Co-subalternity and the political ecology of human–elephant conflict in Odisha, India

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Abstract

Dominant biocultural conservation discourses on human–elephant conflict in India and elsewhere often reduce local communities to a victim/perpetrator binary. Even seemingly divergent models— fortress conservation, and rights-based approaches— reproduce this framing. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's evocative question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and insights from subaltern political ecology, this article argues that both perpetrator and victimhood theses encourage silencing and misrepresentation of the subaltern communities who interact with wildlife on an everyday basis. Based on qualitative research with the tribal and other traditional forest dwelling communities (the "subaltern") in Odisha, this article illustrates how these communities resist such portrayals. Through practices of livelihood adaptation, narrative resistance, and land-rights claims, they showcase their agency and frame human–elephant relations as political negotiations between "co-subalterns." This framing of co-subalternity moves beyond dominant conservation paradigms and critiques the victim/perpetrator binaries for subaltern communities in conservation discourse.

Keywords: Epistemic violence, co-subalternity, politics as negotiation, subaltern political ecologies, Asian elephant, tribes, decolonization

Résumé

Les discours dominants sur la conservation concernant les conflits entre les humains et les éléphants en Inde réduisent souvent les communautés locales à une dichotomie victime/agresseur. La conservation de type « forteresse » et les approches fondées sur les droits reproduisent ce cadre. S'appuyant sur la question évocatrice de Gayatri Spivak « Les subalternes peuvent-ils parler ? » et sur les enseignements de l'écologie politique subalterne, cet article soutient que la recherche réduit souvent au silence et déforme la réalité des communautés subalternes qui interagissent quotidiennement avec la faune sauvage. Sur la base d'une recherche qualitative menée auprès de communautés tribales et d'autres communautés forestières traditionnelles en Odisha, je montre comment ces communautés résistent à de telles représentations. Par l'adaptation de leurs moyens de subsistance, la résistance narrative et les revendications de droits fonciers, elles mettent en avant leur

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capacité d'agir et définissent les relations entre les humains et les éléphants comme des négociations politiques entre « co-subalternes ». Elles dépassent les paradigmes dominants de la conservation et les dichotomies victime/agresseur.
Mots-clés: Violence épistémique, co-subalternité, la politique comme négociation, écologies politiques subalternes, éléphant d'Asie, tribus, décolonisation

Resumen

Los discursos dominantes sobre la conservación en torno al conflicto entre humanos y elefantes en la India suelen reducir a las comunidades locales a una dicotomía víctima/agresor. La conservación de tipo «fortaleza» y los enfoques basados en los derechos reproducen este marco. Partiendo de la sugerente pregunta de Gayatri Spivak «¿Puede hablar el subalterno?» y de las ideas de la ecología política subalterna, este artículo soutienne que la investigación a menudo silencia y tergiversa a las comunidades subalternas que interactúan con la vida silvestre a diario. Basándome en una investigación cualitativa con comunidades tribales y otras comunidades tradicionales que habitan los bosques en Odisha, muestro cómo las comunidades se resisten a tales representaciones. A través de la adaptación de sus medios de vida, la resistencia narrativa y las reivindicaciones de derechos sobre la tierra, estas comunidades ponen de manifiesto su capacidad de acción y enmarcan las relaciones entre humanos y elefantes como negociaciones políticas entre «cosubalternos». Van más allá de los paradigmas conservacionistas dominantes y de los binomios víctima/agresor.
Palabras clave: Violencia epistémica, cosubalternidad, política como negociación, ecologías políticas subalternas, elefante asiático, tribus, descolonización

1. Introduction

Dominant biocultural conservation discourses on human-wildlife conflicts in India and elsewhere in the Global South often reduce rural communities to a victim/perpetrator binary. Even seemingly divergent models— fortress conservation, and rights-based approaches— reproduce this framing. In this article, I explore the question: how do subaltern communities articulate their agency, and resist the victim/perpetrator framing of conservation discourses? I argue that conservation discourses on human–elephant conflict (HEC) in India and elsewhere need to be framed under the rubric of "subaltern political ecology" (Featherstone, 2007), by drawing on Gayatri Spivak's (1988) evocative question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and its critique, insights from subaltern politics as "politics of negotiation" (Nilsen and Roy, 2015; Chandra, 2013, 2015), and qualitative fieldwork in the Eastern Ghats of Odisha, India. I illustrate my argument by examining the ways Adivasi[2] and other forest dwelling communities (OFDC), whom I categorize as subaltern, in Odisha resist their problematic portrayals through livelihood adaptation, narrative resistance, and land-rights claims, and frame the tribal-elephant relations as political negotiations between "co-subalterns." Such framing moves out of the dominant biocultural conservation paradigms and critiques the victim/perpetrator binaries for subaltern communities in conservation discourse.

[2] In this article, I use the terms Adivasi and tribal interchangeably. More so because in central India, the communities (both tribal and non-tribal) themselves use such a nomenclature. Other terms that are often used are *Janjati* and *Vanjati*. Such naming entails identifying them as part of the Hindu caste system. In my field area, neither the tribal nor the non-tribal communities identified the Adivasi communities as part of this system, even if they were identified as Hindus. Rather the terms of reference were: Adivasi/ST, and Odia (for caste Hindus). I do not use the legal term scheduled tribe (ST) as my respondents in the field area were not categorized as ST in government records.

The eastern Indian region has witnessed the greatest number of reported fatalities from human-elephant conflicts of anywhere in the country (Government of India, 2024; Prakash *et al*., 2020). In documented cases of deaths of both humans and elephants due to HEC, the eastern coastal state of Odisha leads with 996 human and 794 elephant deaths from 2013-2023 (Senapati, 2022).

