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In Search of the True Adivasi: The Politics of Land Rights in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, India

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Who is a Tribal? Who has rights to live, use, and protect the forest, and who doesn't? To whom is the Tribal allied, and whom does she/he oppose? Obviously, none of these questions is answerable, or at least will not be met with a single answer when posed to the multiple players involved in what is now the rather messy situation of land rights, forest access, and conservation in the buffer areas of Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary (MWLS) of southern India; for that matter, it may not even meet with the same response from the same person in different contexts. The situation at Mudumalai surrounding wildlife conservation and residents' rights hinges to a large extent on the ways in which the idea of "tribal" (or Adivasi) is constructed and navigated in relation to the "natural" environment and human-occupied landscape. This has become especially important in the face of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 (FRA), which promises greater autonomy and access to Adivasi communities and other groups that have traditionally used forests and their products for their livelihoods. The issue of Adivasi identity - and equally importantly of non-Adivasi identity - becomes crucial in understanding the complications that can and will present themselves in the implementation of the FRA, both at this site and elsewhere in India.

To complicate matters, in 2005-2006 the process to declare Mudumalai as a Critical Tiger Habitat (CTH) was also initiated. This expansion essentially proposed to increase the boundaries of the existing MWLS to include more habitat for tigers. This new area would then have designated "buffer zones" where limited human use is permitted, and "core zones" where access is restricted. This re-evaluation and

re-allotment of land and land-uses, largely without the involvement or consent of affected communities, has been an additional cause of disagreement where political and community identities have come into play. This study is primarily concerned with what the implementation of the CTH and FRA will mean for indigenous land rights, and indirectly about what this means for the success of conservation efforts. The ecology of tiger conservation is not my main topic; however, the success of conservation efforts will be impacted by human attitudes, values and behaviors.

Description of study area and field work:

Mudumalai is situated in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu, India. It is of historical importance as one of the earliest established protected areas in India in 1940; ecologically important as part of a forested corridor (along with Wyanaad, Nagarhole, Badipur, and Satyamangalam forests) joining the biodiverse Eastern and Western Ghats; and culturally important as the home of five Adivasi communities, and as the junction of three linguistically distinct states, with large Muslim and Christian populations in addition to Hindus.

For three and a half months, from May 2008 to August 2008, I conducted ethnographic research in the Sigur Plateau adjacent to MWLS. This region originally lay outside the boundaries of MWLS; however, in 2007, Mudumalai was notified as a CTH, and Sigur was included in the buffer area. Around the same time, a new legislative measure known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) came into being, which promised to convert de facto land rights in forested areas into legal land titles for Adivasis; most non-tribals are not eligible.

Both of these measures, as I will discuss later, have been highly controversial at the central government level. Adivasi rights activists argue that the forest department is notorious for its history of poorly managed conservation projects, and for its mistreatment of marginalized communities, and that the CTH is just another excuse to appropriate yet more land and displace yet more people. On the other

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hand, conservationists argued that turning over forest land to Adivasis though the FRA would only lead to more destruction of forests, either directly by Adivasis, or because lands would be turned over to developers.

The purpose of my research was to investigate how these two highly publicized and controversial measures were being debated and discussed by those living in areas that would be affected by the CTH and FRA, and the causes for conflict surrounding these issues. Specifically, I was interested in understanding people's reasoning behind supporting or opposing the CTH or FRA. I hypothesized that CTH may be opposed by residents based on concerns about elevated levels of conflict with wildlife, and due to mistrust of the Forest Department. I also hypothesized that Adivasis would be highly in favor of the FRA, but that non-tribal residents would not. My research suggests surprisingly different trends.

I interviewed over 120 people, about half of them belonging to the Irula and Jenu Kurumba Adivasi tribes of Sigur, and the remaining belonging to non-tribal communities. These included the politically well-organized large-landowners (primarily farmers with over 10 acres of land, and tourism lodges), tourist vehicle drivers, local politicians, and forest department workers. Most interviews were obtained through snowball sampling. In addition, I attended a number of family gatherings, religious celebrations, and accompanied groups of people in their places of work, as a participatory observer.

Critical Tiger Habitat and the Forest Rights Act: a brief introduction

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) attempts to "recognize and vest the forest rights and occupation in forest land in forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have been residing in such forests for generations but whose rights could not be recorded." There are two kinds of rights accorded by the FRA. The most publicly known and controversial of these are title rights for cultivated land. Essentially, Adivasis can obtain legal rights for land which they have lived on and cultivated, but on which they were historically considered "encroachers" or "squatters". The FRA also contains clauses on community management for forest use and development, and entails the formation of village communities to make decisions collectively

on forest use – a job previously left to the Forest Department. The buffer area of Mudumalai CTH is a type of forest to which FRA is applicable; the core is not.

