

## Micro-Politics and the Prospects for Convivial Conservation: Insights from the Corbett Tiger Reserve, India

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### Abstract

This research article calls for explicit attention to micro-politics through engagement with a feminist intersectional lens for enabling convivial conservation. Convivial conservation provides a vision for equitable conservation through simultaneously pursuing structural change and addressing context specific micro-politics. This research article draws on feminist intersectional research and feminist political ecology to argue that convivial conservation needs to explicitly engage with the ways that intersections of class, gender, caste, and other identity positions shape the micro-politics of power around land rights and opportunities for benefitting from conservation interventions. It draws on findings from two forest villages near the Corbett Tiger Reserve in India to demonstrate the micro-politics that shape the variegated access and tourism dependencies experienced by different local residents. Engaging with learnings from implementation of the progressive Forest Rights Act (FRA) which intended to redress these issues, this analysis highlights that the FRA serves as both a cautionary and potentially transformative example for furthering the convivial conservation vision of local people's engagement with conservation areas.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, feminist political ecology, micro-politics, equity, tiger conservation, India

### INTRODUCTION

Conservation has been long critiqued for its top-down and market-centred emphasis (Igoe and Brockington 2007; Dempsey and Suarez 2016). Consequently, there are increasing calls for alternative forms of conservation policy and practice that foreground social justice and equity. Convivial conservation is one such proposal rooted in political ecology that critiques propagation of capitalist economics and nature-culture dichotomies through Protected Area (PA) creation and other forms of conservation programming (Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020). While proponents of the idea recognise that dimensions of difference within local communities can shape

the micro-politics of conservation, they have not yet critically engaged with how these differences intersect to create a differentiated landscape of ownership, access rights, and livelihood opportunities in the vicinity of conservation areas. To address this gap, this paper draws on feminist intersectional research and feminist political ecology (FPE) (Harris 2015; Scoones et al. 2018; Nirmal and Rocheleau 2019) to argue that the convivial conservation concept needs to explicitly engage with the ways that intersections of class, gender, caste, and other identity positions in local communities shape power dynamics around land rights and opportunities to benefit from conservation interventions. It thereby joins Krauss (2021) and Collins (2021) in calling for more explicit focus on gender and power differences in the convivial conservation concept and its translation into practice.

I illustrate my argument by examining the ways that land rights have shaped the differentiated socio-ecological context of everyday life and livelihood opportunities for people in villages adjoining the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) in India. Named after Jim Corbett, a British colonial official who turned from tiger hunting to tiger conservation, CTR is one of the first Tiger Reserves (TRs) to be established in India (in 1973). It has

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served as the model for subsequent tiger reserves established in other parts of the country. It is also home to the highest number of tigers within a defined Wildlife Protection Area in India (Jhala et al. 2020). The substantial tiger population in CTR has propelled tourism promotion by the state, resulting in a booming industry shaped by both the state forestry agency and private enterprise. However, accessing the economic opportunities associated with tourism is strongly influenced by the intersection of differentiated land ownership and access rights in relation to micro-politics emerging from caste, class and gender differences within households in adjoining villages. My study of the intersectional feminist political ecology of CTR, thus, offers a critical contribution concerning the potential of the overarching convivial conservation proposal to generating transformative change in mainstream conservation thinking and practice.

In the following sections of the research article, I begin by outlining the key elements of the convivial conservation proposal and then provide a short overview of feminist research which addresses the political ecological dimensions of conservation in terms of understanding local difference and micro-politics around land rights and forest access. I use the example of the Corbett Tiger Reserve to illustrate the way intersections of class, caste and gender articulate local differences in land rights and livelihood access. Engaging with learnings from recent implementation of progressive legislation via the Forest Rights Act (FRA), this article explores how micro-politics affect access to rights in relation to this development. My analysis suggests that the FRA represents potential to further a convivial vision in local people's engagement with CTR as long as these important micro-politics are sufficiently acknowledged and addressed. I highlight the importance of paying explicit attention to the micro-politics of access and equity in pursuit of a just and equitable conservation landscape that embodies the values and aspirations expressed in the convivial conservation proposal.

### **CONVIVIAL CONSERVATION AND ITS CONCEPTUALISATION OF LOCAL POWER DYNAMICS**

The concept of convivial conservation was put forward by Büscher and Fletcher (2019, 2020), in response to the neo-preservationist (Wilson 2016) and new conservation (Kareiva et al. 2012) proposals, to address the growing problem of global loss of biodiversity. The neo-preservationist proposal privileges and reinforces the separation between non-human nature and human society by expanding PAs, ideally to cover at least half the earth's surface while largely excluding any economic activities within them. The new conservationist proposals, on the other hand, promote explicitly capitalist approaches in integrating economic development into conservation programming, even as they seek to go beyond nature-society dichotomies embodied in PAs by calling for integrated spaces in which humans and non-humans overlap. In contrast to both of these perspectives, the proponents of convivial conservation call for radical transformative change in conservation thinking and practices grounded in post-capitalist politics and a co-constitutive understanding of nature and society.

