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India's Indigenous people pay price of tiger conservation

Several Adivasi groups say the conservation strategies mean uprooting numerous communities from forests.



Tigers at the Ranthambore National Park in Sawai Madhopur, India, which celebrates 50 years of tiger conservation on April 9, 2023 (File: Satyajeeet Singh Rathore/AP)

Officials were celebrating just hours away from several of India's major [tiger reserves](#) when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in the southern city of Mysuru that the country's tiger population has steadily grown to more than 3,000 since its flagship conservation programme began 50 years ago over concerns that the numbers of the big cats were dwindling.

“India is a country where protecting nature is part of our culture,” Modi said in his speech on Sunday. “This is why we have many unique achievements in wildlife conservation.”

Modi also launched the International Big Cats Alliance, which he said will focus on the protection and conservation of seven big cat species: the tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard, puma, jaguar and cheetah.

But Indigenous people, known as Adivasi in India, say wildlife conservation projects have [displaced](#) members of their community over the past half-century. Adivasi communities in Karnataka [organised protests](#) last month to highlight how their people, who have lived in forests for centuries, have been kept out of conservation efforts.

Project Tiger began in 1973 after a census of the [big cats](#) found India's tigers were quickly going extinct through habitat loss, unregulated sport hunting, increased poaching and retaliatory killings by people. Lawmakers and officials tried to address these issues, but the conservation model centered around creating protected reserves where ecosystems can function undisturbed by people.

Several Indigenous groups say the conservation strategies, deeply influenced by American environmentalism, have meant uprooting numerous communities who had lived in the forests for millennia.

Members of several Adivasi groups set up the Nagarahole Adivasi Forest Rights Establishment Committee to protest against evictions from their ancestral lands and seek a voice in how the forests are managed.

“Nagarahole was one of the first forests to be brought under Project Tiger, and our parents and grandparents were probably among the first to be forced out of the forests in the name of conservation,” said JA Shivu, 27, who belongs to the Jenu Kuruba tribe. “We have lost all rights to visit our lands, temples or even collect honey from the forests. How can we continue living like this?”

The fewer than 40,000 Jenu Kuruba people are one of the 75 tribal groups whom the Indian government classifies as particularly vulnerable.

Jenu, which means honey in the southern Indian Kannada language, is the tribe's primary source of income. Its members collect it from beehives in the forests to sell. Adivasi communities like the Jenu Kurubas are among the poorest in India.

Experts say conservation policies that try to create a pristine wilderness have been influenced by prejudices against local communities.

India's Ministry of Tribal Affairs has repeatedly said it is working on Adivasi rights. Only about one percent of the more than 100 million Adivasis in India have been granted any rights over forest lands despite a government forest rights law, passed in 2006, which aims to "undo the historical injustice" for forest communities.

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Indigenous people are also losing their lands to climate change with more frequent forest fires spurred by extreme heat and unpredictable rainfall.

India is home to more than 75 percent of the world's wild tiger population. India has more tigers than its protected spaces can hold, and the cats are also now living at the edges of cities and in sugar cane fields.

Tigers have disappeared on Bali and Java, and China's tigers are likely extinct in the wild. The Sunda Island tiger subspecies is found only in Sumatra. Many have praised India's efforts to safeguard this endangered species as a success.

“Project Tiger hardly has a parallel in the world since a scheme of this scale and magnitude has not been so successful elsewhere,” said SP Yadav, a senior Indian government official in charge of Project Tiger.

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But critics say the social costs of fortress conservation, in which forest departments protect wildlife and prevent local communities from entering forest regions, is high.

Sharachchandra Lele of the Bengaluru-based Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment said the conservation model is outdated.

“There are already successful examples of forests

managed by local communities in collaboration with government officials, and tiger numbers have actually increased even while people have benefitted in these regions,” he said.

Someone who agrees is Vidya Athreya, director of the Wildlife Conservation Society in India, who has been studying interactions between large cats and humans for the past two decades.

“Traditionally, we always put wildlife over people,” Athreya said, arguing that instead, the way forward in protecting wildlife in India is to engage with local communities.

Shivu wants to go back to a life where Indigenous communities and tigers live together.

“We consider them gods and us the custodians of these forests,” he said.