

GAJALDOBA: Resisting Eviction In North Bengal



...settlements like Gajaldoba get erased from the maps...

Gajaldoba, Part No.10, Post & Village: Gajaldoba, Oodlabari,
PS: Mal, Dist: Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India.



'...a faceless few get scattered in the wind...'

“As refugees from Bangladesh we had settled down on a piece of land Teesta had left behind. Then came the devastating floods. It doesn't really matter any more as to whether it was only nature's fury or unannounced release from the barrage. Fact is we lost everything again! We came to Gajaldoba. All around was fallow marshland having risen from the bosom of Teesta. It was 1967. Parimal Mitra, The Forest Minister of the United Front was from North Bengal. He settled us here. We worked hard. After four decades the land is giving us enough. Now they say we'll have to give up our land and vacate our homes!”



...a human settlement born of sweat and blood...

Gajaldoba is a saga of human survival and human insensitivity towards refugees/evacuees. It is a human settlement born of sweat and blood – and hard labour. The worst, it's inhabitants thought, was over! They had a livelihood, homes and achievable dreams for the future. Presently they are again being threatened with eviction by the Forest Department – the biggest *jamindars* (landowners) of modern India.



The green fields with a distant glimmer that is Teesta

“Can they do this to us? This has never been a forest? This does not belong to them? It was a marsh when we came and all it had was nalkhaagra (a type of bush that grows in shallow water)! Why did the Forest Department wait forty years to come and tell us that this land belonged to them? Can you just come and throw away people like this? Doesn't the Forest Department need to follow any legal procedures? They have not given us any notice? They have not allowed us to put forward our claims? Can anyone just say this is mine and grab land under cultivation? Is this democracy? Will it be unfair if we say that they should be punished for this? ”



The Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 has been passed on 18 December 2006 at the Parliament. It seeks to recognise and vest certain rights over forestland to those living in and around the forest. It is also stated that those who have been in occupation of forestland prior to 13 December 2005 will not be evicted or removed from forestland till the recognition and verification procedure is completed. However the Act is yet to come into force. Pending that there do exist government guidelines (F no.2-3/2004FC dt 12.5.05, issued by MOEF, FC Division, Govt. of India), which say that no settler who came before 25 October 1980 can be evicted without conducting the settlement process first, and ascertaining who has what claims. However the Forest Department conducts no verifications and issues no notices in the case of Gajaldoba. It is pure strong-arm tactics.



“That is the forest, this our land and these are the mounds...”

“Do you see these mounds? The ‘Forest people’ put them right here. They will plant trees on them. They did not care that the land had standing crops on it! They don’t care that we have been cultivating here for 40 years. They act like zamindars. They had brought almost a hundred policemen. What has happened to the Left Front?”



Notice: "...stop non-forestry activities...in the Reserve Forest area..."

On 12 April 2007 personnel from Kathambari / Apalchand Forest Range Office arrived at Gajaldoba accompanied by a huge state police force. They set about 'acquiring' a parcel of land adjacent to the forest area on which there were standing crops. They build hundreds of small mounds on which trees would be planted later. The villagers who had put in all the labour and money to raise the crop gathered around in dismay. The police without any provocation resorted to *lathi* charge. At least 10 villagers were injured.



"Tarani Sarkar was one of the early settlers. An old man now, he was 'picked up' from the field by the Forest officials. There was no charge against him. He was locked up for 48 hours. He was made to pay Rs5000 as 'fine' before he was released. Is the Forest a foreign land with different laws? They can come and destroy our crops and pick anybody up without warrant? They can – you'll don't know – they do! There is no one to stop them. They think they can crush us. Nobody bothers for a few people like us. Unless some of us lay down our lives the society will be silent while eviction takes place. "



... 135 acres to be 'taken over' for planting trees...

There is about 495 acres of land under agriculture around Gajaldoba. About 500 families of Gajaldoba – predominantly scheduled castes – are economically dependent on it. The 'leaders', it was later learnt, had principally agreed to the 'demands' of the Forest Department to allow a parcel of 135 acres to be 'taken over' for plantation – on fertile agricultural land. 170 families would be affected directly. The villagers had no idea about this 'proposed' takeover till they saw scores of policemen approaching their land.



