

Van Gujjar community

May 28, 2021

In news- Uttarakhand High court recently slammed the state government for forcing families of Van Gujjars tribe to survive in conditions “below animal existence”.

More information-

- A **PIL was filed by a Delhi based NGO, Think Act Rise Foundation** in 2019 to highlight the plight of Van Gujjars.
- The PIL has pleaded for the **community to be made a beneficiary under the Forest Right Act**, giving them land rights and quashing petty cases against them.
- The High court noted that some migrating Van Gujjars were forced to live under open skies in tough conditions after they were denied entry to **Govind Pashu Vihar National Park in Uttarkashi** by the deputy director of the park.
- The HC order noted that since these families cannot sell the milk produced by their cattle due to the Covid-induced lockdown, their life was reduced to “below animal existence” for they have neither shelter, nor economic means to survive.
- It directed that steps should be taken to allow their entry into the park to eke out a living if they test negative for COVID-19 and have the required legal documents with them.
- It directed the Uttarkashi district magistrate and the deputy director of the park to accommodate the families in “pucca houses” and provide them with food, water and medicines besides fodder to their cattle.

About Vangujjars-

- Van Gujjars are **transhumant pastoralists** inhabiting the foothills of Himalayan States such as Uttarakhand,

Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

- They usually migrate to grasslands in the upper Himalayas during summers to feed their **buffaloes, their primary source of livelihood and subsistence.**
- These Van Gujjars are said to have migrated from Northwest India about 300 years ago and during the period of **king Aurangzeb rule they have been converted to Muslims.**
- Buffalo grazing is adapted by seasonal movements in keeping with climatic variations prevailing between different altitudes of the mountain region of the Himalayas.
- The Van Gujjars spend autumn (October – April) in the lower ranges of Chhillarveli in the Shiwaliks and then move up in the summer and rainy season to the higher alpine regions of the Himalayas.
- Such grazing provides Van Gujjars with a **livelihood by the sale of milk from buffaloes** which yield about 2-3 litres of milk per day.
- Van Gujjars also make milk products such as butter, ghee for sale.

This highly ecologically sensitized movement is disturbed by the deliberate eviction of Van Gujjar families by the forest department which enclosed the forest area by declaring it as the **Rajaji National Park** during the year 1983.