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Mongabay Series: Beyond Protected Areas, Indigenous Knowledge, The Indian Forest Story

Including indigenous perspectives for equitable forest management

by Arathi Menon on 27 October 2023

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- *The indigenous peoples' engagements with forests are based on respect, responsibility, trust and relationships whereas the modern, post-colonial protected areas approach sees forests as extractable resources, a new study finds.*
- *Despite the indigenous communities exhibiting great stewardship in land use and management that sustained the global land base for centuries, the colonial and post-colonial land management practices exclude the adivasi's experience.*
- *Researchers believe that including indigenous perspectives can contribute to more equitable land management and strengthen collaborative governance that promotes human rights and biodiversity conservation objectives.*

Conversation

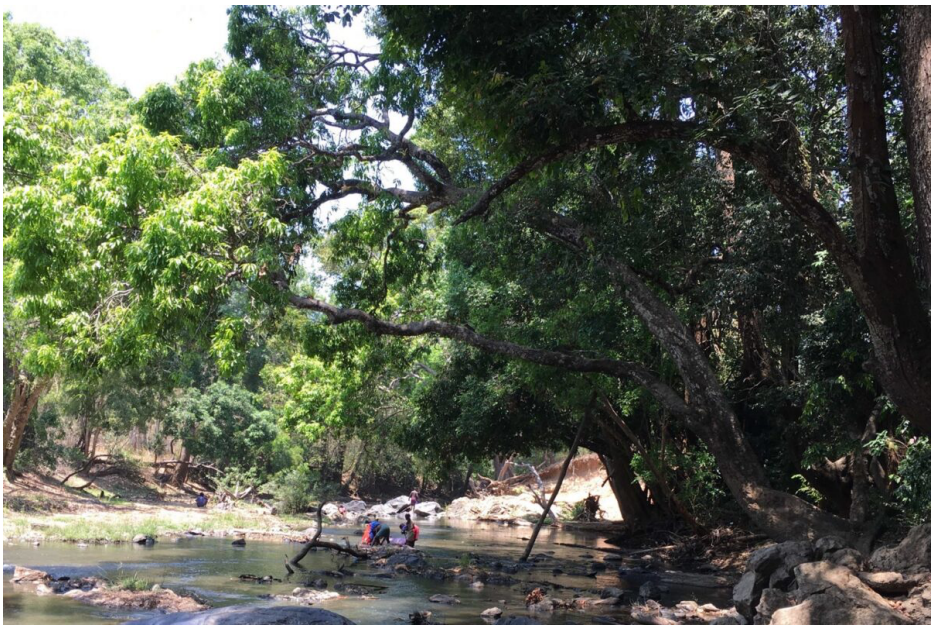
What does a forest mean to the forest-dwelling adivasi communities in India? Do they see forest ecosystems the way those outside the forest see it? How much of their interpretation of forests is reflected in the forest management and conservation blueprints in the country? These are some of the questions probed in a recent study on the relationship of the Kattunayakan community, an indigenous hunter-forager community in the Wayanad district of Kerala, with the forest they live in.

The study, titled *Locating Kadu in Adivasi portrayals of protected forest areas in Southern India,* was conducted over five years in the seven Kattunayakan settlements, namely Ponkhuzhi, Anacyamp, Kuzhimoola, Alathoor, Kalamkandi, Kumuzhi and Chukkalikunni, located in and around the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. It revealed that a Kattunayakan's forest or *kadu*, as they refer to it locally, is vastly different from the protected areas that are deemed forests by forest management agencies.

An approach that sees forest as an extractable commodity

While the protected areas approach sees forest land as either extractable or conserved resources and most studies on protected areas focused on wildlife conservation, revenue generation and fiscal compensations, indigenous peoples perceive landscapes as spaces that

offer opportunities for various human and non-human interactions; their engagements with the land are based on "respect, responsibility, trust, and relationships", according to the study.



Members of the Kattunayakan community in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. Kattunayakans consider entering the kadu at least once a day as a fundamental form of security and well-being. Photo by Helina Jolly

The Kattunayakans do not use the terms *kadu* and forests interchangeably. Researchers found that they use "forest" to describe areas prescribed as protected, which also include references to forest departments, forest regulations and strictness and prohibitions in the forests. On the other hand, *kadu* meant *"ellam"* (everything) to them, a complete and all-encompassing entity with its own agency. For example, in one of the interviews the authors did with the community members, one of them is reported to have said, "We are scared of the forest (meaning the forest department), we cannot enter the forest (as protected area) whenever we want" whereas another individual said, "In the forest, we have to listen to their rules and regulations". The authors describe that "forest," in this sense, is a contemporary term that largely indicates new governing rules of natural resource use. In contrast to these, the word 'kadu' represented freedom, trust, reverence, strength, and belief.

