

Contested Conservation: Governmentalizing Landscapes and Belonging in the Nilgiri-Wayanad Region of South India

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In 2012, a cluster of 39 sites spread across the Western Ghats, a mountain range in southwest India, were collectively inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. This tag of World Heritage Site further fuelled debates in the Nilgiri-Wayanad (Gudalur) region of Tamil Nadu, a predominantly tea-growing area of the Western Ghats inhabited by a diverse set of communities including Adivasis (scheduled tribes), Sri Lankan repatriates and other ‘agrarian’ communities from erstwhile Madras Presidency, about who and what belongs in ‘forested’ landscapes such as these.

My research in the context of the Nilgiri-Wayanad engages with what Radcliffe and Anthias (2015) call ethno-environmental fixes or the ways in which the state goes about governing society and nature by designating some people and not others as environmental citizens. Over the last few years, contestations over land in the Nilgiri-Wayanad have amplified as the forest department and conservationists have defended the declaration of inviolate tiger reserves and the need to retrieve ‘forest lands’ given that the region is also an important watershed and elephant corridor. The fault lines have been drawn politically as the state sets about trying to (re)create ‘conservation landscapes’.

Conservation is as much about politics as it is about nature. The Nilgiri-Wayanad as an ethno-spatial fix needs to be unpacked genealogically so as to interrogate its premises and its consequences. My research looks at how landscapes are governmentalized, what conservation means at different points of time and the spatial and property rights dimensions of conservation. Doing so allows me to illustrate the social constructedness of conservation, how different actors (forest department, British hunters, conservationists) have shaped the conservation agenda and the environmental justice implications of conservation in its past and present forms.

Environmental history and political ecology provide a lens through which I look at contested conservation in the Nilgiri-Wayanad. The environmental history of Nilgiri-Wayanad includes the reservation of forests for timber supply, the notifying of private forests, the creation of wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and tiger reserves, the declaration of elephant corridors and most recently the listing as a World Heritage Site. I situate the making of conservation in wider colonial and post-colonial histories that have shaped the Nilgiri-Wayanad region. Of particular importance are the histories of the plantation economy in the nineteenth and twentieth century, agrarian reform legislation in the 1960s, in-migration of Tamil estate labour from erstwhile Ceylon from the 1960s onwards and the enactment and implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Rights to Forest Act), 2006, a legislation aimed at recognizing historical claims to forest lands.

By telling this history, I hope to highlight the problematic nature of ethno-environmental fixes that essentialize communities and the difficulties that continue to exist in making conservation work in environmentally just ways.