

# Serious irregularities found in relocation process of Talewadi forest dwellers

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Pic: Forest minister Eshwar Khandre is distributes a relocation compensation cheque to beneficiaries in Talewadi hamlet in Khanapur taluk of Belagavi district (File picture from May 17)

Belagavi: Grave irregularities have surfaced in the relocation of 32 families from Talewadi hamlet in Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary (BWS), Khanapur taluk, carried out by the forest department in Jan this year.

Sources allege that several beneficiaries who received govt compensation did not own land, making them ineligible under relocation norms. The state govt has already recommended an inquiry into the alleged irregularities.

More than 56 families of Talewadi, which comes under Gavali revenue village, applied for relocation years ago. The district-level committee, headed by deputy commissioner Mohammad Roshan, approved compensation of Rs 10 lakh each to 32 families. Of these, 27 families received their first instalment in May.

It has now emerged that most of these beneficiaries were not eligible. According to the Wildlife Protection Act and NTCA guidelines, only forest dwellers residing within protected areas, who voluntarily surrender their land and property after due verification, are entitled to priority compensation. Their land is then transferred to the forest department and officially declared part of the protected area.

However, at least 10 beneficiaries did not own land. They were residing on private property belonging to one MM Suresh, who earlier sought diversion of forest land in Hassan district for a stone quarry project. As part of the clearance, he purchased non-forest land in Talewadi (Survey No. 49) for compensatory afforestation, which was transferred to his name in June last year. The then DCF (Belagavi division), Maria Christu Raja D—who has since been transferred—certified the land as suitable for afforestation.

Ironically, the same officer later recommended relocation compensation for families residing on Suresh's land. This effectively counted the same land twice—once for compensatory afforestation and again for relocation compensation.

The irregularities do not end there. Among the 17 other compensated families, many continue to reside on Gramthana (govt land) within the village, while nearly 30 families who actually own land with proper records were overlooked. Guidelines clearly stipulate that land-owning families should be given first priority for relocation benefits.

Belagavi South MLA Abhay Patil, who has been pursuing the matter, told TOI that he gathered substantial evidence of irregularities. "I raised the issue before the legislative assembly's estimate committee, following which an inquiry has been initiated," he said.

Meanwhile, the new DCF, NE Kranti, who recently assumed charge, said he would examine the documents before offering to comment.