

KUNO INITIATIVE : AN UPDATE (IV)

Samrakshan Trust, October 2001

The current situation in relocated villages

On 7th September 2001, 5 relocated villages [Paira (Adivasi), Jakhoda, Meghpura, Laddar and Durreri] held a meeting, reportedly attended by around 250-300 tribals (all men). This was actually a culmination of a number of small meetings of the Sahariya tribals that had been going on for quite some time. During the meetings, the displaced people were vehemently of the opinion that these were the major promises made by the forest department to lure them away from their original villages and gain their consent for relocation. However, in not even one village have all these promises been fulfilled in totality till date. In the 7th September meeting, the people unanimously decided that they would return to their villages inside the sanctuary if their demands were not immediately met. These demands included:

- fertile land, defined by the farmers as land with a soil depth of at least four hands
- irrigation facilities for each agriculture plot
- education facilities
- electricity

There have been reports subsequently of follow-up meetings, held to consolidate the earlier decision and to plan strategies for tackling different circumstances that may arise. Even the Sahariya women, who have not participated in any of the meetings, are very vocal, and express their anger and their keenness to take action in no uncertain terms. They complain of lack of fuel and fodder in the new settlement, and compare this with their earlier lives when they had ample access to land, cattle, and milk and milk products.

This meeting was also followed up by a rally (*padyatra*) to Sheopur, the district headquarters, organized by the displaced villagers between 1st-10th October 2001, to draw attention to their plight and to present a memorandum to the district collector outlining their main demands.

Immediate causes of the crisis

The immediate provocation for these moves has been the failure of crops in the region for the third consecutive year. Though the area experienced very healthy pre monsoon showers as we had reported in our previous update, there was rain failure towards the end of the monsoon. This resulted in drying up of the *kharif* crop. Two other man-made factors have added to the woes of the displaced villages. Firstly, the quality of land allotted to the displaced families is not good, especially when compared to the land in their original villages. Although agricultural experts say that this land is potentially cultivable, in general the soil depth and soil moisture conditions are much poorer than what was available inside the sanctuary. While there are instances of allotment of alternative land in lieu of poor agricultural plots, the forest department finds this an uphill task, since the number of such cases is quite large and there is very little extra land available. The important thing to note here is that the eagerness to go back to the sanctuary is greatest in villages where problems relating to land quality are more severe.

The second factor that has precipitated the present crisis is lack of assured irrigation. Last year, the sanctuary management distributed funds among the villagers for digging around 60 irrigation wells. However, none of these could be completed in time for the *kharif* crop, due to delays in disbursement of funds. This coupled with the fact that none of the three proposed lift irrigation projects were functional before the end of August (this was the time when the *kharif* crop needed water to survive) made matters worse. There have also been no effective emergency support

programmes (like food-for-work) to help the villagers to tide over their difficulties. The villagers had no savings to fall back upon while their crops matured, so they have borrowed heavily against their standing crops. Now, since both *bajra* and *tilli* crops have died, moneylenders are unwilling to extend any further loans to these farmers.

Perspective

The most striking part of the entire village relocation at Kuno is that if one looks at the overall picture, it seems much better than other attempts at rehabilitation elsewhere in the country. This is clear from the fact that only five of the sixteen villages relocated so far have taken the extreme step of threatening to return to the sanctuary. The rehabilitation package being offered to the people is among the most comprehensive in the country, and even in its implementation, the degree of sensitivity and commitment shown by the Kuno sanctuary management is way above ordinary. However, the flip side is that a project of such vital national importance as the lion reintroduction project of Kuno was set into motion with so little planning at the state as well as central level. There are practically no institutional support mechanisms that were devised for assisting the implementing agency at the field level. There is virtually no active coordination between the sanctuary management and the office of the district collector (to whose direct jurisdiction the relocated villages will eventually be transferred). The state government and centre have both set up a committee each to oversee and guide the lion reintroduction project, but in terms of actually meeting and providing direction to the sanctuary management, both committees have contributed precious little in the single meeting that each has had. And while adequate funds have been made available to the sanctuary management, complementary support in terms of adequate and efficient staff, which is specially hand picked to carry out the diverse tasks that the project requires, is completely missing. It is thus a classic case of a good and viable idea going awry due to overall apathy at the level of planning and implementation.

The displaced villagers do not deny the fact that the forest department is trying hard to fight the impending crisis, and even grant that some day it may succeed. However, they argue that they do not have the economic strength to hold out till then, and so the department should allow them to go back and inhabit their former villages, until the government manages to put together all the necessary facilities. These villagers know better than anybody else does that life inside the sanctuary is no bed of roses. The area is cut off from development infrastructure, and also has a serious dacoit problem, being part of the infamous Chambal belt. Moreover, all these villages have been shifted out as part of preparations for the lion reintroduction project, under which Kuno wildlife sanctuary is being readied to receive a small population of the threatened Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) from Gir National Park in Gujarat. Already, the sanctuary management has spent about Rs.11 crores on the lion project, and the people know that their shifting back to the sanctuary would not be welcomed.

The wheel now seems to have turned full circle for the Sahariya tribals of Kuno, who are left with no option but to go back inside the sanctuary and pick up the threads of their lives where they left them over two years ago. Meanwhile, it is clear that a move back to the sanctuary by the villages would be a setback to the entire lion reintroduction project, and would also render futile the huge effort put in by the sanctuary management over the past three years in the rehabilitation process.

Possible solutions and Samrakshan's strategy

From its vantage position at the grassroots level, the Samrakshan team finds that it is possible for the authorities at the state and central government levels to initiate a number of immediate and long-term steps that would help to diffuse the current crisis. These points are relevant not only for the five villages that are currently agitating, but also for all the other displaced villages. These include

- initiation of wage employment opportunities for immediate support
- speeding up grant of land title deeds (*pattas*) to relocated villages
- speeding up changing of uncultivable agricultural plots
- speeding up provision of irrigation facilities

The Samrakshan team has already met the Secretary to the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Shri Jaikrishnan, on 3rd October 2001, to apprise him of the situation and ask for prompt action on the points outlined above. We are also trying to set up meetings with various members of the state bureaucracy in Madhya Pradesh, as well as with peoples' representatives at the state level (the local MLA, MP, the state forest minister and so on) to apprise them of the situation and demand action. Simultaneously, we have also offered all possible assistance to the local DFO in areas like implementation of appropriate wage employment works and identification of families for changing of poor agricultural plots. In addition to this, our team would continue to extend its support and assistance to the community in any further moves they may plan to bring public attention to their plight through meetings and media contact.

For any further queries / suggestions, please contact:

Samrakshan Trust

Email: asmitak@vsnl.com, arpan@samrakshan.org

Syed Merajuddin

Arpan Sharma, Asmita Kabra

Village Agraa, Tehsil Vijeypur

c/o C-II/2, IIPA Campus

District Sheopur-476332

Indraprastha Estate, Ring Road

Madhya Pradesh

New Delhi 110002

Tel. 279 5099, 371 5382