

Relocated tigers and relocated villagers: ferality and human-animal entanglement in Indian conservation

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Abstract

This article will examine state intervention into the lives of tigers and people living in and around Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, Central India. It explores how over a decade after a reintroduction project has rebuilt the tiger population from extinction and the central government launched a new compensation scheme to relocate villagers away from the national park, relocated tigers and not-yet relocated villagers resist and challenge conservation interventions to eradicate human life in Panna Tiger Reserve and (re)construct it as a wild tiger landscape. It will show how discourses of conservation and development that motivate state intervention seek to depoliticise and obfuscate programmes of control over human and tiger lives through their separation and purported ‘care’, contiguous with colonial policies and discursive practices which have intertwined the fate of wild animals and forest-dependent villagers in this part of India. In their feral subversions against these interventions, relocated tigers and not-yet relocated villagers expose the problematic contradictions and tensions that plague animal management, wildlife conservation and rural development in India today. Based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, the article draws on case studies and accounts from communities living around Panna Tiger Reserve as alternatives to colonial and postcolonial discursive legitimisations of state intervention and control, revealing alternate understandings of the entanglement of humans and animals and the categories of ‘wild’ and ‘tame’.

Keywords: India, conservation, human-animal relations, state, postcolonial, wild

Introduction

Along the Amanganj road, about ten kilometres outside of Panna Town in Madhya Pradesh, there is a forest *chowki* (station) at Akola. The *chowki* is distinct in its grey and green, the range name and tower number painted in white Hindi across its wall next to the doorway. A barrier stands at attention, to be lowered when a *chowkidaar* (forest watcher) or forest ranger takes his post. The barrier, when lowered, rests across a road leading to the West, towards the core of Panna Tiger Reserve passing through a handful of villages, the first of which is Jardhoba. Although it is ‘forest land’, the sides of the road leading to Jardhoba are covered with *Lantana camara* bushes, an invasive species brought to India by the British as ornamental flowers but native to South America. The lantana obscures the roadsides to Jardhoba, dominating the landscape until, two kilometres later, it gives way to farmland, enclosed fields and village homes, livestock in their pens and shopkeepers resting from the hot sun or playing cards.

Jardhoba is a large village, split into three different neighbourhoods: one dominated by members of the Sahu and Kallar castes, traditionally oil and alcohol tradesmen, another by tribal Gonds, traditionally farmers and gatherers of timber and non-timber forest products, and another by Yadavs, traditionally semi-nomadic pastoralists, previously reliant on the vast forest lands to graze their buffaloes and cows. At the edge of the village, overlooking a cliff which leads down into the forest is an old hunting lodge, used previously by the Panna royal family and their guests, now in disrepair and often visited by tourists. It was members of the royal family who founded Panna National Park in 1981 in the forests which border Jardhoba, and since then the forest lands on which many villagers depended have been closed. Encroachment and any livelihoods based on the forest have been made illegal. Protected areas in India like National Parks are designated with the intention of preserving and protecting flora and fauna to the exclusion of human settlement and activity in the same area. Local people become

‘disturbances’ and their livelihoods a ‘threat’ to the forest and its non-human inhabitants (cf. Choy 2011). Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Project Tiger Reserves, of which Panna is India’s 22nd (notified in 1994), set aside for India’s national animal and an apex symbol of conservation worldwide, the Bengal Tiger. The forests bordering Jardhoba form part of Panna Tiger Reserve’s (PTR) core area, a critical tiger habitat and an inviolate zone supposed to be free of villagers like those living in Jardhoba.

In November 2020, Panna Tiger Reserve was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve as part of the Man and Biosphere programme. One key objective for the Man and Biosphere programme is to improve the relationship between people and environment and ‘contribute to building sustainable, healthy and equitable societies, economies and thriving human settlements in harmony with the biosphere’ (UNESCO 2017, 17). The accounts described in this article point to a long history of state intervention towards contrasting outcomes and undergirded by contradictory discourses, namely the removal and further marginalisation and vilification of human settlements and communities within and around the biosphere. Villagers and tigers appear not to be allowed to flourish together (cf. Ginn et al. 2014) in this instance of Indian conservation. Instead, they are meant to be separated, removed from the purported threats they pose to the other’s lives and livelihoods, which make it, as Rashkow (2018) has described in Pachmari, another Biosphere reserve in the same state, ‘entirely unclear how such high-minded ideals are being implemented or achieved’ (Rashkow 2018, 153).

While tigers are prioritised, villagers are asked to move, compensated to leave the areas where they have lived, often once their livelihoods have been significantly curtailed and they are left without any other options. Since 2008, the Government of India (GoI) has set up compensation schemes for villages to be relocated away from National Parks and Tiger Reserves, and in parks like PTR, many villagers have accepted the terms. The rate of village relocation increased after the mid-2000s in Panna following a crisis leading to the local

extinction of the tiger population by 2009. Since then, the Forest Department has implemented a successful reintroduction programme, moving tigers from other reserves to Panna, placing radio-collars on them and tracking them around the clock. However, as the tiger population has (re)grown, the number of villages accepting compensation has not, village relocation slowing significantly.

Since the revival of Panna's tiger population, tourist traffic to PTR has increased, new hotels have been constructed, and more tour groups from across India and abroad now include Panna in their itineraries. Yet it remains unpopular for many professional 'wild-lifers' and photographers. Some of this is due to the reputation of the other, more famous reserves. Some is due to the hilly terrain and challenge of navigating the plateaus at the end of the Vindhya hills where Panna is found. The steep inclines and dense bamboo and teak forests, the dry heat of the summer when the leaves have fallen and the sun beats harshly through the canopy do not always make for pleasant safaris. However, much of it has to do with the tigers themselves. In Panna, tigers sighted easily in the tourist zones often have radio-collars: large, clunky things that hang around their necks, transmitting a tracking signal to roving teams. The collars serve as reminders of Panna's past tragedy and don't look good in photographs. Symbols of the anti-wild, the tame and domesticated, they are one reason why many wildlifers choose to skip Panna and why visitors question exactly how 'wild' these new tigers are.

Examining the interventions of Indian forestry and conservation in the lives of tigers and forest-dwelling villagers, this article explores how these relocated tigers and not-yet-relocated villagers in Panna refuse and contest ascribed discourses of 'wildness' and 'tameness'. It illuminates how paternalistic narratives of 'development' or 'conservation' seek to obfuscate what are essentially programmes of state control over tigers, people and their lives which entangle human and animal histories through the creation of wild and non-wild spaces and the separation and control of wild and tame subjects. It contends that attempts to control and

remove forest-dwelling villagers from ‘wild again landscapes’ in favour of ‘wild again tigers’ are contiguous with colonial and post-Independence discourses of hunting, forestry and conservation and the state intertwining of human and animal histories in Panna. The ferality of the collared tigers, in their not-not-wildness (Cf. Willerslev 2004), and the villagers in their refusal to leave their ancestral homes is ‘a subversive force’ (Garrard 2014, 244) that disrupts these state programmes, exposing, in moments of disjunction, the internal discursive contradictions and harms of Indian wildlife management and conservation.

Historical precedents: taming wild India

During the British Raj in India, hunting, forestry and conservation became important mechanisms through which colonialists not only established control over large areas of land and different groups of people (Rangarajan 1996), but it came to express or symbolise various forms of masculinity, civilisation, patronage, benevolence and gentlemanliness (Schell 2007; Sramek 2006; Thompsell 2015).¹ In particular, some scholars have focused on the role of *shikar* (hunting) in British and Mughal times in India as a form of benevolent control or ‘predatory care’ (Pandian 2001), a way to build the reputation of colonial officers as skilled hunters and also protectors of local people from both ‘man-eating’ wild animals and ‘cruel’ local rulers (Skaria 1998; Mandala 2018; Pandian ibid.). Thus, hunting, forestry and conservation were about ‘taming and protecting wild India’ both in the sense of a particular understanding of nature and wilderness (Cf. Cronon 1995) which justified the seizure and exploitation of forest

¹ The relationships between imperialism, the environment, conservation, hunting and notions of wildness, wilderness and civilization have been subject to much scholarly attention across many parts of the world, particularly India and Africa during British rule (Arnold and Guha 1995; Beinart 2003; Boomgard 2001; Drayton 2000; Grove 1995; Hughes 2013; MacKenzie 1988; Rangarajan 2000; 1996; Storey 1991; Thompsell 2015).

land and resources across the country, and in the sense of taming and/or protecting Indians that colonialists considered ‘wild’ or ‘unruly’ subjects.

