



## RELOCATION OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN TIGER HABITAT CORE ZONES: PAPER III



### Introduction

The delicate balance between wildlife conservation and human rights is often a challenging feat to achieve. This challenge is particularly prominent in the context of India's efforts to protect its dwindling tiger population. Tiger reserves across the country are designated sanctuaries meant to provide safe and undisturbed habitats for this endangered species. However, many of these reserves are also home to indigenous communities, creating a complex intersection of environmental and social interests.

In recent years, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has been actively promoting the relocation of tribal communities from the core zones of these tiger habitats. This initiative has been met with mixed reactions, with some praising the steps taken to secure tiger conservation, and others concerned about the potential violation of the rights of these communities. This article explores the necessity of relocation, examines the current rehabilitation package, and delves into the roles and actions of the NCST and NTCA in addressing this issue.

### Necessity of Relocation

India's tiger population is one of the most celebrated conservation successes, yet it remains under constant threat. Core areas of tiger reserves, or Critical Tiger Habitats (CTH), are designated as exclusive zones for tiger conservation due to their ecological importance.



Scientific research has shown that human activities, such as agriculture, hunting, and logging, can have detrimental effects on tiger populations, disrupting their habitat and food chains. For this reason, conservationists argue that relocating human settlements from these core areas is necessary to protect the habitat from human interference.

The NTCA's directive emphasizes that activities of tribal communities within these core zones could potentially lead to irreversible damage to tiger habitats. The presence of people in these areas often results in habitat fragmentation, resource competition, and sometimes even human-tiger conflicts. By relocating villages outside these critical zones, the NTCA aims to minimize such disturbances, allowing tigers and other wildlife to thrive undisturbed. Moreover, it seeks to safeguard human lives by reducing encounters with potentially dangerous wildlife, a risk that is heightened in shared habitats.

While the conservation rationale for relocation is clear, the process is legally bound to consider the rights of these communities. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA), mandates that the relocation of tribal communities can only occur with their consent and after ensuring that there are no feasible alternatives for co-existence. Despite this, there has been significant tension between conservation objectives and the protection of tribal rights.

## Rehabilitation Package

The NTCA's relocation initiative is supplemented by a compensation package meant to assist families who choose to move voluntarily. Initially set at Rs 10 lakh per family, this compensation was revised in 2021 to Rs 15 lakh. However, the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) has voiced concerns that this amount may be insufficient. In 2018, the NCST recommended that compensation packages be updated in line with the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013, which would provide a broader range of entitlements.

The NCST's recommendations included monetary compensation as well as additional entitlements like two hectares of land, a house, basic utilities (water, electricity, and sanitation), and other necessary infrastructure for those opting for relocation. The intention behind this proposal was to ensure that relocated families would have the necessary resources to build sustainable livelihoods outside the tiger reserves. However, the implementation of these recommendations has been slow, and there remain gaps in ensuring that all relocated families receive the full range of entitlements outlined.

The NTCA's compensation and resettlement efforts have made some progress, but reports suggest that several families have yet to receive these benefits. Additionally, tribal communities often face challenges adapting to new environments, as they are separated from their traditional lands, which are integral to their cultural identity and subsistence.

## The Role and Status of NCST and NTCA

The NCST, a constitutional body responsible for protecting the rights of scheduled tribes, has taken a proactive stance in addressing the concerns surrounding forced or pressured relocation. In recent months, it has raised questions regarding the NTCA's June 2023 advisory, which directed state forest departments to prioritize village relocation from tiger reserves and develop action





plans for this purpose.

In response, the NCST held a full commission meeting in September 2023 to discuss the issue and decided to seek detailed reports from both the NTCA and the Union Environment Ministry on their actions regarding the commission's 2018 recommendations for an enhanced rehabilitation package. The NCST expressed concerns that the NTCA's advisory might violate the FRA, which requires consent from tribal communities before any relocation can occur.

## Recent Issues

The NCST's scrutiny of the NTCA's recent advisory was spurred by petitions from over 150 tribal rights groups and individuals. These groups argued that the NTCA's directive for time-bound relocation plans was coercive, contravening legal provisions that make such relocation a voluntary choice. They pointed out that the NTCA's advisory lacked mention of the FRA's consent requirement and the mandatory ecological and social assessments needed to confirm that no other co-existence options are viable. This oversight, according to tribal advocates, could lead to relocations that are not truly voluntary, thereby violating the rights of the indigenous communities.

The NCST's involvement is a reminder of the critical role that legal oversight plays in balancing conservation needs with the rights of tribal people. Without careful adherence to laws and respectful engagement with the communities involved, relocations run the risk of causing social injustice.

## Way Forward

Moving forward, there are several steps that can be taken to ensure a more just and effective approach to village relocation from tiger reserves. First, the NTCA and state governments must prioritize thorough ecological and social impact assessments to evaluate the necessity of each relocation on a case-by-case basis. This would ensure that relocations are genuinely required for conservation purposes, and that all alternatives have been considered.

Second, the NTCA should work in collaboration with the NCST to update the compensation package in alignment with the Land Acquisition Act of 2013, as recommended by the NCST. This would provide displaced communities with a more substantial foundation for rebuilding their lives outside the tiger reserves.

Third, consultations with tribal communities should be conducted transparently and respectfully, involving independent mediators if necessary. Ensuring informed consent through the Gram Sabha will be crucial to maintaining trust between the government and tribal groups.

## Conclusion

The relocation of tribal communities from tiger reserves touches on a delicate balance between protecting biodiversity and respecting human rights. While conservation efforts are necessary to protect India's tigers, these must not come at the cost of disregarding the rights of indigenous communities who have lived in these areas for generations. The NCST's oversight and recommendations underscore the need for a more inclusive and fair relocation process. By



updating the compensation package, conducting careful assessments, and respecting the legal rights of communities, the NTCA and other authorities can move toward a model of conservation that upholds both ecological and social justice.

The relocation of tribal communities must be viewed not as a mere administrative task, but as a process that respects and incorporates the voices and rights of the people it affects. Only then can India truly achieve a sustainable model of conservation that benefits both its wildlife and its citizens.

## Main Practice question

**Examine the roles of NCST and NTCA in tribal relocations from tiger reserves, recent challenges raised by tribal groups, legal implications, and propose measures for balancing conservation with tribal rights.**

### Answer Guidelines:

- 1. NCST and NTCA Roles:**
  - Outline NCST's mandate to protect tribal rights and NTCA's conservation-focused role.
- 2. Recent Issues:**
  - Describe NTCA's advisory for relocations and tribal groups' opposition.
- 3. Legal Provisions:**
  - Mention the Forest Rights Act and Wildlife Protection Act requirements for consent and co-existence assessments.
- 4. Recommendations:**
  - Propose solutions like fair compensation, transparent consultations, and thorough assessments for ethical relocations.



## MIND MAP:

