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Human–Wildlife Conflict in Kerala

Conservation Policies and the Elusive Ethics of Peaceful Coexistence

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The troubled human–wildlife relationship in the highlands of Kerala is a matter of growing concern due to the constant disruption of the lives and livelihoods of the people who share space with wildlife. Debates surrounding the complexities of human–wildlife conflict often persist, largely due to the divide between the environmentalist perception of conservation and the experiences of farmers confronting wildlife-related threats. This study demonstrates that the precarious social and economic circumstances of the farmers and local communities directly affected by the inter-species conflict undermine the skewed discourse promoting coexistence between humans and wildlife.

“This is my second life,” Ammini whispered with panic on her face as she described her narrow escape during an elephant attack on a morning in 2017. Ammini is from the Aralam tribal Resettlement Area in Kannur district, Kerala, where elephants have claimed 16 lives in the past nine years. The elephant in the above incident appeared out of nowhere and started walking towards Ammini. “I do not remember anything that happened afterwards,” she tearfully recalled. The 55-year-old woman was found with serious injuries, lying on the ground, with a deep wound on her chest. Medical investigations revealed that the wounds were caused by either the elephant’s tusks or a stump on the ground. It took two months of intensive medical care to restore her health. When I met her in 2023, five years after the incident, Ammini was still traumatised both physically and psychologically. The tension in the relationship between humans and wildlife is becoming increasingly evident in Kerala with each passing day. The handbook published to address the issue of human–wildlife conflict by the Government of Kerala recorded 105 deaths in 2023–24 due to wildlife attacks in the financial year. The frequency and intensity of the conflict increased towards the end of 2024. In 33 days, from 14 December 2024 to 15 January 2025, seven people lost their lives in various elephant attacks in Kerala (Government of Kerala 2022, 2024).

The rising incidence of elephant attacks over the past few years has raised concerns about the survival of local communities settled in the forest’s peripheral areas. Fending off animal attacks has become a top priority for those living in high-risk areas. Essentially, the state is caught in a cleft between safeguarding the lives and livelihood of the people and protecting the region’s biodiversity. This study highlights the experiences and concerns of local people who rely solely on marginal farming for their subsistence and whose lives have become miserable due to a strained relationship with wild animals.

Reflecting on the human and non-human dynamics, it may be reiterated that it is impossible to fully prepare for the constant changes experienced by both kinds of entities in terms of evolution and development. Thus, the unprecedented changes humans face with the environment prompt them to consider the future of human existence, leading to various ways of protecting the environment from further damage, conserving biodiversity, and pursuing sustainable development practices. Worldwide, environmentalism is recognised as a school of

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thought that advocates for raising environmental consciousness among stakeholders from all backgrounds at local, national, and global levels. Often, its broader acceptance is hindered by the harsh reality of conflicts between wildlife and humans living on the edges of forested areas. Generally, these are impoverished communities that end up bearing the unintended consequences of conservation efforts.

The discourses surrounding the human–wildlife confrontations tend to follow two kinds of patterns. They either end in the form of emotional outbursts from the victims or end up spewing theoretical rhetoric that is far removed from real-life experiences. The state's conservation policies and programmes are primarily implemented through a top-down strategy (Münster and Münster 2012: 46), which contrasts with the situations in spaces of human–wildlife interaction. The inadequacies of the approaches employed by the state and the representatives of other regulatory entities in such locations lead to antagonism between the local communities and the state. Such a situation requires that the currently prevalent environmentalist discourses be critically re-examined and applied on the ground to fairly assess the actual intricacies of the human–animal interaction in forest areas.

Research Setting

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Aralam Tribal Resettlement Area of the Kannur district in Kerala between 1 January 2023 and 30 June 2023 this paper sheds light on the persistence of an unbridgeable chasm between the plight of forest area residents and the impractical activist interventions aimed at preserving the wildlife. To comprehend the lived experience of the resettled tribal communities, it is essential to accurately understand the historical context of the conflict zones.

