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## Biligiri Tiger Reserve: Include Soligas in conservation plan

By Ashish Kothari and Nitin Rai

**In an unusual move, a forest-dwelling human community has made a bid to conserve another forest-dweller: the tiger.**

Protesting against the proposal of the Karnataka forest department to notify the Biligiri Hills as a Tiger Reserve, the resident Soliga adivasis have instead proposed a community-based tiger conservation model.

The tribals' apex association, the Soliga Abhivrudhi Sangha (SAS), has made known its views in a letter to the Union ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) and the Karnataka government. The letter has been co-signed by members of civil society groups like Vivekananda Girijina Kalyan Kendra, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment, Kalpavriksh, Shodh, Vrikshamitra and Vasundhara.

The forest department's proposal to notify the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary as a tiger reserve is based on studies that show a healthy population of tigers in the area, and is part of the ongoing move by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) to expand tiger conservation in the country.

Unfortunately, it is based on a tired old model of wildlife protection that ignores ground realities, focuses more on quantity than on quality (the number of tiger reserves has jumped from 28 to 39 since 2009), and ignores the knowledge and capacities of communities that have lived with the tigers for centuries.

It is a model that is failing, as witnessed in Sariska and Panna Tiger Reserves, and evident by the continued decline of tiger populations in other tiger reserves even though crores of rupees are being poured in. Despite widespread evidence of such problems, the NTCA and the MoEF continue to flog a dead horse.

Dogmatic tigerwallahs assert that people and tigers cannot co-exist. This however begs the question: how is it that every one of the tiger reserves that have been notified in India, had communities living inside it at the time of notification? How is it that BRT Sanctuary has a healthy population of tigers even while there are 61 Soliga hamlets spread throughout its forests?

Or, to take another example lest it is argued that BRT is an anomaly, what about the dozens of Chenchu adivasi settlements inside Nagarjunsagar Srisailem Tiger Reserve in Andhra Pradesh? Even forest officers in that reserve say that the presence of Chenchus is crucial for conservation!

Such views have been expressed in private by forest officials in many reserves, but they are not able to say it officially, as it would seem to be heretic in the face of the powerful lobby that has made 'inviolable' areas (read: free of communities, but not tourists!) as the only possible way to save the tiger.

The strange thing about the BRT Tiger Reserve proposal is that it does not even have the support of Ullas Karanth, one of India's leading tiger ecologists. Karanth, who is also a member of the NTCA, stated that "the choice defies ecology-based science" and that "process of continuous expansion of tiger reserve areas appears to have become rather ad hoc."

With such varied opposition, why is the forest department pushing ahead with this? Is it because tiger reserve status brings in substantially more financial resources from the Centre? Or because it enhances the department's control over the area?

### Eviction

The government has assured that a Tiger Reserve status will not mean forced displacement of Soliga adivasis. But this is an empty promise. In other tiger reserves, the forest departments has proceeded to evict people, by artificially stopping even basic facilities and access to communities, or by providing enticements such as the Rs 10 lakh per family relocation package.

The Soligas have stated unequivocally that they are not prepared to move out of their settlements, but dominant government bureaucracies have a way of creating conditions that make communities succumb, or at least create serious internal conflicts as some members get attracted by seemingly easy money.

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In any case, Soligas and their support organisations are asking what the need is for the declaration of a tiger reserve when tiger numbers are increasing and both the wildlife and livelihoods are improving? BRT Sanctuary has been fortunate to have some of the longest standing research programmes by such institutions as Atree, and the results strongly pointing to the continued co-existence of the Soligas within the forest.

Soligas possess sophisticated knowledge about biodiversity, and their customary practices have helped sustain ecosystems and diversity. Their willingness to work with the forest department and NGOs on conservation strategies and sustainable forest produce harvest has been repeatedly demonstrated over the last decade.

Soligas recently produced a map of the BRT forest that shows 46 Soliga clan boundaries and 489 sacred sites, demonstrating their deep cultural and historical links with the forest. The ground situation is ripe for an alternative model of tiger (and wildlife) conservation, which is inclusive of community needs, which combines modern and traditional knowledge, and brings together various actors to synergise their respective skills and expertise. This is precisely what the SAS and supporting organisations have proposed.

The SAS proposal has the support of several prominent conservationists. Jairam Ramesh has made a mark taking a number of bold decisions in his tenure as a minister; will he add to this list by facilitating an alternative model of conservation at BRT? Could this be a precursor to similar models elsewhere, generating mass grassroots level support for the tigers' struggle to survive?

(Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune; Nitin Rai with Atree, Bangalore)

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