This applied to both local rulers who colonialists were hoping to overthrow and local people whose livelihoods or ways of life impeded imperial projects of accumulation and exploitation but who required their ‘predatory care’ (Pandian 2001). Forest-dependent peoples were seen as an impediment to British aspirations in scientific forestry and natural resource exploitation through their practices of shifting cultivation and the collection of untaxed timber and non-timber forest products. This was clear in the sudden and drastic criminalisation of forest-dependent livelihoods in favour of taxable forms of sedentary agriculture through legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gadgil and Guha 1995; Rangarajan 1996), a process Rashkow identifies (2018) as ‘moving towards the utter destitution of many [forest-dependent and tribal] communities [...] culminating in the near eradication of forest-based ways of life and livelihoods’ (Rashkow 2018, 154).

British notions of ‘wildness’ at the time could easily map onto the lifestyles and livelihoods of forest-dependent people, underlay by conceptions of ‘primitive tribespeople’ and ‘wild men’ (see Dudley and Novak 1972 for an exploration into conceptions of the ‘wild man’ in European culture). Skaria (1997) argues, adapting from Fabian (1983), that ‘colonial constructs of tribes’ (Skaria 1997, 727) involved an anachronistic relationship with time which ranked societies in relation to one another, creating *‘in the present’* a universal taxonomy of primitives, and more broadly of various societies’ (Skaria 1997, 728, italics original). This taxonomy situated Europeans above all and relegated those dependent on ‘lower’ forms of subsistence, such as forest-dependent peoples, to lower rungs of ‘primitive’ and ‘wild’, the conceptual inferior to ‘the modern’ or ‘civilised’ (Fabian 1983; Kuper 1988). Such hierarchies led British administrators to automatically label many forest-dependent and hunting-dependent groups as ‘wild tribes’, even designating some forest-dwelling, nomadic hunting tribes as ‘criminal

tribes' through legislation in 1871 in efforts to eradicate their way of life. The European association of forests, and uncultivated land more broadly, with 'wildness' and 'wilderness' reinforced this (Skaria 1997, 731). Therefore, the civilising mission of the colonial government found an appropriate expression in colonial forestry programmes and the curtailment and criminalisation of forest-dependent livelihoods in favour of more 'civilised' sedentary agriculture for those considered 'before or outside' civilisation. As Pandian writes, 'projects of regulated resource extraction were a feature of colonial governmentality, premised on the management of natural resources and the cultivation of disciplined and industrious subjects' (Pandian 2001, 85).

Heavily forested areas far from large administrative centres like Panna were clear examples of areas considered criminal, wild and uncivilised and 'in need' of British administration (Bhukya 2013). This was due to both conceptions of wild tribes and their view of local landowning elites and rulers. Through forestry and hunting, colonial officials 'appropriated the figure of the Oriental despot [...], depicting themselves as more caring and responsible sovereigns' (Pandian 2001, 81). Hunting also became a way of 'policing and subjugating rebel or troublesome territories' (Mandala 2018,11) or forging political alliances with submissive local rulers (Hughes 2013). Sramek (2006) argues that in hunting tigers, the British both sought to emulate other rulers and symbolically stage their defeat. This points to the discursive comparisons that colonial rulers made between 'savage beasts' like tigers and 'wild subjects' like forest-dependent peoples and how instrumental hunting and forestry were to 'taming' both under imperial control.

However, the comparison between tigers and colonial subjects did not rest only on the supposedly violent and unruly characteristics of both. While the hunting of tigers may have symbolically staged the defeat of local rulers, the admiration expressed by hunters for tigers echoes the views that many officials held of 'wild tribes'. Skaria (1997) notes the emphasis

that colonial officials place on wild tribes as noble, independent, truthful and fearlessly masculine, particularly in comparison with ‘castes’ in the plains who were often feminised and considered deceptive and dishonest. The Enlightenment ideal of the ‘noble savage’ with its implications of egalitarianism and harmony with nature in existing ‘before’ or ‘outside’ civilisation encouraged the occasional forgiveness of misdemeanours as ‘they didn’t know any better’. Colonial officers, he argues, saw themselves and their characteristics of public schoolboy mischief and inherent nobility reflected in so-called wild tribesmen. As self-appointed superiors, it was the job of the officers to guide them, and ‘[p]aternalistic protection was needed because simple, straightforward men like the wild tribes were lamentably prone to being deceived by plains merchants and traders, as well as by plains powers like the Rajput states’ (Skaria 1997, 736). This does not mean that tribal people were not brutally oppressed but rather that colonial officials justified their rule through their discursive infantilization and admiration of qualities they saw in themselves.

Similarly, scholars have noted the later British hunter-cum-conservationists’ admiration for tigers and the respect they had for a noble and royal beast, equating their own masculinity with the tiger’s power. Schell (2007) writes, ‘The hunters’ sense of kinship with tigers was infused with a nascent conviction that masculinity itself was essentially predatory’ (Schell 2007, 230). Hunters regularly described tigers as intelligent, discriminatory and even as gentlemen. This was often in comparison to themselves, but along the same discursive lines as descriptions of ‘noble wild tribes’. They even went so far as to suggest that tigers shunned rotting meat and held noble taste, with an appreciation for beef (cattle), something they shared with Englishmen and perhaps the ‘wild tribes’, but not with Hindu villagers in the plains. Famous hunters like Jim Corbett described a hunt as a kind of boxing match, a face-off between intelligent and noble foes. These preoccupations with the hunt as a gentleman’s and ‘gentleman-making’ sport alongside growing concerns about depleting wildlife, blamed on reckless, uncivilised and

indiscriminate shooting by villagers and local rulers and fuelled by animal welfare activism back in Britain and in the colonies, led to early conservation efforts. This was mostly in the form of stricter rules on hunting; yet another way to control and limit the sovereignty of local rulers as well as a way to preserve game for colonialists to hunt (Mandala 2018). Thus, discourses that suggested the need for colonial foresters and hunters to tame a noble but lesser animal in a tiger resonated with the ways that officials spoke about the need to civilise noble but lesser peoples in ‘wild tribes’.

Forestry and conservation, from its earliest forms in colonial India, were thus preoccupied with taming ‘wild India’ and taming ‘wild Indians’; analogies made between tigers and people to legitimise direct intervention and state control of land, resources and people, refracted through and towards particular notions of ‘wildness’ and ‘civilisation’. This has entangled the histories of Indian animals and people in areas where the state has sought to exert control over both through their separation and categorisation (cf. Candeia et al. 2015). We will see in what follows that contemporary conservation and forestry in Panna justifies intervention into tiger and village lives through similar discursive strategies, since ‘for better or worse, conservation laws have bound [villagers’] futures to those of wild animals’ (Govindarajan 2018, 127). I seek to build on this scholarship that has highlighted particular colonial entanglements of human and animal histories that continue in post-colonial conservation in India by highlighting the subversive ferality of relocated tigers and not-yet relocated villagers found in moments of disjunction (cf. Govindarajan 2018; Jalais 2010; Mathur 2015).

Wild Panna in crisis

Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) is probably best known for the loss of the local tiger population to poaching and mismanagement in 2009. Despite the warnings of researchers and

conservationists, the Panna and Madhya Pradesh Forest Departments failed to prevent the disappearance of the area's tigers, the second such crisis in India after Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan lost its tigers in 2004 (Shahabuddin et al. 2007). The decline of the tiger population started in 2002, and repeated denials by forest officials, falsified wildlife surveys and smear campaigns against those raising alarm bells prevented any successful intervention to stop Panna's tigers either leaving the landscape or being poached from it. In the years preceding the local extinction, the Forest Department simply refused to accept the reality of the conservation crisis. The results were devastating with the population crashing from almost thirty to exactly zero in six short years.

In this landscape of wild tigers and densely populated forest areas, local people and 'meddling researchers' became clear targets of blame for Forest Department officials, their actions considered unruly and uncontrolled. Instead of policing the reserve by enforcing regulations or engaging with communities that may have been involved with poaching, the Forest Department retracted research permissions for those most concerned and vocal about Panna's decline, drastically restricting their movements and ability to conduct research. The officials cited 'tourist disturbance' as justification for withdrawing and restricting permissions. As it had been researchers keeping track of the tigers through radio-collar telemetry, when researchers' movements were restricted, the animals' movements and whereabouts were increasingly unknown. Without more vigilant patrolling or increased protection to match, by the time a proper investigation was launched in 2008, it was too late, and Panna was devoid of tigers by the end of that year (Chundawat 2018).

