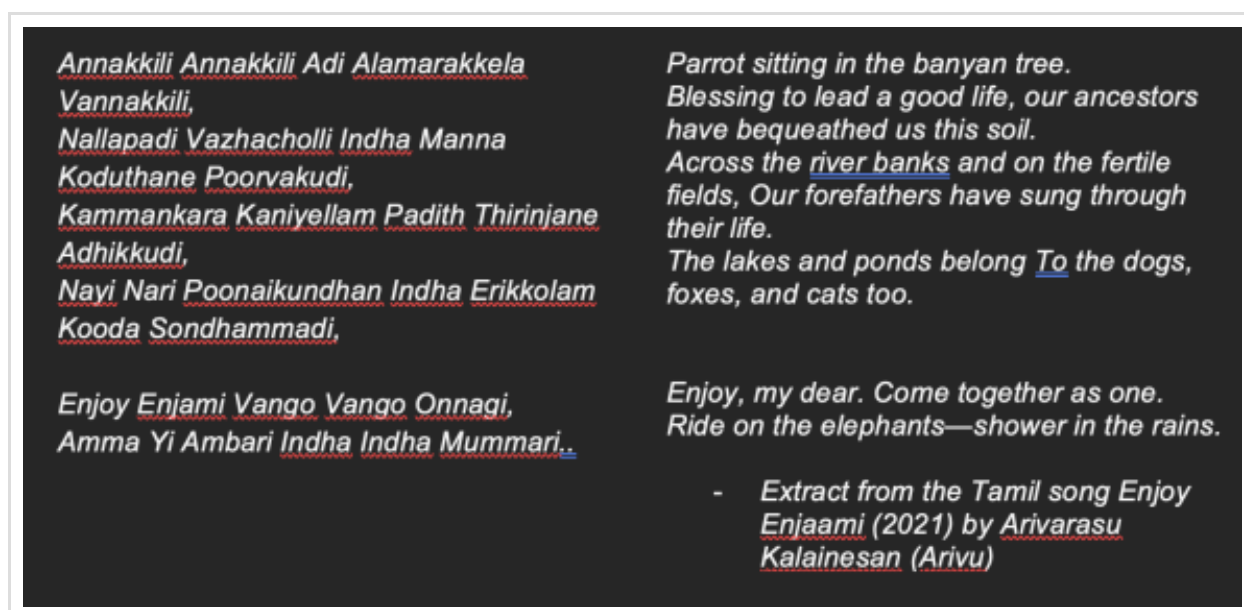


## The Biligirirangan Hills: Tracing history of the land, the people and the forests

Posted on **January 15, 2022** by [daktre](#)

*A shorter edited version of this article appeared in JLRExplore in two parts (read [part 1](#) and [part 2](#)). Thanks to Dr. Santosh Kumar (IFS) & S Karthikeyan for help and inputs.*



- The epic song and lyrics of Enjoy Enjaami communicate the intersections of slave labour and alienation from one's land and the connectedness between a People and their land very well. [Listen here](https://youtu.be/eYq7WapuDLU)<https://youtu.be/eYq7WapuDLU>

Nestled among the undulating landscapes of the Byloor range of what is today the Biligirirangaswamy Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve is the impossibly named Aaneyerada Betta (in Kannada the hill that (even) the elephant wouldn't climb). During a recent bird survey led by S Subramanya, some of us birders retraced the probable routes that Salim Ali, sometimes referred to as the *Birdman of India* took when he surveyed this area (more on this later). As we watched Malabar Parakeets screeching across the low hill forests at the foothills on one side, and mixed flocks often with Orange Minivets and Yellow-browed Bulbuls, we watched with intrigue Rose-ringed Parakeets and White-browed on the other side. The majestic wet-zone and shola-covered hill ranges in the south-eastern parts of BRT Tiger Reserve drop rapidly here to merge with dry deciduous and scrub forests within a very small area

