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Desperate to relocate

Author(s):

M Suchitra ^[1]

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Chetty communities living in the core area of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve have been demanding that they be shifted out of the forest for three decades. Why is the forest department delaying their rehabilitation?



House of a Chetty farmer in the core area of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu (Photographs: Ajeeb Komachi)

Krishnan chetty, 75, is no longer at ease in the heart of the dense forest and in the midst of wildlife. “We have been living here for generations,” he says, showing rani patta, or title deed given by the British for his six-hectare farm in Benne village, located in the core area of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. He earns a living by growing pepper, coffee, paddy and vegetables. “Lately, life has become stifling in here,” he says.

Any question about resettling outside the forest infuriates him. It’s not that he is unwilling to abandon his home or farm. On the contrary, for three decades, Krishnan and others from his Chetty community from seven villages in the core area of Mudumalai, have been asking the government to resettle them outside the forest. “But the authorities have been dragging their feet over their demand. They are delaying the relocation process despite an order from the Madras High Court,” says B Srinivasan, president of Mudumalai Rehabilitation Committee, a people’s forum. The court in 2007 ordered the state to relocate the residents within a year by providing them land, equal to what they would lose during relocation, and other facilities.

“Instead, the government upgraded the protection status of Mudumalai from wildlife sanctuary to tiger reserve and then to a critical tiger habitat,” Srinivasan adds (see ‘Life in a tiger hot spot’) The judgement came in response to a petition by Srinivasan’s father, M Balakrishnan, leader of Mountadan Chetty community (see ‘To relocate or not’). He filed the petition in 1998 on behalf of the seven villages in Nellakotta and Mudumalai gram panchayats (see ‘Appeals dismissed’). He passed away two years ago after having waited in vain for government to act.

Explaining their desperation to move out of the reserve, K C Sukumaran, resident of Kolli hamlet in Benne, says, “After declaring Mudumalai a wildlife sanctuary, the forest department imposed various forest and wildlife protection laws, which hindered our free movement and blocked development works, including maintenance of houses and roads and preparation of land for cultivation.” The villages do not have basic facilities like electricity, healthcare, higher education and transport. “We have to walk for kilometres through the wilderness for almost everything, from going to schools to hospitals to shops. Though there are primary schools in a few hamlets, they are hardly visited by teachers due to lack of transport facilities,” he adds.



The number of wild animals has increased following increased protection. While this is good for the biodiversity, says N K Gopalan, a resident of Benne, they now frequently raid and damage the crops. “It seems the forest department is trying to smoke us out by delaying resettlement,” alleges S Sivaprakash of Muduguli village.

Curious case of relocation

“Relocation in Mudumalai is a unique case,” says P M Muthanna of Wildlife Conservation Society-India Program, a non-profit in Bengaluru that supports voluntary relocation projects. The process of relocation from a tiger reserve or a wildlife sanctuary is usually initiated by the forest department and faces stiff opposition from people. But the resettlement process in Mudumalai is being driven by a petition filed by people and a court order favouring them. Yet there is little progress in the matter, he points out.

In fact, Mudumalai gram panchayat is the only one in and around the reserve that gave its written consent for the formation of the tiger reserve. “The officials had assured us that if Mudumalai becomes a tiger reserve, they would get a lot of funds and would resettle us immediately,” says Srinivasan. “We now feel betrayed.”

The authorities have no answer for this inordinate delay. Activists, however, blame it on the ineffective forest department. “The officials have little understanding about relocation processes. The lack of coordination between the forest and the revenue officials delayed the land identification process,” says Muthanna.

To relocate or not

The SEVEN villages inside Mudumalai Tiger Reserve are inhabited by four communities. A majority of them belong to Mountadan Chetty and Mountadan Chetty communities and practise farming. The others belong to landless tribal communities of Kattunayakar and Paniya who work for the Chettys or as forest watchers and anti-poaching squad members under the forest department. While the Chetty communities have been demanding that they be rehabilitated outside the tiger reserve, only one tribal has applied for relocation. Instead, about 90 tribals from Mudumalai panchayat and 40 from Benne village have applied for title deeds for forestland under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. The process of recognising their rights is yet to be completed. Some Kattunayakar tribals told Down To Earth that they would not leave the forest, while many Paniyas said that they would like to relocate for Rs 10 lakh as compensation, and that they have informed the forest officials about their intention. “Here, we get Rs 150 to 250 a day. We will get higher wages outside the forest,” says Kannan, a Paniya youth.

It's illegal if tribals are pressured to leave the villages without settling their rights under FRA, says M Suresh, a Moundadan Chetty youth, who works for non-profit Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development in Gudalur.

