

ENVIRONMENT / CONSERVATION

Green approach

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Soliga Adivasis and NGOs discussing the conservation plan for the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary.-ASHISH KOTHARI

An alternative conservation model for the BRT Sanctuary is a step closer to becoming a reality.

It was a perfect way to celebrate Mahatma Gandhi's birthday in Chamarajanagar, Karnataka. On October 2, 2011, 25 gram sabhas in and around the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (BRTS) were awarded community forest rights, including right of access to and ownership of non-timber forest produce (NTFP); fishing, grazing and cultural practice rights, and the right to conserve and manage the forest. This was unprecedented as these rights were granted in a protected area and tiger reserve.

It was the culmination of a five-year struggle by Soliga Adivasis under the umbrella of the Zilla Budakattu Girijana Abhivruddhi Sangha (ZBGAS) for the rights to harvest forest produce, which had been banned in 2006 under the Wildlife (Protection) Act. The Forest Department was conspicuously unrepresented at the function where District Commissioner Amar Narayan and MLA C. Puttarangashetty distributed the community forest rights.

The Soligas have been advocating a larger role for themselves in the management of the BRTS and in tiger and wildlife conservation. At a workshop held in the BRTS on July 12 and 13, about 160 Soliga Adivasis and a few conservation and social action groups prepared the framework for a community-based plan for conserving the area's forests and wildlife and securing forest-based livelihoods. In the process they also challenged the short-sighted conservation policy of 40 years which pitted traditional communities against wildlife (and the officials mandated to conserve it). As an alternative, they came up with a vision on how the Soliga community, the Forest Department and civil society groups could work together to achieve more inclusive and lasting conservation of one of India's biologically diverse ecosystems.

The Biligiri Rangaswamy hills of southern Karnataka were infamous for being the hideout of the forest brigand Veerappan. They are otherwise well-known for their tigers and elephants and as a major site for pilgrimage. Some plant ecologists consider the hills the meeting point of the Western and Eastern Ghats, and therefore have affinities with both areas. The BR hills, with megalithic burial sites dating back to at least 300 B.C. and Adivasi populations that have resided there for several

centuries, has a long history of human use.

In 1974, an area of 540 sq km of the Biligiri hills was declared the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary. The Soligas, until then a tribe that mostly practised shifting cultivation, were forcibly settled in podus (settlements), some of them getting small plots of land and others having to turn to manual labour and other occupations, including gathering forest produce such as amla (Indian gooseberry, or *Phyllanthus emblica*) and honey from the rock bee (*Apis dorsata*).

In 2004, pursuant to a Supreme Court order, the State government prohibited the collection of NTFP for sale. The ban order was put into effect in the BRTS in 2006. This impoverished several thousand Soligas. The Adivasis, who until then had mostly cooperated with the Forest Department, became hostile and agitated. The proverbial last straw was when the State government notified the area as a tiger reserve in January 2011 ignoring protests by Soligas and civil society groups and without obtaining the final approval from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

Towards an Alternative

Over the last decade, the BRTS has been gearing up to demonstrate that it could be an alternative model for a protected area. Early discussions on a paradigm change in the governance of the sanctuary were held as part of a National Consultation on Wildlife Conservation and People's Livelihood organised there in 2000 by Kalpavriksh, the Vivekanandan Girijana Kalyan Kendra (VGKK), and the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). In 2005, a joint meeting of the Karnataka Forest Department, the VGKK, ATREE and the ZBGAS mooted the idea of joint management, until a change of leadership in the Forest Department scuttled the formation of a sanctuary advisory committee under the Wildlife Protection Act.

Further discussions were held by these organisations from time to time, including in 2007 when the Soligas were falsely implicated in a series of forest fires and mistreated by the Forest Department. Meanwhile, a decade of research by ATREE showed that not only were the Soligas not a threat to the area's biodiversity but their traditional management techniques such as controlled burning of undergrowth may have sustained forests until the takeover of their management by the State forest administration.

The restoration of collaborative management got a big push when the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was promulgated. In August 2007, a workshop was organised by the Soliga Abhivruddhi Sangha (SAS), the VGKK, ATREE and Kalpavriksh to discuss the FRA. It was noted that apart from securing tribal livelihoods (through rights to land and forest produce), the FRA could be a basis for moving towards a community-based model of conservation (especially through the community forest resource management rights provided in it). The Soligas got busy in making claims under the FRA. Then, in 2010-11, with the notification of the area as a tiger reserve, all the groups realised that an alternative conservation plan was now more urgent than ever.

They sent a short note on this to the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests and the Karnataka government urging them to pursue a community-based approach rather than the conventional tiger reserve model. The total silence from these agencies was the trigger for the July 2011 workshop, organised by the ZBGAS, ATREE, the VGKK and Kalpavriksh. While the participation was overwhelmingly from the Soliga tribe, inputs were also provided by members of the organising groups and the NTCA, the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) and Vasundhara, and conservationists such as Ravi Chellam and Kalyan Varma.

A Framework Plan

Two days of lively discussion resulted in a framework plan consisting of three components for community-based and collaborative management of the BRTS.

Ecological conservation: The BRTS faces a number of serious conservation challenges such as the rapid spread of the weed *Lantana camara*. Its story is symptomatic of what has gone wrong with the BRTS in the past few decades.

The Soligas firmly believe that their traditional management of the forest kept this weed at bay. In particular, they point to the use of taragu benki, or litter fire, which they lit in a highly controlled manner, affecting only the leaf litter and suppressing lantana and other weeds. Once the area was declared a sanctuary, the Forest Department prohibited this practice, resulting in lantana's prolific spread. ATREE's long-term research has quantified the spread of lantana, the influence of fire on

retarding lantana growth and the adverse effect of the weed on native vegetation.

