

THIS year there is a drought in most parts of Rajasthan. Bharatpur is no exception. The kharif jowar crop — a crucial source of animal feed in the region — has virtually failed. There is a fodder crisis in an area where cattle are almost as important a source of livelihood as crop cultivation. The villagers say that this year cattle taken to the local fair for sale could find no takers. And when I spoke to the village women who had returned after a long day's search for fodder in the fields and along the road, they clustered around me pleading, "Ghana khulwa do, Bajji, Ghana khulwa do".

'Ghana' meaning thick jungle is the local name for the Keoladeo Ghana National Park (better known as the Bharatpur bird sanctuary), described in the tourist brochure as "a paradise for nature lovers in all seasons". Spread over 29 sq. km. of low-lying land, in the best of seasons it claims a bird population of over 350 local and migratory species, including the rare Siberian cranes, beside mammals and reptiles. In late October 1982 when I first visited the Park, it was teeming with bird life and water lilies, and also had a fair sprinkling of local buffaloes which served as a happy perch for egrets and darters. This

banning of cigarette smoking (which had caused two earlier fires), reinforcing existing firelines, etc. Atul Cowsiah, writing in *The Statesman* (18-10-86) said: "Men — the inhabitants of villages around the sanctuary — deserve to be blamed. And so do the cattle — if you please". Typically, perhaps no one bothered to speak to the villagers themselves or of their needs. In the last weekend of October, when three of us from Delhi visited the Park we got a glimpse of how it appears to the villagers peeping in from over the boundary wall.

Chakrampur, the first village we visited, is one of several that dot the surrounding countryside. It is essentially a hamlet of some 40 Rajput households, mostly small and marginal cultivators, with 80 per cent of its adult male population away in Bharatpur and elsewhere to work as construction labourers and petty vendors. The burden of family subsistence falls mainly on the women who not only fetch the fodder, water and fuel but also cultivate the land. Goats are more commonly to be seen than draught animals, and the households often have to hire tractor services for ploughing at Rs 25 per bigha. The ground water is typically brackish and the single drink-



Is Bharatpur for birds only?

October, much of the marsh land was dry, with few birds, no lilies and no buffaloes. A five foot high boundary wall surrounds the park with its barbed wire cut through in most places.

As we drove through the Park towards the area recently devastated by a fire, some 20-25 villagers who had scaled the wall to gather grass illegally could be seen running away in the distance. Since November 1982 when the sanctuary was declared a National Park, this boundary wall, the law governing such Parks, and a bureaucracy strictly guard the golden gates of this 'paradise', keeping out the villagers who till then had used the area for permitted grazing. And tensions between the villagers and the Park authorities have been mounting ever since.

In the circumstances, perhaps not surprisingly, when the Park fire broke out on Wednesday October 15, 1986, speculation was rife whether it had been caused deliberately by the villagers. Unnoticed for some time, and then inadequately attended to for several hours (the telephone lines were dead and the Bharatpur fire station is short of equipment), it spread over 108 ha. before it could be controlled with the help of the local policemen, army jawans, and firetenders called in from as far away as Agra, Alwar and Jaipur. Luckily, there was little damage to the wildlife. This was not the first fire in the Park — there were three in 1984-85 alone — nor was it the worst in its spread (it got contained by recently-constructed fire lines). But given the tension in the area it hit the headlines of several national dailies.

The newspaper reports, however, focused entirely on the situation within the Park, calling attention to management failure, and listing the measures that the administration proposed to take, such as an enquiry by the Rajasthan Government into the causes, the

Should a large tract of grazing land be reserved for a bird sanctuary in a drought prone state like Rajasthan? What about the local people's fuel and fodder needs, asks BINA AGARWAL.

ing water well is a good half hour's walk away. After being barred from the sanctuary, the women depended for fodder on jowar residues from their own fields, supplemented by grazing on the roadsides and along the bunds of fields. This year, however, there is little crop residue. The out-of-bound grass within the Park appears green indeed.

Aghapur, the second village we visited, is larger and more prosperous and politicised. It has no apparent drinking water problem but, as in most parts of the region, water logging and soil salinity have rendered much of the area uncultivable. Here too there is an acute fodder shortage this year. The villagers accuse the forest guards of corruption (one cited a case where a fine of Rs 900 was unfairly imposed and the receipt given was only for Rs 500), of favouritism towards relatives and friends (many Park employees come from the villages around) and of making profits illegally from the grass and wood in the Park. Some say that the October 15 fire could even have been caused by the guards themselves in order to destroy the evidence of their illegal tree felling. The villagers resent the fact that while they and their cattle are barred from the Park, the Park animals and birds often stray out and destroy their crops.

In both villages, the people feel that the Park has enough grass for birds and

domestic beasts, as there had been before 1982. The five foot wall serves as a strong psychological barrier for most, though physically it is easy even for the women to leap over it. Some do venture in, but most keep out. They see the Park as a pleasure ground for foreign tourists and upper class Indians — and in effect it is just that, and has been so historically.

