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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
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Ursula Münster

Invisible Labor: Adivasi Workers in the History of South Indian Forest Conservation

Since colonial times, indigenous forest workers have played a pivotal role in the environmental history of South Indian forests. In the Western Ghats of Kerala, the environmental expertise and physical hardships of low-wage Adivasi laborers has enabled governance and state rule over inaccessible forest landscapes. The experiences of subaltern forest workers, however, have largely remained undocumented by environmental historians and anthropologists working in the region. By engaging with the oral histories and daily life experiences of Adivasi laborers at the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, it becomes clear that the Indian Forest Department could not work without their support. Today, forest and wildlife conservation still relies on the exploitation of the worker's cheap manual labor and on the appropriation of their indigenous environmental knowledge.

Indigenous Labor in Wayanad's Forest History

Historically, indigenous Adivasi laborers have played a major role in the transformation of Wayanad's densely forested landscape into a site of colonial timber production. The East India Company discovered the wealth of timber resources in the forests of Malabar as early as 1805. The abundance of teak in particular attracted the British rulers to these remote forest landscapes in the Western Ghats when the demand for hardwood increased for colonial warfare, the construction of ships, and the building of railway tracks (Grove 1995, 391). For timber extraction in these inaccessible forest regions, the colonial empire depended on the labor force of forest-dwelling Adivasis. In Wayanad, the Kattunaika, former hunters and gatherers, were the main "tribal" group to work for the colonial forest department. They were knowledgeable about the forest environment and its animals; furthermore, in the interior forest areas there was no other labor available (Premachandran Nair 1987). Unlike the British officials, who greatly suffered from the climatic conditions of the region, the Kattunaika were largely resistant to malaria. Most importantly, they were cheap laborers who, to ensure their survival, worked for minimal remuneration. As stated by the conservator of forests in one of the wildlife sanctuary's working plans, when referring to the management practices of the colonial period: "The wage rates of the tribals

were nominal when compared to the rate of other local labor” (Premachandran Nair 1987, 205). The Kattunaika had been dispossessed from their land, their practice of shifting cultivation in the forest had been criminalized by the British (Logan 1887), and thus for many families no other choice remained but to work as low-wage laborers for the British rulers.

Since 1885, the colonial forest department started using Kattunaika laborers for the large-scale capturing of elephants in pits and for training the elephants to work (Logan 1887; Premachandran Nair 1987). The tradition of elephant capturing amongst the Kattunaika was only created through the colonial encounter, in contrast to other areas in South Asia, where indigenous communities had been skillful mahouts (elephant handlers) even in precolonial times (Lahiri Choudhuri 1999). In Wayanad, elephants and their Kattunaika mahouts provided the necessary infrastructure for the British to enter the remote forest regions and extract its timber wealth. The relationship between the Kattunaika and the forest environment, their use of the forest, and especially their relationship to elephants, was thus radically altered during the colonial period.

After Indian independence, the industrial use of the forest continued, mainly through the planting of eucalyptus and teak for revenue intake by the postcolonial forest department. The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary was formed in 1972. However, India’s wildlife laws were not rigorously implemented until 1985 and after, when hunting was increasingly prohibited, possessing weapons became illegal, anti-poaching surveillance became stricter, and clear-cutting and planting of timber by the forest department stopped after protests by members of the local environmental movement. The Kattunaika elders I spent time with during my ethnographic fieldwork between 2009 and 2012 remembered these transformations as the most significant turning point in their lives. Instead of being dwellers of the forest, occasional hunters, and timber workers on the plantations, Kattunaika men were employed from that time on to serve the conservation mission of the postcolonial forest department.

Adivasi Laborers as Conservation Workers

Since the 1990s, the sanctuary’s Adivasi workers have experienced the conversion of Wayanad’s forests from a landscape of timber production into a postindustrial conservation landscape for tourist consumption (Münster and Münster 2012). Today, the

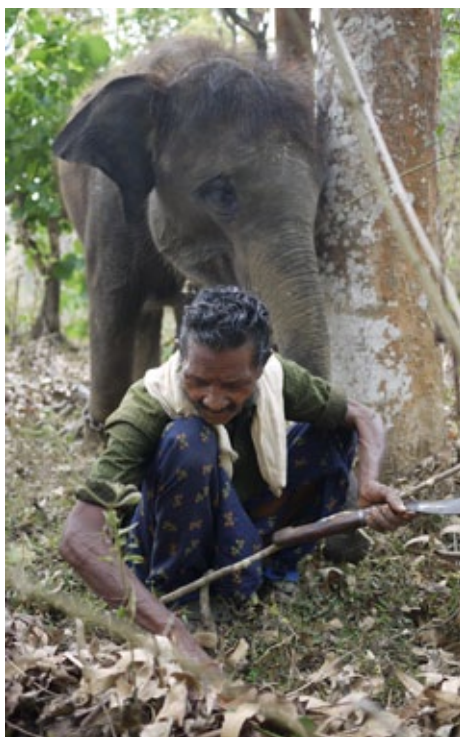
region is increasingly valued by urban tourists and wildlife biologists for harboring India's last endangered megafauna, such as the tiger, the elephant, the Indian guar, the leopard, and the lion-tailed macaque. In contrast to the numerous urban tourists who visit the wildlife sanctuary every day, for Madan, an old Kattunaika mahout who spent most of his life working for the forest department, it was clear that the sanctuary's "wilderness" was a highly man-made landscape that was continuously shaped and reshaped through the changing interests and management policies of the forest department and their own labor power. Madan vividly recalled the environmental changes that he lived through during his lifetime:

