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FOREST RIGHTS

Tamil Nadu ban on grazing inside sanctuary threatens livelihood of Adivasis, forest inhabitants

The restrictions violate the Forest Rights Act and will hinder conservation of indigenous cattle breeds.

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A herd of Alambadi breed cattle drink water from water tubs constructed by the village panchayat of Koothapadi-Kulatharampatti Vanam. | D Muniraj for Mongabay

Residents of Bargur Hills in Tamil Nadu's Erode district continue to have their livelihoods at risk after the declaration of the Thanthai Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary and the 2022 Madras High Court's ban on cattle grazing in the forest areas.

Desan, 61, from the Oorali tribe, says that he has had to sell eight of his Bargur breed cows to meet his emergency needs. "If they do not allow my cattle to graze in the forests, I cannot afford to buy fodder for my cows," he adds. "I will be forced to sell off whatever few cows I have left."





Madhu 51, a professional cattle caretaker, rests his herd of Alambadi breed cattle under the shady trees in a village near the forest fringes in Dharmapuri District. Credit: D Muniraj for Mongabay.

Grazing cattle has traditionally been a major source of livelihood, particularly for forest dwelling communities. In March 2022, the Madras High Court [banned](#) domesticated cattle from grazing in forest areas in response to a July 2020 public interest petition filed by G Thirumurugan, a conservationist.

He had only sought a ban on grazing in the Meghamalai Wildlife Division and Sanctuary, a part of the Srivilliputhur-Meghamalai Tiger Reserve, alleging the risk of transmission of diseases from domesticated cattle to wildlife, and destruction of grasslands.

However, the court later extended the ban to the entire 22,877 square kilometres of forest area in the state. This was done under the provisions related to restricted entry in sanctuaries under the [Wildlife \(Protection\) Act, 1972](#), and on cattle trespass under the Tamil Nadu Forest Act, 1882.

Residents' demands

Desan is one of the few to receive land ownership granted to traditional forest inhabitants under the Forest Rights Act 2006. In February, residents of Bargur Hills [protested outside the Tahsildar's office](#) in Anthiyur town of Erode district, demanding recognition of their rights and re-examining of the ban.

“As tribals, we respect the forest by observing traditional practices, which are beneficial and harmless to the forest and wildlife,” says 90-year-old Arapali, from the Doli forest village in Bargur Hills. He, too, was part of the protest.

“Our cattle protect the forests from fires, as they consume the grass which, if left to grow, dries and burns when the temperature rises,” he adds. “For what they consume, they give back in the form of dung which enriches the soil and helps in vegetation.”

Rajiv Gandhi, President of the Federation of Tamil Nadu Pastoralists, says that it’s not only the lives of the marginalised cattle owners, and forest ecology that are at stake, but it’s also a way of life. “The Tamil Nadu people’s cultural ethos and a long-term sustainable rural occupational are in jeopardy, too.”





The Bargur breed cattle, an endangered, medium-sized hilly cattle breed reared in the Bargur hills of Anthiyur Taluk in Erode District, Tamil Nadu. Image courtesy of Tamil Nadu Tribal People's Organisation via Mongabay.

According to the [Livestock Census](#), the number of native cattle breeds in Tamil Nadu such as Bargur, Kangayam, Pulikulam, Alambadi, Umbalacherry, and Malaimadu, which have distinctive genetics and are important drought animals for local agriculture, has decreased to a few thousand between 2013 and 2019.

The central government's conservation efforts were prompted by a sharp decline in these breeds, while exotic breeds increased. Indigenous breeds, known for their drought potential, disease resistance and adaptability, are vital for organic farming

due to their grazing in forests with mixed eating habits and dung, [according to a study on Bargur cattle.](#)

The cultural significance of these breeds was evident in the historic 2017 Jallikattu protests against the Supreme Court ban on the traditional bull-taming sport, viewed as crucial for preserving native cattle. The protests led to the ban's reversal through a special ordinance in 2017 and the establishment of exclusive research centres for the conservation of each native breed.

While breeds such as Alambadi and Malaimadu still await official recognition, in 2019, the foundation stone was laid for a research centre for the Alambadi cattle in the Karimangalam Taluka of Dharmapuri district, as the population had reduced to a mere [5,273](#) in its native tract.

Conservation efforts

Experts say that the ban on grazing has led to a hindrance in conservation efforts. For the Bargur cattle breed, the population in its native tract had dropped from 95,400 in 1977 to 46,600 in 1982, and steeply reduced to just 12,106 during the 2013 count, with fewer than 10,000 pure breedable females. The Bargur Cattle Research Station's programmes saw a sharp rise with 42,300 during the 2019 [national livestock survey-breed wise census.](#)

Ganapathy, the research centre head, says that he advocates for the cattle owners to switch to a backyard dairy model, in order to sustain the livestock amid increased restrictions on grazing in forests.

“In order to support the poor cattle owners’ transition smoothly, we are promoting new income sources through marketing of milk-based products and dung (the native cattle’s dung is a potent manure used widely in organic farming),” he adds.



Forest dwellers protest against the notification of the Thandhai Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary at Andhiyur, demanding recognition of the traditional rights of the people under the 2006 Forest Rights Act. Image courtesy of Tamil Nadu Tribal People’s Organisation via Mongabay.

According to the Alambadi Cattle Breed Research Centre in Dharmapuri district, the Alambadi breed of cows native to the Pennagaram taluka in Dharmapuri; Denkanikottai and Hosur in Krishnagiri district have their germplasm in a state of deterioration.

