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# **Waiting to Stay: In-Situ Displacement and Soliga Youth in Tiger Reserves in South India**

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## Abstract

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Political Ecology critiques wildlife conservation for violently removing people from protected areas. As a solution, activists and academics alike advocate for rights-based legal mechanisms to give people legitimacy within forest spaces. This thesis explores the limitations of this solution in the BR Hills and the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserves in South India. Following Feminist Political Ecology's call to better understand the intersectional differences within communities in conservation spaces, I study intergenerational change and the everyday lives of youth. Based on two and a half months of participant observation and over 100 interviews, the thesis explores the ways in which the Soliga tribe, and young people in particular, navigate the material, discursive and legal facets of conservation that shape their lives. Through ethnographic data and interview transcripts, I describe people's experiences in the forest and their engagements with the forest department, focusing on youth as a lens through which future possibilities emerge. I argue that, although people have rights within tiger reserves, they continue to be dispossessed through *in-situ* displacement. Youth, in particular, feel caught between worlds, experiencing long-term "waiting" for an undefined future in the forests they call home. Interestingly, I found that most young people want to stay in the forest and are willing to subsist under uncertain and precarious circumstances to do so. Further, many young people want to get jobs with the forest department to empower and represent their community. I illustrate the complexity and contradictory nature of life within tiger reserves for young adults, highlighting the need to centre their everyday struggles in research. I argue that empowerment of Soligas needs to move beyond legal mechanisms to consider other forms of negotiation that communities employ.

*To my partners in research  
and to endless sources of good food,  
Lakshmi and Guruswamy.*

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## **Relevant Abbreviations**

BRT – Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve

FRA – Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006

IFA – Indian Forest Act, 1927

NREGA – National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

NTFP – Non Timber Forest Produce

STR – Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve

WLPA – Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972

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## Introduction

The house is made up of two rooms, one with a bed, clothes and a television and the other with some tools, food and storage. The kitchen, partially covered, has a few pots and pans but otherwise is sparse. We are sitting by the bed and the TV is blaring in the corner of the room, playing a loud movie that is too bright and rather grainy. Guru<sup>1</sup> and I sit on a small mat in the corner eating dinner, and his aunt walks in every now and then to fill our plates up with more food. The food is simple, rice, sambhar and a dish made with eggs and greens, both collected from the forest. Vijay is sitting on the bed right next to us, his hands propping up his head, fully engrossed by the TV. He often turns to us to talk about various Tamil movie heroes, people whom I am only vaguely aware of. He comments on the cars in the video, saying that the city life is not for him. We are in Arepalyam village, a small settlement within the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. Both Guru and Vijay are youth from adivasi communities<sup>2</sup> that have lived in this forest area for centuries.

After dinner, we thank Guru's aunt, and walk back to the field station across the road where I am staying while I conduct fieldwork on youth in the BR Hills and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserves. The forest guard for this part of the forest lives nearby and we see that the light in his house is on. We walk past his house silently, almost to not draw attention to ourselves. Suddenly Guru sees something jumping in the grass and runs after it excitedly. It is a large beetle, almost the size of my palm, and the boys rush to the field station and put it down on the ground to examine it more closely. Fascinated, they take pictures of it on a camera from the field station.

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<sup>1</sup>All names used are pseudonyms unless they are leaders or community representatives.

<sup>2</sup>The Indian term for tribal or forest dwelling communities. I explain this term and its significance in more depth below.



*Figure1 Guru and Vijay taking pictures of the beetle. Photograph by Author*

Evenings like this over two years of work and research in the Nilgiri biosphere<sup>3</sup> are what got me interested in the lives of young people that live within tiger reserves. I often found myself comparing my own life with theirs, thinking about all the ease that various forms of privilege have afforded me, particularly in my ability to choose what I want to do, even for the next two or three years. I found young people highly attuned to the latest movies and TV serials, excited by technology, and equally excited by the life around them and their place in it. Yet living within a tiger reserve is complex and often difficult due to histories of disenfranchisement and harassment by the forest department. The lives of youth within tiger reserves in India have received little attention within academic literature that often refers to them in passing or not at all. How do young people navigate the various forces that shape their lives? How do they experience the forest and the forest department in the everyday? These are questions that I address in the following pages.

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<sup>3</sup> A montane hill region in South India which overlaps in the corner of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala

I try to approach these questions from multiple scales and temporalities that address conservation policy and structural politics as well as experiences of the everyday. I begin by setting the stage for both conservation and adivasi politics in India, as a way to open up more specific topics later in the thesis.

## **India's Protected Areas – History and Governance**

The history of conservation in a region as vast and diverse as the Indian subcontinent is hard to tell. Regional climatic, ecological and geological differences, combined with rich diversity in peoples, cultures, and ways of living make India's environments complex spaces that are often hard to understand on a larger scale. While historical events have had country-wide impacts, they rarely had the same impact across different areas, and every part of the country can be seen as the product of a unique set of historical, socio-political processes (Arnold & Guha, 1996; N. Menon & Nigam, 2007). For the purposes of this introduction I focus on wildlife conservation, and the historical processes that led to the creation of protected areas for conservation. Wildlife management has largely emerged from previous systems of forest governance<sup>4</sup>, and therefore forests are an important element of the story. Consequently, I begin with a brief structural overview of forest governance in India starting from pre-colonial times. This version of environmental history is limited and does not tell the stories of resistance, resilience and deep relationships with forest land across the country. However, it is an attempt at creating a framework for understanding the governance of conservation spaces in India today.

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<sup>4</sup> Indian protected areas largely coincide with forest lands as defined by the state, even when the landscapes resemble savannas, for instance. Thus, much of the conservation policy pertaining to protected areas borrows from forest management laws.

The emergence of certain historical events continue to reflect in conservation today. Colonialism and the post-independence governance structures are such events, and have had lasting and important impacts on the way forests and the communities that live within them are viewed. It is important to recognize that all forest spaces are inherently political. Legacies of land governance since pre-colonial India have asserted various forms of nation making through the appropriation and control of land (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). I begin, therefore, with a broad introduction to forest use and history in the subcontinent before colonial rule. I then discuss the ways in which the British colonial governance systems transformed both forests and people's relationships to them. Finally, I explore the Independent Indian state's wildlife conservation regimes, looking at both their intense regulation of space and the resistance to them.

### Pre-colonial forest spaces

Before its formation as a nation state, the Indian subcontinent was comprised of multiple territories and kingdoms, each of which spanned diverse geographical regions and shaped their socio-environmental surroundings differently. Some rulers were much more influential in shaping their environments than others, and several forest communities remained relatively isolated while others had ongoing active relationships with surrounding villages, towns and rulers (Arnold & Guha, 1996). Moreover, both forests and settlements were dynamic, changing over the centuries. Entire kingdoms now lie within forests, and spaces that were agricultural fields have been swallowed up by trees (Fisher, 2018; Rangarajan, 1996). This makes understanding forest spaces and forest dwellers in pre-colonial times highly contextually specific.

Forests have always been an important part of Indian history. India's major religions have all referenced and given great importance to forests, whether through art and music or

myths and legends<sup>5</sup>(Fisher, 2018). These often refer to forests as spaces of both beauty and plenty, and fearful abodes of demons. Forest communities, too, have largely been both demonized and exoticized, although they often maintained tactical relationships with local rulers. In the South Indian Vijayanagara kingdom<sup>6</sup>, for instance, the rulers regarded forest communities as independent chieftainships, and their edicts emphasise the need to remain on friendly terms with forest communities for strategic reasons (Fisher, 2018).

In the Mughal era<sup>7</sup>, non-agricultural societies were viewed as primitive, and outside of ‘mainstream’ society (C. Singh, 1995). In the regions where Mughal revenue regulations were in place, these communities were considered a threat to the productive capacity of forests as sources of timber and game hunting, and yet tribal chieftains often had trade relations with Mughal and other kings and kingdoms, and governance of land under the Mughal emperors was highly decentralised, affording forest communities autonomy (Fisher, 2018).

While forest communities were not entirely isolated (Baviskar, 2004; Shah, 2007), they were considered outside the caste and religious structures that encompassed most of South Asian society(Singh, 1995, Rycroft & Dasgupta, 2011). However, forest dwellers’ relationships to the forest and to local peasant and ruling societies also differed widely across the country, as some communities became indentured labour or were employed to increase the commercial output of forests (Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006), while others had autonomous governance structures of their own. Interestingly, forests in many regions provided both a refuge for people to retreat into, and a crucial food source in times of drought or famine (C. Singh, 1995). Forest communities therefore have also been dynamic, and

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<sup>5</sup>These too, vary across space and time, and derive from regional religious beliefs and animistic traditions.

<sup>6</sup>C.1340-c.1672 this kingdom rules across the Deccan Plateau

<sup>7</sup>C. 1526-1707, this was one of the largest and most successful empires to rule large parts of the subcontinent before colonialism.

moved in and out of forest spaces (Fisher, 2018), and land use has included shifting cultivation, nomadic grazing and settled agriculture for several centuries. I return to a discussion later in this introduction to explore how forest communities became legally and politically classified as tribes and occupy unique positions in India's political and environmental discourses today.

### Forest control and consolidation in Colonial India

Colonialism and colonial laws have had some of the most lasting impacts on conservation today, both ecologically and socially. The colonial period was uniquely destructive of both forested environments and of common property systems which did not rely on commodified land ownership (Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Rangarajan, 1996). These include property regimes and state ownership and control over land and resources. This has transformed the way conservation spaces are governed today.

The expansion of the British empire through colonial rule in India is captured by political economists of the time. Writing in 1853 when the colonial British Raj was just establishing itself in India, Marx<sup>8</sup> lamented at the destructive nature of colonial expansion and accumulation of land and resources (Marx, 1853). Building on his foundational ideas, Luxemburg argued that the way in which capitalism survives and expands outside of industrial society is through the accumulation of modes of production. Land, and associated timber, is one such mode of production. Capitalism spreads by annihilating 'all forms of natural economy that it encounters', through forceful colonial policies that both render vulnerable inhabitants encroachers and deepen existing hierarchies that tax small land holders to a point where they can no longer retain their 'natural economies' (Luxemburg, 1913).

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<sup>8</sup>This piece of writing is limited and problematic given Marx's lack of nuanced understanding of the subcontinent. Nevertheless, it offers an interesting starting point to understand the role of land in the colonial enterprise.

Thus, gaining control over land and forest land in particular, was inherent to British rule in India, as it fuelled their industrial revolution. Forest management was influenced both by enlightenment thinking that saw nature as outside of society, needing to be tamed or controlled, and by the Empire's need to extract resources, both of which went hand-in-hand. This was also intertwined with ideological understandings of human relationships to nature, and the role of conservation for 'civilised' society. The British constructed forest users they encountered in India as negligent and destructive, believing that they were saving forests from irresponsible natives (Rangarajan, 1996, p. 5). They also used forests as hunting grounds and curtailed human activities within them (Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006).

One of the key reasons for bringing forest land under colonial rule was for the Empire to have access to and control over timber stocks (Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009) to fuel industrial production in England, and railway and ship building in India. In many parts of the country, colonial officers weaponised narratives of local destruction of forests in order to justify the planting of trees for timber. For example, the British considered the South Indian Canara region degraded, blaming it on traditional grazing and clearing of forest land. They saw shifting cultivation as particularly destructive in this regard (Pouchepadass, 1995). The British then employed this demonization of land use and users to justify the ongoing restriction of traditional forest use and management practices. To benefit the needs of the empire, the British transformed spaces that they considered degraded by planting trees, often non-native species<sup>9</sup>, that were then felled for timber (Gadgil & Guha, 1995).

For the British government to exercise its power in forest spaces, they needed to create a centralised forest agency (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2006; Springate-Baginski

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of this can be seen across the country, and continue to have ongoing effects on the ecologies of the regions as well. For example, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/alien-invasive-and-thriving/article24905530.ece>

& Blaikie, 2007). With the creation of the Imperial Forest Service in 1863 (now known as the Forest Department) and the passing of legislature such as the Indian Forest Act (first passed in 1865, and then expanded and amended over the years), the British government sought to formalise its control over forest spaces. Between 1878 and 1900, one fifth of British India's land was legally notified as state forests, and this effectively brought seventy percent of the forested land area under state control (Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009). The Indian Forest Act (IFA) categorised forests into reserved forests, protected forests and village forests. Reserved forests were exclusively set aside for the state, while the act criminalised traditional use and inhabitation of them. People living on those lands received little to no mention, and in reserved forests access was a privilege, not a right, so privileges could be revoked when deemed fit (Singh, 1995). Land brought under colonial rule was governed through systematic demarcation, categorization and commodification that usually favoured local elites (Rangarajan, 1996). The colonial government used administrative and bureaucratic interventions to strategically define and redefine forest land categorizations and uses over time<sup>10</sup>. Crucially, they created a tenure system, which took away land from those who did not have documentation, largely shifting cultivators (Pouchepadass, 1995). This land tenure system and reliance on property rights for legitimately living on forest lands continues to haunt forest dwelling communities today.

Colonial conservation policies were implemented unevenly across the country and resistance and protest from local communities led to the colonial government allowing certain lands to be considered commons. Yet the colonial state 'reserved' and brought large portions of forest land under their control (Pouchepadass, 1995). The Indian forest department was

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, this varies in severity across the subcontinent, and some forests and communities never came into contact with the British empire. However, this was one of the most defining factors shaping conservation in India today.

one of the “largest forestry enterprises in the world” (Rangarajan, 1996, p. 3), and was also the most unpopular arm of the British empire (Pouchepadass, 1995)!

Forest and rural community uprisings took place all across the country. Governance in India has always been decentralised and differed regionally, and it is important to remember resistance and existing thriving systems of management have continued to influence policy, particularly at the turn of independence with a more decentralised constitution (Sivaramakrishnan, 1995). Interestingly, however, many of the reserves set aside both for timber and hunting are protected areas today, and “contain much of what is left of Indian wildlife” (Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, Saberwal and Rangarajan (2006) argue that the forest department’s control over protected areas has remained constant over time. It has been largely exclusionary and has rarely acknowledged local presence, rights, or knowledge. Within protected areas, centralised control has largely prevailed (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009).

### Independence and beyond

With a transfer of power to the Indian government in 1947, the independent Indian state retained most of the forest policy frameworks that the British had created. In fact, more forest land was brought under state rule after independence<sup>11</sup> (Gopalakrishnan, 2017), and the number of people displaced due to conservation increased in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009; Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009).

Narratives from the state regarding forest management largely fell under three overlapping categories – national development, modernity and eminent domain. National development saw forests as a source of rich natural resources, and therefore maintaining canopy cover was important for retaining timber as well as biodiversity stocks. The second

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<sup>11</sup> In part due to ideas of eminent domain, explained below

narrative, that of modernity, depicted communities as primitive, using destructive practices such as shifting cultivation, and in need for modernization by the newly independent Indian state. Finally, the socialist roots of the Indian government dictated rules of eminent domain. Forest and revenue (rural agricultural land) land can be acquired by the state if seen as useful for the greater common good. These narratives brought forest conservation into the fold of India's development as a new nation (Springate-Baginski & Blaikie, 2007).

The 1970s under the Indira Gandhi government were particularly important years for Indian conservation, as it became both a personal and political passion for her (Rangarajan, 2006). Forest and wildlife conservation increasingly became a priority and the wildlife protection act and project tiger were enacted in 1972 and 1973 respectively to increase land area covered by protected areas for conservation.

In 1976, the Indira Gandhi government brought reserved forest management under the concurrent list of the constitution. This was an acknowledgement of the national significance of forests, shifting from exclusively state level decision making to a combination of central and state governance. This accelerated the expansion of protected areas across the country and between 1980 and 1984, the number of protected areas increased from 19 to 52 (Rangarajan, 2006). Once forests came under the purview of the central government and the conservation apparatus was expanding, the groundwork was laid for a centralised institution, resulting in the creation of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change in 1985 (Then called the Ministry of Environment and Forests). The Forest Department and all other conservation and forest related government institutions now fall under this ministry. The relocation of communities from national parks and tiger reserves gained greater urgency with centralised support. Therefore, the 1970s were a turning point for many forest communities who suddenly faced evictions and relocations from their lands (Fisher, 2018).

Further, narratives from ‘expert’ scientists and tiger conservationists at the time (and even today) deemed forest communities a threat to tiger conservation, claiming that people and tigers cannot coexist, largely ignoring the needs of local people (Bijoy, 2011; Rangarajan, 2006; Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009). This led to ongoing relocation of communities out of protected areas (Kabra, 2009) into the late 1990s and early 2000s. Research across the country illustrates the highly coercive and exclusionary nature of wildlife conservation in India (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009; Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006). The impact of bans on the use of fire and other traditional management strategies (majorly enforced with the Wildlife Protection act in 1972) (N. D. Rai, Benjaminsen, Krishnan, & Madegowda, 2018), as well as the ongoing discrimination that many forest communities face (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2006; Sahu, Dash, & Dubey, 2017; Villatt, n.d.) show that conservation spaces are fraught with conflict (Simlai, 2015).

Environmental discourses and policies in India cannot be separated from political and national goals (Cederlöf & Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). The increased funding, tourist interest and rhetoric for conservation can also be seen to stem from a particular form of development that the state has been pursuing. Large-scale industrialization and extractivism have been accompanied by valiant efforts toward conserving nature and wildlife in the form of Protected Areas that are ‘untouched’ (Ramnath, 2015). Therefore, forest diversion for development is seen as inevitable, almost necessary for ‘growth’, and economically poor forest-dwelling communities are seen as destructive of or obstructive to the last few forests left standing. The needs of development and of the environment are juxtaposed as competing claims yet both are drivers for displacement (Baviskar, 2004; Gopalakrishnan, 2017), and complement one another. This process is most evident in Tiger reserves. Using the tiger both as a spectacle and a matter of pride is imperative for conservationists and the state to justify

the violent means used to protect them (Bijoy, 2011; Greenough, 2004; Madegowda & Rao, 2017; N. Rai, 2012; Rice, 2012).



*Figure 2 Fenced off Forests. Biligiri Ranganathswamy Tiger Reserve in Karnataka. Photograph by author*

### Resistance and community participation

The coercive conservation measures described above did not go uncontested. Various groups challenged and debated them, proposing a range of alternatives. Rangarajan argues that these alternatives largely fall into four categories – the pragmatic conservationists, constructive workers, urban intelligentsia and rural activists. While these are not static categories, they offer a better understanding of the debates around wildlife conservation in India (Rangarajan, 2006).

Pragmatic conservationists view species conservation as a whole, arguing that local community conflicts with wildlife need to be taken into consideration, and that conservation goals cannot be achieved without local support and prosperity. This view does not take issue with protected areas, but is concerned with minimising conflict. Constructive workers push for a mix of traditional management practices with state run initiatives and ‘modern’ managements techniques. The Joint Forest Management scheme (extended to protected areas in the late 1980s, but largely unsuccessful) is one example of this approach. Urban intelligentsia, on the other hand, call for a complete overhaul of conservation systems. These academics and activists contest the ideological underpinnings of conservation practice in India, and question the need to remove people from conservation spaces. Finally, rural activists have opposed conservation policies because of the loss of their own livelihoods and land (Rangarajan, 2006).

Forest dwelling communities, for example, have actively and sometimes successfully resisted external control over their lands. Gopalakrishnan argues that activity within forest spaces is “against the will of state machinery”, and communities have collectively asserted their resistance to both the British and Indian governments (Gopalakrishnan, 2017). In fact, today there are an estimated three million people still living within Protected Areas (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009; Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006).

Over the years the government has tried to create schemes that address the ongoing disenfranchisement of forest dwelling communities, and incorporate customary and historical forms of forest governance (Springate-Baginski & Blaikie, 2007). Yet, participatory management schemes have rarely applied to or been successful in Protected Areas (Broome, Rai, & Tatpati, 2017). Even beyond protected areas, several scholars have critiqued the efficacy of these various programmes in different parts of the country (Agarwal, 2009; Lele, 2017; Sarin, Singh, Sundar, & Bhogal, 2003).

In 1997, a Supreme court directive turned forest-dwellers across protected areas in the country into ‘encroachers’ overnight. It stated that they were to be relocated and their rights settled. This essentially meant the relocation or limiting of resource use by people both living within and around India’s Protected Areas (Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006). Thousands of forest dwellers resisted these evictions and stalled the execution of this order with movements across the country that advocated for forest-dweller rights (Fisher, 2018). The Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a movement across ten states in the country, came together to correct historical injustice to forest communities, and drafted the 2006 Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (recognition of forest rights) Act, or the FRA, making a bold step towards democratizing conservation spaces (Campaign for Survival and Dignity, n.d.). The FRA was passed in 2006, when political wiggle room became available, and the ruling government at the time was more open to peoples’ movements as long as they didn’t challenge large capital investments. Despite this wiggle room, rights activists could not pass many of the more radical aspects of the Act. State officials wanted to remove non-tribals as beneficiaries of the act (this was unsuccessful), strongly discouraged community ownership, left some of the rights intentionally vague, and the notification of the act was delayed, during which time the forest department relocated several villages from within Protected Areas (Gopalakrishnan, 2017).

The FRA provides communities with inalienable land titles for individuals and families, and community rights to access forest resources and areas of cultural significance. It also provides management rights where communities can create a management plan that the Forest Department is signatory to. Management has become a key focus in conversations on where the FRA is headed. Over the past five years, forest rights activists have held several meetings across the country focussed on discussions on post- community rights, and the importance of participatory management (Broome et al., 2017; Lele, 2017; *Promise and*

*Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Right's Act in India*, n.d.; Sahu et al., 2017). In an analysis of the impact of the Forest Rights Act ten years after the fact, it is clear that the implementation has been very poor. Sahu, Dash and Dubey argue that many of its failures were because of limited state infrastructure, active obstruction of implementation by the forest department and some environmentalists, and a lack of political will to realise its potential (Sahu, Dash, & Dubey, 2017). Further, Lele argues that truly local governance can only happen when there is an effective devolution of power to local communities, and they are allowed to participate in decision making (Lele, 2017), a sentiment echoed among many of the writers on community conservation in India's protected areas (Cronkleton, Saigal, & Pulhin, 2012). Throughout this thesis I hope to address the FRA's successes and failures, reflecting on its overall lack of implementation and the ongoing dispossession of communities despite having rights under the FRA.

There is a great deal of literature on the FRA as well as ongoing activism across the country, and yet the experiences within communities have not been explored as much. Here, I try to complicate our understandings of the role of the FRA in conservation spaces. To do this, I focus on youth experiences in one of the few tiger reserves to have communities that live within them with rights under the FRA. Before I get to the case study, however, I spend a little time unpacking ideas of indigeneity in India as well as literature on youth.

### **Forest Communities and Indigeneity in India**

Forest communities in India are not one homogenous entity, and many communities have moved in and out of forest spaces over time (Fisher, 2018). They have had highly diverse experiences and histories across the sub-continent, and as happened with forest lands, colonialism led to the peoples being essentialised and categorized. Today, many of these communities are legally (and in everyday discourse) considered 'tribes'. Many are also

referred to as - and consider themselves to be - ‘adivasis’<sup>12</sup>, original dwellers, which often gets conflated with indigeneity (Béteille, 1998; Shah, 2007). The terms “adivasi”, “tribal” and “indigenous” in the Indian context emerge from specific histories, which I hope to explore in this section. Each is complex and contested and tied to larger political and social processes such as colonialism, Hindu nationalism and activist and community struggles. Today scheduled tribes comprise 8.6% of the Indian population, numbering close to eighty-five million peoples (Upadhyay, 2016).

Indigeneity in global discourses is often associated with colonialism and a settler state that marginalises communities that existed before. In India, distinguishing between who came first, who are ‘original dwellers’, or who are lasting forest communities is a highly contentious and even political task (Xaxa, n.d.), as the Hindu majority also position themselves as being indigenous to the land. Therefore, defining indigeneity in India is contested both within political spheres and academia (Shah, 2007).

As mentioned above, forest dwelling communities have always had relationships to the rest of society (Béteille, 1998), sometimes through servitude, at other times through chieftainships and autonomous land control. They retained distinct linguistic, cultural and religious practices and were often identified as outside of the majority populace (Arnold & Guha, 1996; Fisher, 2018). Yet, their ongoing relationships to caste society has led many academics<sup>13</sup> to question whether these communities can indeed be considered distinct ‘tribes’, or whether they were closer to castes, and were “at various stages in the passage from tribe to caste” (Béteille, 1998, p190).

