

## Forest dept accuses spiritual body of land grab

The Delhi centre of Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB) has occupied 123 acres of forest land, the forest department has alleged.

The department has alleged the philosophical and charitable organisation, with several national and international centres, has occupied 72 acres of land in the Asola-Bhatti wildlife sanctuary in south Delhi and 51 acres of the adjoining Ridge or reserve forest.

Destruction of the Delhi ridge, of which the sanctuary is a part, means desertification of Delhi, fall of its water table and more pollution.

Deputy range officer of Delhi's lone wildlife sanctuary, Dharam Singh, on Monday filed two complaints - HT has copies - with the police and made these allegations.

"It seems the head of RSSB, with help from his supporters, has occupied land and is trying to occupy more land. It seems on his directive, one Chandan Sharma is obstructing the survey work being done by us."

"This violates sections of Wild Life (Protection) Act 1972 and the Indian Forest Act, 1927. These violations could be probed only by an assistant commissioner of police. Please act and get the land returned to the forest department," the complaints read.

A senior Delhi Police official said, "Yes, we have received complaints from the forest department. We're investigating the case".

The organisation, however, vehemently denied the allegations. RSSB (Bhatti Mines) secretary Kamal Gurbuxani told HT, "No forest land is under our occupation. The forest department on Monday issued a notification, detailing all khasras (land parcels) belonging to them. Our land and property are not there on the list."

On its sprawling and well-maintained campus in south Delhi, RSSB holds frequent gatherings where speakers such as Baba Gurinder Singh Maharaj, Master at Beas, and other speakers deliver spiritual talks. Its website says the organisation is based on the spiritual teachings of all religions and dedicated to a process of inner development.

The complaints claim five land parcels of the 5,000-acre sanctuary and 16 outside it (which could be termed eco-sensitive zone) have been occupied by RSSB. Overall, about 480 acres of land is said to be under illegal occupation by various individuals and organisations in the sanctuary.

After Hindustan Times on April 12 laid bare a systemic land grab in the sanctuary, the forest department started demolishing boundary walls of illegal farmhouses there. These farmhouses with gates and huge boundary walls also have approach roads, besides electricity and water supplies.

So far, 125 acres of land has been reclaimed. The going rate for such land in south Delhi is Rs 6 to Rs 40 crore per acre.