In the final government report on the disappearance of Panna's tigers, the Special Investigation Team (2009) note the high number of wildlife crimes in the region in the years leading to the crisis. It explains how there were dacoits (bandits) operating and living in the forests between April 2006 and July 2008, listing all wildlife crime incidents between 1995

and 2009, citing ‘poaching [as] a major cause of tiger extinction in Panna TR’ (Special Investigation Team 2009, 13). The report describes Panna as a ‘conflict-ridden landscape with...trigger happy fringe villages and poaching by local communities’ (Special Investigation Team 2009, 9). It places direct blame on organised criminal gangs as well as nomadic hunting tribes such as Bahelias and Pardhis, groups classified as criminal tribes by the British colonial government, regularly blamed for poaching across India and once labelled the ‘number one threat to wildlife as well as to the tiger population in MP’ by former Panna Field Director and subsequent Additional Principal Chief Conservation of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden for Madhya Pradesh, HS Pabla (Press Trust of India 2008).

Their continued stigmatisation and ostracisation make employment and education challenging for Pardhis and other traditionally hunting and nomadic communities (Dutt 2019). The report focuses repeatedly on failed attempts by the Forest Department to assimilate and ‘rehabilitate’ the children of Pardhi and Bahelia families through resettlement, education or social welfare. It cites 2007-2009 as the main period of activity for the resettlement of Pardhi families out of the forest to a temporary settlement at Gandhigram and the construction of a hostel for Pardhi children. This included the involvement of NGOs, who still support and operate numerous programmes aimed at creating alternative livelihoods for the community.² However, conservationists and forest officials deemed the efforts a failure (see Pabla 2019 for a unique insider account).

Alongside the Pardhis and Bahelias, other villagers living in and around the reserve are similarly vilified in this final report as rule-breaking, disruptive neighbours to the reserve and its animal inhabitants. This includes the Yadav, Gond and Kondar communities I spent time with during fieldwork in Panna. Gonds and Kondars are named as tribal groups in the report,

² These initiatives are supported primarily by the Last Wilderness Foundation. Visit <https://thelastwilderness.org/projects/> for more details.

described as part-time hunters of everything from wild boar and deer to tigers and leopards. During this period, the Forest Department also focused on removing hundreds of cattle from inside the reserve, where villagers around its edges have historically released herds during challenging summer and monsoon months, directly implicating communities like the Yadavs. Thus, the report articulates a sense of Panna as a wild and unruly landscape outside of the reaches of institutions of authority, a trope common to forested and tribally inhabited areas of India (Yadav 2018), echoing views expressed in colonial accounts of Panna's forests and resources and the region more broadly as a lawless and wild area (Bhukya 2017; 2013).

This crisis and the government's reaction to it highlighted both the inability of the Forest officials to perform their duty of care towards Panna's tigers and to regulate the actions of criminals entering the jungle or local communities around its edges. These characterisations contrast starkly with the portrayal of harmony between communities and environment described in the manifesto of the Man and Biosphere programme that Panna Tiger Reserve has now joined, only a decade later. Following the crisis, politicians and forest officials reinforced the need to manage unruly, wild people within and, if possible, away from landscapes that have been set aside as wilderness. Behind the condemnations of management and local people are conceptualisations of both unruly, wild and 'uncivilised' communities in need of 'rehabilitation' and control and an ideal, inviolate and protected wilderness free from human disturbance where wild nature is allowed to flourish and yet also needs the strict care and protection of the state to do so.

Thus, the Panna tiger crisis was a crisis of 'wildness' and one which exposed the discursive contradictions of wildlife management in places like tiger reserves. Protecting and preserving 'wild nature' requires exactly that which is condemned as contaminating 'wildness' - drastic and disturbing human intervention on the lives and landscapes of wild subjects. Morally charged accusations refracted through state discourses of civilisation and 'backwardness'

amongst India's forest-dependent populations drive the programmes of intervention aimed at controlling and taming wildness in the form of poachers and 'trigger-happy fringe villagers'. In their reports and assessments, agencies of the state reinforced the need for greater state control.³ According to its own assessment, the state had failed to tame wild Indians to protect wild tigers.

My interlocutors in villages around the edge of the tiger reserve similarly saw negligence, or *laaparavaahee*, and the discursive contradictions surrounding the tigers' 'wildness' at the root of Panna's tiger crisis, however in a slightly different way from the official reports. I chose to discuss the loss of the old tigers with very few people during fieldwork, simply as many were still sore from accusations that the Forest Department had lobbied against local communities. I presented myself as someone not researching the tigers as that was considered 'government work', and therefore I never directly enquired about wildlife management or the tiger crisis in early conversations with people. Only after months of fieldwork, when it was clear that I was not from the Forest Department or from another government agency or NGO investigating local communities, when distrust and doubt had somewhat abated, did I broach the topic of why the old tigers disappeared.

After some months of fieldwork, I asked the Sarpanch (head of village council) of a village near to the tiger reserve what had happened to the old tigers. He described to me that he was called to a meeting following the local extinction, in which he was asked whether he had any information about the poaching. He explained then, as he did to me a few years later, that, in his words, '*Hum vaise tarah...we aren't those kinds of people. We don't have the courage to hunt.*' In his large room in the village, he explained that the authorities had sent him on his way, and there had never been any connection established between his village and the poaching

³ Most keenly expressed by the reaction of the state to the loss of tigers in Sariska, rather than in Panna, where paramilitaries were brought in to forcibly relocate villages and protect tigers that were not there (Shahbuddin et al. 2007).

of Panna's tigers. I asked him tentatively whether he knew what had happened. He took a long pause and started to describe the early days of the park, when wildlife researchers and foresters arrived to study the tigers. They placed radio collars on the tigers in order to track them and to him, this was key to the tigers' disappearance and indicative of what he considered the Forest Department's contradictory practices of 'care and control' over supposedly wild animals.⁴

He said,

'*Un researchwale aur forestwale* ...those researchers and foresters put the collars and then left them. They don't check the collar on the tiger. They don't look for cuts or infections. They aren't there every day. It's not possible. You see, we are Yadavs, we have livestock- buffaloes and cows. We also put collars on our animals, a rope with a bell, so we can hear when they come home. Every day we look at our animals and check the rope is correct. We can see if it is too tight or too loose, whether there are any cuts or infections. And if there are, we treat them with medicine. They don't do that. They don't take care of the tigers.'

For him, by intervening in the lives and on the bodies of the tigers to the extent that they did, the Forest Department failed to care for tigers fully, treating them as 'wild' when in fact, human interventions perhaps suggested otherwise.

The question of care and contradiction surrounding the supposed 'wildness' of tigers in India is therefore a concern not only for the state and the broader conservation community, but also for people living around conservation areas. This is particularly true when their lives are disrupted through accusations of poaching and disturbance during a crisis such as Panna's. Unlike the state, the local people I spoke with saw the loss of Panna's tigers not as justification for further control over people and animals, but rather as an example of the broader contradictions in wildlife management and the inability to reconcile 'wildness' and the intense intervention on the lives, bodies and movements of 'wild animals'. However, the reaction to

⁴ Cf. Singleton (2010) on the place of control and care in analyses of human-animal relationships, farming and animal husbandry.

the crisis and the actions of the state in the aftermath, were, in their eyes, typical- an intensification of state intervention through the restoration of Panna as a wild tiger landscape and the diminution and eradication of ‘human disturbance’ in the form of local communities.

Relocating tigers and relocating villagers

An ambitious project to repopulate Panna with tigers began in early 2009 under the guidance of a new Field Director, Mr. R.S. Murthy. Following the previous request for translocation and the urgency of the situation, two parks were nominated to send tigresses to Panna. The first tigress, T1, came from Bandhavgarh National Park, and the then-Field Director in Bandhavgarh commissioned a three-month behavioural study to determine her suitability for translocation. The proposed translocation was met with resistance, particularly from members of the tourism industry who did not see why Bandhavgarh should have to pay for Panna’s mistakes. However, the study continued and T1 was translocated to Panna in March 2009 along with T2 from Kanha Tiger Reserve, whose move was also protested.⁵ With Panna declared officially devoid of tigers only just before this translocation, the comprehensive project plans were drawn up in September 2009 to relocate four females and two males in total to re-build Panna’s tiger population.

