

PROJECT-TIGER AND PEOPLE

- A Report on Similipal

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The Similipal forest reserve of Mayurbhanj district in Orissa is one of the fifteen tiger reserves of the country where Project Tiger is in force. The selection and subsequent development of this area as a sanctuary for wild life has generated certain contradictions in the social life of the region which have far reaching implications both for the population of the area and for the environment. The pursuance of 'Project Tiger', in the absence of democratic intervention can lead to serious social tensions. With a view to understand the problems intensified or generated by this project a team of scholars investigated the complex issue, involved in the whole project. The team includes Shri Hutasan Purohit, Shri Ashok Babu (Sambalpur University) and Shri C.V. Subba Rao (University of Hyderabad). Following is the full text of the report.

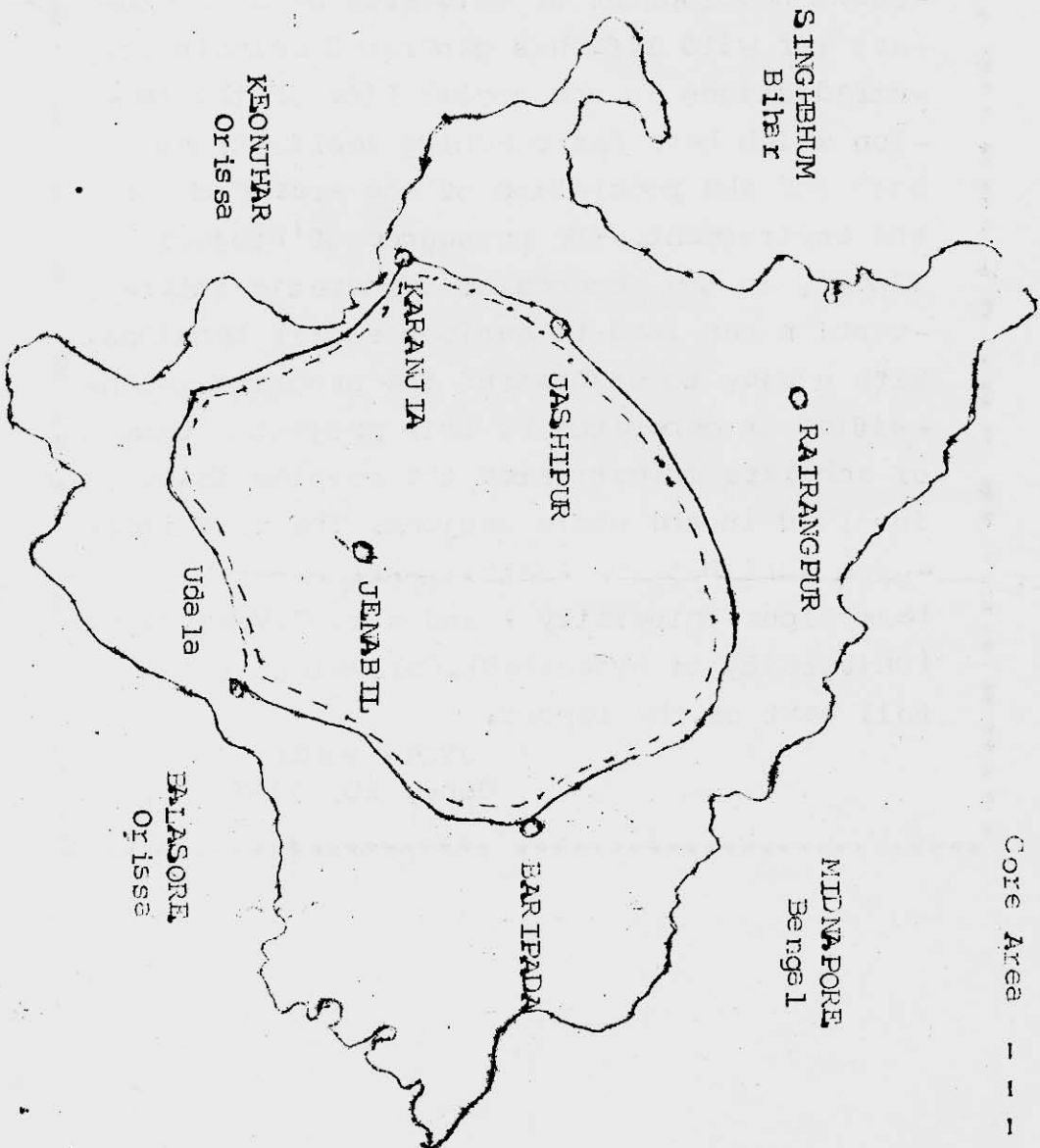
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MAYURBAN : PROJECT TIGER

