

# 90 per cent of Pabha forest in Assam freed from encroachment

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GUWAHATI: The Assam government has cleared encroachment from almost 90 per cent area of the Pabha Reserve Forest in Lakhimpur district, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said. The administration started the eviction drive to clear encroachment on January 10 which continued for several days, to evict around 500 "illegal settler" families.

"Our commitment to preserve our natural resources is sacrosanct. Happy to share that after 5 days of eviction exercise 4,163 ha (32,000 bigha) of Pabha Reserve Forest freed from encroachers," Sarma said in a tweet.

The total area of the reserve forest is estimated to be 4,625.85 hectares, he added.

The chief minister also lauded efforts of the administration in their endeavour to conserve Assam's forest cover.

The Assam government had carried out an eviction drive to clear 450 hectares of forest land from encroachment, where people had constructed residential units, from around 500 families of alleged encroachers, mostly Bengali-speaking Muslims, in Lakhimpur district.

Apart from these encroached locations, a large area of agricultural land allegedly encroached by the villagers were also cleared in Pabha.

According to Lakhimpur Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) Ashok Kumar Dev Choudhury, out of the original 46 sq km Pabha Reserve Forest in 1941, only 0.32 sq km were free from encroachment and the rest all occupied before the eviction started.

Altogether 701 families had encroached upon the Pabha Reserve Forest land over the last three decades.

The Himanta Biswa Sarma-led dispensation has been carrying out eviction drives to clear encroachments in different parts of the state since it assumed power in May 2021.

Setting aside opposition criticism, Sarma had on December 21 told the Assembly that eviction drives to clear encroachment from government and forest lands in Assam would continue as long as the BJP is in power.