# Doing Chowkidaari: Vulnerability in Village-Forest Relations and the Compulsion of Forest Work

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**Abstract**

This article explores the conditions and perceptions of daily wage work provided by the Forest Department around Panna Tiger Reserve in Central India. Drawing on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, it analyses the conditions of forest work within this context of livelihood prohibitions, the broader political economy of precarious labour, and village-forest relations in Panna district. Through different case studies, the article unpacks the dynamics of familiarity, negotiation and exploitation that characterise forest work, utilising forest workers' own description of their work to comment on how a confluence of vulnerable conditions compel local people to take up the precarious daily wage work offered by the Forest Department. The workers' descriptions also offer the concept of 'compulsion' as an important addition to interdisciplinary discussions about 'vulnerability.' I argue that forest workers are a missed opportunity for good relations between conservation projects and local communities, as actors who regularly manage the simultaneous demands of their village communities, and Forest Departments and navigate the complexity and nuance of the relationships between and within both. Rather than examples of conservation benefits for local communities, the poor conditions and insecurities of forest work lead to decreased support for conservation and worsen the reputation of the Forest Department in areas where gainful employment is desperately needed.

**Keywords:** forest work, labour, livelihoods, community engagement, vulnerability, conservation employment, tiger conservation, ethnography, India

## INTRODUCTION

Fostering good local community relations around and within protected areas worldwide has been a priority for conservation scientists, managers and policymakers for decades (Berkes 2004, 2007). Lately, this stems from the twin recognition that conservation efforts are often difficult without local expertise and support and interventions can contribute to the disenfranchisement and impoverishment of those dependent upon the landscapes that others seek to conserve (Brockington 2003; Brosius 2004; Brockington et al. 2006; Adams and Hutton 2007). The result has been decades-long attempts to create more inclusive conservation through local participation, to design and implement projects that integrate both conservation and development outcomes or that incentivise local stewardship of the biodiversity which surrounds them and of which they are an integral part (Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Brosius et al. 2005). However, these attempts have often fallen short of desired outcomes in poverty alleviation and participatory governance, leaving conservation open to critiques from natural and social scientists (Chapin 2004; West et al. 2006; McShane et al. 2011).

In Indian conservation, efforts to foster good community relations are not novel, first embodied formally in the 1988 Forest Policy and the launch of Joint Forest Management (JFM) initiatives (Saxena 1997). Despite revising forestry priorities to include local communities, objectives listed in the policy are

potentially conflicting (Lele and Menon 2014) and critiques of participatory initiatives have grown in recent decades (Bhattacharya et al. 2010). Scholars argue that initiatives can further entrench internal divisions and exploit communities towards implicit conservation agendas (Sundar et al. 2001), focusing on a fundamental failure to understand local sociocultural contexts and troubled relationships between local people and conservation actors (Rishi 2007; Nayak and Berkes 2008; Ota et al. 2014).

The difficulties of relationships between local communities and Forest Departments, what I term 'village-forest relations', are well-documented across scholarship on sociopolitical dimensions of Indian conservation (e.g., Robbins 1998, 2000; Vira 1999; Nagendra et al. 2010; Rastogi et al. 2012, 2014). However, studies rarely focus on specific groups like forest workers, who are often at the centre of crucial dynamics between Forest Department and local communities which impact the success of conservation and life around protected areas.

This article draws on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork spent around Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Central India exploring village-forest relations in various forms. I examine the local employment of forest workers as one such form, analysing the conditions and perceptions of forest work in the context of prohibited traditional livelihoods and antagonism between communities and the Forest Department. The term 'forest workers' refers to local villagers paid daily wages by the Forest Department on a rolling basis. Their distinction from Forest Department staff (forest employees) and temporary labourers (forest labourers) is clarified below.

Through different case studies, the article analyses the conditions of forest work within this context of livelihood prohibitions, the broader political economy of precarious labour, and village-forest relations in Panna. It also analyses how forest workers themselves understand and evaluate forest work, drawing on local distinctions between *kaam* (*kaam*=work), *naukri* (*naukri* =secure employment) and *majdoori* (*majdoori*=labouring) and the framing concept of *majboori* (*majboori* =compulsion, necessity). I argue that, instead of mitigating vulnerability caused by the prohibition of forest-based livelihoods, forest work ultimately serves to propagate the state exploitation of local labour for conservation outcomes, like many other seemingly participatory opportunities. In varied forms, forest work is shaped by dynamics of familiarity and negotiation which refract through local power relationships based on caste, kinship and residency. The poor conditions and negative perceptions of forest work present a missed opportunity for improved village-forest relations and local support for conservation in India.

## Work and labour in Indian forestry and conservation

The term 'forest workers' refers to local villagers paid daily wages by the Forest Department on a rolling, semi-permanent basis as forest watchmen, drivers, tiger trackers, office workers or radio operators. They are distinct from other groups working for and paid directly by the Forest Department. Firstly, forest workers are distinct from the forest officers of the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, who occupy the posts of forest guard, forester, deputy ranger, and ranger. Secondly, they are distinct from forest officials posted to tiger reserves, who are usually members of the elite Indian Forest Service and serve in the posts of Assistant Director, Joint Director, Field Director, or Divisional Forest Officer and oversee the reserve's management. Finally, they are distinct from short-term labourers, employed for specific tasks like grass-cutting or construction.

