

# CHANGE THE STRIPES

**It is now official that the Indian tiger is in a state of terminal emergency. The final tiger census and habitat mapping report, which was released on Tuesday, says that there are only 1,411 big cats left in the wild.**

**Whenever we discuss our conservation efforts, the first reason given for this sorry state of affairs is that there's no political will to save the tiger. The second answer invariably is that the growth of human population has destroyed tiger habitats. There is truth in both these answers. But the manner in which these arguments were placed before us made us believe that there was no other way to see this decline in the numbers. This tunnel vision has overshadowed the most important reason behind this decline in the number of big cats: people never joined the tiger conservation programme. The tiger was appropriated by a handful of people — inside and outside the government — and only they decided how the tigers should live or die. The larger world was never factored in.**

**The upper class and the English-speaking elite have always dominated 'conservation' issues in India. This is a great loss because they were protecting something that was never truly theirs. The loss of forest cover or shrinking of tiger habitats never affected their lives. The people who were affected by any attack on the forests were those who depended on them — like the tribals. And, unfortunately, the elite who were trying to save the tiger had little place for these forest-dependent people. For them, they were the fall guys.**

**It takes no rocket science to prove that when population increases, wildlife and forests decline. But the conservationists got the nation consumed on a debate, a non-issue really, about the co-existence of people and tigers. It was broadly agreed by everyone that tigers need inviolate space for breeding and securing their future. The next logical level should have been to create that space by voluntary and just relocation of forest dwellers. In many tiger reserves, people living inside had agreed to move out of the parks. For instance, in the few remaining villages of Kanha and Sariska, most villagers agreed to get out and were waiting for a fair compensation package of land and money. But in 30 years, our tiger protectors could manage only a few 'successful' relocations: Bhadra Wildlife Sanctuary in Karnataka, Corbett in Uttarakhand, some villages in Kanha and in a few other reserves. If relocation wasn't easy, then efforts should have been made to help communities live inside the reserves but with little disturbance to the tigers. This, too, never happened. So, neither was there a concerted effort for relocation, nor was there any effort to reduce the tension between the people and tigers. In this 'neither-here-nor-there situation', both tigers and tribals lost their homeland.**

**When we protect the tiger, we also protect its habitat. But if 'forest' equated as land on which it grows, then there would be political, social and economical conflicts over**

**this precious physical resource. This is because development projects need land, forest-dwellers and tribals need land, miners are ready to pay huge sums for mineral-rich valuable land, politicians build their vote-banks by getting people to encroach upon forestlands, forest mafias throw people out of their forest land and extremists and brigands use this land to extend their activities.**

**In Kerala, Andhra, Uttar Pradesh, Orrisa, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, rural people — especially women — are at the forefront of a battle to secure their homelands in the government-designated forests. All this while, the people protecting the tigers naively thought that they could use passion and good intentions to save this land for the big cats. Even after 30 years, most people have not even started to understand the politics of the tiger land. Any meaningful mitigation strategy needs to face this conflict and factor this into its strategy. Any engagement with conservation needs a wider engagement with environmental justice and equity. Sadly, this never happened.**