allowing co-occurrence of birds that rarely overlap. Such is the intrigue of BR Hills where floristic and faunistic elements of what are often considered distinct ecological regions are found together. Not very far away from where we stood were wet forests at higher elevations, home to Rufous-bellied Hawk-eagles, Indian Blackbirds, Black Bulbuls, Fairy Bluebirds and Nilgiri Flycatchers. As we stared upwards towards the higher elevations beyond Aaneyerada Betta, I remember thinking of the Nilgiri Wood-Pigeons and Bronzed and Racket-tailed Drongos that we were sure to meet as we proceeded upwards. That said, previous efforts to locate other wet-zone birds such as the Broad-tailed Grassbird found easily a bit further west in the Brahmagiris or the Malabar Trogon, that is well seen south of BR Hills at Mudhumalai has always puzzled me.

If you trace the local legend on the name of the hill, elders say that it is one hill that even the Elephant would not climb due to the steep inclines and slippery grass-rock terrain. An elderly *Tammadi* (a Solega priest) that I met during my work there, confirms the origin of the name. However, change a small vowel sound in the name of the hill from *aa* to *ee* and the meaning shifts to convey the opposite: the hill that the Elephant climbed! Indeed, many Solega youth that I meet are sometimes confused if the name is in fact Aanyerida Betta. As is often the case with lore and tradition, the shifting sands of time make the origins fuzzy. Did the name capture the inability of the Elephant to make it atop here? Or is the recent sighting of elephants possibly changing the name? And as many younger Solega suspect, is this a sign of the changing climate patterns that they too notice, which creates micro-ecological changes in these eco-sensitive biodiversity-rich areas? The answers to such intriguing questions are mired in oral history, traditional knowledge and its interface with modern science and forest management. For this year's wildlife week, let us dive into how the history of these hills and the inter-generational memories of the Solega intertwine to possibly help us revere and protect the social and ecological heritage of these hills.



— Photo of a hill bearing shola-like features near Aaneyerada Betta as seen from the road nearing the low-land forests around Mavathur in BRT Tiger Reserve. Photo by Prashanth N S

## Of lost times and oral histories

Our view of history often boils down to tracing the first appearance of a place or an event in written form, and for post-colonial societies such as ours, this invariably comes down to history in English, written typically by an Englishman (almost always a man, a sign of their times!). Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's 1807 expedition which passed through BR Hills is most often cited as the first historical record of the region and its "shy" Solega inhabitants (his characterisation). History of *peopling* of this landscape is yet to be deciphered during the pre-colonial times. While the later colonial administration paid great attention to the characterisation of the flora and fauna, given their extractive economic interests, there was little effort at documenting local oral histories. The presence of dolmens in these hills dated possibly to the early history of settled human beings testifies to the early peopling of these landscapes. Dolmens are structures made by arranging large to small stones in various configurations, typically erecting them to create a burial chamber (cist), with or without an outer circular arrangement of stones. What is fascinating is the widespread finding of [these megalithic burial site traditions from Scandinavia and western Europe to the dense forests of the Anamalais, Nilgiris and BR Hills](#). It is very likely that many of these human settlements could date as far back as 3000-4000 BC (if not older). Only a systematic survey, mapping and archaeological preservation of these sites will tell us more about the people who built these. Such dolmens are known in several sites in this region; see for example a treatise on the Nilgiri dolmens by William Noble in 1976, along with a discussion on the plausibility of these being the ancestors of the Adivasi communities there, the *Toda*, *Kota*, *Badaga*, *Kurumba* and the *Irula*, or the [description of megalithic burial sites in south India by V D Krishnaswami](#). In the case of BR Hills, systematic archaeological and scholarly work in the public domain does not yet tell us the relationship between these sites and the current Adivasi inhabitants of the hills. Possibly a lot of answers are hidden within the diminishing oral knowledge transmitted across generations among the *Solega*.