Relocating a tiger: T1

Relocating a tiger is by no means a simple process and requires expert knowledge and logistical and bureaucratic know-how. Firstly, scientists must ‘specify’ (cf. Choy 2011) an individual

⁵ Anon, ‘Tigress translocated to Panna tiger reserve’, *Economic Times Online*, published online on 09 March 2009, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/environment/flora-fauna/tigress-trans-located-to-panna-tiger-reserve/articleshow/4245691.cms>, [accessed 10 October 2021].

suitable for the relocation. As in the case of T1, this can involve months of study and analysis, making sure that, in her case, she would adapt well to the different climate, vegetation, terrain and prey species found in her new home. In studying T1, scientists became familiar with what she ate, where she rested, how far she moved, how often she drank, her comfort levels with humans and even her mating behaviours. This intimate knowledge of the tiger built a profile to share with the receiving group of foresters, vets and scientists once the relocation happened. In Panna, this meant identifying a part of the reserve where T1 would be released, where she could be protected and treated if necessary and successfully habituated to her new conditions. They built a large enclosure on the site of the first relocated village, Badagadi, and waited with uncertainty.

In addition to this, in order to move a tiger, one has to negotiate the complex bureaucratic procedures for relocating an animal of such high priority and with such stringent protection measures, gaining permissions from various authorities at the state and national level in accordance with increasingly layered wildlife protection laws, answerable at all times to the national and international conservation community should something go wrong. PTR was fortunate in this respect for two reasons. Firstly, the translocation of tigers would take place within a single state: Madhya Pradesh. This meant that the Head Office in Bhopal could act as the Headquarters for the entire exercise, and, in theory, procedural mechanisms would function along the same lines in Panna as they would in Bandhavgarh and Kanha. Secondly, there had already been attempts to relocate tigers to Sariska once the population crashed there in 2004, and the team in Panna could learn from their mistakes, knowing that the successful translocation of tigers via airlift and/or truck was possible. However, the shortcomings of the Sariska relocations put extra pressure on Panna to get this one right. In addition to the bureaucratic and legal procedures, the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department also had to arrange the complicated logistics of transporting a live, wild tiger for hundreds of kilometres in a

container, either by helicopter or truck, and provide logistical support for attendant officials, scientists and press all within a specific time frame set by the procedure of the actual tranquilisation and movement of the animal.

Finally, such an exercise requires very specific scientific and technical understandings of tiger biology and radio-collar technology to successfully tranquillise, medically treat, collar, transport and wake up an adult, wild Bengal tiger.⁶ Taking nothing away from the skill of the team in PTR, they were fortunate in this respect as well, particularly since Dr. Raghu Chundawat had pioneered many necessary techniques in the decades preceding in his research into tiger movement and behaviour with the old, deceased or disappeared Panna population. Locating a tiger is fairly difficult in a dense jungle like those in Bandhavgarh and Kanha, let alone getting a close-enough position, with a clear-enough view on top of a steady-enough elephant to shoot a tranquilliser dart from a handheld rifle to strike the shoulder or hind legs of an individual animal. One must be a good shot and get the dosage exactly right in order for the tranquilliser to be successful. A miscalculation could be fatal, either for the animal, if too strong, or the vet and staff, if too weak.

While this enormous operation to reintroduce tigers to the Panna landscape was taking place, villagers living within or near Panna Tiger Reserve faced increasing pressure to leave their ancestral homes. After the outcry that followed the mass eviction of around 300,000 forest-dependent peoples between 2002 and 2004 (Bijoy 2008) and subsequent passing of the Forest Rights Act into law in 2006 (Bandi 2014; Sarker 2011), the Government of India launched a new scheme in 2008 to compensate villagers for leaving protected areas, replacing piecemeal and inconsistent legislation in a handful of states. Although the main aim of the Forest Rights

⁶ For brief summaries on the science of animal translocation, see Craven et al. (1998); Fernandez et al. (2003); Letty et al. (2007); Massei et al. (2010). Also see https://ntca.gov.in/assets/uploads/guidelines/translocation_protocol.pdf for the specific national scientific protocols for tiger translocation in India.

Act was to address the historical injustices faced by forest-dwelling populations and recognise their contribution to the sustainability of forests, and this scheme was intended to offer rightful compensation for ‘voluntary’ relocation, in Panna, its convergence with the tiger crisis only served to further fuel and embolden the Forest Department in their efforts to remove forest-dwelling populations from the landscape. Just as the final extinction of Panna’s tigers in 2008 was not a singular event but rather the culmination of years of negligence and mismanagement, the new scheme was but the most recent chapter in a long history of sustained pressure on communities to move.

Throughout the early 2000s, as Panna’s tiger population declined, for those living deep inside the core area of the park, tightening rules and regulations were making life more and more difficult. Once Panna was notified as a national park and then a tiger reserve, rules banning gathering, grazing, felling and swidden agriculture grew stricter, the presence of the Forest Department spread across the landscape and the ability to transport forest goods out of the park for commercial sale in surrounding towns and villages disappeared almost entirely. Facing the prospect of more regulations on quickly diminishing livelihood opportunities and the possibility of some compensation from the Forest Department, villages debated whether and how they would move outside of the park.

Relocating (part of) a village: Jhalar

Jhalar was one such village, located 24km from my main study village Hinauta towards the east, deep within the core area of PTR. The village sprawled across an open grassland in the forest, bordered by the sharp rise of the Talgaon plateau to the north. Yadav and Adivasi communities comprised the majority of residents in Jhalar, and they relied on dairy products and the collection and sale of forest produce in the near-by town of Amanganj and in villages

like Hinauta, a key entry point for PTR and the headquarters of one of Panna's six ranges. Just south of Jhalar, down a steep and winding path through bamboo and teak forest was Sakra, where Jhalar residents kept agricultural fields along the east bank of the Ken River. The fields in Sakra were said to be some of the most productive in the entire jungle, sprouting *quintals*⁷ of high mustard and wheat crops each year without fail due to the fertility of the soil near the riverbank, coming up on their own, *aapne aapse*. Villagers would toss handfuls of seed across the land, into the fertile soil, scattering them freely, since wherever they landed, they would sink into the riverbank soil, sprouting fast and rising eventually to overlook the river. That was unless the myriad of waterfowl, common mynas, asian pied starlings, rose-ringed parakeets and yellow-footed green pigeons didn't swoop in to disrupt the process. Although crop depredation from sambar and spotted deer, wild boar and *nilgai* antelope was an issue for Jhalar farmers like everywhere else in Panna, the speed at which crops would grow and regrow meant that losses were managed. The surrounding jungle was full of *mahua* and *achar* trees, which they collected to sell or convert into oil, local liquor or chutneys and pickles.

Life this far into the jungle wasn't ideal though and came with its challenges, particularly since the closest places with a secondary school, medical facilities, electricity and access to the main town via bus were Hinauta and Amanganj, both over twenty kilometres away. Once the national park encompassed Jhalar and Sakra, an already challenging life became increasingly impossible to sustain. The number of young unmarried men increased, as outside families were not prepared to send their daughters to live in such a remote and underdeveloped place. The ban on infrastructural development in the core area of the reserve all but smothered the possibility of developing facilities, supplying electricity or improving roads.⁸

⁷ 1 quintal = 100kg

⁸ The literature on village relocation in India has noted this important point; that life inside the forest should not be idealised or fetishised. Motivations to leave forested areas for more economically prosperous and better serviced areas can be strong in some communities and are not simply the result of Forest Department pressure

Herders and gatherers faced a series of impossible decisions about their livelihoods. For those with sufficient land, they could set some aside to graze their animals, but for those without, they risked fines and jail by grazing their animals outside of village land in the surrounding *jungle*. For those unwilling to risk punishment for gathering forest produce for commercial sale, something increasingly likely as checkpoints and watchtowers proliferated, migrant labour became one of a handful of viable options. Disputes broke out between those with and without land, as ‘landless’ animals wandered into fields, eating crops and destroying plants and trees. Landowners with diminishing returns clashed with herders without anywhere to graze their animals, causing rifts within families and tension across the community. Such situations led to the proliferation of ‘feral cattle’ within the reserve, as described in the Special Investigation Report following the crisis, since ‘landless’ cattle were often found where villagers simply had nowhere to graze them, released into the surrounding jungle. State intervention to ‘care for’ and ‘protect’ a wild landscape and wild animals had forced forest-dwelling villagers to deny care and protection to animals around which they had built their traditional livelihoods. The residents of Jhalar, like so many villages within the reserve, faced a difficult choice: to leave their homes or risk the possibility that more and more livelihood restrictions would ultimately extinguish their way of life.

In 2003, forest officials offered Jhalar the chance to accept compensation to move out of the jungle and settle elsewhere. Poorer residents, in favour of accepting, argued that it was the only way of rebuilding their life, challenged by neighbours and friends who believed that their life was satisfactory in the jungle and compensation might improve in the years to come. Arguments intensified and came to a head, and within a year of the initial meeting a group of

(Agrawal and Redford 2009; Beazley 2011; 2009; Ghate and Beazley 2007; Kabra 2013; 2009; Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2006).