For clarity, I refer to forest workers' work as 'forest work', forest officials' and officers' work as 'forest employment' and short-term labourers work as 'forest labour'. As the case studies below demonstrate, unpacking the local sociopolitical dynamics between and within these groups is crucial for understanding the complexity of village-forest relations through the lens of local employment. This article does not address the employment of villagers in tourism, research, or filmmaking, since this work is not directly under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department. However, this is not to say that such employment is insignificant in the contextualisation of available work around PTR. It is simply beyond the scope of this article.

Rather than an 'alternative livelihood project' (Roe et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2016) or an attempt at community-based conservation, local employment in Indian conservation is historically rooted in the exploitation of local labourers for the timber industry during British rule in the 1860s. Rangarajan (1996: 2013) describes how Baiga villagers were recruited as forest workers and a "source of cheap labour" in central India following British prohibition of swidden agriculture. Similarly, in Münster's (2014a,b) account of Kerala, former hunter-gatherer Kattunaika villagers, dispossessed from their land and traditions of shifting cultivation, were forced to work for as low-wage labourers and elephant handlers, a role that has not changed. She argues, "conservation still relies on the exploitation of the worker's cheap manual labour and on the appropriation of their indigenous environmental knowledge" (Münster 2014a: 53).

As Locke (2011) writes about Nepal, "a class of privileged, salaried workers with minimal local environmental knowledge depend on a class of skilled but poorly paid workers who endure insecure working conditions as part of a risk-laden job" (quoted in Münster 2014b: 17). In Madagascar, Sodikoff (2012) argues that "the workers who do all the grunt work… have been virtually invisible in accounts of what has failed and what has worked in conservation efforts" (Sodikoff 2012: 7).

A growing literature on Indian forestry management from public policy, political ecology and anthropology analyses bureaucratic behaviour amongst forest employees, often highlighting the shortcomings of participatory opportunities and exploring challenges experienced by lower-level forest employees (Robbins 1998, 2000; Vasan 2002, 2006; Fleischman 2012, 2015; Wangel 2018). For example, Dutta

(2020) argues that in Assam rangers are crucial actors for everyday community relations. Positionality and local context are central to her analysis of working conditions and behaviour. In one study, Belhekar et al. (2020) highlight the toll of poor conditions on the well-being of forest guards across six reserves including PTR.

Since forest workers often work closely with forest guards and rangers, they share the risk and poor conditions that characterise work in forested areas, and many observations resonate with my own. However, forest workers are usually absent from these accounts, highlighting their exclusion from the forest bureaucracy and a distinction in the conditions of their labour. Following Parry (2013), the privilege and security of a *sarkari naukri* (*sarkari naukri* =secure government employment) characterises forest employment and the status of forest guards, rangers and IFS (Indian Forest Service) officials in PTR in contrast to the *kaam* of forest work. In the following analysis, we will see how forest workers draw this distinction themselves, view their work mainly as *majdoori* and frame their journeys to and experience of the work through the concept *majboori*.

### Livelihoods, vulnerability, compulsion

In this article, vulnerability is a key concept through which to explore the context for forest work. However, vulnerability has multiple meanings and analytical usages across disciplines, so explication is key. Vulnerability is most often used as a way of describing precarious life, referring to a 'vulnerable' state of being. In conservation science, one can define vulnerability as "the susceptibility of a system to a negative impact" (Williams et al. 2008: 2621), or the likelihood of biodiversity loss to threatening processes (Wilson et al. 2005). This draws on the risk and hazards literature in geography and development studies, which has highlighted the "rooted character of [human] vulnerability" in societal power dynamics (Wisner et al. 2004: 9; Birkman 2006). In anthropology, vulnerability tends to reference the inherent interdependency of people on each other and the generalised precariousness of different forms of life, often referencing Butler's work (2004; 2011) (Millar 2017; Alexander and Sanchez 2018; Hann 2018).

I seek to situate forest work within the context of changing socio-environmental and sociopolitical relations that involves both forms of labour and relationships within and between different community or caste groups, and relationships with the Forest Department. In this sense of vulnerability as a state of precariousness, the curtailment of livelihoods, human-wildlife conflict and displacement have made lives increasingly vulnerable, decreasing the ability to sustain livelihoods around PTR. These factors have reduced previous risk mitigation strategies involving rooted social networks, changes in livelihood patterns or resource use (Robbins 2012), reconfiguring relationships between and within forest-dependent communities. Due to these conditions, local villagers around PTR often join what Sanyal and Bhattacharya (2009) characterise as the 'surplus' labour force:

"dispossessed producers whose traditional livelihoods were destroyed but who were not absorbed into the modern sector" (Sanyal and Bhattacharya 2009: 36). Such dispossession through livelihood prohibitions and village relocations leaves families, like those described below, vulnerable to precarious labour regimes (Yadav 2018).

This shift ought to be understood in the context of both forestry's historic use of local labour and wider "processes of casualisation and informalisation that produce the 'flexible' labour required by the capitalist production regimes of post-liberalisation India" (De Neve 2019: 169). As we will see, this disruption to livelihoods places communities previously not in competition in the same labour pool with uneven outcomes for and within each group. While technically 'unregulated' work, cultural categories and structures like caste, kinship and political status deeply shape forest work in its various forms (cf. Harris-White 2003).