The convivial conservation perspective draws on a growing body of scholarship that similarly argues for alternative frameworks for conservation policy, programmes, and practices. This scholarship calls for equity and justice in conservation based on recognising cultural diversity (Kothari et al. 2014), building self-reliant regional economies (Shrivastava and Kothari 2012; Büscher and Fletcher 2019), and pursuing redistribution and reduction in both production and consumption (Demaria et al. 2013). The overarching vision for convivial conservation entails moving beyond monetary valuation of nature and redefining value in terms of the social, cultural or affective ways that people live with, and relate to, nature in everyday life (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). This entails a focus on both short-term and long-term change, as well as engaging different groups of actors involved in conservation. Büscher and Fletcher (2020) argue that conservation interventions continue to disproportionately target rural or forest dwelling communities who are least responsible for the capitalist accumulation and resource extraction threatening conservation both locally and globally. Their critique is thus directed partly towards political and economic elites who are responsible for and promote capitalist approaches to both economic development and the conservation practice and governance intended to counter this. Their proposal, thus, calls for a radical transformation in conservation policy and practices that pursues both large-scale structural change and micro-level political organisation simultaneously.

Büscher and Fletcher (2020) outline several elements that articulate this vision across multiple scales ranging from macro governance structures to the level of local implementation. One of these key elements centres on moving away from 'protected' area thinking and towards 'promoted' areas wherein co-existence between humans and non-humans is encouraged. Another element concerns historical reparations for rural or forest-dwelling communities negatively impacted by past conservation interventions and other forms of uneven development. Potential forms of reparation include land distribution and co-ownership or co-management. Other elements address the need to move away from short-term voyeuristic tourism centred on charismatic wildlife towards long-term engagement with everyday nature; to reduce reliance on revenue from external tourism for conservation; and to introduce some basic welfare payments, such as a Conservation Basic Income, for households and individuals living in villages adjoining conservation areas.

Büscher and Fletcher (2020) recognise that contextual realities of local community politics matter in conservation interventions. They articulate the importance of a co-constitutive understanding of power that acknowledges micro-politics in relation to larger structural factors. They argue that while power is indeed situated within micro contexts and is complex, it is vital to also relate these complexities to the ways they are shaped and constrained by capitalist structures. Thus, they promote a co-constitutive understanding of structure and agency. They also call for the co-constitutive understanding of resistance movements, asserting that these must go hand in

hand with movements that pursue broader structural change. Drawing inspiration from Gibson-Graham's (2006) community economies approach that highlights potential for cultivating post-capitalist practices and spaces within an overarching capitalist system, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) suggest that short-term and long term strategies to subvert capitalist logics at both micro and structural scales must be implemented simultaneously. They also relate issues with the separation of nature and culture and intensifying oppression along lines of race, gender, and coloniality.

While these are important points, here I suggest that the convivial conservation proposal warrants more explicit and substantial engagement with micro-contexts and the intersectional dimensions of difference they contain. I propose that a feminist intersectional lens is particularly suited for such analysis as it explicitly articulates and draws connections between these dimensions of micro-politics and the overarching societal structures in which they are situated.

### **FEMINIST INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON MICRO-POLITICS AND CONSERVATION**

Intersectionality involves viewing lived realities and identities as multidimensional (May 2014). A feminist intersectional lens recognises the multiple axes of power emerging the articulation of gender with other dimensions of difference including class, race and caste, which, depending on the local context, may intersect in different ways to shape patterns of access to and control of resources (Rocheleau et al. 1996; Nightingale 2011; Sultana 2011; Mollett and Faria 2013). Thus, a feminist intersectional framework provides insights into local social dynamics centred around patterns of differentiated access to resources and livelihoods as well as into larger community or regional resource management structures (Sultana 2020). For example, research on gender dynamics in India has shown that forest dependencies often vary based on dimensions of local difference such as gender, caste, and class, consequently impacting vulnerable groups' stakes in resource management (Agarwal 2009). Yet, despite the obvious intersections of these factors in shaping distributional outcomes, there is a tendency among scholars and policymakers to consider them as separate categories. Thus, Pan (2019: 36) argues that Dalit (a collective term used to refer to socially oppressed castes, also categorised as Scheduled Castes in the Indian Constitution) politics and mainstream Indian feminism "often suppress difference in order to magnify particular issues and impose universality." Joshi (2011) notes similarly that water reform policies in India commonly consider caste and gender as separate categories, and hence that the benefits targeted on the basis of either caste or gender do not reach most Dalit women.