Kattunayakans believe they need to live close to the *kadu* as every Kattunayakan has to walk and enter the *kadu* at least once a day which they consider as a fundamental form of security and well-being. The study observes that that sense of well-being is achieved through *kadu*-based activities like visiting deceased ancestors, praying to mountain gods, gathering honey, collecting mushrooms, fruits, tubers, or occasionally trapping small animals.

If biodiversity is conserved inside and outside protected areas, people will live in harmony with nature. Photo of a theyyam performance at Neeliyarkottam sacred grove in Kannur district of Kerala. Photo by S. Gopikrishna Warrier/Mongabay.

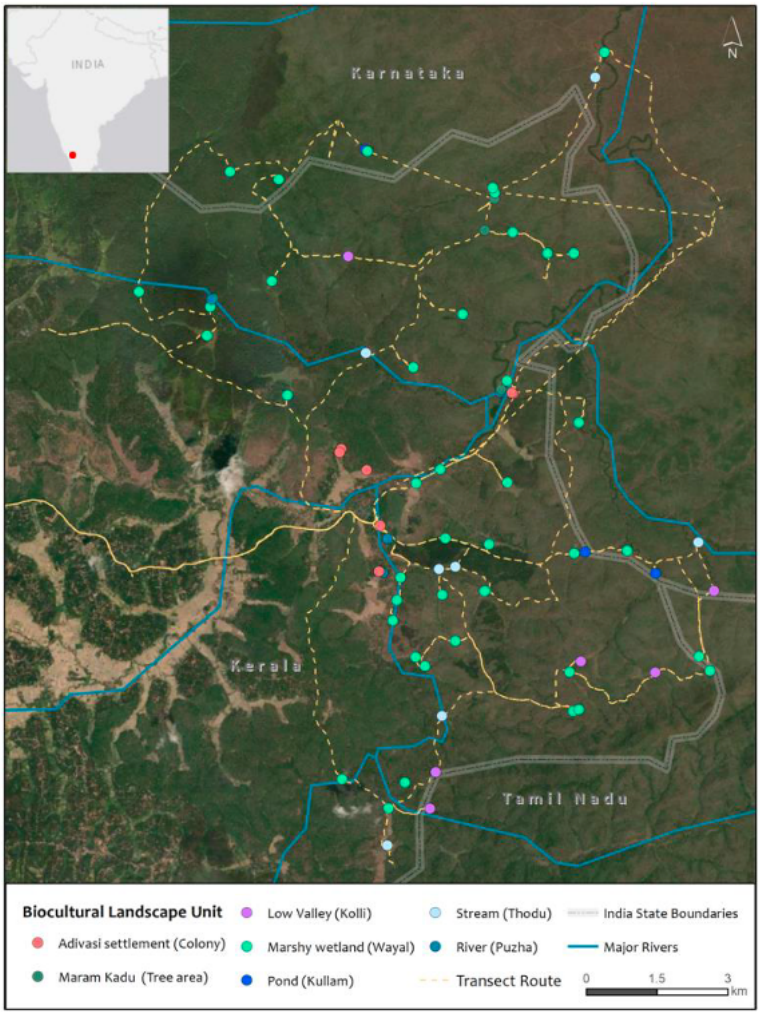
The lead author of the study, Helina Jolly said that there is more to protected areas (or forests) than tiger habitats and elephant corridors for Kattunayakans. "It encompasses ancestral burial grounds, spaces for overnight stays, connections to deities, and even temples," she explained. The forest is perceived as an entity with an agency consisting of distinct biocultural landscape units known as *nalla sthalamgal* (good places). "To Kattunayakans, the forest is a realm inhabited by human and non-human entities with fluid identities that transcend the physical boundaries of protected areas," she added.

This reciprocal and convivial approach to forests is reflected in the way they interact with wild animals too, which Jolly explored in a previous study (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36000317/) from the same region. The 2022 study found that Kattunayakans displayed tolerance and acceptance of wild animals; their coexistence with wild animals is centred around the ideas of wild animals as rational conversing beings; as gods, teachers, and equals; as well as relatives with shared origins practising *dharmam* (a cosmic law underlying right behaviour as per social order).

Alienating land stewards from forest management

Despite the fact that indigenous communities have exhibited great stewardship in land use and land management that sustained the global land base for centuries, the colonial and post-colonial land management practices prevalent in India, do not acknowledge or include the adivasi's traditional knowledge, wisdom and experience. This often makes them feel alienated from the forests that are their original homes. "The forest is their home, shelter, provider and comforter. Forest departments, on the other hand, look at forests as resources that can be extracted," said Snehlata Nath, founder-director of the Nilgiris-based non-profit Keystone Foundation that works closely with the indigenous communities in the Nilgiris, including Kattunayakans. She added that the adivasis also use forests for their benefit but in a sustainable way and for sustenance. "They take what they want but not over-extract forests for economic benefits," she said.