In each case, one can see how the confluence of conditions of vulnerability leads to forest workers' compulsion to take up daily wage roles with the Forest Department, something expressed through the language of *majboori*. Unfortunately, forest work does not significantly decrease vulnerability due to its insecurity, lack of benefits, low pay and poor conditions, and its over-reliance on interpersonal relationships of familiarity and individual skills of negotiation, leaving forest workers both dispossessed from traditional livelihoods and open to exploitation and discrimination.

## METHODOLOGY

### Field site: PTR

PTR is located in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh (MP), spread over 543 sq. km in its core area across Panna and Chhatarpur districts. The Ken River, a tributary of the Yamuna, runs for 55 km through it and two plateaus (Hinauta and Panna/Talgaon) create gorges and open grasslands overlooking the river valley. Panna has been historically inhabited by numerous forest-dependent groups and is one of thirteen districts in the cultural region of Bundelkhand, which stretches between Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

During the British Empire, Panna was in the Bundelkhand Agency before becoming part of the state of Vindhya Pradesh at Independence in 1947 and MP in 1956. The forests which now make up the reserve were previously hunting grounds for local royal families before a part of it was made into Gangau Wildlife Sanctuary in 1979. Panna National Park was founded in 1981 and notified as India's 22nd Project Tiger Reserve in 1994, an example of forest administration focused on wildlife conservation, distinct from territorial forest divisions.

PTR enjoyed mild success in its early years, including research which tracked tigers via radio-collar (Karanth et al. 2004; Chundawat et al. 2016). Sadly, from the mid-2000s the population began to decline. Mismanagement and negligence in the Forest Department kept authorities in denial until local population extinction in 2009 (MoEF 2009). Following this,

Forest Departments across MP coordinated a tiger translocation and reintroduction project. Since March 2009, seven tigers have been reintroduced and PTR now supports a population of over 40. Many are monitored 24/7 via radio-collars by teams comprising forest workers and occasionally joined by officers and officials.

In villages I visited during fieldwork, most people belonged to two groups—Yadavs and Adivasis—whose inter-relationships are crucial to understanding village-forest relations and forest work in PTR. Yadavs are a middle-caste community whose traditional livelihoods centre around herding. In the recent past, this involved grazing buffalo and cattle in the forests, and in the more distant past, moving villages seasonally as semi-nomadic pastoralists. Adivasi is a term meaning 'original inhabitant', often a shorthand for what the Government of India designates as people belonging to a Scheduled Tribe (ST) (Sekhsaria 2007; Yadav 2018). In the villages visited, there were three main groups of Adivasis: Kondar, Raj-Gond and Gond.

Adivasis in Panna have traditionally depended on the forest for livelihoods, collecting timber and Minor Forest Produce (MFP) and using forest streams and lakes for agriculture. Sandstone and diamond resources in Panna have also provided labour work (Chundawat 2018; Yadav 2018). However, restrictions on grazing, gathering, hunting, felling, farming and mining have forced all communities previously dependent on the forest to adapt, many now migrating to other mines in the region or cities across West and North India to work as labourers. Local people see the reserve as one major reason why there are no industry or factories to provide livelihood alternatives.

In comparison to Adivasis, historical linkages into towns through the dairy industry have helped Yadavs in forest-border villages to pursue livelihoods beyond forest resources and livestock in transportation, construction, or politics. Panna's Yadav population is increasingly visible at the village and block levels of government in the district. There doesn't appear to be political unity across the population, like Michelutti (2004, 2008) has documented in Western UP. However, Yadav positioning manifests in relative influence within village-forest relations. In confluence with discrimination against Scheduled Caste (SC) and ST groups, this means that Yadavs are more likely to negotiate exploitation by individual forest officers, hold better paying and more secure Forest Department positions and draw more benefits from village-forest relations than Adivasis.

The diversification of Yadav livelihoods and ability to mitigate the vulnerability of livelihood prohibitions contrasts the increased exposure of Adivasis to exploitative precarious labour regimes, of which forest work is one (Yadav 2018). This is not to say that Yadavs do not face exploitation or discrimination or that the experience of Yadav forest workers is uniform, but rather to highlight how variations in forest work are situated within a context of local politics, caste relations and political economy.

Case studies below deliberately draw from a range of communities, seeking to not draw sharp distinctions between Yadav and Adivasi or Adivasi and non-Adivasi experiences of forest work since livelihood prohibitions have negatively affected many different caste groups. The diversity of forest worker and forest officer backgrounds inhibit generalisations about any group's experience of forest work since it varied with the positionalities of forest workers and forest staff in each situation. However, the lack of employment opportunities for some middle and upper caste families led often to their capture of better-paid forest positions, disadvantaging Adivasis who likely face even greater exploitation and discrimination in lower positions or as forest labourers.

## Ethnographic Fieldwork

Data was collected over 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in villages bordering PTR, allowing me to understand changing dynamics between the Department and communities across seasons. The study was based in two main villages, Hinauta and Madla: large, mixed communities and bases for two of PTR's six ranges.

Madla is the centre of PTR's tourism industry, located along the Ken River and National Highway 39. Hinauta is found at the end of a road leading off NH39 into the national park for 30 km, encompassed on three sides by forest and opposite a National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) Diamond Mine, a government run, large-scale diamond mining operation. While there is no scope to cover the complexities of a diamond mine within a tiger reserve, undoubtedly the NMDC provides an important counterpoint for villagers in their employment struggles. I conducted semi-structured interviews in Hindi in 11 other villages.

