

Forgotten Villages: A People's Perspective on Village Displacement from Sariska Tiger Reserve – Dr Gazala Sahabuddin. Technical Report. National Foundation for India & Council for Social Development, New, 2005

Historically, village displacement has been one of the priorities in management of Protected Areas in India. The aim of village displacement from wildlife sanctuaries and national parks has been to create strictly protected spaces for biodiversity conservation where minimal human use is allowed. Such inviolate spaces are deemed essential by biologists for sustaining natural biodiversity in large continuous forest habitats. However, most village displacements in the country have historically taken place in the absence of information related to socio-economic status or forest dependency of oustees or identification of key needs that are required in new sites. Barring a few recent instances such as Bhadra Tiger Reserve, displacement programmes have therefore been ineffective in successfully rehabilitating people, often leading to severe impoverishment and social dislocation of marginalised groups. For these reasons, village displacement has always been a controversial issue in conservation circles. Above all, little is yet known about the socio-economic impacts of such displacements or their effectiveness in restoring biodiversity.

Sariska Tiger Reserve is one such Indian protected area where village relocation has been prioritised as one of the key programmes to be undertaken for saving biodiversity. Sariska was one of the important conservation areas for the Royal Bengal Tiger in north-western India until its recorded local extinction in 2004-2005. It represents the last few remnants of native tropical dry forest and scrub still to be found in the Aravalli Range. Warnings of habitat degradation and declining tiger populations caused by excessive biomass extraction, mining and tourism activities have been sounded since the early 1990s.

Sariska already has a long history of village relocations. One village, Karnakawas was moved from the Core Area between 1975-77, and unsuccessful attempts have been made to move two other villages, Kirashka and Kanakwari. The latest refurbished plan for relocation involves moving of 11 villages comprising 493 households located inside Core Zone I. This plan has been on the anvil since before 2000 but gained impetus after the local extinction of tigers was revealed in early 2005, as it was felt by the Government that the presence of people in the Reserve was the primary reason for the observed 'tiger crisis'. Of these 11 villages located inside Core Zone I, beneficiary lists and village-specific plans have been drawn up for 4 villages located centrally in the Core Zone, whose relocation has currently been prioritised.

The Study

A study was undertaken by the Environmental Studies Group of the Council for Social Development with the aim of understanding ground realities surrounding village relocation in Sariska. The specific objectives were: (1) documentation of socio-economic status, forest dependency and cultural heritage of proposed oustees; (2) documentation of the aspirations and perspectives of the proposed oustees in relation to relocation and (3) study of the process of relocation planning as well as the rehabilitation package in relation to the proposed relocation site. The study was carried out using a structured household questionnaire survey (using a 40% sample size over all 11 villages) in addition to informal interviews, group discussions and observations. The study was undertaken between September 2004 and October 2005.

Management History

The area today comprising Sariska Tiger Reserve was an important hunting reserve for the princely State of Alwar since the early twentieth century. The villages today existing inside Core Area I were established during the same period under the *lamberdaari* system for revenue collection. Post-independence, the history of Reserve management follows a pattern of gradually tightening restrictions on forest use by local people starting with the notification of a Wildlife

Sanctuary in 1958, upgradation to Tiger Reserve in 1979 and finally, notification as a National Park in 1982. Meanwhile no settlement of forest rights has taken place at any stage as required by the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and subsequent amendments. Of the 11 villages that are proposed to be relocated, 3 have officially recognised land rights and limited agricultural land. All others today have informal rights of forest produce collection within arbitrarily defined boundaries. Core Area residents today exist in a state of severe conflict with the Forest Department over livestock-grazing and other biomass extraction activities.

The People & Their Economy

The total population approximates 3000 inside the 11 villages of Core Area I. 87.4% of these people belong to the Gujjar caste and are occupationally buffalo-herders. Meenas, Bairwas, Brahmins, Meos and Rajputs make up the remaining population. The people in the study villages exist in a condition of severe impoverishment and deprivation. Literacy rate among the villagers was estimated as 31.6% and only 1% of people (above 6 years) had studied to Class 10. Sex ratio was found to be an abysmal 735 females to 1000 males. Villagers need to travel a minimum of 10 km to reach local markets and between 2-25 km for health services. Much of this distance needs to be covered on foot. Villagers only have access to primary educational facilities, which are of poor quality.

Traditionally a grazing community, the people of Sariska derive most of their income (72.33%) from sale of milk and milk derivatives such as *ghee* and *mawa*. 100% of respondents reported livestock-rearing as their primary occupation. On the average, each household owned 9 buffaloes, 1 cow and 12 goats each. The livestock holdings had recently been reduced by approximately 50% during two successive years of drought from 2002-2003. The Gujjar people have an intimate knowledge of buffalo-rearing and rarely require veterinary help. Livestock are grazed extensively in the Reserve, stall-fed with fresh leaves and dry hay in summer, as well as commercially available nutritional supplements and agricultural crop residue. A large diversity of forest trees, shrubs and grasses are harvested intensively for fodder. Apart from grazing, agriculture, daily wage labour, sale of livestock and pensions were also reported as secondary occupations.