55 Yadav and Raj-Gond families decided to split from the village and accept the compensation, leaving their homes, the productive fields of Sakra and their fellow villagers behind.

Former Jhalar residents told me that the proposed compensation at the time consisted of two hectares of land per adult plus additional INR 235,000 and small amount for any previous land in Jhalar and Sakra greater than the two hectares already offered. The Forest Department identified a few areas for resettlement, far outside the forest and each family was left to choose where they went, effectively dividing the community even further. Former Jhalar residents who settled in the village of Janwar to the east of Panna told me that they were satisfied with their land and the minimal infrastructure built by the Forest Department but only ever saw INR 35,000 of the promised cash compensation, the rest deducted by the Forest Department for “transport and building costs”, disappearing into the records of the forest bureaucracy and never making it to accounts of the relocated villagers.

When the Government of India launched the new compensation scheme in 2008, far away in the national capital, it was too late for the departed 55 families to reap any benefits. The rest of Jhalar village relocated the following year, taking advantage of the new scheme. The new scheme gave relocating villages two options, both based on a budget of INR 10 lakh⁹ per person. In the first, the local Forest Department relocates and resettles a village in its entirety, as a whole. Each family receives a plot of two hectares on the new site and the Forest Department is required to build housing, wells, roads, electricity, a medical clinic and a school at the new site. This bears a resemblance to the compensation accepted by the first Jhalar group. In the second option, each family receives INR 10 lakh in cash and the Forest Department provides no land or infrastructure wherever they decide to move, leaving villagers free to resettle wherever they like. If villagers would like to be compensated for land

⁹ 1 lakh= 100,000

or any other property, the total amount of each individual package can be reduced, and the freed-up funds distributed accordingly. In both cases, a family includes ‘a person, his or her spouse, minor sons, unmarried daughters, minor brothers, unmarried sisters, father, mother and other relatives residing with him or her and dependent on him or her for their livelihood; includes ‘nuclear family’ consisting of a person, his or her spouse and minor children’ (NTCA 2010: 18).¹⁰

Just as relocating a tiger is a long and detailed process, based on accounts gathered in 19 villages during fieldwork, relocating hundreds of villagers is not straightforward. First, Forest Department officials hold an open meeting with the village. Usually the Field Director of the reserve, the Assistant Director of the range where the village is found, the ranger in charge of that particular section of the range as well as the forest guards and deputy rangers that patrol the area on a regular basis are present. Occasionally, such meetings may also include members of the local bureaucracy from the District Collector’s office or members of the *Zila Panchayat* (District Council). The officials outline the two options available to the villagers, explaining in detail what that would mean.

Often these meetings are also a chance for officials to justify the relocation to the villagers, expounding upon discourses of development and state benevolence and care, framing their attempts to move villagers as a form of paternalistic goodwill for the betterment of their lives. Villagers are told about the hardships of their lives that they already know and how relocating can offer them access to services, facilities, opportunities and stability more in line with the developing areas outside of the forest, framed as a form of ‘rehabilitation’, ‘assimilation’ or ‘civilisation’ in ‘unwild’ places. I found that forest officers and even safari guides would propagate these discourses of state care when tourists raised questions about abandoned wells,

¹⁰ The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) updated its compensation package in April 2021 to INR 15 lakh (1,500,000) per family (Pinjarkar 2021).

handpumps, shrines or partially demolished houses in the middle of the reserve. In these discursive justifications, the state ascribes itself the position of benevolent patron, echoing colonial preoccupations with civilising and controlling tribal populations under the guise of ‘care and protection’, now couched in the language of development and economic mobility (cf. Ferguson 1990; also see Venkatesan and Yarrow 2012). This framing of ‘the state caring for vulnerable citizens’ or ‘improving their lives’ justifies the intervention, depoliticising it away from conservation or natural resource management, obscuring the suffocating pressure on livelihoods the Forest Department has been exerting for decades (cf. Li 2007; West 2006).

In this initial meeting, if there are any questions about the process, they will, in theory, answer them, and leave the village to decide on its own about whether to relocate. This process of deliberation can take years, if not longer, as villages are now required to decide as a whole whether to accept compensation and leave. They cannot, as Jhalar did in 2003, splinter into leavers and stayers. If a village agrees to leave and notifies the Forest Department, it sets in motion a series of procedures that stretch from the central Indian government through the state government, district bureaucracy and into villagers’ homes.

A series of government surveyors from a variety of agencies will begin to appear in the village to survey the residents and their households, interviewing each to gather biodata and determine the value of property and assets. Surveyors measure and quantify each household’s assets, noting the number of livestock and the size of land. They determine the value of everything held in the household, creating a detailed and itemised list of all that the villager will be removing from the forest and taking to their new home. Crucially this includes timber and forest products that have been gathered for domestic use that the villagers intend to take with them out of the reserve. Such lists are vital as future evidence and protection against accusations of illegal timber or forest product transportation during the course of the relocation. Surveyors also note the building materials that villagers want to move, as they prepared to shift

their lives brick by brick. Finally, they would also note the livestock that the villagers would want to move, making sure that those livestock are escorted out of the jungle along with everything else. Villagers who settled around the edges of the reserve from large villages formerly in the core often brought with them reduced but significant herds, depending on how dependent they had been on them for their livelihoods. This made finding land and adequate space more challenging depending on their ultimate destination.

Once the surveyors have determined the number of recipients eligible for compensation, a request for funds is made in Panna, sent to the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department headquarters in Bhopal and on to the central government in Delhi. Once the funds have been approved and are transferred to the bank account of the Panna Forest Department, the information gathered during the initial population survey is used to open bank accounts for the villagers to receive their compensation and issue them with identity and ATM cards. Finally, the ‘relocation’ can formally begin.

All of these intricate bureaucratic processes can remain quite opaque for villagers who have no previous knowledge or understanding of the procedures of such an intervention, existing in the ‘shadows of the state’ (Shah 2010). Where there is no NGO or civil society presence, nor media pressure to hold forest officers and officials to account (cf. Beazley 2011; 2009; Kabra 2013), villagers are dependent on their and their social networks’ minimal knowledge and the information offered by the Forest Department as well as the individual care and sympathy of particular forest officers. This reliance on forest staff in the earliest relocations in Panna led to confusion amongst villagers and divisions between those with influence and those without as well as exploitation by forest officers, looking to taking advantage of desperation and ignorance.

Moreover, finding somewhere to purchase land, pursue a new occupation or start a new life can prove extremely challenging due to the extent of forested land in the district, the lack of

support from the Forest Department post-relocation as well as the prejudices and exploitations that certain groups face in their attempts to resettle. This was, and is, particularly pronounced for the nomadic tribal groups such as Pardhis, who, even with monetary compensation and state support, struggle to purchase land, find employment or enrol in school due to their reputation and vilification, something rooted in the history of forestry and conservation in India and perpetuated by contemporary practice and portrayal. Cheated by the Forest Department at the point of relocation, some villagers recounted how they were exploited by landowners and other groups where they eventually resettled. Certain groups could rely on established kinship and social networks for opportunities, affordable land and support more than others, such as Yadavs, whose political power in the rural parts of Panna has been steadily growing. However, others were left with much more uncertain futures.

In these processes of relocation, under the guise of development and care, the state renders villagers legible and ‘known’, controlling and fashioning them into bureaucratic and technical details that fit the mould of their ascribed subject positions as ‘villagers in need of relocation’, ‘villages in need of development’ or ‘wild villagers’ that need to be tamed. Yet, following relocation, once removed from the forest, many communities are left to the unknown, unsupported by the Forest Department except in the policing and control of any activities that threaten the forest and wild landscape from which they are separated.

Through different means, tiger relocations make the animals known and knowable to the state, placing them under its care and control. Placing a collar on its body, tracking its every movement, naming it and building enclosures and procedures for its release and protection invests the entirety of Forest Department and the broader wildlife community into the well-being of a single animal as a particular subject of conservation. The tracking by radio antenna and the constant attention paid to the tigers indicates a huge commitment to repopulate the Panna landscape with state-ascribed ‘wild tigers’ and keep them healthy and thriving at the

same time as the state depopulates the Panna landscape of ‘wild villagers’, making their lives more and more difficult. This state rewilding of the Panna landscape with tigers appears to require the gradual separation and deletion of human existence in the same space (Philo and Wilbert 2000). The contradiction between this history of conservation intervention and the recent inclusion of Panna in UNESCO’s Man and Biosphere Reserve programme, which seeks to promote a harmonious co-existence between local communities and their environment, is striking.