Research on HEC in Odisha is surprisingly rare. Elephants do not restrict themselves to their officially designated corridors and often deviate from these predetermined pathways. Therefore, this study focuses on the frontier areas of human–elephant conflicts rather than restricting itself to the so-called protected areas. These frontiers consist of forest areas (both state-owned and community-accessed), farmlands (of both tribal, and non-tribal peoples), plantations, and horticultural gardens (for plantation zones see Barua, 2024; for the intersections of hills, farmland, and urban areas see Mathur, 2021 & Aiyadurai, 2016; for the interface of estuarine and forest areas see Jalais, 2014 &Sen, 2021). As I will illustrate a focus on these areas, within the rubric of subaltern political ecology, opens new avenues for research on human–wildlife conflicts, tribal agency, and subaltern politics.

The article is divided into four sections, following the introduction. The first discusses Spivak's argument on representation, misrepresentation, and silencing. It is followed by my engagement with a subaltern politics of negotiation, and the political ecology of human-wildlife conflicts. Section Two is methodological, and the third discusses three practices of the Adivasis leading to the co-creation of subalternity — livelihood adaptation, narrative resistance, and land-rights. Finally, I conclude by delving into the framing of co-subalternity and how such theorization moves beyond dominant conservation paradigms and breaks the victim/perpetrator binaries for subaltern communities (both human and non-human animals) in conservation discourse.

2. Subalternity, politics as negotiation and subaltern political ecology

On May 27, 2020, a pregnant female Asian elephant (Elephas maximus) died in the Silent Valley National Park in the south Indian state of Kerala. The reason for her death was ascertained to be the consumption of a firecracker-filled pineapple, which burst inside her mouth, eventually leading to her death. This incident led to a national outrage, with both politicians and celebrities campaigning about it on social media and in leading dailies. In a mass media trial, the blame was placed on the local farming communities for this incident. But the mainstream media did not report on the opinions of the local villagers. A study of available literature on conservation practices in South Asia shows that in the course of tribal-elephant conflict, middle-class conservationists, forest department officials, and national & global news media frame tribals within a victim/perpetrator binary, in which tribals (or local villagers) are either victims of elephant depredation (on media framing see Barua, 2010, 2023; Gubbi, 2012; Banerjee & Sharma, 2021; van Houdt, *et al*. 2021; Maurer *et al*., 2024), or perpetrators of habitat loss, crop-raiding responses, or "retaliatory" violence against wild elephants (Madden 2004; Chartier *et al*., 2011; Hoare, 2015; Kumar *et al*., 2018; Thant *et al*., 2023). Like the dominant fortress conservation model (Brockington, 2002; Hartter & Goldman, 2011; Büscher, 2016), historically, these narratives have created discourses on "biocultural endangerment" (Rashkow, 2022) and subsequently moved to keep humans and wildlife separate from each other through physical barriers (Münster & Münster, 2012). In the process, they often misrepresent and misappropriate the voices of subaltern communities within dominant discourses on biocultural conservation practices in the Global South (for more on this see Büscher, 2009; Kelly, 2011; Singh *et al*., 2024).

Within the complex historical-sociological-ecological milieux of postcolonial societies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argued that the reason for the effectiveness of misrecognition of subaltern voices is the result of the limits of

institutional spaces that recognize subaltern agency over matters concerning their own marginalization. She terms this process as "epistemic violence" (Darder & Griffiths, 2018), which is perpetrated via two paths. One, by the installation of articulate voices from non-subaltern groups who would act as representatives and interpreters of subalterns. And second, by overshadowing the knowledge of subaltern groups about their own conditions (Colombo, 2020). By these two measures, the historically dominant classes, and the institutions of the state occupied by these classes do not let the subaltern "speak."

Ezra Rashkow notes that biocultural diversity conservation —and the creation of victim/perpetrator binary vis-á-vis tribals— in colonial and postcolonial regimes is the result of "…the disconcerting lack of awareness of the long and problematic history of human endangerment, extinction, and vanishment discourses" (2022, p. 9). In other words, discursive silencing of tribals and OFDCs in the discourses on human-elephant conflict, to use Spivak's framing, has been a structural issue which creates conditions in which communities become subalterns when they are "removed from all lines of social mobility" (Spivak, 2005, p. 475) and remain in the condition of subalternity as "social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action" (Spivak, 2005, p. 476). In effect, this legitimizes denial of their agency (Fredriksson, 2022), including choosing appropriate livelihood options —capitalist or otherwise— available to subaltern communities (Pandya, 2022; Sen & Pattanaik, 2017). This lack of recognition of subaltern agency meant that the subaltern cannot speak in a language that is comprehensible to the non-subaltern classes (Morris, 2010). The same can be said about non-human animals.

