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## Delay on relocation of villages in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve to cost govt dear

Shantha Thiagarajan, TNN | Aug 14, 2012, 05.49AM IST

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UDHAGAMANDALAM: A long delay in the relocation process of forest dwellers and tribals living in 30 villages, including Mudhuguli village, located inside Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) in the Nilgiris, will cost the state nearly double the amount in compensation as the number of families in the villages has increased significantly in the past five years.



Life at stake: Thirty villages, most of them belonging to mountadan chetty community, have been waiting for relocation for more than five years.

Villagers, most of them belonging to the mountadan chetty community, have been waiting to be relocated for the past over five years. In 2005, the community leaders approached Madras high court seeking a directive to the state's forest department to resettle them. The court ruled in their favour in 2007 and told the government that it was duty bound to resettle them.

Accordingly a survey was held in 2007 and around 449 families (1,940 people) from 20 villages in Mudumalai panchayat and 10 villages in Nilakottai - both inside the 321 sq km Mudumalai wildlife sanctuary - were found to be eligible for voluntary resettlement under Project Tiger.

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However, as per National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) guidelines, an individual of age 18 and above is considered a separate family. So the forest department fixed a cut-off date -- December 31, 2010 -- for identifying families that were to be relocated. "We have also come out with a MoU between the forest department and the individuals of the villages on the number of 'families' to be relocated," said P Raghuram Singh, field director, MTR and Mukurthi National Park. "The MoU is technically important to ascertain that the relocation is solely voluntary. After the cut-off date was fixed, we received claims from 763 families from the said 30 villages," he added.

As per NTCA guidelines, each family can opt either for a cash package of Rs 10 lakh without involving any rehabilitation or opt for rehabilitation in a village. Almost all villagers who are to be



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relocated own titled land. The revenue department is scrutinizing the authenticity of the 763 families who have submitted the claims. "Also a sub-committee comprising the forest and revenue officials and representatives from the villages to decide about the allotment of land in Ayyankolli, which has been identified by the forest department for rehabilitation," said A Ameer Haja, deputy director, MTR. Singh too added that the process of relocation has been speeded up.

Villagers say they had expected to be relocated at least a year after the court gave its verdict in 2007. They say the government is moving very slowly as it is more than five years since the court directive. "We are desperate now. We are farmers and our livelihood is at stake," said the villagers. Besides, the isolated existence inside the forest has deprived them of hospital and educational facilities. Many of the children are forced to discontinue their studies after class VIII.

According to Singh, the government has identified 398.47 hectares of land for relocation near Ayyankolli, of which 289.49 hectares come under the Gudalur forest division.

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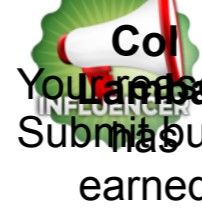
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I had filed a Public Interest Litigation for Mandakara Balakrishnan on behalf of the indigenous mainly Mandadan Chetti people residing in the various hamlets comprising around 700 acres within the Mudhumalai sanctuary wherein they engage in agriculture, for their relocation in accordance with their wishes to a place called Ayyankolli in Writ Petition No 18531 of 1998 in the High Court of Madras and the same was allowed on 19.02.2007 but in spite of the Order of the High Court, these forest dwellers and tribals are not being

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This community -- mountadan chetty -- has an interesting language of its own. Typical tribal peaceful-militant group. The settlers at Pulpally were associated with Pazhassi Raja (as his army) British harassed the Mountaden chetties after Pazhasi Raja died. British did not allow them to cultivate forestland, hiked their revenue (taxes), and auctioned off their land if they did not pay taxes. So many left their villages. Ever since their settling process has been problematic. Sadly even after so many years of independence looks like they have not got respite yet.

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