

# Tigers don't growl, but others do!

**THE CORE AREA OF THE VALMIKINAGAR** Tiger reserve is witnessing a 'war' of another type. As tiger numbers come down, forest officials want the tribals inhabiting these areas to give up their village land. This has sown the ground for a new confrontation, reports **Rakesh Verma**

**V**almikinagar: For the 2.5 lakh Tharus and Dhangars living for centuries in an area known as the Doan— 40-odd square kilometres of undulating topography full of knife-edged ravines formed by years of landslips and soil erosion, the Indian tiger is the lesser threat than a forest warden.

The area crisscrossed by seasonal rivulets such as the Panchanad, Bhapsa and the Bhalawi, is host to around 93 villages split between two panchayats, and lying in the Valmikinagar Tiger Sanctuary's buffer zone.

During the past year the Forest department has slapped over 200 cases against residents of these villages citing infringement of various clauses of the Forest Act.

In certain cases the entire village population— of Bhurahwa and Gobraiya for instance, neat tiny villages amidst dense Sal forests—has

been charged with either encroaching upon the Sanctuary land or carrying out commerce in forest produce.

"In the last five years, Doan's Tharus and Dhangars have thrice been told to vacate their homesteads that they have been occupying for centuries. We have been also told, that the government does not recognize our Harsingha (the right to plough) and Gharsingha (the right to construct a house) on land granted to us by the erstwhile Bettiah Raj. They say our land pattas (land rights and grants) are worthless scraps of paper. The uncertainty that we live under is killing," said Satyanarain Rana, a Gumasta or a village head at Champapur, deep within the Doan.

Villagers at Bhurahwa, Dhokni, Chilaiyatn and Bankatwa—among the most backward of the Doan's villages—often conduct surprise raids in



the 51 buffer zone Doan villages, seizing everything from livestock to freshly threshed grains on the pretext of searching for felled timber.

Most Tharus say that they had given up felling trees after the Sanctuary's core area was declared a tiger reserve in 1989. There are, however, Tharu villages that have the Forest department's permission to collect fallen timber and maybe tap a beehive for honey.

"Why them," wondered Chandeshwar Bhagat of Sherwa village, insisting that forest guards book them on tree-felling charges in order to divert attention from their inability to prevent Nepalese criminals from carting away truckloads of precious teak from in and around the sanctuary's Madanpur range—a stone's throw from Susta in India and Ratanganj and Rani Nagar in Nepal.

Forest officials at Bagaha

admitted as much. But insisted that they stopped short of running the smugglers down because of the 'tenuous relationship that exists between India and Nepal, particularly after the CPN (Maoists) acquired social legitimacy and joined that country's political mainstream'.

"The department recognizes the rights of residents of 42 villages as these were included in the survey carried out by the department prior to the sanctuary's notification in 1978. We even allow them to graze their cattle herds though this invariably serves as an invite to the wild animals that inhabit the adjoining Nepal's Chitwan Wildlife Park," a Forest department official said.

Bison and the one-horned rhinoceros from the adjoining Chitwan Wildlife Park in Nepal very often stray into Tharu villages causing intensive damage to standing crops.

## SSB, FOREST STAFF TO THE RESCUE TOO!

**T**he Forest department as also the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) authorities have undertaken laying of roads across the Sanctuary's buffer zone in a bid to make life a wee bit easier for these simple forest folk. More recently, the SSB and the DRDA has also installed solar lights atop houses in these villages whereby there is some life in these villages after sunset. Of the state government's Rs 125 crore special welfare package for the Tharus and the Dhangars there is no evidence. Special industrial training institutes besides residential schools—five each for boys and girls—as also community centres were integral components of the welfare package.

Consequently, government schools in villages go teacher-less. The few primary health centres are relics in disarray, with no doctors or paramedics staying back for more than a month.

"The high school here—established in 1960 and named after India's first president Dr Rajendra Prasad—has just one teacher. And since the past two months he has been staying at Ramnagar," said Thajai Mahto at Doan's

Gobraiya village—pretty as a picture postcard village with the blue-misted mountains of the eastern Himalayan range looming up just behind.

Goitre, leprosy, tuberculosis are rife in the region. "There is an additional PHC at Sherwa but the lone doctor remains elusive," said Mangar Bhagat at Bangaon.

Bhagat with seven sons and five daughters and over a score of grandchildren had in the early 1950s been an All India Radio guest artist courtesy Prem Narain Garhwal, a Tharu leader who had been a minister in the Congress government of Bindeshwari Dubey—but gave up the 'good life'.

"I missed out on the cool crisp air of the Doan, the forest and the feeling of being amongst my own".

"They are simple people, the Tharus—law abiding and peace-loving, whose interests have been ignored for far too long. It's high time the government addressed their concerns lest the sentiment of being willfully ignored gets too strong," he ended on an ominous note.