In 2007, the Government of Kerala implemented the Resettlement Project at Aralam pursuant to an agreement with landless tribal families who have been campaigning for the restoration of expropriated land for decades (Sreerekha 2010). However, after decades of landlessness, the resettlement measures intended to promote self-reliance among these tribal families proved especially arduous for these tribal families, a hardship compounded by their exposure to wild animal attacks in the Aralam Tribal Resettlement Area. The experiences and perspectives underscoring these resettled families' struggle for survival were elicited through informal interviews, formal interviews with key informants, direct observation, and focus group discussions. Household visits and interactions with labourers at various workplaces brought forth narratives of life-threatening encounters stemming from increasing wildlife attacks. These concerns also led to several protests, demanding urgent state intervention.

In early 2024, when six lives were lost in Wayanad district within a span of 45 days, widespread protests were carried out by the farmers and people living in proximity to the forests, demanding immediate state intervention to mitigate the conflict. The people expressed their anguish in various forms—in some places, the dead bodies of the deceased were

carried to the protest sites; the carcass of a cow that a tiger mauled was tied to a forest department vehicle; and a funeral wreath was placed on another forest department vehicle, signifying the department and state failure to ensure the security of the people (The Hindu Bureau 2024a).

Every time a casualty occurs, it precipitates intense media debate and public reactions around the causes of conflict, mitigation strategies, the state's role, environmental changes, animal rights, and farmers' rights. The arguments broadly emanate from two perspectives. Those advocating for farmers' rights criticise the state for its failure to prevent the conflict and for not taking the initiative to remove the problem-causing animal from the residential area, whereas environmentalists argue that this conflict is a consequence of human presence in the habitat of wild animals. The latter's solution proposes that either such areas be depopulated so that the animals can live in peace, or that people coexist with wild animals. These opposing viewpoints come to the fore through campaigns, media discussions, social media activism, and agitations. The environmentalist narrative, supported by the fear of impending environmental degradation and the rhetoric of compassion for the animals, has gained precedence over the under-represented marginal farmer's story. A comprehensive understanding of this predicament necessitates an examination of the historical dynamics of the human–animal relationship.

Historical Overview of the Conflict

As human societies transitioned from hunter-gatherer modes of life into settled agriculture, they domesticated and utilised animals to support their survival and advancement. The animals that became friendly over time became domestic animals, and those that did not conform to human control remained "wild" animals. Mythologies, folk tales, cave paintings, stone carvings, and cultural symbols represent these relationships (Nyhus 2016). The main concerns of early communities when they relocated and established settlements were access to food, safety, and better living conditions. This food included animal meat, while better living conditions necessitated security and comfort, which naturally led to the control of predatory animals and harmful insects. Additionally, the presence of animals played a key role in determining the locations that developed into distinct cultures. According to Nyhus (2016: 143),

People compete with wildlife for food and resources, and have eradicated dangerous species; coopted and domesticated valuable species; and applied a wide range of social, behavioural, and technical approaches to reduce negative interactions with wildlife.

In contrast with the relatively close interaction with herbivores, the carnivores and large-bodied mammals were constantly battling for space and food. Search for food and security necessitated this fight during the hunter-gatherer and subsequent settled agriculture phases. The battle continues in the current phase, however, in a different form. Human communities tend to struggle and clash with each other over cultural, economic, and political issues. The entry of any kind of wild animal in this set-up will undeniably lead to the

escalation of conflict. This continuous conflict throughout the history of humankind has led to the extinction and reduction of numerous species, countless human deaths, and economic losses (Nyhus 2016: 143). The abundance of research on human-wildlife conflict (Bhatia et al 2020) attests that it remains one of humanity's major concerns today.

The highlands of Kerala constitute some of the major sites of human-wildlife conflict marked by one of the most intensive ongoing struggles for ecological space. The recent history of this region has presented a greater number of instances of land appropriation compared to other areas. The residents of these highlands are small-scale farmers who migrated from the low and midlands of the Travancore region between the 1920s and the 1960s (Varghese 2016; Joseph 2008). The post-World War II food scarcity intensified the movement, and it was further encouraged by the state during the "Grow More Food Campaign" (Suneesh 2016). The settlers cultivated the uncultivated land that provided an ecological habitat for diverse life forms. Consequently, crop raiding by the animals and their attack on humans became major obstacles in turning this forestland into a peaceful settlement. Besides, hunting became a major source of food for the settlers (Joseph 2008: 1180).