LEGEND

Sanctuary —————

Core Area - - - - -



THE BACKGROUND:

The idea of selecting certain areas of the country for the development of a natural forest region free from human interference took shape in the early seventies. In 1973 Project Tiger was conceived. It was named as Project Tiger since usually the free flow of nutrients through the complex web of nature in the forest ecosystems culminates in tiger. For in a natural habitat micro-organisms break up plant and animal residues to form humus which accounts for soil fertility. The resultant diverse vegetation conserves soil and enriches water. Predatory animals like tigers thrive on this kind of environment.

Initially in 1973-74 nine tiger reserves were established. Later two more were added in 1979 and four more in 1983. Each reserve has a core area of the project where the habitat is to be completely free from any interference and a buffer zone all around the core. As the number of reserves increased the total number of tigers, according to the 1984 census, has increased four times to become now almost a thousand. Besides deer, elephant, rhino, wild buffalo and other animals have also multiplied. Similipal is one of the earliest reserves established in December, 1973. It is located in the Mayurbhanj district of Orissa.

Mayurbhanj district is in the north-east corner of the State in the trijunction of three States with Singhbhum, Bihar and Midnapore, West Bengal on the border. Most parts of the district consist of forests.

Till the time of independence Mayurbhanj was a part of the princely State of Bhanjdeo Rajas. One of the few dynasties in the country to have an almost unbroken succession for nearly a thousand years, the Bhanjdeo kingdom virtually became a tributary of the British East India Company in 1812. But it was during the reign of Sri Ramchandra Bhanja Deo from 1890, that the State was firmly integrated with the economy outside. The discovery of iron-ore deposits in Gorumahisani in the north-eastern part of the State paved the

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way eventually for the establishment of the Tata Iron and Steel Company at Jamshedpur in 1910s. It was also the period when more systematic exploitation of forests began in the district. Till then the exploitation of forest, which started in 1885 with the establishment of railways and mines in neighbouring British administered province, was done departmentally with somewhat irregular leases to businessmen and traders. Moreover the exploitation of forest produce was confined to the peripheral regions of the vast forest area of the State. The central core of the forest area known as Similipal itself was relatively untouched. Similipal served as the hunting reserve of the Rajas. But in 1906 the Raja entered into a contract with M/s B. Borooah and Company. The company was given monopoly rights on a thirty year lease for a large area including Similipal forest. Meanwhile Mayurbhanj State railway came into existence connecting Baripada, State headquarters to Bengal-Nagpur railway. Borooah and Company's contract continued till the merger of the State.

It appears that prior to this contract, human settlements were there only on the frontiers of the central core of Similipal forest. Most of the people belong to the Bathudi, an Oriya tribe. The company for its own purposes encouraged human settlements even inside the forest, although the extent is not very significant. That seems to be the period when the Kolhas (presently the majority in this part) and other Bihari tribes came and settled here. It must be noted that this was also the period when a large influx of tribals from Bengal and Bihar came and settled all over Mayurbhanj. The Santhals became the largest tribe of the State. Most of the people settled here during what they call "Ramesh Bandobast", the first land settlement survey in Similipal forest conducted by Ramesh Chandra Ghosh in 1927. In fact the very names of the many villages inside the forest indicate the migrant origin.

These changes affected both the social life of the State and the forest-based economy. But the interior forest area of Similipal itself was relatively less affected and it continued to be the pleasure hunt of the feudal kings.

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They organised hunting expeditions for the pleasure of both themselves and their guests and British masters.

After independence Maharaja Pratap Chandra Bhanja Deo signed the instrument of merger in October, 1948 and on 1, January, 1949 Mayurbhanj became a district of Orissa.