The invisibility and under-representation of women in forest access and management in India is well documented and points to the ingrained patriarchal relationships within communities and households. Agarwal (2001) argues that due to the combined influence of class and patriarchal power dynamics, community forestry groups often exclude women despite the official mandate

to include women. Notwithstanding the fact that it is largely women in forest and rural areas who are the primary collectors of Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP), most women are represented through the men in their families (Sarin et al. 2003).

Feminist intersectional analyses concerning community dynamics and local participation in commons or forest management programmes in India reveals the ways that power dynamics between different caste groups can align to create strategic alliances for livelihood needs, but also end up perpetuating hierarchies wherein tribal community and women are dispossessed (Parthasarathy 2015). For instance, in a village in Odisha widely known for its forest protection, much of the work for protecting the forests was led by lower caste women and men, yet after the forest regenerated, the village elites belonging to higher castes asserted control over the management and extraction of resources by using their capital and gaining the support of state forest department officials (Sarin et al. 2003). Sarin and colleagues point out that the rights and interests of different groups within a village community are not congruent and that these differences are often institutionalised in their customary forms of forest governance and management systems. One major dimension of difference within any village community is class, which is directly related to land ownership status and size of holding and often overlaps with caste status and access to bargaining power. Naidu (2013) demonstrates that landholding not only defines access to benefits, but also facilitates circumventing restrictions on forest access or benefiting from alternative economic avenues. She points out that pre-existing class differences reinforce inequalities within a village and further marginalise the landless households who often belong to lower castes.

Feminist political ecology (FPE) approaches have often integrated intersectional perspectives in their framework of analysis. FPE is "more about a feminist perspective" than "a single focus on women and/or gender" (Rocheleau 2015: 57). The emphasis of the approach is on environmental and social justice, focusing attention on local experiences of marginality, vulnerability and dispossession emerging from the intersections of gender, class, caste, race, and ethnicity (Baviskar 2001; Sundar 2001; Resurrección 2017; Joshi 2014; Shrestha and Clement 2019). It also examines the lived experiences of marginalised groups and situated knowledges which recognise multiple ways of relating to nature and place rather than only in terms of the strict nature-culture separation that state politics and modern science often promote (Rocheleau and Nirmal 2015). For instance, Aiyadurai (2018) demonstrates that the Mishmi community's spiritual kinship with tigers is challenged by conservationists' agenda of creating a tiger reserve to separate humans from tigers. Pandey (2017) examines how Dongria Kondh's legal battle against a mining corporation in Odisha remains a landmark case in the recognition of tribal communities' spiritual and material identities tied to their land. In this way, it represents the ongoing resistance of local and tribal groups to State prioritising corporate interests. Similarly, Baviskar (2004) examined the anti-dam movement in Narmada valley by highlighting the cultural relations of a tribal community

to their land and river, revealing the discrepancies between identities used by the State to oppress and those embodied by the community. Other scholars have highlighted how social dynamics of caste are reflected in access to programmes and benefits within communities targeted for conservation and development projects (Rastogi et al. 2014; Kabra 2020). Kabra (2020), for instance, notes that when people in villages are displaced from their traditional homes for creating conservation areas, not only are the impacts of displacement varied but also that the demands for claims and settlements can differ based on historical access and dispossession.

A feminist intersectional perspective thus provides a valuable framework and grounded approach for understanding the landscapes of conservation that emerge from the interaction between broader policies and programmes and the micro-politics of rights, access, and opportunities available to various groups within areas adjoining conservation areas. In the following sections, I use this approach to illustrate the micro-politics of access, alienation, and dependencies in forest villages adjoining the Corbett Tiger Reserve in India.

## THE CORBETT TIGER RESERVE

### Context

The Government of India instituted the Project Tiger in 1973 with the goal of stemming the dwindling tiger populations in the country and reviving their numbers through the creation of dedicated PAs for wildlife conservation (NTCA 2020). Project Tiger was inaugurated in Corbett National Park, making this site one of the first nine tiger reserves in India. CTR has a strong preservationist history. The CTR site was a hunting area before it was designated as the first National Park of India and of mainland Asia in 1936, during the British colonial regime. It is named after Jim Corbett, an officer of the colonial regime, who was known for being a hunter-turned-conservationist and who spent some years in the sub-Himalayan region before he left India. This history contributed to it being as an important site to launch the Project Tiger.