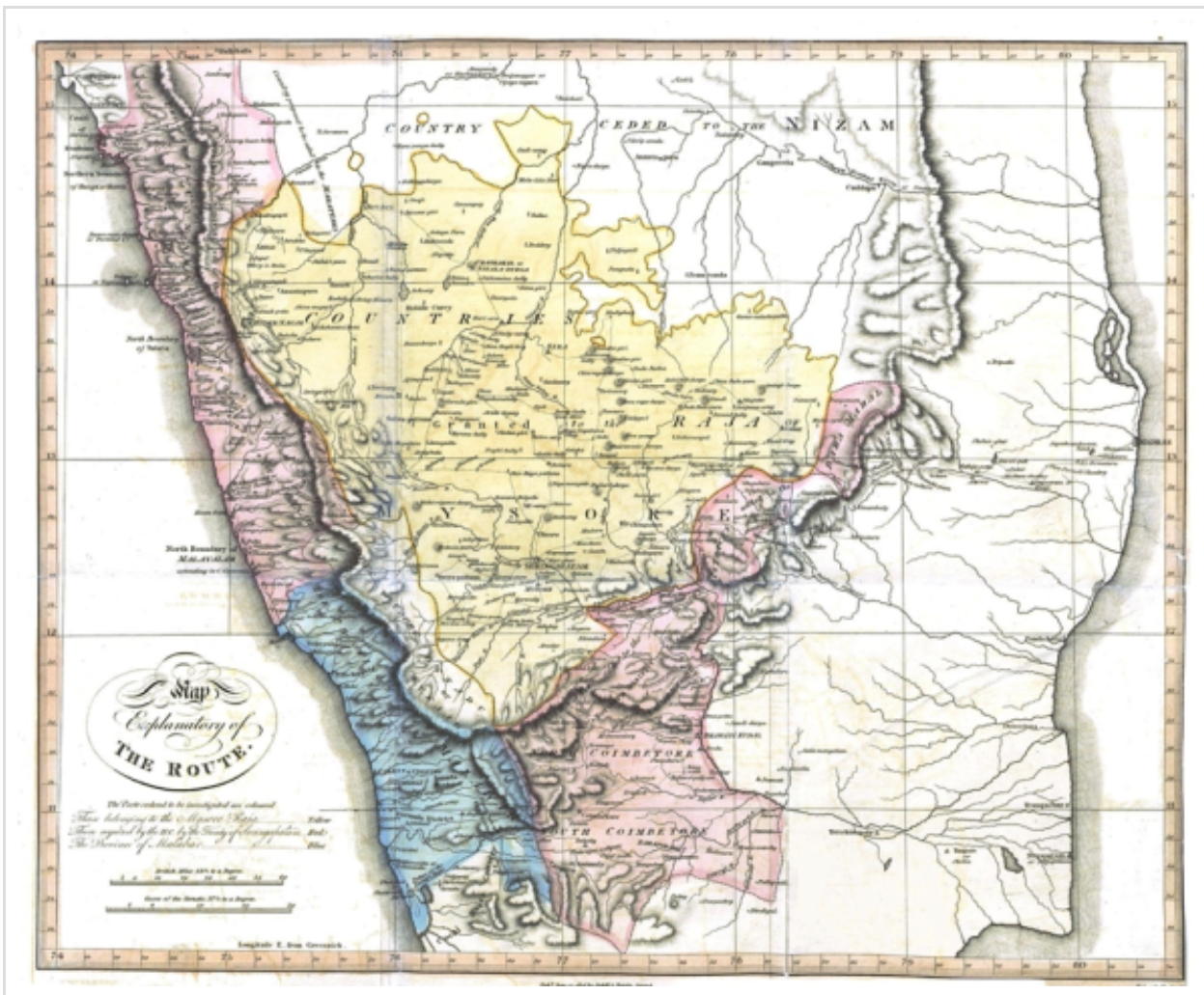


- A Dolmen discovered locally reorganised for public display at Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra campus, BR Hills; Photo by Kalyani Nadgir

