

Bureaucratic Strategies in Relocation

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The relocation earlier this year of the residents of one village in Tadoba Reserve in Maharashtra showed the bureaucracy adopting strategies that did not respect the villagers' right to live with material dignity.

The passage of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Rights to the Forest) Act in December 2006, which is "expected to put our forest and biodiversity resource management on a sounder footing" [Gadgil 2007], has come a little too late for the villagers of Botezari. The village, one of six located inside Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR), in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra, started shifting outside the reserve on March 14, with the last family moving out in the middle of May 2007. For these villagers relocation was a long drawn process stretched over two decades, ever since the declaration of Andhari wildlife sanctuary in 1986.

In general, relocations in India have been a failure as a norm rather than an exception. This is mainly due to faulty planning and execution, which has been proved over and over again [Shahabuddin 2007; Kabra 2003]. A recent synthesis of research by biologists and sociologists alike adds credence to the critiques in protected areas in particular [Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2006]. On the face of it, the minutiae of one village in a tiger reserve in central India should not matter so much. Yet, it is precisely via the examination of such detailed processes of the exercise of power or alternately of disempowerment that we can better grasp the enormity of the changes under way in the forests of India.

Without trying to judge whether the relocation of Botezari is a failure or a success, in this article we simply want to emphasise the methods used by the relocation authority, also known as "Project Authority", in the whole process. How the villagers located inside TATR have suffered due to prolonged delay, and how they have been made to pay disproportionately higher cost for the ecological gains of global community have been discussed earlier [Ghate 2005, 2003]. The potential problems that they are likely to face at the new site too have been enumerated

[Mehra 2005]. Therefore in this article we narrate only the developments that took place almost six months prior to the shifting of Botezari village, indicating how strategies, deeply reminiscent of colonial era tactics and strategies are still at work in India.

The Background

The Andhari sanctuary was created in 1986 by marking some area to the south of Tadoba national park, with the clear intention of increasing the wildlife habitat in the region. This required shifting of six villages. A decade later, a settlement officer from the revenue department undertook an enquiry in this regard for settlement of rights. After several rounds of objections raised by the forest department and responses filed by the revenue department, a proposal for shifting of three of the six villages namely, Botezari, Kolsa, and Palasgoan, was finally submitted to the government of Maharashtra in December 2000. In the meanwhile, alternate relocation sites were shown to the villagers. Every time, for each site, and from each of these villages only male residents were taken for selection/approval of the site. They finally gave their assent to a site known as Tolewahi/Kesalaghat, where Botezari has now been settled.

As the villagers admit, this particular site was chosen for two reasons. One, there was forest area around, so they would not feel totally out of place in their new milieu. Two, their relatives and acquaintances lived in nearby villages. The site selected belonged to the Forest Development Corporation of Maharashtra (FDCM), and necessary formalities were undertaken to transfer 550 hectare of land (out of the 1,100 hectare patch) from FDCM to north Chandrapur forest circle. A detailed proposal for the purpose was later forwarded to the ministry of environment and forests, and permission for relocation was granted by the central government in January 2001. Administrative sanction for the relocation proposal was given in 2002 with a caveat that the status of the land on which the three villages would be relocated, would remain "reserve forest", while the land that would be vacated by the villagers from within TATR would be converted into forest land with immediate effect.

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In 2003, the relocation authorities received from Project Tiger an amount of Rs 4.63 crore. In February 2004, the conservator of forests (CF), north Chandrapur forest circle was appointed as project officer for the relocation work, and the work at the relocation site started in full earnest. A relocation committee was set up as per the norms, with representatives of the villages, an NGO, along with the officers in charge of relocation. At this point villagers of Palasgaon backed out from their decision and came up with a conditional consent and a charter of demands. Kolsa villagers chose a "wait and watch" policy, while Botezari gave written consent for moving to the new place.

In the process of relocating villagers from Botezari, authorities adopted clever strategies to ensure that the relocation would take place at their own convenience and at their terms rather than that of the people who were to be relocated. Some of the strategies are discussed here.

