

On Mudumalai Tiger Reserve

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T arsh Thekaekara’s response (4 September 2010) to our article “Can a Tiger Change Its Stripes? The Politics of Conservation as Translated in Mudumalai” (10 July 2010) is welcomed for opening up in public a debate on tiger reserves that has remained regrettable confined to the corridors of power. However, his misreadings of our argument warrant responses, particularly given his unwillingness to seriously engage with the legalities of tiger reserve declarations and with progress towards a more democratic and transparent process thereof.

False Assertions
Thekaekara makes two completely false assertions: (1) that we challenge the need for tigers to have inviolate spaces, and (2) that we view the communities of Gudalur as a homogeneous or “cohesive social units”.

What we say is that tigers are not necessarily a good keystone species for a “healthy” forest (a point he agrees with) and that one type of forest is not necessarily ecologically or socially better than another type. We go on to argue two things. First, we contend that where local use of forests is important, a landscape mosaic with near-inviolate zones in core areas and coexistence in buffer zone areas, one that acknowledges local people’s partial sovereignty over natural resources, is a better way forward, both from a biodiversity and a political perspective, rather than the current obvious state of conflict. Second, leading on from this, the form that a landscape mosaic takes should be decided upon in a more democratic manner, where local communities are active participants which is what the 2006 Amendment of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (WLPA) specifies.

Thekaekara suggests that we oversimplify social reality in the Gudalur region by not acknowledging tensions between adivasi and non-adivasi groups. This assertion is based on our argument that the current “adivasi only” approach to the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006 is a violation of the law. Our point is that the process defined in the FRA, if implemented properly, is flexible enough to be able to mediate these conflicts: the purpose of the law being implemented properly is so that the historic injustice meted out to adivasis by settlers is taken care of. Recognising adivasi hamlets as villages is permissible within the law. However, denying non-trivial forest dwellers their rights claims, as the district administration is doing, supported by non-governmental organisations (ngos), is both unlawful and unmindful of a complex history of migration to the region. It might also aggravate the existing adivasi/non-adivasi divides.

Why not go through the process as put forth in the FRA, namely, admit all claims to forest lands, and then assess these claims? Thekaekara may think that achieving a more inclusive form of local democracy is a utopian ideal, but then he needs to come out, and say, he has no confidence in Indian democracy. Failing that, one must be open to a more detailed practical discussion of what may or may not work within certain constraints and timescales.

Defence of ‘Due Process’
Thekaekara’s defence of “due process” is also weak. He argues that the WLPA Tiger Amendment and the FRA should not be read together. But the government circular we cited clearly states that the declaration of critical tiger habitats (and more generally, critical wildlife habitats) should be in accordance with the FRA.

Claiming that the forest department only implements the WLPA and has no jurisdiction over the FRA flies in the face of the facts: the forest department has a representation equal to that of the tribal and revenue departments in the district and subdivisional level committees that assess claims submitted by the gram sabha. Indeed, Nilgiris district has the highest number of forest officials on these committees in the state. Thekaekara might also be surprised to hear that we filed a right to information (rti) to get all documents regarding the creation of tiger reserves, but the expert committee report either does not exist or was withheld.

It is also disingenuous to suggest that we tried to, or, indeed could, influence stakeholders in the region with a pre-determined position. We had discussions with all stakeholders including him on a number of occasions. Our aim was to take an informed position based on these discussions and our reading of the law. His unwillingness to acknowledge this seems to be based on the fact that his interests conflict with our findings.

He also argues that we have “attributed de facto mala fide motives to ngos working in the area” without duly acknowledging their service. While we did not write about ngo involvement in the process in any great detail, as it was not the main purpose of the paper, Thekaekara’s response and the issues raised above indicate that a detailed examination would be worthwhile with reference to the politics of conservation and people’s rights.

In order to have a constructive discussion it would perhaps make sense if Thekaekara presented his experiences of being part of an ngo involved in the implementation. Perhaps, he could encourage Adivasi Munnetra Sangam to share information on how rights were settled under the FRA in the core area, and support us in making an rti request to district-level authorities in order to put these matters on the public record. Indeed, without this there remains the vexing question of democratic accountability. Is he suggesting that one dispenses with any and all institutions because they are subject to elite capture? Is he arguing for a model of democracy in which ngos facilitate between the government and people, bypassing elected bodies? Is he arguing for ignoring the rule (or implementation) of law?

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China after 1978: Craters on the Moon

The breathtakingly rapid economic growth in China since 1978 has attracted world-wide attention. But the condition of more than 350 million workers is abysmal, especially that of the migrants among them. Why do the migrants put up with so much hardship in the urban factories? Has post-reform China forsaken the earlier goal of “socialist equality”? What has been the contribution of rural industries to regional development, alleviation of poverty and spatial inequality, and in relieving the grim employment situation? How has the meltdown in the global economy in the second half of 2008 affected the domestic economy? What of the current leadership’s call for a “harmonious society”? Does it signal an important “course correction”?

A collection of essays from the Economic & Political Weekly seeks to find tentative answers to these questions, and more.

Windows of Opportunity

By K S KRISHNASWAMY

A ruminative memoir by one who saw much happen, and not happen, at a time when everything seemed possible and promising in India. K S Krishnaswamy was a leading light in the Reserve Bank of India and the Planning Commission between the 1950s and 1970s. He offers a ringside view of the pulls and pressures within the administration and outside it, the hopes that sustained a majority in the bureaucracy and the lasting ties he formed with the many he came in contact with. Even more relevant is what he has to say about political agendas eroding the Reserve Bank’s autonomy and degrading the numerous democratic institutions since the late 1960s.

Global Economic & Financial Crisis

In this volume economists and policymakers from across the world address a number of aspects of the global economic crisis. One set of articles discusses the structural causes of the financial crisis. A second focuses on banking and offers solutions for the future. A third examines the role of the US dollar in the unfolding of the crisis. A fourth area of study is the impact on global income distribution. A fifth set of essays takes a long-term view of policy choices confronting the governments of the world. A separate section assesses the downturn in India, the state of the domestic financial sector, the impact on the informal economy and the reforms necessary to prevent another crisis.

This is a collection of essays on a number of aspects of the global economic and financial crisis that were first published in the Economic & Political Weekly in 2009.

1857

A compilation of essays that were first published in the EPW in a special issue in May 2007. Held together with an introduction by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the essays – that range in theme and subject from historiography and military engagements, to the dalit viranganas idealised in traditional songs and the “unconventional protagonists” in mutiny novels – converge on one common goal: to enrich the existing national debates on the 1857 Uprising. The volume has 18 essays by well-known historians who include Biswamoy Pati, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Peter Robb and Michael Fisher. The articles are grouped under five sections: ‘Then and Now,’ ‘Sepoys and Soldiers,’ ‘The Margins,’ ‘Fictional Representations’ and ‘The Arts and 1857’.

Inclusive Growth

K N Raj on Economic Development

Edited by ASHOKA MODY

The essays in the book reflect K N Raj's abiding interest in economic growth as a fundamental mechanism for lifting the poor and disadvantaged out of poverty. These essays, many of them classics and all published in Economic Weekly and Economic & Political Weekly, are drawn together in this volume both for their commentary on the last half century of economic development and for their contemporary relevance for understanding the political economy of development in India and elsewhere.