Refusing to go, refusing to stay

Following the tiger crisis and the launch of the centrally sponsored scheme, the rate of relocations in Panna increased, with Pipartola village in 2009, the rest of Jhalar in the same year and Talgaon and Badron a few years later in 2014. Alongside the initial success of translocating T1 and T2, the Forest Department was confident in its ability to free the forest of human disturbance and rewild the landscape with tigers. However, on occasion, both tigers and villagers refuse to inhabit their ascribed subject positions of ‘wild animal’ and ‘tame villager’. In these feral moments, relocated tigers and not-yet-relocated villagers increasingly challenge state interventions, exposing the contradictions, tensions and problematic outcomes of conservation practice.

T3’s epic journey

One such moment of disjuncture occurred in the very first year of the tiger reintroduction project. Once forest officials deduced that there were no male tigers present in the landscape for T1 and T2, a male tiger, T3, was translocated from Pench Tiger Reserve in November 2009

and placed in the large Badagadi enclosure in the centre of the park. T3 did not adapt well to his new circumstances, and upon being released from the enclosure, headed directly south. Moving at a brisk pace, and all the while tracked via radio-collar, T3 headed towards the southern border of the core area, coming eventually to the Ken River near Patori village. He crossed the river, his radio collar signal disappearing for days at a time, causing concern amongst the staff that this would spell the end for the revival of Panna Tiger Reserve. With a team of five elephants, seventy staff and numerous local villagers, Mr. Murthy followed T3 as he headed across the South Panna landscape, setting up stationary and mobile camps to feed and pay villagers for their assistance in recovering the big cat.

After losing, finding, attempting to trap T3 and push him back into the reserve, he would not stop. On one occasion, foresters stretched a long white plastic sheet, two metres in height and hundreds of metres in length, around the area where T3's radio collar signal was transmitting, encircling him, coming within a few hundred yards, only to watch him duck under the tarp and run away. On another occasion, the staff set up small bonfires, known locally as *alavs*, stationed with four people at each, spread fifteen feet apart in a two-kilometre line. Jeeps and elephants with spotlights and villagers with horns and drums sped up and down the line of fire, trying to exhaust T3 and usher him back towards the reserve. Staff crowded around the fires eagerly, seeking warmth from the chill of a mid-winter night and relief from the exhaustion of weeks of tracking. T3 lay down and appeared to be resting. After taking a short rest themselves, officials sent the elephants and trackers to close in, only for T3 to rise slowly and then sprint between two bonfires in the opposite direction, within metres of forest staff and off into the night, disappearing out of range once again. Staff who had been involved told me that they thought this would be the end of their journey, a sense of disappointed relief washing over them that perhaps officials would give up. They felt that there was nothing more they could do.

However, Mr. Murthy refused to give up, urging his staff on. T3 was eventually spotted the following week near Ramna village, 200km from Panna, only 300km from his home in Pench after a winding 450km journey lasting over a month into the dead of winter. A villager had spotted something in his sugar cane field, and his radio-collar indicated that T3 was hiding amongst cane which had grown high following a productive monsoon. Mr. Murthy paid the landowner in cash to send the park's largest male elephant, Ram Bahadur, to destroy the cane field, swiping and smashing the crops, flattening them to disturb T3 so he could be returned to the wild place he belonged. Eventually trapping him in sight of the vet on elephant back, T3 was re-tranquillised and loaded into a truck on Christmas Day 2009 and returned to Panna. They placed him back into the enclosure at Badagadi, which they had experimentally covered with domestic female cat urine and cat urine taken from a zoo in Bhopal. This time, he settled and stayed, breeding with T1 and fathering a litter of cubs, born on April 16, 2010, the first new generation of wild Panna tigers.

T3's journey could have been a fatal blow for the tiger reintroduction project. Without a male tiger in the landscape, the translocation of T1 and T2 would have been meaningless, with no prospect of new Panna tigers and the potential denotification of Panna Tiger Reserve to the status of National Park or Wildlife Sanctuary. Officials in Delhi told Mr. Murthy that if he failed to recover T3, they would not approve any more translocations. However, with the help of hundreds of local people and forest staff, officials were able to recover T3 and keep him where he 'belonged', coordinating an enormous effort to make sure that Panna remained a 'wild' tiger landscape.

Once he had returned to PTR and settled, T3's previous refusal to stay within the confines of his designated wilderness area, and his march through decidedly 'unwild' places like villages, agricultural fields and sides of highways, became a sign of his distinct 'wildness' in the eyes of officials and supporters of the reintroduction project. They hailed the episode as the

first ever example of a tiger ‘homing mechanism’, a scientific success for the study of tiger behaviour as a way to reframe what was a logistical nightmare and a costly conservation disaster. It was his wild nature, they argued, that led him to leave Panna and head towards Pench, if that is what he intended to do. Now firmly contained in his rightful habitat, no longer ‘animal matter out of place’ (Peace 2009, 58), T3’s wildness could be celebrated. His wildness has ceased to ‘run awry’ (Govindarajan 2018, 144). This was only reaffirmed by the birth of the first new litter in Panna a few months later. His wildness, contained, had achieved the desired outcome.

This unique episode of disjuncture exposes many contradictions and tensions within the discourses and practices of conservation that continue in the management of Panna’s tiger population, particularly from the perspective of local people. Though T3, for all intents and purposes, was celebrated as a ‘wild tiger’ and the future of ‘wild Panna’, the behaviour of the Forest Department to confine him to a particular landscape, track his movements and refuse him the chance to return to his native reserve all in the name of protection and care, indicate that conservation in this instance was about control and the preservation of Panna’s reputation as a tiger landscape rather than a respect for the behaviours and desires of the animal. T3’s behaviour challenged the parameters of the Forest Department’s category of ‘wild tiger’, exposing its limitations and contradictions and the state’s deliberate manipulation of ‘wildness’ to its own ends.

As the Sarpanch of the village noted in comparison to his livestock and as tourists question in reaction to radio-collared tigers, the state’s category of ‘wild tiger’ encompasses qualities of tameness and domesticity in order to uphold its programme of control over the body and lives of the tigers, ultimately restricting the wildness that they purport to celebrate. This is not to say that T3 would have fared much better than he did had he not been ‘re-translocated’, since he has lived a long life and fathered many offspring during his time in Panna. However, in this

short episode of tranquilisation, radio-collaring, translocation, re-tranquilisation and re-translocation, his life was disturbed and disrupted in profound ways and his body dramatically altered.

The entire ordeal exposed T3 to sources of potential harm that, left in Pench, he may not have encountered as he attempted to return home, venturing far outside of protected forest areas. As the Sarpanch correctly noted, placing a large collar on an animal but still treating them as wild can make their care and control especially complicated. The tigress T4, hand-reared by local staff after being orphaned along with her sister T5 and translocated to Panna from Kanha, died in 2014 from an infection under her radio-collar that forest staff did not see soon enough to treat. In 2018, tigress P521 died after her radio-collar got caught in a snare on the southern edge of the park. In trying to pry it off with her feet, she suffocated with her legs and neck entrapped by the wire wrapped around the collar.

In his old age, T3 has been dethroned as the dominant male in his territory, enduring numerous fights with young challengers and requiring repeated veterinary treatment by Forest Department vets and scientists for cuts and injuries as well as faults in his radio-collar. With 24/7 tracking through his radio-collar, T3's movements were carefully recorded and now that he is too old and injured to maintain his grasp over Panna, he has moved out into the buffer zone of the reserve, into less and less 'wild' areas, encountering villagers and their livestock, many of whom have themselves been relocated from inside PTR. In December 2020, the Forest Department decided to remove T3's radio-collar due to repeated injuries and his advanced age. While he will continue to be tracked by elephant and other means, the removal of his collar appears to finally indicate that his responsibility to rewild Panna as a tiger landscape under the strict control and care of state has definitively come to an end.

We won't go anymore

Although the launch of the centrally sponsored scheme in 2008 increased the rate of village relocations in PTR, more than ten years on, things have slowed. The scheme has aged, and the budget of INR 10 lakh per person affords less than it did over ten years ago. Although this has now increased to INR 15 lakh, the pitfalls and drawbacks of previous relocations have increasingly dissuaded villagers in forest-border villages to accept the compensation and move. Residents of relocated villages have settled in communities where relocation is again on the horizon or extensive kinship ties between relocated and not-yet relocated communities have alerted the latter to the potential disadvantages of resettling.