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<sup>12</sup> The legal category of ‘tribe’ and the more political/identifying category of ‘adivasi’ do not necessarily overlap across the country, as will be illustrated below

<sup>13</sup> Largely anthropologists

The category of ‘scheduled tribe’ was created by the colonial government before independence, and much like forest categories, the independent Indian state retained colonial categorizations. Given the blurred boundaries between tribal and non-tribal societies, the legal designation of forest communities as tribes simultaneously synthesized existing ‘traits’ and constructed new ones, creating an idealised category of ‘scheduled tribe’.

### Colonial construction of tribes

The term ‘tribe’ was introduced to South Asia by European imperialists who used it as a descriptor, derived from comparisons with similar communities they encountered in other colonies such as in Africa and Australia (van Schendel, 2011). Viewed as largely anachronistic (Skaria, 1997), these tribes not only represented a particular type of ‘primitive society’, they also represented a particular evolutionary stage (Béteille, 1998). Of course, the role of existing hierarchies in perpetuating these categorizations must be acknowledged, as both European and Indian elites considered tribes primitive and stuck in time, characterized by stereotypical notions of ‘tribal’ attributes (Middleton, 2013). These, along with other narratives around indigenous communities globally, constructed an image of tribal societies as living in close harmony with nature, almost as part of nature itself (Shah, 2007; Upadhyay, 2016). The discourses surrounding these communities not only shape how they are viewed and constructed in relation to broader society, they also continue to shape the legal categories by which the state decides whether a communities can be considered a scheduled tribe or not. Therefore, the categorization of scheduled tribes was based on a variety of descriptive characteristics, including their living in forest and hilly spaces, their economic and social marginalization, and linguistic and religious distinctiveness (Béteille, 1998; Middleton, 2013). These categories were neither systematically defined nor applied, and therefore

scheduled tribes today have a range of different social and economic characteristics (Xaxa, n.d.).

British colonial officials in India viewed tribes through highly patronizing, paternalistic attitudes that deemed them childlike communities “who could not quite grow up but who nevertheless needed to be protected” (Shah, 2007, p1809). It can even be argued that the British believed they were protecting tribal communities by giving both them and some of their lands<sup>14</sup> special status in relation to the state (Fisher, 2019).

These constructions of tribes relied on several contradictory yet simple binaries – they were both romanticized and considered irresponsible (and their daily activities criminalised in some cases), given autonomy and treated as needing protection. In all these definitions, however, they were always studied or understood in “relation to the characteristics of the larger society” (Xaxa, 1999, p2). Many of these attitudes toward tribal communities have persisted, and some academics (Gadgil & Guha, 1995) have been critiqued for describing them as in perfect harmony with nature, when in reality their relationships with their surroundings were more complex (Shah, 2007).

### Adivasis and the ‘tribal slot’

Much like conservation policies illustrated above, the independent Indian nation state preserved colonial constructions of tribal communities, and included them in the Fifth Schedule of the constitution. Scheduled tribes are described as: “primitive” with a “distinctive culture”, “geographical isolation”, have “shyness of contact with the community at large”, and are “backward [economically]” (Government of India). This category, while highly essentialising, is also imprecise and vague, making the designation of scheduled tribes

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<sup>14</sup> The 1874 Scheduled Districts Act is one such example, where land largely occupied by scheduled tribes was given special status. However, these designations did not necessarily apply in places where forests were reserved for conservation or extractive purposes.

complex. It is based on traits, not actual historical research, indicating that the ability to perform the ‘tribal slot’ (Li, 2000) can influence their designation as such. Yet, as Middleton argues, these categories are also influenced by local and regional politics (Middleton, 2013).

The term *Adivasi*, coined in the 1930s as a part of pre-independence resistance movements was a way to unify forest communities across the sub-continent (minorityrights.org; Upadhyay, 2016), and is now widely used as both a descriptive and political term (Baviskar, 2007). It largely overlaps with scheduled tribe designations but includes communities who might have been excluded by state categorizations. Other versions of it in other languages such as *girijana* in Kannada, translate to similar notions of adivasis representing indigenous communities. As illustrated above, however, indigeneity is highly contested in India, especially in relation to the Hindu majority who believe themselves to be the original occupants of the land area<sup>15</sup>.

The term *Adivasi* is therefore not acknowledged by the Indian state which does not consider India to have an indigenous population (Shah, 2007; Upadhyay, 2016). Although the constitution recognizes tribes as culturally distinct, the state’s approach to them is largely assimilationist (Shah, 2007). To many in the community the term ‘adivasi’ is one of empowerment (Xaxa, n.d.), both accepting subalternity and rejecting it at the same time<sup>16</sup> (Shah, 2007, p1810). Many of the communities that occupy spaces that are fast disappearing today due to both development (*India Exclusion Report 2017*) and conservation (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009), rely on their adivasi identity to resist their dispossession. *Adivasi* is a political category and as non-adivasis we must treat it as such, not deny the community their own self-identification. Academics have reflected on whether debates on the legitimacy of an

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<sup>15</sup> See interlude below, for more

<sup>16</sup> This is similar to the use of the term *dalit*, a way to self-identify with oppression as well as resistance among lower caste communities.

‘*adivasi*’ identity might in fact undermine this project (Shah, 2007; Upadhyay, 2016), and therefore researchers working with them need to be mindful of the ways in which communities are both defined by the state and define themselves.

Borrowing from Donna Haraway’s work (Haraway, 1988) on situated knowledge, which is always partial, I posit that ‘tribal’ and *adivasi* identity is also situated and partial. *adivasi* identity is not clearly distinct from the rest of the country, but they have situated knowledge, place-making practices and occupy specific regions that they have lived in for centuries. Through a shared identity of subalternity and ways of being with and knowing the world, they are able to collectively mobilise. Thus, although their ‘indigenous’ status might be questioned or change over time (Beteille, 1998), their *adivasi* status within the caste hierarchies in the country are unlikely to be contested.

In another sense, *adivasis* are situated in relation to the state, in that the ways in which they may be distinguished from mainstream society, through lenses such as language or religion, are situated within particular colonial histories, and are partial<sup>17</sup> (not absolute). The official stance on *adivasis* in India (and some of the academic literature as well) doesn’t reflect the contextual complexity of each of these communities or talk about the historical processes that have shaped them and been erased over time. As *adivasi* scholar Xaxa argues,

“The *adivasi* consciousness and the articulation of indigenous people status is not so much about whether they are the original inhabitants of India as about the fact that they have no power whatsoever over anything (land, forest, river, resources) that lies in the territory they inhabit.” (Xaxa, n.d., p. 8)

Their situatedness in place is then subsumed to a narrative that relies more on descriptive factors, thus setting ‘tribes’ in stone. It does not represent the ways in which the communities and the worlds they live in change.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, Beteille, 1998, discusses the difficulty of identifying distinctive linguistic and religious separations between ‘tribes’ and caste society

Understanding adivasi situatedness in relation to their historical construction allows us to go beyond a debate of strategic essentialism. It allows us to see their mobilization as a reflection of their simultaneous acceptance and rejection of imposed categories. It also allows us to see them as dynamic, and understand that both their identity and their relationships to place are contextual, relational, and change over time. Younger generations in particular will experience their *adivasi* identity in new ways, as have previous generations, and these changing and emergent understandings of their place in the world, are important to study.

### **Geographies of Youth**

This work attempts to look at youth as one *lens* through which to understand the relationships between conservation policy, communities and their connections to place. However, youth as a category of analysis is emerging within Geography<sup>18</sup> and other disciplines and it is important to briefly discuss this literature.

‘Youth’ as a distinct stage of life, emerged in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as economic autonomy became increasingly important in an individual’s life. However, it was not until the 1980s that experiences of youth began to be seriously considered with nuance and complexity in academic literature. Considered a time of dependence and instability, ‘youth’ as a constructed life stage and state of being is now often taken for granted (Jeffrey, 2009). Youth are largely viewed as adults in the making rather than people in their own right. Geographers have placed this age range roughly between the ages of eighteen and thirty (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008), and this is the age range that I have used in my work as well.

The current moment of late capitalism seems to have brought up newly relevant questions about youth and their condition in the world. Studying youth today is unique

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<sup>18</sup> Much of the description of geographies of youth come from Progress reports, and therefore this literature is only partial at best.

because of global liberalization and a decline of welfare systems since the 1980s. This has meant that on the one hand it takes longer for youth to reach adulthood, but it also means that youth and children need to start becoming economic providers earlier, or take on the responsibilities of social reproduction (Aitken, 2001). Studying young adults in today's world offers new insight into issues such as education, work, identity and politics, and thus youth also emerge as an important lens through which to understand the workings of global capitalism and its entanglements (Jeffrey, 2009; Katz, 2004).

Youth have received limited attention in Geographic literature, particularly youth from the global south (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008). Studying subaltern youth provides a powerful lens with which to see how social forces shape the lives of young people. In this context, 'youth' is being redefined as a period of prolonged vulnerability and hardship due to various forms of subjugation.

Looking at education in particular, researchers have studied youth experiences with discrimination, alienating education systems and 'dropping out' (Ansell, 2008), all of which I discuss in this thesis. Education for many marginalised communities is considered a luxury and an investment in future success, and youth are often crucial for family incomes. It can also be seen as a 'contradictory resource', particularly within the adivasi community in India (Froerer, 2011), providing benefits and yet 'drawing young people more tightly into systems of inequality' (Jeffrey, 2009, p5).

Academic attention has been given to unemployment, a related issue, particularly in India. Experiences of changing temporality, gender norms and associated anxieties have emerged as important areas of research. An example of this is research on educated unemployment among young men (Chowdhry, 2005; Jeffrey, 2010).

Youth agency is another key area of research. One common manifestation of youth agency is their increasing political awareness and involvement, and India in particular has seen the rise of youth in political movements<sup>19</sup>. Literature on youth has argued that their agency is always in relation to multiple structures of dominance, not just one form of oppression (Jeffrey, 2012). Overlapping structures of power such as capitalist expansion and economic change (Katz, 2004), state regulation of behaviour, and social stratification all engage youth differently, and are uneven along lines of gender, class, race and caste. They vary across space and time, interacting with other factors such as education, livelihoods, and familial support.

In India, rural-urban migration is increasing as young people find it harder to work and live in rural spaces (Gidwani, 2008). The experience of urban life among young people and its role in shaping identity (Datta, 2018; S. Smith, 2017; S. H. Smith & Gergan, 2015) has also been crucial to understanding these shifts.

The literature also looks at adivasi and tribal youth, although this is largely in relation to education levels (Vasavi, 2012). Vasavi and colleagues who work in similar regions as my own fieldwork wrote a report on adivasis and education (Vasavi, 2012) which highlights some key points that are pertinent to my work, as well as questions about adivasi youth across the country.

The report points out multiple processes that are influencing adivasi youth today, all of which emerge as key experiences for Soliga youth as well. These are: disruptions of earlier systems of social-ecological resilience; emerging economic and social hierarches where adivasis are at the bottom; loss of local food security; state institutions which simultaneously assimilate and disenfranchise communities; political movements, religious fundamentalism,

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<sup>19</sup> Although interestingly, Soliga youth do not necessarily seem to be politically mobilising.

and identity politics; increasing dependence on wage labour and shifts away from land-based livelihoods; and finally, adivasis inhabit some of the most precarious and insecure spaces. These indicate the multiple structural processes that affect young lives today.

My interviews with Soliga elders and NGO workers indicated that youth are perceived largely negatively and with concern, both within the community and by outsiders. I see this in my own life and in the lives of people around me as well, so an interesting question for me to unpack was whether perceptions of youth in a slightly negative light are universal, or specific to the particular socio-political moment that I am studying within the Soliga community.

Literature on youth though indicates that they are commonly associated with negative perceptions, viewed as restless, irresponsible, and dependent financially and socially (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008). These negative perceptions can significantly impact employability, especially of young men (Jeffrey, 2009). Further, negative stereotypes are not new, but negative discourses around youth political mobilizations and idealised notions of adulthood that youth often fail at achieving, are increasing due to a rise in neoliberal politics (McDowell, 2003).

As we emerge into an increasingly polarised and necropolitical world (Mbembe & Corcoran, 2019), studying youth can offer both insight and hope. The everyday politics of young lives that are situated within changing landscapes are important to study in order to unpack and understand future possibilities. Thus, I hope my work can contribute to academic conversations on youth as well.

## Setting the Stage

### BR Hills Tiger Reserve and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve

Sathyamangalam tiger reserve (STR) and BR Hills temple tiger reserve (BRT) are contiguous to each other. The land area is divided by a state border with BRT in Karnataka and STR in Tamil Nadu to the South. Situated at the confluence of the Western and Eastern Ghats in South India, these two protected areas are highly ecologically diverse, and have been the focus of multiple state conservation efforts since colonial times.



*Figure 3 View South toward STR and the Nilgiris from BRT. Photograph by Author*

They are also home to several adivasi communities that have had varying access to the forests over time. One such community is the Soligas who are spread across BRT, the northern range of STR and other surrounding forest areas. Soligas are the only adivasis in BRT and were the first community nationally to secure community rights (under the FRA)

within a tiger reserve in 2012. In STR the implementation of the FRA has been slower, and this is explained in more detail in chapter one. However, Soligas in both BRT and STR continue to experience highly exclusionary conservation practices that emerge out of complex and contested histories.

The history of the BRT and STR hills show that they have had a range of land use and users from kings and priests to the colonial and contemporary forest departments, timber operations, coffee plantations and Soliga settlements. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Maharaja of Mysore, a patron of the Ranganathaswamy temple, ruled over the region. However, a large part of the area was brought under British control in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Rai et al., 2018). In 1807, Buchanan, a British officer mentions the Soligas in a travel account, describing them as living in a poor state in the forest, showing that contact between the Soligas and the British began as early as the 1800s (Morab, 1977). In 1887, the British leased a portion of the forest to a Scottish planter who established a coffee estate in the heart of BRT which still remains today (acquired largely by Indian corporations) and employs a majority of the Soliga population from surrounding villages (Rai et al., 2018). Another British document from 1909 describes Soligas in the Dhimum and Kollegaala region, and as assisting the British in hunting and timber operations through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Morab, 1977). Therefore, Soligas in the entire region were both mobile and actively engaging with the communities around them, illustrating that human activity has actively contributed to the creation of this forest space for many years (Thekaekara et al., 2017).

After independence the space was divided along state lines. The Karnataka government built roads to transport timber out of the forest. They began to encourage Soliga families to move closer to the temple and roads, as Soligas were a vital source of labour for the extraction of timber (Morab, 1977; N. D. Rai et al., 2018). Soon after, in 1974, BRT was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary leading to a large-scale relocation and settlement of people to

the peripheries and closer to main roads. The forest department settled communities that lived near the coffee plantation into eight colonies that they established exclusively to provide labour for the estates. Those living along the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu border say that many of them were also made to relocate in the early 1970s. Some claim that forest officials made them cross over from Tamil Nadu into colonies in Karnataka. Traditional practices of shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering were banned, including the use of ground fires (lit between January and February to enrich the soil and encourage regeneration of grasses and shrubs) (Madegowda, 2009). STR became a Wildlife sanctuary in 2008 and then both BRT and STR became tiger reserves in 2012 and 2013 respectively. These increasingly high-profile transitions in conservation priorities meant that the forests and the people have seen rapid transformations over the last fifty years.

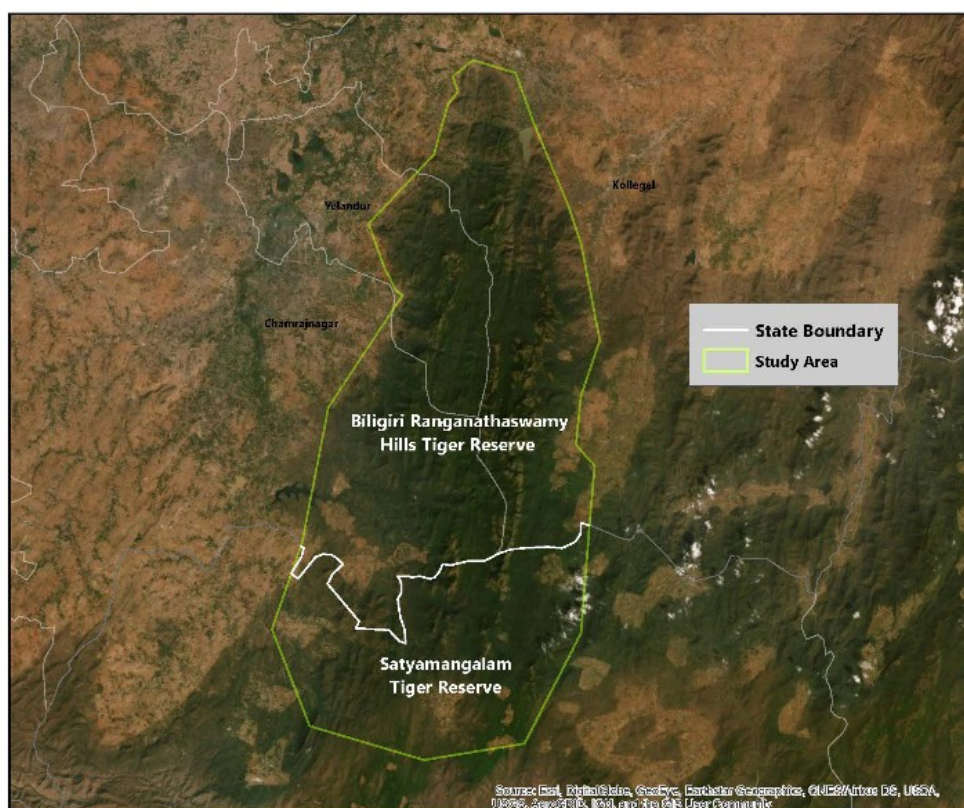


Figure 4 State boundary within region studied. Map made by Caitlin McShane.

The most detailed study of the Soligas in BR Hills, was written by Indian anthropologist SG Morab in the 1970s (1977), based on fieldwork conducted for a few months in the 1960s. Given the short duration of his fieldwork and his own positionality as a non-local and an anthropologist, this book has many holes and contradictions. Even so, it paints a picture of the Soliga that is different from the one we see today. Villages and settlements that existed deeper within the forest at the time, for instance, have since been evicted and many more settlements exist near the main road, where he did most of his fieldwork. Currently, most Soligas who live near the temple or on the peripheries of BRT and STR live in ‘colonies’ (consisting of cement roads and cement houses), created for relocated communities to live a sedentary life. Morab describes a road, built recently, for the transport of timber and bamboo – the cutting of which are completely illegal today. That road is now a national highway that opens only from 6AM to 6PM. Food staples that he describes, such as millets and tubers have now become harder to procure, and rice received through rations is consumed more regularly. The book describes forest meats in great detail, all of which are now banned from being hunted and eaten. Soligas were in fact required to surrender their guns and weapons to the forest department to ensure that hunting would be stopped (Rai et al., 2018). The consumption of alcohol was virtually non-existent at the time when he wrote, and today alcoholism is unfortunately widespread in the region (Morab, 1977). These changes between Morab’s observations and what we can see today, are linked to the impact of restrictive conservation policies that have transformed lives and livelihoods in both BRT and STR. Moreover, Soligas believe that the banning of the use of fire and other local management practices has led to an increase in invasive species such as *lantana camara* which have taken over and transformed large tracts of the forest. This has reduced forest biodiversity as well as the availability of honey and fruits, important forest resources on which Soligas historically relied. (Mundoli, Joseph, & Setty, 2016; Thekaekara et al., 2017).

As you can see in the image below, lantana is dense, leaving little room for undergrowth. Forest department documents estimate the lantana in BRT to have taken over approximately 60% of the land area (Mathur et al., 2018).



*Figure 5 Soligas carry firewood on paths lined with Lantana Camara bushes. Photograph by Lakshmi S Gowda*

Although Morab's work is the only historical ethnography of the Soliga community, in recent years they have received more research attention. Local NGOs such as the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) and Keystone Foundation have worked extensively with them to emphasise their management knowledge and the importance of community rights for the scientific establishment<sup>20</sup>. Political ecology research has studied the various impacts of conservation policy on Soliga lives (A. Menon et al., 2009; N. D. Rai et al., 2018; N. Rai & Menon, n.d.). Ecological research has looked at the long term role of

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<sup>20</sup> For example, see <https://www.atree.org/projects/enabling-locally-managed-conservation-forest-and-wildlife-habitat-while-improving> and <https://keystone-foundation.org/community-forest-rights-challenges-faced-by-the-community-members-within-nilgiri-biosphere-reserve/>

Soliga forest use in maintaining forest health (Setty, Bawa, Ticktin & Gowda, 2008; Varghese & Ticktin, 2008). Other studies have paid attention to linguistics (Si & Agnihotri, 2014), oral histories and Soliga experiences of forest change and degradation to understand the ecology of the region (Sundaram, Krishnan, Hiremath, & Joseph, 2012; Thekaekara et al., 2017). Further, Soliga academic and activist C Madegowda, the first member of the community to receive a PhD, has written extensively about Soliga customs, knowledge (Madegowda, 2009), and experiences of conservation policies (Madegowda & Rao, 2017). Much attention has also been paid to the impacts of bans on NTFP collection and resultant shifts to wage labour economies (Madegowda & Rao, 2013; Sandemose, 2009). Apart from conservation and ecology related work, researchers in the region have also studied Soliga public health and nutrition (Seshadri, Madegowda, Babu, & Nuggehalli Srinivas, 2019; Venkatesh, Kusakabe, & Veena, 2018). These are just a few examples of the extensive academic and other interest that the Soliga community has received, and I explore some of the implications of this in interlude II.

### Research interests

Although there is a lot of literature from India on the importance of community involvement in conservation and the lack of agency given to locals in the past (Lele, 2017; Sarin, Singh, Sundar, & Bhogal, 2003), there has not been sufficient engagement with the question of how communities will navigate decades of alienation from forests (and resulting socio-economic and ecological change), to achieve the kind of participation that many scholars are advocating for. Forest dwelling communities are not static, and neither is their knowledge or relationship to forests. This is predominantly evident among youth in forest dwelling communities, where changing knowledge, practices, and aspirations may be re-defining ideas of rights and management for the future. Therefore, my research tries to address some of these gaps in the literature.

I approach these gaps by studying the relationship between tiger conservation policy, the forest rights act, and experiences of dispossession among Soligas in Biligirirangaswamy Tiger Reserve and Sathymangalam Tiger reserve. For the research project I was particularly interested in understanding changing livelihoods, knowledge systems, aspirations and relationships to the forest. This included experiences of material change in forests and villages, and how they were impacting people across the community; dependencies on wage labour and cash economies; changes in social relations within the community and youth aspirations and experiences of life in the forest. I also tried to understand agency among youth and the wider community in the face of multiple changing power structures.

### Thesis overview

This thesis attempts to synthesize findings related to the broad goals listed above. I do this in two separate articles that address various elements of lived experiences in a tiger reserve and the role of the FRA in particular. Youth offer a valuable lens in this regard to study the emergent and diverse effects of tiger conservation and other overlapping processes on the community. They also offer valuable insight into the future of tiger reserves and the people that live within them. Since this thesis is structured around two articles, I included elements of the field site that I felt were interesting or important but irrelevant to the papers in interludes in-between the articles.

The first paper in this thesis addresses the structural impacts of legal and ideological systems on everyday lives. Communities living within BR Hills and other tiger reserves have been theorised as experiencing ‘in-situ displacement’: displacement that is socio-economic, not physical, and removes peoples’ access to markets, livelihoods, spaces of significance and so on. Rather than viewing dispossession as an event (eg. physical displacement), in-situ displacement unfolds at the scale of the everyday, both continuously experienced and contested. I contribute to literature and understandings of the social impacts of conservation

practice by adding to literature on in-situ displacement, combining it with a reading of overlapping legal structures and the lens of the theory of access. Together these speak to everyday lives and the potential for participatory conservation practice. Legal ambiguities, resulting from multiple and overlapping laws that create loopholes, open up spaces for local power structures to displace communities even as they remain on their lands. I also use literature on access and rights to argue that even communities which have received rights under the FRA experience displacement due to a range of ongoing factors. These need to be overcome in order to achieve a true democratization of conservation in the future.