The district presently has a population of about 1.58 millions. More than 45 percent of the total geographical area of the district is covered by forests. With more than 58 percent of its population as tribals, the district has highest population of tribals in the State. The single largest group is Santhals who originated from neighbouring Chota Nagpur region. They are followed by Kolhas, Bhumij and Bathudi tribes. Altogether there are as many as 46 number of tribes in the district. Overwhelming majority of the population are engaged in cultivation.

The central portion of the district is what is known as the Similipal area. The Meghasani hills, the highest in the region, form the southern extreme of the long Similipal hill range. The hill range, which receives the monsoon at its advent influences the climate of Orissa, Bihar and West Bengal. The range is also the source of a number of rivers and rivulets. Budhabalanga, Gangahara, Sone and other rivers and 12 rivulets originate in Similipal. Some of them join Subarnarekha and Baitarani rivers. With an unusual variation in altitude from 30 meters to 1000 meters the Similipal has a wide variety of forests from semi-ever green to extreme dry deciduous forests. Similipal is also the abode of wild animals like the famous KHAIRI tiger leopard, elephant, sambar, deer, python, hyena etc. Thus this somewhat unique character of the Similipal forest as a natural habitat seems to have determined its choice as a National Park.

In 1956, Similipal was declared as a National Park for conservation purposes and for the development of tourism. Meanwhile in 1972 the Wild Life (Protection) Act came

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into force. Orissa State made its rules under the Act, a year later. In 1973 northern Similipal was notified as National Park under the provisions of this Act. The new National Park area, constitutes 304 sq.km. became the legal status of the core area of the Project Tiger. Further the buffer zone around the core is declared as a sanctuary under the same Act. Both these legal provisions empower the Government to take steps to prohibit or regulate human activity in the notified areas. Thus total notified area (legal status :sanctuary) is about 2750 sq.km. of which core (legal status:National Park) was initially 303 sq.km. Recently since 1, May, 1985 the core is extended to 800 sq.km. Total area wise it is the fourth largest tiger reserve in the country. And core area wise, it is the fifth largest. A separate Directorate of Project Tiger took over the management of the forest.

Meanwhile the systematic exploitation of forests in Similipal which began with the Borooah Company continued unabated on an ever expanding scale. Construction of roads inside the forest paved the way for it. From almost no roads in the begining of the country, the interior forest has now about 900 km.length of roads. Similipal region contributes about 90 percent of the districts forest revenue. Timber and fire wood among the major forest produce and sal seeds among the minor forest produce are the chief sources of revenue in Similipal. The auctioning off of areas was done more organisedly since the mid-sixties when the Orissa Forest Development Corporation came into existence. The revenue earned from timber and firewood was on an average Rs3500/- per sq.km. of forest in Orissa. In Similipal it became Rs12,000 per sq.km, Jashipore, in the local parlance became a timber town. Situated on Bombay-Calcutta national highway it became a transit point for forest produce enroute to Calcutta, the headquarters of the trade. In sal seeds local contractors grew to be politically very powerful people. The most influential trade in entire Western Orissa now, for instance, was a small trader from Sambalpur who grew with the trade in sal seeds of Similipal.

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Alongwith the legal trade, illegal trade also increased. Large scale felling of trees for commercial purposes took place. Besides in Similipal an organised trade in tuskers, animal skins etc. also thrived. The increasing scale of both legal and illegal trade in forest products and animals over long years resulted in the development of a section of forest officials who are closely involved in these operations. Thus among the vested interests that decisively influence Similipal now should be included a sections of the forest bureaucracy.

Eventuakly in December, 1979, a new organisation called Similipahal Forest Development Corporation(SFDC) took over the production and trade of both major and minor forest produce in the buffer zones of Similipal. Initially SFDC eliminated all forms of middleman. But in later years they came back in for form of mahants in forest villages, acting as middlemen between the corporation and tribals. In April, 1980 the complete prohibition of felling of trees for any purpose, already in force in the core area was extended to entire Similipal. But as the demand for forest products went on increasing, the market laws could not be controlled by such legal notices.