For example, this was true in Hinauta, where 16 families settled from Talgaon as well as a handful from Jhalar and from Pipartola. These families, having suffered through the disadvantages of relocation, warn their kin, neighbours and friends against accepting the current terms, over a decade after the scheme was launched. Their experiences of under-compensation, failure to receive the full amount promised and confusion during the resettlement process as well as the dissolution and dispersion of their village communities has made the relocation package a poor option in the eyes of many.

In Hinauta, my neighbour was a Raj-Gond man from Pipartola, who spent his days labouring in Panna town, piling into the 8 o’clock bus with dozens of other hopeful day-labourers, often walking two kilometres to the bus-stop down the road to guarantee himself a seat. I occasionally followed the same tactic when going into town, both of us walking separately in the same direction, him hunched over and always ahead of me, *tauliya*¹¹ in hand, me with my seemingly unnecessary collection of possessions, a bag slung across my back containing my field notebook, iPad, hand sanitiser and wallet, an umbrella and water bottle in each hand, my

¹¹ The term *tauliya* refers to a headscarf, headwrap or towel used in a variety of ways to keep off the sun, protect oneself from the elements and prevent sweat from dripping down into one’s eyes or dust from filling one’s mouth, as well as balance construction materials like bricks while working as a labourer.

tauliya wrapped around my neck, shadowed by a baseball cap. In his spare time, he worked on his garden patch along a main thoroughfare in the village, where he grew, amongst other things, *baigan* (aubergine), *lauki* (bottle gourd), *karela* (bitter gourd) and *sitaphal* (custard apple). He and his younger brother and their wives and daughters all lived in conjoined houses just a stone's throw from where I spent my evenings writing in my fieldwork diary. He often sat on the ledge outside my window at night while I wrote, smoking, drinking or just swatting at mosquitoes in the heavy, humid air.

While he had moved only nine kilometres to Hinauta from Pipartola, his wife's family had relocated far from the forest, over 50 kilometres away. I visited his *sala* (wife's brother) where the Forest Department had re-settled most of the Pipartola families. They had accepted the option of land and facilities, rather than cash, but the Forest Department had not yet built much in the interceding decade. Villagers discovered that the fertile land they were promised was, in some places, merely stone ground temporarily covered with soil from elsewhere; a cruel deception. Some villagers complained that they had yet to even receive updated ownership papers for their land after the validity of temporary documents had lapsed.

In addition to these accounts, not-yet relocated villagers have taken advantage of other opportunities for improving their lives, resisting the intervention of relocation in favour of different government agencies who provide access to opportunities for rural development, effectively exploiting the 'fundamentally fragmented nature of *sarkar* (state/government)' (Mathur 2015, 23). Hinauta is a prime example of this. Opposite the village, a National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) diamond mining project has raised the standard of living in the village beyond what one might expect for a community over 20 kilometres inside the forest.

The mining project has provided opportunities in education, employment and access to towns and cities through transportation links. Pipes run from the water treatment plant inside

of the mining complex under the walls and fences guarded by soldiers to access points and pumps in the village. Village council members lobby mining officials regularly to support proposals for infrastructural improvement and recently, the NMDC paid for the repaving of the road running to Hinauta through the jungle from National Highway 39. The NMDC runs buses throughout the day, free of charge, into which dozens of men and women like my neighbours and their wives squeeze in, hopefully each day to find work as labourers in Panna. They pass school buses bringing students from Panna town and from villages near to Hinauta to attend the school inside the mining township, considered one of, if not the, best in the district. All of this means that if they were to accept the current relocation compensation package, Hinauta villagers risk losing a relatively high standard of living with no guarantees of the same opportunities and amenities anywhere in the region.

Due to the NMDC, Hinauta is an exception: a village inside the jungle with arguably better amenities and opportunities than many villages outside. However, there are other examples of across the landscape in which resistance to relocation is growing. In the opening account of this article, I described Jardhoba, whose relocation was abruptly cancelled when terms were renegotiated. The Ken-Betwa river linking and dam-building project planned in the western part of Panna has held up relocations, since villagers surmise that they may be eligible to receive better compensation if they wait for that project to start. Unlike the NMDC, the project has yet to provide any benefits, and the Forest Department refuse to allow infrastructural improvements. Trends in these communities echo the experiences of Jhalar and Pipartola, with marriage numbers falling, livelihoods diminishing and pressure to leave growing. Like Jardhoba, the money for their relocation arrived in the Panna Tiger Reserve bank account, only for the prospect of a better ‘package’ from the river-linking causing a cancellation.

Only four foundation stones have been laid for the first dam planned, and court cases from environmentalists and local activists in addition to political inertia have halted the ambitious

project (Anon 2019). Now the money simply sits in the account, and the villagers are left in ‘anxious waiting’ (Mathur 2015, 142). Meanwhile, the Forest Department denies repeated requests to improve the road that leads out of the jungle for these communities. Jeeps carrying people crammed inside and perched precariously on the roof to the markets and jobs outside traverse a long, steep stone path built first by colonial officers in the 1910s and now enclosed on all sides by dense forest belonging to Panna Tiger Reserve.

Villagers across the Panna landscape are refusing to relocate. They refuse the compensation and take their chances in the hope that something better will come. As we have seen with Jhalar, their hopes aren’t unfounded. In the short-term though, the pressures to relocate cause rifts and may splinter communities stuck waiting. Those with the most to lose in villages like Hinauta want to wait for the launch of a new scheme. Those will the least to lose are keen to move on and accept whatever the Forest Department has to offer. However, they cannot move on their own, particularly as those with the most influence, who are often resistant to leave, hold sway in their communities and will ultimately be the ones to negotiate with the Forest Department. This exacerbates tensions between village groups. Overall, the refusal of village communities to leave frustrates the conservation state hoping to eradicate human disturbance from a landscape set aside for wildlife.

Re-wilding and de-wilding Panna

Despite the refusal of many communities to leave, the success of the tiger reintroduction project has led many to declare Panna a rewilded tiger landscape. In her book about rewilding, Dutt (2019) describes the tiger reintroduction and the programmes to ‘rehabilitate’ Pardhi communities alongside one another. With the aim to praise Panna as a conservation success for both wild tigers and ‘wild tribes’, Dutt traces a recent history of Panna in line with an ethic of

restoration and rehabilitation in conservation. She promotes a future of harmonious co-existence between communities and wilderness like the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Network which Panna has now joined.

However, as authors like Jørgensen (2015) have pointed out, the term ‘rewilding’, in its multiple usages, can obscure the intense management of conservation landscapes as well as the deletion and separation of humans from them in favour of an idealistic ‘wild’, sanitising and depoliticising histories of persecution and disenfranchisement. As I have argued here, the ‘wild’ towards which rewilding efforts might aim not only denies human co-habitation and co-existence within conservation landscapes, but it also ironically justifies intensive state intervention to manage different forms of ‘wildness’ in tigers and humans. State interventions into tiger lives to manage their movements and behaviour have centred on ‘re-wilding’, attempts to preserve or reinstate ‘wildness’ through separation from ‘unwild’ spaces (villages and non-forest land) and behaviours (entering human settlements, preying on livestock). In tandem, interventions into villagers’ lives appear to be concerned with ‘de-wildling’ through the criminalisation of traditional livelihoods, relocation from forests and the devaluing of connections to and knowledge of conservation landscapes and their animal inhabitants. There is minimal concern for these connections, knowledges, or traditions, since they are considered, contiguous with colonialist logics of rule, ‘wild’ or ‘backward’ and in need of remediation or eradication. That is unless, they serve the interest of state conservation and its control over people, animals, land and resources.

For example, Dutt describes a successful programme implemented by an NGO in Panna which has trained young Pardhi men, evicted and resettled outside of the forest, to deliver walking safaris to luxury hotel guests, which has, in her words, ‘achieved an image makeover for the community’ (Dutt 2019, 39). This programme utilises generations of inherited tracking knowledge amongst Pardhi people to offer ‘nature experiences’ to outsiders, reframing

practices once considered a threat to the jungle and animals as something to protect them. This is also true for the broader safari guide community in Hinauta, Madla, Jhinnah and Akola villages in Panna, who accompany guests into the jungle and who come from communities that are either under threat from relocation or have been relocated already. While traditional livelihoods and cultures involving the jungle are broadly denied and devalued through processes of ‘de-wilding’, ecological knowledge that serves the interests of state conservation and eco-tourism is promoted and strictly regulated. This is yet another example of state-managed ‘wildness’, refracted through discourses of Forest Department and civil society ‘development’ and ‘care’ for communities that face limited livelihood opportunities or discrimination in attempts to find alternative employment. However, this managed ‘wildness’, framed as a form of ‘care’ or ‘development’ from a benevolent state, is sanitised and separated from a broader context of the colonial and postcolonial state’s historic criminalisation, exploitation and persecution of the same communities. This is paralleled by the management of ‘unwildness’ in processes of ‘tiger rewilding’ in which radio-collared tigers are fed domestic buffalo meat, kept in enclosures and provided with medical treatment, in the name of caring for and protecting ‘wildness’.¹² In both cases, attempts to ‘re-wild’ tigers and ‘de-wild’ people towards conservation outcomes involves a managed allowance of each’s ‘un-wildness’ or ‘wildness’ in cases where state conservation stands to benefit, obscured under a façade of care, protection or development.

