
[India: Welcome to Mowgli's Land](#)

At the entrances to the Pench Tiger Reserve straddling the states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh are signposts with the words "welcome to Mowgli's land." Mowgli, in Rudyard Kipling's nineteenth century children's book entitled "Jungle Book," is a young boy who grows up talking to all the other inhabitants of the jungle including a mongoose and an elephant. There is no question of Mowgli and his people not living symbiotically with animals in the dense forest. And yet today, Mowgli's land is siphoned off as a National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary and the human inhabitants have either been asked to leave the forest voluntarily or have been forcibly evicted.

In 1995, the World Bank launched the ecodevelopment project (EDC) with the Indian government. Pench Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh was eventually selected as one of the loan recipients. Located in a Fifth Schedule Area, an area reserved for tribal populations such as the Gonds, Pench Tiger Reserve straddles the states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The general objectives of the project are to protect biodiversity and ecosystems in India by inciting villagers in the buffer zones around the national parks to reduce their dependence on the forests for survival.

And yet, in the World Bank's 1996 "Project Document," it is clearly stated that "India's biological resources are economically important both globally and nationally." And these biological and natural resources will be exploited "for industrial and municipal development." So wildlife will not be protected from global and national industrial development but will be "protected" from tribal populations living in and around the parks. Furthermore, while the World Bank recognizes that "medicinal plants and other non-timber forest products are particularly important as a source of income and subsistence for tribal populations," it has designed a program which clearly denies tribal populations on the peripheries of these national parks access to the biological resources it deems "economically important" to other industrialized populations. Even traditional medicinal plants are cited as important "commercial products" to be exploited by pharmaceutical companies in the future.

One of the EDC "beneficiaries," Salae, is located approximately one kilometer away from the sanctuary and has a population of 500 Gonds. The villagers depend on forest produce like tendu leaves (used for making "bidees", the Indian cigar) and mahua seeds (from the mahua tree, used for making an excellent country liquor) for their survival and go to the forest for fuel wood. These villagers have a bhumka, or "traditional healer" performing the religious ceremonies and collecting various herbs, twigs, nuts and fruit from the forest for medicinal purposes. His son is also studying to become a bhumka. When asked about how it is they identify as Gonds, the villagers replied that they differ from non-tribal people because they have a bhumka rather than a pandit — Hindu priest.

While the ecodevelopment project was initiated in 1997, the villagers clearly explained that they don't have any idea what the project is about; forest officials haven't conducted a single meeting in their village! The forest department installed nine biogas plants (generating cooking gas from cow dung) in the village but none of them are working. When asked why these plants are not working the villagers told us that to run these plants they need water and added that "there is no water in the village for drinking, so how can we put water in these biogas plants." Though the irrigation department and a local NGO has constructed a well half a kilometer away from the village, it only caters to their daily

needs.

There is constant conflict between the villagers and forest department regarding the compensation for loss of cattle and crops to wild animals (tiger, wild boar, deer etc). The villagers do not receive any compensation though there is a provision for it. The forest department does the paperwork but does not give any compensation to the villagers whose survival depends on these two sources of income. Moreover, villagers are fined if their animals trespass into the park and are often arrested and put in jail. When the villagers were asked whether the project has changed or affected their lives in any way, the villagers said that nothing has changed; "we were harassed before and we are still harassed."

The village of Durgapur, located two kilometres from the sanctuary, has integrated fifteen Gond families from the displaced village of Alikatta in the sanctuary. They were all born and brought up in Alikatta on the banks of the Pench River. They had good agricultural land in Alikatta and many of the men also had jobs as night watchmen or building roads for the Forest Department. In Alikatta they were growing rice, maize and wheat and didn't have water shortages.

The villagers of Alikatta were displaced from inside the sanctuary when the state hydroelectric dam started flooding their land. They were resettled in Durgapur ten years ago, in 1993, and were told that they had to move because a National Park had been created and a dam was built. They say they moved "voluntarily" when they realized that rising water levels were beyond their control and that wild animals were destroying their crops, but they were clearly told to leave and forced to move by circumstances.

These villagers want us to know that they were promised good land, irrigation, wells and a dam but that all the promises have been broken. They were also promised money but never got it. They were given bricks for their homes but had to provide all the other building materials such as bamboo themselves. They were also promised work in a tourist lodge but they have yet to see the tourist lodge. They are very angry about the five or six acres of land each family was given as it is of "poor quality." They have severe water problems and have yet to see any provisions from the government and forest department for irrigation.

They know about the EDC because the forest officials came to tell them that there was money available for building bunds, ponds, wells, etc. But they haven't seen any of the money and no bunds, ponds or wells have been built. And yet, their only request is that their water problem be solved. They need water to irrigate fields not sufficient to sustain them and not yielding enough rice without the water. They were not offered any alternative sources of livelihood and must "go to Nagpur for work." These villagers say they get firewood from their fields and use dried cow dung for fuel. They don't go into the forest anymore as they get arrested and jailed. What they got from the EDC were six biogas plants, three of which are working, and fifteen pressure cookers.

The women were told about a sewing centre four kilometres away and were told that if they attended the sewing course they would get a sewing machine and a cycle. However, two of the women report that when they went to the sewing centre, they were asked for their Scheduled Tribe Certificates. The women explained that they couldn't present their Scheduled Tribe Certificates as the certificates were in their mothers' villages. Then they were asked to sign papers but they cannot read or write. So they were excluded from the program. Women who did attend the sewing training are angry because they haven't received any of the sewing machines or cycles they were promised. But they know that in another village thirty-six cycles were distributed.

Villagers in the buffer zone of Pench National Park were not consulted in the micro-planning process of World Bank's ecodevelopment project. The schemes do not suit local needs and villagers are losing their sources of livelihood due to their exclusion from the national park and restricted entry into the sanctuary. Gond culture and identity has been neglected even though the national park is in a Fifth Scheduled Area; relations between villagers and the Forest Department have deteriorated.

It is not clear that wildlife was being adequately "protected" when a dam was built and the sanctuary opened to tourists. The states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh started constructing a dam in the sanctuary adjacent to the national park as part of a hydroelectric project despite the national park's mandate to protect wildlife in 1974 —much wildlife habitat was submerged. Villagers in Madhya Pradesh are experiencing water shortages but no water is provided by the hydroelectric project or the EDC. The loan from the World Bank has been spent and there is nothing to show for it other than the gradual eviction of tribal populations from the forest.

Meanwhile, global and national industrial interests are sanctioned and supported by the state apparatus. The village bhumka is arrested for entering the sanctuary to collect medicinal plants but these same plants are being "protected" for harvesting by multinational pharmaceutical companies. The tigers aren't safe at all.

One thing is for certain: the supposed new paradigm on protected areas (one that respects the rights of indigenous and local people), agreed to at the World Parks Congress in Durban, and the Convention on Biological Diversity in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, can not come fast enough for the people of "Mowgli's land".

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