What is important to note is that while Sigur has a mixed population, the majority of which is non-tribal, only adivasis (and a handful of non-tribals who have lived on the same plot of land for over three generations), are eligible. Other groups are not. While many non-tribal farmers and livestock owners in the area own land, a large portion have leases to land owned by the state which could, in theory, be taken away from them; many fear that this will be the case if the CTH is declared.

Critical Tiger Habitats are also a new development in India, following the local extirpation of tigers from Sariska Tiger Sanctuary in 2005. CTHs belong to the most stringent category of "forest land" controlled by the Forest Department, consisting of an inviolate "core" zone free of human presence and activity; and a "buffer" where certain activities, such as constructing new buildings, would be curtailed, but apart from that, major livelihoods such as farming, herding, etc would be allowed to continue as before.

Perceptions towards forests and wildlife:

My original hypotheses assumed that peoples' attitudes towards the CTH and FRA in particular would be strongly influenced by their attitudes towards forests and wildlife. I assumed, first of all, that the declaration of the CTH might represent to some a heightened concern about conflict with wildlife, particularly tigers but also elephants, deer, and wild pigs. I found this to be the case only nominally. Anecdotes with Forest Department employees playing a largely negative role -- ranging from stories of mild corruption, to serious violence and coercion -- were fairly common. Without a doubt, obvious exaggerations of the Forest Department's activities also exist. At a number of political rallies, flyers were handed out describing the process by which the Forest Department was secretly relocating dozens of tigers to Mudumalai, without sufficient wild prey available. Through such documents, and a number of discussions with locals, particularly non-tribals, it was evident that especially among non-tribals, the CTH represented not a greater threat from wildlife, but a greater threat of elevated Forest Department control over forests and wildlife. I will discuss later though, that this opinion is not shared by many Adivasis in Sigur.

A discussion of Adivasi and non-tribal identities

As discussed earlier, the historical viewpoint on “Adivasi culture” has been overwhelmingly negative, particularly in relation to forests: tribals are abjectly poor, and therefore destructive of forests. More recently, however, there has been a push, beginning with NGOs and extending into government, to recognize the rights of Adivasi communities. There has also been a move to change the discourse surrounding tribals from a negative image of an uneducated, backwards community to one of a people living in harmony with nature. This represents a sea change in social norms; Mudumalai is now at a crossroads where most individuals of non-Tribal communities hold their past prejudices towards Adivasis, yet understand that in the face of new norms of political correctness, they too must at least outwardly change their stance towards Adivasis.

More importantly, non-tribals are aware of the political implications of the new tribal identity, and how it translates into policy and government action. They recognize that the FRA is a move garnered towards promoting the interests of Adivasis; at the same time, Forest Departments throughout the country – which have historically been known for their mistreatment of marginalized communities – have started to offer a number of benefits to forest-dwelling Adivasi groups. Thus, non-tribals have found it advantageous, even necessary, to align themselves with, or even identify themselves as, Adivasis.

This is done in one of two ways: first, a non-Adivasi may claim that he or she has been historically allied with the Adivasis, and is therefore just like them. The argument is often similar to this: “everyone will agree that the Adivasis have been here for hundreds of years. However, they have worked for us and with us for hundreds of years. Therefore, we are just the same as the Adivasis” (V. Matthews, local politician*). That is, claims of indigeneity, historical relationships with the land and people, are used as arguments for tribalness. Secondly, non-tribals may claim that they currently live “just like Adivasis”: they have little land, are dependent on the rain for their harvests and on the forests for their fuelwood, but are at the same time just as protective of the forests as Adivasis are supposed to be (Govindan, landed farmer*).

Therefore, these communities will argue that if the FRA is implemented, they should be given the

same rights as Adivasis; similarly, if the CTH will bring in funds for development of Adivasi livelihoods, non-Adivasi communities should also benefit.

Ironically, and importantly, non-Adivasi land-owners who are not eligible under the FRA seem more supportive of it than do landless Adivasis, whom it is supposed to benefit. This appears to be because non-Adivasis feel that they should be treated to the same advantages as Adivasis, but also have the political clout to ensure that their ineligibility is overlooked. Thus, the situation is such: Adivasis have the legal rights but often not the means, while non-Adivasis have not the legal rights but the often political means and will to bend it to their advantage.

The elusive “Adivasi opinion”

While non-tribals and the Forest Department have very uncomplicated answers to what defines Adivasis, and what their opinions are, in truth Adivasis represent themselves and their opinions in individuals, ranging from those who are still primarily forest-produce gatherers and depend to a large extent on government welfare to meet their nutritional needs, to those who are well-educated, own farmland and property, and have children studying in colleges in nearby cities. Most lie somewhere in the middle of this range: they cultivate but do not own a few acres of land, are partially dependant on welfare (or “ration cards” which they are entitled to on the basis of their Scheduled Tribe status), and have access to local schools for their children.