Consider this. When the legal battle began, the forest department looked for land to resettle people. Since no revenue land was available in Gudalurtaluk where the villages are located, the forest department identified 480 hectares of degraded forestland at Aiyankolly village in the adjacent Panthalurtaluk, 30 km from the reserve. For speedy implementation of the rehabilitation process, the state government in 2007 established a district-level committee, with the district collector as chairperson and the wildlife warden of Mudumalai sanctuary as the member secretary. But it took the officials three years for preparing the list of 449 beneficiaries.

Worse, after receiving the list in 2010, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) accepted the claims of only 19 of the 20 beneficiaries who had opted for Rs 10 lakh cash

compensation. NTCA rejected the list of the remaining beneficiaries—368 families that had opted for land-in-lieu-of-land scheme and 61 did not opt for any benefit—saying that the list was prepared without complying with its guidelines, which says those above 18, unmarried daughters, widows and physically and mentally challenged persons within a family should be considered as separate families and be given cash compensation. NTCA asked the authorities to prepare a fresh list of the beneficiaries.

In another instance, the authorities initiated land survey of the relocation site for the seven villages in 2011. “Chetty people helped the authorities in the survey by removing the undergrowth and laying stones along the boundary. On most days, they could not return to their villages and camped out in the open,” says H Madhusudanan, conservationist who coordinated the survey. Despite this the officials took nine months to complete the survey which could have been completed in a couple of weeks, he adds. Besides, all the work has gone in vain. Without the final list of the beneficiaries, they could not demarcate or allocate land to anyone. Forest has regrown at the relocation site, and the survey will have to be done again, he adds.

Appeals dismissed

1927: Mudumalai forest in Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu declared a reserved forest

1940: Declared a wildlife sanctuary

1958: Area of the sanctuary expanded to 32,100 hectares

1979: On November 26, freedom fighter Mallavayal Subramaniam Chetty, 90, threatens to sit on fast-unto-death, demanding relocation of Chetty communities, traditionally living in the core area of the forest. Revenue divisional officer visits him and promises rehabilitation in six months. Nothing happens

1979-1998: Chetty communities continue to protest. A community leader, M Balakrishnan, petitions the Madras High Court

2007: The high court in February directs the Tamil Nadu government to relocate all seven villages within a year. In April, the government declares Mudumalai a tiger reserve, and upgrades its status to a critical tiger habitat in December

2010: National Tiger Conservation Authority receives list of beneficiaries, rejects most claims saying the list is not prepared as per its guidelines

2011: Survey begins for relocation site. But land cannot be allocated in the absence of beneficiaries' list

December 31, 2013: The forest department receives fresh list of 800 beneficiaries; yet to finalise the list

By December 31, 2013, the authorities received a fresh list of 800-odd beneficiaries, but are yet to finalise the list or prepare master plan for relocation. Says K Sukumaran, who gives legal aid to the Chetty communities, the district-level committee has held several meetings with the representatives of the communities and non-profits in the past two years. Frequent transfer of top level district, forest and revenue officials has hindered the rehabilitation process. Five district collectors, four field directors of the tiger reserve and four revenue divisional officers have taken charge since the court order in 2007. “Every time an official

joins, they raise new issues on rehabilitation, and the process goes back to square one,” he adds.

Lessons not learnt

The officials of Mudumalai could have taken lessons from other successful relocation projects. At Bhadra Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, 460 families were relocated within three years. At Wayanad in Kerala, 150 families have been relocated since 2010. At Nagarhole National Park in Mysore, relocation is taking place in a phased manner.



Landless Paniya tribals harvest ginger in the fields of Moundadan Chetty community in Puliyalam village. They are eager to be resettled outside Mudumalai forest so that they can earn higher wages

“Had there been a master plan with all details of each person, the process would have been faster and efficient. But the authorities seem directionless,” says S Jayachandran of non-profit Tamil Nadu Green Movement.

Tarsh Thekaekara of Shola Trust, a Gudalur-based non-profit, points out another problem. The forest department does not have a dedicated team to implement rehabilitation projects. He says the department can create a “relocation sub-division” exclusively for this purpose, headed by an assistant conservator of forest.

Repeated attempts to contact Nilgiri district collector R Sankar to obtain comments on the allegations against the authorities did not yield result. Chief wildlife warden Raghuram Singh and deputy director T Chandran were reluctant to speak about the rehabilitation process. “The resettlement plan is being implemented phase by phase. We are now finalising the list,” was all that Chandran had to say. C Vijaya Babu, the newly appointed revenue divisional officer of Gudalur, also refused to divulge more details.

Says Thekaekara, speedy implementation of relocation in Mudumalai will not only ensure social justice to the residents but also help consolidate the largest block of elephants and tiger habitat in southern India.

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