Spivak's provocative position on subalternity and agency (in short, subaltern politics) has been critiqued by scholars who have argued that she raised the wrong question (Maggio, 2007), as she does not take into consideration the emancipatory projects emerging from different social and environmental movements in the Global South (Eimer, 2020; Darder & Griffiths, 2018; Nilsen & Roy, 2015; Peet & Watts, 1996), while other scholars have acknowledged the significance of race and colonial difference in Spivak's work for understanding subaltern politics (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2005). Critiquing Spivak's position, Maggio (2007) argues that the question of a subaltern group's race is not simply whether they could speak, as this puts the onus of explanation on the classes (and genders, castes, races) that have been historically marginalized. As he puts it,

> Like a child being torn between two divorcing (or married) parents, the subaltern are silenced even when attempting to speak. The subaltern is always framed as a quisling or as a resistant. Its own voice, is never heard… On Spivak's account, the subaltern cannot speak. (2007, p. 425)

The appropriate question to ask, according to Maggio, is whether "the subaltern can be heard?" This reframing of the issue is significant as the subalterns speak all the time (Maggio, 2007, p. 437). When we (non-subaltern scholars working with marginalized groups) dissociate Spivakian Western liberal-independent agents from the act of active speaking, we recognize that there are multiple languages in which subalterns express their agency and participate in politics (Chabot, 2019; Riach, 2017). Misrecognition of subaltern agency emerges in situations where Marxian notion of *vertreten* (political representation) is interpreted as an absolute agency of the (non-subaltern) representative to interpret the voices of the represented (Chatterjee, 2010). So, one way to move out of the double-bind of (mis)interpretation and (mis)representation is by replacing the discourse of interpretation with "cultural translation" that would allow us to understand the micro-politics and micro-history of subaltern articulations "that might place the subaltern as a key player" (Maggio, 2007, p. 423).

Nilsen and Roy (2015) identify the processes of cultural translation as the subaltern politics of negotiation. Chandra (2013), working in the postcolonial context and characterizing the subaltern groups as "rightful resisters" (O'Brien, 1996), argues that when we hear the subaltern's voice, the latter's logic emerges in the form of "resistance-as-negotiation" and not as "negation." This is because unlike the colonial state, which was seen to rule by coercion (Guha, 1997), the postcolonial democratic state cannot ignore its marginalized classes, who now negotiate with the state for transfer of resources (Chatterjee, 2008). In other words, the centrality of subaltern politics in the contemporary period, as Chandra (2015) notes, understands that the subaltern groups are like actors inhabiting a "Bourdieusian field" (p. 586) and have a "feel for the game"; wherein they "recognize the structures of power and domination in society and work within those to articulate their claims, exploiting crevices and cracks in social arrangements to push forward subaltern political agendas" (Chandra 2015, p. 566). They understand that owing to its claim to democracy, the laws in a modern state define tribals as "primitive beings" who require certain degrees of legal protection to conserve their way of life. Therefore, the tribals in India present their politics in the form of both primitivism, and territorial claims on postcolonial state, as and when the situation demands (Rajesh, 2023; Das Gupta, 2020; Chandra, 2013).

On similar lines, Nielsen's ethnographic studies of anti-land dispossession movement in Singur, West Bengal (2015), and Goa (2017) highlight this duality of approach when the agitating farmers not only used the legal courts for their struggles but also adopt mass mobilization against the postcolonial state to counter their dispossession. Similarly, Rashkow (2022), while studying the tribals in the western Indian state of Gujarat, argues, "The tendency in most contemporary accounts of tribal communities is to pair together the life and death of endangered species and societies into a narrative of biocultural diversity loss" (p. 100). This, according to him, is a way by which tribal communities in India, and indigenous groups in Latin America, try to negotiate their position within the victim/perpetrator discourses in biocultural conservation politics. In this article, I frame this approach as "co-subalternity."

For the purpose of this study, Featherstone's (2007) integration of subaltern politics and political ecology in the conceptualization of "subaltern political ecology" holds significance as it challenges the reflexive (environmental) modernization theses of sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck as they redefine the role of expert knowledge in late modernity (Giddens 1990), and risk society (2009) on the one side, and Bruno Latour's *Politics of nature* (2004) on the other for its centrality of officially designated "professional skills" of economists, politicians, scientists, moralists, among others. All three sociologists, according to Featherstone (2007), have attempted to create a "new common sense" for political ecology (p. 284) where subaltern politics and subaltern ecology are not mutually exclusive. But by giving centrality to the voice of "experts" (in the case of Giddens and Beck) and "professionals" (in the case of Latour) in the context of subaltern lifeworlds, these scholars continue to reinforce the marginalization of subaltern voices, their knowledge about human–nonhuman interactions, and political strategies (Featherstone 2007, p. 284).

In this article, I suggest that the new commonsense in political ecology of conservation practices could rather be understood as rejection of "a single version of the environment" (Featherstone, 2007, p. 287) and struggles to conserve it. This can be done by documenting the diverse ways by which subaltern politics articulates itself in the construction of "antagonists" (Roy, 2015; Featherstone, 2007), "collaborators" (Nilsen & Roy, 2015), and/or "frenemies" (Ramesh, 2021) within the framework of subaltern political ecologies. In other words, by decentering the location of "experts" and "professionals" as the authoritative voices on politics and ecology, subaltern political ecology can help in decolonizing environmental politics in the age of the Anthropocene

(Prasad & Das, 2025), and argue for "epistemic justice" for subaltern groups (Fricker, 2007) that would be "pluriversal, rather than one standard universal, notion of socio-ecological transformations" (Das & Prasad, 2025, p. 4). Therein, co-subalternity is understood not simply as the position of marginalization alone, but rather it would represent politics within which subaltern groups make use of all kinds of available resources (including "experts" and "professionals") to articulate their case of marginalization and production of knowledge. Thus, they can use of the institutions created and reproduced by the dominant classes to articulate subaltern causes, as Spivak suggested. The relationship between subaltern politics and political ecology can be summed up as a Venn diagram illustrated in Figure 1.