CTR is located in Uttarakhand State in the Shivalik foothill region of Indian Himalayas. It covers a total of 1,288.31 sq. km and encompasses a mix of montane areas and sub-Himalayan tracts called Terai-Bhabar which include grasslands, wetlands, riverine tracts, and moist deciduous forests (Badola et al. 2010). The forests comprise about 70% of the area with grasslands, wetlands, agriculture, and settlements occupying the remaining 30% (Government of Uttarakhand 2010). CTR contains a Core protected area of 821.99 sq. km which is exclusively maintained for the tiger population, and a Buffer zone of 466.32 sq. km surrounding the Core area (see Figure 1) within which some human settlement and livelihood activities are permitted and human-wildlife interactions can occur (NTCA 2012, 2020). The Buffer zone is also designated as an area where local communities are provided livelihood alternatives that reduce their dependence on forests. Ecotourism is promoted as a form of livelihood alternative employing the win-win narrative

of simultaneously achieving conservation and community benefits (NTCA 2012).

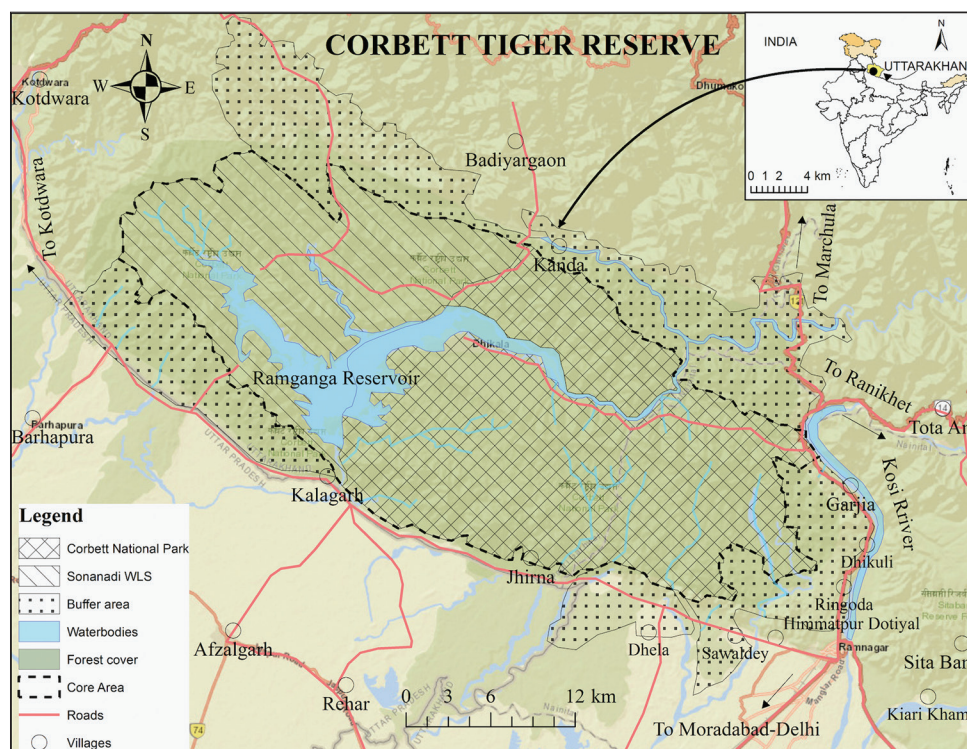
The areas surrounding CTR are a combination of rural and forest landscape. Historically, livelihood activities in this region largely entailed subsistence agriculture, livestock keeping and forest resource use. Soon after it was designated a Tiger Reserve, the villages that existed within the demarcated boundaries were displaced and moved outside to the areas controlled by the State Forest Department (Lasgorciex and Kothari 2009). The growth of ecotourism since the early-2000s has heavily influenced land use and livelihoods. Today, the areas adjoining the south and eastern boundary of CTR have a high concentration of villages and hotels. The villages are distinguished by two formal classifications: revenue villages and forest villages. Revenue villages are agricultural areas with definitive cadastral boundaries of private land ownership. These villages fall within the jurisdiction of the district administration and the State's Revenue Department (Census of India 2011b). Forest villages are located within areas that come under the land ownership and jurisdiction of the State's Forest Department. Thus, individuals and households in these forest villages cannot obtain titles to own land nor set up permanent structures.

### Methods

I conducted ethnographic research in the villages near CTR between August 2018 and August 2019. I used qualitative methods such as participant observation and interviews in villages located outside the south and south-eastern boundary of CTR. I employed a field assistant to assist me with identifying research participants and for interviews. I used a basic framework of questions on family history and relationship to CTR and the area, livelihoods and association with tourism to guide the interviews. When necessary, I repeated interviews with the same respondents. Participant observation was recorded in field notes. In addition, I collected data on CTR from secondary sources such as independent and government reports, newspaper articles, and published academic research. I analysed the field data through inductive coding and drawing themes that supported comparing and contrasting information (Bernard 2006).