## White man arrives: roads, royalty, extraction and disease

Memorialising, cataloging and documenting in written form is a particular type of scholarship that came to prominence only within the last few centuries. For centuries before that human societies have transmitted oral knowledge, and wisdom from one generation to another through song, lore and tradition. Several *tacit knowledge* forms, knowledge and scholarship that cannot be codified in formal language, in the domains of wisdom, experience, insight and intuition were vast and enabled life in forests for the *Solega*. This was even before local kings and feudal lords (from Mysore and Coimbatore) or colonial planters and foresters. For the “outsiders” and “settlers” who came in awe of the BR Hills ever since Buchanan’s fabled *Journey through Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, the tacit knowledge of the *Solega* was possibly the only way to survive in these hills and thick forests.

Across the world, colonial history is replete with mere footnote references to unnamed “locals” whose help was critical to the wider extractive enterprise for timber and other forest products that began with the setting up of the colonial forestry activities under British rule. Such support of the “locals” , possibly facilitated the scholarship of English and particularly Scottish doctors, naturalists, and colonial officials, who made remarkable strides in carefully documenting the local flora and fauna. Standing out among these is the legacy of the Morrises, the father and son Morris and their extended family which made BR Hills their home since the earlier Morris arrived in BR Hills in the mid 1880s. See S Subramanya’s excellent weaving together of this story across three generations [in this article on JLRExplore](#). As a doctor-birder in BR Hills when I came in early 2000s, many *Solega* elders from the Bedaguli settlement (near the estate that the Morrises lived in) reminisced about the strange ways and means of the *white man* (*Bilibattheyavaru* – in Kannada people with white clothes). Halage Gowda (now deceased), whom I befriended, remembered as a young boy – working odd jobs at their estate – their eating of food with “belli kaddi” (possibly silverware cutlery) and the “sticky food” that when offered to him stuck to his mouth. He went on to say that many of his kin never fancied their food much. The colonial characterisation of the Adivasi as “primitive” only belies a colonial gaze; the Adivasi narrative on the white man which is possibly disappearing and yet to be written might in fact illustrate the intrigue, wonder and perhaps some ridicule of their ways.



— Map showing the regions covered by Francis Buchanan-Hamilton. Map from volume 2 of Journey through Mysore, Canara and Malabar (1807) from Wikimedia Commons

During my years in medical college at Mysore in the late 90s a (then) popular book by the Anglo-Indian naturalist and an early contributor to post-independence wildlife conservation in India, Edward Pritchard Gee (EP Gee) titled *Wildlife of India* describes his first stop-over at BR Hills in his journey across Indian forests. He drove here to meet Morris at his bungalow hidden away in the folds of the BR Hills shola forest and coffee estates mosaic at Honnametti. E P Gee's book with a foreword by the (then) Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru is known to have influenced an entire generation of wildlife conservationists. Much earlier BR Hills entered global wildlife and natural-history chronicles in the late 19th century when the British naturalist George P Sanderson, who worked in the colonial public works department arrived at what he called *Morlay*. Sanderson's *Morlay* was the outskirts of today's Chamarajanagar town. Standing there today, one can see Jadeyana Betta and Yediyalli betta that lie near the Kyathadevara Gudi (K Gudi), a popular tourist destination which houses an elephant camp, an old guest house now renovated and maintained by the Forest department and the Jungle Lodges & Resorts, which stands at the site of the hunting lodge of the then Maharaja of Mysore. In fact, the *Lagerstomia speciosa*, that stands tall even to this day outside K Gudi is supposed to have been planted by the then prince of Mysore. Systematic searching of early documents by Santosh Kumar, currently the field director of BRT Tiger Reserve reveal that the (then) Mysore kingdom was commissioning a road connecting Jothigaudanapura to the Punjur-Bedaguli road in 1897 for the purposes of transporting timber, primarily Teak (*Tectona grandis*), Matti (*Terminalia spp.*), Honne (*Pterocarpus*) and Beete (*Dalbergia*). Sanderson's task at hand was also to capture elephants. This was both for the purposes of domesticating them as well as for protecting several farmers who had begun complaining about crop-raids. The contested human-elephant interface has a long history ever since the expansion of agriculture into forested areas.



