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STORY 20 JUN, 2024

The Conundrum of Tribes: A Complex Situation in Conservation and Tribal

Rights

In the forests of India, the revival of tigers a revered symbol of conservation success only reveals a part of the story. Beyond this achievement lies an often overlooked struggle faced by tribal groups inhabiting these areas. While India celebrates the growth in population there exists a lesser known narrative depicting the challenges encountered by tribes whose lives and customs are deeply connected with these wildlife sanctuaries but are overshadowed by the advancements in wildlife preservation. This intricate scenario, exemplified through Prime Minister Narendra Modis visits (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-project-tiger-bandipur-50-years-mudumalai-mysuru-live-updates-2357567-2023-04-09>) to Mudumalai and Bandipur Tiger Reserves epitomizes the conflicting outcomes of conservation victories and the social disruptions experienced by Indias populations.



PHOTO: PHOTO CREDIT: SOURABH BHARTI

India's progress in tiger conservation notably marked by the anniversary of Project Tiger stands as a significant milestone in ecological preservation. After plummeting to 1,411 tigers in 2006 the population (<https://www.conservationindia.org/articles/statement-of-concern-by-tiger-biologists>) has surged impressively to 3,167 by 2022. This remarkable recovery is attributed to the expansion of reserves from 9 in 1973 to 54 in 2023 showcasing collaborative efforts and unwavering commitment from various stakeholders. However while this surge in tiger numbers signifies a triumph for conservationists it has also brought about profound effects on tribal communities residing within and, around these reserves.



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The intrusion into lands of indigenous tribes often under the guise of conservation efforts highlights the intricate challenge of balancing environmental preservation with the rights and well being of native communities.

When examining the governments strategy for safeguarding tigers a crucial issue that arises is the implementation of the 'voluntary relocation' program. This initiative, aimed at moving tribes out of reserves has drawn significant criticism due to its execution. Critics contend that the program frequently lacks consent and fails to provide adequate compensation (<https://www.newsclick.in/tamil-nadu-nilgiri-tribes-relocated-proper-compensation>) thus neglecting the needs of displaced populations. Moreover there have been accounts of misappropriation of funds (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/nilgiris-tribals-allege-they-were-duped-of-compensation-67231>) intended for tribal recompense exacerbating existing grievances. This scenario underscores the disparity between wildlife conservation goals and the welfare of residents. The

establishment of Buffer and Core Zones within tiger habitats has resulted in relocating tribal families prompting scrutiny into the true expenses associated with conservation endeavors. It sheds light on the challenges faced by communities like the Soligas, Kattunayakans and Paniyas whose traditional lifestyles are disrupted by policies supposedly aimed at safeguarding their relationship with nature.

Anitha, a young mother from the Paniya tribe, shares her experience: "They said it was for the tigers, for the forest. But where does that leave us? My children were born here; their laughter has mingled with the sound of these woods. Relocation isn't just about changing locations; it's about leaving behind everything we know and love. The compensation they talk about cannot replace the connection we have with our land."





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Tribal Communities - Unsung Heroes of Conservation

studies are challenging
(<https://india.mongabay.com/2022/05/celebrating-tiger-numbers-in-sathyamangalam-tiger-reserve-while-tribal-residents-await-their-rights/>) the old idea that tribal groups harm tiger habitats. Instead research suggests that these communities can actually help increase tiger populations and prioritize wildlife well being. Their presence in forest areas often supports conservation efforts than posing a threat.

An excellent example of this influence is evident in the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, India. In this reserve the local Soliga tribe coexists harmoniously (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/tiger-population-doubles-in-reserve-that-allowed-tribals-to-stay-52093>) with tigers. A study by Survival International, a profit organization advocating for tribal rights revealed that from 2010 to 2014 the tiger population in the BRT Tiger Reserve nearly doubled from 35 to 68 individuals (<https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/11004>). This growth rate surpasses averages for tiger population increases significantly. The Soliga tribe holds a respect, for their natural surroundings and particularly reveres tigers.

There have been no documented cases of conflicts or hunting incidents between the Soligas and tigers in this region. These findings suggest that having communities like the Soligas, who have peacefully coexisted with wildlife for generations can positively impact conservation efforts.

"As an elder of the Soliga community residing in the heart of the BRT Tiger Reserve I have witnessed significant changes in our way of life " shared Madesh, a tribal elder. "The tigers are ingrained in the essence of our land just as we are. When they compelled us to relocate it felt like ripping a part of our soul. Our songs, stories and traditions all find their place among these forests. Losing our home equates to losing our identity.



