

# Enslaved people in free India

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**F**OREST officials call it shramdaan (voluntary labour), but for Gond tribals of Baretha it is the price that they must pay on a regular basis to keep their life going. Begar (unpaid labour) may have become illegal in the statute book, but for these forest dwellers time has changed nothing except the term itself. "Every household in this village has to do weekly shramdaan. Under this practice, from each family one person every week toils for a day without wages for the forest department. The shramdaan began about a decade back when forest protection committees were formed by the forest department," says Chunkalibai Uike, the Gond **Sarpanch** of Baretha Vangram (forest village) in Beatal district on Madhya Pradesh.

The forest protection committees were formed as a part of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) with the objective of involving local communities in the protection of jungle and, in return giving them a limited right over minor forest products. However, in most Vangrams, which the forest department treats as labour

colonies **that it settled in the fast**, the shramdaan has become a compulsory labour and a synonym for begar, not so unknown a practice to these tribals.

So what does this shramdaan actually mean for these tribals? "Sweeping and moping forest guest house and attending to sahibs, fetching water for them and also conducting forestry operations in the nearby jungles," says Mangal Kumre, a Gond resident of Baretha.

in **Betul district** of Madhya Pradesh, which has a total of 925 such villages. According to forest manuals, Vangrams are settlements established during pre-Independence times by the forest department, which brought people (mostly tribals) to particular jungle patches to conduct forestry operations.

In return of their labour, they were allowed without transferring ownership rights - to cultivate pieces of forest land to meet their

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And what do they get in return? "Nothing. One can dare to refuse shramdaan only at the cost of getting uprooted from the village itself. Even the collection of stray pieces of wood amounts to stealing and if caught we have to pay fines," adds Mangal Kumre.

Baretha is one of 92 Vangrams

subistence needs. The situation has not changed since then. Although these tribals claim themselves traditional owners of these lands, in official records they are either "non-patta holders" of forest land or simply "encroachers".

The debate continues and so

does the status of these vangrams as labour colonies. The tribals here own nothing not even their labour. Living constantly under threat both physical and psychological of eviction, they cannot even dream of disobeying the unjust demands, earlier under British regime and now under a government "of the people, by the people and for the people".

For Gonds of Baretha, the begar is not limited to individual shramdaan alone. The unpaid labour here is often collective as well.

"The entire village has to come out and work together with the forest guards if there is any threat to them by timber thieves or by fire. Such threats are quite common and keep happening every now and then," says Mangal Kumre, adding: "The need may arise at any hour, whether day or night, and it may take any number of days for the situation to normalize. No one is excused and no one is paid any wages except those who are on the payroll of the forest department as chowkidars (watchmen)."

Collective begar especially becomes frequent during summer months when forest fires are a regular feature. In fact, this year's fire season has already started, and

Baretha experienced its first summer blaze a few weeks back. It was quite and dark in the village. After a day's hard work everyone was trying to *get* some sleep when the drum started beating, a call to quench fire.

We all rushed out, disheveled and tired. The forest was ablaze. Scorching flames were engulfing tall trees and dense bushes. We had to dig ditches around the fire area to stop the spread of wild horror. It took almost two days to fence off the fire," says Mangal Kumre.

His brother, Ojha Kumre, got fingers of both hands mutilated while fighting the forest fire. No one paid any attention to his suffering, no damages were ever paid.

"Not only no wages are paid for our traditional collective responsibility, even medical aid is not provided to us in case of any casualty incurred while performing the voluntary labour," laments Chunkalibai. The unjust practice call it shramdaan or begar continuous to keep an essentially colonial means of oppression alive even in the new millennium. The Gonds of Baretha remain the serfs of forest officials. Independence is yet to reach them.

*(Courtesy: The Pioneer)*