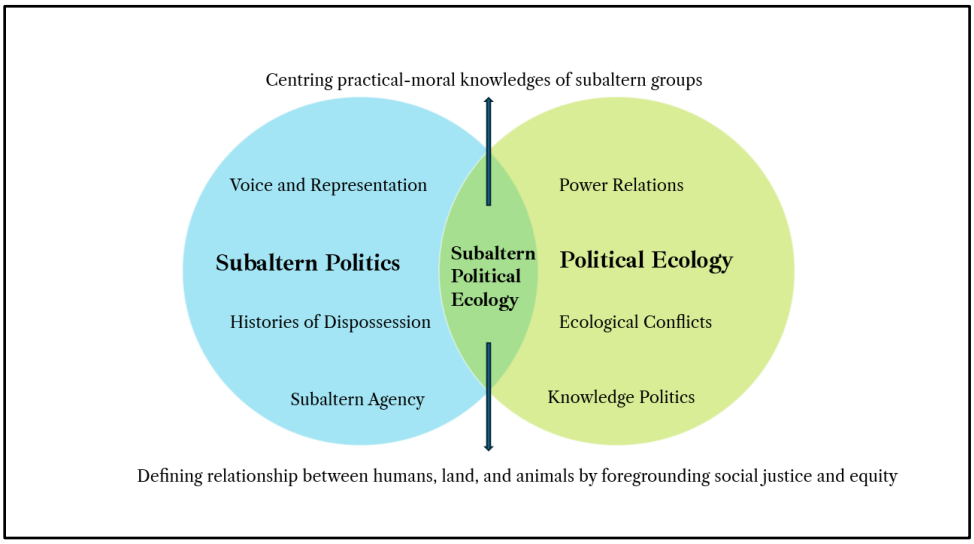

Figure 1: Subaltern political ecology at the intersection of subaltern politics and political ecology. Source: Author

As I will discuss, the case of human–elephant conflict in Odisha illustrates the manner by which the tribals and OFDCs in the region use the three distinct approaches of livelihood adaptation, narrative resistance, and land-rights claims to negotiate with the state and its agencies for their self-representation as active voices against the victim/perpetrator binary in the context of human–elephant conflict. Before that, let me discuss the methods I used to collect primary data from the field.

3. Methods and data

As per the 2017 Elephant Census, Odisha had 1,976 Asian elephants (Palei *et al*., 2021). This number was the highest in the East Central Region of India (consisting of states like Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal (South Region)). These elephants predominantly dwelled in the five designated elephant reserves linked by 14 elephant corridors[3]

[3] See https://pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetail.aspx?PRID=1986211 accessed 10th January 2024. Inter-state elephant corridors are given as: Deuli-Suliapada (Odisha and West Bengal), Badampahar-Dhobadhobin (Odisha and Jharkhand), and Badampahar-Karida East (Odisha and Jharkhand). Intra-state: Karo-Karampada, Telkoi-Pallahada, Similipal-Hadagarh-Kuldiha (Similipal-Satkosia) (Baula-Kuldiha), Maulabhanja-

crisscrossing the Eastern Ghats and Chotanagpur Plateau regions of the state. At approximately 23 percent of its overall population, Odisha also has one of the highest percentages of scheduled tribes in India (Ota *et al.*, 2018). Like the elephants, the Adivasis have been living in the Eastern Ghat and Chotanagpur Plateau regions of the state for generations. A substantial portion of this area is designated as 'scheduled' areas which are governed by special laws (Government of Odisha, 1956). Meanwhile, they have a high concentration of timber, mineral resources like iron ore, bauxite, coal etc., and there are associated industrial facilities that extract these minerals for processing (Adduci, 2017).

The Adivasis and the OFDCs in Odisha are some of the most marginalized communities in the country (Padel, 2009; Choudhury & Aga, 2020; Jena, 2022). In the postcolonial period, these groups have faced increased pressure on their land, culture, and identity by various developmental projects – ranging from the construction of large dams over rivers, to mining projects, and national parks and wildlife sanctuaries transforming them from subsistence agriculturists to precarious labor, but also participants in the modern economy (Padel & Das, 2010a, 2010b; Sahu & Dash, 2011; Debasree, 2015). At the same time, the Adivasis and OFDCs have shown great courage in taking on the might of the colonial and postcolonial state of Odisha by struggling against the very same developmental projects that were supposed to dispossess them (Dungdung *et al.*, 2022; Oskarsson & Sareen, 2020; Padhi & Sadangi, 2020; Pati, 2018). This is not to say that all tribal groups in Odisha are equally marginalized or follow similar approaches to struggle against the state or other dominant social classes.

Primary data for the study were collected during 2022-2023 in three phases, over a period of 18 months, from a tribal *panchayat*[4] in the Eastern Ghats mountain range in the Nayagarh district of Odisha (Figure 2). These villages are inhabited by officially recognized ST (Saora & Kandha) and some Adivasi communities (unrecognized ST, Odia Kandha[5]). The forest area around the *panchayat* comes under the jurisdiction of Nayagarh, Khurda, and Ganjam district administrations. Although movement of elephants has been taking place between Chandaka forest (in Khurda district) and other nearby areas, the movements to the study area has been relatively recent. So, this area does not come under any designated elephant corridor.

Jiridamali-Anantpur, Kanheijena-Anantapur, Nuagaon-Baruni, Buguda-Central RF, Tel-Kholgarh, Barapahad-Tarva-Kantamal, Kotagarh-Chandrapur, and Karlapar-Urladani.

[4] Created by the Government of India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1993 for democratic decentralization, the Panchayati Raj Institution consists of a pyramidal three-tier structure, namely, Gram Sabha, Gram Panchayat, and Zilla Panchayat.