The average gross annual household income in the 11 villages was estimated as Rs. 48,175 while average disposable household income (after accounting for fodder costs) was Rs. 30,190. About 32% of household expenditure is on farm fodder and commercial fodder while 50% of income is used for food items. At the time of the study, most families were highly indebted with an average debt of Rs. 20,000 recorded in the year 2003-04. 19% of households reported having agricultural land outside the STR Core Zone, of which 85.7% reported less than 5 bighas each (a bigha being roughly equivalent to one-fourth of an hectare). The majority of the respondents felt that economic opportunities available to them have declined lately with deterioration in forest productivity, closure of forest department-related daily wage activities and heavy mortality of livestock during drought of 2002-2003. 13.7% of households reported livestock loss to tigers and leopards during 2003-2004, but none of these households had been compensated.

Process of Relocation Planning

Through our questionnaire survey, we attempted to ascertain the kind of process adopted by the Forest Department for relocation planning in the 11 villages that have been prioritised for relocation. Our study revealed that the process of relocation planning in the current phase has been highly non-participatory and inequitable. Forest Department had not held any informatory meetings with the proposed oustees before the plan was finalised. Even after plan finalisation, most of the people found out about the relocation either during their informal interactions with either forest personnel (40%) or other villagers (37%). About 23% of respondent households (located in remote parts) had not yet heard about the proposal. No member from 71% of households had seen the proposed relocation site while males of 39% households had participated in a site visit organised by the Forest Department (the only one so far).

When interviewed, 50% had no idea about the details of the proposed relocation package but 50% of respondents said that they were aware of the package provisions. But discussions revealed that even those who claimed to have knowledge of the package did not have a clear idea of the compensatory provisions such as financial break-up, division between cash-and-kind etc. For instance, most people were under the impression that the cash compensation would be itself Rs. 1 lakh. So far, no Implementation Committee has been formed for relocation planning and implementation as required by the Rajasthan State Guidelines. The participation of locally active NGOs or local representatives in the planning process, as mandated by the guidelines, has also been missing. The local District Magistrate is unaware of the current status of rights settlement situation and of the proposed relocation from Sariska.

The Relocation Package

It is planned that a package of Rs. 1 lakh per household, will be used to resettle people at the new site. The relocation site is located in a 222 ha *Prosopis*-covered wasteland located about 75 km from Sariska. The site has currently a Reserved Forest status and is surrounded by a prosperous farming community dominated by Jat people. It is proposed that the Gujjar people will move from grazing-based livelihood to a primarily agriculture-based livelihood at the new site. The site is well-connected, overtly fertile and appears to have the amenities required for development of a new village.

However, a closer look at the relocation plan with respect to the proposed site reveals its inadequacies. The Rs. 1 lakh compensatory package includes both household-level compensation and community works. The break-up of this household package involves a meagre cash compensation of Rs 16,000 and a 'disturbance allowance' of Rs 7,000. This disturbance allowance is supposed to take care of each household of five to six members over the transition period when the Gujjars will be forced to change their primary occupation from livestock-grazing to cultivation in a new environment. A sum of Rs 40-54,000 has been allotted per family for construction of a house, a cattle-shed and fences and Rs. 8000 per family for land development. Community works include provision of electricity (Rs. 1 lakh), village road (Rs. 1 lakh) and common drinking water well (Rs. 50,000).

The relocation plan does not provide for irrigation facilities at all, a serious lapse if a shift from grazing to a cash-cropping livelihood is envisaged. Conversations with adjacent villagers in the proposed relocation site, reveal that considerable investment is required in borewell facilities in this area (about a lakh of rupees per drilling). The water table in this area has gone down to 400 ft due to water-intensive cultivation of wheat and mustard. Expensive inputs required to start up agriculture, in the form of seeds, fertilisers, pump-sets and pesticides, are other expenditures not considered in the compensation package. Communal facilities such as halls and schools have not been provided for, either in terms of land allocation or financially, as is required by the state's own guidelines on relocation. While the plan makes a brief mention of utilising existing governmental schemes to develop infrastructure at the new site, there is no exact budgeting of such items. Provision for electricity (Rs. 1.5 lakhs) and for approach road per village (Rs. 1.5 lakh) is not based on realistic estimates.

There are serious social concerns too at the new site. The degree of acceptance of a new Gujjar-dominated village by the more prosperous host community (Jats) is questionable, particularly as conflicts related to livelihoods, water, grazing pastures and fuelwood are likely to arise soon after resettlement. The use of existing amenities at the new site by the oustees may also become a problem given the caste hierarchy in this part of Rajasthan.

Our analysis therefore indicates that the proposed relocation is likely to lead to further impoverishment of an already marginalized community, given the inadequate financial allocation and lack of thinking on livelihood issues.

