

Starving PA oustees arrested

16 residents of Village Bhagwanpur, who were ousted from village Botezari in the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, Chandrapur, Maharashtra in March 2007, were arrested on May 21, 2009 after they entered the TATR to gather Tendu leaves and start cultivation on their old lands. While the Forest Department has charged the group with having felled 60-70 trees, and have slapped offenses under several conservation legislations on them, villagers claim that they are in a state of semi-starvation in their new location due to lack of irrigation facilities and employment, and all efforts to communicate with officials in this regard have proved futile.

The bone of contention between the forest and revenue departments of the district on the one hand and the residents of Bhagwanpur on the other is an irrigation tank that was promised to the residents at the time of relocation. Irrigation is of vital importance for paddy, which is both the staple food and the main crop grown by these people. At the time of relocation, the village was provided a tank situated lower than their fields, and hence unsuitable for irrigation, with the result that they could not take a single crop in the last two crop seasons. Despite repeated pleas, the revenue and forest departments have done little but to give assurances.

The situation rose to a crisis on May 20, when at a meeting held in the village in the presence of TATR field director Sheshrao Patil, RFO Arun Tikhe and district collector Pradeep Kalbhor, the residents demanded that they be allowed to cultivate their older lands in Botezari village till irrigation facilities were provided at the relocation site. Villagers said that they are in a state of semi starvation because there are no opportunities for employment in the area where they have been relocated.

The officials are understood to have threatened the villagers with arrest during the meeting. Villagers, however, told the officials that they would go into TATR for tendu leaves and cultivation, as they had no other option.

According to the testimonies of the eight men and eight women arrested on May 21, after this meeting which happened in the afternoon, members of some 24 households set out for the old location. They reached the spot at 9 PM and slept the night there. On the morning of May 21, forest and police officials arrived at 7 am just as the people were in the process of cooking breakfast. Eight men and eight

women who were present on the spot were arrested. The remaining people had gone to village Kolsa to buy provisions.

The arrested residents were presented in court where the women were granted bail on personal bonds. The women, however, refused to accept bail and demanded that their men be freed as well. All sixteen people were then remanded to magisterial custody.

Meanwhile, NREGA work, which had closed in the village since Diwali last year, was restarted on May 22, one day after the arrests. However, the residents have still not been paid wages despite the fact that they were promised weekly payment.

Bhagwanpur residents have demanded that the arrested residents be released and all charges against them be dropped. They have also reiterated their demand for cultivation rights on their old lands till all necessary facilities are provided at Bhagwanpur. Villages Kolsa and Rantalodhi located inside the TATR have also supported the demands.

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