The second paper looks at experiences of life within a tiger reserve, particularly among youth. Unpacking the tensions between staying in and leaving their homes, I argue that youth experience ‘waiting’, a theoretical framework for understanding the sense of stagnation that characterizes many young people’s lives. I argue that rather than challenging the status quo, the FRA enables waiting to occur, due to its lack of implementation and ongoing power structures that it is unable to overcome.

As the thesis is largely structured around articles, there may be repetitions in the information provided. I also do not adequately address questions of gender which I hope to explore further in later work. I now briefly describe some methodological considerations before presenting my papers.

## **Methods**

I conducted research over two and a half months, from June to August 2019. I was lucky to be returning to spaces I had worked in and been a research assistant at for two years previously, so finding research assistants and research participants was relatively easy. My prior knowledge of the region and some of the people helped me to build trust and rapport

with participants. My similarity in age also helped to connect to youth, as I could talk to them as peers and share my own experiences with them in order to establish a connection.

My research involved a mix of interviews and participant observation with over 100 Soliga informants and some more informal interviews with local schoolteachers and NGO workers. Before beginning the work I had in-depth conversations with my field assistants to share my research questions and proposed methods. I asked them to advise me about the best ways to go about it, and whether questions I was asking were appropriate and sufficient. This exercise allowed them to participate in the interviews, and to better understand my motivations for this research. I would like to acknowledge them as partners in this process.

**Interviews** – Interviews were conducted with both youth and adults, and while some were recorded, many were written down, as informants were uncomfortable and spoke less freely when being recorded. I spoke to 60 youth between the ages of 18 and 30, (28m, 32f) and the rest were older members of the community. These ranged from group discussions with 3-5 people, to one-on one interviews that were between half an hour and an hour long. Consequently, some conversations were more in-depth than others. I chose informants of different income levels within the community, and marital status varied across the board. I also spoke to people with a range of employment including those working in resorts, for the forest department, doing wage work, and so on. My informants were spread across 30 villages spanning the entire area. I was keen to get interviews from many different locations to compare information from villages in the forest, at the border, close to towns, with land, and without it.

**Participation** – I stayed in field stations that were within villages during my field work, and thus I could also observe the lives of people around me during my stay. Field notes and discussions with my assistants took place at the end of every day.

I originally planned *walking transects* as walks with Soliga youth in the forest. However due to constraints with access to the tiger reserve (explained in more detail below), I was only able to do two walking transects in the forest. I did however conduct eight more walks within the villages and along main roads, and spent time with young people as they were grazing cattle and doing chores in the house.

I conducted *mental mapping* of youth depictions of the forests and their homes with fifteen participants, who drew maps of their surroundings. I was keen to use this data in order to enhance my work but unfortunately due to time constraints that was not possible. The exercise has influenced my understanding of youth knowledge, and I hope to use the maps for work in the future.

I also observed *meetings* in the region, and I was grateful to be included in them. Soligas are often in multiple village and regional level committees and collectives both political and labour related. I was lucky to attend two meetings in different villages related to value addition for NTFP collection, a meeting on youth, education and scholarships, and a gram panchayat meeting, a day-long meeting with the local district politician and all community members (only a fraction of whom actually showed up). These gave me insight into the political and social motivations of Soliga leaders in particular.

I conducted research in person, in Kannada and Tamil, both of which I speak. I also received assistance from the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), and Keystone Foundation with my access to field sites and accommodation in both locations, and am very grateful to them for that. I am additionally grateful to have received the CARTSS and Solstice grants from the University of Colorado Boulder and Geography Department, which supported me financially during fieldwork.

## Research in a tiger reserve

Throughout this thesis I have attempted to unpack my positionality in regard to this work and talk about the ways in which it both impacted my ability to do research and influenced the responses I heard. One key element that influenced research for me was the fact that I was working in tiger reserves, which are the most monitored conservation areas in the country.

I was able to visit some villages more often than others, as I could not visit villages within the core area without a permit. It was difficult to go into the forest without a research permit that clearly outlined a need to be in the forest for research purposes, and my permit did not indicate a need to leave settlements. In STR, I was unable to get a research permit due to time constraints and therefore was only able to go to villages that were on non-forest land. I did manage to briefly visit some of the villages within forest land, but that had to be done carefully and therefore the research from those areas is less thorough. I was lucky to be introduced to people from villages I couldn't access and that also gave me some insight into their experiences.

Another difficulty was with the forest department. In both BRT and STR I was advised to talk to the forest department staff about my research cautiously. I was told to talk about socio-economic change and youth, but not about conservation or the FRA. Below is a brief anecdote from a day in the field that highlights this experience.

*I was keen to visit a village inside the forest, right next to an old coffee plantation started by the British but now run by multiple different private companies. Here, most residents of the village work in the coffee plantation and have for generations, yet they are still on daily or monthly contracts and are dependent on the plantations to call them for work. This dependence on the plantations allows them to be paid low salaries, and not have*

*year-round guaranteed employment. We approached the village and were stopped at the range forest office. In the jeep with me were Kona and Ranga, two Soliga employees of the organization whose field station I was staying in. They advised me to take my permit letter to the Range Officer so that we could go into the village.*

*The Range Officer took a minute to look over the letter and then asked me more about the projects the NGO I was staying with does. He told us he was new here and was transferred to BR Hills only a month ago. Kona and Ranga spoke familiarly about the previous Range Officer and the work they have been doing at BRT over the last two decades, subtly establishing their intimate knowledge of both the place and the forest department. This lack of meek demeanour on the part of Kona and Ranga seemed to make the officer suspicious of us, and he said he would send a guard with us to the village. As we entered the village I could tell there was immediately some tension in the ways in which we were received. Conversations often drifted off topic, and some questions were artfully ignored. I could see that I too was changing the way in which I asked questions, so as not to worry the guard - I spoke more softly and asked more questions about the forest and their lifestyles and less about the forest department and forest policies. The guard seemed satisfied, disappeared into someone's home, and as I continued to talk to people, emerged from the house with a bottle of honey. I was told by my field assistant that he had walked into the house and demanded the honey – a bottle that would have given the family 300 rupees if sold – the same amount of money as their daily wage! I was mortified that my research project brought the guard to the village, aware that I was also perceived with a certain degree of fear.*



*Figure 6 Two Soliga women singing a traditional song. June 2020. Photograph by Lakshmi S Gowda*

## **Chapter One:**

### **Settled yet Displaced – In-situ Displacement and Legal Ambiguities in Tiger Conservation**

In the fall of 2019, I was hiking in the Rocky Mountains and I sent a photograph of the fall colours to a friend, Mada, a Soliga<sup>21</sup> activist who lives on the periphery of both the Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Tiger Reserve (BRT) and the Sathymangalam Tiger Reserve (STR) in South India. He replied, “Oh lucky. Are you able to roam around the forest without permission?” His response reflects the restrictive and murky legality that he experiences every day, as accessing a tiger reserve in India requires one to have a permit or rights to do so, even if the space has been home for centuries.

Mada has worked in a local NGO for several years, building awareness around forest-dweller rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA)<sup>22</sup>. Our brief exchange reminded me of a story Mada had told me one afternoon while in the field, as he reflected on the inadequacy of rights and awareness in the everyday:

*He had gone into BRT one day to collect roots<sup>23</sup> with his uncle, when they were stopped by a guard sitting by the side of the game road (roads constructed to drive through the forest by the Forest Department). The guard was young, Mada said, younger than him for sure, and yet his uniform and gun made him seem immediately intimidating.*

*Years of working for an NGO have made Mada appear more urban than many other Soligas. He wears jeans and shirts, and he has a faux leather jacket that he wears all the*

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<sup>21</sup> A legally designated scheduled tribe in South India.

<sup>22</sup> An Act that provides forest dwelling communities with rights to live in and access forest land as discussed in intro

<sup>23</sup> Used to cook special pickles and medicinal dishes.

*time. His ability to speak Kannada and Tamil fluently and his 'modern' appearance made the guard suspicious. The guard was rude and authoritative, refusing to believe Mada was Soliga, and asked him to prove it. He pointed at the bag of roots and told Mada he could be arrested for taking things out of the forest. Mada's uncle was scared, and he signalled that they should just apologise, leave the roots with the guard, and get out of the forest. Having worked on implementing the FRA for years, Mada knew their actions were not illegal, and stood his ground, insisting both that he is Soliga and that he has the right to collect forest produce. Finally, the guard let them go.*

*He reflected on the story, asking "How many people would know they have rights and their actions are legal? How many would have the courage to stand up to a guard? Awareness makes no difference if people are scared all the time".*

This paper focuses on the Soliga community in two tiger reserves in South India – BRT and STR (mentioned above). Tiger Reserves are high priority conservation areas in India and are supposed to be free of human activity. Consequently, BRT and STR are unusual, as it is rare that communities are allowed to continue to live within and access forest spaces in a tiger reserve. Yet people living within them still experience harassment, discrimination and subjugation despite their ability to stay in the forest. Moreover, they are often threatened with legal consequences for their actions. Their access to the forest is continuously contested, controlled by the creation of social and material boundaries, despite them still being able to live on their lands. This paper builds on and extends work done in the region that argues that restrictive policies lead to a distinctive form of dispossession within such tiger reserves (Rai et al., 2018). Rai et al describe this as *in-situ* displacement, where people experience changes in access to markets, livelihoods, spaces of significance and so on while still continuing to physically occupy the land. In this paper I build on *in-situ* displacement as a concept, illustrating the complex ways in which it plays out in the

everyday. I argue that the experiences associated with *in-situ* displacement are exacerbated due to multiple overlapping and contradictory legal systems. These legal contradictions enable existing power hierarchies to dispossess people on the ground, and create atmospheres of fear, as illustrated above. Further, *in-situ* displacements transform experiences of space and place over time. Thus, *in-situ* displacement complicates literature on conservation and displacement by shedding light on the impacts of dispossession for people living *inside* protected areas.

I begin by situating my work within the larger literature on conservation -related displacements. I also give a background to the legal governance structures in Tiger reserves such as BRT and STR. I then present the field site and explore the forms that *in situ* displacement (aided by legal ambiguities and restrictions of access) takes in this particular context. I provide specific case studies to strengthen and illustrate my points, arguing that although legal rights allay the outright exclusion of Soligas from their land, they do not do enough to assure a true sense of self determination, and *in situ* displacement continues to define everyday life.

### **Conservation and Displacement in The Literature**

The creation of protected areas for wildlife conservation around the world have emerged as an international necessity, framed as a need to protect the world's last few natural *wilderness* spaces and make them free of human intervention. Yet, around the world, these 'natural' spaces were rarely ever free of human presence and were in fact created by violently evicting and policing forest communities. There is a long literature critiquing wildlife conservation spaces, largely from within Political Ecology, which argues that conservation is always political and often resisted (Adams & Hutton, 2007; Robbins, 2012). Within this literature, evictions and displacements have been well documented (Dan Brockington & Igoe, 2006).

Political Ecology literature on early conservation induced displacements theorised them as colonial enclosures (Neumann, 2004; Peluso, 1992, 1993), with roots in the enclosure movement in England. Landscapes free of human inhabitation were created for both leisure (Williams, 1973) and for state control of land and timber extraction (Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Peluso, 1992), and justified through paternalistic attitudes that devalued existing ways of life (Thompson, 1993), aiming to ‘civilize’ forest and swidden agriculturalists (Pouchepadass, 1995). Seen as assertions of state “control over territory, resources and people”, Neumann argues that conservation continues to occur through state control and exclusion in post-colonial states (Neumann, 2004). Along with enlightenment thought, the creation of the first National Park in America (with the removal of native American peoples), reinforced and actively shaped the idea that conservation spaces need to be free of people (Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009; Schroeder & Neumann, 1995; A. Tsing, 2005). Thus, eviction, displacement, and the regulation of activity within forest spaces have been well exposed within the literature as a key aspect of conservation efforts (Dan Brockington & Igoe, 2006; Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006).

In India, exclusion and eviction for conservation began at first through British colonial practice and later through conservation policies of the Indian state (Arnold & Guha, 1996; Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009; Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009). Tiger conservation in particular has emerged as a key concern within Indian conservation discourse, and tiger reserves in India are responsible for the ongoing displacement of thousands of households (Greenough, 2004; Kabra, 2009; N. D. Rai et al., 2018; Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009; Rice, 2012), many of which took place in the late 90s and early 2000s (Shahabuddin & Bhamidipati, 2014).

Conservation induced displacements have been theorised and understood in many different contexts (Dan Brockington & Igoe, 2006; Robbins, 2012), as both material and

economic dispossession (Agrawal & Redford, 2009). Research has shown clear links between fortress conservation and poverty (Adams & Hutton, 2016; Daniel Brockington & Wilkie, 2015; Shahabuddin & Bhamidipati, 2014). In fact, displacements resulting from conservation have gone beyond the idea of physical enclosures to talk about the ongoing impacts of a loss of access. The theory of access (Peluso & Ribot, 2020; Ribot & Peluso, 2009) argues that access is a useful lens through which to understand the multiplicity of ways in which people ‘derive benefit from things’. Laws and rights are often not enough to ensure access or agency, and often lead to ambiguities that allow state discretion in the allocation of access (Peluso & Ribot, 2020; Ribot & Peluso, 2009). This can be seen with legal ambiguities in the field site where overlapping laws each of which carry different ideological motivations, both provide and take away access, thus challenging the efficacy of a rights based system.

Although political ecology literature illustrates the long history of injustice that has characterized conservation through displacements and exclusions, less has been written to address ongoing experiences of protected area conservation for communities that have not been physically displaced, but rather continue to live within them. Writing about the very same landscapes that this paper is set in, Rai et al, 2018, describe the experiences of Soliga communities as that of *in-situ displacement*. They argue that conservation in BRT takes the form of a biopolitics that lets Soliga bodies die by alienating them from livelihoods and forest land. Rather than looking at displacements as physical removal from land, this approach looks at socio-economic displacements, and “the impact of conservation measures on people who still remain in tiger reserves” (Rai et al., 2018, p12). Understanding these experiences as *in-situ displacements* nuances understandings of conservation induced displacement. It provides insight into the lives of communities who have not been evicted, and have received rights and land titles to continue living on their lands, and yet continue to be dispossessed and subjugated.

Building on Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession' (2003), Rai et al discuss Tania Li's work on land and dispossession (Li, 2010), arguing that in conservation spaces dispossession does not create a surplus labour or accumulate capital. In fact, they argue, spaces like BRT do not need Soliga labour, and instead Soliga bodies are 'let die' (Rai et al., 2018). Moreover, Feldman, Geisler, & Silberling (2003) argue that in-situ displacement is a form of dispossession that "depends on relations of exclusion that set new boundaries for people's physical and social movement" (p9). Thus, in-situ displacement can be seen to speak to the theory of access as well, as everyday lives are negotiated through the ability and inability to access forest spaces and resources (Ribot & Peluso, 2009). In-situ displacement is also often invisible, and takes place gradually, experienced through a loss of support systems, even a loss of ecological systems (as illustrated below), and declining sense of security (Feldman & Geisler, n.d.).

I suggest that in-situ displacement contributes to both theories of displacement and access, by exposing the messiness that occurs on the ground where people live *inside* protected areas and have the rights to do so. Halstead argues that in-situ displacement is unique in that it also brings into focus questions of space and place (Halstead, 2019). Geographers have distinguished between space and place, where place is imbued with meaning, and space while also socially produced, is more material (Cresswell, 2004). Halstead says that place and space are often conflated in literature on displacement, where spatial dislocation and loss of 'place' are equated to one another. However, he argues, people can be displaced without dislocation, and can remain in-situ, but precariously so, experiencing disruptions and loss of sense of place instead (Halstead, 2019). While Halstead and Feldman illustrate this through economic change and development, I approach in-situ displacement and loss of sense of place through legal ambiguities. For instance, Mada's interaction with the guard above illustrates a removal of connection to place, not just an

economic or physical displacement or loss of access. His relationship to the forest as well as his Soliga identity were both challenged and tested when the guard stopped and questioned him, and fear and intimidation were used to make him feel as though he no longer belonged within the forest.

Finally, in-situ displacement is not experienced evenly across the community, as there is heterogeneity within the community too. Recent literature, particularly in Feminist Political Ecology, highlights the need to think about intersectional differences (along lines of class, age and gender, for instance) that exist within communities and influence everyday experiences of life in protected areas. These reflect diverse use, access and relationships to the forest for different people (Agarwal, 2009; Nightingale, 2017). I pay attention to gender, class and age in understanding the heterogeneous impacts of in-situ displacement.

Thus, in situ displacement offers a unique lens with which to understand the impacts of conservation in places where people have rights to live, access and manage the forest. These rights don't stop people from experiencing gradual, invisible, everyday forms of displacement through ongoing removals from place. Combining theories of dispossession, the theory of access and understandings of place and space, I look at three different ways in which in-situ displacement occurs in the study site- subsistence, governance and everyday politics. To situate the field site, I begin with a background on legal ambiguities.

## **Background I –Legal Contradictions In Tiger Conservation**

*“Sarakaarene kaanunu” (The government is the law) – Soliga elder Veeranna, BRT 2019*

The administration of forests and wildlife in India, much like the rest of the world, is built upon colonial laws. Many of them still operate alongside more recent legislature and together they continue to actively shape forest spaces. In this section, I trace an ongoing

history of legal classifications, contradictions and ambiguities in order to understand the ways in which loopholes and blurred lines in legislature influence everyday lives. I focus on the emergence and implementation of three laws (and associated policies) to illustrate these ambiguities: the Indian Forest Act, the Wildlife Protection Act, and the Forest Rights Act, all of which pertain to the forest spaces in my research.

### The Indian Forest Act

During British colonial rule in India, the British government consolidated its control over forest land and resources by creating elaborate legal regulations around the use, ownership and access of land. The most comprehensive and lasting legal system that the British government enacted was the Forest Act in 1865. This was expanded and amended to become the Indian Forest Act, 1927, which still applies today (Fisher, 2018). The Forest Act allowed forests to be brought under state control through a process of settlement of rights by a ‘settlement officer’, yet the means and nature of rights settlement were undefined within the act. The colonial government acknowledged customary use of these forested landscapes in some parts of the country, and completely overlooked them in others (Sivaramakrishnan, 1995), so forests were categorized differently based on local political relations (Fisher, 2018).

Colonial categorizations largely focused on defining the extent of state control of surrounding communities in each forest type. Reserved forests were the most stringently controlled, created as exclusive timber reserves for the state. Protected forests were state owned but could still be accessed and lived on, and village or private forests had the least state control. The Indian Forest Act was thus largely applicable to reserved forests, and criminalised previously everyday practices of forest use within them (Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006), terming them *forest offences*. For instance, the Act states that within

reserved forests, any individual who “sets fire to a reserved forest or, in contravention of any rules, made by the State Government in this behalf, kindles any fire, or leaves any fire burning, in such manner as to endanger such a forest.”, “trespasses or pastures cattle, or permits cattle to trespass”, does any damage to a tree, removes any forest produce, clears land for cultivation and hunts, shoots or fishes (section 26) can be fined or arrested. Although the Indian Forest Act has been amended post Indian independence, forest offences continue to criminalize many everyday practices.

### The Wildlife Protection Act and Project Tiger

In the 1970s, wildlife conservation became a global concern and the Indian government passed the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (WLPA) to protect wildlife and biodiversity habitats across the country. Under the WLPA, following the notion of eminent domain, the State Government has the power to declare any area, not limited to reserved forests or forest land at all, a protected area for wildlife conservation. These have often coincided with Reserved Forests that were expanded to become protected areas, so colonial forest categories continue to serve present day conservation decisions (Saberwal & Rangarajan, 2006). Examples of protected areas are National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries. Within these protected areas the WLPA also criminalises previously everyday practices such as the use of fire, hunting and shifting cultivation, deeming them *wildlife offences*. The WLPA did not acknowledge, let alone encourage human rights and presence in protected areas, as illustrated in the photograph below, allowing the forest department to evict and displace more families (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009).

In response to growing fear over declining tiger populations, Project Tiger was launched in 1973, to spearhead the creation of tiger reserves across the country. These tiger reserves can be declared on any land that is considered significant tiger habitat and are not

restricted to falling within protected area boundaries (though they are considered protected areas themselves).



*Figure 7 Sign in Pakke Tiger Reserve, which continues to have members of the Nyishi tribe living with it in Arunachal Pradesh<sup>24</sup>*

Today, tiger reserves are recognized as the highest profile conservation areas in the country, and there are constant efforts to increase the number of tiger reserves as well as to relocate communities living within them.<sup>25</sup> In 2006 the WLPA was amended to include the Forest Rights Act and the concept of core areas, called ‘Critical Tiger Habitats’ (CTH). CTHs are required to be inviolate for the purposes of tiger conservation, as long as the decision to relocate communities is “based on scientific evidence” , and “*without affecting the rights of the Scheduled Tribes or such other forest dwellers*” (Section 38V (5)). This 2006 amendment and the inclusion of forest dwellers in the WLPA brings us to the Forest Rights Act.

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<sup>24</sup> Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/77436133@N03/7210563676/in/photostream/>

<sup>25</sup> A case in point is the ongoing effort to dilute the FRA within tiger reserves: <https://forestrightsact.com/forest-conservation/wildlife-conservation/tiger-conservation-a-disaster-in-the-making/>

## The Forest Rights Act

Forest communities have asserted their autonomy over their lands since pre-colonial times, resisting and rejecting exclusionary laws across the country (Arnold & Guha, 1996, Fisher, 2018). Forest communities and allied activists have challenged the exclusion of local communities from management of forests and wildlife as well as the privileging of ‘expert’ scientific knowledge for conservation (Broome et al., 2017). Participatory management schemes emerged across the country in the 1990s, as part of populist political motivations (Fisher, 2018; Gopalakrishnan, 2017; Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). Yet, fortress conservationists increased pressure to relocate communities from protected areas in the late 1990s. In response, the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, “a national platform of adivasi and forest dwellers' movements from ten States in India”(Campaign for Survival and Dignity, n.d), came together with forest rights activists across the country to demand a correction of “historical injustice” to forest dwelling communities. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), implemented in 2008, was considered revolutionary (Gopalakrishnan, 2017).

It is seen as a legal tool to resist both development induced displacement, and conservation induced displacement, and addresses prior injustice in two ways – granting individual rights to land, and community forest access and management. Individual rights are inalienable and provide land titles to forest dwellers to live and cultivate on forest land (yet, ultimately the land remains under state control). Community rights, on the other hand, are collectively held by villages or hamlets that have applied for Community Forest Resource Rights (CFR) over any forest land on which they are dependent for livelihoods. These include recognition of the rights to collect Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) (Section 3(1c)); the rights to fish and graze in forest areas (Section 3(1d)); and the rights of access to culturally significant sites within the forest (Section 3(1k)). Thus, community rights legalize many of

the forest and wildlife offences that the IFA and WLPA criminalize. Finally, communities also have management rights which represent the “Right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource which they have been traditionally protecting and conserving for sustainable use” (section 3). Communities have to create a management committee and give the forest department a management plan that can be used jointly. This is important for recognizing the role that many forest dwelling communities are already playing in managing forests through local knowledge, asserts the need to include local communities in conservation activities (Broome et al., 2017), and is thus seen as crucial for self-determination (Gopalakrishnan, 2017).

According to the framers of the FRA and the spirit and ideological intention with which it was written, the Act “grants legal recognition to the rights of traditional forest dwelling communities, partially correcting the injustice caused by the forest laws”, and “makes a beginning towards giving communities and the public a voice in forest and wildlife conservation (sic)” (Campaign for Survival and Dignity, n.d.). The FRA also crucially “provides that no modification of such rights can take place without a prior process of recognition”(Kalpavriksh & Natural Justice, 2015), and is to be considered a legal precedent, overruling other forest laws such as the IFA and WLPA, where they might apply.

However, the idealistic intentions of the FRA are hampered by its lack of clarity on implementation. The act *recognizes* rights, but does not *grant* them, meaning that communities can exercise these rights until and unless they are denied them after due process has been conducted and claims have been rejected (CFRLA, 2016). As a form of protection for those who do not yet have such rights, the FRA also provides that relocations can only take place after rights have been settled and written consent obtained from the Gram Sabha (village level government). While this provision is widely accepted and used for activism among forest rights groups, fortress conservationists continue to consider forest dweller

activity and presence in protected areas as illegal until documentation for rights are granted. Unless communities have titles and papers under the FRA, they are unlikely to be considered rights-bearers. These loopholes in the Act allow for communities without paperwork to continue to experience threats of eviction, as can be seen in government management plans which continue to recommend ‘voluntary relocation’ as a management strategy (Mathur et al, 2014).