[5] Soara or Sabara and Kandha are designated as Scheduled Tribes (STs) by the Government of India. Apart from Odia language, both the communities speak Kui as their first language. Although self-identified as Adivasi, neither the Government of Odisha nor the Government of India recognize Odia Kandha as STs. Rather they are designated as Other Forest Dwelling Communities by the state. The Odia Kandha speak Odia as their first language.

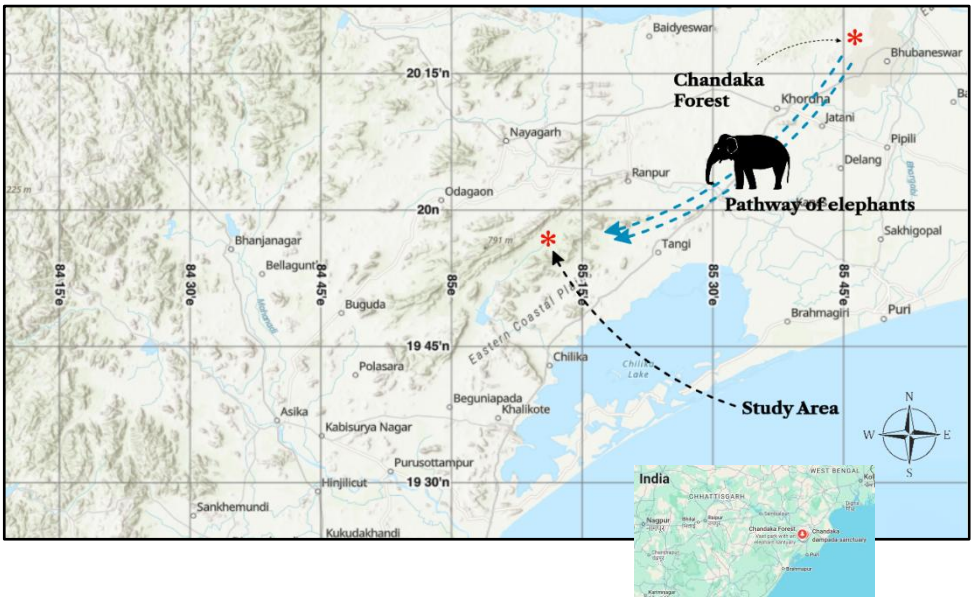

Figure 2: Emerging elephant route. Source: Author fieldwork

During phase one (July-September 2022), I administered a reconnaissance survey of all twenty-seven villages in this *panchayat* to document livelihoods, forest resources, and occurrences of human–elephant conflicts. Based on this village survey, in phase two (June-July 2023), I took a sample of two villages (Nelipada & Dhulipada)[6] directly impacted by these conflicts. During this period, I conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) involving Odia Kandha communities. A survey of 50 households was also carried out in these two villages to understand the impact of human–elephant interactions for the livelihoods of households. The survey results show that like most of the villages in the tribal populated areas in central and southern Odisha, all surveyed households in Nelipada and Dhulipada were engaged in a complex web of farm, forest and wage labor activities to gain a livelihood. In phase three (December 2023), I interviewed non-tribal farmers outside these villages in the foothills who had resorted to solar powered electric fencing to protect their crops, with barbed wire and metal spikes to protect electricity poles from elephants, and forest guards who resided in these locations. My aim throughout was to understand more about the emerging human–elephant conflicts in the region.

For this article, I have used only the qualitative data emerging from FGDs and interviews. As survey data was meant to document the multiple livelihood activities of the tribals in the study area, it was not used for thematic analysis in this article. Unlike studies on human–nonhuman conflicts in protected areas, where there is a clear demarcation between insiders (wild animals) and outsiders (villagers), or areas where there has been a religio-cultural proximity between humans and animals (Saha, 2024; Sinha & Singh, 2020; Aiyadurai, 2016; Jalais, 2014), this area did not have such a history. There were no core elephant areas where farmers or herders could not engage in economic activities, and there were no generations-long relationships between humans and elephants to fall back to. Nevertheless, the forests in the surrounding study villages are classified as "reserved forest" by the Odisha state government. Therefore, villagers have restricted access to the forest and its

[6] Pseudonyms.

resources. As almost all studies on human–wildlife interactions in India have differed from these field conditions, where elephants entering ever-newer areas have come in contact with humans, some of whom had only ever seen tamed elephants only in circuses or temples, and not in forests. It was important to study these ineractions. Moreover, owing to the non-designation of the study villages as part of protected areas, I did not require any written permission from the Forest Department of the Government of Odisha to enter the forest villages or to reside there. The following sections discuss the results of my engagement with the villagers of Nelipada and Dhulipada and their encounters with elephants, particularly male tuskers (*danta hathi*), civil society, and the postcolonial state.

4. Livelihood adaptation as political practice

A thematic analysis of focus group discussions with tribal households, and interviews with non-tribal farmers and gardeners reveal three distinct forms of agency that the tribals and non-tribals in the study area show in the context of HEC. One, at the community level people practice livelihood adaptation to maintain their subsistence needs. Second is the resistance narrative used to counter the victim/perpetrator framing present in the mainstream media, and found among forest department officials and city-based conservation activists. They respond to loss of life among villagers and/or property, and particularly the death of elephants in the forests. Third is the political claim to land rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 to obtain legal land records for homestead land, and community forest land, to utilize them for non-timber commercial purposes. Throughout, I emphasized the voices of the local communities and the strategies they use to mobilize support and to fight misrepresentation and misrecognition. These narratives were analyzed using the subaltern political ecology framework developed in this article.