The midlands and lowlands were not devoid of this conflict either. The only difference was in terms of the pattern, and the species involved mostly lived in waterbodies. Vinil Paul, studying the local history of a village named Manchadikkari in the midlands of Kerala, states that the local history of Manchadikkari is the history of crocodiles killing people and people killing crocodiles (Paul 2022: 51).

Similarly, in a study on the sacred groves of Malabar, Freeman (1999) elaborates upon his experience of interviewing many of the older inhabitants of the highlands, who recalled a time when their subsistence was derived exclusively from a combination of swidden agriculture and hunting, a way of life that was empowering and plenteous but vanished from contemporary India. The settler farmers I interacted with also mentioned that hunting was widely practised, as part of which venomous reptiles were killed on sight, and monkeys were driven off to the interior forest to protect crops and human lives. A phrase that many of them reiterate as they recollect the migration episode is *malyodum, malampampinodum maleriyodum kattumrugangalodum padavettianu njangal ivide jeevichathu*, it translates as—"We lived here fighting with mountains, pythons, malaria, and wild animals."

To them, the only possible way of ensuring steady food production was to push these life forms away from cultivation. Consequently, the highlands, constituting a segment of the Western Ghats in Kerala that originally served as a natural habitat sustaining various forms of wildlife, transformed into a cultural space inhabited by farmers. The study posits that every existing human settlement, irrespective of its geographical location, will have a story of directly or indirectly exploiting the environment, disturbing the wildlife habitat, and overpowering other life forms.

The "environmental crisis" has become a major topic of debate in modern academia and activism. The environmental

discourse strongly emphasises the relationship with animals and the development of modern conservation ethics based on this connection. A challenge faced by these treatises is the distortion of the history of the human-animal relationship, particularly with reference to the history of agriculture and its deeply rooted connection with the non-human world.

Departure from History and the Contemporary Narrative

The current human-wildlife conflict needs to be addressed within the framework of ecological modernity that has emerged in the wake of the expansion of agriculture, urbanisation, transformation of landownership into a form of long-term investment, massive expansion of tourism, and the contemporary environmentalist movements and state-led conservation policies (Münster and Münster 2012). The emergence of this modernity has undergone many environmental shifts. Marginal farming communities near wildlife habitats and urban populations not directly reliant on agricultural livelihoods are situated at opposite ends of the spectrum, and their perceptions of wildlife and conservation policies differ depending on their geographical location. The environmental costs of capital-intensive urbanisation are often overlooked, especially when it comes to the rural farmer's demand for the removal of the problematic wild animals from the residential area. Furthermore, conservation ethics tend to prioritise animal rights over the plight of the farmers confronting problematic wildlife.

A key question when addressing currently pressing issues is whether humans have ever truly occupied a separate space in nature. The question stems from the argument that humans are among the species that appeared on earth at a later juncture, and they have appropriated territories once occupied by other species. Additionally, the observations of Greenough (2001: 141), drawn from the analysis of the emerging environmental narrative, serve as a useful measure in evaluating our understanding of the human-animal relationship. He refers to this as the "standard environmental narrative" and considers it "flawed by its failure to take into account the historical reality of violence between humans and wild animals and by its ignorance of the devastating victory of humans over wild animals in the past fifty years."

Similarly, the Greenough describes the "standard environmental narrative" as the emerging scholarly consensus that,

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over the past 120 years, has portrayed a shift from a state of harmony, distributive justice, and material abundance in rural India to one characterised by ecological disruption, profound social inequality, and widespread suffering. The preference for flora over fauna, termed “vegetal bias,” is another limitation of the standard environmental narrative.

The cultural and religious significance of specific locations like hilltops, sacred rivers, sacred places, and sacred groves, and the use of symbols that are connected to immediate surroundings, highlights the deep connection of South Asian communities with nature.