Consequently the deforestation process became accentuated. Timber, firewood and various other forest products are smuggled out regularly. An interesting factor here is that denudation is more in the uninhabited parts and less in inhabited areas. The few villages inside Similipal are dispersed over a large area. A single village of very few households having no other human settlement anywhere around is quite common. In areas around the human settlements the presence of people effectively became check on illegal trade. Finally, as an SFDC report puts it " with the stoppage of felling trees.. organised theft from the forest has commenced"(Page 7, " A note on future management of Similipahal forest", SFDC, December, 1983). Given the fact that the entire area is cordoned off and free entry is prohibited under the provisions of the Wild Life Act, such organised theft cannot take place without the knowledge, consent if not active involvement, of

forest officials. Hence the environmental degradation, a familiar phenomenon in other forest areas of the country, also affected Similipal. In fact simul (silk cotton trees), from which the region acquired its name, were removed. A tree which has a life span of over 400 years. No simul trees older than 100 years are found now in the forests. Thus Similipal itself has become a misnomer.

The forest area of the district which is 51 % according to the revenue department and 45 percent according to forest department became according to satellite survey 20 percent. In the village Gurguria the patch of land which houses Gram Panchayat Office is still officially the "reserve forest" This deforestation process led to afforestation programmes. A separate afforestation wing of the forest department is now actively engaged in the buffer zones. Under this programme totally new species are being introduced such as eucalyptus at Chahala, Sunajhari (Acacia auriculiformis) Chakunales (Kesia) and others. The introduction of new species has serious implications for the environment.

The scenic beauty of the region coupled with wild life also made Similipal an attractive place for tourists and other pleasure seekers. Tourists need permits from the forest department to enter the area. And these permits seem to be issued rather liberally. Inside the forest there are a total of 15 rest houses. In the year 1984-85 as many as 560 parties constituting 5000 people have been issued such permits, from Jashipore alone. And Jashipore is only one of the five entry points of the forest. In addition to 'pure' tourists, the list includes a number of officials whose visit to Similipal has very little to do with their official duties. Thus the register at Jashipore reads like a who's who of Eastern India. It includes American Consulate General, Governors of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. House Committee of Orissa Assembly, Public Account Committee of Orissa Assembly, Board of Revenue (twice in one year), Chief Justice, Chief Secretary, Top forest officials of all the three states and top class of police and other departments. Evidently the secluded Similipal has become

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the pleasure ha-unt for a number of elites in the region. According to the villagers alcoholic drink and even womanising are part of it. There are also reports of gentleman poaching. The impact of this kind of permissive culture on the villagers seems to be the most devastating effect on tribals in the vicinity. A section of tribals became suppliers of such pleasure to the visitors.

On the whole now there are traders of forest produce and smugglers of ivory, animal skins who operate through a chain. At the apex are big traders and smugglers of both Orissa and West Bengal who are also politically very influential. Next in the ring are traders, especially Marwaris at Jashipure and Baripada followed by mahants and mukhias of the villages. The last are the villagers, some of whom are settled for such purposes.

From the Government side there are four agencies which overlap each other. First there is the forest department which generally looks after the protection of plain forests and monitor forests to meet the requirements of the forest produce by local inhabitants. Large parts of Similipal come under the territorial division of Karanjia forest division and a small part under Baripada division. The SFDC is the sole authority for production and trade of all forest produce in the buffer zones (which is presently around 1950 sq.km). The Project Tiger directorate is in complete control of core and is also incharge of manipulation of habitat in the buffer zones. Finally a separate afforestation division looks after afforestation programme in the sanctuary. Predictably the four agencies are at loggerheads with each other and are always willing to give, both officially and unofficially, information about how the other agency is responsible for all the ills of the region. Together they blame politicians and people.

Meanwhile a new move to make the Similipal as a 'National Biosphere Reserve' is afoot. Initiated by UNESCO under its Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme, the Biosphere

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Reserve Programme is intended to conserve representative ecosystems. It is aimed at providing natural conditions, long-term conservation of plants, animals and micro-organisms. The concept emphasizes the need for the conservation of the entire ecosystem of suitable size, to ensure self-perpetuation and unhindered evolution of the living resources. It is distinguished from the concept Project Tiger in its emphasis on research and scientific management and its emphasis not on particular species like tigers or wild animals but on the sum total of biological communities whose elements are interacting within a single life-zone. Already about 12 such zones are identified for the development of Biosphere Reserve in the country. A seminar held at Baripada in May, 1985, sponsored by state patronised Orissa Environmental Society recommended that Similipal should be added to the list. The State bureaucracy, especially the forest department does not seem to be in favour of the idea as it would mean the central take over of the entire project. But we understand that the proposal is under the active consideration of the Center's Department of Environment.