Adapting to agriculture and forest resources

Nelipada and Dhulipada are like other villages in the region where villagers earn a livelihood by engaging in subsistence agriculture, and the collection of non-timber forest products. For subsistence, they cultivate food grain crops like millet, rice, corn and legumes. The arrival of elephants in the area and their regular raids on villages have impacted the cycle of farming. As a result, things that elephants seek out like corn, sugarcane, black eyed peas, and long duration paddy crops no longer figure prominently in farming. Farmers said that these crops are capital-intensive to cultivate, take relatively more time to mature, and finally, owing to their long stems, are easier for the elephants to uproot and consume. In the two villages, villagers have altogether abandoned the cultivation of corn and sugarcane due to the recurrent losses sustained from elephant raids.

Does the creation of these uncertainties mean that the farmers in these villages are abandoning cultivation? According to my respondents, leaving agriculture is not an option for them, at least in the near future. As a result, they are devising innovative methods like prolonged guarding of their vegetable crops, and quitting some capital-intensive food crops to adapt to changed circumstances.

The collection of minor forest products figures prominently in the overall livelihood security of the Adivasis in the region. The coming of elephants has partially impacted on this. My female respondents suggested that despite the presence of wild elephants, women still go to the forests to collect Tendu/Kendu leaves (Diospyros melanoxylon), herbs, and roots. Women interviewed claimed that they have identified the relatively safe timings when the elephants are less active. After night-long foraging in the forests, farms and villages, respondents claimed elephants tend to relax till early noon. So, by adopting such tactics women in these communities have kept themselves safe and do not seem to have experienced any fatal incidents. However, owing to their self-imposed restrictions,

women cannot spend an entire day on the forest floor. As a result, their net income during specific seasons has decreased, increasing uncertainty during the relatively lean periods.

In addition to non-invasive ways by which Adivasi communities adapted to the arrival of elephants to the region, the relatively well-off non-tribal groups have adopted more invasive methods of co-existence. One of the prominent ways by which elephants are separated from non-tribal economic zones is by installing mild-voltage solar fencing around farms and fruit orchards (Figure 3). At the time of fieldwork, and researching rates available online, the initial cost of installing these setups, depending upon the number of electrified wires (ranging from 3 to 10), could be between ₹250-450 per meter (US$ 2.65-4.77). Added to this cost is the price of an electricity generator, solar panels and battery. Specialized solar fencing firms have emerged who advertise the effectiveness of their installations (Figure 4). Private entrepreneurs (mostly from non-tribal groups) with their access to institutional finance can buy these installations.

This is not the case for tribal households. During the focus groups, the Adivasi villagers claimed that they neither have ownership rights over forest lands, nor of the farmlands where they grow their crops, so investing in expensive technologies is not viable. Moreover, getting loans from banks is difficult for Adivasis. In contrast to the Adivasi respondents, my non-tribal interlocutors and NGO workers claimed that Adivasi men "being lazy" do not want to work on solar fencing installations. That was the reason elephants could easily forage across an Adivasi's farm or orchard, they said. These variations in the representation of similar situations are important, as the voices of these interlocutors and NGO workers later became instrumental in furthering the subalternity of Adivasi communities.

Figure 3: Solar fencing around horticulture orchards. Source: Author

Figure 4: Advertisement for solar fencing. Source: Author

Gendered adaptation tactics

Apart from the economic adaptations to human-elephant conflicts,, there are also social responses. Scholars have suggested that Adivasi women are relatively more autonomous than their caste Hindu counterparts (Das, 2024; Deshpande, 2011). Ashwini Deshpande (2011) refers to this phenomenon as "tradeoffs", in which due to widespread poverty, there are lesser restrictions on women to move into work in public spaces. In Adivasi societies, as my respondents noted, women are more active than men in the three workspaces: home, farmlands, and forest floors. Firstly, inside the home, women are expected to complete all the household tasks like cooking, feeding the family, taking care of the elderly and children, and animal husbandry of dairy cows. This they do without much support from their male relatives, including spouses. Secondly, in the farmlands, men till the soil. Transplanting crop saplings, planting them and irrigating them when required is mostly done by women. Harvesting of crops is carried out by both men and women at the community level. Unlike the cases presented by Banerjee and Sharma (2021) from Assam, where they found it was the duty of the men to guard the crops from wild elephants, in this case, guarding (including against elephant attacks) is done by both men and women.

Before the elephants arrived, the communities in the region used to migrate outside their forest areas for marriage alliances and work in the neighboring town of Rajranpur. However, there is now a distinct pattern of male migration only. Although studies show that in patriarchal societies the underlying feature is the subjugation of women to conform to the contextual ideals of a "good wife" (Doubleday, 2020), my respondents— particularly women— wished to differ from such dominant narratives. They argue that traditionally women and men of their communities are considered as equal partners —two wheels of a vehicle— in the wellbeing of a family. Both men and women

conduct their duties as per the prescribed norms. So, even if women do most of the work inside and outside the house, nevertheless, this does not devalue men's contributions. Owing to conflicts with elephants, as more women find it difficult to arrange food and other necessary items for their families, men are now the ones who are freer to migrate to bigger cities in the state or elsewhere in south India. The remittances they send home compliment women's work. As my female respondents argued, it is the duty of men to go out and earn money while women take charge of farms, forests and the young and old members of the family in their absence. Finding newer livelihood options in the context of elephant conflicts shows that the subaltern tribal groups are using their agency to not only frame arguments about gender roles in their households, but also to provide contexts for their social and economic decisions.