Divide and Rule

A legacy of the colonial rule, this strategy involved picking and using one or more dominant persons from the village, convincing them of the intended objective, and rewarding them for their cooperation. The relocation officers were well aware of the social dynamics of the village and exploited that to the hilt. The project authority realised that the village patil (headman) was the most powerful person in the village and that the fellow villagers did not challenge his decisions. Therefore the officials conveniently restricted all communication to the patil and his friends from elite sections. The officials further exploited the fact that simple acts like being invited to an officer's cabin, sitting in front of officers such as conservator of forests or district collector and being offered tea by them, are considered acts of prestige by villagers. These were used on few of people "targeted" from the village. It is no coincidence that the patil's was the first house to be shifted where the collector performed the "initiation-of-relocation ceremony" on March 14, 2007. A majority of the villagers, who were not informed of the ceremony, later commented, "how can we stay back now when the patil (headman) has decided to go to the new place".

The patil was rewarded with agricultural land of his choice. Throughout the function no one was allowed to ask questions, give comments, or express concerns. It was simply assumed that once the patil moves, all others would follow.

Giving Selective Information

When Botezari villagers had selected the site and had given their consent to shift, they had no idea that they would not get the same legal landholding at the new place. Being a revenue village all the agricultural land in Botezari was owned under Class I tenancy, under the "7/12 extracts of land" revenue code. But the agriculture land given in exchange at the relocation site was of Class II tenancy, and being forestland, it meant that the owners cannot sell or pledge the land for loans at the new site. What is disturbing is the fact that this information was not provided to the villagers for a long time (till the end of 2005). Being a contentious issue, the project authority probably feared that this information would discourage people from agreeing to move out.

Demand for Irrigation

Another very important demand made by the villagers was for an irrigation tank. Botezari had an irrigation tank for very many years, although it could irrigate only one crop of paddy. The villagers

understandably were insistent about the irrigation tank at the new site. Throughout the negotiations the project authority promised provision of the tank. It was only after construction of a village tank and houses was over, that the villagers were told that there was no appropriate site for an irrigation tank.

Later on arguments like insufficiency of land, need for special permission to build an irrigation structure on forestland, insufficiency of funds etc were forwarded. The authorities even offered to dig bore wells, wells for individual fields, but the fact remains that they cheated the villagers by promising an irrigation tank and then not fulfilling it.

Intimidation Strategy

Although the project authorities had put up a face of being democratic and encouraging participation, their patience soon ran out with the villagers not moving out when asked to. Especially after the passage of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Rights to the Forest) Act in December 2006, a sense of urgency seemingly set in. Forgetting that the proposal for relocation had clearly mentioned that "rehabilitation will remove hardships to residents and will provide them all social amenities", which was in keeping with the government resolution (GR) issued by the government of

Maharashtra (dated July 17, 2000) wherein provision of 18 facilities including drinking water, electricity, grazing land etc is mandatory, the authorities insisted on immediate shifting of Botezari in the middle of March without the facilities being in place and without intimating the villagers about it in advance.

On an earlier occasion, in a meeting attended by representatives of the three villages facing relocation, members of NGOs and government officials, the collector, also chairman of the meeting had mentioned in no uncertain terms that the day Botezari village moves out, he would get the old village bulldozed and no one would be allowed to come back. In another meeting the collector had declared that if the villagers do not shift within a month, he would settle flood-affected people from the district at Kesalaghat, knowing fully well that the villagers would not understand that legally this could not be done.

Transparency in Veil of Secrecy

Another claim the project authority made was that of transparency in all of its actions. But what the Botezari villagers have experienced is contrary to this. Since Botezari was the first village willing for relocation, they were allowed to choose the spot for the gaathan, the village/settlement area. Kolsa villagers were hesitant in giving their consent, and were watching the moves of Botezari closely, taking their own time. According to the villagers of Botezari, in order to appease the people of Kolsa, their demands and choices were given precedence over the choices put up by the people of Botezari. Thus, the decision to allot the piece of land selected by Botezari villagers to Kolsa villagers was taken unilaterally without consulting or even informing the people of Botezari. And thus the site of their settlement was shifted to a less preferred part.