"...This has never been a forest?..."



"There are two rivers flowing on two sides – the Teesta and the Neora. Come monsoon and there will be flooding. It makes life difficult but you see it also makes the land fertile! There is a canal running through. Just have a look at the fields! Badam, lankaa, teel, jhingay, kumro, paat, begun, pawtol, bhindi... – what are the standing crops you would like to see? And remember it is mid-May! We have two paddy crops and potato besides various other vegetables the rest of the year. And see what they have done to our fields. Are they human beings?"



'They know what it is to be land-losers'

Bhumi Uchched Pratirodh Committee of Gajaldoba has been formed cutting across party lines. They know what it is to be a land-loser. They had started from scratch and they know how difficult it is. Rashtriya Van-Jan Shramajibi Manch, a solidarity force for forest people and forest workers, has formed a local committee at Gajaldoba. The villagers, getting over the trauma of the 12 April 2007 onslaught, is becoming aware that the Forest Department can no longer legally dispossess them from their land. The resolve to resist at any cost is clearly visible.



The forest – the land being seized by force – and the people readying to fight...

“Can we still be labelled as encroachers – after 40 long years and three generations? If the Parliament decides that we can stay, why should we be afraid of the Forest Department? We must fight. If any party helps, then it is good – otherwise we must unite and fight on our own. See what is happening at Nandigram? The Left Front had protected us at the beginning but now they look away and even send their police to beat us up. So what? Does that mean we now go and drown ourselves in Teesta water?”

Dark clouds are hanging over Gajaldoba. The village folks do not fear the monsoon or the flood, which are synonymous in this part of North Bengal. It is the State and the political parties that they fear.

Who protects them now from the terror unleashed by a section of the State? Those who have played an exemplary role by being vocal in favour of the forest people and forest workers at the national level will perhaps remain silent because this is a Left Front-ruled state.

Will these refugees turned evacuees become oustees again? Their life and livelihood is at stake – all in the name of development. In this case, for the sake of afforestation.

Who plans, on whose behalf, is the big question.

Acquisition of agricultural land is becoming ruthless and dehumanising. Decisions from the top are playing havoc with the lives and livelihoods of those below.

Some, which are making news, are just the tips of the icebergs. Most settlements like Gajaldoba get erased from the maps and Tarini Sarkars and a faceless ‘few’ get scattered in the wind. But ... their souls go marching on!

“We have had enough! We are not giving them our land”, was the parting volley as the six-member team from Nagarik Mancha left Gajaldoba on 16 May 2007.



Do we hear their voices?

Update

On 22 May 2007 the following handwritten notice was served at Gajaldoba:

<u>NOTICE</u>
To Sri Tarini Sarkar Son of Late Radha Krishna Sarkar
You are hereby informed that, you are illegally cultivating into AP-1 and AP-2 Compartments of Kathambari Beat under Apalchand Range, Baikunthapur Division, West Bengal. Forest department is going to start FDA Plantation-2007 in the said Compartment which is under Reserve Forest.
So you are directed to stop non-forestry activities immediately into the Reserve Forest area within 30 (thirty) days of the issue of this notice otherwise legal action will be taken against you according to the –
1) Indian Forest Act, 1927 (under section 26 (1) (a) (d) (h) and 2) The Forest Conservation Act, 1980 (under section 2).
(Illegible) Forest Beat Officer Kathambari Beat
No-367 / AP-15 dt 22/05/07 Copy forwarded to
1) Divisional Forest Officer, Baikunthapur Division 2) Karmadhakshya, Bon-o-Bhumi Sanskar Sthayee Samity, Mal 3) Officer-in-Charge, Mal Police Station 4) Officer-in-Charge, Kranti Police Outpost
(Illegible) Forest Range Officer Apalchand Range

The following are the team members of Nagarik Mancha who participated in the fact finding at Gajaldoba:

Naba Dutta, Subhashish Mukherjee, Prajnaparamita Duttaraychaudhuri,
Swati, Tarun and Ashim.

Naba Dutta
General Secretary
Nagarik Mancha
134, Raja Rajendra Lal Mitra Road
Room 7, Block B, First Floor
Kolkata 700085
Phone: +913323731921
Email: nagarikmancha@gmail.com