

## Unsettling

The reality of resettlement in Orissa

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Sariska's 'missing' tigers have started off a flurry of activity and debate. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh set up a Tiger Task Force; Rajasthan's chief wildlife warden was suspended, and the Ministry of Environment and Forests (moef) has begun contemplating a Wildlife Crime Bureau. Justifiably, conservationists are up in arms; Sariska represents the dismal state wildlife conservation in India is in.

Why don't the co-inhabitants of forest areas, forest dwelling communities in and around protected areas facing similar life-threatening situations across the country, fail to provoke such activity? They only manage to provoke a great deal of opposition whenever what is rightly theirs -- in this case the right to inhabit forest areas -- is about to be given any recognition.

India's national parks and wildlife sanctuaries (covering about 5 per cent of its land area) are critical for the survival of threatened habitats and wildlife, water security, and myriad other ecological functions. But they also contain over 4 million human beings, traditionally resident or depending on their natural resources. A top-down bureaucratic approach, without scientifically assessing which human activities are

ecologically detrimental and which sustainable, has universally curtailed people's access to resources and, in some cases, physically displaced communities. The story of Krishnanagar and Tulsadeipur, two villages in Orissa presented here, highlights the problems with such displacement.

Krishnanagar Located just a few kilometres from Orissa's capital Bhubhaneswar, Krishnanagar's houses has no doors. Its people look insecure and angry. This was obviously not like your ordinary village. And yet, it was just like thousands of other villages throughout the country, facing the brunt of projects, policies and laws that did not even consider their existence.

Krishnanagar is actually a resettled village comprising 62 families. In 1994, these people were shifted here from their original village Bentasahi, which nestled within a forest area declared the Chandaka Wildlife Sanctuary in 1982. Though the Wild Life (Protection) Act 1972 under which Chandaka was notified does not require human settlements to be relocated, sanctuary officials felt the villages were causing ecological fragmentation detrimental to the wildlife there.

The over-175 sq km sanctuary, one of 18 in Orissa, was declared to protect the habitat of a small population of elephants and other wildlife. It has deciduous forests regenerating from earlier commercial forestry operations, including some dense bamboo thickets. Chandaka's core area was inhabited by one revenue village with five settlements of 483 families of the Sabara and Santala tribes. 85 households from two hamlets, Bentasahi and Dholakath, 'volunteered' to move out when the state forest department (fd) offered them a rehabilitation package comprising electricity, water, school, health facilities and most importantly, 2.5 acres (about one hectare) of land with irrigation. They were also to receive compensation of Rs 12,000 per acre for agricultural land and 18,000 Rs per acre for homestead lands, to the extent of land they were losing beyond 2.5 acres.

As per fd's plan initially a few families, those in the core area and also more willing, would be rehabilitated. The rest would be motivated to follow. Finally, just two hamlets were rehabilitated, because the resettlement site was adequate only for 200 households, and not all the local population had accepted relocation.

Those who chose to stay on were indeed the luckier ones. A decade has passed and the families relocated in Krishnanagar, and adjoining Tulsadeipur, are still waiting for the land and other facilities they were promised. "We received a lump sum compensation for our land, homestead and trees inside, and not separately as we were told," reveals a Krishnanagar dweller. The land demarcated for distribution is yet to be allotted to the people by the revenue department. Most of this land is of poor fertility. "The land we had in Bentasahi used to provide us with food for almost six to eight months; now we are left with these barren lands for which we have no *pattas* even," said a Krishnanagar resident. In Tulsadeipur, even the house *pattas* are yet to be allotted: this settlement looks more like an abandoned village than one established a few years back, with more than half the structures in total ruins. A water tank completely devoid of water completes the picture of desolation.

According to divisional forest officer (dfo) Suresh Mishra, a steering committee -- headed by the revenue commissioner and comprising 2 collectors and himself as member secretary -- was created in 1994 to coordinate rehabilitation. The committee had one meeting in 1994, the first and last. Its demise signaled the death of any inter-departmental coordination; a blame game began between the forest and revenue departments, with villagers as its victims.