First we were told to plant eucalyptus saplings and teak here in the forest. The forest department also made us capture elephants during that time, so elephants feared us humans and immediately disappeared when they smelled humans. Then, the forest department established the "animal center" [*mrnga kendram*]. Since that time the numbers of animals have increased in the forest. Now that they are "breeding" wild animals [*mrnga valartuka*] there are so many deer, pigs, wild boars, leopards, elephants, and tigers in the forest. They don't fear us, animals have become bold and aggressive [*desham*], we cannot carry weapons and scare them away anymore. Now our work is "protection" [*samrakshnanam*]. (Interview with the author)

Many Kattunaika who live in government housing colonies adjacent to the wildlife sanctuary are now employed to accomplish the manual work of conservation at the sanctuary.

Forest Labor and Environmental Subjectivities

The Kattunaika's long-time working relationship with the forest department has considerably shaped their subjectivities and the way the workers relate to their environment. As Tim Ingold points out, people's relationship to the nonhuman world is essentially based on the task that they perform in that environment (Ingold 1993). In the present day, the workers' main task is "protection work." During their job, Kattunaika men patrol the forest as anti-poaching watchmen looking for ivory smugglers and the so-called "sandalwood mafia." They also work as fire lookouts and firefighters in the dry season, they inform the wildlife veterinarian of deceased animals in the forest and burn the



Forest worker in
Waynad Wildlife
Sanctuary, Kerala.
(Courtesy of the
author.)

carcasses, and they serve as trackers and guides for officials, wildlife scientists, and tourists, introducing them to the forest's flora and fauna and clearing the forest's pathways for them so that they can easily walk through the forest. Higher officials will not even enter the forest without the guidance of a Kattunaika watchman. Additionally, a few of the Kattunaika are still employed as elephant mahouts, using the forest department's remaining captive elephants primarily to mitigate the region's severe human-wildlife conflict, and to scare wild crop-raiding elephants from the nearby farmers' fields.

As a consequence, all the workers I spoke to identified themselves as *kooli pani*, daily wage workers for the forest department, and never emphasized

their cultural belonging to a former hunting and gathering community. The forest laborers' work is strenuous, their employment insecure, and their payment only on a daily wage basis. Especially during the fire-prone summer season, they often work day and night to extinguish the forest fires. In addition, the forest increasingly poses a threat to the workers, as cases of wildlife attacks, especially by elephants, have steadily increased. What could be celebrated as a success for conservationists is a matter of concern and disquiet to the Kattunaika watchmen. "We are not paid according to the risk we take and the skills we have," a watchman complained, "even though we often work for 30 days, we get their salary only for 20 days. Wild elephants might attack us at night or walking through the forest." Despite the workers' commitment, their environmental knowledge and abilities are not recognized enough by the forest officials.

Notwithstanding the introduction of "participatory forest management" in India in 1990 financed by World Bank funding, the marginal position of the conservation laborers

on the lowest level of the forest department's hierarchy has not changed much since colonial times. Decision-making processes in wildlife management remain firmly in the hands of higher forest officials, experts, and scientists, regardless of their reliance on the workers' environmental knowledge. Thus, Kattunaika men working for the forest department encounter an "institutional devaluation that molds subjective experience" in their daily lives (Sodikoff 2007, 12). The workers often complained about their hard and usually dangerous manual labor for which they receive only minimum wages. The elders nostalgically remembered the "good life" [*nalla vidul*] before the wildlife sanctuary was formed, when hunting was still tolerated and food was readily available for them in the forest. Despite the role that Adivasis have played in the environmental history of Wayanad's forests and despite their importance for the present-day wildlife management, Adivasi labor remains invisible in representations of biodiversity conservation by the conservationists and the forest department officials.

By depicting Adivasi laborers as important agents in Wayanad's forest history, it becomes clear that environmental rule, subject formation, and knowledge production were never one-way (and top-down) processes: scientific environmental management and expert rule always have and continue to rely on local forms of ecological knowledge. In this process, hybrid forms of environmental knowledge and practiced expertise have emerged. At the same time, low-paid forest labor has been pivotal in forming the lives of former hunting and gathering Adivasis. Their position at the lowest level of a bureaucratic state department has deeply shaped their subjectivities and influenced their interaction with the forest and its animals. Yet, even today, indigenous forest laborers continue to play an indispensable, albeit silent role in the sanctuary's environmental governance and wildlife conservation. With an increasing commodification of Wayanad's nature for urban tourists, the value of rare wild animals enhances, since this is the "wild nature" urban tourists seek to consume on their jeep safaris. The valor of those who work hard for this wilderness to be created, however, remains unrecognized and invisible.

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