

Paradise lost

Tribesmen, facing eviction from the Pachmarhi Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, are apprehensive and unsure about their future, writes Sushmita Malaviya

ONLY a few years ago, 35-year-old Hari Bai recalls, she and her husband were able to make Rs 500 a week selling lac, brooms, *mahua*, *tendupatta*, *donga* and *beedi* leaves without having to move out of their village, Tendukheda, in Madhya Pradesh. On any day, like other women in the village, she could also take a headload of dry wood and sell it 8 km away for a kilo of kanki (broken rice), which is worth Rs 10.



Gond tribesmen are likely to be evicted and moved to a wasteland next year

Today, all this has come to an end. Most of the other 35 Gond tribal families in the village, as many others in the Pachmarhi Tiger Reserve area, 171 km from Bhopal, are likely to be evicted as early as summer next year. Hari Bai's father-in-law explains, "In 1998, we were informed that we would be evacuated." While those affected have been promised rehabilitation and compensation, many have decided to stay here.

Village elder Shankar explains why many of them have taken this decision. "I have seven fertile acres here where I have been growing *jawar*, maize, *kutti*, *samah* and *bajra*. The administration is giving me five acres somewhere between Babai and Semri and compensation for the remaining two acres. But there is no legal *patta* for the land."

Deepak Ekka, programme coordinator for the Poorest Areas Civil Society (PACS), which has been working in the area for the last few years, says, "People, rangers, and guards all know that the eviction is due. There has been talk about making arrangements for the people to be transported to their allotted areas and being allowed to sow in both places — where they are living now and where they will be rehabilitated. But nothing has happened so far." One reason Ekka attributes to people not wanting to move is that the land being provided is wasteland. "People will have to put in a lot of effort to get that land to a productive standard," he said.

Since things have not moved over the years, there has been an impasse. However, this year, the signs have been clear. That the situation will be taking a harsh turn became obvious from the fact that forest officials did not allow these villagers to sow crops on the small bits of land that they have. Left with no option, many of the families are surviving only on the produce of the kitchen garden that they have.

The court stay on access to forest produce is set to bring more misery to the populace of the entire Pachmarhi area as well as the Itarsi side of Tawa.

Apart from being cut off, people here have no access to health facilities. Besides serious diseases such as tuberculosis, leprosy and malaria, common diseases among tribal communities are parasitic infections, diarrhoea, dysentery, skin diseases, respiratory infections, whooping cough and measles. Health facilities do not reach them because the norms prescribed by the state governments for establishing primary health centres and health subcentres are inappropriate for a dispersed population in small settlements in inaccessible areas.

When health facilities happen to be available, most tribesmen can neither afford the fee of the doctor nor the cost of medicines. Tribal women's health is often at risk during their reproductive years. Says PACS animator Lallan Singh Chauhan, who works among these people, "These people are very simple and they believe anything the government says. They have no work, no jobs." Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which have been formed with the help of PACS, are doing all they can for these tribesmen.

How are these villagers going to earn a livelihood is a matter of concern and is being tackled by programme implementers.

About changes brought in by the PACS programme, Father Soosai, Director of the Asha Niketan Welfare Centre (ANWC), which is implementing the PACS programme, explains, "After the field visits, trainings and exposures, there has been a change in the mindset of people. Earlier, they never came forward to meet us. Now when we go to the village, they come to talk to us and they express their happiness at being associated with us."

Villagers are now keen to try out other livelihood options. Village elder Shankar Singh says there was a time when he used to sell 16 kg of honey at Rs 80. "Today people have been trying to suck life out of the forest," he says, referring to man's greed for commercial endeavour. Since the question of livelihood has become the most important one, the ANWC is focusing on training women.

PACS block coordinator Pushpalata Samuel says, "Despite the sword of eviction dangling over their heads, the women are planning to take land on lease so that they are able to cultivate wheat and *channa*. Since the health of women and children is a concern too, they want an *anganwadi*."

So what do the men in the village think of these activities taken up by women? Shankar Singh says, "Should the day come when we have to confront those who want to evict us, at least we would have strength in numbers." Should his estimate be accurate, Shankar is referring to the 50 SHGs that have been formed in the two blocks, each with 13 to 14 women and their helpless families with them. Shankar adds that he supports his wife's endeavour, "Because, if people are helping her then we also can move ahead."

Father Soosai hopes that people will be prepared to plan for their own development and the development of the region. As for the imminent eviction, he says it is too early to comment, but says this will in fact be not only the people's first major struggle but the "struggle for my workers too".

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