The spread of parasitic mistletoe on trees has also resulted in the death of adult trees. The Soligas claim that both invasive species and parasitic growth have increased owing to the ban on litter fire. Ecological research and local knowledge show that the lantana spread has caused a decline in the populations of native species and hence the availability of food for wildlife.

None of this research and local knowledge has, however, been incorporated into the management planning of the sanctuary.

Most of the participants in the workshop seemed to be in favour of controlled burning, but there was some concern that even talking about it may expose the tribal people to prosecution by the Forest Department. Memories are still fresh of the 2007 forest fires, in which the department levelled charges against a number of Soligas. Some of them still face the charges, while others were forced to give written agreements that they would not be involved in incidents of fire in the future. A few Soligas were even beaten up. It is an irony of India's conservation scene that a practice that may be good for the ecosystem and wildlife is considered illegal.

Other ecological issues discussed included poaching, tourism, plastic pollution by tourists, roads and check dams, quarrying, use of chemicals in coffee estates, and the increased tick infestation (because of the ban on litter fire). Broad strategies were listed for each of these, such as regular patrolling by joint teams of Soligas and Forest Department staff, restrictions on tourists, and organic production of coffee.

Livelihood security: The BRTS has 16,000 Soligas living in 62 podus. Their predominant livelihoods are agriculture, NTFP collection, and labour in coffee estates, or Forest Department service. The first point that came up in the discussion was a detailed listing of the plants that the Soligas used from the forest for food, medicine and other household or market purposes. Serious problems had cropped up of late, including a marked decline of many of these species (especially owing to the spread of lantana), restrictions in access to forests imposed by the department, and reduction in bee populations (and therefore honey) as bees were killed by pesticides when they gathered honey from the plains.

The Soligas proposed that they be given the opportunity to take tourists into the forest so that they could earn some money from it. Currently, their only benefit from tourism was employment in the various tourism enterprises in the BRTS, they pointed out. They also suggested greater control over the NTFP trade. Using the provisions of the FRA, they propose to harvest, add value and sell NTFP directly to outside markets without going through state-controlled cooperatives.

Governance and management: The participants explored the potential of the FRA to transform the governance and management of the BRTS dramatically. The Soligas proposed the formation in each of the 62 podus of a forest management committee responsible for the conservation of a patch of forest in a 10-km radius. Above this, to ensure coordination, they would set up committees for the three taluks contained in the sanctuary and one committee for the sanctuary as a whole. The latter would have representatives of the Forest Department and local civil society groups, making it a genuine co-management institution. The tentative name suggested for this was the Biligiri Community-Based Tiger and Wildlife Sanctuary Committee. Significantly, the Soligas did not want an exclusively community-driven model, and they strongly felt that management would only be possible if the Forest Department actively worked with them.

The duties of the podu-, taluk- and sanctuary-level committees include meeting once a month to discuss issues pertaining to forest conservation, drawing up detailed action plans for the short and long term, and submitting podu-level plans to the government for approval and support. The conservation plan will include procedures for the arrest of persons involved in illegal activities, prescriptions for fire management and NTFP harvest, and suggestions for sharing of benefits from tourism and other enterprises.

The Soligas have drawn up a detailed process for the coming months, including public consultations in the relevant gram sabhas where this framework will be discussed. They will solicit additional inputs from ecologists, policy experts and forest officials. On the basis of this, a consolidated plan will be prepared, endorsed by gram sabhas (to give it a legal stamp) and presented to the State

government and the NTCA. A 20-member committee of Soligas (appointed at the workshop) will take the process forward, helped by an advisory committee of conservationists, social scientists, and activists familiar with the BRTS or having worked on related processes elsewhere.

Huge challenges

All this is easier said than done. The challenges are huge. First, it took the Soligas three years of campaigning to win community forest rights. Second, though it had been invited and it had promised participation, the Forest Department was not represented at the workshop. It will need much skill and perseverance to get the department on board, especially now that the area is considered a tiger reserve and the department might possibly exercise greater control.

Third, the tiger reserve status also means that there will now be attempts to relocate some villages (from the so-called core or critical tiger habitat). Though the Soligas seem to be united in opposing such a move, the temptation of a Rs.10-lakh relocation package for each family (currently offered by the Central government) could cause divisions within the podus, especially in the case of some families that do not currently have access to land. Fourth, putting local and scientific knowledge together is not easy, given the very different methodological and epistemological arenas in which they operate and exist.

Despite the above, there is no doubt that the BRTS is set for a change in course; the uncertainty is more about how long it will take. An alternative conservation model for the area is now much closer to becoming a reality. It will gain strength not only from the factors mentioned above but also from the participatory and equitable conservation wave that is now sweeping the world, with country after country changing its laws and policies towards more collaborative and community-based governance.

Indeed, India is also legally bound to move in this direction, having agreed to do so under the Convention on Biological Diversity and a number of other international treaties and having asserted for itself the need to devolve decision-making to the grass roots. The people and institutions which currently hold power in the BRTS would do well to recognise that such a model can do more for the tiger and for its myriad fellow species, including human communities, than the bureaucracy-based, exclusionary model they currently espouse.

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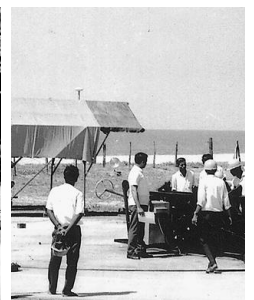
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