

For protecting tigers, tribals are out, tourists in



**A Shankar Prakash, Resource Conservation Criminologist.
For contact: shankarprakash@live.com**

For the past couple of days, social media has been ablaze with discourses on India's national animal – tiger. Prime Minister's Narendra Modi's visit to the Mudumalai and Bandhipur tiger reserves, the event where he inaugurated the International Big Cat Alliance to mark the 50-year completion of the Project Tiger in Mysore and the tiger census report released at the event could be cited as triggers for the tiger narratives.

The census report has pegged the tiger population in India at 3,167. It feels happy and hopeful for the wildlife activists because the number of tigers, which was 1,411 in 2006, has shot up, recording a 2.25 per cent rise. The tiger reserves have increased in proportion to the rising tiger population, from nine in 1973 to 54 in 2023. The government, NGOs, officials, field workers, the people and researchers all deserve kudos on this count. For the increase in number is a matter of joy; isn't it?

Criticism and reaction

At the same time, a few wildlife conservationists and researchers have pointed out some fundamental defects in the method of counting tigers. An article published in Al Jazeera news media platform has provoked Twitter reactions from the Indian Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and several forest officials. The Minister has termed the article as a hate campaign against the Indian initiatives to conserve wildlife.

In addition, the officials have reacted, saying that the article in question has failed to take note of the immense benefits of the successful Indian wildlife protection project and instead, highlighted a few negative features of the project. The article has not understood the ground reality about the project which has, in fact, attained success on the basis of culture and philosophy in the plains dominated by humankind, the officials have said, adding that the article has not taken into account the contribution of the tribal people to the success of the project.

The Project Tiger owes its success to the participation of the tribal people, the officials say firmly. It seems that the officials mean to say that some people of the ancient tribes have been given jobs in the Forest Department. But the truth is that they have been appointed to the temporary posts of anti-poaching guards with consolidated pay. There is no job security at all.

The identical tenor of statements in reaction from the minister and the officials has surprised people like me, who have done field work in the tiger reserves.

Pressure on tribes

Tiger reserves have been categorized into buffer areas and core areas. There is a scheme in operation now, according to which the people living in the core area volunteer to migrate out of the tiger reserve with or without the help of the Forest Department. A family moving out without the department help was paid a sum of Rs.10 lakh which has been enhanced to Rs.15 lakh now.

For the families moving out with the department's help, the same amount would be spent, out of which 35 per cent would be for their agricultural land, 30 per cent for land ownership, 20 per cent for building of dwelling place, 10 per cent for provision of basic amenities such as drinking water, road etc and 5 per cent as an incentive.

Though the scheme of 'voluntary migration' is in force, it cannot be denied that most migrations take place following several external pressures. Curtailing of the people's movements through forest check-posts, denial of permission for basic amenities such as road, electricity etc. and indirect hindrances to farming and transport of inputs from markets can be cited as instances of external pressures. Besides, there have been instances wherein the officials misappropriated the relief amounts due to the tribal people under the 'migration' scheme. Criminal cases against such officials are still pending.

So far, over 18,000 families have been moved out of tiger reserves. But basic amenities have not been provided at the places where the tribal people have re-located and they are confronted with issues pertaining to livelihood. Hence the people of the ancient tribes want to go back to their ancestral lands.

If a single person is affected by the project, the problem should be discussed from the sociological and anthropological perspectives. But such discussions have not been initiated in the public domain.

'Inevitable evil'

Apart from the defects mentioned above, there are also critical viewpoints that tourist norms are flouted in several tiger reserves. For instance, there are allegations that tourists are allowed much more than the stipulated number into forests by the department in the Jim Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand.

Is it not ironical that while the people of the ancient tribes are moved out for the sake of protecting tigers, more and more tourists are permitted to roam about in the forests?

An official told me, "After all, tourism is an inevitable evil in tiger reserves." We have come to terms with not only such an inevitable evil but also the denial of the tribal people's rights.

However, the fact is that tribal people's living in the forests will help increase the number of tigers because they hold aloft the wildlife welfare rather than their own wellbeing, say studies.

Of course, there may be some tribal people who harm the wildlife. But the Forest Department can keep surveillance and crack down on such incidents. Instead if the tribes are alienated from the forest and wildlife, the initiative will be unscientific. It does not stand to reason that while we are celebrating the success of the Project Tiger that has ensured the rising number of the tiger, we are totally denying the ill-effects of the project on the tribes.

Let us lend our ears to the cries of woes from the tribal people affected by the Project Tiger.

Translated by V. Mariappan