For this research article, I focus on forest villages of Amer and Beran (pseudonyms). Fifty-three (53) participants were identified through a combination of referral and purposive sampling based on their dwelling location, livelihoods, and socio-cultural backgrounds. I provided full information about the research project and sought respondents' verbal consent before proceeding with the interviews. I use pseudonyms for the two villages to ensure full anonymity and privacy for participants. I did not ask participants about their caste status and only made note of it when it was freely offered by them. I was conscious of my positionality as a non-local, urban woman researcher from a substantially different socio-economic background and sought to maintain reflexivity during data collection. The field assistant was a local male from a nearby town, and his gender and situated knowledge about local social





**Figure 1**  
*Corbett Tiger Reserve. Created by: Ecoinformatics Lab, ATREE*

dynamics was critical for mediating initial doubts or concerns expressed by participants when they arose.

### Amer and Beran

The forest village of Amer is located near the eastern boundary of CTR near the highway that runs along the Kosi River corridor. The village comprises 101 families, most of whom were relocated outside the PA after the area's designation as a Tiger Reserve in 1973. Relocation from inside the CTR area to land belonging to the State Forest Department outside the reserve boundary meant that the families held no legal rights to land ownership or forest access rights. The Forest Department initially employed people in the relocated settlement in plantation work in its Reserved Forests (Tiger Conservation Plan 2015). The majority of families in Amer are classified as falling within the officially defined low-income category (Tiger Conservation Plan 2015). Households in the village belong to upper and Scheduled Castes (SC) (low castes identified in one of the Schedules of the Indian Constitution for affirmative action), with the latter continuing to face enormous social stigma and oppression in local society. The average household size is 6 and approximately 90% of the households in the village rely on income from wage labour in tourism. According to information from field interviews, four individuals, all men belonging to upper caste groups, have relatively stable daily wage jobs in tourism: one is a guide and three are safari vehicle drivers. Women are primarily involved in household care and forest resource collection. Some households maintain vegetable plots adjoining their homes, but most rely

on purchasing their basic food requirements from local markets and government subsidised ration shops.

Beran is also a forest village located near the eastern boundary of CTR. It is home to nearly 500 families, all of whom fall under the category of SC and are identified as low-income households. Most of these households migrated to Beran from the nearby hill areas in the early-1970s to work as labourers for the forest department and seek employment in nearby urban areas. Since Beran is located within land owned by the State Forest Department, households do not have rights to own land. In addition, the CTR management plan has identified Beran as part of a wildlife corridor and has proposed the relocation of households to other sites. The majority of households depend on wage labour for their livelihoods, with nearly 80% linked to tourism. Men work as labourers in tourist lodges, for the forest department, in building and in road construction. Women are responsible for household care, firewood collection, and maintain small vegetable plots around their homes. Some women have found work in a local factory and piecework through local NGOs.

In comparison with these two forest villages, revenue villagers can own land, and many have sold their land to out-migrate or continue living on part of their land while leasing a section to tourism enterprises. The revenue villages near CTR have some of the densest tourism services. Revenue villages have a mixed composition in terms of class and caste, but are generally higher class and caste owing to their land ownership status. Most households in such villages depend on or supplement income through tourism. Tourism work includes safari jeep drivers, safari guides, safari booking agents, homestays, guest house owners, restaurant entrepreneurs,

souvenir shopkeepers and hotel staff. These villagers have relatively easier access to facilities as there are government primary schools, electricity and water access for farming in villages. Government schemes for supplementing livelihoods, such as silviculture, are also accessible to revenue villagers.

## **CORBETT TIGER RESERVE AND THE POLITICS OF ACCESS**

### **Variegated access and tourism dependency**

Amer and Beran are similar to many forest villages located around the Tiger Reserve where households' tourism dependencies through tourism-based work is increasing. However, the ability to gain better outcomes from tourism work is influenced by socio-economic status. A village elder from Amer pointed out that current restrictions on forest access is a contrast to his ancestors' time. His family, along with other villagers, was relocated in 1978 from the forest inside CTR with their agreement. While tourism has served as one source of income due to lack of options, it is also a form of restriction on villagers' lives:

“They keep taking the tourists inside the forest and tell us to keep quiet. 30 safari jeeps go into the forest twice a day from the gate next to our village, but there is no issue with so many people going in. The issue is always with us entering the forest. All the kids from this village who work in tourism wash dishes. The better jobs go to people with contacts” (Respondent 1, May 9, 2019).