- Photo of a bull Elephant hunted at BR Hills possibly in early 1920s with unnamed Solega assistants who might have been crucial in this hunt. R.C. Morris (left) and hunter-naturalist Arthur S. Vernay (centre, seated on the elephant's leg) also seen; the elephant is now supposedly at the American Museum of Natural History

Sanderson's legacy today is his *discovery* of the *kheddah* system of capturing wild elephants which made him to set up an [Elephant-catching establishment/department](#) within the colonial administration at Bengal's Chittagong hill tracts where he is supposed to have put his experience gained in Mysore and BR Hills into practice. Some of his early experiments and perfection of the technique happened around the Boodipadaga area at the south eastern foothills of BR Hills. Colonial legacies often overstate realities identifying a single white man with achievements. It is unlikely that his technique was entirely an idea of his own. Leveraging tacit knowledge from experience and wisdom of several unnamed *Solega* likely gave form to his ideas, which of course he elegantly captured in one of his books, *Thirteen years among wild beasts of India* published in 1879. Indeed, it has been suggested that Rudyard Kipling fashioned the [Jungle Book story's character Petersen Sahib](#), "the man who caught all the elephants for the [Government of India](#)" after him. Sanderson's death at the age of 40 from pulmonary tuberculosis was not uncommon at the time even among the colonial privileged and gives us an insight into the possibly even more devastating effects it might have then had on more socio-economically deprived communities around him. A life cut short by tuberculosis, his gravestone today inconspicuously merges with the landscape at the outskirts of Chamarajanagar town.



- Sanderson's grave inconspicuously stands amidst cattle and fields near Doddamolay village at the outskirts of Chamarajanagar town. Photo by Kalyan Varma in 2012

Sanderson's assessment of the then health around Chamarajanagar is staggering. He says "Morlay is not however a healthy place, and my people and myself have suffered from fever at various times....during our second year, we lost about 200 per *mille* (per thousand) per annum among servants (*sic!*), which is about five times the death rate in England". Reading his books prompted wildlife photographer Kalyan Varma on an expedition around villages outside Chamarajanagar town in 2012 to find out the place of his burial and possible memorialisation of his presence. A tombstone has survived the times and according to Kalyan, there were efforts from his family (in the United Kingdom) to restore the location. It turns out that Sanderson's Morlay is a corruption of Doddamolay village, where his grave overlooks the same large water-body that he then described as being contiguous with the forests at the foothills of BR Hills with views of K Gudi forests from below. Today's forest boundary has shifted quite some distance from this location; cattle and farms take the place of elephants and deer.

The story of the colonial overlords bringing new diseases into far-away and remote areas is much better documented in the *new world* where this relationship between the *natives* and the *settlers* was stark and contested. Jared Diamond's book *Guns, Germs and Steel* is a fascinating read on how disease-carrying germs and pathogens might have been stowaways on the colonial armies which brought as much devastation as the colonial enterprise itself. Some of Sanderson's descriptions of Chamarajanagar at the time as well as British gazetteer documentation of deaths from the flu pandemic in the early part of the 20th century give a local facet to this global narrative.

