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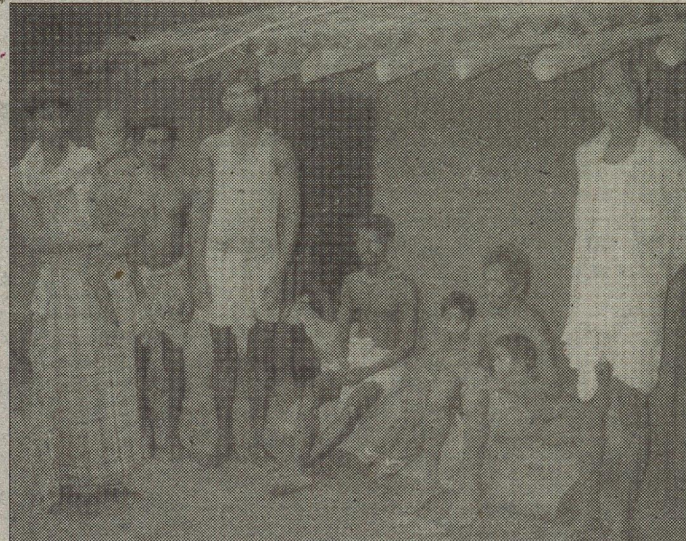
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Missing the wood for the trees

EXPRESS FOCUS DEVELOPMENT

What's a forest without people, ask the tribals of Jashpur district in Madhya Pradesh, as they are asked to move out in the name of developing a sanctuary. **RAJENDRA KHATRY** reports



A Pahadi Korwa tribal family sitting outside its dilapidated hut inside the sanctuary (left); A view of the hills encircling the Badalkhol sanctuary. Photos by Rajendra Khatri

THE rain-laden dark clouds kissing the green hilltops encircling Badalkhol sanctuary in Jashpur district of Madhya Pradesh bordering Orissa make a pretty picture. But there are rumblings in the mountains, and the streaks of lightning flashing across the sky warn of dark days ahead.

For hundreds of years, the tribals in this region have protected and nurtured the forest, using its produce to feed themselves. But instead of acknowledging their contribution, the Forest Department seems more keen on displacing them from their natural habitat in

the name of developing a sanctuary.

Aware of the government's moves, the tribals in the sanctuary area are gearing up for the big fight. "Who will dare drive us out of this place? The forest is ours, we belong to the forest and no one can ever separate us," declares Puniya Ram, a resident of Rangpur. Adds Janglu Ram, from Dumarpani village, "Kill us if you want. We will never leave this place." Others say they don't even want compensation. "Just leave us alone where we are," is all they demand.

The Badalkhol sanctuary in eastern MP, with an area of 105

square kms on the banks of Eib river on one side and Dorki river on the other, is the 33rd sanctuary being developed by the state government with aid from the World Bank. The area, derived its name from the fact that earlier, the forest was so dense that once you entered it, it was impossible to see the clouds (badal). However, illegal

felling of trees by timber mafia has denuded the forest over the years.

An eviction notice in the form of an appeal was recently served on four villages inside the sanctuary—Rangpur, Rajpur, Kurhatipna and Dumarpani. Although the forest department does not say so openly, it is evident that once these villages are vacated, the tribals from the 34

villages on the periphery of the Badalkhol sanctuary will have to make way as well.

The Badalkhol sanctuary development project is more than two decades old. In 1976, under the Wildlife Protection Act, the MP forest department first issued a notification for the protected area's development. The plan had no role for the tribals, though. At best, they were considered an obstacle. Stiff resistance from the tribals—

mostly the fierce hunting tribe of Pahadi Korwas—however bogged down the project.

In 1982, the forest department served a verbal notice on the inhabitants to vacate the forest. The tribals refused, but the department persisted. The tribals retaliated in anger by massacring hundreds of animals and birds in the sanctuary.

Since then, the government has mellowed down its approach. Now, the government is experimenting with the idea of inducement to lure the tribals out of the forest. The forest department has offered Rs one lakh each to the family that vacates the sanctuary. But there is still no talk of a rehabilitation plan.

The result of this "grand offer": the tribals didn't just refuse, but got even more belligerent. In desperation, forest officials rushed to the area to explain to the tribals they had no plans to oust them by force. They even distributed a written statement signed by the District Forest Officer (DFO) declaring that nobody would be displaced against his or her wishes. But the tribals are not convinced.

DFO of Jashpur, Arun Pandey, said the government wants to develop the sanctuary to protect wildlife and the forest. He has been at pains to remove any doubts from the minds of the tribals and convince them that the forest department will not use force at any cost.

"We are not enemies of the tribals. In fact, we have formed hundreds of Forest Protection Committees comprising tribals from the concerned areas all over the district," he says. And the inducement offer? Well, according to the government's existing forest policy, the forest will be safe only when there is no disturbance from human beings or their domestic animals. "Eventually everyone may have to leave," he admits.

District Collector of Jashpur, Durgesh Mishra, says the tribal displacement issue has been blown

out of proportion. "The administration is conscious of the rights of the forest dwellers even as it wants to protect the wildlife," he says. A separate department has also been formed for the development and protection of the Pahadi Korwa tribe, he says.

It is ironical though, that while the government has launched an ambitious project to help the Pahadi Korwas, simultaneous plans are afoot to uproot them from their homeland. The charge that tribals have begun to destroy the forest and damage the eco-system holds no water, not in Jashpur, not anywhere in the country.

Living in abject poverty in mud houses in far-flung areas with no electricity, proper roads or safe drinking water, the tribals hardly present the face of the timber mafia that the forest department charges them with. The tribals cut wood mostly for domestic purpose like building houses or lighting their *chulhas* and not for commercial exploitation. They depend on farming to sustain themselves.

Alleged harassment by the forest department is slowly but surely driving the tribals in Badalkhol sanctuary area to desperation. Things could only worsen if the forest department doesn't tread carefully.