

4. Left high and dry in the Nilgiris

Prelims Syllabus: Environment

Mains Syllabus: GS-III Environment; Biodiversity



Why in News?

- The Tamil Nadu Forest Department and more than 700 families in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and Gudalur in the Nilgiris (including Kattunayakans, Irulas, Paniyas, and Kurumbas) signed the 'golden handshake' agreement.
- The agreement was made after the Mountadden and Wayanadan Chetty communities obtained an order from the Madras High Court in 2007 seeking relocation away from the forest due to a lack of basic amenities.
- The objective of the agreement was to benefit the local communities inside the tiger reserve and aid conservation efforts.
- However, the Adivasis claim that the Chettys wanted to relocate as they had no traditional ties to the forest.
- The first phase of the relocation started in 2017. Almost 569 families from the four Adivasi groups have been relocated so far.

Associated concerns:

- Adivasis are dissatisfied with the relocation as they have not received the promised compensation.
- An Adivasi rights activist highlights that many of the Adivasis are unaware of what they were owed in the first place because the promises were made with little paperwork and documentation.

- Though the Mountadden and Wayanadan Chettys have largely relocated, Kattunayakans and the Paniyas have not been resettled fairly.
- The two communities complain that they were cheated by a few Forest Department personnel, some landowners, or middlemen.
- The activists are trying to ascertain the level of fraud, but there are many challenges like:
- The community is suspicious of outsiders and it is difficult to gain their trust.
- They are illiterate and do not know the money and accounts clearly.
- There is a lack of documents and evidence.
- Many land brokers have cheated them by over-inflating the land prices or relocating them to government land.
- It is also argued by many experts that the funds for the relocation should have been granted by at least 2010 (as the land was affordable).
- Now with inflation, it is difficult to find adequate land for earning a living through agriculture.
- As there is no document to prove ownership of land, it is difficult to get compensation or a loan in case of crop failure.
- The government-built houses allocated to relocated families are in dilapidated condition. Several other structures suffered damage due to heavy rains in 2018 and 2019.
- Many cases of fraud have been perpetrated against Adivasi groups during the relocation process.
- The communities have a deep connection with the forests that are considered sacred groves and sites of worship.
- It is particularly difficult for older members of the community to leave the forest.
- They also fear an identity loss if they move out of the forests.
- Despite the allegations of fraud and cheating, the forest department is continuing the relocation process.

Conclusion:

- Though some state officials and forest staff are trying to address the concerns of the Adivasis, nothing concrete has been done or achieved till now.
- Many villagers are firm that they will not leave the forest until there are more favourable negotiations or at least what was promised in the original agreement is offered completely.