Despite the inherent respect for nature and primacy accorded to conservation, such perspectives do not adequately address the problems ensuing from conflicts with animals over survival. In this context, Freeman (1999) deconstructs many romanticised assumptions based on the socio-economic factors that guided the society of the previous centuries in his study of the sacred groves (*kavus*) in northern Kerala. In popular imagination, these groves are iconic cultural symbols of the deep harmony of human beings with the environment. At the same time, Freeman (1999: 275) refers to different *teyyam* performances of these groves that are linked to hunting and killing animals as part of rituals, to reveal the often-ignored stressful side of the human–animal relationship. While cultural narratives foreground harmonious relationships with the vegetal world, they simultaneously obscure the historical conflicts humans have had with animals. The connection between the human and non-human life forms is no less permeated by ideas of spiritual exchange and moral causation than it is between plants and humans as explicated by Vandana Shiva, Ram Guha, Madhav Gadgil, and other advocates of the standard environmental narrative (Greenough 2001: 160).

Amid popular references to pre-capitalist Hindu culture, especially indigenous practices that promote harmony with the environment, Freeman (1999) and Greenough (2001) shed light on another perspective. Freeman draws evidence from the *teyyam* performances, which are indigenous ritualistic acts closely linked to hunting for self-defence, ritual hunting, and animal sacrifice. The dominant sentiment in the *teyyam* songs is not one of reverence or gratitude towards nature but reflects the struggle of gaining a livelihood from the land, along with concerns about the dangers—both natural and supernatural—that accompany this process (Freeman 1999: 274).

During the fieldwork, the members of the *Kurichiya* indigenous community at Aralam remembered the days of swidden agriculture during which their major task was to watch out for wild animals raiding their cultivated lands once the seeds were sown. Their hunting, thus, was survival-driven. Binu, a participant, noted,

We do not hunt nowadays because forest laws prohibit it; if we could kill those that raid and destroy the crop, we could have a better economic condition.¹

The response of one of the participants, Santosh, also aligned with Freeman's (1999) study, as he stated that hunting “was part of our rituals. We had to offer meat for the deity that

we get through hunting.”² There were exclusive *teyyam* performances related to hunting, and many *teyyam* songs invoke deities of hunting (Freeman 1999: 278).

Greenough (2001: 154) cites that the Mughals and the colonial administration sought the help of tribal hunters when wild animals pressed too hard on peasant cultivation. Their services were eagerly solicited, and local officials and elites offered them honours, land, money and specific titles, “Preeminent among them were *baghmaras*, or tiger killers, who were called upon by landlords and even kings to rid their territories of ferocious beasts.” As previously stated, the majority of the victims of animal attacks in Kerala are from tribal communities (Varghese 2023).

Lived Reality in Fringe Zones

A lack of economic resources to resist animals or make an adequate living from non-agricultural sources makes these locations more vulnerable to conflicts, further affecting their social life. Fieldwork observations indicated that some villagers exhibited a greater degree of compassion and tolerance towards animals involved in conflict situations, for they attributed such incursions to the depletion of food resources within the forest habitats. However, these villagers are left with no options but to defend their cultivation so that their family does not go hungry. Mukherjee (2009) argues that the peasants' conflict with animals does not stem solely from hunting, but from resistance as a survival strategy, an insight that underscores this tense rural scenario. The sociocultural and economic conditions in the fringe zones located on the peripheries of the wildlife habitats are unique. Therefore, the relationship between animals and humans should be viewed differently as a farmer–wildlife interaction.

Conversations with the study participants in Aralam revealed the precarious living conditions of the local farmers in conflict-prone regions. Shinto,³ a farmer in his late 30s has had many encounters with elephants in his locality, which is 6 kilometres away from the forest. While engaged in rubber tapping for latex on an early morning, he saw an elephant facing him just a few meters ahead. Fortunately, he could sprint away and save himself in the nick of time. Even though it has been three years since the encounter, he has not entirely recovered and exhibits lingering signs of trauma. Such recurring incidents render life in these areas precarious with profound implications for mental well-being and livelihood security.

