

Relocation of forest villages caught in vote-

Biswajeet Banerjee ■ Surma (Dudhwa)

Relocation of villages located inside the core forest areas to the fringes has taken a political hue as different political parties were going an extra mile to sympathise with the villagers and asking them to stay put.

Despite High Court and government orders, political leaders have assured the villagers that "they would not be relocated."

Surma village, located inside the core forest region of Dudhwa National Park, is testimony of this political

game plan. "We have been assured by all the political parties that no one will shift us outside the forest area," Prem Shankar, a two time pradhan of the village, told this reporter.

The village is a classic case of politics making a mockery of the drive launched by the Forest department to relocate villagers in other areas.

The state government issued the relocation order. The villagers were given compensation and they readily agreed to move out of the village inside the forest area.

Some of them even shifted their base to nearby Bhatta village outside the forest zone.

But the majority preferred to stay put.

The case was taken to the court and the Allahabad High Court ordered that villagers should vacate the land and move out of the reserve forest zone.

But the adamant villagers are not ready to leave the place and being encouraged

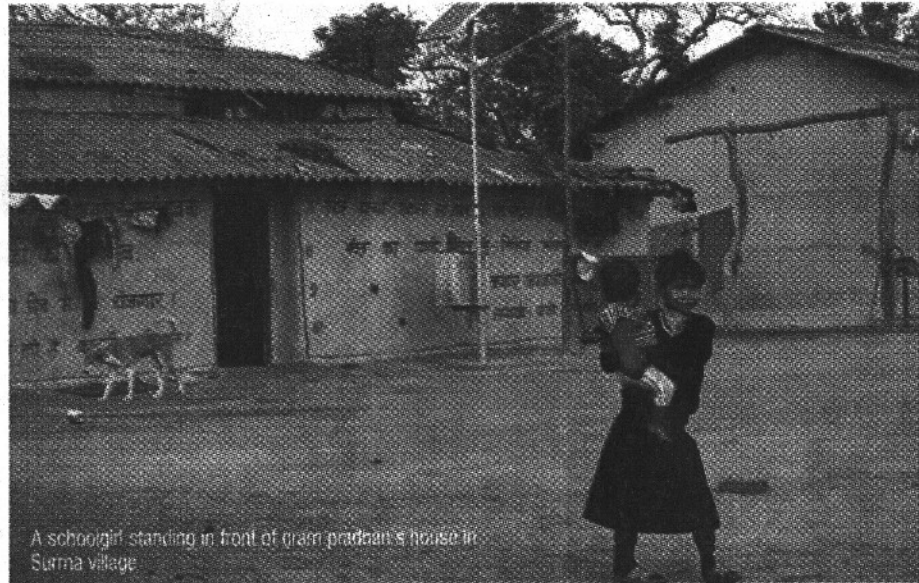
for the same by a bunch of politicians for the obvious reasons.

The gram pradhan knows that the villagers are illegal occupants of the forest land. He also knows that the government can make them leave the area because they have lost the case in High Court. He even admits that they do not have enough funds to move to the Supreme Court.

"How can we leave this place. This is our ancestral place. My great grandfather was born here. We have an emotional attachment with this land," Prem Shankar said.

After a long pause, the gram pradhan said: "If the government gives us as much land as we own here in Surma, we can think of leaving this place. The land should be as alluvial and fertile as is in Surma."

The villagers are asking for 884 acre of land where as they have been given 547 acre of land in three villages



A schoolgirl standing in front of gram pradhan's house in Surma village

just three kilometres away from Surma. The land, villagers claim, is not of good quality. "Take our word. We are not leaving this village whatever the Forest department says. Netaji (political leader) has assured us they

would help us and we rely more on him than these corrupt forest officials," Ram Chander, a former pradhan of Surma said.

The strength of Surma lies in its numbers. The village has a population of over 1,500

with around 800 voters. Last time the village had voted for the Samajwadi Party and this time they are rooting for the Bahujan Samaj Party.

Despite this being an 'illegal' village, Surma can boast of all the government facili-

-bank politics

ties inside the village. Lying almost 13 kilometres from Dudhwa National Park, the approach road to the village is rutted. Once inside the village, the landscape changes.

Surrounded by wheat and sugarcane crops, the village is neat and clean with almost all houses having a courtyard where forest wood is neatly chopped and stacked for fuel. Almost all the houses have thatched roofs barring the gram pradhan's residence which has an asbestos roof.

The house has a hand-pump in the courtyard while the slogan of National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme promising employment is neatly written on the front walls of his house - thus differentiating it from other houses of the village.

The striking feature of the village is that it has solar street lights and solar lanterns in each house. "As it is a disputed village, the power authorities have not given us power supply. But NEDA (Non-conventional

Energy Development Authority) has provided us with solar street lights that lanterns," Prem Shankar said.

Government intervention in this illegal village is also proved with the presence of a primary school where children get mid-day meal regularly and has an aanganwadi centre. This is not all, the village also enjoys the status of Ambedkar village.

"Government is speaking with forked tongue. On one hand, it is extending government support and running national programmes in the village, on the other, it has filed a suit terming Surma an illegal village," Convenor Terai Nature Conservation Society, Dr VP Singh said.

Interestingly, the National Tiger Conservation Authority has claimed that an estimated 1,500 villages having a population of around 3.25 lakh living inside the core forest areas in the country need to be relocated.

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