Steady employment, as per the Census definition (i.e., which provides income for more than six months of the year (Census 2011) in Amer is very low. At the time of fieldwork, only four men in Amer belonging to higher caste groups held steady employment in tourism. Daily wage work, such as washing dishes, is most common in forest villages, followed by work for local businesses and government infrastructure projects. The village elder's assertion that better jobs in tourism go to those who are of higher socio-economic status and have direct access to powerful people or power brokers is repeatedly mentioned in forest villages. Other researchers refer to 'gatekeepers' who can influence the flow of benefits or funds as their social networks stem from their dominant caste position, thus allowing them to position themselves as links between the State and rural community (Kabra 2020).

The variegated access to steady employment and the type of work is more striking when households in forest villages are compared to revenue villages. In the latter case, more than 80% of the working population in the neighbouring revenue village were employed in farming their own land and had steady employment in tourism. For example, when CTR was being actively developed as an ecotourism destination in the early-1990s, the State Forest Department offered a safari guide training course for people from surrounding areas. The majority of trainees selected were from nearby revenue villages who later were worked for the State Forest Department or with private hotels. Some of these guides have since set up their own

travel agencies, including safari booking agencies, as well as homestays. During the tourism boom in the 2000s, and after, landowning households in revenue villages were able to set up their own tourist accommodation facilities; one villager from an upper caste, landowning family explained: “we had land and set up a 16-room hotel” (Respondent 2, August 17, 2018). Other landowning households in revenue villages, since the 2000s, have built small shops on their land and some rent these out to tourism-related retail businesses, and set up restaurants. Since households in forest villages do not own titles to the land they occupy and are not permitted to build permanent structures on forest department land, they cannot set up similar businesses to take advantage of CTR tourism.

### ***Access to development schemes, infrastructure, and benefits***

In addition to the lack of land ownership, households in forest villages have little to no access to government schemes and subsidies, and infrastructure facilities such as electricity and water supply connections (Upadhyay 2019). Although road infrastructure in the area has improved, most forest village households point to the lack of electricity and water supply. A couple in Amer whose son works in a hotel spoke of the marginal change to their lives since they were relocated to the forest village: “We were married here, we had children and now grandchildren, but no facilities over these generations. We don't even have an electricity connection” (Respondents 3-4, May 29, 2019). Although lack of electricity supply is a critical issue for forest villages, some settlements on forest land have been able to access electricity due to their proximity to major religious shrines or revenue lands purchased by wealthy outsiders. A resident of Beran village noted that its neighbouring settlement on forest land has been able to access electricity because “Bania people (trading communities higher up the caste ladder) from a nearby town have bought land near the village” (Respondent 5, April 10, 2019). Another resident of Beran added “there are people with contacts who have influence in that area which is why they got electricity access. There is a big temple there which attracts a lot of people, which is also why they get it [electricity]” (Respondent 6, April 10, 2019).

Households in Beran also emphasised their disadvantaged position for access to formal education. Since most adult males work as daily wage labourers for construction or road work or as gardeners or guards in hotels, they see formal education as necessary for their children and grandchildren to gain access to better jobs. A teacher in the local primary school and resident of Beran said, “We have been trying to get a high school set up here, it would be very good if we had one.... We cannot ruin our children's future, but not everyone supports that idea even within the village” (Respondent 7, April 10, 2019).

Unequal access to development schemes not only affects households in forest villages near CTR, but also people belonging to lower socio-economic status within adjoining revenue villages. The village head, who is often a male from the dominant upper castes, exercises power in decision-making for the village as a whole and functions as a gatekeeper for government schemes, grants, and subsidies that village

household may be eligible to access. One member of a local women's association noted that:

"Most government schemes [for women's benefit] are not implemented in these [revenue] villages, unless you have contacts with the village head. But in a forest village there is no formal village head and so that is the biggest difficulty. Even in revenue villages, if a family who is well-off needs resources to rebuild their home or bathroom, they will be able to get resources to do so, but the poorest will not get the same" (Respondent 8, May 14, 2019).

#### ***Access to forest rights and community mobilisation***

Livelihoods based on forest access and resource collection are becoming more restricted for households in both forest and revenue villages. The restrictions imposed by the CTR management are more severely felt by forest village households in Amer and Beran since they lack tenure security. These residents, along with those from other forest villages on the periphery of CTR, have been seeking ways of accessing legal forest rights through existing legislation. However, finding common ground for demanding forest rights has been challenging. As one resident from Amer pointed out: "Even within villages there are differences in coming together to demand for forest rights" (Respondent 1, May 9, 2019). Factors that influence differences include local elite alliances with political parties that attempt to secure 'vote banks' by promising benefits such as electricity supply, cooking gas, and food ration subsidies to village households. A resident of Beran remarked, "this village has a two-party [political party] support" (Respondent 9, September 13, 2018), which resembles swing voting, and supporting political parties promising support and advocating for their rights, such as electricity connection. The villager also implied that people ally with political parties that have a chance of winning, with the hope of thereby building social capital through the parties' networks of influence. Nevertheless, despite divergent political allegiances, a Forest Village Association was formed to mobilise communities around CTR that lack security of tenure. The association threatened to boycott voting in the upcoming elections unless their demand for revenue village status was recognised (Upadhyay 2019). This demand has not yet been met.