Soman, a 56-year-old man from the Aralam resettlement area, recounted his narrow escape from an especially mischievous elephant. On his way to the community water tank to supply water to the nearby households, Soman was once chased by an elephant. Familiar with the elephant manoeuvre in his premises for a long time, he gathered all his courage and somehow managed to climb the ladder and get to the top of the tank. In the gap of just a few seconds, the elephant grabbed the ladder and threw it away. Fortunately, Soman carried his mobile phone and rang the forest department and the neighbours for help. Soman remembered, “The elephant was moving around the tank premises angrily.” He

was chased and attacked by the elephant, albeit without provocation. The persistent fear of animal attacks compels farmers to seek new income-generating opportunities away from the region. Consequently, the youngsters are also encouraged to migrate overseas. Those who reside in this area are severely traumatised by these clashes and the resulting casualties. In their study focusing on the impact of the human–elephant conflict on people's well-being, Jadhav and Barua (2012: 1361) observe:

conflicts aggravate pre-existing problems such as poverty and poor mental health. Fatality from elephant attacks results in domino effects that multiply extant family conflicts and untreated mental disorders, including alcoholism. They generate newer psychiatric morbidities and impact on maternal health.

After being regularly attacked by animals and living with the horrific memories of the onslaught, the quality of life of these people has deteriorated dramatically. Therefore, the interventions addressing these issues must be unbiased, rational and humane.

Furthermore, sleep deprivation and the resulting decline in mental health caused by the hostile environment further worsen the situation. Protecting crops from wild animals is also known to lead to extreme fatigue and higher alcohol consumption among adults (Barua et al 2013: 312). Feeling hopeless about a better life, unable to relocate in search of work, and facing constant threats of attack have driven the impoverished farmers further into alcoholism, bringing with it various social problems. Sometimes, their inability to afford liquor from state-owned stores forces them to produce arrack or locally distilled toxic drinks, which pose a crisis for both humans and wildlife. At Aralam, there have been instances where elephants have raided local alcohol production sites, consumed the distilled liquor, and caused destruction.

Left with no other options to keep the animals away from cultivation, especially the elephants, the farmers stop defending their land and gradually develop a passive acceptance. According to the records of TRDM Aralam (Tribal Rehabilitation and Development Mission), out of the 3,300 landless tribal families who were resettled at Aralam and given ownership of one-acre land, more than 1,500 families left the allotted land when they realised that neither their lives nor their livelihoods would ever be secure there. Displacements such as these are followed by social ruptures in kinship bonds and family support, leading to a further increase in stress levels (Barua et al 2013: 311). The study also proposes that cases such as those of Soman, Shinto, and others are no longer isolated incidents and require immediate psychological and material intervention.

Situating Farmers in Conservation Ethics

It has been observed that 88 species belonging to nine taxonomic groups are involved in human–wildlife conflict, although research has focused on only certain species and regions (Anand and Radhakrishna 2017: 154). This is particularly true for animals affected by conflicts in the highlands of Kerala. Following recent incidents in Kerala, environmentalists and conservationists strongly advocate for animals' rights,

especially elephants, tigers, gaurs, peacocks, and other species that cause major concerns for farmers. However, while recognising the cultural and aesthetic significance of these animals, environmentalists often overlook the difficult lives of poor rural communities, who remain largely under-represented in environmental discourses. When a rogue elephant in the Idukki district of Kerala posed a problem for the local community, the government decided to translocate the animal to the interior forest in 2023. Large numbers of environmentalists gathered and opposed the move both online and in person.

Unfortunately, many such entities disregard the situation where the less privileged live under the constant fear of being attacked by animals (Varghese 2023: 89). Similarly, there was a widespread debate over a pregnant elephant's death by biting into an explosive that was a suspected trap for wild boars in the residential area in the Malappuram district of Kerala in 2020. Celebrities, environmentalists, and union ministers promptly sprang to action, critiquing the incident as cruel and even went on to politicise and communalise it (Ramkumar 2021: 105). The contemporary environmentalist discourses, especially those that follow the human–wildlife confrontations, exhibit a social binary where environmentalists and the people living on the peripheries of wildlife habitats are on opposing sides. The former labels the latter as the encroachers of the animal habitat and blames them for the human–wildlife struggle.