It remains unclear how Panna’s recent inclusion in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere programme will address or reconcile these discourses and logics or whether conservation will continue along the same lines, undergirded ultimately by colonialist conceptions of wild tribes, animals and landscapes and their simultaneous separation and control by the state. UNESCO

¹² See former IFS officer Suhas Kumar’s (2020) excellent account of P212’s repeated medical treatment and tranquilisation for a further example- <https://en.goanconnection.com/the-unusual-story-of-tiger-p212-who-was-tranquillised-eight-times-to-keep-him-safe/>

(2017) states that ‘biosphere reserves integrate biological and cultural diversity, particularly recognising the role of traditional and local knowledge in ecosystem management’ (UNESCO 2017, 12). However, as described above, through relocation and the eradication of traditional livelihoods, communities are encouraged to ‘rehabilitate’ and ‘assimilate’ rather than participate or contribute to conservation. Moreover, conservation in Panna does not appear to be concerned with cultural heritage amongst formerly forest-dependent peoples nor promote the use of traditional ecological knowledge unless it directly benefits state conservation, framed as something that communities ought to ‘leave behind’ to ‘develop’.

The Man and Biosphere Network offers international recognition to designated Biospheres and a network of guidance to national and local governments to foster best practice to integrate conservation and sustainable development. However, crucially UNESCO (2019) recognises that the designation of Biosphere Reserves does not supersede state sovereignty over conservation areas. In fact, it divides biospheres in the same way that national parks are currently managed in India with a core area (an inviolate area for biodiversity preservation) and a buffer zone (an area with sustainable use practices and scientific research), adding what they term ‘the transition zone’, an area for ‘communities [to] foster socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable economic and human activities’ (UNESCO 2019). In a reserve like Panna, this ‘transition zone’ may include the territorial forests and sanctuary land to the north and south of the park, where communities are currently under pressure to accept compensation from the Forest Department to relocate and where strict forest regulations still apply.

Thus, UNESCO relies on the interpretation and implementation of principles by member states while also creating an allowance for the continued separation of wild and unwild spaces from different groups as different ‘zones’ within reserves. This fails to recognise the historic and contemporary expulsion and exclusion of communities from core areas to the buffer and transition zones and ultimately far from the forest. It risks offering international legitimacy and

funding to potentially harmful forms of local intervention around conservation driven by programmes of state control and separation of animals, environments and people that date to colonial attempts to tame ‘wild tigers’ and ‘wild Indians’ and that have been inherited in postcolonial legislation, bureaucratic structures and institutional practices. Moreover, it risks perpetuating state discourses of ‘development’ and ‘care’ which depoliticise and obfuscate the historic and contemporary disenfranchisement of local communities.

Looking to the future, the state’s claim and attempts to preserve PTR as a wilderness area free from human interference, and one celebrated now as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, faces a substantial challenge from the river interlinking project. It would submerge thousands of hectares of the park, which, as Dutt points out, could undo the conservation successes of the last decade spent repopulating the landscape with tigers. Building a dam, reservoir and canal in the centre of a tiger reserve in order to harness water for power and irrigation would decidedly de-wild a landscape that conservation managers have tirelessly ‘rewilded’. The link would also displace thousands of local people in the western parts of the landscape, increasing pressure on other communities to relocate. Just as their histories have been interlinked through colonial and post-Independence state forestry and conservation, the futures of local communities and local wildlife are now tied and under threat from an industrial-development intervention that seeks to uproot both. Local communities and tigers are once more caught at the centre of contradictory discourses emerging from the state’s attempt to simultaneously control, protect and exploit animals, people and landscapes.

Conclusion: feral subjects

On my daily walks from my room in Hinauta to the main gate for Panna Tiger Reserve and back, I often came across herds of cattle and buffalo, unaccompanied and grazing around the

lantana bushes on either side of the dirt road. On the days when mist and fog overtook the first hours, they emerged slowly in the light, outlines of animals that seemed, to me as an outsider, out of place. I asked the Yadav herders in Hinauta whose ancestors had grazed and kept thousands of animals in the Panna forests for generations, what those animals were doing, so far from their pens and so close to the jungle. I thought that perhaps they were ‘feral cattle’. As with so many of my naïve questions, they chuckled and then explained. ‘We let them go in the morning and they usually return at night. They are our animals, but they need to roam’.

I realised, over time, that the contradiction I saw in ‘domestic animals’ roaming freely in wild areas was my own and one also found in the logics of conservation that seek to separate ‘wild’ and ‘unwild’ spaces, animals and people. Throughout Panna’s existence as a conservation area, such feral cattle have been a challenge for the Forest Department as it attempts to create an inviolate space without such ‘feral subjects’, key targets for forest regulations that prohibit grazing and animal relocations that remove cattle from inside the reserve and its fringes.

For my neighbours, they treated the cattle as they were. They did not operate with the same distinction between tame and wild that I or the Forest Department did. They cared for their animals in their own way, taking great care of them each night when they returned and each morning when they left but allowing them the freedom of the forest and the land around to graze and roam. Increasingly, this freedom has been curtailed by the erection of Forest Department boundary walls and fences. For the Sarpanch, himself from a Yadav family that previously had hundreds of cattle and buffaloes, there was no contradiction in a domestic animal roaming freely in the jungle. The spaces and categories of ‘wild’ and ‘unwild’ emerged from the other worlds of conservation and state control. It is not that the cattle were feral because they were ‘domestic animals that had gone wild’ but rather that the categories ‘domestic’ and ‘wild’ did not apply and the movement of the animals at their owners’

encouragement resisted and rejected environmentally-focused discourses that ‘define various forms of agency, administer certain silences and prescribe various forms of intervention’ (Brosius 1999, 277–278).

Magnone (2016) writes, ‘Ferality describes animality as resistance to an anthropocentric order, a mode of being that challenges human practices of controlling and confining animals both physically and epistemologically. It reminds humans that they too are animals, linked to a multitude of other species as predator and prey, cohabitant and competitor’ (Magnone 2016, 33–34). This idea of ‘ferality as a subversive force’ (Garrard 2014, 244) is productive here, not because not-yet relocated villagers or relocated tigers or roaming cattle are somehow feral in any derogatory sense. It is not to say that somehow forest-dependent villagers have ‘gone wild’ nor that radio-collared tigers are not truly ‘wild animals’. Instead, recognising ferality as a subversive force illuminates the entanglement of human and animal histories through conservation (Govindarajan 2018; Jalais 2010; Mathur 2015) and foregrounds resistance against colonial and postcolonial state interventions that have sought and seek to control both. Ferality is subversive both as a resistance against discourses of ‘wild’ and ‘tame’ but also as a viable alternative.

In their performing of what Govindrajan calls an ‘otherwildness’, these feral subjects expose the contradictions of control and care in Indian conservation, refusing to bend to categories of ‘wild animal’ and ‘tame villager’ and challenging colonial and postcolonial ‘logics of racialization and rule’ (2018, 144) upon which state designations of wild people and wild animals depends. It is what Anna Tsing (2005) has highlighted as ‘weediness’, or the hope that Haraway (1992) sees in monsters, emergent in ‘the cracks of dominant systems of classification and ordering, [...] pointing towards other possibilities’ (Van Dooren 2015).

In their ferality, the cattle whom I accompanied on my daily walks resisted the discursive pens into which the Forest Department sought to usher them, just as not-yet relocated villagers

and relocated tigers resist conservation interventions. As feral subjects, they offer a different understanding of entangled human and animal histories in the landscape; one not defined by the colonial comparisons made between noble tribals and gentlemanly tigers or the separation of wild and domestic spaces. Instead, they challenge the constraints and limitations of conservation practice, exposing the contradictions and discursive collapses of conservation control and offering the possibility of something else.

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