“Earlier, farmers used to rear two pairs of breedable females, and are now held only by herd owners,” says to S Vasantha Kumar, Associate Professor and Head of the Alambadi research centre.

Asaithambi, a 51-year-old professional herd owner of Alambadi cows in Dharmapuri district says that their primary source of income depends on cattle rearing.

“With restrictions tightening, we face uncertainty,” he says. “We sell a full-grown female cow for Rs 20,000 to Rs 30,000 in the cattle shandies, but with dwindling opportunities (cattle being replaced by tractors for ploughing and exotic breeds for milk), our livelihood is under threat.”

The road ahead

The notification that created the Sanctuary concedes that the rights admitted under the Tamil Nadu Forest Act 1882 – a time when forests were reserved – and those conferred under the Forest Rights Act 2006 “shall remain and continue to be enjoyed by the persons concerned,” says CR Bijoy, a researcher and activist. “Cattle grazing is one of the main community rights claims under the FRA,” he says.

Meanwhile, experts blame the tardy implementation of the Forest Rights Act in Tamil Nadu for the situation. Forests in Tamil Nadu cover 26,419 square kilometre, 20.3% of the state’s total area, with protected areas comprising around 6%. Five National Parks and 34 sanctuaries make up around 6% of the state. Five Tiger Reserves have been established within these areas. The Western Ghat hills and Eastern Ghat hills have diverse vegetation, and cattle grazing has been established

for centuries. Pastoral communities practice transhumance and settled grazing.

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According to Bijoy, only in Tamil Nadu has grazing inside the forests been banned by the courts. “This ban on grazing being near total in Tamil Nadu [contradicts the FRA’s intent](#) to empower local governance through gram sabhas of forest villages, setting a precedent that could undermine forest rights across India,” adds Bijoy.

“The court has not considered two major laws enacted in 2006 to protect forests, wildlife, and biodiversity. The Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 amendment made tiger reserves a statutory category and prescribed notifications for their establishment. The core area in the critical tiger habitat was to be established without affecting the rights of Scheduled Tribes or other forest dwellers. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (FRA 2006) recognised grazing and seasonal resource access of nomadic or pastoralist communities as a community right. However, only a paltry 0.4% of the recorded forest area of Tamil Nadu has been granted for individual right titles.”





A forest patrol vehicle with the name of the newly notified Thandhai Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary painted on the sides, creating awareness about the rules for forest dwellers in a wildlife sanctuary. Image courtesy of Tamil Nadu Tribal People's Organisation via Mongabay.

Bijoy further says that according to the latest data (2021), of the 1,082 claims for community rights received in Tamil Nadu, including that for grazing, 450 titles had been issued and 86 claims had been rejected. “But the area recognised and entitled to the gram sabha has never been reported.”

VP Gunasekaran, President, Tamil Nadu Tribal People's Association, says that the Forest Department neglected mandatory rights assessment formalities prior to the Thanthai Periyar Wildlife sanctuary's notification. “The creation of sanctuaries must align with the principles of the Forest Rights Act to ensure the protection of indigenous communities' rights.”

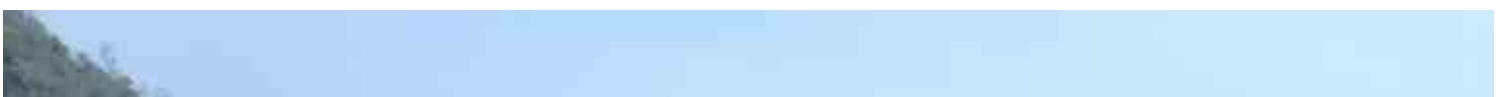
Gandhi says that the restrictions on grazing in forests in Tamil Nadu's Sivagangai and Virudhunagar districts are affecting the Pulikulam native breed cattle. Pastoralism, though a traditional way of life, hasn't been officially recognised.

“However, over 50 lakh people in Tamil Nadu rely on it. The loss of grazing lands due fragmentation and shrinking of grasslands, village common property resources and restrictions on traditional forest grazing rights has forced many pastoralists to switch livelihoods, leading to decreased income for remaining cattle owners.”

Grazing 'buffer zones'

Venkatesh Babu, district forest officer, Nilgiris district (former district forest officer of Erode district), suggests creating buffer zones for grazing, clearing invasive species, and promoting alternative livelihoods for tribal communities.

He justifies the sanctuary's creation without forest village people's concurrence, citing the ecological importance of species such as elephants and otters present in the Thanthai Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. However, activists argue that the Forest Rights Act supersedes the Wildlife Protection Act, necessitating forest village gram sabha concurrence for sanctuary creation. Babu has now been transferred to Nilgiris district.





Bargur breed cattle remain at the foot of Andhiyur hills in Erode District as grazing inside forest has been banned. Image courtesy of Tamil Nadu Tribal People's Organisation.

K Rajangam, District Forest Officer, Dharmapuri, alleges that grazing restrictions are due to criminal activities such as poaching, and He emphasises regulated grazing based on terrain carrying capacity.


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With the approach of forest officials and activists being drastically different, the experts have called for a nuanced approach and informed decision-making that aims for a harmonious balance between conservation and livelihoods.

M Mahenderan, Senior Researcher Agasthyamalai National Conservation Centre, says that considering the proven benefits of cattle grazing for the forest ecology, especially in preventing forest fires and growth of non-beneficial weeds, a scientifically managed, regulated grazing may be permitted.

Meanwhile, Adivasi communities hope that the state government would address their plight.

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