

Cabinet nod to Tribal Bill, no clear winners

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THE Cabinet today cleared the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill but neither the Environment Ministry nor the Tribals Affairs Ministry have emerged clear winners.

The Bill seeks to give temporary land rights to tribals living in wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. But to the delight of wildlife activists, the Forest Department has been given five years to relocate them. Failure to do so within this period would ensure tribals get permanent *pattas* over their piece of sanctuary land.

The Environment Ministry had wanted these protected wildlife sanctuaries to be kept outside the Bill's ambit while the Tribal Affairs Ministry wanted permanent land rights to be granted.

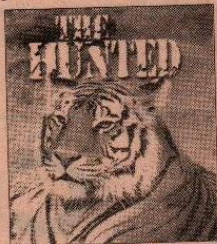
Today's compromise paves the way for the Bill to be introduced in the winter session of Parliament itself.

"The sanctuaries will be protected... the environment and revenue officers will take care that the Bill is implemented in its spirit," Environment Minister A Raja said.

The settlement of tribals inside sanctuaries had led to controversy. In the first bill prepared by the Tribals Affairs Ministry, permanent land rights were bestowed on tribals in sanctuaries, angering tiger activists.

After a long battle that necessitated Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's intervention, the two ministries tried to hammer out a middle path.

Sources in the Environment and Forests Ministry said tribals who live in core sanctuary areas will be relocated. Relocating all tribals in sanctuaries might be impossible.



Another new provision incorporated at the Environment Ministry's behest is that the cut-off date for recognising the tribals' rights has been set as October 25, 1980 — the date the Forest Conservation Act came into being. In the original Tribal Affairs Ministry bill, the date was flexible.

The Environment Ministry has failed to have its way on including non-tribals in the ambit of the Bill and making the gram sabha the arbitrator of all land disputes. The ministry had wanted a quasi-judicial body to handle land disputes.

Sources said Raja brought up the exclusion of non-tribals at the meeting. His ministry maintains that excluding non-tribals could trigger social unrest.