### **Post-independence science and conservation**

Post-independence marked the reclaiming of the forests and its administration by the Indian State. After the Wildlife

Protection Act (1972) came into force, BR Hills gradually went from being a reserve forest, to a wildlife sanctuary and finally in 2011 was notified as a tiger reserve. Perhaps one of the first well documented expeditions to catalogue its flora and fauna was undertaken by Salim Ali, as part of the *Birds of Mysore* survey (November 1939 to February 1940). Ali, independent India's first well-known ornithologist, visited over 75 locations spread across nine districts in Karnataka and three districts in Tamil Nadu, including multiple locations in BR Hills. The Mysore Bird Survey possibly redefined the ornithology of the then Princely State of Mysore (today's southern Karnataka). A fitting tribute to this effort was spearheaded by entomologist & ornithologist, S Subramanya when he surveyed locations on the same dates as Ali's team and visited the same very localities after 78 years, for an assessment of changes in habitat conditions and the consequent bird patterns. Being fortunate to join this team [tracing Ali's footsteps in the BR Hills leg of the survey](#) along with L Shyamal, Samira Agnihotri & S Subramanya was a fascinating peek into the birdlife of BR Hills.



- Team which retraced the Mysore Bird Survey locations at Honnametti. Photo by a local staff member for S Subramanya. [Read more on this here](#)

In 1997, S Karthikeyan and J N Prasad conducted a faunal survey of BR Hills where they documented the birds as well as various mammals in the hills. Extensive work on bird vocalisations by Samira and her *Solega* collaborators continues, particularly focusing on the spectacular Racket-tailed Drongo, whose veritable mimicry of other bird calls is a window into vocalisations and social behaviour among birds. Outside of birds, the naming of a frog that was collected at few locations in BR Hills after the *Solega* people, *Microhyla sholigari* was also an interesting development. At the time of description, this Microhylid frog was thought to be a rare frog limited only to BR Hills. But careful and extensive documentation of many *Microhyla* frogs by ecologists have [shown them to be much more widespread](#). Nonetheless the species name commemorating the *Solega* people, who possibly knew of the frog much before it was described in English for posterity continues to be apt.



— Adult *Microhyla sholigari* shot in Bisle ghat. Photo by K S Seshadri from Wikimedia Commons

The Kollegal Ground Gecko variously called Leopard Gecko and Spotted Gecko, another reptile that is named after parts of forests occurring in BR Hills is possibly more extensive in peninsular India. Described in 1870 by Richard Henry Beddomme, a British military officer and naturalist based on just one specimen collected in BR Hills, very little was known about its distribution and taxonomy [till recently](#). Some interesting discoveries more recently in 2009 was when along with several other colleagues, [we reported the occurrence of the Madras Tree Shrew \*Anathana ellioti\*](#) from multiple locations in BR Hills. There have been several sightings of this species and interesting interactions recently documented of this species with Jungle Babblers. Interestingly such mixed foraging associations between tree shrews and birds has also been described in other parts including in S Karthikeyan's work on Tree Shrews from Yercad and [Meera Anna Oommen and Karthik Shanker's fascinating research on the interactions](#) between tree shrews and racket-tailed drongos and Sparrowhawks in Great Nicobar Island. When we first recorded the Tree Shrew in BR Hills, it was the first report of its occurrence from Karnataka, albeit such administrative boundaries are drawn over otherwise contiguous ecological boundaries.



- Kollegal Ground Gecko (*Cyrtodactylus collegalensis*) described in 1870 from a single specimen collected in BR Hills. Photo by M D Madhusudan from Wikimedia Commons of an individual in Melukammanahalli in Bandipur



- This one for example was seen by Kishore P in BR Hills interacting with a bunch of Jungle Babblers. See [full record on iNaturalist](#)

### **The curious case of absent or visiting(?) Great Hornbills**

Perhaps the most intriguing bio-geo-historical puzzle that I grappled with about BR Hills was to do with the mixed western and eastern ghats avifauna at BR Hills. During my stint as a doctor here in early 2000s, I was joined by fellow doctor-birder Umesh Srinivasan (now an ecologist at the Indian Institute of Science) in our quest to

understand the apparent lack of some wet-zone western ghats species. [We examined the current bird occurrence patterns in BR Hills in relation to known theories of how avifauna might have dispersed](#) and/or locally speciated within peninsular India. In the process of researching this, we read several fascinating theories in the domains of biogeography and speciation. These theories proposed hypothetical pathways for the flora and faunal dispersal across the Indian plate since its collision and its *tussle* with the Asian plate.



