

# EPE: Nature and Space

## Conservation-by-Alienation: Koliwadi Forest Estrangement in Maharashtra, India

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Keywords:	Alienation, community forest governance, forest-dweller self, capitalist conservation, Western India
Abstract:	<p>Increasingly, critical theory insists on a structural-ethical response to capitalism's intensifying socio-ecological crises. In efforts to transcend capitalism, we must illustrate how capitalist logics fail not just functionally, e.g., by being crises prone, but also show how they morally and ethically corrupt our relations to other humans and non-human nature producing injustices and poorer forms of life. Towards such an illustration, the concept of alienation serves as a vital analytical construct. It reveals the connections and disruptions between the objective/material and subjective/psychological realms. In what follows, we use alienation to uncover the multifaceted impacts changing forest-governance regimes are having on community-forest relations in a forest village in Maharashtra, India. Marxist understandings of labour alienation are complemented with inputs from Rahel Jaeggi's largely social philosophical treatise on self-alienation, revealing the compounded and temporally distinct effects of fortress-conservation against the background of pervasive neoliberalisation—the reality of several global South forestlands. Specifically, we claim that the effects of fortress-conservation must be visualised as forms of alienation that persist even when the fortress has been weakened by forest-dwellers' rights-based struggles. Older alienations manifest more subtly at the level of the forest-dweller self, especially under conditions of insecure forest rights, increased commodification of needs and the longstanding marginalisation of Indigenous lifeways: all present in our case. Together these factors give rise to socio-ecological relations that villagers themselves seem uneasy with. Although State forest officials we interview recognise the adverse influence of the wider political-economic context—including unabashed attempts by India's government to divert forests for political and economic gains—their preferred solution is to induce greater separations between forest-dwellers and their forests. This perverse logic of (re-)imposing mainstream conservation is what we term Conservation-by-Alienation, a tendency also witnessed in the global emergence of the 'back-to-the-barriers' approach and of nature's capitalisation.</p>

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Figure 2: Forests and subsistence farms in the BWLS area. Source Author 1

270x361mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Figure 3: Stalls where villagers sell medicinal plants in the Bhimashankar Temple. Source Author 1

164x204mm (300 x 300 DPI)





Figure 3: A wild vegetables festival in September 2022. Since 2010, such festivals have been proudly organised by women from Koliwadi and other villages Indie-NGO collaborates with. Outsiders including government officials and media often attend. Source Author 1 received it from Villager-3.

84x112mm (300 x 300 DPI)

# Conservation-by-Alienation: Koliwadi forest estrangement in Maharashtra, India

## 1 Introduction: The road to Koliwadi



*Figure 1: Roads such as these are starting to crop up around Koliwadi's forests. Source Author-1*

In a forest reserve in Western India a newly tarred road has made once remote *Koliwadi*, more accessible. While most villagers appreciate the improved connectivity, the prospect of outsiders—more deeply subsumed in capitalism's dance of markets and money—having easy access to Koliwadi elicits contradictory feelings.

“Now with the road people, tourists will come. It will help our livelihoods. Women can also get some employment by providing them food, sell forest vegetables. So that can be a good as a source of income and we can get some money. So it is good if people can come. But we will need a village committee to monitor this [influx] to ensure that the nature here stays intact once

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3 people start coming. [Typically] people who come from outside, they  
4 sometimes drink alcohol, throw the bottles here, create plastic litter—that  
5 will not be good. It will become all polluted.” (Villager-2 to Author-1, July  
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9 2022)

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12 The road, and the changes it brings, can serve as a metaphor for the rapid and unforeseen  
13 transformations forested places such as Koliwadi are undergoing in a neoliberal India.  
14 Although neoliberalism began in earnest in the 1990s, under Prime Minister Modi’s  
15 decade plus regime it has taken its most authoritarian and ruthless form yet (Chacko,  
16 2018; Levien, 2018; Nielsen and Nilsen, 2022; Patnaik, 2021). We concur with Levien  
17 (2018)’s conceptualisation of India have become a ‘land broker State’ at whose altar rural  
18 and forest-based livelihoods are now regularly sacrificed (see also Levien, 2015). Despite  
19 opposition by those most affected by these policies (the farmers protests being a recent  
20 case in point, Fareed, 2024; Moliner and Singh, 2024; Shamim, 2024) that slows the pace  
21 of these transformations, there is little doubt about the agenda of those in power: land,  
22 and other natural resources, are now capital, rents from which necessarily accumulate in  
23 the hands of a few at the cost of India’s larger, more vulnerable masses.