5. Narrative resistance and counter-framings

During the elephant conflicts, the Adivasis and OFDCs need to challenge not only the wild elephants, but also groups that label their communities as insensitive towards conservation. Apart from blaming the processes of urbanization and human-induced climate change, both national and international conservation, NGOs, and government departments alike place blame on the Adivasis and OFDCs for human-elephant conflicts. A quotation from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (2023) summarizes the unanimity of such discourse:

> Around 1.2 billion people worldwide live on less than US$1.25 a day. Many live in elephant range countries – countries where elephants roam. As some of the world's most marginalised people, they frequently find themselves competing with wildlife for land, food, water, and other natural resources; they are also often unaware of their own encroachment onto the habitat of elephants and other wildlife.
>
> Meanwhile, elephants increasingly find their home ranges fragmented by new villages, farms, cities, highways, or industrial growth such as mining. Barriers like fences and train tracks force them to travel longer distances and risk injury. The land where they once foraged is now home to agriculture, and accessing watering holes increases their contact with villagers.
>
> As climate change raises temperatures and changes rainfall patterns, resources become even more scarce and elephants get pushed into new areas, including communal lands. Humans face their own challenges as they must move deeper into elephant territory to collect water or firewood. For this they are blamed. Competition becomes fierce and life-threatening – for people and wildlife.

The local communities are now trying to problematize such assertions by city-based conservationists and policy makers, as well as rural non-tribal interlocutors supporting visiting professionals. Firstly, the communities have started producing documentary evidence of loss of livelihoods. For this they use mobile phones and social media. At the same time, they also write petitions to the local state institutions for financial compensation, to rally opinion in their favor, and to draw attention to the growing HEC in the forests. Storytelling about the loss of human life is also used to gather more sympathy. Social media platforms like WhatsApp messenger have now become important methods for spreading information. One or two photographs with a catchy line are

forwarded as documentary evidence. Sometimes these photographs are geo-tagged (Figure 5). Community members use smartphones to present this graphic evidence.

Figure 5: Documentary evidence of loss of property due to elephant attack. Source: Fieldwork

At the same time, the relationship between the Forest Department, NGOs, outsider professionals, and villagers is not always antagonistic. Villagers will work with the Forest Department for the upkeep of the forest when required, and document elephant activities. While the Forest Department officials are kept in the loop, they are still mocked by the communities for not responding effectively to conflicts. When the forest officials come, the communities organize impromptu protests to signal the need for them to work towards mitigation and proper compensation (Guru & Das, 2021). As most tribal people in the two villages are either illiterate or partially literate, the local NGOs have become petition writers and translators. The NGO activists hail from non-tribal caste groups, and have their own interpretation of events. But there is an, emerging educated leadership within the tribal communities that use Odia to mediate discussions of conflicts and other events.

The aim is to secure rights-based compensation from the state. For example, as shown in Figure 5 damage caused to the house by elephants was not considered serious by the Forest Department officials or by accompanying interlocutors and the family did not receive any compensation. Nevertheless, pictorial evidence similar to the one presented here becomes an attempt to draw attention of locals and outsiders alike to highlight the potential loss that could take place if the state and its departments do not actively safeguard the lives and livelihoods of the Adivasi

households. Here we don't find the role of state or NGOs negated, but part of an active process of negotiation.

6. Land-rights claims and legal agency under the FRA

The state and non-state actors (Government of India, 2020), often suggest the installation of live fencing (Figure 3), which tribal people cannot install. These are non-lethal structures that keep elephants and humans at their respective spaces. However, demand for rights by the Adivasis are deeply political and are part of an alternative imagination of the HEC problem in India, which is contentious and involves land and forest rights for the Adivasis and OFDCs (other forest dwelling communities). As an older respondent noted, rhetorically: "everybody seems to have a right over our lands and our products, except us" (*aama chada aama jami aau fasal upare samasthinka aadhikaara*) (Personal interview). Such rhetoric, similar to the instances of mocking the Forest Department personnel discussed above, are ways by which non-confrontational forms of negotiation and claims-making to the state are carried out. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA) promises to provide several rights to the Adivasis and OFDCs to use community forest areas and have individual titles to their farmlands (Kashwan, 2013). However, in the study villages, locals claimed that the Forest Department mostly ignores the Act and restricts their forest activities.

At the same time, the Forest Department may actually be increasing the human–elephant conflicts in the region. They recently dug a pond near the Adivasi villages to provide water for elephants and other wild animals during the dry summer months, not people. There was no consultation process and since it is right next to the road that connects the village with the main forest road and in daily use, villagers now try to avoid it in the evenings when elephants are most active. At a discursive level, such non-participatory interventions can be equated to the adverse impacts of improvements made by quasi-state institutions that favor wildlife safaris, resorts, and ecotourism that lead to displacement of tribal and other forest dwelling communities (Fanari, 2022; Lee & Wolf, 2018; Dash & Kothari, 2013).

The villagers are also aware of the non-implementation of the Forest Rights Act, or its partial implementation (Oskarsson & Sareen, 2020; Bandi, 2014) under the guise of "green capitalism" (Dawson, 2010; Sullivan, 2009) and "economic greenwashing" (Zhang, 2023). Therefore, within the framework of biocultural diversity conservation, Adivasi respondents note the "co-subalternity" of themselves and elephants. Neither have land rights. They argue that land rights, held by individuals and communities, are important for the human and non-human subalterns. As one woman respondent in focus group 3 noted,

> For implementation of FRA in our villages, we walked with Ekta Parishad (an NGO which spearheaded the movement for the formation of FRA) from Gwalior to New Delhi in 2012. These elephants have walked for hundreds of kilometers from their native forests to ours. So, we understand very well the precarity of these elephants. Our only request is that you researchers should also listen to our genuine concerns.

