

In Chhattisgarh, a primitive tribe in trouble

Administration argues pulling down their huts will ensure 'safety of wildlife'

A day after the Union government announced a Rs.100-crore grant for Chukutiya Bhunjia of Orissa, a primitive tribe which lives on the eastern border of Chhattisgarh, 30 huts of the Baigas, another primitive tribe, were razed to the ground by government officials in the western part of the State.

The incident took place on February 18, adjacent to the Boramdeo Reserve Forest in Kawardah district. While officials reasoned that it was done to ensure the 'safety of the wildlife,' the eviction is in violation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006.

The two overlapping villages, Rajanacha and Bajadhap, in the district wore the same look as that of villages ravaged by members of the Salwa Judum in south Chhattisgarh between 2005 and 2009. A team of 20 forest guards and the police raided the villages with "clubs, axes and pistols," said Bijadhap residents, an allegation not denied by officials.

While no villager was beaten or detained, the officials axed all stocky twigs that held the interwoven mats of dry leaves. A similar operation was carried out in the same villages two weeks earlier. "Officials have threatened to... arrest us, if we resettle here," said Budhni Bai, an old woman who was unsure about her age.

As 30 houses of sun-dried leaves, grass and twigs were crushed, roughly 60 Baiga families of 200 members became homeless. The families stuffed a few household items in large cement bags and were sleeping in the open on plastic sheets spread over their destroyed home. Around 100 Baiga men and women are busy building their houses before Chhattisgarh's cruel summer sets in. "The other day when a hailstorm started, I freaked out; he ought not to have been born now," said Amrita Baiga, 25, feeding her three-month-old son Gopal.

The Baigas are not sure when they built their first house in Kawardah. But going by the map produced by Jawaharlal Nehru's tribal affairs adviser, Verrier Elwin, in his book *The Baiga*, the "extraordinarily shy" community is in Kawardha and adjoining hill areas for centuries. Yet, the community does not know why they are asked to "vanish." Bijadhap residents said they were "asked to leave Boramdeo and settle in Bijadhap around 2006 by Forest Department officials."

The FRA says forest-dwellers have complete right to forestland and they cannot be evicted. In case of their displacement for development, gram sabhas will have to approve the government's offer in writing. Moreover, 'a resettlement or alternatives package' has to be prepared to secure livelihood for the affected individuals and communities, and "no resettlement shall take place until facilities and land allocation at the resettlement location are complete." These norms are violated in the eviction of the Baigas. Let alone

the consent of the gram sabha, even Assistant Commissioner of Tribal Affairs Department M.L. Deshlahre was not aware of the eviction; he came to know about it from this correspondent.

Divisional Forest Officer Vishwesh Kumar told *The Hindu* that the Baigas came “on their own” to the plains from Bhomradeo in 2006 as they faced “water and other agricultural problems” in the forest. “How can we give settlement according to the FRA since it is meant for only those who are resettled before 2006?”

Chhattisgarh’s tribal affairs experts differ. Speaking on condition of anonymity, one of them said it was not correct to say the displaced Baigas came from the forest “on their own” before 2006. “The Forest Department evicted the Baigas before the FRA came into force. Hence, the tribals should be adequately compensated as per the FRA and the rehabilitation policy of the Central government, which is in place for a longer time.”

On the other hand, Mr. Kumar said the administration was “trying hard” to find a solution, and the issue had been referred to the higher authorities.

An activist, who is trying to organise the Baigas, said the archaic wildlife laws and the highhandedness of Forest Department officials helped Maoists carve out a base in south Chhattisgarh. “The government is making the same mistake in the rest of the State.”