Beyond interviews, the main methodologies were participant-observation and the collection of oral life histories. While living in Hinauta, I became familiar with many families who depended on forest work, attended the Department events with forest workers, and developed close relationships with forest officers in the communities I visited. One limitation of the study is that I was unable, due to regulations, to accompany forest guards and forest workers into the reserve. However, not pursuing this type of participation did not arouse suspicion with forest officials in the context of Panna's turbulent past. I was conscious of the sensitive character of the field site, surrounded by the tiger reserve and the mine. So, I anonymised all notes and never recorded audio or video to protect participants and soften suspicions that I was a government agent, a characterisation confronted throughout.

## FINDINGS AND ARGUMENT

I will describe different types and aspects of forest work through case studies. I will describe getting forest work through the example of a tiger tracker, the experience of doing forest work through the example of *chowkidaars* (*chowkidaars*=forest watchers), and the importance of providing work opportunities for others through the example of *babus* (*babus*=office clerks).

### Getting work: tiger trackers

When I started asking about forest work in Panna, I discovered that even in villages like Hinauta and Madla, there were few regular forest workers. Hinauta residents estimated between 15 and 20 individuals. As fieldwork progressed, it became apparent that this didn't represent the full extent of forest employment locally. Former and occasional forest workers were more numerous. Some had previously worked for the Forest Department and been fired. Others were caught in a cycle of quitting forest work only to find nothing else and reluctantly return to the Forest Department to ask for another job. The workers described in what follows exemplify these precarious realities of forest work around PTR. All names, locations and family situations have been changed.

### *Kailash's story*

I first met Kailash Yadav during pilot fieldwork at his house in Naheri where he lived with his family. His father died when he was young, so Kailash's brother dropped out of school and started working at a hotel. Their cousin lived next door and worked for the Forest Department, driving a water tanker during the dry season. The land where the houses are built belonged to the two families' great-grandfather whose sons decided to split the family property once married, one taking all the livestock (Kailash's grandfather) and one taking all the farmland (their cousins' grandfather). However, grazing livestock in the forest became illegal, and slowly Kailash's father sold most of their animals. By the time I met him, Kailash had three buffaloes and one cow. On that first day in May, I asked Kailash about his family and work. He said, grinning, that he had married for love, despite his mother's objections, and his wife was seven months pregnant. Through his brother's work, he had been an assistant on a short research project and then a tiger tracker. However, he was about to quit his tracking job because of the long hours and working conditions. He had no time for his family and didn't want to spend 12 hours on-duty through the night.

Tracking can be difficult and monotonous. Teams follow one of Panna's radio-collared tigers, travelling through dense teak forests across plateaus and along the banks of the Ken, often scaling challenging terrain, placing themselves at risk of animal encounters and going far off road to note the animal's location and report to range offices via radios. Teams have three members usually: two trackers and one driver. The trackers operate an antenna receiver, standing on cars or cliff edges to find a signal—a short beep that quickens when the tiger moves, gets louder as it comes near and weakens as it walks away from the radio operator. Teams work in rotating 12-hour shifts, and while most of the people I spoke with said that they were supposed to have 12 hours on and 24 hours off, depending on how far the tigers took them and where they lived, they often spent days in the forest. Trackers are provided with very little supplies besides what they bring with themselves from home, and rest at various forest watchtowers or camps, having cups of tea or the food their wives, sisters or mothers made for them (cf. Belhekar 2020; Dutta 2020).

Since vehicles move between range offices, villages and the reserve core, trackers are also important for the *chowkidaars* posted at towers and camps for their supplies. A meeting between a tracker and a *chowkidaar* leads to welcome respite from the monotony and loneliness of tiresome walks through the jungle for *chowkidaars* and forest officers. Trackers and *chowkidaars* will share information, tea, water or handfuls of *gutka* (*gutka*=chewing tobacco). Trackers are also responsible for notifying rangers of unusual activity, like an unknown tiger or person in a territory, whether a radio-collar signal weakens and stops or whether the tiger hasn't moved in a few days. A collar signal weakening or not moving could be that the collar is faulty, a tiger is mating or has given birth, or, worst-case, is injured or deceased.

Kailash asked me whether I had any work for him. It was a common request. Sadly, I said that I didn't need an assistant and didn't want to stop him finding work elsewhere. When I returned to Panna 15 months later for full-time fieldwork, Kailash was trying to regain his job as a tracker, having quit the previous year. He hadn't found any other work, getting by with his brother's help and odd jobs around the village, finally doing summer work as a tanker driver like his cousin. With his daughter now 13-months old, he needed to start earning, resigning himself to the only option available, working for the Forest Department again. When asked why he was returning, he explained, "*this is my majboori.*" *Majboori* is a local term that can be imperfectly translated into compulsion, obligation or necessity, resulting from a confluence of vulnerabilities. The language of *majboori* was used often to describe why villagers sought forest work.

In Kailash's case, and those following, we can observe how a confluence of vulnerable conditions, starting with the prohibition of traditional livelihoods, the failure to find other work through networks, and the lack of other forms of regular employment compel people to seek or return to forest work despite its precariousness. Securing a position as a forest worker, however, was not necessarily straightforward, refracting along the lines of familiarity and informality within unequal power relationships between permanently employed forest officers and local people desperate for any temporary or low paid work.