Women were trying to create common cause with animals to project the two as subalterns who are on the verge of getting dispossessed in the name of conservation, development or urbanization.

7. Co-subalternity as the politics of negotiation

This co-subalternity is an innovative attempt to shift the debate on classic conservation activities. For instance, even though Adivasis and OFDCs are known to hunt wild animals, this is done with great restraint (Locke, 2013). Both men and women usually try not to harm animals, as anthropologists have noted (Saha, 2024; Sen 2021; Aiyadurai 2016; Jalais 2014). At the same time, the Adivasis have their own conception of what it means to conserve wild elephants. As one woman respondent noted: "…where will the elephants go if not stay in our jungles? Urban people have already taken over the houses of elephants and erected their own high-rise buildings" (FGD 2). Another woman said that "…elephants and us Adivasis have the same fate. Outsiders come and make claims on our lands and forests but when we retaliate we humans are embroiled in court cases, and poor elephants get electric *jhatka*" (FGD 2). In the same FGD a third woman claimed that "elephants are *chalakhi* beasts (smart, in Odia). They can differentiate between men and women just by looking at their clothes. As women wear sarees and act non-hostile, even wild elephants do not harm them" (FGD 2). Giving further credence to these conceptualizations, a woman respondent in FGD 3 noted,

> …elephants cannot speak for themselves when their houses are legally or illegally occupied by the dominant groups with active support from the state government, but by troubling us, the elephants want to make a common cause with Adivasis. Elephants and Adivasis are the children of these forests. Forests nurture us, give us everything that we want. When it cannot, we Adivasis go outside of our forests to earn a living and these elephants go out to fill their stomachs. We are two sides of the same coin.

Despite elephants not being part of the everyday imagination of the respondents, because they reside in areas that are still at the frontier of elephant–human interactions, the traditional care Adivasis had shown towards wild animals has come to play a part in their emerging worldview. They acknowledge that elephants are majestic and *chalakhi*. Beating drums or showing fire torches does not scare them. So, the tribals' reimagination of human–elephant interactions in the form of co-subalternity takes into consideration the precarity of situations under which both interact with each other. This interaction could be antagonistic, based on solidarity, or a relationship of 'frenemy' (friend and enemy).

During my fieldwork, I rarely came across any Adivasi village where residents demanded installation of solar fencing or a complete annihilation of local elephants. Rather what my Adivasi respondents wanted was the proper implementation of the FRA, 2006, so that they can utilize the forest and its resources judiciously. That would be beneficial for both the humans and the animals. Büscher and Fletcher (2019), Krauss (2021) and others have proposed, along these lines, that conservation in the 21st century needs to be a non-capitalist and radical intervention based on equity and justice for the subaltern humans and their animal counterparts. The implementation of FRA, 2006 could be a key process to enable this conviviality (Pandya, 2022).

8. Conclusions: Listening to subaltern political ecologies

In this article, I explored what it means for Adivasi communities in the Eastern Ghats of Odisha to coexist with increasing cases of human–elephant interactions in social settings where elephants were not part of their traditional imaginations. To do so, I developed the concept of co-subalternity. Spivak's conceptualization of subalternity included a warning that "social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action" (Spivak, 2005, p. 476).

However, co-subalternity as proposed here recognizes that Adivasis have agency and can voice their concerns by drawing attention to the similarity of situations between themselves and the non-human nature. They do this by using the tripartite framework of identifying antagonists, collaborators, and 'frenemies.' They try to make the state and other dominant producers of knowledge aware of their everyday interactions between humans and their natural environment. In addition, no one within this framework is a permanent antagonist or collaborator. The omnipresent Forest Department is both an antagonist and a collaborator in the lives of forest dwelling communities. As Chandra (2013), Rashkow (2022) and others have shown, subaltern communities in India have moved away from the colonial imagination of the state being the dominant coercive force (Guha, 1997). Rather, these communities see the state as a site of negotiation (Chatterjee, 2008), through which resources can be channeled to the benefit of subaltern groups.

There is no simple answer to the question: what do Adivasis and OFDCs do in the events of human-elephant conflicts? Some scholars have argued that in the event of increased HEC, the local communities tend to become hostile towards wild animals (Gubbi, 2012; Ogra, 2008; Hoare, 2015). But I found that the relationship is more complex. Even in situations where local communities had no prior experience with wild elephants, they did not react to conflict by wanting to kill these majestic beings. Nor are they becoming fatalistic towards their future. What the Adivasis and OFDCs in the Eastern Ghats understand, like their subaltern counterparts in other parts of the Global South, is that the arrival of elephants (other any other animal) only adds another dimension to their already existing precarious life.

As the wild elephants arrived to a new address and started doing what they are supposed to do— raid crops, fruit orchards, forage on granaries— the Adivasis and OFDCs in this area did not abandon everything and move, or blame the protected status of wild elephants. Instead, they tried to adapt to the emerging circumstances. This involves altering farming practices and crops, and altering the seasonality of agriculture. They are redefining gender roles and expectations. Meanwhile, wild elephants respond to shrinking territories and natural habitat by changing their movements.

The backdrop to these changes is that neoliberal forest conservation practices, ecotourism, mining activities, urban sprawl and construction of large-scale dams and highways restrict the availability of land for subaltern peoples, and non-humans. By articulating the ever-evolving relationship between antagonists and collaborators, subaltern politics is intersecting with subaltern ecology to co-create and manage resource-dependent lifeworlds. Subaltern political ecology is about listening to the subalterns and their politics, in all its pluralities.

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