they were promised
By Rakesh Dixit in Bhopal



shivpuri.nic.in

IN 1916, Lord Hardinge, the then governor-general of British India, went for a game drive in what is known today as Madhav National Park in northern Madhya Pradesh. He is reported to have killed eight tigers in one day. However, from 1970, there were no tigers in the Park due to intense hunting. But there are 39 landless tribal families who were displaced from the Park 20 years ago to recreate a habitat for big cats. These families are still waiting for the two hectares promised in lieu of forgoing their forefathers' land in the forest. Families which got

the promised compensation are also not too happy as the land they were allotted is uncultivable.

In the late 1990s, the MP government approved a plan to notify a large chunk of forest in Shivpuri district as a park to be named after late Madhavrao Scindia, the scion of the erstwhile Gwalior state and grandfather of the late Congress leader who was killed in a plane crash. At the time, Sahriya tribes lived in the forest. They depended on water, land and other natural resources for their livelihood.

In order to create a tiger corridor



trell.co

BEYOND THE JUNGLE
Spotted deer (top) at Madhav National Park (inset), in Shivpuri district, Gwalior, from where tribals were evicted



flickr.com

there, tribals in nine villages were displaced. The villages were Balapur, Gatwaya, Lakhangaon, Harnagar, Chak Kamalpur, Mahuakheda, Arjungawan, Mamoni, Dongar and Chak Dongar.

In 2002, in Balarpur village, 100 tribal families were relocated near the periphery of the park. But the land allotted was infertile. Of these, 39 families have yet to receive their share. Other villages were surveyed in 2004 but were given compensation only in 2008-09.

Almost 12 years after Balarpur's residents were forced to leave, a Right to Information report filed by a local NGO revealed that 39 families had not even received the dysfunctional rehabilitation that is typical in such cases. This is because their files were caught in a dispute between the forest and revenue departments. At one time, a different site was allocated to them by the revenue department, but the forest department claimed the land, before

these people could settle there.

Forest officials allegedly coerced some villagers to leave the villages identified for relocation. When they faced resistance from many residents, the department retaliated by depriving them of basic facilities such as electricity, roads and other developmental works. Villagers alleged that forest officials often confiscated their cattle grazing in the forest and released them only after a fine was paid. The evicted Sahariya families are not allowed to collect firewood, tendu leaves and other minor forest produce and live in the relocated site in poverty.

Displaced from his village, Jadon Adivasi, 80, still nurses hope of the

A Right to Information report filed by a local NGO revealed that 39 families had not even received the dysfunctional rehabilitation that is typical in such cases.

MAN VS WILD
Sahariya tribals living in the Shivpuri forests were displaced to make room for wildlife

promised two-hectare land that he can till in another village. "What other alternative do we have?" he asked. The displaced villagers have made several representations to the Shivpuri collector and successive chief ministers but in vain.

In 2017, the villagers launched a forest protest with the help of Zenith Legal Aid Clinic, led by a group of law students. They demanded that the relocation drive be stopped and their land and forest rights be settled under the Forest Rights Act. One of the major reasons for the protest was that the land given to them as compensation was "uncultivable".

According to Abhay Jain, a law student of National Law University, Odisha, who documented the displaced communities in Shivpuri, there are no ▶

roads in the village and only one hand pump. His paper said that the report of the commissioners of the Supreme Court in the Right to Food case clearly reflects the dismal state of affairs in this village. “Moreover, there are around 40 families who are yet to receive their share of land and were asked to adjust with others by the revenue officials,” he said.

The document further says that in Gatwaya, another Sahariya village, the relocation process carried out in 2013 had allegedly violated provisions of the Forest Rights Act.

The villagers were not ready to move out of the village but were allegedly coerced to do so by forest department officials. The village, as per the revenue records, had 193 families which comprised Sahariyas, other *adivasis* and Gurjars, of which 15 families were declared ineligible for compensation.

In other villages—Lakhangaon, Bardkhedi (Mamoni), Harnagar, Kamalpur, Dongar and Arjungawan—located in the periphery of the National Park, the survey of affected villages started in 2004 for fixing compensation but it was actually paid in 2008-09. The report quoted villagers as complaining that no *gram sabha* meetings were conducted and no prior information was shared with the *gram sabhas*.

No informed consent was obtained from the villages for relocation and *gram sabhas* were mostly conducted on paper and in the office of the revenue officials.

According to Jain, the compensation in many cases was as low as ₹10,000. “The process of recognising forest rights of the *adivasis* or Sahariyas was never conducted here. Many are left landless after being displaced.” About 27 villages were vacated over the years to make way for this wildlife corridor.

Then in 1999, the tribals were allotted agricultural land under the rehabilitation policy endorsed by the Digvijaya Singh government and approved by the centre in 2000. In 2016, the Madhya Pradesh Human Rights Commission



Abhay Jain, of Zenith Legal Aid Clinic, says the compensation in many cases was as low as ₹10,000, and the process of recognising forest rights of the Sahariyas was never conducted.

(MPHRC) sought a report from Madhav National Park and district authorities on the delay in the land allotment. The Park director admitted to the Commission that allotment of land to the 39 families was pending. Replying to the notice of the rights body, he said that the families worked on the fields of those with lands “of their own accord” and would be allotted land on the centre’s approval. All the families were allotted a house and extended electricity and water supply, though.

But then the district administration noticed that they had relocated the 39 families mistakenly on protected forest land instead of revenue land. As diverting forest land for non-forest purposes violated the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, the process had to be stalled again. The state government then sought the land’s de-notification from the centre. Clearance from the centre is still pending. Park authorities say they had sent the proposal to the centre in 2002.

However, Shivpuri collector Anuraha P reportedly said there was no question of land allotment. According to the collector, revenue officials have inquired into the tribal families’ claims and come up with a list of ineligible claimants. Either they were not residing in the relocated village at the time or were minors, claimed the collector. District revenue officials claim the 39 families were declared ineligible in 2001-02 itself when others were allotted land in Budi Barod village.

In 2017, the MPHRC directed the district administration to speedily complete the rehabilitation process, including those of the remaining 39 families. It further ordered that a compensation of ₹3 lakh be given to each family. The Commission noted that several male members were forced to work in stone mines. “Male breadwinners like this have died due to tuberculosis and other diseases because of working in mines,” it said.

Zenith Legal Aid Clinic contests the district administration’s denial of land. Jain has reportedly asked: “If the government considers them ineligible, why did the Park misinform the Commission that they would get the land? And how did the district authorities inexplicably upturn a policy approved by the centre?” More than 14 years have lapsed since the Forest Rights Act was passed. The legal aid group said that the families have all the documents and can easily be allotted land.

Balapur is not the only village that pays the cost of development. Oustees from the Sardar Sarovar Dam project reveal that they were allocated land that is lacking in basic amenities. Recently, activists from the Narmada Bachao Andolan unearthed massive corruption in rehabilitation packages, with money reaching middlemen only.

Madhav National Park welcomes the public with a large board featuring a tiger. The “Save the Tiger” campaign has not been able to bring tigers to the Park, but managed to take tribals out of their ancestral homes. ■