

## **BUXA TIGER RESERVE: THE RELOCATION STORY**

Here's a real story of how they conserve wild life in this country, in an incredibly participatory manner.

On behalf of National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (NFFPPFW), North Bengal Regional Committee, a 4-member team visited the forest settlements of Jayanti, Buxa Road and Santarabari on Indo-Bhutan border, on 30th and 31st May, 2008. Situated inside the so-called core area of Buxa Tiger Reserve, these settlements have apparently been identified as to-be-relocated villages, and the State Forest Department has started the relocation proceedings there.

### **Jayanti**

The NFFPPFW team went to Jayanti on 30th May. A public meeting was held in the local playground, where several hundreds of people from this once-thriving and now a ghost settlement tried to understand what was happening to them. Only a few of them knew about the Forest Rights Act, [EXPLICAR] and that too, in an incomplete manner. For all practical purposes, the Departmental Raj reigns in Jayanti, and the Range Officer can still forbid people to undertake renovation work in their own homes because such renovation work without permission from the Department supposedly violates the Wild Life Protection Act, 1972.

The People produced copies of notices which have been served on such "violators". No one in the Meeting seemed to be aware that the Department has no longer yields legal power to issue such notices, or, since the Wild Life Protection Act, 2006 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006, the concept of core/buffer has changed so much that any demarcation of such areas need mandatory endorsement by the community.

The Range Officer and his staff threaten and lure us, said the people, "on one hand they keep on saying you can not have any rights inside the "core" of a Tiger Reserve, and on the other hand, offer us wads of money--10 lakhs (1 millón de qué??)(per person--if we leave voluntarily".

The Department has stuck notices for the relocation meeting in various public places. The notice is in plain paper, and carries neither a date nor any number. It is signed by someone called "anchaladhikarik (which can be interpreted as Range Officer)" and calls upon people of Jayanti to a meeting where some "special relocation package" will be discussed.

"There surely should have been some GO for the relocation process", people kept on asking. Many of them suspect the Department, "Why doesn't the notice has any date or No? And who issued it, officially?"

After our Meeting, we decided to confront the Range Officer of Jainti with these questions. About 500 angry people marched to the forest office. The RO was not there. It

was heard he was closeted with the Deputy Field Director of the Buxa Tiger Reserve somewhere. We decided to wait, and the RO came after sometime. People were so angry that they could have literally torn him then. Everyone was shouting. "Why should we who raised and protected these forests all these years be asked to leave?" said an old man. Another old woman waived her frail fists: "I won't, won't, won't go...before we go we'll kill you all. If we can not stay, we will not let you stay either".

When asked about the legal basis of his 1972-act-violation notices, and the "anchaladhikarik" one, he was visibly upset. We asked him in front of the people whether he knew about the Wild Life Protection Act 2006 and the Forest Rights Act 2006, according to both of which his notices are illegal. "I do not know anything about this", he said, "I do whatever my bosses tell me to do". "Didn't they tell you about the new acts?" "No. Why don't you take this up with my superiors?" We asked him about the "GO" which asks him to start the relocation process. "There is a GO", he said. "Can you show it to us?" "Yes, we can, but my Beat Officer has left with the file."

While this was going on, there was a storm and the crowd thinned. Those who remained told the RO that there would not be any meeting until they form the Gramsabha and initiate the Rights Settlement Process according to the FRA.

But the lure of 10 lakhs-per-person kind of money is too strong, and while we were leaving, some people have already decided that they would attend the Relocation Meeting. "We have heard you Sirs. Now let us hear the DFD sir, too. We must listen to both sides." We tried to convince them that we are not a "side", and unless they act together, the Department will surely dupe them. Not all of them seemed to be convinced.

### **Buxa Road/Santarabari**

On 31st May, we visited Buxa Road (a remote forest village, constantly threatened both by wild elephants and soil erosion) first, with the notion that people had already assembled there for the Meeting. But there was no meeting. The Department had held a meeting there yesterday, and promised the villagers 10 lakhs per person (if a family has five adult members, it will get 50 lakhs!) and everyone willingly gave their word to go away. We met some of the local leaders and tried to tell them about their legal rights under the FRA and why they should not believe in the Forest Department's promises: "Let us go and ask the local RO about the legality of his promises". Some of the villagers accompanied us uphill to Santarabari. We talked to many villagers there, most of whom are against moving away. The Department was supposed to have their Meeting on Santarabari on that day. "Many of us have decided not to go to that Meeting", said the people in unison.

We met the RO nonetheless, and charged him with violation of both the WLPA 2006 and the FRA 2006. He, like his Jainti colleague, only mumbled. "We do not know about law,, etc. I am carrying out the orders of my boss", he said. "Is there any GO for this Relocation Meeting?" we asked. He says there is no GO. Later local people told us that the RO told them there was a GO, which could only be shown to villagers.

The Department has issued no written notices (not even the "anchaladhikarik" variety) in the Buxa Road and Santarabari for the relocation meetings.

Several facts should be added to this story in lieu of a tailpiece:

1. Buxa was one of those forests which the British foresters boasted of. Originally grassland and Sal forests in stony highlands, the area was irreversibly altered when the colonial foresters moved in around 1865 and banished the indigenous swidden agriculturists like the Rava, the Mech, the Dukpa and the Garo. Evergreen trees colonised the empty spaces rapidly as the forest fires got "controlled", and the foresters came to realize that they could not have new Sal plantations unless the fire motif was re-introduced.

Thus came the famous Taungya system of plantation, and the banished "fire-setters" were brought back to the forests as forest villagers. It was they who toiled, cut and burnt forests, and planted and protected new trees for nearly 150 years, and many many days without any wage, up to the point the "independent" foresters of India decided that they need to save the Tigers of Buxa. Buxa forests were declared as a Tiger Reserve in 1983. The forests already had 33 recorded forest villages and 4 Fixed Demand Holdings (leasehold lands under control of the Forest Department).

From 1990 onwards, forestry activities dwindled and came to almost a halt in many parts of the Reserve. The old dolomite mines inside the Reserve were closed down. In many areas, Non Timber Forest Produce collection was banned, and cattle-grazing was declared an offence. Living inside the forests became a nightmare as foresters started to plan relocation strategies to like Jainti, which was declared to be part of the no-human-activity-permitted "C-O-R-E". Thousands and thousands of people suddenly found themselves bereft of livelihood. One after another, the old Sal trees (known as the Pride of Buxa) started to disappear, as jobless and hungry people were forced to take to forests.

The tiger conservation mechanism in Buxa swung into motion, and money from various sources like the World Bank --Buxa was one of the seven Global Environment Facility funded India Eco Development Projects in India-- came and went. But both wild life and their habitat continue to disappear. Tigers became a rarity, so much so that no one knows exactly how many tigers are there in Buxa now...4/5 will be an optimist estimate.

2. The "conservation"-oriented new regime foresters of Buxa continued to persecute the forest villagers of the area, especially the indigenous Rava community. A 2005 Public hearing organised by NFFPFW and others recorded innumerable cases of torture, harassment and murders of the forest-dwellers by the Forest Personnel. People, many of them children and youth, were killed in cold blood inside and outside the forest. The most recent incident was the killing of Samuel Rava of Poro village in 2008 February, after the FRA with its package of rights has formally been notified.

None of the killers has ever been brought to justice.