

Aversion to Relocation: A Myth?

Rucha Ghate and Kim Beazley

AVERSION TO RELOCATION: A MYTH?

RANGARAJAN AND SHAHABUDDIN'S (2006) synthetic essay on the contentious issue of displacement of people from wildlife areas is interesting and informative. Focusing on the Indian context, the essay crucially highlights the dichotomous views on displacement that commonly exist between biological and social scientists. The former contend that village relocation is fundamental to the conservation of nature and wildlife, the latter argue that the social costs, which relocations impose upon oustees, outweigh any benefits that people-less nature provides. Rangarajan and Shahabuddin (2006) thoughtfully outline both 'sides' of the debate and discuss potential avenues of compromise that could serve to limit future village displacement. However, the tone of the Rangarajan-Shahabuddin essay is largely anti-displacement, given the 'deprivation and social injustice' that has, in the past, resulted from it (2006: 369). Based upon over a decade of research by SHODH: The Institute for Research and Development, on a particular protected area, the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Maharashtra, India, we would like to raise a few supplementary points.

When SHODH began its baseline socio-economic study of the six villages located within TATR (see Ghate 1999), we held the opinion, which Ranga-

Rucha Ghate, SHODH: The Institute for Research and Development, 50 Puranik Layout, Bharat Nagar, Nagpur 440033, Maharashtra, India.

Kim Beazley, Darwin College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB3 9EU, UK.

Address for Correspondence

Rucha Ghate, 50 Puranik Layout, Bharat Nagar, Nagpur 440033, Maharashtra, India.

E-mail: ruchaghate@gmail.com

Conservation and Society, Pages 331-334

Volume 5, No. 3, 2007

Copyright: © Ghate and Beazley 2007. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use and distribution of the article, provided the original work is cited.

rajan and Shahabuddin (2006) endorse, that displacement has a detrimental effect on oustees and should thus take place only as a final resort, if at all. However, our subsequent discussions with the villagers have revealed that they are largely not averse to the idea of relocating and in fact many actively *want* to relocate.

It is the harsh reality of residing within a protected area that has made relocation a *preferred* option from the perspective of the villagers in question. In the case of Tadoba, exclusionary regulations, under the Wild Life (Protection) Act (1972), are currently enforced, despite the presence of the six villages within the Reserve's boundaries. Consequently, the occupants of these villages have been viewed as 'encroachers' on their own land (Ghate 2003; Mehra et al. 2004; Nagendra et al. 2006), and experience severe restrictions on their rights to collect minor forest products, grow crops and graze their livestock. Moreover, for the same reason, and also due to their remote locations, none of these villages have ever received substantial external development assistance (Bhagwan & Ghate 2003; Ghate 2005, 2006). Therefore, they lack access to all-weather roads and thus to markets, they lack schools beyond fourth grade, and only one of the villages has a primary health centre (Ghate 2003; Mehra et al. 2004; Nagendra et al. 2006). A former *sarpanch* (head) of Jamni village was resolute that, having seen her children grow up isolated from educational opportunities and thus illiterate, she would not see her grandchildren grow up in the same way.

The main reason why many of the villagers want to relocate is the bleak future associated with living within a protected area in an extremely remote location. The desire to shift is also fuelled by the fact that some villagers, by exceptional means, have managed to receive education outside the Tiger Reserve, and have thus seen the wider world and the potential development opportunities that it holds. The legal obligation to move the six villages within TATR has been discussed for almost two decades. To date (early March 2007), two of the villages (Botezari and Kolsa) have agreed to move out of the Reserve, to a site that they themselves have selected. Both Revenue and Forest Departments are in the process of preparing this new site. Two other villages (Navegaon and Jamni) have also expressed their desire to shift, particularly due to increased instances of crop depredation and loss of human life and livestock to tigers. However, for reasons only known to the authorities, these villagers' willingness to relocate has thus far been ignored. The remaining two villages (Rantalodhi and Palasgaon), though initially hesitant to relocate, have now come up with a charter of demands. While these demands are high, this is merely a reflection of the villagers' political awareness. Indeed, there are numerous indicators that these villagers' demands are negotiable and that they too are keen to move. As Rangarajan and Shahabuddin correctly state, 'forest-dependent occupations are not profitable or preferred options for most' (2006: 373). Yet living far into the interior of a protected area, Ta-

doba's villagers are isolated from the wider economy and thus have few other livelihood options. Their desire to shift thus seems justifiable.

