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No change in stripes

THE RECENT announcement that a tiger reserve status has been accepted for the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary (BRTS) in Karnataka shows that there has been no change in India's short-sighted, conflict-ridden strategy for wildlife conservation.

The BRTS is home to significant wildlife that must, indeed, be conserved. But it is also home to 15,000 Soliga adivasis, who have carefully tended the landscape around them with ancient and evolving knowledge that would be the envy of any ecologist. If BRTS goes the way of other tiger reserves, these Soligas may be displaced and dispossessed. A letter from the adivasi to environment minister Jairam Ramesh says: "The government should first give poison to Soligas, and only then notify BRTS as a tiger reserve." Ironically, displacement of the Soligas could also lead to a worsening of the ecological status of the area. Already, according to research group ATREE, various restrictions on the Soligas' use of fire for management has led to serious spread of the weed Lantana, smothering native vegetation and reducing wildlife habitat.

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**ASHISH KOTHARI**

tralisng powers in a bureaucracy. This has completely ignored generations of dependence and knowledge that characterise ecosystem-based communities.

Between one lakh and six lakh people have been uprooted from protected areas (PAs), most of them offered no or very poor rehabilitation. Many millions more have been rendered 'illegal' occupants, simply because of

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change in the land's legal status.

Meanwhile, tens of millions of hectares of natural ecosystems have been diverted for mining, industries, dams and other projects. Prospecting for uranium mining is going on inside Nagarjunsagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve and mining within Sariska Tiger Reserve, but in both reserves, ancient communities are being relocated in the name of conservation! Such denial of rights and displacement without a due process of ecological studies and community consent are violations of the Wild Life Act and the Forest Rights Act.

By no means are all local communities practising conservation or untouched by vested interests backed by markets and politics. Nor do they (especially their

younger generations) want to continue staying inside forests. However, this cannot be an excuse to deny the recognition and vesting of rights and the extension of basic welfare measures to them.

Conservation can only be achieved through dialogue, recognition of rights, ecological assessments, encouragement to relevant traditional practices, changes in practices that are destructive, and provision of ecologically sensitive livelihood alternatives. Thousands of initiatives in India, led by or with communities, are showing the way. The government itself acknowledges such Community Conserved Areas (CCAs), but needs to move to respectfully recognising and supporting them, and transferring their lessons for protected areas. It also needs to facilitate the transformation of landscapes around PAs and CCAs, into areas of ecological sustainability and livelihood security, for they cannot survive long if the surroundings are destroyed. Such actions are also part of India's commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity. As it moves towards hosting the 12th Conference of Parties of this Convention in 2012, the world will be looking to see if it remains true to its words.

The writer is a founder-member of Kalpavriksh, an environmental research and action group.