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## Indigenous Baiga women in India: “Our story should be heard”

*“This forest is our mother. We have territorial rights”.*

This sentence is written on boards that women from the Fulwaripara village raised across their land. They are declaring to the government and other relevant actors that the forest they depend on belongs to them. The Indian Forest Department keeps denying this. Its guards have destroyed the boards many times – even though some were made of concrete, and many times the women raised them again. Because of this, ten women have been put into jail in the last two years.

Fulwaripara is located in the Chattisgarh state, central India, where many communities live with the forests and face threats of eviction due to conservation units, like tiger reserves, which are often linked with destructive projects, like mining. **The NGOs WWF and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) support the Indian Forest Department in this region, providing training, patrol resources, vehicles and other equipment to the foresters who are conducting the evictions.**

(1)

Image

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*Under Clause (i), Section 3 of Forest Rights Act 2006. COMMUNITY FOREST RESOURCE. Claimant: President, Forest Rights Committee Village: Fulbaripara (meaning: the house where flowers live - ful is flower and bari is house) Village Panchayat (self-local government): Baheramura Development Block: Kota District: Bilaspur (State Chattisgarh) Proposed and Approved by Fulbaripara Gram Sabha (village assembly) On 02/03/2017. Claim Submitted to Block Level Committee, Kota on 16/03/2017. Ph: Larry Lohamann/The Corner House*

After having faced many evictions over the last two centuries within their own territory, a dam displaced them once again 40 years ago. They ended up living in Fulwaripara, at the edge of the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve.

The Forest Rights Act was approved in India in 2006; it is a historic law that recognizes the rights of forest dependent peoples to their territories (2). Since then, **the Fulwaripara village has faced all kinds of harassment from the Forest Department guards, who tried to prevent them to submit their claims for recognition of their tribal land under the Forest Rights Act.**

But the guards could not stop them. To inform the Forest Department officials and guards about the submission of their claim under the Forest Rights Act, the women wrote the claim number on the boards in their fields. However, a recent Supreme Court decision could order that the communities that have their claims under the Forest Rights Act rejected might face eviction. **As a result of a petition made by a handful of conservation NGOs, including the Wildlife Trust of India, the Nature Conservation Society, the Tiger Research and Conservation Trust and the Bombay Natural History Society, together with retired forest officers, the Supreme Court could order the eviction of more than one million forest dependent people from their land.** (3) Fulwaripara's claim was not allowed to be completed; like more than 50 per cent of the rejected cases. (4) In consequence, **Fulwaripara faces the threat of eviction, once again.**

In the Fulwaripara village, **women have always been at the frontline of the struggle.** When asked why, they simply answered: "men are afraid to do so". They are part of an indigenous Baiga community that continues to practise the traditional use of controlled burning to grow their crops, under what they call the "Bewar system", a type of shifting agriculture. **Bewar is heavily criminalized by the government and conservationists.**

**This is the testimonial of a Baiga woman from the Fulwaripara village (5):**

## **The History of Our Settlement**

**The Adivasi (indigenous) Baiga people that are settled in Fulwaripara have lived in this region for more than 200 years. Yet, they have been displaced numerous times.** As far as we can remember, our ancestors settled in Belghana some 200 years back. This used to be a hilly area before the railway line was built. We used to live in what is the current market area in Belghana. Later, the construction of roads and a railway line destroyed our heritage and we settled in Behramuda. Initially, seven households (3-4 families each) settled there, five were Baiga families and two were Gonds. From that moment on we started losing our land.

The grandfather of Phuleswari, one woman from the village who has been twice in jail due to this

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struggle, had mortgaged 9 acre (almost 4 hectares) of land for Rs 140 (around 2 dollars) during the famine era. Later, false papers of the land were made. I remember that we had just harvested paddy rice and brought it to the threshing floor, at the time that land grabbers took it away.

**The names of the villages in the area also make reference to the Baiga history and their relation with the tigers in the region.** The *Mata Choraha* was a worshipping place in Behramuda for Baigas and every year we performed rituals. But **we lost our worshipping place**, as it was taken over by others when we were forced out. The day before the annual paddy rice harvest celebration, called *cherchera* (or *poush puni*), each household gave an offering to the gods and contributed to sacrifice a goat. The goat was beheaded and placed at the foot of the gods- "*budadev*". We ate meat along with new rice and celebrated. Each household also gave offerings to the village elder (*mukadam*) who would bless the houses by chanting mantras and offering holy water. This ritual, we believe, brings good rainfall for the coming season. A form of resin from the sal tree (*Shorea robusta*) is burnt as incense in Hindu ceremonies and is offered, together with coconut and betel nuts, by the Baiga elder to *budadev*.

In *Akti*, we used to celebrate the annual spring festival and again we worshiped the *budadev*. This worship is to ask for good harvests of mushrooms. We sowed *kanki* (broken rice), maize, *kodo* (a type of millet), *kutki* (a type of millet), paddy rice, *jowar* (a type of millet), all sorts of *bewar* seeds and also *kheera* (cucumber). We offered liquor and the *Bidri* ceremony for the blessing and protection of crops was carried out. Each household gave some donation as well as 1 kilo of rice.