The Bharatpur bird sanctuary came into being in 1956. Prior to this it had served as a duck shooting preserve for the Maharaja of Bharatpur and his colonial guests. Stone plaques in the sanctuary record as many as 1400 or more birds being shot down in a day. After 1956, it was developed as a bird sanctuary covering 29 sq. km, 11 under marsh land, 12 under scrub, and the rest under forest and grassland. Water is supplied to the sanctuary marshes through the Ajan dam or Kohli bandh (as it is locally called). This in turn receives waters from the Banganga and Ghambir rivers. The sanctuary gets first priority in the distribution of water from the dam which also supplies water for irrigation. This year the water level was 1/7th of the normal, inadequate even for the sanctuary and leaving little for irrigation (another cause for resentment by the villagers).

Upto November 1982, some 2000 head of cattle from 14 nearby villages had permits to graze in the sanctuary. In practice an equal number must have grazed illegally. The declaration of the sanctuary as a National Park marked an end to permitted grazing and the village Panchayats were asked to make alternative arrangements.

Most villagers accepted this, albeit resentfully. But the residents of Aghapur protested. In what followed, seven (including a woman) were killed and several others injured in the police firing. The

ban. Nevertheless, we came away with a strong impression that the villagers would not have wilfully caused the fire — the Park grass is too precious given the scarcity in the area, and their hopes of accepting it still alive.

Ultimately the issue is not who caused the fire on 15 October, 1986. Nor is it one of man vs. birds. The questions are larger and more complex: How do we plan the use of our finite natural resources such as to accommodate the needs of both people and wildlife? How do we justify the declaring of a large drought-prone region which provided the basic needs of the local people, and especially of the poor, as a National Park, without any pre-planning for the villagers' needs? How do we ensure an equitable access to village resources — the common pasture, village forests, waste-lands, river banks and beds, ponds, tanks and groundwater etc — which are ostensibly owned jointly but in practice are the preserve of a few?

Most of the village common land has been heavily encroached upon by the larger farmers who have legalised their claims over time. In addition, areas demarcated for the redistribution of this land to the landless under the land reform programme of the government, have gone largely to the landed. What little is left of the commons is heavily degraded.

And this is not just the story of Bharatpur. It is true of much of Rajasthan and indeed of semi-arid areas elsewhere in India as well. N. S. Jodha's 1983 study of six villages in West Rajasthan shows both the high dependence of the poor on common property resources (CPRs) for their subsistence and the rapid depletion and degradation of such resources. In Nagaur, Jodhpur and Jaisalmer districts, CPRs provide agricultural labour and small farmer household with 42 per cent of their gross income, much of their fuel and over 70 per cent of their grazing needs. Between 1953-54 and 1982-83 the share of the CPRs to total village geo-area declined from 43 to 14 per cent in the two Nagaur villages and 38 to 16 per cent in the Jodhpur villages, so that the number of animals per ha. of CPRs increased substantially. This decline in CPRs is attributed to illegal encroachments and State redistribution of the

land to farmers — 59-62 per cent of which has gone to those who already possessed 10-15 ha and only 11-13 per cent (most of it of poor quality) to the landless.

Also, village common land is often auctioned by the government to contractors who extract various types of produce for sale through local people as labourers. This commercialisation of the commons as well as heavy pressures on what still remains as common property, has led to the severe degradation of the commons — for all to exploit but none to protect and manage.

According to the Centre for Science and Environment's 1985 Report, Rajasthan has some 40 million heads of livestock, constituting a third of India's livestock wealth, and providing 10 per cent of the country's milk, 50 per cent of its wool and a large part of its meat and eggs. Between 1951-52 and 1977-78, the grazing land in the State's arid zone declined from 60.5 per cent to 45.1 per cent of the geo-area; the periodicity of drought in the State according to a Planning Commission Task Force Report is once every three years.

With the declining ability of the environment to sustain the animal population, its composition also appears to be changing, with a fall in the proportion of cattle and an increase in that of sheep and goats. Goats, especially, can browse on very wide range of plant species and survive readily in highly degraded environments. Also *prosopis* and other such less browsable species of trees which are more drought and salinity resistant are beginning to dominate the Bharatpur landscape. It is a reinforcing cycle. The issue for concern is thus not only the relationship between people's needs and sanctuaries but the management of an entire eco-system.

Nor is this the story of just one State, or one bird sanctuary or national park. India today has over 32 national parks and 211 wild life sanctuaries and the number has been increasing steadily over time. Questions, similar in thrust and different only in detail, arise in the context of these parks too, and with increasing urgency. Once again we need to answer: ecological protection of what? For whom? At what cost? And how?

However, once the marshy tracts were cleared of unwanted grass, the authorities reinforced the ban on the grounds that the remaining grass was just adequate for the birds. According to the Park officials, the villagers were quite grateful that they had been allowed in even for two months, and appreciated the reasons for the discontinuance. However, in the villagers' perceptions there was enough grass to go around and simply no legitimate reason for reinforcing