- The Black Eagle, a spectacular peninsular Indian eagle, breeds in tall cliffs in the outer ranges of BR Hills. It is fondly called ‘darkness of the wet forest’ by the Solega. This individual photographed by Kalyan Varma at the BRT cliff & used to nest there...until recently when the road expanded to approach the tree the couple used to nest in. (See [on Wikimedia Commons](#))

Our work at the time as amateur-birders possibly fed into multiple other ongoing inquiries into biogeographical aspects across specific barriers. A much deeper and extensive scientific inquiry into avifaunal patterns in relation to bio-geographical barriers is pursued today by [Sky Island Lab](#). Along with birds that were found, we were particularly interested in birds *that were not found* here, especially the wet-zone hornbills. To our pleasant surprise recently, [Samira and her collaborators reported Great Hornbill sightings in the southern slopes of BR Hills](#). In her words, “*those blue hills are not too far as the hornbill flies*”. Although not frequent or widespread, visiting Great Hornbills and their possible breeding at these hills further deepens the need for us to understand historical sources and current ecological changes. Great Hornbills, for those who have seen them, are unmistakable. Although Samira traces a local Solega name for this species through her interactions, extensive natural-history publications by Morris does not mention its occurrence here. Could these Hornbills be relatively recent visitors or is there a historically infrequently used flyway that has always existed? These are some questions that can only be answered through careful observation and partnerships with local communities. The shared floral elements between core western ghats and the eastern ghats and a mosaic pattern of flora and fauna elements between these two ecological zones indicates the wider historical and ecological importance of BR Hills.

## Tiger haven and rightfully so

As the recent history of BR Hills shows, colonial scientists and writers are now replaced by more Indian and local icons. This can only bear well for Indian science and wildlife conservation. Yet, there is still a wide gap in terms of partnering respectfully and more closely with local communities. For decades after independence too, wildlife conservation had tended to be heavily borrowing from the colonial enterprise and had been criticised as being rather exclusive of local communities. In that background, the passing of the Forest Rights Act in 2006 sought to mitigate this historical injustice. BR Hills in recent history has also made news for its pioneering efforts at securing forest rights much earlier than in many other locations. Efforts by the *Solega* leadership coupled with long relationships with civil society and with forest department and administration enabled a slow but steady process of providing forest rights that the *Solega* were entitled to. The role of an educated and empowered *Solega* youth in this enterprise including people such as C Made Gowda, a researcher and a *Solega* leader, and M Jade Gowda a Professor of forestry, has been extensively documented. Other icons include Jallesiddamma (a Rajyotsava awardee who lived in Yerakanagadde *podu*), as wonderful a naturalist as a midwife who taught me so much about the wildlife lore of the *Solega* and so many other women who've stood strong through various struggles. In the last decade, many of the *Solega podus* have been investing in forming forest rights committees which seek to be the torch bearers of community engaged conservation in the years to come. When researchers from ATREE partnered with local communities to create maps of their social and cultural sites it was indeed a way of reinstating the historical relationship between the people and their forests. As a community that has lived through these historical eras that we trace above, it is perhaps impossible to conceptualise the history of these hills and forests without viewing aspects of these through their lore, lens and worldviews. As we celebrate this year's wildlife week, let us also celebrate the importance of oral history, local traditions along with the formal knowledge and scholarship, which together help us protect and preserve the socio-ecological heritage of places like BR Hills.



- Many *Solega* settlements have begun to receive their forest rights over the last decade. Many adivasi settlements elsewhere continue to struggle to secure their rights. Photo by Shrenik Sadalgi at BR Hills

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