When I asked Kailash how one got a tracking job, he said that one had to ask the ranger. To get any kind of work, becoming known (*jan pehechan*=becoming known) to the ranger (cf. Jauregui 2016) was crucial. In this sense, Kailash was in a relatively good position, having previously worked as a tanker driver and tracker. "What if the ranger doesn't like you?" I asked. He responded that it was more difficult then. "You can ask someone more senior, like the AD (Assistant Director) or the JD (Joint Director)." Kailash said that he had a memo signed by the AD to reinstate his position. Thus, for him, it was all but guaranteed. He showed me paper where the AD had scribbled and declared that he was going to be a tracker in tigress T1's team. He was still waiting for the deputy ranger to assign him. It would only be a few days.

Three weeks later, while relaxing at a *dhaba* (*dhaba*=eatery, café) in Madla, I saw Kailash driving a tractor along the highway. I turned to the *dhaba* owner's son, who had been a forest worker, fallen out with a forest officer and lost his job, and asked whether Kailash was now part of the T1 team. He simply shrugged and said, "There is not work now for T1." It seemed that every young man in the village was attuned to the (un)availability of work in the Forest Department.

Some days later, Kailash appeared at my room in Hinauta at 9 am. I invited him in and offered him a cup of tea, which he politely accepted. I asked what he was doing there so early. He said that he had come on the 8 o'clock bus for work. "I thought you were working in T1's team?", I asked. Still waiting for the position, the ranger said he needed someone to drive tractors and transport labourers. Unable to refuse the work for fear of damaging the relationship and losing the chance of becoming a tracker, Kailash reluctantly agreed, still hoping for T1's team, where he was assigned 10 days later.

### Dependence on powerful others and vulnerability

Kailash's journey to finding work as a tracker illuminates central dynamics of 'familiarity' and 'negotiation' in forest work. Familiarity with forest staff and the processes of the forest bureaucracy is crucial to finding and staying in work as is one's ability to skilfully negotiate those relationships and processes. As Wisner et al. (2004) emphasise, access to income opportunities through social relations can help to manage risks like unemployment. However, the prohibition of forest-dependent livelihoods has led both to the loss of income and to the erosion of social networks that traditionally would have diffused livelihood risks (Robbins 2012: 57–63), transforming the access of impoverished groups to income opportunities to depend on potentially more exploitative sources of work. As Wisner et al. (2004: 85) note, "structures of domination" are crucial to understand any limitations of actors' ability to "adapt to new and threatening situations." Thus, any analysis of vulnerable conditions, like those facing the people in Panna hoping to find forest work, must acknowledge "the politics between people at different levels" (Leach et al. 1997; Wiser et al. 2004: 85-86).

In Panna, for those with relatives or fellow caste members in key positions within the forest bureaucracy or with strong friendships with forest officers, the chances of hearing about and taking advantage of opportunities were much greater. Being on good terms with someone in a *naukri* could often lead to some *kaam*. Often this meant that the availability and quality of opportunities appeared much lower for more marginalised groups, like *Adivasis* or those belonging to SC, and much higher for middle or upper caste communities, like Yadavs or Rajputs, like Kailash or the dhaba owner's son. In Kumbalgarh, Robbins (1998, 2000) notes how proximity within caste hierarchy affected the enforcement of conservation rules and authority since Rajput and oher upper caste villagers could socialise with forest officers and officials in ways that lower castes couldn't. A similar principle applied in Panna for availability of forest work, though one cannot generalise that all forest officers were high caste.

It is key to remember that while familiarity and negotiation are key dynamics in forest work and, broadly in village-forest relations, relationships between job providers/gatekeepers and job seekers, for the most part, were deeply unequal and exploitative, starting from a position of compulsion and vulnerability for seekers and security and authority for providers. This was less to do with caste, per se, and more to do with differences in the terms of their employment and the status afforded to government employees. As we will see, the dependence on familiarity and negotiation within deeply unequal power relations to find and keep work can lead to abuse in Indian conservation of the "workers who do all the grunt work" (Sodikoff 2012: 7).

### Transfers and abuse: doing chowkidaari

Of all forest workers, *chowkidaars* perform the most varied tasks, are the worst paid, and are subjected to the most direct abuse by officers. Yet they are essential to the operation of PTR. The term *chowkidaar* has historically referred to 'village watchmen,' used by police forces to report on the *halchal* (*halchal* =goings-on) in their village (Gupta 1974). The term has evolved to also include those who fulfil a variety of roles across conservation areas.

*Chowkidaars* work in watchtowers, camps or at park gates for days on end, visiting villages like Hinauta or Madla to purchase food and other supplies before resuming their post. They are often tasked with helping junior officers manage forest labour, and two *chowkidaars* accompany every forest guard on their beat. Experienced *chowkidaars* are expected to familiarise new Department recruits with the forest, often spending long stretches of time together. This leaves open the possibility of developing camaraderie between forester and worker but also, dependent on the persons, conflict and disagreements.

During fieldwork, I heard about unusually risky and exploitative tasks asked of *chowkidaars* and how, if refused, they were reprimanded or lost their jobs. One example is Rakesh Pal, a *chowkidaar* from Kemasan village whose superior officer in Madla asked him to bring him *chhachh* (*chhachh*=buttermilk) from home. Pals traditionally raise goats, though the restrictions placed on grazing have led to drastic herd reductions. At the time, Rakesh was posted at a *chowki* (*chowki* =station/camp) an hour from Kemasan village by foot. Like trackers, *chowkidaars* are expected to simply adjust to tough conditions, and so when asked to 'bring chhach', the officer assumed that Rakesh would simply walk the few kilometres through the jungle, up a dry riverbed and scale the sharp cliff face to reach Kemasan.