### Ambiguities in legalities and governance

Although the FRA addresses previous restrictive forest legislature by taking precedence over all other laws, in protected areas, and tiger reserves in particular, this is rarely reflected on the ground for several reasons. First, conservation laws have only been slightly modified after the passing of the FRA. Second, on the ground in tiger reserves, the IFA, WLPA and tiger conservation apparatus overlap with the FRA at the same time (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009). Finally, the FRA has been difficult to implement (CFRLA, 2016) due to a lack of infrastructural and state support. Together, these factors create an ambiguous situation for communities within tiger reserves.

Activities such as grazing and the collection of firewood can be both legal and illegal at the same time in the same space, providing room for locally powerful actors to use threats of arrests, detainments and fines (under the provisions in the IFA and WLPA) to stop people from going into the forest (Kodiveri, 2017). Thus criminality is mapped onto particular bodies and ways of being, defining very specific acceptable relations to the forest. For instance, the forest department invokes “forest offences” to threaten local communities with arrest when animal poaching or forest fires occur (their bodies are automatically considered responsible for these ‘crimes’), illustrating the continued use of conservation laws to intimidate and harass communities who have little bargaining power, despite their presumed rights under the FRA (Villatt, 2016). This creates a constant state of uncertainty and fear

about forest access and contributes to experiences of in-situ displacement that the FRA is unable to resolve.

As a result of having multiple laws, there are also multiple overlapping governance institutions at the village and block levels. While the IFA and WLPA are backed and implemented by the Ministry Of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MOEFCC), a central department with sizeable financial support, the FRA is monitored by the Ministry Of Tribal Affairs (MOTA), a significantly less powerful department, that has smaller scale institutions constituted only for the recognition of rights under this act. The FRA rests on village level organizing with no state or central backing, while the IFA and WLPA are enforced by the Forest Department and have little or no representation at the village level. Further, people in a tiger reserve experience forest department presence and power in the every day in the form of uniformed boots on the ground that often have guns and are backed by the state. The FRA, however, is supported and implemented through local leaders or NGOs who visit every few weeks or even months, and rarely have financial or social capital. Further, forest-dwelling communities are often unaware of their legal rights, enabling the forest department to create atmospheres of fear on an everyday basis (Kalpavriksh & Natural Justice, 2015, N.J, S.et al. 2016).

Given these everyday manifestations of state power, community management of forests seems like a distant dream. Institutional power hierarchies are reproduced locally, and state conservation efforts seldom give room to committees under the FRA. It remains unclear whether committees created under the FRA have discrete powers or the ability to contest or request funds from other institutions. This leads to a disregard of management rights, further excluding communities from any decision making, effectively 'recentralizing' forest governance (Ribot, Agrawal, & Larson, 2006). For instance, a management evaluation plan written by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (Mathur et al., 2014), describes

management strategies that are almost entirely about controlling human activity or the management of forest staff, and has little to nothing about forest health or the FRA.

Legal ambiguities allow the state to continue to use their power in forest spaces, even when communities have been given legal rights to access and manage these spaces. This can be seen in the central government's ongoing agenda to voluntarily relocate communities from BRT.<sup>26</sup> I now present a case study of BRT and STR to show how these legal ambiguities contribute to in-situ displacement of Soliga communities.

## **Background II – Field Site and Methods**

As you drive through the Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve (BRT) in Karnataka, or the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve (STR) in Tamil Nadu, you see large groves of eucalyptus and teak tree plantations interrupting the otherwise dense and messy foliage of South Indian scrub jungles. Perhaps, as you drive by, you wonder why these timber trees, which are non-native to these regions, are here in the middle of a forest, stretching in some places for at least a kilometre along the road. You figure, perhaps, that they were planted for timber before these forests became protected, became the abode of tigers, untouchable by 'human disturbance'. You may never learn that trees were planted, by the colonial and then Indian government, over what used to be fields, homes and grazing pastures of people who called these places home. You may never learn that these people were evicted to make way for tree plantations so tall now that the traces of life before them have disappeared. The trees are too neat, too orderly, yet what lay beneath them is hidden in plain sight. The history of this landscape is complex and layered, much like that of protected areas around the world,

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<sup>26</sup> Another loophole in the law emerges here, as the FRA's requirement to settle rights before relocation has been interpreted by the forest department as a way to relocate communities. Provide token rights, and then convince them to relocate 'voluntarily'.

where fortress conservation policies have often dramatically transformed social and ecological landscapes into a façade of pristine nature.

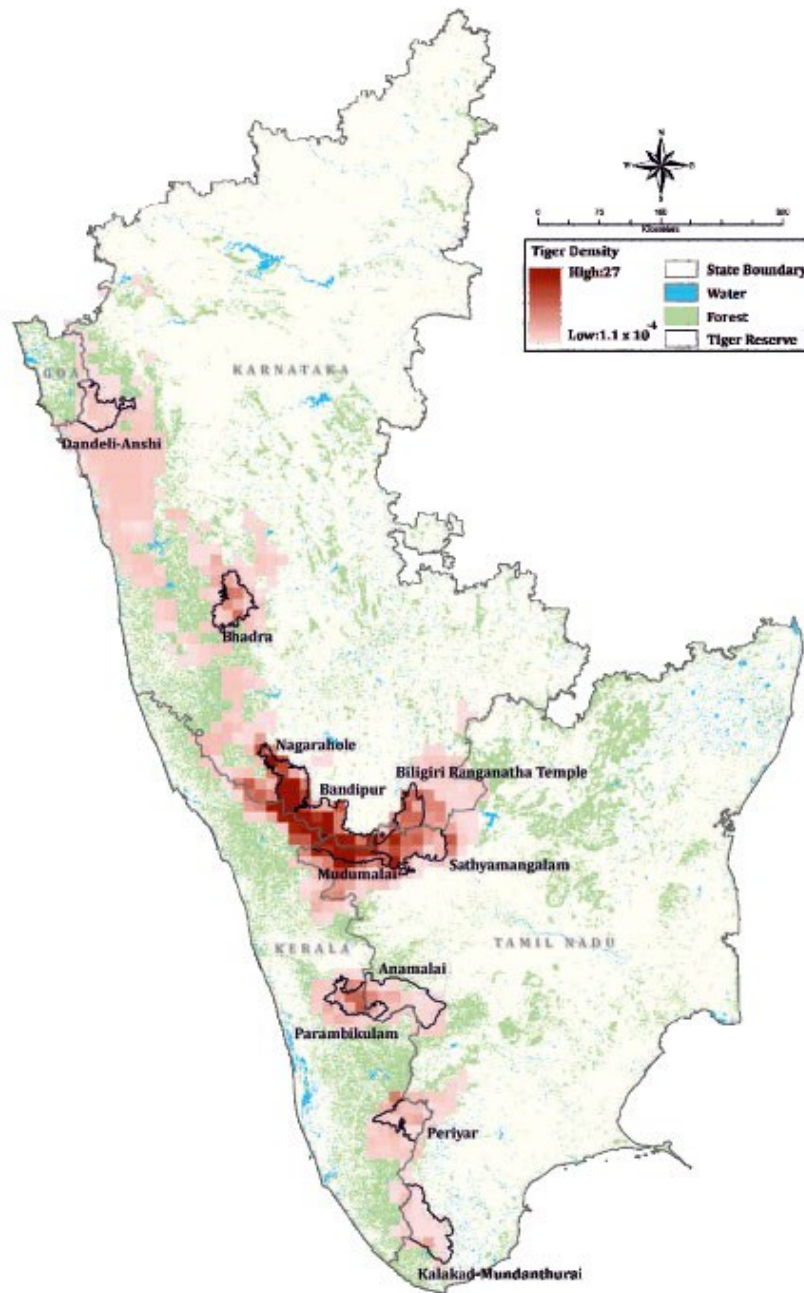


Figure 8 Map taken from Tiger Census Report, 2014

The Biligiri (translated as ‘white hill’) Ranganathaswamy Hills get their name from a white rocky outcrop that protrudes out of one of the hills, above which is a Ranganathaswamy temple (a temple devoted to the Hindu god Vishnu that has been in this forest since the 1600s<sup>27</sup>) (Madegowda, 2009). Located at the periphery of South India’s Nilgiris (a montane hill district in Tamil Nadu), at the confluence of the Western and Eastern Ghats, BRT is 575 km<sup>2</sup> of tiger reserve with diverse forest types and fauna. It also part of a longer stretch of tiger habitat with Bandipur and Mudumalai tiger reserves a little distance to the West, and Sathyamangalam tiger reserve to the South. The entire region is considered vital to India’s ongoing tiger conservation goals (as evidenced in the Map above, made by the National Tiger Conservation Authority), and state conservation efforts have focussed on the area for decades.

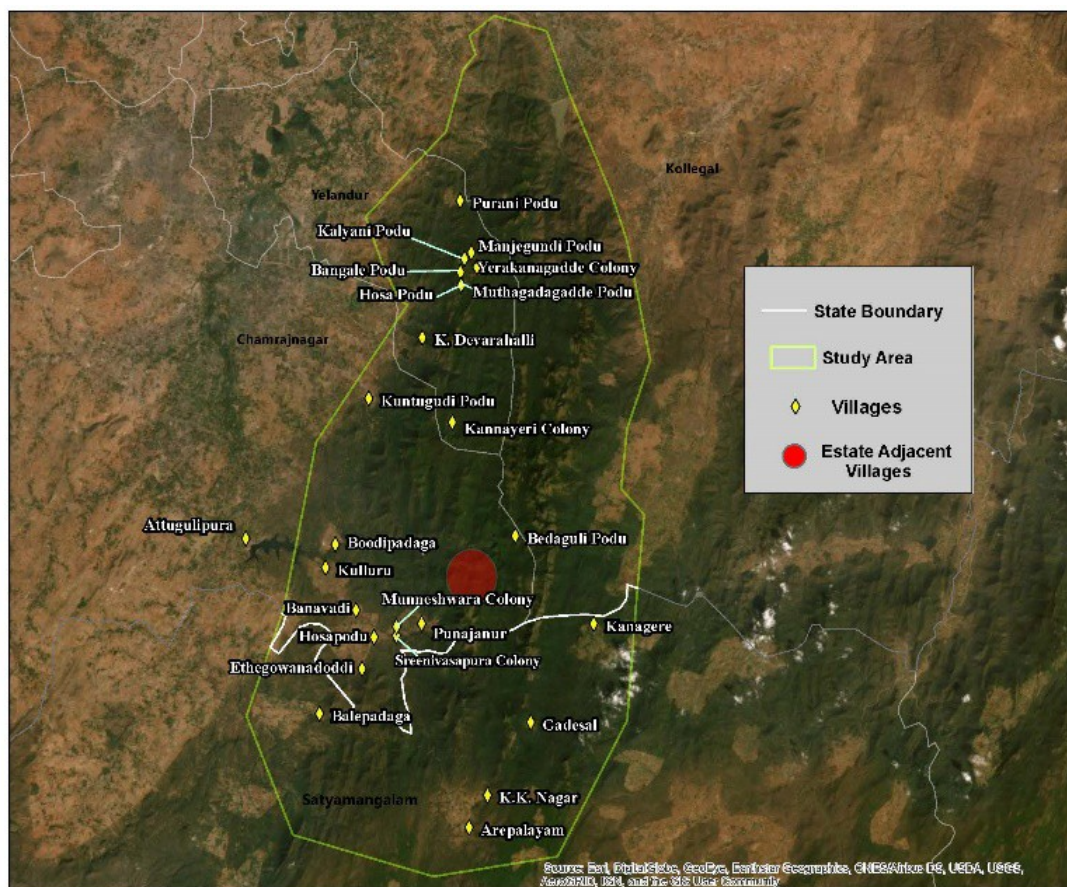
The communities that live in BRT include more recent settlers (who live along the main road near the temple and do not go into the forest), but the main inhabitants (larger in number and more spread out across the landscape) are an adivasi<sup>28</sup> community, a legally designated scheduled tribe, called Soligas. They have lived in and managed the forest for centuries and consider it their spiritual home. While the northern ranges of STR are also largely inhabited by Soligas, this area has more revenue land (agricultural land that contributes to state revenue and may not be used for residential or industrial purposes) within it, much of which is inhabited by caste communities. These settlers tend to be more locally powerful, with larger landholdings, but like in BRT only Soligas access the forest.

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<sup>27</sup> Source: <https://jlrexplore.com/explore/on-assignment/gods-of-br-hills>

<sup>28</sup> Many of the forest dwelling communities in India are ‘Scheduled Tribes’, a legal category used to describe relatively isolated, ethnically distinct, economically ‘backward’ forest dependent communities. In India, they are referred to as ‘Adivasis’ (original dwellers), and while there is much debate about whether these communities are in fact indigenous to specific regions (the state does not recognize the term ‘adivasi’), (Baviskar, 2013, Fisher, 2018) they are understood to have lived in the same forests for several centuries, and often identify themselves as Adivasis (or other regional terms for the same). For the purposes of this paper therefore, I use ‘adivasi’ and ‘tribe’ interchangeably, especially as members of the soliga community refer to themselves as Adivasi as well.

The Soligas were historically a hunter-gatherer community who practiced shifting cultivation deep within the forests until four decades ago (Rai et al., 2018). Shifting cultivation is also called *Podu* cultivation referring to the Soliga term for hamlet/settlement. It involves moving *podus* from one space to another, roughly every three years. Soligas claim a mutualistic relationship with the wildlife around them, saying that when they moved to a different site, they left behind some of the trees and fruit for animals (Madegowda, 2009; Morab, 1977).



*Figure 9 Map of Soliga villages where fieldwork was conducted. Map made by Caitlin McShane.*

The map above indicates the villages I visited between June and August 2019, where I conducted over 100 semi-structured interviews, 60 of which were with Soliga youth (between

the ages of 18 and 30) and the rest with Soliga elders, leaders and local school teachers and government officials. I also did ethnographic research, observed meetings and went on walking transects with young Soliga adults. Two wonderful field assistants, both Soligas themselves, enriched and made my work easier. Two years of prior research and action in the region between 2016 and 2018, also helped me to understand and build relationships with the spaces and people who occupy them. Given constraints of research in a tiger reserve, I was able to focus on some villages over others, but my aim was to have some form of representation from villages spread across the tiger reserves.

I now describe the historical political ecology of the region, tying it both to legal contradictions and to ongoing dispossession experienced through in-situ displacements. In many ways the continued presence of Soliga bodies in these tiger reserves contests acts of dispossession, and people continue to actively negotiate increasingly restrictive situations. So, I wish to go beyond a dialectic of dispossessor and dispossessed by showing the ingenuity of Soliga peoples in finding both local and other sources of employment despite ongoing experiences of displacement. While my focus is largely on livelihoods for this paper, I hope it opens up questions about the social and affective impacts of in-situ displacement, as well as the ways in which Soliga agency and resistance occurs.

## **History and Political Ecology of The Region<sup>29</sup>**

### Ongoing history of displacements in BRT

BRT and its surrounding forests have had a range of land use and users. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the British brought a large part of the forest area under their control (Rai et al.,

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<sup>29</sup> There is little historical ethnographic work on the Soliga community, so in this section I have used a combination of both existing literature (where cited) and personal data in order to complement the ethnographic work.

2018) through the IFA. They used the for elite game hunting, but did not relocate communities from their homes at that time. As Soliga elder Nanjegowda recalls<sup>30</sup>,

I was born in Thattavadi, in the forest in Tamil Nadu. In the old times, about 90 years ago, the British used to hunt in the forests and Soligas were used as kooli [daily labour]. My parents and grandparents were hired to herd and catch elephants for them!

In 1887, the British leased a portion of the forest to a Scottish planter who established a coffee estate in the heart of BRT which still remains today (acquired largely by Indian corporations) and employs the Soligas from surrounding villages (Rai et al., 2018). After independence in 1947, the forests were fertile ground for local timber operators (hired by the forest department). They paid Soliga workers meagre sums of money to help with logging and loading wood, and constructed roads and transportation systems to aid with their operations. This vital source of labour led to the Karnataka government encouraging (and perhaps coercing) Soliga families to move closer to the temple and newly constructed roads (Morab, 1977; N. D. Rai et al., 2018).

I learned more about these historic timber relations in the forest during a jeep ride back from Gombegallu, a village in the core area of the forest. I was with my field assistant and three older Soliga men. The men were all in their fifties and could recall their childhoods before the protected area notifications. As we drove through the forest, they began to reminisce about timber extraction operations:

80 trees would be cut, 20 would be left. People would come from outside (Kerala and Karnataka). They would also come to buy fruits, grasses, lichen... they would pay us 3 rupees per day to cut and load the timber. For 5 days we would get 15 rupees.  
*Naavu Kushiyagidvi!* (we were happy!).

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Author, 2019

Based on fieldwork conducted in the 1960s, Indian anthropologist SG Morab described Soligas as “experts in these jobs and the labour charges comparatively cheaper (sic)”, so “the contractors who are authorised by the forest department always engage[d] them” (Morab, 1977, p 46). While the timber operation and cutting of grass have completely stopped, Soliga NTFP collectors continue to sell forest produce like fruit and lichen. Lichen in particular is a lucrative source of income, sold to people in Kerala who use it for Biriyani or paint-making.

Until the early 1970s, despite having labour opportunities, Soligas seem to have depended on some sale and consumption of forest produce, but were otherwise subsistence-based, looking to wage opportunities only when they needed a disposable income. Small-scale fishing and grazing of cattle were also sources of livelihood (this, according to Morab, was largely for families closer to the road where people had been gifted cattle by the government) for both subsistence and basic incomes.

In 1974, post notification of the WLPA, BRT was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary, and the forest department conducted a large scale relocation and settlement of people to the forest peripheries and closer to the temple and main roads. They settled communities that lived near the coffee plantation into eight colonies that were established exclusively to provide labour for the estates (Madegowda & Rao, 2017; N. D. Rai et al., 2018). Those living along the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu border say that the forest department also relocated their families in the early 1970s, and some of them claim they were asked to cross over from Tamil Nadu into Karnataka. Currently, most Soligas in both BRT and STR live in ‘colonies’ (consisting of cement houses along cement roads), created for relocated communities to live a sedentary life. All shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, and the use of ground fires (traditionally lit between January and February to enrich the soil and encourage regeneration of grasses and shrubs) were banned and criminalised as wildlife offences (Madegowda, 2009). The forest

department mandated that the Soligas surrender their guns and weapons to the forest department to ensure that hunting would be stopped (N. D. Rai et al., 2018).



*Figure 10 Cement roads and cement houses into which people were 'settled' in BRT.*

*Photograph by author*

Although this process was of physical displacement, many of the villages remain within or just beyond the boundaries of the forests, affording people continued access to their lands. Displacement took the form of a loss of mobility, livelihood practices and connections to 'place', rather than a direct physical or economic loss. Customary sites of resource and spiritual significance continued to be used by and accessible to the community, and subsistence and a reliance on forest resources remained a possibility for those living in and on the edges of the forest (Madegowda and Rao, 2017). Those who continued to have some access to land could practice small scale agriculture, and everyone could access government welfare schemes such as the procurement of rations for basic consumption. State officials

also permitted the collection and tendering of NTFP through government agents, but this system was highly unequal, and Soligas would get a very small amount of the profits (Madegowda & Rao, 2017; Morab, 1977). Yet, Soliga ways of living were transformed as forest access became increasingly fraught and contentious, and wage labour became necessary for survival.

In 2006 the collection of NTFP was banned, and in 2011, BRT was converted into a tiger reserve, and the forest department further reinforced this ban. Soligas and allied activists strengthened ongoing efforts to secure rights under the FRA in response to the impending tiger reserve notification, and protested the NTFP ban, pushing for the implementation of the FRA (Survival International, 2013). After months of bureaucratic processing, almost all of the villages within BRT secured individual and community rights under the Forest Rights Act in 2012. These gave Soliga *podus* land titles, (re)granted them the ability to collect NTFP, graze animals and cultivate within the tiger reserve, and potentially participate in management. As a result of obtaining rights under the FRA, Soligas are now not only able to access resources and sites of significance in the forest, but have also begun talking about management and have written a draft management plan under the guidelines in the FRA.

The Soligas in BRT were the first community in India to receive community rights in a Tiger reserve under the FRA, making their very presence in that space a ‘radical act’ of resistance<sup>31</sup>, a manifestation of an elusive reconciliation of an externally imposed binary between ‘nature’ and ‘society’. Much research has been done to challenge this binary (Bijoy, 2011; Greenough, 2004; Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009), and BRT is often used as an

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<sup>31</sup> I borrow this phrase from Leanne Simpson’s work on indigenous radical resurgence in North America. Although these are very different spaces, Simpson describes the very act of stepping on certain lands as indigenous bodies radical, as they challenge settler (and I argue non-settler) colonial logics.

example of a space where tigers and people can coexist<sup>32</sup> – after all, tiger numbers have doubled despite having communities living inside (Broome et al., 2017)! This poses a viable alternative to the fortress conservation model that the forest department believes has been successful, highlighting the ideological underpinnings of legal contradictions.

Yet, while BRT may be touted as an example of successful ‘coexistence’, and despite Soliga residents gaining rights under the FRA, its overlap with the IFA and WLPA in the same forest poses many challenges to daily life. Community members have been unable to truly participate in any decision making, and BRT has heavy forest department presence that regulates and monitors Soliga movement within the forest. When asked about the FRA in BRT, one Soliga elder told me, “even if we have got the rights, we are not able to hold onto them strongly”. He imitated pulling a rope toward him and said “A tight grip still has to come”.

#### Ongoing histories of displacement in STR

On the other side of the border, in Sathyamangalam, Soligas have experienced a slightly different situation in the last few decades. Sathyamangalam Reserved Forest, patchily spread between villages and towns, was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary in 2008. In 2012, there was a proposition to make it a Tiger Reserve, at around the same time as BRT. Adivasi communities living within the forest protested the proposition, fearing that their lives and access might be restricted as this was the case in surrounding Tiger reserves<sup>33</sup>, and forest officials were already restricting access to forest resources. Despite this, in 2013, Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve was created with hundreds of families living within it.

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<sup>32</sup> Journalistic attention has also been given to Soligas in BRT in this regard. For example, see: <https://scroll.in/article/896580/how-a-tribe-in-karnataka-fought-and-won-a-legal-battle-to-stay-in-a-tiger-reserve>

<sup>33</sup> <http://cmsenvis.cmsindia.org/newsletter/enews/NewsDetails.asp?id=45120>

In contrast to Karnataka, implementation of the FRA has been very slow in Tamil Nadu, as the high court had put a stay on the Act from 2010 to 2016, stalling all rights recognition procedures. Although several villages in STR had started the application process in 2008 before it became a tiger reserve, their chances of getting rights today seem slim. Many residents of villages in STR have forgotten about the FRA or don't know that it is possible to get rights in a tiger reserve. Further, Soligas in STR do not have ties to Soliga political organizations in Karnataka and are not as politically active. Given this lack of knowledge and political mobilization, as well as delay in the legal recognition of their rights, most communities are at the will of the forest department's rules under the WLPA. With little to no access to the forest, not even for grazing, getting fuelwood, or meeting subsistence needs, communities have shifted to a combination of seasonal, often migratory wage labour and agriculture for their survival (*Status Report of implementation of FRA in Tamilnadu, Samanvaya Consulting, 2017*).

Conversations with Soligas in STR reveal that the forest department heavily restricts access, not just to forests, but also to markets and public forums. Forest produce is still only allowed to be sold through the forest department, and any attempts communities make to go directly to the market and sell produce are deemed illegal by the forest department, and they regularly confiscate goods or fine individuals in these situations. The continued use of IFA and WLPA offences to regulate community action violates rights to forest produce under the FRA, and yet without official recognition of those rights, community actions often hang in the balance between legality and illegality, leading to many Soligas seeking wage labour opportunities outside the forest.