The romanticised notion of privileged urban leisure seekers to “refresh and recharge” in a rustic or rural setting is one of the main reasons why these biased narratives get amplified. During a break from the hustle and bustle of urban life, seeing wildlife and greenery is a significant leisure activity, further sentimentalising a life with these animals. According to the people living close to Aralam Wildlife Sanctuary, the frequent entry of nature enthusiasts into the forest and protected areas disturbs wildlife habitat, often leading to harmful retaliatory behaviour from the animals, the brunt of which is borne by those who are consistently in proximity to these areas. Communities residing in the forest peripheries are the primary witnesses and sufferers of these behavioural changes. Thus, the urban conceptions of wildlife and the countryside significantly impact the current human–wildlife conflict and the responses towards it. In addition, the revenues earned through these individual visits and tourist activities are taken by the respective state agencies managing the forests and the conservation efforts, thereby ignoring the socio-economic needs of these localities. Hence, such policies often raised criticism among pro-human conservationists (Mukherjee 2009: 53).

Reasons for Present-day Conflict

The practice of segregating spaces of humans and animals adopted in developing countries for the purpose of conservation is based on the model of Yellowstone National Park in America (Mukherjee 2009: 53). The conflicts being addressed in this discussion take place outside segregated spaces for animals. As a result, the animals that enter the residential areas and cultivated lands of humans are blamed as intruders. Members of the local communities at Aralam assume that the animals come out of

the forest because they do not have adequate prey, forage and water inside the forest. According to them, animals are also attracted to standing crops in the farming field and prefer this readily available forage. Therefore, the farming area provides easy access to food through the course of animals' strenuous search for edible vegetation (Anoop and Mohan 2024). The introduction of monoculture through plantation agriculture by the state is one of the major causes of food scarcity and disturbance in the animal habitat (Münster and Münster 2012; Anoop and Mohan 2024). The topographical alterations due to the expansion of the human population and the increased competition for food and other resources turned the human–animal relationship acrimonious.

The increase in agriculture, urbanisation, transportation networks, energy production, and leisure activities are the other factors that significantly influence the wildlife habitat. On a larger scale, the changing climatic conditions also adversely affect the forest environment and food availability. Citing state wildlife enumeration reports in Kerala, Alex Ozhukayil, the chairperson of the Kerala Independent Farmers Association (KIFA), argues that over the years, the wildlife population has gradually increased, especially the Asian elephants and wild boars. On the basis of the wildlife enumeration report of the past years, he stated that since the animal population exceeds the carrying capacity of the designated protected areas, animals tend to find new territories, such as farming fields.⁵ Another perspective shared by the affected people is that, unlike in the past, wildlife protection laws impose stricter restrictions on preventing crop-raiding by animals through various methods. However, measures were not implemented to prevent animals from entering residential areas. Conflict occurs when animals enter the residential area in search of food.

Coexistence: A Practical Solution?

Even though the term “human–animal conflict” has become standard for cases advocating a balance between the resource demands of humans and wildlife, it is inherently problematic because, given traditional definitions of conflict, it positions wildlife as conscious human antagonists (Peterson et al 2010: 74). A term frequently used by environmentalists and scholars is “Co-existence” (Peterson et al 2010; Nyhus 2016; Thekaekara et al 2021). A close view of the conflict sites in Kerala reveals that wild animals, especially carnivorous and large-bodied herbivorous like elephants and guars, are perceived as threats to life and livelihoods based on local communities' direct experiences. Advocates of coexistence promote the idea of shared spaces for animals and humans, rejecting segregation. Simplistic barriers or deterrents designed to separate these spaces may have long-term negative effects, making people less willing to share space (Thekaekara et al 2021: 15).

