ENVIRONMENT

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When We Speak of Human-Wildlife Conflicts, Who Are the Humans?

It would do all of us concerned about the future of forests much good to pay more attention to communities who do not subscribe to a worldview that isolates people from their surroundings in the first place.

At Karemala village. Credit: Nithila Baskaran

Nithila Baskaran, Shiv Ganesh and Kashika Sharma

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A few weeks ago, after the forest fires that ravaged at least 10,000 acres of forest in and around Bandipur in February, we were talking with an Adivasi woman named Bommamma. She lives in a resettlement colony there, and spoke with us at length about how she viewed the place of her community in the forest. “When I’m walking in a forest and I see an elephant, I don’t feel any fear. In fact, even when it comes straight towards me, I don’t feel any fear.”

Her son Manba interrupted: “When we look straight at the elephant, we can see what mood it is in.” Bommamma continued: “I don’t feel any fear from it even when it is close, because when I look at it, we both know that it needs to go its way and I need to go my way.”

“Are there any animals you fear?” one of us asked. Bommi, Manba’s

mother-in-law laughed. “The only animals we fear are human beings.”

The many conversations we have had with Adivasi groups in the area, especially with highly vulnerable communities like the Jenu Kuruba and Betta Kuruba, have underscored the deep, unique, holistic and organic connection they have with the forest and their suspicion of society outside. It is clear that Jenu Kuruba see themselves primarily as part of a greater unity of existence: the forest as an all-encompassing space and force from which they, like other forest species, are descended.

Several people have described their relationship with the forest to us as symbiotic, based on mutual need, saying such things as “we save the forest, and the forest saves us.” And their descriptions of their relationship with animals emphasised coexistence. For example, Mada, a Jenu Kuruba man, said, “We live with animals; we exist with them; that is part of our life.”

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This is perhaps why they view animals as having, at the least, an equivalent place to humans in the larger scheme of things: “They have their needs just as we have ours.” Some of their deities are named after animals. For example, Handiattayya is depicted as a wild boar, and Karadiattayya as a bear.

The central place of the forest in the Adivasi’s general life explains why several people we interacted with were both aggrieved and disbelieving that a few Adivasis had been arrested for allegedly starting the Bandipur fire. “People are blaming us for the fires, but we know we would be the very last ones to set fire to our forest,” one man, Gurumalla, told us. “Our life is good only when the forest is safe. We don’t have a life outside the forest; everything to eat, drink and be healthy is in the forest.”

This regard and reverence is also why it’s no surprise that none of the 40+ people we spoke to in five villages see their relationship with animals in

terms of conflict. Even those who had lost up to 75% of their crops to elephants and wild boar were accepting of the loss; more to the point, they did not see it as a loss. According to Shivamma, “We don’t have a problem with animals; in fact, we expect them to be there.”

Manba and family. Credit: Nithila Baskaran

Another woman named Belamma said, “We don’t face any problems from wild animals. After all, they live for their stomach – and we also live for our stomach.”

None of these people had applied for government compensation for crop damage by animals. For one, they see engaging with a clientelist bureaucracy as a futile endeavour, compounded by their own lack of power, literacy and negotiating skills. Some were also reluctant to spend time applying for compensation because of the concomitant loss of daily wages.

Moreover, most of them weren't even likely to frame crop damage as a big loss, but perhaps more subtly, their unwillingness to express their relationships with animals as a problem also indicates that agriculture as an occupation was not integral for them. Thus, they were less likely to understand or frame animal incursions into agricultural land as a form of conflict, economic loss or risk to life, at least as the bureaucracy defines it.

This in turn implies that the term 'human-animal conflict' is more suited with a view of environmental management that separates humans from their surroundings in the first place. In India, it is commonly associated with a wildlife-first approach propounded by groups that are often urban and elitist, and disconnected from the communities that have lived in and around forests in India for millennia.

We would also argue that wildlife-first 'fortress conservation' policies are more susceptible to be hijacked by private interests to create tourist enclaves instead of preserving them as the public commons that all of us need to care for. More insidiously, such Conservation policies can also provide implicit justification for overdevelopment and exploitation anywhere that is not designated a forest and contributing to degradation.

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The idea of pristine, people-free forests is not just an elitist fantasy that is untenable in an era where the pressure on land and resources is enormous. It is also an ineffective way to manage the environment because it excludes the very people who know most about how vulnerable forests can be nourished and protected. A growing body of research around the world has demonstrated that policies that try to create inviolate forests and zones are simply not likely to have much success.

India's forests have never been devoid of people and people-first policies, especially those that involve Adivasis as guardians, are more likely to result in good environmental management than separatist policies. There are already many examples of such successes, such as in the BR Hills in Karnataka and in the Doyang reservoir in Nagaland.

In sum, we must be wary of encounters with animals being pitched as conflicts because that could just be the first step to further removing indigenous people from their forested lands. It would do all of us concerned about the future of forests much good to pay more attention to communities who do not subscribe to a worldview that isolates people from their surroundings in the first place.

Nithila Baskaran lives and works in the villages around Bandipur National Park. She started the Vanam Foundation, an organisation that focuses on education and works with Adivasi communities. Shiv Ganesh is a professor at the University of Texas at Austin who studies and writes about communication and collective action in various parts of the world including India, New Zealand, Sweden and the US. Kashika Sharma has a MSc in ecology and environmental science, and has studied human-animal conflict in the villages around Bandipur.

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