## **Material and Affective Manifestations of In-Situ Displacement**

Given the layered nature of legal and political processes in BRT and STR, in situ displacement takes multiple forms. As demonstrated by feminist political ecologists, they are spatially and socially uneven, and occur at different scales. In particular, generational change and young adults within these communities have often been overlooked in research and action, even though this demographic has experienced drastic changes, and will determine the future of both communities and forest spaces. In BRT and STR, young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty experience in situ displacement in uniquely precarious ways. They are largely under and unemployed (relying more on unstable wage labour than previous generations), and those that do find employment outside do not hold jobs for more than a few years. They are the generation born post relocation and have therefore never lived deeper within the forest or practiced shifting cultivation or hunting as their parents did. Some parts of the forest exist merely in their imagination, described to them by older generations, as they have never experienced life without the protected area laws and regulations. Therefore throughout the following section, I pay attention to generational change and youth experiences within the tiger reserves. I argue that in-situ displacements are experienced in three broad facets - subsistence/survival (a loss of access to customary means of existence), management/governance (undermining of local participation and forest knowledge), and everyday politics (generational change in political articulation). Each of these aspects is explored in more detail below.

### Survival/subsistence

Legal ambiguities and accompanied displacements have transformed the social and ecological lives of the BRT and STR forests. Financial futures have increasingly become tied to cash incomes and a wage economy. This wage dependence and effective

underemployment of most Soligas, particularly youth, has led to high levels of precarity and movements out of the forests to look for labour opportunities (Madegowda & Rao, 2017), making people less self-reliant. It is vital to emphasise the fact that although some members of the community are forced to leave forests for wage work, Soligas have actively resisted displacements by continuing to occupy their homes in the forests. Therefore, survival strategies have emerged among both landed and landless Soliga families determined to remain in the forest (Madegowda & Rao, 2017).

Mundoli et al., 2016, argue that Soligas have become cash dependent due to an increased reliance on markets for foods that were previously available/accessible in the forest, as well as because of the presence and failure of state welfare schemes. Without shifting cultivation, soil fertility has diminished in agricultural land, reducing crop yields. Forest ecological changes such as the overgrowth of *lantana camara* have further compromised Soligas' ability to access forest produce (Sundaram et al., 2012). Welfare schemes that assure individuals below the poverty line basic rations often do not provide enough food and other amenities for year round sustenance (due to lack of nutritional produce, and inconsistency of procurement) and government schemes like the NREGA which are supposed to provide 100 days of waged labour to rural communities, do not always pay salaries on time, or even at all. Other benefits from government schemes such as fishing materials or cattle are completely unfeasible locally and far from steady livelihood sources within a tiger reserve (Mundoli et al., 2016). These shifts illustrate that in-situ displacement has transformed labour and livelihood options in both BRT and STR, as well as relationships to work.

Additionally, these transformations are experienced and contested differently along lines of gender, class, age and location, all of which influence an individual's ability to access the forest and maintain steady incomes. Displacements over the years have led to the

emergence and reinforcement of power hierarchies both between the community and outside entities, and within the community itself. Differential access to titled land (or any land, for that matter), cattle, and agricultural produce have produced new forms of stratification, as have gendered access to labour opportunities, which favour men (Mundoli et al., 2016; N. D. Rai et al., 2018). Further, since FRA titles are inalienable and forest laws will not allow for new agricultural land to be created, land holdings have been reducing in size over generations, leaving youth with fewer options. Over the course of conversations in the region, I found that there were also significant spatial differences in terms of opportunities for subsistence and cash based incomes. While Soligas in Karnataka do not necessarily look to cities for employment (apart from some of the more educated youth), in Tamil Nadu many young people look to urban spaces for temporary employment. Because of their ability to speak both Kannada and Tamil, (largely youth who have gone to school and learned the languages), Soligas living in Tamil Nadu are often perceived as having more opportunities than their counterparts in Karnataka. However, Soligas in Karnataka are able to continue to live on their lands and do not need to look outside for work because of their continued ability to access the forest. Therefore spatial differences reflect different abilities to access forests, occupations, markets and outside spaces.

### *Uneven Displacements*

In this section, I provide a broad overview of spatial differentiation in the field site and end with a brief ethnographic case study that highlight the ways in which access mechanisms shape experiences of in-situ displacement. In order to compare the impacts of legal policies across different locations, I have divided the field site into five broad regions: villages in the northern section of the BRT tiger reserve, called ‘betta’ locally (eg. Muthagadagadde and surrounding villages); estate-adjacent villages that are closer to the core region of the tiger reserve (eg. Bedaguli and red circle); villages along the Western edge of

the tiger reserve, called edge villages (eg. Kuntugudi); villages along the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu border (eg. Punanjanur), largely in Karnataka; and finally, the villages in STR (eg KK Nagar).

The table below illustrates some of the broad trends in spatial differences in labour. As the table indicates, a combination of legal and access related constraints determine the livelihood opportunities available to communities locally, as well as their migration patterns. There is a striking correlation between a lack of implementation of the FRA in Tamil Nadu, and the lack of local income/subsistence options, as community access to the forest and to land is heavily constrained, and people have become increasingly dependent on seasonal migration for survival.<sup>34</sup>

| <u>Location</u>       | <u>Local Work and subsistence</u>  | <u>Legal rights and access mechanisms</u>  | <u>Migration patterns</u>   |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|
| <u>BRT betta area</u> | Tourism jobs (work in shops, restaurants, resorts), NGO jobs, NREGA, construction/forest department daily wage, NTFP, small scale agriculture, grazing | Everyone has FRA rights here, and people are politically active, giving them bargaining power. Access is usually easy but there is heavy state presence which inhibits people from going into the forest, particularly in the summer | Migration to cities for education and work is common because of educational and NGO opportunities, but most come back/want to stay because they can negotiate/access the forest and have some land. |

<sup>34</sup> With the recent coronavirus related lockdown in India, many Soligas from the border regions were stuck in Coorg (<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2020/mar/29/tribals-run-out-of-food-desperate-for-vehicles-2122860.html>). As situations unfold in India the precarity of these villages will become heightened. Perhaps the FRA can make a significant difference in spaces such as these which need forest access in order to be able to stay.

|                            |   |  |   |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|
| <u>BRT estate adjacent</u> | Largely agriculture, grazing and NTFP collection. Estate work, daily wage. Forest department wage work. | Everyone has FRA rights, but only some have land. It is closer to the core area and easier to access forest, but there are frequent visits from the forest department and accessing markets is difficult.            | People go to betta only for education or for essential supplies. Some seasonal migration to coffee estates in Kerala/Coorg, or chips selling but only when money is needed  |
| <u>Edge of the forest</u>  | Daily wage work in other people's fields, land etc. Grazing and limited agriculture and NTFP            | Harder to access the forest because of trenches and guards. The FRA is not entirely implemented because of a lack of access to political organizations. Communities rely less and less on the forest for subsistence | Seasonal migration to Kerala/ Kodagu estates or other places for timber operations during the summer. Young people in particular look for employment in local towns.  |
| <u>KA/TN border</u>        | Daily wage work, some tourism or NGO related work, agriculture, fishing and grazing, some NTFP          | More stringent restrictions, and FRA titles and rights recently received for some villages. Access to the forest is tricky because of the border and ties to Soliga political organizations are tenuous.             | Regular seasonal migration to coffee estates/bamboo cutting operations and local cities for work during the summer and often even beyond. Youth often end up taking up multiple small opportunities locally and in cities and towns in factories and shops. |
| <u>STR</u>                 | NTFP, agriculture for one or two villages, but  | No FRA rights, and highly restricted access to the forest. Many  | People migrate seasonally to local estates for labour, or to work in  |

|  |                              |   |  |
|--|------------------------------|---|--|
|  | few opportunities for others | communities are also unaware of the FRA and their rights under it. But locals still access the forest carefully. Almost no ties to the Soliga political organizations in Karnataka. | factories and other wage work in urban areas. Others do some agricultural labour locally, but people here are more likely to migrate for several months at a time. |
|--|------------------------------|---|--|

*Figure 11 Differences in spatial locations along lines of labour, policy and migration*

I now present a brief comparison of villages I visited to illustrate spatial differences within the field site:

*Muthagadagadde village in the betta region is alive in the morning as everyone is getting ready to leave for the day. Kitchens and cooking spaces are outside most homes, little rooms with openings on top to allow woodsmoke to escape. Despite government attempts at making people switch from wood fire to gasoline stoves (to reduce forest dependence), people insist on cooking with firewood. The smell of a morning meal wafts across - rice, sambhar, bananas, sweet potato, sometimes ragi mudde or ragi dosa<sup>35</sup>. The morning meal is made heavy, as the next meal is likely to be only in the late afternoon.*

*Some women are getting ready to go to the forest to graze their goats. They will spend much of the day there, collecting tubers and fruit, and perhaps some honey if they are lucky. Many of the men are getting ready for wage work. In the rainy season they will go into the forest to collect honey and fruit that can be sold in the market and agriculture is also a source of income for many people who grow coffee, pepper, and sometimes vegetables (Mundoli et al., 2016). But in the summer, forest produce is scarce and it is safer to find work*

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<sup>35</sup> Fox millet preparations eaten in the region

*outside. As forest fires have become increasingly destructive in this landscape, particularly during the summer, Soligas who are in the forest when a fire starts are immediately considered under suspicion of arson. It is easier for women to go into the forest at these times as forest officials view them as less of a threat than men who smoke and could even light a fire by mistake!*



*Figure 12 Bamboo kitchen built to cook with firewood*

*Wage work of different kinds are often available through the year, yet there is little to no security of employment in the long run, leading to extreme precarity and uncertainty, characterized by large amounts of under-employment in the region, especially among youth. This is often accompanied by high rates of alcoholism among young men in the region and a growing disinterest in education, as its gains are elusive and don't seem worth the effort.*

*If they are lucky, Soliga men and women in the betta region are hired by local resorts, NGOs or researchers like me, and some own small shops that sell snacks and small*

*necessities to both the locals and to visitors. Yet for the most part, job opportunities in this part of the tiger reserve (and across the field site) have redefined gender roles in a community that is largely egalitarian when it comes to work. Both men and women work in other people's fields, coffee plantations, or do NREGA or construction work, but men often receive higher wages for the same work. Women are hired by the government to do nursing jobs or health work, or teach pre-primary school. The forest department hires some people (mostly men) as watchers in the forest, labour to prevent/put out fires, or for small construction work, but rarely provides steady incomes. Youth here find similar opportunities for local work although many of them have some education, and look to teaching, nursing and other more service-oriented jobs as well.*

*This precarity is slightly less evident in the estate adjacent region, where Soligas can access the forest more easily. Gombegallu was full of the sounds of birds and morning activities when we entered. Everyone there has land with FRA titles, on which they largely cultivate coffee, pepper and silver oak. The homes in Gombegallu are more spread out, built in clusters within coffee plantations, along with jackfruit, mango and other ornamental trees that have been planted. We see several tree houses, built to protect fields from wild animals. Some NTFP like broomgrass are being dried out, but people are not sure they would get much of a profit from them, because they don't go to the betta or to the towns and cities very often.*

*The forest department is trying to restrict the NTFP collection here, but community rights have been granted and people are still largely dependent on the forest through NTFP collection, some grazing and fishing, and collection of food. They also receive food rations every few months. For cash incomes, some people work at the Honametti estate locally. This is not a regular source of income; an old man sitting outside his house tells us "The lorry that takes people to the estate hasn't come yet, and today I will just be in the village".*

*Gombegallu residents are able to be quite self-sufficient, looking to outside employment only when they need a cash income and this is reflected by youth as well. A young man tells us, “We only go to the towns or to the temple area (betta) if we need supplies. Otherwise we stay here most of the time. Coffee estate is the only major wage labour we get here. Some work for the FD in fire season. But there is enough agricultural work to do most of the time.”*



*Figure 13 broomgrass being dried in Gombegallu. Photograph by author.*

*Given the presence of the FRA, many Soligas are able to stay in BRT through the year with a minimal level of self-sustenance. The gaining of rights to access the forest and the proximity to both government and other institutions means that most residents of*

*Muthagadagadde and Gombegallu are politically aware, and able to assert their rights to go into the forest and collect and sell NTFP<sup>36</sup>.*

*The impact of conservation laws and legal ambiguity are perhaps most apparent in the villages I visited in Sathyamangalam, where all NTFP collection has been banned post the TR notification. Kanagere, a small village located in the Northeast of STR, was almost empty when we walked in one weekday afternoon. After wandering around the village for a while, we met an old man coming back to his home with some firewood. Nobody is here except for old people and some women, he said. Everyone under the age of 45 has left the village for work. They will come back soon when the rains begin. “All across the border of Sathy it is a similar situation for the last few years”, he told us.*

*Surrounded by revenue land owned by higher-caste settlers in the region, and located right at the edge of the Tiger Reserve, the residents of Kanagere feel pressure both from the reserve and from surrounding villages. The fields nearby, owned by people from local towns, offer some daily wage labour but the salary is relatively low. So, men and women alike migrate to towns in the Nilgiris, like Ooty and Kotagiri for several months at a time, working in factories and estates. A young lady who cooks lunches in the local primary school said, “Now homes are becoming more crowded in the village and landholdings are getting even smaller. They won’t let us build more houses either. So it is easier to leave for small periods of the year.”*

*Despite needing to seasonally migrate for incomes, Kanagere village residents of all ages return to the village at least once a month, and for longer in the rainy season when there is some agricultural cultivation and NTFP collection. When asked why younger*

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<sup>36</sup>This is not necessarily the case with youth, and will be explored in the everyday politics section.

*families do not just move to the towns they work in, an older lady said, “They need us, and we cannot live there. That’s why they do not move full time”.*

In asserting their need to remain in their forest homes, Soligas across the field site have adapted to experiences of in-situ displacement, changing livelihood strategies based on their ability to continue to access forest resources and spaces. These differences illustrate the complexities of rights and access mechanisms, showing that although rights are crucial for continued access, they do not necessarily address ongoing and emergent precarity.

### Management/Governance

As illustrated in the legal ambiguities section above, having management rights under the FRA does not necessarily translate on the ground, and many customary management strategies cannot be used in these forests. Since the tiger reserve notification, canopy cover and tiger numbers have steadily increased (Rai et al., 2018), so to the forest department the story of BRT is one of success due to fortress conservation. In an interview with the Sierra Club, Ullas Karanth, a leading tiger conservationist and proponent of the fortress conservation model said about BRT , “You cannot have people also raising cattle, doing agriculture, and hunting the prey species in those habitats...It doesn't work”... “Enforcement [of wildlife laws] is what has brought prey species and tigers back” (Benanav, 2017).

Yet, to Soliga inhabitants, the forest is far from thriving, and their claims are supported by studies in the region which have shown forest degradation over the last few decades (Sundaram et al., 2012). This is in part because of erratic rainfall and climate change, but also because of the restriction of access to forests (Mundoli, Joseph, & Setty, 2016; Rai & Setty, 2013). Forest degradation and change has not only disrupted people’s ability to use and access forest resources, it has also made accessing spiritual and other sites difficult and

reduced biodiversity crucial to traditional medicine and cuisine. In this way it has also transformed people's sense of place.

Community members describe a range of management activities before the bans that they believe kept the forest healthy. Invasive species such as Lantana Camara were kept in check with ground fires lit to clear forest space for grazing and agriculture. Also, repeated entry into the forest allowed people to remove the few lantana plants that remained, while ensuring that other biodiversity remained intact. Today, bans on controlled fires have allowed lantana to take over forest patches, making the forest extremely fuel heavy and vulnerable to large, destructive forest fires. Soligas used to also remove parasites from important plant species and dam rain water both for their own consumption and to provide water to specific plants and animals. The banning of these activities has significantly impacted biodiversity, particularly in terms of the availability of forest foods and medicinal plants used by Soligas (Mundoli et al., 2016; Thekaekara et al., 2017), who hold the tiger reserve status responsible. As one elder jokes,

If we ask the forest department [about us doing management] sometimes they say that the tiger project has come so we can't do anything. But is the tiger even able to roam around in the lantana? We don't know.<sup>37</sup>

Living in a tiger reserve also impacts the ability of Soligas to negotiate with other government agencies, as tiger conservation holds significant economic and discursive importance in India. In 2017, the Soliga Abhivruddhi Sangha (an association for soliga development started and run by some leaders in Karnataka) gave a petition to the forest department saying that they would like to use the NREGA (a govt scheme that pays individuals below the poverty line for 100 days of labour every year) to clear lantana in the

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<sup>37</sup> Quote from personal data. See Rai, Benjaminsen, Krishnan, & Madegowda, 2018 for additional information on this.

forest. Their request was denied, and Soliga elders told me that they had been informed this work was not considered to be economically beneficial since the tiger reserve was performing well (in terms of tiger numbers), and therefore the request was denied. Communities are not allowed to participate in conservation work, unless they speak with state conservation discourses, another contradiction that emerges from legal ambiguities.

A key question for forest management down the line is also the role of generational change, and forest knowledge changing and often being lost over generations. Many young adults are first generation learners, often experiencing education systems that are alienating and difficult. Some are the first members of their families to leave their villages and go to towns to study. Although there is a preference and reverence of knowledge from formal education over that of Soliga knowledge, loss of 'traditional' knowledge (and associated values) among youth is a concern for many Soliga elders, who believe that schooling their children has taken away from their knowledge systems and values. Soliga knowledge about the forest is often tied to stories and names of places as well as in traditions of worshipping specific animals and birds in their songs, dances and religious rituals (Si & Agnihotri, 2014). Therefore, language and rituals are a part of what is considered important to Soliga leaders in particular, with regard to youth:

We need to grow the desire to conserve.... The forest is extremely important for everything in our lives, it gives us strength...But we are losing that understanding over the generations... For example, even the language is getting lost. So of course, knowledge of plants and roots is going, we're forgetting... we need to maintain the knowledge of the ecosystem and the 'value' it has, and then we can conserve.

### The everyday politics of life in a tiger reserve

The third facet of in-situ displacement is a change in political positioning. While this is more abstract, it also offers hope for resistance. The Soliga community has been quite politically active over the years, protesting evictions and demonstrating for rights under the

FRA<sup>38</sup>. They continue to have political organizations, or Soliga Abhivruddhi Sanghas, (Soliga Development Committees) at the block and district levels that advocate for their issues. Madegowda, a member of the Sanghas and the first Soliga to receive a PhD, talked with me about the difficulties of organizing within the community. He spoke of a lack of resources and funding leading to members of the committee rarely having the time to devote to the Sanghas. He also talked about the FRA, saying that a lack of immediate need to mobilise politically has meant that interest in the work of the Sanghas has dropped in the last few years.



Figure 14 Soliga women attend a protest against eviction in 2010.

Source: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/article30183011.ece>

Shobha, a fiery and strong woman described protests that she and other women orchestrated to ban the sale of alcohol in BRT. Yet alcoholism has returned today. “We need to come together again, we are losing that sense of collectivity”, she said wistfully. Thus,

<sup>38</sup> See <https://frontline.thehindu.com/social-issues/article30183011.ece>

even though the workings of in-situ displacement are felt constantly, its insidious nature limits political mobilisation.

However, politics is also present in the everyday lives of community members as they negotiate ongoing displacement from the forest. Approaching politics as a negotiation of access to the forest “in quiet, subtle expressions that are rarely organized or direct” (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 232), allows for an understanding of political action at the scale of the everyday. This is revealed in conversations with older members of the community whose casual conversations about the forest are inherently deeply political.

Memories of living deeper in the forest and being forcefully moved, are still alive in the minds of many older members of the community, and they are aware of their tenuous position in the forest. In articulating their relationships to the forest, they politically position themselves as adivasis, who will fight to stay on their land<sup>39</sup>. Some examples from interviews are:

They can't evict us. If we leave, the forest will come with us. If we are not there, there is no forest. It is wrong of the govt to want to evict us. We have grown with the forest, other people can't know it like us. All the adivasis have this knowledge.

The forest is still ours, it has always been ours, it will be ours. But now we can't go inside

Youth, however, do not necessarily express their attachment to place in such forceful or political terms, perhaps giving the impression that they do not feel as strongly about the forest or the community. Born after relocations took place, their relationship with the forest, and the forest department, is unique. They have not lived through both the embodied memories of the trauma of relocation, as well as life before the forest department's commanding presence.

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<sup>39</sup> Although these forms of political positioning are often referred to as strategic essentialism (Li, etc), I hesitate to use that phrase to describe Soliga politics as I believe these expressions of attachment to place hold deep significance to the community beyond their relationship to the state.

They were born after in-situ displacement began, and their relationships to place have changed, despite still occupying the same space.

Moreover, this generation has very little knowledge of their legal and political status within the tiger reserves, and only 13 of the 60 young people I spoke to knew about the FRA. Attending meetings in both BRT and STR I was aware that young people were rarely present. When I asked them about meetings and whether they wanted to go to them, many said they would be interested but they don't get invited, while others did not see the point in attending meetings, arguing that nothing changes anyway. Many believed that village elders did not have their interests in mind. Many wanted to learn about rights and laws but felt that they had to pick up information from conversations around them rather than from elders who rarely taught the youth about their legal status.

Village elders, on the other hand, had a slightly different perspective. While they agreed that they need to actively involve youth in their work, they believed that youth were uninterested, more preoccupied by their phones and other self-indulgent pastimes than interested in the needs of the community. My interviews, however, illustrated that although youth are reluctant to participate in meetings, they are aware of the precarity and political nature of their lives. They are conscious of the threat of arrests that entry into the forest entail, and as illustrated above, are equally if not more impacted by in-situ displacement.

In fact, I believe that although they do not explicitly express their relationship to the place and people in political terms, they too perform everyday politics. I found that 90% of the young adults I spoke to actually want to stay or return to their villages, even those in STR! This included young adults who were participating in seasonal migration for labour. Everyone expressed attachment to the place and to the traditions and people. Through

wanting to stay, resisting imposed displacements, and living precariously in the process, youth embody politics in the everyday.

Further, their everyday politics goes beyond experiences within the tiger reserve. An important element of wanting to stay comes from experiences with discrimination and discomfort outside of the forest, where many feel they did not fit into urban spaces because of difficulty with language, money and differences of caste and ethnicity. Many of them found cities loud, and difficult to negotiate, and expressed a desire to stay at home because of the fresh air and clean environment, as expressed in the following quote from a young man in BRT:

I spent three years outside in a city and I hated it. I was scared, I didn't know how to communicate. People thought I was stupid. Now I am happy here, I want to stay here and work for my community

These situated expressions of wanting to stay reflect the conflicted positionalities of young adults who have grown up with displaced lives, as well as experiences of the forest as home. They are forms of everyday politics. These experiences are different along axes of class and gender, and yet were expressed by a majority of my participants. Displacement is a part of living in tiger reserves, yet youth insistence on wanting to stay within forest spaces represents a form of resistance, an incompleteness of the separation of place from space. Therefore, although in staying youth often end up experiencing a sense of limbo, a literal and metaphoric 'waiting' (paper 2), changing expressions of everyday politics need to be considered in our understandings of ongoing resistance to fortress conservation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has illustrated the multi-faceted experiences of in situ displacement within tiger reserves, particularly in places like BRT and STR, where communities continue to live in the forest.

In situ displacements have unique impacts for generational change that raise several questions about the futures of both the spaces and the people that live within them, and the impacts of legal structures that both restrict and enable self-determination at the same time. They show the complexities of dispossession, access and relationships to place and space that emerge through everyday contestations around subsistence, management and everyday politics.

Further, spatial and locational differences illustrate the vital role that rights, access and political processes play in allowing or enabling young people in particular to stay within forest spaces. The creation and implementation of the FRA in BRT has afforded people with many job opportunities that allow them to stay there through the year, unlike in STR or closer to the border, and yet people live in a state of precarity, and experience fear on an everyday basis due to legal ambiguities. Yet, as illustrated, in-situ displacement is ongoing and therefore incomplete, and this provides room for resistance and negotiation.

As long as exclusionary legislation continues to exist, state control of people and places continues to be justified despite the (tokenistic) provision of rights. These findings reinforce the fact that in order for communities to address and resist in-situ displacement, merely receiving rights is not sufficient. They need to be accompanied by access mechanisms that strengthen local autonomy and challenge the hegemony of both historical and contemporary conservation legislature and discourses that continue to deem local communities a threat.