From current conflict situations, it is clear that achieving peaceful coexistence is a long process and citizens, regardless of their location, must share the responsibility for it. Alex Ozhukayil emphasises that in specific contexts characterised by tense human–wildlife relationships, confrontations should

be regarded as “wildlife attacks” rather than human–wildlife interactions or conflicts since farmers are often incapable of resisting the animals, who easily overpower humans.⁶

Farmers resort to lethal measures when various non-lethal methods fail to stop the animals from entering their fields. As a resident of the Aralam locality, I directly witnessed the conflict situations and the farmers' responses to them. To keep animals from exiting the Aralam Wildlife Sanctuary, an electric fence was installed first; however, elephants destroyed it by felling large trees. Subsequently, the state government built an elephant-proof wall, which was completely toppled by these powerful animals. As elephants and other wild animals began roaming freely into residential areas, farmers tried using audio devices with frightening noises and installed bright lights in the field. But neither of these methods prevented the animals from their cultivation. Although the animals stayed away for a few days, they eventually returned to the cultivated areas. Farmers installed various types of lights in some locations, but to no avail. Despite these attempts, 16 lives were lost, along with the destruction of crops, several houses and cattle sheds. Most people in this location belonged to tribal communities that hold on to the common belief of “co-existing with wild animals,” which is a core part of their identity.

The environmentalist movement emerged in Western civilisation precisely because there was proof of how highly destructive its technologies and policies could be to the natural environment (Freeman 1999: 295). Similarly, the idea of coexistence has its origins in academic and environmentalist discourses. It gained wide acceptance among environmentalists and conservation activists. When I mentioned the possibility of coexistence to the participant Shanto, a graduate in his 30s, he asked whether the proponents of this idea can definitively prove that the local people can share the habitat with these animals for a longer duration, rather than their limited days of field visits when these experts observe the conflict as outsiders.⁷ The first step in the implementation of the coexistence paradigm should be the mitigation of the ongoing conflict and addressing the economic vulnerability of the local communities. Otherwise, in the name of the coexistence models, it will only create greater misery in the lives of the marginalised people. Unless the local communities are provided with viable alternatives for subsistence, security from carnivores, and safeguards against territorial wildlife, coexistence will remain a theoretical ideal.

Drawing parallels between the coexistence of selectively trained pets or domesticated animals and that of wild animals risks producing an unrealistic understanding of human–wildlife relationships in the forest-fringe areas. Obviously, animals are incapable of producing a moral consideration necessary to cultivate a sense of restraint like a rational being who thinks twice before committing a destructive act (EPW Editorial 2023: 9). Studies indicate that human responses to wildlife differ across individuals and communities, species, cultures, and over time (Bhatia et al 2019; Thekaekara et al 2021). Therefore, it is important to define coexistence in rational terms and to deepen our understanding

of the complex and interrelated biological, social, economic, political, and cultural factors that ultimately determine why some regions and species may be more amenable to human-wildlife coexistence than others, while simultaneously question the long-term viability of coexistence as a concept and constraints to its realisation (Nyhus 2016: 163).

The coexistence of agriculture with wildlife, as envisioned by conservation biology, remains far from practical in fringe zones surrounding wildlife habitats. Therefore, it could be argued that the government, as the third party, is ethically obliged to intervene in the conflict, acting on behalf of the animals, and taking a moral initiative by compensating the farmers for their agricultural losses (EPW Editorial 2023: 9).

Need for Urgent State Intervention

The increase in deaths due to wild animal attacks has understandably resulted in considerable anguish among residents, and their anger was directed towards the government and forest officials. It is not difficult to imagine that both immediate and long-term measures must be taken to minimise, if not eliminate, human-wildlife conflicts in Kerala and other forest areas (EPW Editorial 2023: 9). As the responsible agency for the citizens' welfare and guardian of the right to a dignified life, the state needs to urgently intervene by introducing practical alternatives for wildlife management. Recent incidents in Kerala have revealed that existing administrative mechanisms and top-down conservation strategies neither ensure the protection of the local people nor effectively

mitigate human-wildlife conflict. Many fatalities could have been avoided had the state taken cognisance of past incidents and acted in time.