Furthermore, just because negative assessments of past displacements dominate the literature, this does not mean that it is necessarily impossible to engineer a relocation that raises local living standards and that eradicates, rather than re-establishes, previous poverty levels (cf. Downing 2002). Indeed, the current operation to relocate Kolsa and Botezari, despite taking a long time to come to fruition (see e.g. Ghate 2003), looks set to have many positive consequences for the villagers in question. While there have been complications along the way, the relocation site now looks likely to provide a level of amenities far greater than that in the original villages, and also greater than that in nearby villages outside the Reserve. Moreover the relocation site is close to urban centres and all-weather roads, which should enable villagers to reduce their unwanted dependence upon forest-related occupations, which are also low paying. Therefore, in our view, to assert that displacement is inadvisable and socially unacceptable in all situations is just as problematic as to advocate involuntary displacement.

This point does not seek in any way to undermine the pressing need to explore the more theoretical, academic issue of the social (and for that matter biological) efficacy of the 'fortress' approach to conservation. Yet in the meantime, it is important not to fall into the trap of arguing against relocation *as a matter of social principle*.

We are aware of the provisions in the recent Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (2006), by which long-term forest dwellers within protected areas will be granted ownership of their land and permission to accept developmental assistance. Yet, a history of differences and delays between government rhetoric and practice is far too glaring for this to provide much hope for the current generation of deprived Tadoba villagers. Relocation seems thus, at present, their most strategic move.

However, there is one more problem. In the Tribal Act, the status of those that have been, or will have been relocated from protected areas onto other *forest* land since 13th December 2005 remains ambiguous. According to section 27 of the Indian Forest Act (1927), land used for the purposes of relocation should be *revenue* land. However, in the Tadoba case, the land that has been selected for the relocation of Botezari village and Kolsa village is another piece of land under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department and the official terms of the relocation clearly state that this land category will not be changed. In such situations, the relocated villagers lose on both fronts. Neither can they be given land ownership under the land revenue code, nor can the Tribal Act, in its current form, enable them to claim land ownership at the relocation site. This could serve to operate as a disincentive for villagers living within protected areas to sustain their current desire to relocate.

REFERENCES

- Bhagwan, S. and R. Ghate. 2003. Creating Protected Areas: In Whose Interest, at What Cost? A Case Study of Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra. Paper presented at the seminar 'Relocation of People from Protected Areas in India: Policy and Process', Council for Social Development, New Delhi, India.
- Downing, T. E. 2002. Creating poverty: The flawed economic logic of the World Bank's revised involuntary resettlement policy. *Forced Migration Review* 12: 13–14.
- Ghate, R. 1999. *Socio-Economic Study of Six Villages in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (Maharashtra)*. SHODH: The Institute for Research and Development, Nagpur, India.
- Ghate, R. 2003. Global gains at local costs: Imposing protected areas: Evidence from central India. *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology* 10: 377–389.
- Ghate, R. 2005. Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve: Relocation versus wildlife preservation. *Economic and Political Weekly* 40: 4807–4809.
- Ghate, R. 2006. Relocation Blues: Compromises Locals have to make for Conservation. Paper presented at the International Association for the Study of Common Property 11th Biennial Conference, Bali, Indonesia.
- Mehra, D., S. Ghate, R. Ghate, A. Chaturvedi et al. 2004. Impact of Relocation on Forest-Dependent Communities: A Case of Protected Area of Vidarbha Region in Maharashtra State, India. SHODH Working Paper 5-04. SHODH: The Institute for Research and Development, Nagpur, India.
- Nagendra, H., S. Pareeth and R. Ghate. 2006. People with parks—forest villages, land-cover change and landscape fragmentation in the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, India. *Applied Geography* 26: 96–112.
- Rangarajan, M. and G. Shahabuddin. 2006. Displacement and relocation from protected areas: Towards a biological and historical synthesis. *Conservation and Society* 4: 359–378.