## Interlude I

### Understanding the Misunderstood/Why are Adivasi Youth Looking to Right Wing Politics?

As discussed in the introduction, unpacking indigeneity in India cannot be done without engaging with Hindu fundamentalism. The Hindu right actively tries to negate and erase complex histories as well as bring adivasi communities into their political agenda. With the current rise in right wing politics in India, there has been much debate on how the very communities that the current government's politics target and disenfranchise, could re-elect the ruling party. During my work in villages and forests in Karnataka, both before and after the re-election, it was evident that the project of the right in India has been going on for several decades, built by the Fundamentalist group, the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (RSS). One example of this large Hindutva (Hindu fundamentalist) apparatus is that of the '*Vanavasi*'.

India's forest communities have long been 'othered' and have existed at the margins of mainstream Hindu society, and define themselves as adivasis, often considered indigenous. Yet questions of indigeneity in India are hotly debated, particularly by the Hindutva right. Considering adivasis to be indigenous challenges their own nationalistic and anti-Muslim/Christian claims to India as a historically Hindu nation (Baviskar, 2007). In the 1950s, the RSS created organizations across the country, using the term '*Vanavasi*' or forest inhabitants to refer to communities, rather than '*Adivasi*', or original inhabitants. This simple change of terminology carries significant political weight and is deployed as a way to bring adivasis into the Hindu fold. In Karnataka the Vanavasi Kalyana (Vanavasi welfare programme) was created in 1989. They hold camps that teach 'Hindu culture' (as opposed to Muslim or Christian culture) and hire local youth to teach children both Hindu and Adivasi songs and stories (Vanavasi Kalyana Karnataka, n.d.).

I encountered the Vanavasi Kalyana through conversations I was having with youth on the Southern edge of the BR Hills Tiger Reserve in Karnataka. The Kalyana works exclusively with youth, and has tried to hire many young people from villages along the border. I was introduced to five or six young adults who had worked for them, although all but one had left the organization. Most left because of low pay and said they found training sessions disconnected from their lives and boring. As I was told by two young women, “They made us sit the whole day and listen to a North Indian man talking in Hindi<sup>40</sup>. We got very bored”. Another young man who was aware of their political implications said, “they just talked about Hindu-Muslim issues the whole time, so I didn’t want to work there anymore”. Significantly, many adivasis in the region live in villages with Muslim populations and therefore these concerns are immediate. However, one young man who still worked with the Vanavasi Kalyana spoke about it passionately, saying even though the wage was low, he loved it too much to quit. Yet he also equally passionately spoke to me about the ways in which forest access restrictions by the state were actively marginalizing his community and their knowledge. I was fascinated by how the state simultaneously disenfranchises adivasis while at the same time its affiliated wing continues to ‘assimilate’ them into its goals through claims for cultural preservation.

In understanding the Vanavasi organizations, it is easy to paint them with a dismissive and negative brush. And yet with time, I understood that they hire young people locally, they reaffirm the forest identity of the community at a time when that status is being threatened, and they teach about tradition and culture when that is being ‘lost’. These are all elements of Vanavasi organizing that allow the adivasis to believe they are aligning with a group that will help them empower themselves (Baviskar, 2007), that their best interests are being heard and

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<sup>40</sup>Hindi is spoken largely in parts of North India and the Southern states have actively resisted it as a hegemonic language, teaching it only minimally in schools as required.

considered. These sentiments must not be underestimated in their role in the current move to the right among adivasi communities in India. As Baviskar argues, “Adivasis could now imagine themselves as part of a larger cultural landscape – the Hindu nation, rather than as a subaltern presence incarcerated in a state of nature” (Baviskar, 2007, p22). Through the Hindu right, adivasis can participate in power structures that are otherwise denied to them.

### Understanding power through the local

What does it mean to ‘take people seriously’ (Astuti, 2017) when they hold opposing views from your own? What would it mean to take peoples’ support of the right seriously, to understand the weight of their actions<sup>41</sup>, to give their motivations some thought?

Shah (2019) writes about the Naxal movement in East India, another institution which ‘recruits’ many adivasis into their extremist causes. In analysing why adivasi communities join Naxal movements, Shah gives both entities agency, particularly when she talks about Naxal body language and respect, positing that their respectful treatment of adivasis lend them credibility within those communities, and therefore that adivasis are not merely easily swayed by persuasive arguments (Shah, 2019). Similarly with shifts to the right then, it is easy to assume a lack of agency on the part of adivasis, and that disenfranchisement leads them to think Hinduism might save them from the state – but we must afford them more agency (Baviskar, 2007). Thus, their relationship to Vanvasi Kalyanas and the benefits they derive from the organization need to be understood in light of this agency.

The current condition of adivasi youth is one of precarity – intertwined and entangled webs of capitalist expansion and ecological destruction come together to define people’s lives today (A. L. Tsing, 2015). By understanding processes through the multiple spaces they

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<sup>41</sup> Adivasi youth were responsible for attacks against (and in some cases the death of) many Muslim people during communal riots in Gujarat, in 2002 (Baviskar, 2005), revealing their deep association with the Hindutva cause.

inhabit and forms they take, we allow ourselves to treat phenomena as complex assemblages of historical, structural and therefore both local and global processes (Hart, 2004; A. Tsing, 2005). The Vanavasi organizations need to be seen as just one part of a much larger apparatus that acts along with social and economic marginality and dispossession to shape young lives.



*Figure 15 Looking to uncertain futures. Photograph by Author*

## Chapter Two

### Changing Natures: Youth Experiences of Living and Waiting in a Tiger Reserve

Shobha and I sit together in a field in the Biligiri Ranganathaswamy tiger reserve, chatting while her goats graze on the grass and shrubs around us. Periodically she gets up to herd them when they wander off too far, but otherwise we spend the afternoon talking and eating fruits, and at times saying hello to a passer-by. In a field near us, three young men sit side by side glancing at their phones, talking quietly, looking towards us every now and then, visibly shy of me, an urban woman. Further away from us, two young men sit by the main road that comes from the local towns with several small plastic bags each filled with small amounts of fruit, waiting to sell them to tourists. If the fruits don't get sold today, they will be distributed among friends and family, and a fresh round will be collected to sell the next day, and the day after. These young adults are from the Soliga community, a scheduled tribe that lives in South India. Their lives encompassed by long times of slow activity.

Life within a tiger reserve in India is complex, and often fraught with conflict. India's tiger conservation policy is largely a hegemonic enterprise, dictated by scientific 'expert' knowledge that both undermines and vilifies local communities and their rights to live in and manage forest lands (Bijoy, 2011; N. D. Rai et al., 2018). While tiger reserves often warrant the removal of any human habitation from within them, communities like the Soligas, continue to live within tiger reserves across the country, and experience their exclusionary policies in varied ways (Rangarajan & Shahabuddin, 2009 and Ch 1 of this thesis). In this chapter I focus on the experiences of youth, illustrating the ways in which changing social, ecological and economic dynamics have unique implications for their lives. I argue that the

everyday acts of negotiating a contentious life in tiger reserves result in a sense of both a literal and metaphorical waiting for a different future to arrive.

I present ethnographic data to show that youth in BRT and STR experience a constant tension and sense of ‘in-betweenness’, and that this impacts their ability to truly have agency over their lives. Borrowing from Craig Jeffreys, I argue that their lives are characterised by a literal and metaphorical ‘waiting’ (Jeffrey, 2008) for better opportunities or life situations. Finally, I suggest that rights-based mechanisms, introduced to democratize forest spaces for community participation and self-determination, are unable to overcome material social hierarchies and the impacts of decades of coercive conservation practice and alienation. Therefore, I believe that although rights-based policies are important legal and ideological tools, they are still embedded within unequal power structures, leading Soliga youth to seek empowerment in complex and contradictory ways.

## **Background**

The Soliga community occupies a region that lies at the confluence of the Western and Eastern Ghats, and have lived there for over 2000 years and consider it their spiritual home and territory. This area is also home to several tigers, and many Soliga households lie within or outside of Tiger Reserves (Madegowda, 2009). My study is based in two contiguous tiger reserves – BR Hills Temple tiger reserve (BRT) in Karnataka, and the northern range in Sathyamangalam tiger reserve (STR) in Tamil Nadu.<sup>42</sup> Given that my field site straddles two states, there are differences in conservation and land ownership histories and policies. There are also variations along lines of access to markets/cities/govt agencies, and different language and social relations that impact young adults differently across

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<sup>42</sup> I have focussed only on this part of the tiger reserve, since this is the area where Soligas live. Other ranges in Sathyamangalam are inhabited by other scheduled tribes, but my research focus is on the Soligas.

intersectional lines (i.e. by various access of social difference such as class, age, gender and caste). However, for the purposes of this paper, I largely refer to the entire region as one space, unless explicitly stated otherwise.



*Figure 16 Soliga settlements in the Betta region of BRT. Photograph by author*

BRT and STR have been tiger reserves since 2011 and 2013 respectively. BRT was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1974, after the passing of the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972. Wildlife sanctuaries are protected areas, designed to conserve wildlife and biodiversity largely through the exclusion and removal of forest dwelling communities, and the creation of ‘inviolable’ spaces for wildlife (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009). While Sathyamangalam was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary only in 2008, communities in both BRT and STR experienced evictions and relocations from the forest in the 70s (in some cases Soligas living in Tamil Nadu were relocated to Karnataka). The forest department made them sedentary, and ‘settled’ them into villages along main roads within and in some cases at the periphery of the forest.

Since the 70s, therefore, Soliga experiences of life in BRT and STR has been one of increasing state control (Madegowda & Rao, 2017; Venkatesh et al., 2018). As an older Soliga man explained to me, “In 1972, the forest department told us we shouldn’t be in the forest and brought us together [from the different hamlets]... Now especially because of the tiger reserve everything is controlled, even in the village.”

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of *Forest Rights*) Act, 2006 (FRA) was enacted on the pretext of correcting this ‘historical injustice’ to forest dwelling communities, who experience marginalization and threats of displacement for a variety of reasons. It challenges the dominant conservation approach, requiring forest-dwellers to give their informed consent before their rights can be compromised (*Promise and Performance: Ten Years of the Forest Right’s Act in India*, n.d.). It values local knowledge and forest use (Broome et al., 2017) and recognizes that forest dwelling communities have always had rights to their land and resources, even if they have no official paperwork for them. This recognition process involves reviewing claims to forest rights and granting communities with paperwork if they sufficiently prove their forest-dweller status. The FRA provides individual rights (inalienable land titles) and community rights (collective access to forest resources, and management). In this way the FRA makes steps toward “democratizing forest and conservation spaces”, and to the framers of the act, has the potential to give forest dwelling communities agency over their land and lives (Campaign for Survival and Dignity, n.d.).

The FRA was implemented in BRT from 2008 onwards, and by 2012 most of the villages obtained community forest rights as well as land titles under the act. Many activists and conservationists see this as a landmark example of co-existence, as BR Hills is the first tiger reserve within which people received rights under the FRA. It is used as an example of a space where tiger numbers have doubled in the last six years, despite having communities

living within it (Madegowda, 2009). In STR, however, while communities have put in claims for use and management rights under the FRA, they have received no rights or paperwork (*Status Report of implementation of FRA in Tamilnadu, Samanvaya Consulting, 2017*). Therefore, Soligas on the Tamil Nadu side of the border are more restricted from entering the forests than those living on the Karnataka side.

The recognition of rights under the FRA has significantly helped Soligas in BRT continue to access and live on their lands and my research has shown that in STR, where communities do not have such paperwork, many young people have had to resort to seasonal migration for survival (see Chapter 1). However, gaining rights under the FRA has not truly created a sense of self determination, even in BRT. Previous studies (Rai et al., 2018) of Soligas in the region theorised their current experience as one of in-situ displacement – with displacement occurring as loss of access, mobility and changing markets, rather than the physical removal of people from their land. They argue that this leads to an alienation of the community from the forests they continue to live in. Moreover, alienation takes differentiated forms within the community, and can be understood through different lenses. Youth, and experiences of change across generations, are one such powerful lens through which to understand differentiated experiences of alienation and life in a tiger reserve.

Young adults in particular experience this form of displacement through a loss of viable local livelihoods, and many are under- and unemployed, living unstable and uncertain lives. Young adults between ages eighteen and thirty are the generation born after families were relocated out of forest spaces, and have never experienced the forest without protected area policies and restrictions of access. They are also often first-generation school goers, experiencing post-liberalization development in India through the emergence of new technologies and connections to the ‘outside’ world. This means that they often learn less about the forest and land-based livelihoods than previous generations, and all of these factors

work to further alienate young adults from the forests they have grown up in. Yet, as I show below, most of them retain deep connections to the forest and still want to stay in it. Thus, studying youth also offers a useful lens for understanding the future possibilities for the spaces and the people.

## **Theoretical Framework**

I situate my work within literature at the intersection of critical conservation studies, feminist political ecology and work on the FRA in India. In this confluence, I use youth as an important lens to understand the ways in which conservation policy continues to have implications for forest dwelling communities. I illustrate how all three of these schools of thought have largely overlooked the role of youth within conservation spaces and their implications for future possibilities. I also introduce ‘waiting’ as a useful theoretical concept in this regard.

Wildlife conservation has been shaped by several overlapping processes over time, that have dispossessed forest communities around the world (Dan Brockington & Igoe, 2006; Schroeder & Neumann, 1995). Colonial empires established models of enclosure and ‘fortress’ conservation (Adams & Hutton, 2016; Peluso, 1992) that coerced and excluded communities, creating spaces void of people for both economic benefit (Peluso, 1992; Rangarajan, 1996) and leisure activities (Cronon, 1996; Williams, 1973). Influenced by enlightenment thought, these conservation spaces were socially constructed to preserve pristine natural habitat (A. Tsing, 2005), perpetuating the ‘national park ideal’ (Neumann, 2004), a conservation space that needs to be protected from ‘irresponsible’ local communities (Fairhead & Leach, 1995; Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Springate-Baginski & Blaikie, 2007)

More recently, political ecologists and others have studied the implications of fortress conservation for local communities, economies and ecologies (Perreault, Bridge, &

McCarthy, n.d.). These approaches have ranged from those of understanding the relationship between conservation, displacement and poverty of surrounding communities (Adams & Hutton, 2016; Agrawal & Redford, 2009; West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006) to seeing them as spaces of governmentality and environmentality that create specific conservation subjects (Fletcher, 2010; West, 2006), to critiques of the spectacularization (Igoe, 2010; Sullivan, 2011) and militarization (Duffy, 2016; Sandbrook, 2015; Simlai, 2015) of conservation spaces, and finally more epistemic and ontological manifestations of conservation policy (Forsyth, 2019; Goldman, 2003; Goldman, Nadasdy, & Turner, 2011).

This last element has been elaborated and expanded on in the work of feminist political ecologists, who highlight the importance of understanding intersectional and embodied subjectivities of experiences of conservation practice (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayer, & Wangari, 1996). They point out the lack of heterogeneity in much of the conservation literature, which tends to flatten power relations and differences both within and beyond communities (Elmhirst, 2011; Mollett, 2017). Critiquing ecofeminist perspectives, Bina Agarwal's work on economic relations and the gendered nature of forest management (Agarwal, 2009) paved the way for more material engagements with questions of gender and conservation. Feminist Political Ecology literature builds on and moves beyond these relations to talk about subjectivities, and the affective relationships that different people have with the forest (Gururani, 2002; Nightingale, 2011; N. Singh, 2018). These approaches to understanding conservation practice see communities as heterogenous and differentiated along lines of class, gender and so on, and individuals within communities as dynamic actors who influence and are influenced by their surroundings. Moreover, they understand change to be experienced and co-produced differently along lines of class, gender and location (Nightingale, 2017), and while changes have embodied manifestations in everyday lives, they can be understood through multiple scales of analysis (Truelove, 2011). However, even

within feminist political ecology literature, the impact of protected area conservation on young adults has received little to no attention. Although youth themselves are diverse and have very different experiences along lines of gender and class, I hope to introduce some complexity into our understanding of structural, material and discursive impacts of conservation practice over generations.

Similarly, work on the Forest Rights Act in India has failed to adequately address the role of youth within communities and forest spaces and their implications for conservation and community futures. This literature has also largely viewed the community as homogenous and has not addressed questions of gender and class sufficiently either. Much literature has been devoted to the revolutionary potential of the FRA (Broome et al., 2017; Gopalakrishnan, 2017) and its ability to challenge previously exclusionary forest laws (Lele, 2017). Yet its poor implementation, particularly in protected areas, has led many to question its efficacy, and has put it in conversation with a broader political economy (Karthik & Menon, 2016; Ramnath, 2015; Sahu et al., 2017; Savyasaachi, 2015). However, much of this literature focuses on community empowerment without adequately addressing other factors that pressure and impact youth on an everyday basis. Youth experiences will change the ways in which communities will engage with and benefit from the FRA in the years to come.

While all of these approaches provide great insight to studying conservation, they offer few examples to understand generational change within conservation spaces. Literature from the Geographies of youth however, offers a powerful analytical lens with which to understand the situation. Youth as both a time and a stage in life has recently begun to receive academic attention. It is often defined in relation to adulthood, as a time of relative dependence and instability. Studies from the global South in particular highlight changing temporalities for youth, arguing that the period of time 'youth' is experienced is growing (Jeffrey, 2009). Further, something that applies to Soligas as well, is that youth are beginning

to measure their lives increasingly through abstract conceptions of years and decades rather than more seasonal rhythms (Jeffrey, 2008). Jeffrey combines these changing temporalities with emerging arguments about the centrality of ‘waiting’ as a subaltern experience of capitalist society (see Bayart, 2007), to argue that waiting has become a characteristic of many young lives. He illustrates this in his study of middle class rural youth and unemployment in Uttar Pradesh in India (Jeffrey, 2010). While the Soligas embody vastly different circumstances than the middle class youth in Uttar Pradesh<sup>43</sup>, his theorization of waiting offers a powerful way in which to understand the impact of conservation policy on Soliga lives. I believe that waiting is a useful concept and metaphor to understand life in protected areas, where people have not been evicted per se, but live in liminal spaces. It complicates ideas of precarity, contrasting structural components (lack of employment, rights implementation and so on) with desires, aspirations and expectations that emerge within youth and elders in the community. Waiting is often both a choice and an active negotiation, a changing temporality for young people whose experiences of life in tiger reserves is unpredictable and contradictory. Thus it is both literal and metaphorical, and offers a valuable lens through which to understand youth experiences.

### **Soliga Youth**

I now bring us back to the Soligas in BRT and STR to explore the ways in which youth in particular navigate changing ecologies, economies and livelihoods, as well as knowledge and relationships to the forest. Young adults engage with multiple overlapping pressures at various scales. I illustrate the ways in which these overlapping, contradictory

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<sup>43</sup> His research subjects are mid-caste, wealthy land owning rural communities in North India with access to more social and financial capital than Soligas who are considered outside of the Hindu caste system and have much less land, and live very different lives.

processes often lead to experiences of waiting. Waiting is not necessarily passive because young people are agents in their own lives. I present it, rather, as an active negotiation with the structures that shape their lives.

## Methods

BRT and STR are diverse ecological spaces which have had a range of land uses. I conducted research across many villages to get a sense of the diversity of youth experiences across the land area in 30 villages spread across both tiger reserves between June and August of 2019. This included a combination of interviews (with over 100 individuals), observation, participant observation of meetings (attended 5 meetings), mental mapping (with 14 individuals, largely youth) and walking transect exercises (with about ten young people). I conducted 60 interviews with young men and women between the ages of 18 and 30, and the rest were with Soliga elders. I also conducted interviews and had more casual conversations with local NGO workers and schoolteachers<sup>44</sup>. I found my participants through a combination of snowball and random sampling, and my field assistants, both Soliga young adults themselves, were vital to this work.

Doing ethnographic fieldwork in a tiger reserve as a young, upper caste woman from Bangalore has implications for the ways in which I am perceived and therefore treated. For instance, I was seen as an outsider and as someone their children could aspire to be. I was also asked often about my caste status and community as a way for people to place me within larger society. I found fieldwork both challenging and rewarding, and I learned equally from moments of reserved consideration and candid, unfiltered conversations. Being a woman myself, interviewing young men was uniquely challenging as many of them were reserved

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<sup>44</sup> All names have been changed unless they were community elders explicitly speaking on behalf of the community.

and shy and spoke to me without ever looking at my face. On the other hand my positionality was advantageous to talk to women and community elders, who felt less threatened by my presence, and spoke to me more freely. My association with a local NGO, and ongoing work in the region also helped me to establish a rapport with many Soliga youth, allowing me to spend time sitting or walking with them without me feeling particularly conspicuous or them necessarily changing their behaviour around me. The positionalities of my field assistants, one a woman (in BRT) and the other a man (in STR), also allowed me to meet and build trust with several people across multiple villages in a relatively short time. I am deeply indebted to them for this work.

However, despite the relative ease with which ethnographic work took place, I am aware that responses to many of my questions during interviews were definitely shaped around my positionality. This was reflected in parents comparing their children to me, or with participants curious and hopeful that sharing their woes with me might change something in their lives. With all of this in mind to situate myself within the research, I share my findings on youth in BRT and STR below.

### Change and challenges that shape and influence youth

Soligas in BRT and STR have experienced many changes to their lives over the years, particularly after the tiger reserve notifications. Soliga families practiced shifting cultivation and did some wage labour work for the British and then Indian government before the areas were officially 'protected'. Today, families living within these tiger reserves are sedentary and increasingly dependent on wage work, and this is particularly so for youth. Young adults offer a valuable lens with which to understand dynamic realities, as they live with changing forests, community dynamics, lifestyles and livelihoods, and expectations, all of which are

actively shaped by ongoing engagements with and rejections of power relations on the ground.



*Figure 17 Young people's futures are often uncertain. Photograph by author*

The forest department's presence is one such power relation young people navigate on a daily basis. One afternoon my field assistant suggested that we could go for a walk in the forest, and I agreed immediately since I had a permit. Others around us were a little nervous, warning me that I could still be stopped if a forest department guard caught me in the forest, and that they make decisions based on a whim. After lunch, four of us, all women, set out into the forest. I walked behind the other three, watching as they were able to be both alert to the forest around them and carry on a conversation about marriage, food and family. We encountered a large fruiting tree and stopped to collect some fruit. The tree was at the confluence of two paths, and as we picked fruit the conversation was equally about whether

an elephant might walk down the path as it was about whether a forest guard might. Wildlife and the forest department both produce fear, one that is internalized and normalised and yet constant and discomfoting. This is definitely a deterrent to many young people entering the forest, and the fear of facing harassment from the department is real.

The forest department is also explicit in its desire to continue to reduce both human activity and presence within the tiger report. A report evaluating tiger reserves in India (Mathur et al, 2014), for instance, says about BRT:

Settlements in the core area should be relocated voluntarily. Constant efforts should be made to win the faith of the local inhabitants (p112).

And about STR:

As all the human settlements inside the core have been excluded from the core area of STR, legally they are not the part of the core. But as a result of their presence inside the core, the core is not inviolate. Hence a voluntary relocation process should be planned and implemented (p123).

Discourses from the forest department conveyed through both personal relationships with the forest department and with official statements, indicate that young people should be encouraged or even coerced into leaving ‘voluntarily’. Moreover, it is important to understand that the tiger reserve status ensures that there is little potential for new livelihoods or infrastructural developments. Therefore, even though the FRA provides better access to the forest in BRT, incomes from the land or forest are limited due to the forest department’s ongoing restriction of access, as well as changing forest and seasonal patterns. Coercive conservation policies and associated restrictions of forest access have led to multiple transformations in the social and material fabrics of life, affecting peoples’ capacity for self-determination.

Multiple studies in the region have shown forest change over the last few decades, in part because of erratic rainfall and climate change, but also because of the restriction of

access to forests (Mundoli et al., 2016; N. D. Rai & Setty, 2013). This is corroborated by oral accounts from Soliga elders, who strongly believe that the banning of traditional management practices has led to a reduction in forest health. These narratives describe the forest as being choked by overgrowth of an invasive species, Lantana Camara, as well as tree parasites that kill fruiting trees (Rai et al., 2018, and interview sources). Further, many Soligas have noticed a significant reduction in rain over the last decade or so, believing that this too has impacted forest health. Many of them believe that the forest needs to be burned with ground fires in order for it to be restored. One interviewee, for instance, explained it to me by saying, “It’s like the forest needs a bath, to cleanse itself from the disease”. Forest degradation has significantly impacted biodiversity, particularly in terms of the availability of forest foods and medicinal plants used by Soligas. For many youth, therefore, experiences of the forest before the banning of ground fires are distant memories, if not only imagined through stories. Forest change has also had uneven impacts on the community, as some people are more dependent on forest resources than others who have access to land or labour opportunities, and this differs by gender and class<sup>45</sup>.