Though the effectiveness of the conservation model of keeping wild animals in fortified protected areas is debated, creating boundaries is unavoidable in locations where the conflict is severe and the farmers' lives are at stake. At Aralam, the decision for the construction of the elephant-proof wall was taken only after sustained agitation by the local people following the deaths of 14 people in elephant attacks. The government sanctioned ₹53 crore to construct the wall around the Aralam Wildlife Sanctuary, and the construction began in December 2023.

Despite the forest department's recent attempts at conflict mitigation methods like capturing the animals that are identified with conflicting behaviours, constantly tracking their movements by fastening radio collars, and translocating them from residential areas, the problem was not solved, as these radio-collared and translocated animals would appear in unexpected locations. Besides, these measures are strenuous and often risky for the people involved. An incident where a radio-collared elephant appeared in Manathavadi city in Wayanad district caused panic among the public (The Hindu Bureau 2024b). This confirms that animal behaviour is often unpredictable, and they are capable of adapting to new patterns.

A practical and permanent mitigation plan is yet to be identified and implemented—one that ensures citizens' right to a dignified life while simultaneously making space for wildlife.

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Depending upon the availability, data-sets are provided month-wise and quarter-wise at the All-India and State levels, starting from 2003.

In terms of state budget allocations, this should be accorded the same priority as national defence and other developmental projects. As an alternative to the barrier method, though the concept of a buffer zone around the protected areas was proposed and endorsed by the Supreme Court (2022), the proposal faced staunch opposition from those living in vulnerable locations, pointing out that it would only lead to more human casualties and huge crop depredation. In areas severely affected by human-wildlife conflict, the local people's discontent with the state's inaction led them to raise funds and install hanging electric fences on their own. The fortification of protected areas and wild animal habitats highly prone to conflicts remains essential until the residents of adjoining human settlements located here are economically, culturally, and socially equipped to transition to viable alternatives.

The nationwide implementation of conservation policies must be complemented by region-specific strategies that meaningfully engage with the local experiences and account for the economic and ecological distinctiveness of the relationship between wildlife and forest-based and forest-adjacent communities. In order to provide a common platform for expertise from multiple streams and local knowledge, it is necessary that the state frame a long-term participatory model for wildlife conservation while ensuring the security of human life and livelihood. Madhav Gadgil, the chairperson of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, favours this idea and suggests that licensed hunting should be allowed outside India's

national parks (Sreejith 2023). As per the newspaper report, "Gadgil asked: 'When a human is found to be a threat, necessary action is taken as per relevant sections of the IPC. Then why not kill a wild animal if it poses a threat to your life?'" Gadgil also demanded scrapping the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WPA), 1972, and bringing in new legislation" (Sreejith 2023). Likewise, various farmers' organisations demand the immediate removal of the problem-causing wild animals in residential areas.

It is important to mention the remarkable efforts of various governmental and non-governmental organisations in raising public awareness about environmental issues. However, these activities must adequately highlight the difficult condition of those living on the periphery. Environmental justice can be achieved only when the lives of the people directly dependent on the environment are given equal consideration. The right to a dignified life for the farmers in conflict zones must not be undermined by the loud voices of conservationists. The responsibility and cost of conservation must be equitably shared among all citizens, regardless of their geographical locations. In our pursuit of a greener and more sustainable future, we should not overlook the resistance of the past, whether it was against wild animals to create human settlements or the ongoing efforts of people to resist. Our approaches towards conservation and development must account for the complexities of the historical and current state of human-wildlife relationships.

NOTES

- 1 Field interview conducted on 20 February 2023 at Aralam, Kannur.
- 2 Field interview conducted on 23 February 2023 at Aralam, Kannur.
- 3 Field interview conducted on 10 April 2023 at Aralam, Kannur.
- 4 Field interview conducted on 23 April 2023 at Aralam, Kannur.
- 5 Field interview conducted on 15 March 2024 at Ezhakkad, Palakkad.
- 6 Field interview conducted on 15 March 2024 at Ezhakkad, Palakkad.
- 7 Field interview conducted on 5 March 2023 at Aralam, Kannur.

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