This symbiotic relationship where humans are also a part of the forest is not reflected in the fortress model of conservation practised in India. This approach treats forest-dwelling communities like Kattunayakans as trespassers rather than residents of forests.



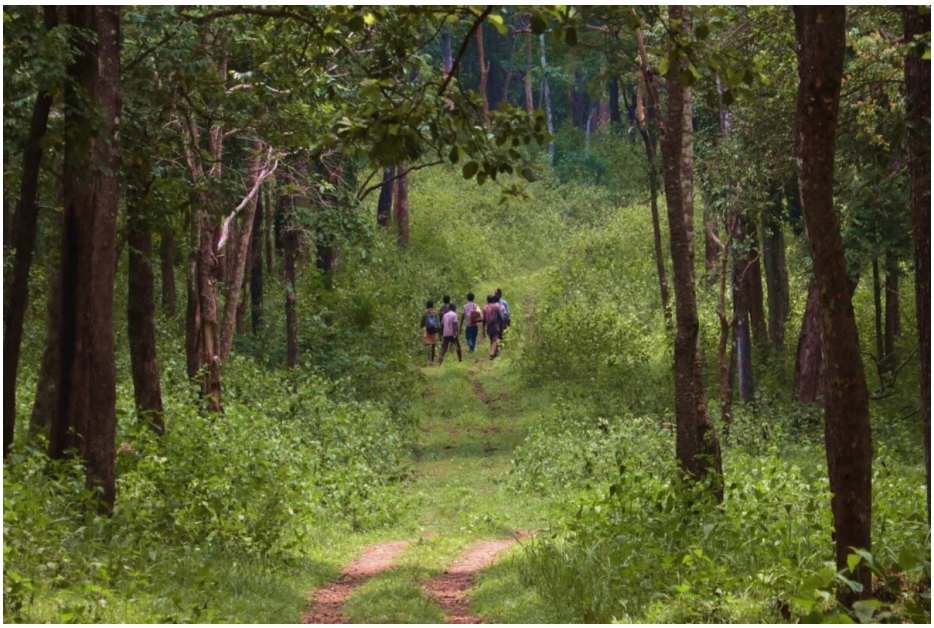
The biocultural landscape of Kattunayakans in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary.

The recent study makes a case for decolonising the idea of forests and their management. Jolly contended that none of the protected area maps in India capture the intricate Indigenous human histories interwoven with these landscapes. "This limited spatial representation inadvertently perpetuates the colonial legacy of land management rooted in separating humans and nature," she said. The study quotes one of the Kattunayakans as saying about the sacred spaces in the forest, "We have it all in our *manasu* (mind). Like people in *nadu* (outside forest) have roads and names of places. We also have distinct places. We don't read or write. So, it is not written anywhere, but we know it. We grew up in this *kadu*. Our ancestors lived here. We know every nook and corner of the *kadu*."

Intangible benefits of forest ecosystems

Economic valuation of ecosystem services is one way of measuring the value of a forest in tangible terms. It, however, may not be practical in the case of *kadu* because a lot of its services to the Kattunayakan community are intangible like the biocultural relationship and we don't have the methods to measure them, Jolly said.

She said in the context of protected areas that there are discourses around wildlife corridors and elephant and tiger habitats but there is hardly any conversation about the human history of the land. "Moreover, communities like Kattunayakans are non-sedentary hunter-foragers. So a lot of their relationship with the land, unfortunately, is not seen as a productive way of engaging with the land, unlike say, agriculture-based communities who have evidence of long-term association with the land to show," she said.



Economic valuation of ecosystem services may not be practical in the case of kadu because a lot of its services to the Kattunayakan community are intangible like the biocultural relationship. Photo by Helina Jolly

Jolly argues that Kattunayakans' interpretation of *kadu* needs to be adequately represented and discussed in India's history of protected areas as well as in forest and wildlife management policies and approaches. "This oversight carries significant consequences for adivasi communities who lack written or material evidence of their long-standing and productive relationship with forested lands," she said. Researchers believe that the adivasi perspectives on the *kadu* can contribute to more equitable land management and strengthen collaborative governance that simultaneously promotes human rights alongside biodiversity conservation objectives.

Banner image: Baiga Tribal Women of Madhya Pradesh. The Baigas were essentially forest dwellers, living deep in the jungles in I deforestation and the march of development has ensured that they migrate to places nearer the cities. (Representative Image) Ph (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Baiga_Tribal_Women_of_Madhya_Pradesh,_they_are_known_for_their_unique_tatt by Sandy and Vyaj/Wikimedia Commons

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