Meanwhile since 1, May, 1985 the core area of Similipal is extended from 304 sq.km to 800 sq.km. The decision to extend the core has become a controversial decision. For extending the area and thereby increasing tiger population (which now number 65 in Similipal) would result in imbalances in the population between tigers and their prey animals. Consequently tigers would have to resort to human killings. In fact a recommendation in the proposal of the project itself has clearly stated that "holding tiger population at artificially high levels..... can have disastrous results for the habitat and its dependent fauna". The SFDC opposed the extension all throughout. Yet the Government has gone ahead and extended the core area of the Project Tiger.

THE PROJECT AND THE PEOPLE:

It is in this background that one should see the impact of the Project Tiger in the people of the region. The entire Similipal Sanctuary has about 2750 sq.km. It has

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about 75 villages with 40 villages in Karanjia, 15 villages in Baripada and 20 villages in Udala tehsils. Within this sanctuary the original core had only 10 villages but the extended core has about 25 villages.

But it should be noted that the impact of the project can not remain only within the confines of core or sanctuary. The wild animals moving freely in forest usually follow the streams and their actual mobility is determined by nature. Since the legal boundaries demarcated by the Wild Life Act are not enforceable on wild animals themselves, the people both in buffer zones and the surrounding areas (what is called cultural zone) should also be included for all practical purposes. In that sense the project affects 150 villages with 110 in Karanjia, 20 in Udala and 20 in Baripada tehsils.

The average population in all these villages is 200 or less. Some of the villages have as low as 10 - 15 population. Hence the number of people affected directly or indirectly by the project will be around 25 to 30 thousand population. But within the core itself the population will not be more than 5000 people. Since the forests are relatively virgin forests where large scale human settlements are of recent origin the density of population is extremely low. In the core region it is around 5 people per sq. km.

An overwhelming majority of these people are tribals, with Kolhas and Bathudi being predominant. They are all dependent on agriculture, apart from irregular forest work. The cultivation is settled and not shifting cultivation.

Ever since the area has been notified as National Park and Sanctuary, moves are afoot to evacuate the people. Since 1978 the Government has issued evacuation to the villages at least three times. But as yet they are not enforced.

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In Government's view the evacuation is necessary for four major reasons. Firstly it is argued that presence of human settlements in the vicinity of predatory animals is dangerous to the lives of people and cattle. One instance of a tiger killing a cattle is often cited in favour of this argument. But it should be kept in mind that the perception of man's relationship with predatory animals which informs the plains people does not govern the tribal's own perception. Rare instances notwithstanding, the tribals do not view wild animals as danger to their lives. This simple and yet profound difference in perceptions seems to have completely lost on the Government.

Secondly, poaching by tribals, it is argued, is dangerous to the wild life which defeats the objective of the project. One instance of a tiger which killed cattle (the same instance referred above) being killed by tribals in Uski village is often referred. Other than this there seems to be no general poaching by tribals of Similipal. But a major event every year called Akhand Shikar (continuous hunting) is the bone of contention between people and the State.

The Santhals of Bihar celebrate the first day of the VISHAKHI month (usually in the second week of April, as Aakhani Shikar day on which tribals used to go on mass hunting expedition and present the meat of the animals to their community head. This practice got its boost in Similipal when the Rajas encouraged it and in the process also generalised it. Every year they used to lead a large mass of not only Santhals but also other tribal people in a massive hunting expedition. It almost became obligatory on the part of the subjects of the king to accompany him. Since otherwise tribals were prevented from hunting in the reserve forests of Similipal, for the tribals it became an occasion for hunting and enjoying meat. Thus during the Rajas' rule the ritual of the tribe got institutionalised on a larger scale. The practice continued even after the Rajas have left. It is this practice now referred to as Akhand Shikar.

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The forest department officials we met maintained that this killing expedition is harming wild life in the forest. They also point to the number of injured animals during the occasion. There seems to be a controversy about the precise period of this occasion. While some officials maintain that it is no longer confined to Vaishakhi day (known as Pana Sankranti in Orissa) but extends over a whole period of two months, others say it is only for one week. In any case the Government is making determined effort to curb this practice. Given the vast area in which thousands participate in the hunting expedition, Governmental efforts have limited success. In 1982 Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) championed the Pana Sankranti and attempted to assert the right of tribals for Aakhanda Shikar. Well known Jharkhand leader Shibu Soren along with a large number of people was arrested. This year in 1985, five battalions of Orissa Military Police was mobilised. About 110 people were arrested and were charged with violation of Wild Life Act, read with Indian Arms Act. They were produced before sub-divisional magistrate, Karanjia who remanded them to prison. Two months after when the team visited the area they were still in the overcrowded Karanjia sub-jail awaiting trial.