#### ***Gender dynamics***

The insecurity of tenure for households in forest villages affects both men and women in terms of land ownership. However, women bear significant responsibility for cultivating food plots near their homes and collecting firewood and other produce from nearby forests. The restrictions imposed by CTR on forest access by local households have made it more difficult for women to carry out these activities. Due to gendered expectation and cultural norms, access to wage labour in tourism remains easier for men than women. Hotels are mostly unwilling to employ women from the villages, citing the inability of management to be responsible for their personal security and safety.

A forest village near Amer, and located close to the highway, has a number of small food stalls for tourists. Two women run such shops full time, while other women from the village may find temporary work or fill in for their husbands when they are otherwise committed. Several women from Beran worked at a local factory until the management changed and terminated their employment. About 10 young women from Beran received training in sewing and embroidery through a local non-government organisation. These women have been able to do piecework and contribute to their household income. Such work opens up avenues for income, but access to assets such as land remains impossible in forest villages, especially for women. While access to land ownership and better waged work remains a hurdle for male forest villagers, women remain more vulnerable due to the ingrained everyday practices of patriarchy.

Although revenue villagers are able to own land titles, land ownership titles are in the name of men in the family through a patrilineal system, except for widows who can claim ownership as a primary heir (Deo and Dubey 2019). In Uttarakhand state, rights to inheritance of agricultural land are secondary for daughters, and unmarried daughters have greater rights to land than married ones (ibid.). However, changes are taking place. The legal inheritance provisions have recently been clarified for the Hindu Succession Act of 2005, such that daughters will now have equal inheritance rights (Deo 2020). The Uttarakhand government recently supported women's co-ownership of land, specifically pointing out the imbalance in agricultural work between husband and wife (Das 2020). However, despite the existence of reformed inheritance laws, women's rights may continue to be curbed through the micro-politics of power and access to local economic opportunities associated with CTR.

### **LAND OWNERSHIP AND FOREST ACCESS: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE MICRO- POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF CONSERVATION**

The cases of Amer and Beran show the differentiated access to work and benefits, not only on account of landlessness but also in relation to intersecting dimensions of caste, class and gender. CTR's history as an exclusive space for elites has continued, although shifting from hunting grounds to ecotourism. Ecotourism in the form of safaris is one direct new restriction on use of forests that were previously home to the forest villagers. Such differentiated access follows and reinforces historical and ongoing oppression of lower caste and class groups. Tiger reserve governance and tourism has emphasised the lack of access to opportunities for work and use of space. The CTR forest is used for multiple jeep safaris every day, while forest villagers who were living in the same forest are restricted from using the same space. Job opportunities and economic mobility for forest villagers remain limited, except for those who are able to gain access through social capital. This takes place primarily through allegiance with those in power, which does not necessarily lead to benefits for the community as a whole with respect to rights or access. Most landowning



villagers in revenue villages have been able to gain jobs in tourism, including as drivers, guides or entrepreneurs through use of their own farm land. Villagers who are able to train as guides and successfully become part of the guide association are rarely from forest villages. This is shaped by the historical disadvantage in the form of education, infrastructure and socio-cultural subjugation based on their landlessness, caste and class.

In the context of tiger reserve governance, forest villagers have been marginalised, most significantly because of landlessness. Forest resource access also remain restricted. To address the issue of historical injustice to forest dwellers and tribal communities in India, the Forest Rights Act was legislated. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006 (FRA) is a legal instrument for forest use reparations and land rights in India. In calling for redressing historical injustice suffered by forest dwelling and tribal communities, the FRA has forged a radical path for conservation and in many ways can be seen as a forerunner for convivial conservation. However, the implementation of this progressive legislation has faced hurdles emerging through micro-politics in local contexts which are discussed below.

