

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Taungya villagers want panchayati raj benefits to reach them

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At a time of when the extension of panchayati raj to the entire country is frequently cited as a major achievement of India's democracy, there are thousands of villagers who are still deprived of the coverage of panchayati raj and its numerous benefits. These villagers are called taungya settlers.

The system of taungya settlement was practised in India and Burma during the days of British colonial rule. As the forest department was keen to create plantations of commercially useful species of trees, a call was issued to the people of many villages that they could settle near plantation sites. As overall economic conditions in these villages were quite depressing under colonial rule, many villagers particularly those from weaker sections were willing to leave their homes and come to the plantation sites with their families as long as some means of livelihood were assured. Besides, to meet its immediate needs, the forest department at that time was willing to promise them long term benefits as well. However these promises were not kept by the forest department. In the initial years these people toiled in conditions of wilderness to plant trees and also to create their own settlements. Over the decades they rendered very useful service to the forest department as can be seen by the green plantations spread over a large area.

However, once the forest department felt that the plantation work was over, it was keen to get rid of them. So long-term security was not assured to these people who had served so well to increase green cover. These settlements were not given the status of revenue villages. They were denied the benefits of development works and quite often even emergency relief was denied to them.

In Uttar Pradesh these settlements can be seen in several districts like Maharajganj, Gorakhpur, Haridwar and Dehradun. Recently I visited Rajhi Nursery Van Taungya settlement in Block Chargavan, District Gorakhpur. This is one of the 'van taungya' villages (out of total 23 in Gorakhpur and Maharajganj districts) which were set up by workers brought by the forest department for work on its various plantations. These should have been regularised as normal 'revenue' villages a long time back, but denial of this has led to many-sided injustice against the taungya people. On the one hand they are denied benefits meant for most villages and on the other hand continue to face the threat of eviction. The recent legislation for protection of rights on land cultivated by tribals and forest-dwellers has brought some hope to these people, but the challenge of proving their land rights as per the provisions of this legislation (which has some

loopholes) remains.

An organisation called Laghu Seemant Krishak Morcha (briefly called the Morcha) has been active here for about four years and has several strong and determined members here. Chanda, block-level president of morcha says, the presence of morcha has made a big difference to our lives. Earlier we were afraid to oppose the various injustices that were inflicted on us. We were not well equipped to deal with this. But morcha gave us the confidence and the skills to protect our rights and resist injustice. Legal aid camps were held for us. We came in contact with lawyers. With their help we can fight injustice much better.

"We badly needed paths in forest areas. Earlier nobody listened to our needs and would chase us away if we attempted to build a path. But after the formation of the morcha we said openly we will build a path and dared them to stop us. Despite all opposition we could build a path. Then rains come and due to obstruction of drainage we had so much water accumulating in our basti. We went to officials even in the middle of the water to clear the drainage path so that water is cleared from our basti. Then we had a struggle for compensation of flood damage. 25 households got Rs. 2,000 each. Our people had suffered a lot and they needed and deserved much more compensation. But still we were happy at what we received as normally we taungyas get nothing at all." Kailash Nishad, who is block-level general secretary of morcha, carefully takes out his files and shows

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us the papers he has filed diligently - papers relating to the various claims they have filed for land rights, papers relating to officially constituted land reforms Commission which has taken up the issue of their rights. He and others described the various mobilisations for their rights, their rally in Gorakhpur in support of Ekta Parishad's Janadesh movement for land rights, their visits to Delhi, Lucknow and other

places. "Our exposure to other movements and struggles at the time of our visits has given us the confidence that several people are together in similar types of struggles", says Preeti, another enthusiastic morcha member.

Kailash Nishad says with a tone of finality, "Please note that no matter what happens, we'll never leave our land." Immediately there are voices of support among the taungyas sitting in a group, particularly among women, "We can die but we will not give up our land." However the denial of 'revenue village' status implies that they are still denied the benefit of important government schemes such as NREGS.

Also panchayati raj election have never been held here, and so all benefits coming with this are also been denied to them. Similar is the situation in Pathri block of Haridwar district which I visited earlier. Hence several displaced people have been resettled, but the taungyas said that their condition is even worse than that of recently displaced people.

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