What People Want

We attempted to understand perceptions of the village residents themselves regarding the possibility of relocation. Perceptions of local residents about displacement are partly coloured by

past history of forced evictions and ineffective rehabilitation measures for oustees of Karnakawas and Kirashka villages which dominates the local discourse on relocation. A proportion of respondents (27%) said that they would not like to move out of the Reserve under any condition. However, 48% of respondents were ready to relocate given their conditions were satisfied. 3% of respondents said that they had no choice in the matter. When asked about an ideal relocation package, the largest proportion of respondents said that they would move if given 5-10 bighas of land and Rs. 1 lakh as cash compensation along with basic modern amenities such as schools, electricity and drinking water. While 10% of respondents asked for 5-10 bighas of land and an additional Rs. 1 lakh as compensation. Another 10% of respondents said that they would be satisfied only if they received more than 10 bighas and Rs. 2 lakh cash compensation. Most villagers were aware that they would not be able to continue their primary occupation of livestock grazing in the new site as there were no grazing areas there. But they felt confident that they would be able to begin afresh at the new site in case all the promises made by the Forest Department with respect to infrastructural development, were fulfilled. Our survey actually indicated a high degree of optimism amongst local residents regarding their future livelihoods.

Thus the survey indicates that in general people are not averse to moving from Sariska given that they are compensated liberally and adequately. This is possibly because they live a life of extreme hardship in the Reserve given lack of basic amenities and livelihood opportunities. Many villagers, especially young people, are hopeful that any other situation will be better than their current one. However, residents of some villages that are currently better-off, such as Haripura, are strongly opposed to the idea of displacement.

Relocation & PA policy

In terms of PA policy, a larger question that needs to be tackled is whether relocation of villages by itself, is going to be an effective option for saving the tiger habitat when there are many other serious pressures afflicting the wildlife sanctuary from outside. Deep marble mines continue to operate close to the boundary of the Core Area despite a Supreme Court ruling that banned mining in all of the Aravallis. Tourism to the sanctuary has reached the order of 2-3 lakh of tourists a year, a volume that threatens important wildlife habitats – with water and air pollution, deforestation and physical disturbance. *Sadhus* are being allowed to settle at permanent springs located in the core zone of the reserve, which is bound to affect wildlife, especially in a dry forest where water sources and the surrounding riverine forests are critical components of landscape-level diversity. Additionally, there has been reported six times as much pressure of grazing and fuelwood collection, on account of people coming from outside the sanctuary as from the Core Area villages. Many cases of timber-thieving and poaching are reported commonly, often overlooked by forest personnel. So far, no steps have been taken to tackle any of these external pressures. Many observers and locals feel that it is unjust to prioritise village displacement in PA management when little is being done about other serious pressures on the Sariska forests. For instance, in response to a question about their view of how Reserve management could be improved, 18% of people felt that 'strict management' was necessary on the part of the Forest personnel, implying control on extraction by outsiders. 26% of respondents felt that cooperation between villagers and managers would help improve the situation. 11% mentioned village relocation as an effective option.

Recommendations from the Study

However, there is an urgent need for transparency, public discussion, scientific guidance and involvement of oustees and NGOs in deciding which villages are required to be displaced from the Core Zone of Sariska. Scientific assessments indicate that partial relocation would allow for 'de-fragmenting' some amount of forest habitat (up to 400 sq.km.). However, in the event of a decision to move villages, expert and local inputs are sorely required in preparing relocation plans and a generous package that can help successfully reestablish the livelihoods of the oustees. Above all, the implementation of relocation plans requires active local engagement with the needs of oustees, revenue departments as well as the Reserve managers.

Apart from new thinking on relocation, it is urgently required to:

< LI class=MsoNormal style="MARGIN: 0in 0in 0pt; LINE-HEIGHT: 150%; mso-list: l0 level1 lfo1; tab-stops: list .5in">Create livelihood alternatives for peripheral villages (in buffer zone and those villages that will not be relocated) through augmentation and channelling of tourism-related economic benefits from the Core Area I into local cooperatives and limiting outside tourist operators.

Enhance positive interactions between peripheral villages and Reserve management via equitable compensatory mechanisms, controlled biomass extraction and giving preference to locals for all jobs and labour works. An inviolate core zone cannot be maintained without the cooperation, interest and participation of local people.

Drastically improve the capacity and motivation of forest personnel to protect and manage the Reserve as well create the necessary infrastructure for the same.

Improve biomass productivity and employment in buffer zone villages and wastelands in order to reduce extractive pressure on the core zone.

To be quoted as:

Shahabuddin, G., R. Kumar & M. Shrivastava. 2005. Forgotten Villages: A People's Perspective on Village Displacement from Sariska Tiger Reserve. Technical Report. National Foundation for India & Council for Social Development, New Delhi. Pp 135 + x.

The technical report can be obtained by writing to ghazalafarzin@rediffmail.com