**We used to do our traditional Bewar cultivation but later, influential people with links to the governmental administration and especially to the Forest Department threw us out.** At the end, that land was occupied by other communities practicing settled agriculture. The Baigas have always been a peace-loving community and we avoid confrontation so that is the reason we have always been at the receiving end. Baigas have always been subjugated so they left their homes and hearths and moved further inside the forest.

Then, as we were again uprooted, we made our huts in the area where the dam, "Madhav Rao Jalasaya", came up. After the dam was built, we had to move again and for the last 35-40 years we have been in Fulwaripara. The families have also grown in this period.

## **Our relationship with the forest**

Baigas used to always fear the government's Forest Department guards. We are bamboo artisans but were not able to make our bamboo crafts at that time. **Forest guards would climb the hills and go inside the forest to catch us.** We, women, would stay inside the forest and make our products and come back home late in the evening. **Our children knew where we would be so they went inside the forest to warn us not to come out until the forest officials had left the site.**

We used to hide our bamboo baskets inside ponds or pits filled with water. On Saturdays and Sundays we would bring our products down for trading them, to buy and collect products. We would keep the products in a small abandoned hut in the forest and, if caught, we used to deny it was ours. But now the situation has changed, we are no longer afraid of the Forest Department guards. **We decided to give 5 Rs per household (less than one dollar) to the guards in exchange for bamboo.** Bamboo harvesting has been a major bone of contention between us and the government's Forest Department.

Since there is a law for the Forest Rights, **we struggle for our rights on our land and forest, from**

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**which we have been eeking our livelihood since ages.** This is not that much land, but **we have guarded this land and forest like our children**, and our ancestors are also buried on this land.

## **The Bewar cultivation: an integral part of our livelihood system**

Baigas used to grow 8-10 varieties of millet, corn and five varieties of legume, spread over small plots. **The Bewar system, a form of shifting cultivation, comprises mixed cultivation.** We used to cut small plots of degraded jungle where men and women both would go. Then, on that plot, we would burn back the shrubs and other grown plants and later place the seeds in the burned piece of land.

This would be mostly completed in summer and the sowing would take place in May-June, after the first rain, with *kutki* (a type of millet). In July, we used to sow *sawan* and *selar*. *Sawan* was harvested in September-October and *kutki* in October-November. *Sawan* was first to cut and then *kodo* and *kutki*. *Kutki* and *sawan* are ratoon crops [meaning that most of the above-ground plant is cut while the roots and the growing shoot apices are left intact] and the same plot yielded twice and thrice. *Kutki* would be harvested all over the area. When the fire was good, we would get good harvests.

The government used to give us tools, like “*tangiya*”, to clear the plots for Bewar cultivation (known as *kheti*). Before we had basic tools like hoe, dao, and the digging stick and used our family labour. But later, the government asked us to stop Bewar agriculture when our population was growing and big trees were cut down. **The government passed a ban on Bewar and asked the Baigas to settle down on plain land and start practicing permanent agriculture.**

The monsoon season used to be good at that time, lots of rainfall. But now, **the dams have come up; they do not allow the water to go to the ocean.** As a result, the waves have become less and less, creating less tidal pressure and rains have become less. Through the ocean, the water climbs up and then the rain falls. Along with the rains, lots of fish/crabs and snakes used to appear. We remember playing with snakes which would spread all over the land with the incessant rains. With the government ban on Bewar, the rainfall has also become less. Nowadays, we do not even see that much water in the ponds.

**Our traditional Bewar cultivation should start again, as it increases the abundance of the forest and its resources and also it increases the rainfall.**

We used to cook in earthen pots and have *bedra* (a type of legume) many times. There was no public distribution system at that time, which now gives us some free rice. We had very little money at that time and had very little to eat. **Nowadays, our food does not have the same taste as our food back then.** Now we have more pulses and rice, but the taste is different. In many areas *sawan* and *kutki* are still continuing.

## **The tigers, our ancestors**

We have only heard that the government is trying to increase the number of tigers inside Achanakmar National Park [close to their community] by displacing villages and people. Six villages were displaced some years back, and the government says that they gave them land and compensation. But **money as compensation is not the solution.** The government should give **fertile land and rights to the forest to the Baigas for their livelihood and existence.**

We have lived with tigers since our existence and **we worship the tigers as our ancestors.** We do

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not have any problems with tiger conservation and we believe that **only by us staying in our villages, the tiger will survive**. Not by displacing the people from their villages. The Baigas know how to ward off tigers through our mantras and worshipping, so we do not have any problems. There were more tigers before, but now they are hardly seen.

**There is a need for international solidarity for the *Adivasi* (indigenous) communities in India. Our story should be heard** and that should create pressure on the government. **We must get our land and forest back for which we have struggled and even gone to jail.**

*Testimony by a woman from the Fulwaripara community, recorded by by Devijt Nandi from the All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM).*

- (1) See Survival International, [Tribal Peoples illegally evicted](#) and [Tiger Reserve Tribes](#)
- (2) For more information on the Forest Rights Act in India, see the article "[India: Forest struggles at the crossroads](#)", WRM Bulletin 205, 2014
- (3) See All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM) press releases: [22 February 2019](#) and [28 February 2019](#)
- (4) [Supreme Court reports on rejected forest rights claims from states](#), Down to Earth, February 2019
- (5) The testimonial was made in the Fulwaripara village on February 2019. The name of the woman who gave the testimonial remains anonymous due to security reasons.