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33 Against this political-economic background, we ask how does the State’s  
34 entanglement with capital, especially in its relations to forests, materially affect forest-  
35 dwellers and how does this relate to the historical usurpation of forests by the colonial  
36 and post-colonial State? What are the subjective (including psychological) effects of these  
37 processes on forest-dwellers, especially as they try to reclaim their forests using  
38 progressive rights-based legislations? And finally, what is revealed by focussing on this  
39 dialectic between the subjective and objective effects of capitalist logics, a relation  
40 garnering attention in critical theory devised to ultimately overcome these logics (Dunlap  
41 and Sullivan, 2020; Faulkner, 2021; Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018; Harvey, 2018; Llaguno,  
42 2023b)?

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51 These questions emerged as we studied the case of Koliwadi<sup>1</sup>, a small village located  
52 inside a protected forest area (PA), the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary, in Western  
53 India. The coming of a PA in 1985 produced what is now well documented in the political-  
54 ecology of (fortress) conservation: a decisive hampering of villagers’ material ability to  
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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for the village and the NGO, and for all field consultants.

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3 live with forests as they and their ancestors had done. Section five documents this, but  
4 our more novel contribution is to expand on the typology of these harms by bringing  
5 political-ecology in dialogue with social-philosophy to reveal the wide-ranging effects of  
6 fortress conservation on the forest-dweller self. We examine the dialectics of the  
7 objective/material processes of change *and* their subjective/psychological  
8 consequences. Section six places these histories of fortress conservation in dialogue with  
9 the neoliberal present that *Koliwadians* now find themselves amidst. Through this  
10 analysis we conclude (Section seven) that places such as Koliwadi are experiencing what  
11 can be conceptualised as a Conservation-by-Alienation.

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13 We argue that to better support forest-dwellers in their efforts to confront the  
14 neoliberal economy and (re)establish eco-socialist/communitarian forest-governance,  
15 the material and psychological effects of fortress-conservation must be comprehended as  
16 forms of alienation. Alienation persists in forest-dweller relations to forests *even* when  
17 the fortress has been considerably weakened by rights-based struggles. Initial  
18 alienation—or what Marx calls primitive accumulation—induced in communities  
19 because of fortress-conservation manifests itself more subtly at the level of the forest-  
20 dweller self, especially under conditions of insecure forest-rights and the heightened  
21 commodification of needs. Witnessing these newer alienated relationships to forests  
22 makes it possible for outsiders—especially the forest bureaucracy or big conservation  
23 NGOs—to justify that locals be fully separated from nature to protect it. Outsiders  
24 privilege imposing stricter barricades and/or (monetarily) incentivising forest-dwellers  
25 to reduce the little forest dependency they may still have. Conservation-by-alienation is  
26 our term for this perverse logic where the initial alienation produced by conservation  
27 fortresses metamorphosises into subsequent forms of alienation locals feel towards  
28 nature, which outsiders then use as pretext to impose more mainstream conservation.  
29 Studying alienation allows us to grasp the objective and the subjective dimensions of a  
30 process (Harvey, 2018; Jaeggi, 2016; Llaguno, 2023b; Sève, 2022; Swain, 2012, 2019)  
31 such as fortress conservation and its legacies in a neoliberalising world yet its use in  
32 conservation studies has thus far been limited (see as an example Dunlap and Sullivan,  
33 2020).

