

# **NGT seeks Uttarakhand govt reply on Rajaji villagers' plea for rehabilitation**

DEHRADUN: Taking up a plea by the long-neglected villages inside Rajaji Tiger Reserve, a National Green Tribunal bench headed by its chairperson Swatanter Kumar on Friday directed the Uttarakhand government to file its reply on May 10. The villages have been deprived of development ever since the 820 sq-km park was created in 1983. While hundreds of nomadic Gujjars, who also inhabited the park's core zone, were rehabilitated with land grants in Haridwar and other benefits, nothing was done for the 10 villages in the area, said Madan Singh Bisht, former zila panchayat member of Pauri and petitioner in the case. He has moved NGT demanding rehabilitation of the villages or restoration of their fundamental rights.

A resident of Dhautia village in the park, Bisht said 10 revenue chaks (villages) in the Gohri range—core zone—of Rajaji, such as Moban, Simaldandi, Godan and Dhautia, have not been excluded from the boundary. Although most of their dwellers moved out, those who didn't find jobs still farm and rear cattle living in their old houses.

"We lead a primitive life as we don't have electricity, water and other basic amenities like education, healthcare and roads. Our people, animals and crops are always at risk from wild animals. The forest department is planning to translocate some tigers from Madhya Pradesh here, and that will heighten the risk to us," said Bisht.

Park director Neena Grewal told TOI: "These hamlets were left out when Rajaji was declared a national park. However, I will send a proposal for the villagers' rehabilitation to National Tiger Conservation Authority."

Bisht's counsel Gaurav Kumar Bansal said the villagers had not been rehabilitated in violation of National Forest Policy and Forest Conservation Act. "As per National Forest Policy, the rights and concessions enjoyed by tribals and other poor living within and near forests should be fully protected," he said.

In 1983, a committee comprising village and forest department representatives recommended exclusion of these villages from the park area. The Pauri district magistrate pitched the proposal to the government of then united Uttar Pradesh, but nothing came of it.

Even BJP member Satpal Maharaj's recommendation to the environment ministry in 2011 and the forest department's subsequent admission that rehabilitating the villagers was necessary, didn't translate into action on the ground. Bisht finally moved the Uttarakhand high court in 2012 and was told to approach NGT.