There are varying levels of organization amongst the Adivasi communities. Irulas have an Association, which though very well organized in certain aspects (they are responsible for planning and coordinating a three-day, elaborate religious festival every year, which brings in visitors from all over the region), there is little consensus among them in the matter of the FRA. Jenu Kurumbas, on the other hand, represent a much smaller portion of the population; they often voice the complaint that as one of the most marginalized Nilgiri Adivasi communities, with relatively small numbers, they had little or no reason to become involved in political issues surrounding the FRA or CTH, where their voices would not be heard even if they had a strong position on it.

With respect to the CTH and FRA, most Adivasis show less concern for the changes in policy than do other communities. This partly may be attributed to the fact that they have for at least the past five or six

years, enjoyed increasingly positive relations with the government; most recently, all schedule tribes in the Nilgiris were some of the first beneficiaries of a government scheme to bring free LPG gas, television sets, and 2 kgs of rice into every home. Such measures have gone a long way in promoting positive relations with the government at large. While Adivasis (like most other communities) are skeptical as to the long-term relations with the government, which constantly undergoes upheavals, the general trend appears to be cautiously growing faith in government machinery. This includes cautious but growing trust in the historically reviled Forest Department, which has also in the past decade provided elephant-proof fencing around whole Adivasi hamlets, and has heavily subsidized agricultural inputs.

At the same time, a handful of Adivasi individuals have had positive relationships with non-Adivasis. Many have worked for the same non-tribal families for generations, mainly as farm-laborers or cattle herders. Others have benefited from the recent growth of hotels and travel lodges in the area, which provide employment. Very few of these jobs are permanent, and very few provide sufficient income to meet all the financial needs of a family. Yet this is still an improvement over past insecurity.

Due to these varied, often conflicting alliances held by Adivasis, they are in a unique, often uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the FRA and CTH. On the one hand, some individuals are fairly secure in their belief that these policies will most likely not have a negative impact on them, as the forest department's ethic shifts towards pro-Adivasi activities. At the same time, some have had mostly positive associations with non-Adivasi communities. As these non-Adivasi communities have vociferously opposed the CTH, Adivasis are in the often uncomfortable position of "taking sides" between the Forest Department and non-Adivasi individuals and politicians. Thus some Adivasis often will take part in anti-CTH demonstrations, and express the opinion that non-Adivasis should also be included in the FRA. Others will cautiously take the exact opposite view. Additionally, the Adivasi communities are not particularly well-organized politically. Many are not literate (though most are fluent in three languages, one of which is an Adivasi language with no script), and thus local news does not always reach them first-hand. Their primary mode of information is through their local leaders (usually these are non-Adivasi), or (to a lesser extent) through mid-level forest department officers who regularly hold meetings in

villages. On the other hand, Adivasi individuals who have had particularly negative experiences with the forest department, or with non-Adivasis, react in the opposite way. In short, Adivasi attitudes are based not on their feelings on these policies, but based on their attitudes towards the politically and socially dominant groups that support or oppose the policies.

Conclusions and Implications:

At the center of the CTH is the ecological concern over tiger conservation; to most non-tribals, it represents an increasing hold of the forest department. On the other hand, the department had seen increasing favor among Adivasis, who nevertheless also form opinions based on their associations with non-tribal groups who oppose the CTH. These non-tribals recognize the importance of the Adivasi identity in current politics, and attempt to use it to their advantage, particularly in obtaining rights under the FRA. Weak political organization among Adivasis means that a consensus on CTH and FRA will be reached slowly, at best. While this indecision to take a strong stance is seen by many in the Forest Department and in the Non-tribal community as indecisiveness, or a "typical" tribal tendency towards lack of concern, I would argue that this actually stems from a large number of strong opinions existing within what is often perceived as a homogenous "tribal" group. These opinions are based primarily on their past associations with politically powerful groups (the Forest Department or non-tribal communities). This is not necessarily a sign of subjugation to two powerful and manipulative groups, but a calculated position to improve their chances of a favorable outcome.

Adivasis are in a powerful position to determine the course of CTH and FRA, and they are not unaware of it. The FRA is becoming a more widely understood law by Adivasi communities; in large part due to the efforts of a small handful of NGOs which have been involved in tribal livelihoods for over a decade. If implemented correctly, and if increasing importance is given to community rights and not just to individual Adivasi rights, the FRA could prove to be an ideal means through which to manage forest resources in buffer areas. Similarly, increased transparency on the part of the Forest Department with regards to its plans for the CTH, and their active inclusion of all communities who stand to be affected by it, will go a long way in both ensuring an equitable outcome for the human residents, as well as a better chance for the survival of the tiger and other important Mudumalai fauna.