### No written contract

Asked if the villagers could take recourse to a court of law, we got an even more shocking answer. "There was no written contract for the rehabilitation -- everything was done in good faith," said Mishra. A sensitive officer, he seemed pained by the villagers' fate, and helpless to do anything unless his superiors moved on the matter.

Left with virtually no means of survival, the families resorted to setting up what the dfo referred to as "firewood factories". The term is misleading, given the meagre amounts locals earn by selling firewood 'stolen' by women from nearby forests. And don't they run into trouble with the department for using forests that fall within the sanctuary area? Says a woman: "Even though it is illegal, the guards cannot stop us from taking the wood. They know they have not been able to do anything for us". A fact forest officers accompanying us did not refute.

Says a resident of Tulsadeipur "We cannot even avail any government schemes from the *panchayat* and the block because we have not been allotted bpl cards yet or *pattas* for the land". Krishnanagar is not even represented as a ward in the *panchayat* because the seat of ward *panch* for their ward was reserved for obcs, whereas 100 per cent of ward's population are scheduled tribes!

### Outside: isolation

Resettlement has also led to social and cultural isolation. Tulsadeipur is technically a hamlet of the much older Daruthang revenue village, but the latter community has not accepted them. Conflict with neighbouring villages over scarce resources has become a common phenomenon.

Relocation also strained relations with those of their people who decided to stay behind in the sanctuary. "Ironically, those who opposed the department and refused relocation are better off than us; they see us as traitors (for going with the department)."

### Inside: restricted

A discussion with communities still inside the sanctuary revealed that they face problems of a different nature. Restriction on their mobility has affected their day-to-day lives. During festivals and weddings relatives coming in have to pay a fee at the gate. Residents of Bentasahi complained that even in medical emergencies, it was difficult to get a vehicle or even an ambulance in or out at odd hours. Forest officers point out that regulations at the gate are essential to check miscreants from coming in. Being inside a protected area, the village is denied normal governmental schemes for welfare, housing, infrastructure, and development. Access to non-timber forest produce is now harder.

Ironically, despite such glaring failure, the fd is continuing to make plans to relocate the remaining villages. This time, they contend, they will ensure land titles and infrastructure development in the relocation sites, *before* the villagers are asked to move. And caught in the straitjacket of wildlife laws, villagers too seem to look forward to getting "a better life *outside*". This is what officials sometimes call 'voluntary' relocation -- the truth is top-down imposed laws force people to seek such relocation.

### Dismal failure

The villages of Chandaka, those relocated and inside, are not alone in their plight. Most relocation efforts in India have been dismal failures, with human rights violations serious enough to make any conservationist cringe in shame. Yet the system continues to believe in separating people and wildlife even when such separation is often not needed, when it does not have the wherewithal to provide decent resettlement and when it gets away by shifting blame from one department to the other. There is no nuanced assessment of where core inviolate zones are absolutely needed for threatened wildlife, where human co-existence is not a problem, and what kinds of resource uses and restrictions can be applied so

that conservation and livelihood security can be integrated.

Abroad, India signs onto treaties that promise to make conservation more respectful of livelihood rights and people's participation (such as the Convention on Biological Diversity's Work Programme on Protected Areas); within the country, it pushes in the opposite direction. Official agencies or conventional conservationists do not even want to consider trying out the many models of participatory conservation that are showing success across the world.

The state government, rather than learn from Chandaka, has recently banned all collection of non-timber forest produce from within all of Orissa's protected areas. Such collection and sale is the cornerstone of most *adivasi* livelihoods. Without it, they are doomed; in effect, the ban is tantamount to telling several thousand tribal people to get out. Where to, no one says. Will their fate be the same as the villagers dumped into Krishnanagar and Tulsadeipur?

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