Lack of information was not restricted to the villagers alone. Even the office of the principal chief conservator of forest-wildlife (PCCF)(WL) was neither informed of the house pattas being distributed nor was it informed when shifting of houses actually started. The PCCF(WL) later raised objections to handing over houses constructed on land whose status was not changed to non-forest land. In a letter

dated June 3, 2006 to the divisional commissioner, PCCF(WL) had pointed out that the legal status of the land will did not allow people to get 7/12 extract of the land after relocation, and suggested disallowing distribution of land until the issue was resolved. The letter also asked questions regarding the distribution of land in a way that left inadequate land for relocation of the third village. The PCCF(WL) wrote to the chief secretary as well wherein he raised issues regarding faults in land distribution, and suggesting that no minister should get involved in any function related with distribution of houses or agriculture land to the relocating households.

Use and Dump Strategy

The project authority involved different NGOs at different times and for different work according to its own discretion. Initially, an NGO working in wildlife conservation, which believed that people are a hindrance to propagation of wildlife was selected on the relocation committee set up to overlook relocation work. The NGO had no background or experience in working on socio-economic issues of forest-dependent people or relocation problems. Yet it was entrusted with the task of awareness-building and persuading the people to relocate. After a year the authorities "realised" that this NGO had not been able to do its job, as the process of relocation was not moving ahead. The villagers still had some issues with the relocation authorities, which the NGO was unable to resolve by mediating between the two. At this point (later half of 2005), another NGO was invited to mediate between the project authorities and villagers of Botezari. The NGO succeeded in bringing the villagers and the relocation authority on the same platform to resolve issues like design of the house, type of roof, etc. But as soon as the NGO started asking uncomfortable questions, relating to ownership of land and irrigation tanks, and timing of relocation, the NGO was simply sidelined.

Bureaucratic Priorities

While the villagers continuously insisted that their fields be readied first and work on providing irrigation facilities be taken

up on priority, the authorities chose to start with construction of houses instead. Villagers of Botezari were repeatedly saying that they would make their own houses using some of the material that would be transported from their old houses. This would have allowed the villagers to make the houses to their own liking and at the same time would have reduced the cost. But the authority either chose to ignore this suggestion, or the patil never passed on the suggestion to him. Secondly, the villagers wanted the construction of an approach road to be taken on priority. But they were told that work on road would be started only after the villagers shifted because this would give them employment immediately after moving.

Present Situation

In response to an intervention application filed by some organisations in June 2006, to the Central Empowerment Committee (set up by the Supreme Court), the ministry of environment and forest has informed through a letter of April 2007, that the government of India has confirmed that the ownership of "lease patta (Class II tenancy) that can be given to relocated beneficiaries, where agriculture activities are allowed on the suite lands", however "no resale of this land can be done unless its status is changed to non-forest by following due procedure of law". Since Botezari villagers, as other rural people would, insisted on some document of land ownership before shifting, papers for ownership of houses had been given, signed by range forest officer of the forest department! All the households of Botezari and around 40 households of Kolsa village have shifted to the new site, named Bhagwanpur, after the name of the then project officer, without legal ownership of agricultural land.

Despite the full knowledge of essentials and good practices of relocation mentioned by various agencies [World Bank 2002; Tiger Task Force Report 2005], the relocation authorities seemed to have thrown all caution to the wind. What makes the villagers more vulnerable is a situation where all the three officials – the collector, the CF, and the RFO, who were dealing with the relocation issues ever since it started in true earnest, and whom

the villagers trusted, have been transferred within a period of four months. Since the villagers had put faith in the promises made by these officers, they now feel orphaned and uncertain about their future.

It is too early to judge whether relocation will prove to be good for the villagers of Bhagwanpur. Considering the fact that the villagers were living in isolated circumstances within a tiger reserve, where development had almost come to a standstill, people are more likely to be better off once they are able to find their bearings in this new place, with a railway station and an industrial centre nearby. It will not be fair to say that the officials related with the relocation work were all ill-meaning. In fact there

was lot of effort put in by the project authority, large amounts pooled in by the collector to give additional facilities to the relocating villagers. And yet, due to their choice of strategies, the authorities lost an opportunity to make relocation of Botezari an exemplary one. Though a microcosm, the case is illustrative of larger dangers. The securing of conservation objectives seems to have little reference in this case to legitimate rights to live with material dignity. The level of arbitrary conduct in dislocating resource dependent people and depriving them of a better life even though this is entirely within the real of possibility even without major legislative changes. Far from things changing, they seem to remain the same. The bottle is new, the wine old.

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