Too scared to risk his family's source of income, having taken the job out of compulsion following the prohibitions on grazing, Rakesh did just that. He made it back home after an hour's walk and asked his wife to go and milk one of the goats. He took a short rest and made sure to leave Kemasan, with fresh *chhaach* in bottle, to reach the chowki before dark, making his way down the gorge, back along the riverbed to

a former village site and then to the camp. When he arrived, the ranger shouted abuse at him for taking so long. The ranger suspended and transferred him to a different *chowki*.

The frequent transfer of public servants to prevent corruption or weaken political connections has been noted by public policy scholars in India and elsewhere (Kaufman 1960; Potter 1988; Zwart 1994; Iyer and Mani 2012. Fleischman (2012: 131) argues that in the Indian Forest Service, transfers are routine but are also a way for "politicians and senior officials to control the bureaucracy," ultimately serving political purposes. In Panna, the frequent transfer of *chowkidaars* and trackers appeared to have the same aim: prevent corruption and weaken local ties forest workers had where they were posted.

However, from the perspective of the workers, transfers usually happened at the whim of forest employees without any explanation offered. Since the transfer of forest officers was similarly frequent, I asked forest workers to compare with their own transfers. They explained that the key difference is that in cases of protest by the transferee, government servants retain their *naukri* through its lifetime security, and forest workers, treated as disposable, could simply be without *kam*. Those that refused often found themselves without a job (again) and (re) entering a cycle of recurring unemployment.

Though the dynamics of familiarity and negotiation were important in their everyday relationships with forest officers, moments of conflict or tension often crystallised hierarchies of exploitation and the precariousness of forest *kaam* compared to forest *naukris* (*naukris*=secure government positions, Parry 2013). Frequent job transfers bred discontent amongst forest workers and their families and communities, who rarely saw them if posted far away. If confronted about transfers, junior officers would simply defer to senior officers who would defer to officials who would state that it was simply policy or that a junior officer had made the request. Any forest worker challenging a transfer would waste time visiting offices and losing wages. Thus, the precariousness of wage labour and the insecurity of forest work effectively policed challenges, further compelling forest workers to accept abuse, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation.

### *Majdoori and majboori*

Two *chowkidaars*, Mukesh Sharma and Pradeep Kondar, had been working at one reserve gate for 14 years when I arrived, unusual in such a climate of transfers. Some forest workers saw their honesty as key to their longevity. Others said that it was their dedication and willingness to work for weeks at a time. Whatever the reason, they were an exception. When I started fieldwork, I knew nothing about forest work's poor conditions and low pay, assuming it carried status through its association with wildlife conservation, a form of gainful employment in a region with few opportunities.

So, when I asked Mukesh and Pradeep whether forest work was good work, they laughed and said, "We do *majdoori*, what else?" I was confused. *Majdoori* is used most often to refer to manual labourers, working on construction sites in Panna, or those who migrated to cities far from Panna. Naively, I

had never considered forest work as labouring, seeing their involvement in wildlife conservation as otherwise. I asked, "Please say again, you do *majdoori*?" Pradeep explained that their work was *majdoori*, labouring, working for daily wages and with no job security. It was, to him, equivalent to working as an informal labourer.

Forest workers often equated their *kaam* with labouring (*majdoori*) and contrasted it to forest officers' *naukris*. This distinction did not necessarily rest on working conditions with forest officers share (Behelkar et al. 2020; Dutta 2020). Rather it mostly rested on terms of employment, whereby forest employees held secure government positions with attendant benefits and status while forest workers were paid a daily rate with no job security, progression, benefits and suffered exploitation and discrimination at the bottom of the forest service hierarchy (cf. Parry 2013).

When I asked Rakesh and Mukesh why, considering this, they continued to work as *chowkidaars*, just like Kailash, they invoked the language of *majboori* , explaining that it is only out of compulsion and necessity that they tolerated the exploitation and discrimination. One teenager whose father was a *chowkidaar* complained constantly that "there is no good work in the forest [department]" and when I asked why his father continued, he responded, "how will he feed the family?" I asked forest workers whether the less than INR8,000 rupees per month was enough to feed a family and usually heard, "Dal-roti chalta hai…we get by [lentils-rice continue on]", like how Sodikoff's (2012: 161) interlocutors described their bare minimum payment as "cooked rice wages." Sodikoff and I share the observation that forest work does little to decrease the vulnerabilities forest workers face. As with other labour regimes that exploit dispossessed communities, forest work propagates workers' vulnerability, reinforcing their compulsion and dependence by only providing them with enough to get by, but not build lasting stability.

Thus, it is not only that forest workers are compelled by convergent vulnerabilities to seek out forest work but that the work itself propagates conditions that led to the original compulsion. Of course, not all officers and officials were abusive; many had compassion for forest workers. Some were admired for hard work and good character, and forest workers sometimes explained how they were happy to have regular work; however poor the conditions or pay. However, such situations were exceptional and the use of informality and negotiation within relationships with forest officers only reduce discrimination or exploitation but didn't eliminate it. Even cultural structures like caste, such as when a forest officer was lower in caste than a forest worker, only partly mitigated discrimination but not the inherent precariousness of the work itself.