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In the landscapes of Bandipur and Mudumalai Tiger Reserves one can clearly see the intricate bond between tribal communities and conservation initiatives. These reserves harbor wildlife populations including tigers and reveal a lesser known narrative

(<https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/villagers-relocated-from-tamil-nadu-s-mudumalai-tiger-reserve-await-compensation>); how conservation efforts affect tribes like the Soligas Kattunayakans, Paniyas and Mountadden Chettys. For instance in Mudumalai, than 100 tribal families recently staged protests against their enforced relocation as part of a resettlement scheme offering ₹10 lakh or equivalent land.

Many families, such as the Paniya and Kattunayakan tribes believe they have not received compensation (<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2024/Feb/04/681-families-relocated-from-mudumalai-tiger-reserve-says-government>) leading to calls for either their return to the forests or an increase in compensation. This has sparked discussions about the importance of transparent

processes in relocation efforts driven by conservation initiatives. (<https://cablebuzz.net/news-india-current/tribals-relocated-from-mudumalai-tiger-reserve-stage-protest/>)

Currently several families have been moved from tiger reserves. Many resettlement areas lack the essential amenities promised to them. This has resulted in challenges for their sustainable livelihoods. The fact that many tribal people displaced from their lands wish to go back highlights the deficiencies in existing policies and emphasizes the need for more inclusive dialogues on this matter.

The irony of the situation is stark; as tiger reserves attract a growing number of tourists, indigenous tribes—those who truly safeguard these lands—are being displaced in the name of tiger preservation. A forest official straightforwardly stated that "Tourism is a downside in tiger reserves " underscoring a sharp contrast between promoting tourism and neglecting tribal rights. This contradiction becomes apparent as these reserves welcome visitors while displacing their custodians under the guise of environmental conservation.

Despite research suggesting that tribal communities can actually benefit tiger populations they are often portrayed as adversaries, in conservation stories.

The Tribal Conundrum: Balancing Conservation and Tribal Rights

When it comes to protecting our planet's treasures we encounter a complex issue. The preservation of biodiversity sometimes comes at the expense of the indigenous and tribal groups who have long cared for these environments. This intricate dance between conservation efforts and community rights goes beyond boundaries sparking global discussions on environmental stewardship and human rights.

The Situation in India: Navigating Between Conservation and Rights

In a biodiverse country like India with forested areas this conflict is especially evident. Take, for instance the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh (<https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/villagers-allege-they-have-not-received-the-promised-compensation-after-relocation-from-achanakmar-tiger-reserve>). Here the Baiga tribe faces displacement despite not posing any threat to the tiger population. Surprisingly the number of tigers in the reserve increased from 12 to 28 between 2011 and 2015; yet the Baiga peoples ancestral lands are, under threat. This scenario is not an incident but rather part of a larger trend where conservation measures unintentionally lead to the removal and marginalization of indigenous communities.

In an example the Supreme Courts ruling in 2019 to remove over one million forest dwelling individuals under the Forest Rights Act of 2006 (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/baigas-in-exile-38674>)v caused a nationwide uproar shedding light on the ongoing struggle between preserving the environment and upholding tribal rights. Despite the halt to the order it brought attention to the contentious issue of forest rights in India and the vulnerable position of indigenous communities.

The situation at Kanha Tiger Reserve (<https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/villagers-allege-they-have-not-received-the-promised-compensation-after-relocation-from-achanakmar-tiger-reserve>) serves as an illustration of this dilemma, where Baiga and Gond indigenous families were displaced without fair compensation or proper resettlement. Their vital contribution to wildlife conservation rooted in their age customs and wisdom was disregarded in favor of sweeping conservation measures.

A striking revelation from Victoria Tauli Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/07/india-must-prevent-eviction-millions-forest-dwellers-say-un-experts>) on Indigenous Peoples Rights discloses that half of all protected areas are situated on lands traditionally inhabited by tribal communities. This traditional conservation approach has often resulted in degradation and widespread displacement of these groups.



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An alarming trend is emerging in Pollachi as the Kaadar tribe from Anaimalai forests is being pressured to relocate due to amenities. The irony is evident. While places like Topslip (<https://atrpollachi.in/room-category/topslip/>) in Anaimalai Tiger Reserve (<https://www.atrpollachi.com/what-to-do/>) cater to tourists with facilities the original residents lack essential resources, like electricity and clean water.