Livelihood practices are also changing as those families who have access to agriculture move toward cash cropping, and the collection of Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) for sale has reduced, both due to forest degradation and high regulation of movement. Many families that were previously dependent on forest produce or grazing resources have become largely cash dependent and have had to look for supplemental wage labour. Loss of soil fertility, crop-raids by wild animals, the massive spread of invasive species, and increasingly erratic rainfall patterns are also making land-based incomes

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<sup>45</sup> For instance class differences determine access to land and other incomes, and gender differences determine access to alternative forms of employment, which often favour men.

increasingly elusive (Mundoli et al., 2016). This has meant that youth depend on labour opportunities and short-term employment as sources of income, resulting in high levels of precarity within this demographic. Spatial distributions of the communities also impact the kinds of opportunities available to them. This is both in terms of access to the forest (a lack of FRA rights in STR has forced many young people to migrate seasonally for work) and access to other sources of income (access to cities and towns varies by state depending on languages people can speak, access to public transportation and markets and so on).

Most significantly for youth, however, is changing knowledge systems. As the first generation to have higher literacy rates within the community, Soliga youth have experienced a combination of government education, community oral traditions and exposure to the outside world through media and technology. Education systems have been particularly transformative as students learn material that is disconnected from their everyday lives, and do not learn about the forest or their concerns. One teacher I interviewed said this was because of forest department restrictions to accessing the forest, while another remarked, “They are the experts on the forest, so what can we teach them?” They also learn in Kannada or Tamil (depending on location), languages they have not grown up speaking, and are therefore losing touch with the Soliga language, and associated knowledge about the forest. These changes are also very different along axes of class and gender, as some young people spend more time at home or in educational institutions, while others need to help the family by taking goats for grazing or collecting firewood and other forest produce.

This means that young adults are now learning less about forests and forest-based lives from within the community. Many elders are both frustrated and helpless about this seeming lack of interest in Soliga culture and community among youth. One elder said, “What good is education, it is making them learn how to drink and smoke”. Another remarked, “They just spend all their time talking on the phone, they are forgetting the

traditions. We can't say anything, they don't listen". Caught in between two worlds, not entirely comfortable in either, several young people felt strongly about what the next generation should do, and their own role in shaping the lives of children:

"Now forest and wage work is not good, and getting educated is not good either. In the future our children should not do both, they should just properly do one."<sup>46</sup>

"We didn't know information when we were growing up, we didn't know what subjects are important to study, or who to ask. Now I make sure I tell people".

Despite experiencing coercive conservation practices and change, young people continue to occupy forest spaces, and retain deeply embedded relationships to them. Considering their increased access to the outside world, and the restrictive conditions under which many Soligas live in villages, one might assume that they feel pressure or aspire to leave the tiger reserves<sup>47</sup>. However, interestingly, most young adults I spoke to actually want to stay, return to, or eventually settle down in their forest villages. A handful wanted to leave to study further or earn better incomes for their families, and yet 51 out of 60 of those I interviewed expressed a strong desire to either stay or come back to the forest. Many expressed the joy of being in the forest, describing the happiness they feel, the fun of climbing trees and mountains, and finding fresh fruit or honey. A few examples from conversations are:

"I like the forest more than the village. Outside is violent, forest is silent!"

"you should come and stay here sometime, we will take you up the mountain and back! It's really fun. I was up there this morning... I don't like to just be at home, so if I'm bored I just go off up into the forest."

"When I go to the forest in the beginning I feel a bit bored, but after that it's very nice, I don't even realise that time has gone by!"

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with a young man in his late twenties, talking about his daughter's future and reflecting on his own life

<sup>47</sup> Research on youth in India and other parts of the global South often focus on development related discourses and aspirations for urban lifestyles that impact young people. I found those discourses less dominant of a feature in young people's lives in BRT and STR, and therefore I do not explore them further in this paper.

“I have no ambitions or wish to go anywhere else, I want to stay here.”

These sentiments were expressed by multiple young people I spoke to in the field. However, staying rarely means having a stable job or income, it is always intertwined with having not left, or having left and come back. Staying often means *waiting*. Below I explore some of the overlapping elements of leaving and staying that result in experiences of waiting. I do this with notes and transcripts from interviews that illuminate the messy, complex and contradictory lives and decisions young people make, illustrating the both literal and metaphorical forms that waiting takes.

### Leaving, staying, Waiting

*...what of long term waiting? What of situations in which people have been compelled to wait for years, generations or whole lifetimes, not as a result of their voluntary movement through modern spaces but because they are durably unable to realize their goals?*

- Craig Jeffrey on youth and waiting (2010, p3).

Soligas across generations spend much of their time waiting for wage work to be given to them, waiting for results of exams and job applications, waiting for opportunities to participate in skill training programmes, waiting for welfare programmes and payments to come through, waiting for the government to fulfil their development promises (even as simple as providing electricity and a regular water supply), and even waiting for legislation like the FRA to truly correct historical injustice. Communities here are definitely waiting for futures that might never be realised, but they are also waiting for futures that are hard to imagine. Therefore, to expand on Jeffrey’s question above, *what of communities who are*

*unable to articulate their goals due to a history of estrangement from both forests and worlds outside them?*

Youth experiences seem to be caught between the pushes and pulls of staying and leaving their homes, often not having the ability to entirely do either. Cumulative changes over the years have led to a messy constellation of factors that influence young people's decisions to stay or to leave. These many forces and factors act together to hold both coming and going in tension, leaving a sense of limbo, an in-betweenness. I could see these tensions emerging in our conversations, as young people spoke to me both as a researcher and as a representative of the 'outside world' they believe they should aspire to, and yet do not entirely want. Understanding this in-betweenness as waiting, illustrates the changing temporalities of life for youth within these spaces.

One of the key reasons for young people wanting to stay is their *attachment to place/community*. The excerpt below is from field notes from a day in STR:

*We head to Sreenivasapura Colony. It is Saturday morning, but the village is quite empty and there is not a lot of activity. Guru [my field assistant] has inquired before-hand about whether Shalini from Kanneri Colony is at home, so they expect us and welcome us with tea. Curious neighbours drop in to figure out who we are. "Whose son are you? Which village, which sect?" Introductions are made through relationships and belonging, and when established, discussions about weddings, land, and so on follow, until enough comfort has been established. There is something here about community, knowledge of people, of whose son or daughter one is and how they are all connected, of the depth of belonging to community and relationships that exist within the Soliga society.*

Over the course of interviews and observations with both informants and field assistants, the ties of belonging to the Soliga community became increasingly evident to me. Young adults' attachment to community (both emotional and obligatory) is very strong and

an important factor in them wanting to stay in their homes. Conversations I had during fieldwork were scattered with connections and attachments to place. For instance, it was spelled out to me in my conversation with a young woman in a village right by the edge of STR, who described the seasonal migration for labour that many young people are forced to do because of restrictions on forest access. I asked why people don't just move out of the village and live in the nearby towns they work in, rather than renting out rooms for small periods of time every year. "They come back once every two months and for festivals, they can't live away from their families and the forest. And we cannot go there", she replied. I believe that these strong connections to social and material elements of home greatly influence young adults' decisions and desires to continue to live within tiger reserves.

Attachments to community are also intertwined with obligations and expectations. These are often tied to education and notions of progress. *Education* is associated with success and the aspirational qualities of many young peoples' lives, although the experienced returns are often few and far between, and many are disillusioned by it. As first-generation learners many young people do not have the support at home to understand concepts that they learn in school which are completely alien to their lives. They rarely perform well academically, and often fail exams several times. A shy nineteen-year-old girl said,

"I studied till the 12<sup>th</sup> and then stopped. I failed two subjects. I don't want to write exams again."

Studies of adivasi youth across the country show poor literacy rates, as well as high rates of dropping out. A report on adivasi youth and education (Vasavi, 2012) explains these trends at multiple scales, correlating them to poor infrastructural and state support to adivasi communities, as well as the content of education material itself. The use of unfamiliar languages as the medium of instruction, for example, and the focus on text-based learning are difficult transitions for adivasi children. More insidious, however, is that the content they

learn is largely out of context, and they are taught material that often describes and views adivasis through a casteist lens, seeing them as backward, primitive, and in need of modernization. These varied experiences mean that education is a ‘contradictory resource’ for adivasi youth, where it simultaneously promises empowerment and reinforces structural inequalities (Froerer, 2011). In BRT and STR, even young people who have finished graduate degrees find themselves unemployed, waiting for work.

In talking to people about education, many would remark that educated youth are “just sitting at home”, and that even if they have studied they don’t get jobs. Many among the older generation have only attended school for a few years or not at all, and find it hard to understand the difficulties of school work and the pressures of failure on their children. Parents seemed resigned to their children “sitting at home”, lamenting that their children seem uninterested in their own futures.

This indicates that to the community today, being at home is considered less than ideal, perhaps even unproductive. Although youth who are ‘at home’ contribute to social reproduction in the household through help with cooking and cleaning, collection of firewood and NTFP and so on, these activities are still considered waiting, as they do not directly contribute to cash incomes, or seem to contribute to an individual or community’s empowerment.

Many parents still believe education is the best opportunity for their children to live better lives than their own, and consider education a long term investment for the future. Yet this is clearly a confusing and conflicting prospect for them, as they also have a desire for young people to continue to live in the forest. One older man from a village in STR said, “Younger generation should go to school. They shouldn’t go to the forest, they should just study and go out”, and then in the same breath, “They should stay in the forest, they can’t adjust outside.”

Throughout the course of fieldwork I asked parents about their aspirations for their children and the youth in general. My positionality definitely impacted many of the responses I heard, where my own education and life choices (my choice to study and understand their concerns, for example) were used to compare to their children's lives. Many parents said they wished their children would not have to struggle like them. Others said that as long as their children have enough to eat, they can choose to do whatever they want with their futures, insisting that both men and women need to be given equal opportunities. Still others stressed the importance of young Soligas doing work that could benefit the community as a whole:

“We want them to stand on their own two feet, and we want to have representatives in government and forest department jobs. There is nobody like that right now.”

This is also a sentiment expressed by more politically active elders, who have read the works of Dalit and adivasi icon Bhimrao Ambedkar<sup>48</sup>, and in a meeting told students, “If you read Ambedkar you will learn that you need to study, learn and elevate yourselves.”

This range of different hopes and aspirations for their futures can often be confusing for young people, who feel both the pressures to provide for their families and represent the community, and the obligation to continue to live forest lives. Staying and leaving are then intertwined with each other through experiences of education, failure and familial expectations. Repeated failures and dropping out from school often mean that young people wait for results, or drop out and wait to go back again, or wait to go to school if the money runs out, or wait for good employment opportunities that will match their education levels.

An important factor determining why many young people do not want to leave is negative experiences of life outside the tiger reserve. Young people who do leave for educational or employment opportunities often return to their homes soon after, and a

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<sup>48</sup> Ambedkar was a Dalit activist and lawyer who fought for the rights of caste-oppressed communities in India, advocating for their empowerment. He is known for his slogan, ‘educate, agitate, organise’ which speaks to the quote that follows.

significant reason for this is because of *experiences of casteism outside*. Many described living in the city through sentiments of fear and risk. A 22-year-old woman who had just returned from college in a nearby town said,

“In the beginning I was scared, it was hard to adjust. Many of the other tribal students ran away and went back home, and at times I wanted to run away too.”

Research in India has shown that youth experiences with casteism/racialised discrimination are often heightened in cities (Datta, 2018; S. H. Smith & Gergan, 2015). For Soliga youth, urban spaces are disorienting, often times risky and even described as boring. Life in a city is unaffordable and having to live in hostels with unfamiliar foods, people and cultures can be very difficult. Drop-out rates from high school and university are extremely high within the community, and many young people forgo perceived educational or employment opportunities as a result. Being in a city also brings up complex emotional and social dynamics for young people to work through (S. Smith, 2017), as life away from home can be considered liberating as well, particularly for young women. A young girl I interviewed said,

“After we leave home we get a lot of ‘ego’! We want to dress differently, watch movies, go out with our friends. If I see Soligas from older generations in the city I feel shy and I walk on the other side of the road.”

This constellation of different factors leads to many young adults staying within forest spaces. Yet, as mentioned above, staying is often a precarious proposition as *livelihoods* across the field site have shifted toward wage labour and cash cropping. In BRT, while most people do some form of agriculture and collect honey and other forest produce, communities are also reliant on forest/ coffee estate related wage work and some cattle grazing. Most young adults I interviewed here are also able to depend on the forest and government welfare schemes such as food rations for subsistence. In villages along the border, extraction of forest

produce is limited, and people supplement it with either wage work in other peoples' farms, or temporary seasonal migration to work in coffee estates and logging operations in other parts of the state. In STR, the forest department has drastically restricted the use and access of forest resources in the last five years, and communities have not yet secured forest rights. Entire villages now migrate to distant coffee/tea plantation estates or agricultural estates for several months at a time. However, they all return home during the rainy season, and do not spend more than a few months at a time outside of the forest. Many move back to their homes after a few years of working outside, describing their experiences with jobs outside as exhausting and far from ideal:

“I have done jobs in six different places so I've seen my options. I would rather stay here and work here. But now with the Tiger reserve there are few options”

Thus, on a daily basis, Soliga youth face uncertainty about employment. The decision to leave or to stay therefore is complicated by the potential for earning money. When wage work is not available, young people often participate in free schemes and courses offered by local NGOs<sup>49</sup>, spend time in the forest, or sit at home or by the roads and lakes near villages. Several of my younger and older informants described what they do, as '(s)he's *just* at home', similar to sentiments expressed above. While these activities might seem to be a response to experiences of economic inequality and changing labour relations, they are also deeply tied to aspirations that influence young people's decisions to wait, and to acquire skills or abilities that they believe might benefit them down the line.

A common question I had for young adults in both BRT and STR was what they wanted to do to be able to stay, and what kinds of lives they aspire to in the forest.

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<sup>49</sup> These trainings, provided by local NGOs or through govt schemes often do not match the livelihoods of young people living in a tiger reserve. For instance, they do driving and stitching trainings but cannot procure the materials to actually pursue either viably.

Interestingly, about half of my participants responded saying they wanted to work in government jobs, preferably as teachers or with the forest department. They spoke about looking for local stability rather than migration to look for better prospects or opportunities:

“I want a forest department job because that way I will have a stable income and I can spend the whole day in the forest.”

Largely, the sources of employment for Soligas in the Forest Department are limited to contractual labour jobs that are highly insecure. In fact many Soliga elders believe they are actively denied employment due to discriminatory politics within the forest department. This is reinforced by the forest department’s hesitation with hiring locally, as they do not want there to be sympathies between the forest department officials and local people. India’s forest department is a highly bureaucratic and hierarchical institution, constructed by the colonial state, where it is hard to be promoted or secure mid to high-level jobs without access to social capital. Applying to more secure positions, even those that are low on the ladder of bureaucratic power, are based on academic performance and entrance exams. As mentioned above, educational gains are elusive and most Soligas do not perform well in exams, giving Soliga youth a disadvantage in this process. Even filling application forms can be bewildering – one young man said his application was rejected on grounds of spelling mistakes and him not knowing his community’s legal designation.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, Soliga youth are determined to write exams to get higher level positions within the forest department so that they can continue to stay within the forest and have a stable, respected job and income:

“I want to work in the forest department but it is very hard to get and I will have to work hard.”

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<sup>50</sup> For instance, the Karnataka govt is unclear whether the Soligas are forest tribes, scheduled tribes, or particularly vulnerable tribes.

Moreover, even in conversations with elders within the community it is clear that many of them want their children to have jobs within the government as a way to both represent the community and facilitate better cooperation. One Soliga elder told me, “We need to work jointly with the forest department. We cannot do anything otherwise.”

Further, Soligas also see this as a strategic means by which the forest itself can be better conserved. A Soliga lady Radha, the only Soliga woman to be a forest department guard, said:

“All the people who work here in the FD are outsiders. They know nothing about the forest. We are the ones who know about it, we should get the jobs”.

I was surprised to hear repeated aspirations to work with the forest department across the various villages in both field sites. Viewing the space from a critical conservation and political ecology perspective, made me wonder why Soliga youth would want to participate in the very structure and system that dispossesses them. Yet, the power of ethnographic research is in taking people’s claims seriously, in all their paradoxical richness (Astuti, 2017). Therefore, I believe that Soliga desires to work within or alongside the forest department must be taken seriously, understood as a strategic engagement with the state, a negotiation of their position vis-à-vis the state, that allows for both a legitimation and challenging of its authority (Sundar, 2011).

Waiting to be able to stay then, involves waiting to participate in institutions that Soligas believe are stable and important to be represented in. Despite the slim chances of getting into higher level forest department jobs, Soliga youth are willing to wait until they can access those jobs, and in doing so, willing to live increasingly precarious lives.

### Waiting for rights

Given all of these complex processes, youth lives are often caught in transitional spaces between forests and the world outside of them. Further, contradictory legal structures that both actively exclude communities (tiger reserve policies, for example) and advocate for their involvement and existence within the same forest spaces (the FRA), also act as push/pull factors. Although choosing to stay or to leave is informed by different circumstances, I argue that in both staying and leaving, young people in the region are caught in a state of ‘waiting’, as even in staying, they are displaced. Waiting, then is an active negotiation with the world around them, a navigation of ongoing dispossession. It is a waiting to be able to stay.

Empowering legislature such as the FRA has created several possibilities for valuing forest communities for their historical and ongoing management practices. It is also clear that a recognition of rights improves livelihood options and challenges top-down conservation models. FRA activist Gopalakrishnan describes it as,

“...the seeds of a genuinely different, collective and democratic model of the use and conservation of nature, and of the livelihoods of people. The next stage of that struggle will be something more radical, and all that can be said now is that whatever that is, it will push the boundaries of both “environment” and “development” well beyond the way those terms are often understood today” (Gopalakrishnan, 2017, p76).

However, the FRA’s implementation has been poor, and in protected areas particularly, it has not done enough to empower communities. As my own and previous research has shown, conservation policy has systematically reduced local people’s value to labour, not seeing them as collective, democratic actors. The FRA’s existence is challenged by pre-existing laws and institutions, and therefore its implementation and ability to ‘push boundaries’ or be radical are constantly contested through power relations on the ground, and even in the high courts.

Further, the ‘recognition’ of rights, while revolutionary in relation to historical processes, can be seen as limiting of their potential. Global debates on similar processes of

claims to rights over land and forests (M. J. Goldman, Davis, & Little, 2016; Ribot & Peluso, 2009) illustrate the limitations of some of the mechanisms included in the FRA. The collectivising of rights, for instance, can restrict individual autonomy, and impede communities' ability to negotiate capitalistic processes (Li, 2010). While the FRA avoids entirely collectivising rights with individual land titles, their inalienability can also be seen as limiting.<sup>51</sup> These forms of gaining rights can in fact intensify existing structural inequalities in the region (Yeh & Bryan, 2015).

In effect, the FRA and peoples' desire to stay, create the material conditions for both literal and metaphorical waiting to occur, reinforcing historically unequal power relations. By allowing for a measure of forest dependence to continue, the FRA gives room to lives caught in-between coming and going- not fully allowing them to stay or forcing them to leave. In many ways the FRA is unable to dismantle the structural inequalities that it hopes to challenge.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that decades of coercive conservation and experiences of change within BRT and STR have had unique impacts on young adults, resulting in a sense of waiting. I use waiting, as it offers a poignant and valuable lens through which to understand lives that are often caught in-between worlds, the pushes and pulls between staying and leaving. I argue that waiting is at times a choice and at times an imposition, an active negotiation with power structures at multiple scales. Finally, I interrogate the role of the FRA in enabling waiting, arguing that although the intentions behind the act are radical,

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<sup>51</sup> In fact, Soligas refer to these as 'temporary pattas' since they are not private land ownership titles, and therefore people cannot use them to avail govt schemes, or use them for non-forest livelihoods, leading to many fields being left as fallow within the tiger reserves.

its lack of implementation and embeddedness within power structures do not allow it to dismantle the structures of coercive conservation.

In order for communities to have agency in their lives, young peoples' intersectional and affective experiences need to be acknowledged and understood, as these experiences will shape the futures of both the places and the people that live within them. Youth expressing the desire for forest department or government jobs, and being disillusioned with opportunities outside must be taken seriously. Their desire to participate in locally powerful institutions can be understood as a practical engagement with local power structures, a way to both legitimize their lives in the forest and to continue to live on their lands, access their forests, and feel like they have agency over their lives. Thus, they can hope to overcome cycles of waiting, and to be able to stay.

## Interlude II

### BRT and Soliga Engagements with the Outside World

“the point of ethnography is to learn how to think about a situation together with one’s informants; research categories develop with the research, not before it”

- Anna Tsing, *Mushroom at The End of The World*

In doing fieldwork, I found almost every interaction was thought provoking and I came across several moments that felt significant but didn’t contribute specifically to my research. I had my own research questions on Soliga youth, but new and important directions of inquiry emerged through the course of doing immersive fieldwork, that at times informed my project but at times were left hanging as questions. Paying attention to the often contradictory and complex elements of peoples’ lives, offers insight into marginal spaces, and gives our participants agency in changing and defining the research we do (Astuti, 2017; A. L. Tsing, 2015). In this brief interlude, therefore, I would like to introduce you to one such element of fieldwork in BRT that struck me as particularly important, Soliga experiences with outsider interest. Knowledge about Soligas has been produced through largely extractive means, influencing the way Soligas view outsiders.

The following is a piecing together of stories in the form of creative nonfiction. In taking the reader through a hypothetical day of doing fieldwork in BRT, I hope to illustrate some of the complexities of life in protected areas, as well as some of my own reflections on fieldwork that came out of this ethnographic process.

#### Morning

My field assistant and I were determined to reach Muthagadagadde podu (village) before everyone had left for work, and we quickly walked the 3km to the village laughing

and chatting about her education in the local school right next to it. The school was set up along with a hospital in the region for ‘tribal empowerment’ and has since become an influential local institution that is visited by interested college students, social workers, and other groups on a regular basis. As we walked through the village we stopped by to say hello to an older lady, smile at young children running around on the side of the road and exchange the usual morning pleasantries of ‘have you eaten?’ and ‘have you had coffee?’. Through all of this I received wide smiles from people in the village, curious and amused. My previous few days of fieldwork in the region had gone very well, I had formed some new connections and renewed some old ones and was feeling quite excited about the day’s interviews and conversations.

Yet, despite all the smiles and warmth, every time we asked if people were willing to sit down and talk to me, they said no and gave us excuses. Either they did not know anything, or they were busy and needed to get on with the day’s work, or they were just about to head to the forest. Most common of all was ‘ask at the next house, they will know better.’ As we continued to go down the road, propelled on by false promises of potential interviewees, our smiles got more tired and our laughter more forced. To me, an already shy and often hesitant person, their reaction was perfectly valid – I would not want a stranger talking to me about my life and writing my responses down either! My ethnographic training has told me that I need to take time to build trust, and I need to empathise with peoples’ fears, and understand where they are coming from. To my field assistant however, a young Soliga woman herself, this was surprising and disappointing. Why are they so unwilling to share their stories, you are a good person, not a threat! She apologised to me, embarrassed by peoples’ unwillingness to engage with me beyond daily pleasantries.