### Providing work for others: babus

The best-paid forest workers are clerks working in the Forest Department offices. The place of clerks and office staff in Indian bureaucracies is well-addressed in the literature on

bureaucracy in South Asia as brokers and mediators that play a crucial role in the of access groups to state resources (Manor 2000; Berenschot 2010; Witsoe 2012). Those subjects are often government employees, whereas here, I focus on daily wage workers who hold what are considered *kushal* (*kushal*=skilled) positions in the Department offices.

These 'worker *babus*' are distinct from permanent employees at offices in the Division headquarters in Panna and are subject to the same terms of employment as other forest workers. However, in comparison to *chowkidaars* and trackers, their position in the bureaucratic set-up of the Department as skilled workers affords them more regularised hours and decreases their chances of losing work. This is both, because they are perceived to possess specialised skills and knowledge of bureaucratic processes and because of their practices of preference exercised at the intersection of the Forest Department and local communities.

### New guides, old networks

The dissemination of Forest Department information follows a routinised path, placing *babus* (*babus*=clerks) at the interface between headquarters, range offices and communities. From the Field Director to the Senior Clerk to the records office, dispatch ledger and then range officer, a forest order is then transmitted over radio and in writing to the range office, where worker *babus* receive and record it, ready to disseminate to officers, stations or communities. This dissemination is subject to practices of preference exercised by the *babus*, who privilege certain groups, often based on caste or kinship, giving them information before others.

One example is when the Forest Department decided to expand the number of safari guides in Hinauta, opening applications for more positions on the roster. Information came to the Hinauta range office first, dispatched over radio and delivered as a letter. While rumours about such initiatives circulate often, nothing is considered *pukka* (*pukka*=certain/sure) until a physical order arrives at the range office (Cf. Das 2011; Hull 2012; Mathur 2015). However formal the order, the dissemination of the information to the communities unfolds along informal lines of interpersonal preference.

In Hinauta, the *babu* was a forty-year-old Yadav man, Santosh. His nephews were all looking for work, repeatedly applying for *sarkari naukris* or simply 'waiting' (Cf. Jeffrey 2010). While the guiding opportunity was not a *naukri*, it was an opportunity. Information was distributed through interpersonal networks in the village via the *babus*, shifting and transforming as it travelled, stopping, starting and also failing to reach people who may be interested but simply are not prioritised. Santosh contacted his nephews first. One of them told me that out of the 30 applicants from Hinauta, only nine were selected. Eight were Yadavs and four from Santosh's family. The young guide told me, "Yadavs submit more forms."

This is a statement about their access as family members and a comment on relationships between different groups within the village and how categories like caste shape forest work and village-forest relations. As the first recipients of information through networks of communication set along kinship and caste lines, young Yadav men had an advantage. However, the young guide also highlights a greater caste confidence and position of power, which is both expressed within and a consequence of these informal networks. Poorer caste groups are both 'out of the know' and considered less confident and capable of staking their claims. With increasing Yadav involvement in local politics, having Yadav *babus* within the bureaucracy, like the Forest Department, provided better access to forest officials on issues like land tenure or permissions for resource collection.

This is not to say that Adivasis and others do not have any influences of their own, but where that influence leads can correspond to previous positionalities. For example, forest labourers are most often Adivasis and are recruited informally. One senior Kondar woman whom I met, Kushbu, held a position of influence, as a self-designated leader of Kondar forest labourers. Like the *babus*, Kushbu exercised practices of informality and preference at the interface of forest and village, except that the opportunities she has to offer people in her community are temporary and the worst paid. Moreover, her position as a labourer herself is itself precarious, unlike a member of the privileged forest bureaucracy like the *babu* or a regular worker like a *chowkidaar*, and her position as both an Adivasi and a woman likely led to more exploitation and discrimination from forest employees.

However, *babus*' privileged positions do not remove all dimensions of compulsion and obligation entailed within forest work, since *babus* are ultimately obliged and compelled to provide opportunities for wider caste or kinship networks. While not associated with the same vulnerability or exploitation as the language of *majboori* suggested in the previous examples, the demands of *babus*' work further demonstrate the embedded character of forest work in this context and the need to understand both internal and external influences on vulnerability (Cf. Wisner et al. 2004) in analyses of village-forest relations.

### DISCUSSION: VULNERABILITY AND COMPULSION IN FOREST WORK

The accounts of trackers, *chowkidaars*, and *babus* above illuminate dynamics of negotiation and familiarity and dimensions of vulnerability, compulsion and exploitation found in forest work in Panna. Through contrasts between *naukri*, *kaam* and *majdoori* and the language of majboori, they highlight the convergence of vulnerable conditions that lead to and perpetuate within forest work, leaving them open to exploitation. Crucially, securing and doing forest work and even providing it for others, does not mitigate livelihood vulnerabilities for most forest workers. This is due to and situated within three concurrent contexts, each of which de-prioritises the vulnerabilities of forest-dependent peoples and obfuscates their origins of vulnerabilities in conservation itself.

The first context is historical, wherein forest work in India has always been a precarious regime of state-based labour,

exploiting dispossessed and disenfranchised forest-dependent communities (Rangarajan 1996; Locke 2011; Sodikoff 2012). The second context is the contemporary, broader political economy of sparse employment opportunities and mass migration in Panna, caused partially by conservation restrictions. By prohibiting livelihoods, the reserve has led to erosion of established networks within communities that might mitigate these risks and exacerbated caste or kinship divisions between and within communities, competing for diminishing opportunities as they join the "surplus labour force" (Sanyal and Bhattacharya 2009). The final context is Indian conservation more broadly, whereby the state and parts of the wildlife community prioritise the vulnerabilities of tigers over the vulnerabilities of local people, creating a false dichotomy between community prosperity and wildlife protection.