The difference between conservation and development policies is quite noticeable. Take, for example the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (<https://www.mudumalaitigerreserve.com/>), which has a lot of tourist facilities. At the same time its starkly different from the displacement and marginalization faced by tribal families. This kind of pattern can also be seen in places like Bandipur National Park (<https://bandipurtigerreserve.org/>).



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Discussing Tribal Challenges on a Global Scale

Although this discussion mainly focuses on India it reflects an issue where conservation initiatives often clash with tribal rights. This conflict isn't unique to India; similar situations play

out worldwide. Whether its the impact of logging and mining on territories in Cameroon

(<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/forests/tribal-communities-suffer-when-evicted-in-the-name-of-conservation-64376>) or the struggles of indigenous groups in the Amazon rainforest

(<https://journalism.csis.org/deforestation-hits-home-indigenous-communities-fight-for-the-future-of-their-amazon/>) we see stories of conflict and displacement unfolding globally. These examples emphasize the importance of an approach to conservation that respects both ecological preservation and indigenous rights.

Balancing Conservation Efforts with Tribal Rights

The current global conservation model tends to prioritize wildlife protection over the well being of communities requiring immediate reevaluation. In India and many other parts of the world this approach has created a gap between conservation goals and tribal community welfare. Major conservation organizations, like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) have been criticized for contributing to human rights violations through their conservation practices.

The situation of the Soliga tribe within the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve

(<https://india.mongabay.com/2022/05/celebrating-tiger-numbers-in-sathyamangalam-tiger-reserve-while-tribal-residents-await-their-rights/>) in Karnataka presents a contrast to the usual scenario. In this case the indigenous tribes were permitted to reside within the reserve leading to an increase in the tiger population. This challenges the belief that human presence always has negative effects on wildlife conservation efforts (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/tiger-population-doubles-in-reserve-that-allowed-tribals-to-stay-52093>).



The Flawed Conservation Approach

The current conservation strategy prevalent in India and globally often fails to recognize the beneficial relationship between indigenous communities and their environment. Tribes such as the Baigas and Soligas have demonstrated that sustainable coexistence with wildlife is not achievable but also advantageous. Despite this large scale displacements persist, driven by policies that prioritize tourism and safaris over rights.

The need of the hour is a shift in conservation practices. One that acknowledges the vital role played by tribal communities in preserving biodiversity. Their sustainable practices and

traditional ecological knowledge are assets in combatting climate change. Granting empowerment and securing land rights for these communities are pivotal steps towards ensuring their ongoing contribution to environmental protection.

Given the challenges posed by climate change and loss of biodiversity it is crucial to strike a balance in conservation endeavors. Respecting the rights and wisdom of communities is not merely an ethical duty but also a pragmatic necessity, for safeguarding our planets biodiversity sustainably.

Indias forest policy originating from its past has frequently marginalized indigenous communities giving more importance to generating revenue than addressing ecological and socio economic needs. It is essential to establish a policy that considers the rights and requirements of these forest residents for sustainable forest management and their welfare.

The paradox of tourism thriving in reserves while often disregarding tribal rights brings attention to a significant contradiction. The emerging narrative depicting tribes as hidden conservationists challenges the belief that they harm tiger habitats. Instances such as the displacement of communities in the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in South India and Mumbais Aarey forest highlight the sacrifices made for conservation efforts.

Moving Forward, Embracing a Fresh Approach to Conservation

There is a need for a transformative change in conservation practices that recognizes the vital role played by indigenous communities in safeguarding biodiversity. Their sustainable way of life and traditional ecological knowledge are assets in combating climate change and environmental deterioration. Granting empowerment and securing land rights for these communities are crucial steps towards ensuring their ongoing contribution to environmental protection.

Growing up in Mudumalai, I learned to read the forest like a book," remarks Kumar, a Kattunayakan youth. "Our elders taught us how to live in harmony with nature. But now, being pushed out, it's like being asked to forget our language, our culture. The forest is not just our home; it's our heritage. Protecting it doesn't mean pushing us away.

To sum up our investigation highlights the necessity for a conservation strategy that values both the diversity of nature and the rights of the indigenous communities in India. These guardians of the forest with their knowledge and customs should play a pivotal role in conservation efforts. The true gauge of our achievements should not solely focus on the number of tigers. Also on fostering a harmonious coexistence between these native communities and their environment. Adopting this rounded approach is crucial, for sustainable conservation practices that honor both our ecological and cultural roots.

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