The forest officials maintain that to prevent such expeditions it is necessary to evacuate people. But the curious fact about Aakhanda Shikar is that contrary to official view, Similipal tribals themselves do not seem to be participating in it. The people say that if they really want to kill wild animals they do not need an occasion like this once a year since the animals are easily accessible to them. The fear of evacuation seems to have put off any prospective hunter amidst them. In any case all the arrested people presently lodged in Karanjia sub-jail are from outside Mayurbhanj district. The Aakhanda Shikar, which by and large is the practice of tribals from outside, has now become the single major source of violent tension every year.

The Government also feels that evacuation of human settlements in and around the core area will also eliminate illegal trading activities since the tribals are the

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source of supply of materials and labour for all such activities. Here the role of forest officials mentioned earlier is completely ignored.

But the major reason for the Government's programme of evacuation is the idea that tiger reserves should be left without any human interference. Cultivation in such a zone will introduce new bio-chemical interactions which upset the natural equilibrium. Since the project conceives the area as a region where free flow of nutrients through the complex web of nature will help development of natural ecosystem it should be free from any human interference. Hence, it is argued, the need for evacuation.

The people of the Similipal are dead set against evacuation. Some of the villages which have been issued notices have submitted in writing to that effect. A Government proforma seeking to find out the extent of land and properties people have and the compensation expected remained a dead letter. People simply refused to fill up the forms. Given their food, drinking habits, their culture and ways of living which are firmly rooted in forests and tradition, tribals feel insecure about any idea of leaving their place. Meanwhile Government denotified some reserve forests in the newly irrigated Udala block to rehabilitate people. Some of the people were taken around the place. But the people remain unconvinced. They cite the example of the experience of tribals affected by the Hatigarih Irrigation Project in Keonjhar. Almost ten years after the evacuation, people there are yet to receive the compensation and in the new settlement areas many people died unable to adjust. It is reported that in one single village alone more than 80 people died of starvation in these new settlement areas. Hence people are in no mood to co-operate with the Government in evacuation. Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) whose M.L.A. represents this area in the Assembly is opposing the evacuation programme and hold dharnas and meetings at various places.

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CONCLUSION:

The conception that representative forest areas of the country should be preserved for research and scientific purposes and for the maintenance of ecological balance in the long range may have its validity. It is on this basis that the Government is initiating moves to evacuate people in Similipal. But the actual execution of such a programme cannot be judged merely by its scientific validity. For the execution takes place in a given social and political environment. This environment is reducing the entire conception of conservation of forest in which lofty ideas and rational principles are embodied to a choice between different interests.

Thus in Similipal the choice is not between no poaching and poaching but between gentleman poaching by tourists and organised smugglers and occasional tribal poaching. The choice is not between no cultivation and cultivation but between large scale illegal denudation of forests and cultivation by tribals. The choice is not between preservation of natural ecosystem and imbalances introduced by cultivation but between mindless pollution by dangerous new species of afforestation programme and fertilisation of land by tribals. The choice is not between complete removal of human settlement and deforestation by tribals but between organised deforestation with the connivance of State agencies and limited deforestation caused by tribals. In the end, the choice is not between an ecosystem without human interference and that with human interference but it is between interference by tribals and interference by smugglers traders and pleasure seekers. It is a choice between two sets of human beings.

It is this inescapable choice that is now shaping the merging social tension in Similipal. But the manner in which the State is proceeding from National Park, to Project Tiger with a core area of 304 sq.km. and then to extended core area and now the idea of National Biosphere Reserve, in disregard of the actual problems it is generating at field level, in disregard of people and their perceptions will only intensify the tensions. Today the tensions are reflected only during the Aakhanda Shikar. But as the two sets of choices gradually take their shape the social tensions will only be accentuated and local people will be driven to hopeless corners. Hence there is an immediate need for democratic intervention.