### **Forest access and use: institutions and socio-dynamics**

The FRA is the outcome of a prolonged movement led by a grassroots and marginalised forest people's coalition; one that began in 2002 after a ruling by the Supreme Court of India on evicting forest dwellers (Kumar and Kerr 2012). The FRA was enacted by the State to address the historical injustices perpetrated on forest dwelling communities by providing them with legal rights to access and use forest produce, as well as the ability to cultivate land. I highlight the FRA in this context due to its relevance for forest dwellers around CTR and its potential to constitute one step towards enacting the convivial conservation vision. The provisions of the Act include recognition of forest rights in PAs, right to cultivate forest land, ownership, access and rights to the conversion of forest villages into revenue villages (Clause 3(1)(h) and 4(2) FRA, 2006). The FRA is a progressive legislation that encapsulates elements of the convivial conservation approach such as the idea of promoted areas. Through the recognition of rights in the FRA, communities have been able to generate revenue from forest harvest and create a self-sufficient model of livelihood while ensuring for ecological sustainability (Broome et al. 2017). For instance, after the recognition of Community Forest Rights titles, villages in Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary have been able to earn high revenue from sustainable harvesting and selling of bamboo, and have ensured their management plan is guided by their traditional knowledge (Kukreti 2018). FRA also promotes gender equity as it requires land titles for individual forest rights to be in the joint names of husband and wife, or a single household head regardless of the gender (CFR-LA 2016). In the state of Rajasthan, 60 women have filed rights claims as single women, and joint claims from 22 villages have the woman's name as the first claimant (ibid). It is precisely because of these radical

possibilities of the FRA to revolutionise conservation that the conservation administration, particularly the tiger conservation apparatus, has hindered its implementation and actively sought to undermine it (Rai et al. 2019). There have been reports of violation of the FRA in TRs and a lack of state support even after rights are recognised (Fanari 2019; Gupta et al. 2020).

Despite the FRA being a emancipatory State intervention, local socio-cultural contexts have resulted in inconsistencies in its implementation. Kodiveri (2016) has recorded instances of discrimination against Scheduled Castes during the implementation of the FRA. Differences in local engagement, politics of identity, local bureaucracies and diverse local livelihood interests have also plagued FRA implementation and curtailed its emancipatory objectives (Bose et al. 2012; Kodiveri 2016; Sen and Pattanaik 2019). Similarly, Ramdas (2009) examined how the FRA officially recognised rights of women, yet the State ended up using tribal women's rights over land to promote plantation growth instead of their traditional farming practice. Local power dynamics influenced by identity differences and institutional cultures thus pose hurdles for implementing the FRA (CFR-LA 2016). These, in no way, diminish the crucial and necessary role of the FRA in recognising forest rights. Instead, they point to important issues that must be confronted in implementing progressive structural change, offering lessons that can be learnt by focusing on micro-politics and identity differences.

### **Connecting the threads**

I draw from experiences in the implementation of the FRA over the last decade to highlight how different community dynamics and social identities have implications on the outcomes of implementing such a legislation. I do this to illustrate the larger argument of the research article regarding the need to focus on micro-politics, particularly those relating to caste, class and gender. The FRA presents a potential model or pathway for convivial conservation in undoing historical injustice and recognising legal rights of access and use. The FRA also provides valuable insights for implementing progressive legislation that explicitly tackles the micro-politics emerging from intersecting differences of caste and gender.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this research article I have examined the ongoing micro-politics in forest villages around CTR to demonstrate the possible hurdles that could emerge in the implementation of progressive conservation measures such as convivial conservation. I have emphasised the value of a feminist intersectional approach for understanding the micro-politics of difference within communities, and related issues of distribution of access and benefits while considering dimensions and divisions of caste, class and gender. Attention to differences emerging from the intersectionality of caste, class, gender will be vital for ensuring that interventions do not further marginalise but instead proactively benefit the most marginal in affected communities. I



engage with FRA, as an existing legal measure to address historical injustice and recognise rights of forest dwelling communities, to demonstrate a potential form of convivial conservation measure aiming to redress these issues of marginalisation. By drawing out the issues concerning differential access based on caste or gender, however, I show that this progressive legislation has also faced hurdles in implementation related to similar dimensions of local micro-politics.

If the promoted areas element of convivial conservation were to be initiated in CTR, one of the key steps would be to pursue reparations with respect to land and forest access and use through the FRA. This would not only address the historical injustices of alienation experienced by forest villagers but also reveal the ways in which the micro-politics of conservation and ecotourism contribute to marginalisation of these groups by gender, class and caste. The value of an intersectional feminist lens for convivial conservation is in its explicit focus on confronting patriarchy and overcoming other forms of oppression in pursuit of social and ecological justice.

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### Declaration of competing/conflicting interests

None.

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### Research ethics approval

The Wageningen University does not require formal Ethics Clearance, however this research abides by the ethics code of the American Anthropological Association (See <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/upload/AAA-Ethics-Code-2009.pdf>).

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