Vulnerability discourses of 'endangered animals at risk from villagers' motivate exclusionary conservation paradigms that undergird local peoples' exploitation as precarious labour, resonating with Choy's (2011) ethnography of environmental politics in Hong Kong where tropes of endangerment and discourses of endangered dolphins, landscapes and culture clash. Such environmentalist discourses of non-human vulnerability are powerful, fuelled by a global network of public, scientific, and policy concerns, prescribing identities and silences that disfavour local people (Brosius 1999; West 2006).

In this article, I have explored the recursive link between different forms of vulnerability and 'compulsion' or obligation through the multi-valent language of *majboori*. For Kailash, a lack of other options and the demands of his family compelled him to return to the poor conditions of forest work. Rakesh, Mukesh and Pradeep tolerated exploitation due to similar obligations and compulsions, through which vulnerabilities perpetuated. Finally, although not quite as precarious, Santosh and other *babus* are compelled to provide work for others in their positions of influence, as was Kushbu, though her influence was weaker, in the most precarious position as a forest labourer.

Thus, the language of *majboori* foregrounds two key observations. Firstly, despite the potential mitigation of familiarity and negotiation, the demands, obligations and inequalities of forest work lead ultimately to the continued precariousness of forest workers' livelihoods. Secondly, the experience of forest work is ultimately situated in local relationships within and between local communities and Forest Departments and the obligations and demands they entail, refracting through structures and categories like caste, kinship and residency. The diversity of backgrounds in case studies presented earlier demonstrate how negative experiences of forest work affect many communities and the inability to generalise based on caste, and while I venture that distinctions between *naukri*, *kaam* and *majdoori* are more consequential for the inequalities and exploitations of forest officer-forest worker relationships than other "structures of domination" (Wisner et al. 2004: 85) like caste, status or political influence via kinship or co-residency this should not diminish the potential impact of such factors on workers' ability to effectively mobilise negotiation and familiarity within those relationships. Nor should it diminish their potential importance in broader village-forest relations or obscure the realities of likely further discrimination against lower caste or Adivasi forest workers.

These multiple dimensions of *majboori* link and move beyond analyses of vulnerability focusing on 'internal' and 'external' factors in relation to risks and hazards (Wisner et al. 2004) or distinctions between 'vulnerability' and 'precarity' (Hann 2018) by grounding it within the sociopolitical complexities of relationships between and within local communities and the Forest Department. What is challenging for forest workers is that they are often caught between multiple compulsions, between obligations to their communities and requirements of their jobs. This happens acutely whenever a forest worker encounters a neighbour or relative contravening forest regulations. While forest workers cannot arrest or prosecute like forest officers, this entangles forest workers in impossible situations. Whenever I asked other villagers about this dilemma, particularly the times when forest workers were complicit in charging their friends or relatives, they would shrug and say, "that is their *majboori*. What can they do?" reaffirming their continued helplessness and precariousness.

## CONCLUSION: FOREST WORKERS AND VILLAGE-FOREST RELATIONS

In this article, I have explored the realities of forest work around Panna Tiger Reserve for locally employed villagers, working for the Forest Department in various daily wage capacities. The case studies highlight dynamics of familiarity, negotiation and exploitation in forest work, and the article prioritises forest workers' own descriptions of their work. Forest workers must constantly negotiate their dual obligations to their communities and the Forest Department. They thus demonstrate the interconnections between 'village' and 'forest' and how crucial actors like forest workers are in the management of political and problematic 'village-forest relations.'

Forest workers, in their unique position, represent a missed opportunity to foster good community relations. In areas where gainful employment is lacking, providing respectable, secure employment via the Forest Department could prove a masterstroke in encouraging local support for conservation. Currently, however, forest workers only do their work out of *majboori*, equating it to labouring. They have no job security or benefits, and discrimination, abuse and exploitation increase their vulnerability. Work on lower-level forest bureaucrats have provided numerous recommendations to improve working conditions for forest guards and forest officers (Vasan 2006; Fleischman 2012). Here, I would like to add to these recommendations to include the plight of forest workers.

Personnel management training is available to forest officers from the rank of ranger, but it is often lower ranked forest

guards and clerks who are involved in the daily management of forest labourers and forest workers, interacting with village communities around protected areas. These officers are most influential in local communities, but their low level of support, resources and recognition by the senior management and bureaucracy make attempts at community relations difficult. Their ability to work with forest workers and labourers beyond coercive means that exploit vulnerability shouldn't depend on individual personalities. It ought to be a product of professional training.

Forest workers are the unsung heroes of conservation and deserve more support, resources and recognition by senior forest management, the bureaucracy and the wider conservation community. They ought to receive better wages, reasonable working conditions, job security and additional benefits, including pensions, healthcare and insurance. They place themselves at risk for conservation in India and yet are exploited, disillusioned and under-recognised. Until and unless conservation employment is understood as good work with equitable outcomes for local people as well as conservation, forest workers' potential at the interface of village and forest will remain untapped and local support for conservation will remain low. Providing gainful employment for local people and a sense of security and inclusion within conservation efforts is an obvious and necessary change to improve relationships with local people in Indian conservation as well as a step towards basic decency for the rural poor.

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