Yet, I was aware that none of this resistance was directed specifically at me, and it made me wonder what the history of extractive research is in these places. The region has

received extensive research attention by social scientists (largely conducting interviews with people, sometimes for hours, and not compensating people/being sensitive to their time), ecologists who want to learn about human use and forest dependence (by measuring firewood use, for instance), and public health researchers (which sometimes takes the form of extracting blood samples). More jarring however is the attention the community has received from a range of tourists and other interested urban dwellers who want to both capture and explain the life of highly romanticized forest communities<sup>52</sup>. The very fact that the Soligas are one of the few communities still living within a tiger reserve, has brought journalist and media attention, as well as NGOs and charities over the years (many of whom disappear soon after). Large groups of visiting undergraduate students coming to the school next door are often encouraged to go into villages and talk to people to learn about the ‘adivasi’ way of life. Muthagadgadde Podu has become a miniature museum for the consumption of local students who visit the tiger reserve. They walk around the village, taking pictures of people and their homes, asking people questions about their lives, sometimes even asking people for fruits/food they have grown in their gardens. At times they have been sent into villages to write a report, and they approach villagers asking to talk to them for an assignment they need to finish. Given all of this, people are tired of ‘curious researchers’.

Kethamma’s house is the last in the village, right up against coffee and pepper fields. I know her from before, and she is my field assistant’s cousin, so she was instantly welcoming. She sympathised with us, and told me about multiple students that come here to do interviews as an explanation for peoples’ resistance to speak to me:

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<sup>52</sup> A simple youtube search for BR Hills Soligas reveals a range of different videos of people walking around Soliga villages, talking to people and providing a commentary on their lives. One especially problematic video has a new-age guru describing the Soliga shifting cultivation practices, saying: “rather than converting them into modernity we have to go back to their lifestyle” (source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgVpilSIJHU>)

“In this village there’s nobody to give you any information.. People have shouted and sent many students away or closed their doors and gone inside the house. Here in this last house we are the only two who are willing to talk to strangers. People here are tired of answering questions... so many already came and asked, why should we say anything.. we talk about our lives and people write it down and nothing changes.. so what’s the point? They send college students here every year. We are tired. They come, we give information, and they get degrees and progress in their lives. But what do we get? Even people like you, who have good intentions, write the information down and leave, but there is no movement from that.

Sometimes people come and say we work for an NGO/govt, and in the hopes that something will change, people talk to them. But if they come saying they are students then people assume they are doing it for their projects, their future, so that they can move forward. We still have problems, nothing changes. Nowadays, if anyone comes, the villagers send them to me saying “go further go further”. So many people have shouted at the students and sent them off. Last month 53 people came. They stood outside my house and begged me saying “aunty aunty please”, so I felt bad and said come I’ll talk to you. But how can I say the same thing to 53 people?”

The fatigue of the over-researched was striking and made me feel both deeply sad and embarrassed to be one in a line of so many researchers in the region. And yet these stories that emerge from the field can contribute to understandings of the space in ways that may not be expected/perceived (Astuti, 2017; McGranahan, 2012). Dealing with both the unexpected and with positionality in the field site is part of the process, and yet one that is rarely discussed or acknowledged (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013). Being a younger woman in these village spaces means I am perceived (and responded to) in specific ways, that are determined by the structural and cultural make-up of the societies I am studying (Tarrant, 2014), and yet my relative position of privilege in India allows me to access many bureaucratic institutions that are obscured for people on the ground. Therefore, this interaction raises questions about the creation of knowledge (be it about forests and conservation or about the Soliga’s themselves), who gets to participate in it, and on what terms.

### Afternoon

After lunch we walked to a sleepy street right behind Lakshmi’s house to see if we could talk to anyone there. In the afternoon a few men were sitting in the shade of their

homes talking quietly. We asked if we could sit down, and I explained my research project to them, asking if I could interview them. An older man pointed to a man about 40 years old and said, ask him. The younger man, Manjunath, then told me he had been working with the local forest department resort for the last twenty years, one of the few Soligas to hold this position. I asked him some questions about conservation and forest change, and I was surprised to hear him talk about the numbers of tigers in the forest having gone up, the forest health having improved since the tiger reserve status, and the range of wildlife that one can see while driving through the forest. “Animal migration has increased now, it has been 30 years since we left the forest. Lantana is a problem but it will go away if we just leave it as it is.”

As he was talking, I noticed the other men looking uneasy, some even seemed to be losing interest. The older man suddenly interrupted him and said, “That is not conservation. I worked as a watcher for the forest department for fifty years, and I know that Soligas do more than the forest department. This land is ours”.

This moment was striking to me, as it seemed clear that the first interview was almost rehearsed, and that I was being viewed as an urban outsider who needed to be educated about the forest. I was being given the forest department narrative that Manjunath must have given to many non-Soliga outsiders over his time working in the resort. What does this mean for the community as they are told/learn over time to perform their role as ‘hosts’ to wealthy outsiders who come to the forest as an escape from crowded cities?

This story also revealed to me the differences between various levels of authority within the forest department. It mirrors Robbins’, (2009), argument that approaches to nature and society differ within the hierarchy of the forest department. Robbins shows how the lowest and highest in the hierarchy have more progressive views, while those in middle level occupations are entrenched within state views (Robbins, 2009). This diversity in opinions

was well reflected in the conversation above, not so much in terms of internalised politics, but more illustrating internalised notions of outsiders. The older man, employed in the lowest level in the forest department, had no qualms explaining the role of Soligas for conservation in BRT. Yet the younger man, employed in a middle level position, felt the need to defend the forest department to me.

### Evening

It was now past five in the evening and people were returning home from the forests and fields in which they had been working. Over the last few days I had not been able to speak to young men for a variety of reasons. Many are not around during the day and it is harder to approach young men since they are often shy of me, an outsider and a young woman. I told my field assistant that I was keen to talk to at least one young man before the end of the day.

We were walking by a lake, where many young men usually hang out in the evenings, sitting by the water or playing cricket. When I ask if we should talk to them, my field assistant warned against talking to large groups of young men because they would certainly be drinking and smoking, and it might not be safe for us, two girls, to approach them. I realised that this was another reason for not being able to talk to young men as a woman in the field site, since the spaces they occupy were largely inaccessible to me and my field assistant.

Alcoholism has unfortunately increased in the last few decades, especially among men, who are starting to drink at younger and younger ages. Although many of the women have tried to fight the rise of alcoholism by both appealing to village leaders and staging protests to ban it from being sold or brought into the tiger reserve, it still gets sneaked in, and alcoholism is continuing to affect the community. When asked about alcoholism, a young

man Madanna said that it is because of outsiders and tourists who want to party here that it was introduced to Soligas. It has taken root now, and even though it is banned the police don't regulate its sale, because even the leaders drink.

It was close to six PM when we met Kumara, a young man just back from his day at college. He agreed to talk to us and yet throughout the interview his responses were almost monosyllabic. Sensing his discomfort, I stopped the interview about ten minutes in and asked him if he had any questions for me. He paused for a minute, and then asked, "Why are you writing down what I say? Why is it useful? I have grown up seeing people like you do research for so many years, and write everything down, but nothing has changed. So what impact does your work have?"

I was both taken aback and quite glad that he had called me out and expressed his discomfort to me. I explained that research takes a long time to have impacts, aware even as I spoke that I was also trying to convince myself of my legitimacy in being there, asking people questions. I talked to him about youth unemployment across the country, and the pressures and changes that young people have to navigate in BRT and told him I want to understand how they might impact the future. My explanations seemed to break the ice, and he responded animatedly, saying that he too feels unemployment is a huge problem.

After our conversation ended I had a lot of food for thought. His last remarks stayed with me:

"I see that research helped us with forest rights and everything. But it is still frustrating to see people come and go for years and years, telling us they will try to do something, and nothing changes. We still might get arrested by the forest department and we still do not have better facilities or jobs".

As I sat in the field station drinking an evening cup of tea, my mind was lost in contemplating and rehashing all that the day had brought up both in terms of questions of my own positionality and of the various ways in which outsiders have interacted with Soligas in

BRT on a daily basis. What does it mean to engage in peoples' lives in ways that are also meaningful to them? How can we make people collaborators in our research? What would decolonizing our research mean (Alonso Bejarano, López Juárez, Mijangos García, & Goldstein, 2019; Smith, 2012)? How can we make people feel like they are knowledge creators and participants in our work, or that doing research can actually be beneficial to them?

## Conclusion and Reflections

Concerns of eviction and harassment are ongoing for thousands of forest dwelling communities across India who live within protected areas. Academics and activists alike have put forward and promoted narratives of coexistence as counter arguments to the idea that people do not belong in protected areas. The FRA is an excellent example of a tool for resistance, one that has been pushed and promoted to overcome conservation injustices. As powerful and important as these counter narratives are, however, there is ongoing everyday dispossession that characterises life in protected areas, even for those who have rights. Conservation policies have transformed ecologies and ways of being over decades, and therefore youth offer a powerful lens through which to unpack the emergent characteristics of protected areas and people's relationship to them. In this thesis I have shown the various ways in which Soliga youth lives play out in the everyday in tiger reserves.

In the articles above I have illustrated the 'vital conjuncture' of factors that impact, influence and are resisted by Soligas in BRT and STR, particularly youth. I have argued that Soligas who live within tiger reserves experience in-situ displacement. This experience of displacement is both accentuated and aided by overlapping and contradictory legal systems that create moments of legal ambiguity, and raise questions of access and loss of a sense of place. I showed that in-situ displacements impact community members in three overlapping yet distinct ways – subsistence, governance and everyday politics. In the first form, livelihoods and access to the forest have changed drastically with conservation policies, leading some Soligas to seasonally migrate to local towns for work. Others are able to stay within forest spaces and yet are increasingly bound by wage labour relations. Secondly, they experience displacement through a loss of ability to manage the forest even though they can still access them. Legal ambiguities are particularly problematic for community management, where unclear guidelines and uneven institutional powers limit the potential for local

communities to assert their rights. Finally, expressions of attachment to place and articulations of political positioning vis-à-vis the state have changed over years of alienation from the forests and in-situ displacement.

I also showed that in-situ displacement acts along with multiple other pushes and pulls to influence young people's lives in different ways. Caught between the needs of staying and leaving, young adults find themselves waiting for a future that might never arrive. I illustrated the various different factors that influence these pushes and pulls, including education, livelihoods and community attachments and expectations.

Through both of these articles I suggest that the FRA, while a revolutionary tool for ideological resistance, does not in fact do enough to assure young people a sense of self-determination. Legal ambiguities allow the state to continue to use its power in protected areas without needing to acknowledge rights-based policies, and in many ways this enables the waiting that young people experience. In order for us to rethink conservation and displacement, therefore, young people need to be given opportunities to strategically engage with the state in ways that represent the community's needs and allow them to challenge their ongoing displacement. My work highlights Soliga agency, in their constant negotiations and resistance to the world around them. By tracing the emergence of imposed categories of both forest conservation and tribes and adivasis, I hope to have illustrated the contested and constructed nature of conservation spaces in India today.

I contribute to literature on conservation and displacement with a focus on in-situ displacement, which provides a more nuanced understanding of the lives of communities within protected areas. I also address gaps in the literature by bringing attention to the concerns of youth, both as a useful lens to understand change and possibility, and as an important demographic that contributes to our understanding of the relationships between

communities and conservation. Finally, I also use the concept of waiting to show how it applies to contexts outside of peri-urban middle-class spaces to open up new avenues of analysis.

The limited work on youth in protected areas and my own findings have given me many areas of potential research. Comparative work that looks at different communities living within tiger reserves in different states would provide more insights into the workings of tiger conservation and the role of youth. Community conservation and participatory management are emerging as key concerns for a late-capitalist world. How will youth on the margins of capitalism navigate emerging social relations and engage with development and conservation discourses? In what ways can youth be empowered and given the time and space to formulate their own futures? These are questions that I am interested in exploring further.

We are living in unprecedented times. As you read this, youth activists across India are being arrested and harassed in jail for speaking up against the injustices of the government and their followers. For me, writing about youth and dispossession at a time when India is reeling from the rise of fascism and right-wing fundamentalism has been difficult and at times disillusioning. I have felt increasingly disconnected from the lives of people in my home, and yet these strange times have also given me many more directions of enquiry for future work along the lines of experiences of national politics among young adivasis, particularly those who are seemingly less involved in the politics of their own communities.

Experiences of in-situ displacement and waiting are not likely to change any time soon. With India's new citizenship laws (the National Register of Citizens and the

Citizenship Amendment Act), thousands of adivasis might be rendered stateless,<sup>53</sup> and experience a simultaneous loss of land, livelihoods and forests and of statehood. As illustrated in the introduction, adivasis have constantly experienced forms of colonization and imposed statehood. The FRA is a powerful piece of legislature and yet a true decolonization of forest lands needs to go beyond the laws. It needs to give primacy to the everyday politics of life in protected areas, to the struggles of young adults trying to make their way through a complex world.

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<sup>53</sup> See this article for an excellent analysis of the law's impact on the Adivasi community:  
[https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9773:citizenship-amendment-act-cao-and-the-tribal-community-adivasi&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132](https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9773:citizenship-amendment-act-cao-and-the-tribal-community-adivasi&catid=119:feature&Itemid=132)

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Maps: McShane, Caitlin (2019). Credits to Esri, Maxar, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS, USDA FSA, USGS, AeroGRID, IGN, IGP, and the GIS User Community.

## APPENDIX

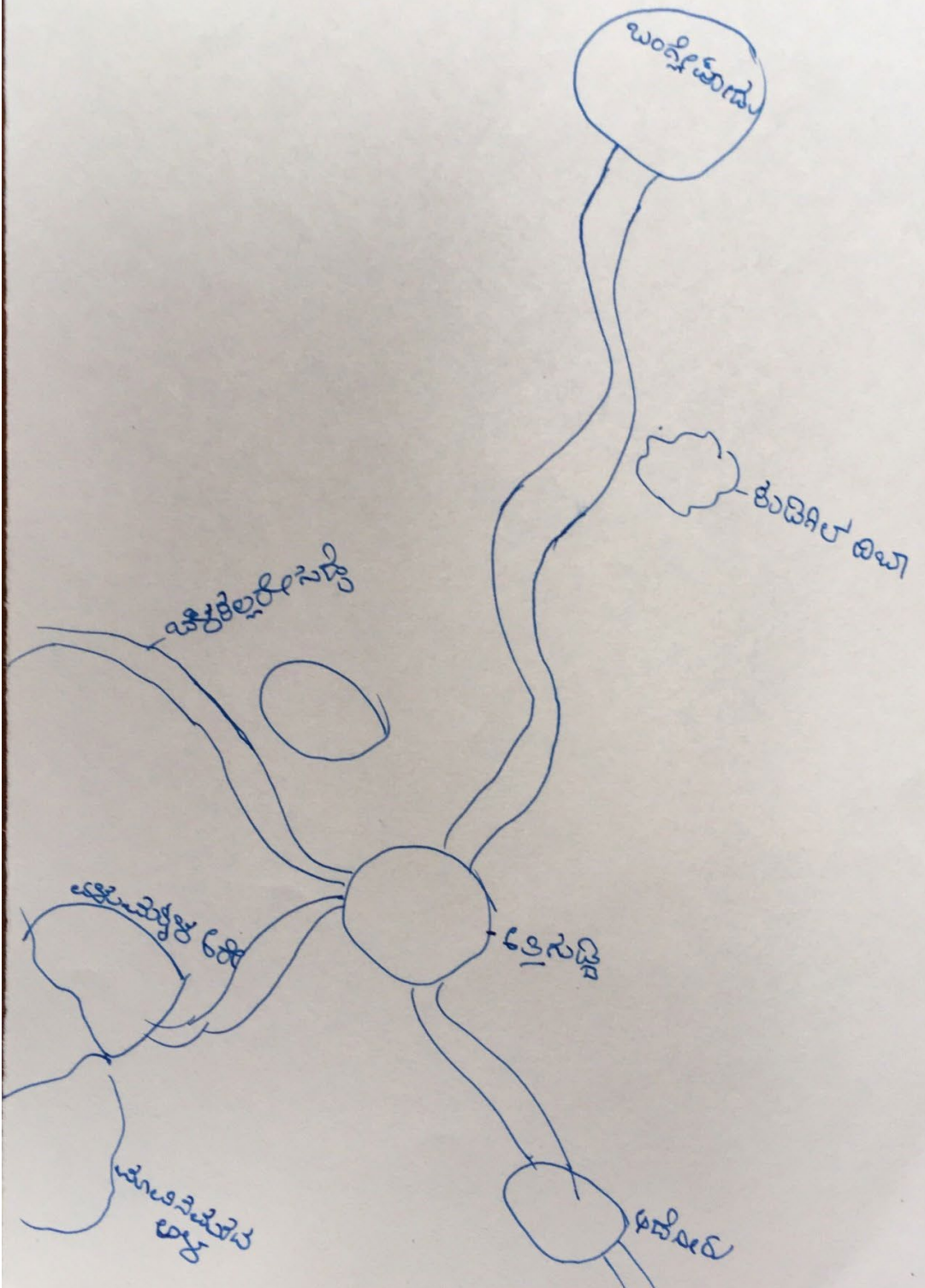
The Maps below were part of a mental mapping exercise where Soligas of all ages drew maps of their villages and surrounding forests. They were not given instructions or requested to draw anything in particular, so each one is unique. Names and personal details have been redacted by the author where possible.

The Maps are organized as follows:

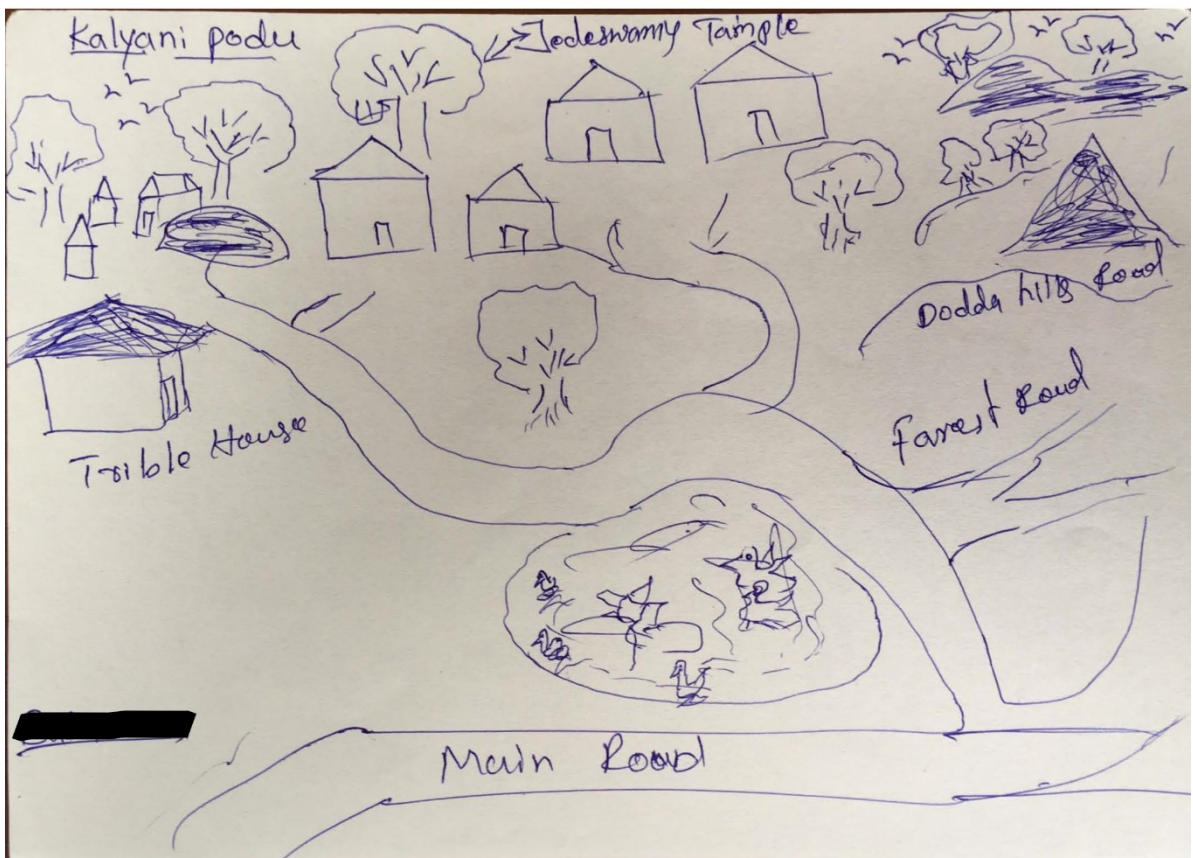
1. Map of Bangale Podu and forest behind it
2. Map of Bangale Podu and forest behind it
3. Map of Kalyani Podu, temple and lake
4. Map of Yerakanagadde Colony and surroundings
5. Map of Kalyani Podu and main roads
6. Map of Betta area
7. Map of Kalyani Podu, lake
8. Map of Betta area
9. Map of Betta area and surrounding forest and game roads.
10. Map of Kulluru village with fields
11. Map showing the distribution of Soliga villages along the Karnataka – Tamil Nadu border
12. Map of Yerakanagadde Colony
13. Map of the main road from Purani to Betta area



~~Handwritten text~~ (Sonde, soppu forest near the podu)







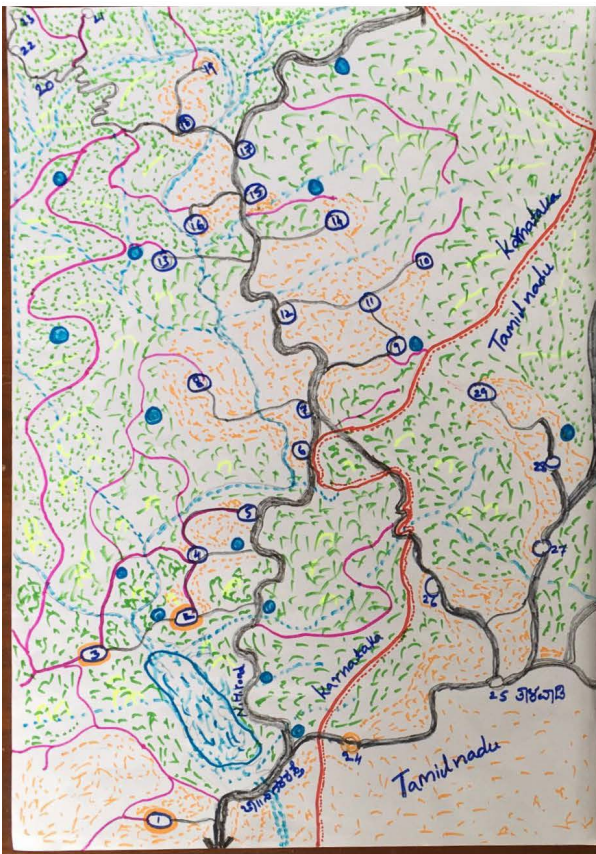












|                       |                            |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| → ముఖ్య రహదారి (N.H)  | → కురుగాకలు కరణ్య ప్రదేశం. |
| → రైల్వే              | → కృష్ణా నది               |
| → నేలమరకూడి (భూస్థలం) | → 20, రంజిత్ - కృష్ణా నది  |
| → ఇతర రహదారి          | → కేళిగలు                  |
| → దాటిన రహదారి        | → డ్యాం (సుపాం ఎకవలతయ)     |
| → గుట్టలు             | → ఇతర గుట్టలు              |

|                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. బొట్టుగుళ్ళిపాడు ✓ ✗ | 16. మునారాళ్ళ కాలువ ✓ ✗ |
| 2. కుళ్ళూరు ✓ ✗         | 17. పులివెందుల గోల్ ✓ ✗ |
| 3. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗        | 18. పులివెందుల ✓ ✗      |
| 4. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗        | 19. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗       |
| 5. దొడ్డిమొదలపాడు ✓ ✗   | 20. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗       |
| 6. గోల్ మొదలపాడు ✓ ✗    | 21. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗       |
| 7. కుంభాచలం ✓ ✗         | 22. కాడిగోల్ ✓ ✗        |
| 8. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗        | 23. కృష్ణా నది ✓ ✗      |
| 9. ముకుందపాడు ✓ ✗       | 24. రామపాడు ✓ ✗         |
| 10. విత్తూరుపాడు ✓ ✗    | 25. కృష్ణా నది ✓ ✗      |
| 11. కృష్ణా నది ✓ ✗      | 26. కుంభాచలం ✓ ✗        |
| 12. కృష్ణా నది ✓ ✗      | 27. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗       |
| 13. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗       | 28. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗       |
| 14. కృష్ణా నది ✓ ✗      | 29. ఇందిరపాడు ✓ ✗       |
| 15. కృష్ణా నది ✓ ✗      |                         |



ಪುರಾಣ ಪೂಜೆ .