## 34 **2 The sanctuary, Koliwadi and a brief history of community-forest** 35 **relations**

### 36 **2.1 The Sanctuary**

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3 The Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary (BWLS) lies in the Western Ghats—a biodiversity  
4 hotspot (Myers et al., 2000). Comprising 130.78 sq. kms, it covers parts of Pune and  
5 Thane districts in Maharashtra, a state located in Western-Central India. Since at least  
6 1903, the forests in and around BWLS were subject to colonial scientific forestry logics,  
7 wherein timber generation was a primary goal (key species Teak, *Tectona grandis*, Govt  
8 of Maharashtra, 2021, p.27-28). Wildlife began receiving formal protection prior to the  
9 sanctuary's official notification on 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1985. The sanctuary's raison d'être is  
10 to provide special protection to the Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa Indica*)—an animal  
11 accorded a special status in Maharashtra (Borges, 1996) and locally called “*Shekru*”.  
12 These forests also feature sacred groves: forest patches traditionally protected for  
13 spiritual reasons although these local customs are slowly deteriorating (Mokashi and  
14 Diemont, 2021). They also host a prominent religious site—The Bhimashankar Temple.  
15 Approximately two million people visit this temple annually with many visits being  
16 concentrated during festive days (Govt of Maharashtra, 2021: 65). Unsurprisingly,  
17 tourism poses a huge challenge for conservation especially in the form of habitat  
18 disturbance and excessive plastic waste.  
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## 33 2.2 Koliwadi and Koliwadians

34 Koliwadi is one of nine villages located inside BWLS, and at least 26 villages lie in its  
35 periphery (Govt of Maharashtra, 2021: 165–166). Most of the population in these villages  
36 are *Mahadev Kolis*, a community classified as Indigenous/*Adivasi* (Scheduled Tribes)  
37 under India's constitution (Borges, 1996; Govt of Maharashtra, 2021: 62)<sup>2</sup>. Smaller  
38 populations of other Adivasi tribes (e.g., *Katkaris*) also live here as do other marginalized  
39 groups e.g., Ambedkar *Dalits* (formerly *Mahar* caste here) constitutionally categorised as  
40 Scheduled Castes. Koliwadi has a mixed population comprising Adivasis and Scheduled  
41 Castes<sup>3</sup>.  
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53 <sup>2</sup> Mahadev Kolis Author-1 spoke to also self-identified as Adivasis. Adivasi is a Hindi word meaning original inhabitant and is the  
54 generic term for India's Indigenous peoples that are internally very heterogeneous (over 700 different groups).

55 <sup>3</sup> We deliberately do not provide additional demographic details to avoid compromising Koliwadi's anonymity especially because this  
56 research involved dialogues with multiple conservation stakeholders—NGOs, the Maharashtra Forest Department, villagers—not all  
57 of whom agree on conservation's goals and strategies but all of whom know that Author-1 has been conducting research with some  
58 villages in the BWLS area. Additionally, we recognise that Caste and Tribe/Adivasi (-ness) are not to be conflated as Virginius Xaxa  
59 has argued (Xaxa, 1999; see Bhuria and Bhuria, 2021 section 2, para 3-6 on how differences between Dalits and Adivasis animate  
60 their political demands). However, in focusing on disruptions to Koliwadians' forest-based lives, we found this difference to be less  
villagers and their farms interspersed in them; (ii) The NGO intervention, central to our case, aims at overcoming villagers' internal differences  
villagers while celebrating their common histories as forest-dwellers.

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3 Most Koliwadians engage in land and forest-based livelihoods: small-scale rainfed  
4 rice farming (Figure 2) and the informal sale of non-timber forest produce (NTFP)  
5 especially medicinal plants—locally known as “*Ayurvedic Jadibuti*”—mostly sold in  
6 temporary establishments at the Bhimashankar Temple Complex (Figure 3). During the  
7 last decade, however, certain villagers have sometimes worked as wage-labourers such  
8 as low-skilled temporary factory workers in industrial complexes increasingly  
9 constructed in Pune, a development that has spurred rapid urbanisation of Pune’s rural  
10 and agrarian lands (Krishnamurthy et al., 2016). One of India’s largest manufacturing  
11 hubs, where some Koliwadians worked, *Chakan Industrial Area* (a Special Economic  
12 Zone, SEZ) is proximate (~85 Kms, see Figure 4). Many villagers now use markets in  
13 these urban centres to procure multiple items e.g., oil, spices, non-forest vegetables,  
14 electronics and health-care, although they continue to collect firewood, fruits, seeds,  
15 tubers and graze cattle in the forests.  
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50 *Figure 2: Forests and subsistence farms in the BWLS area. Source Author 1*

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Figure 3: Stalls where villagers sell medicinal plants in the Bhimashankar Temple. Source Author 1

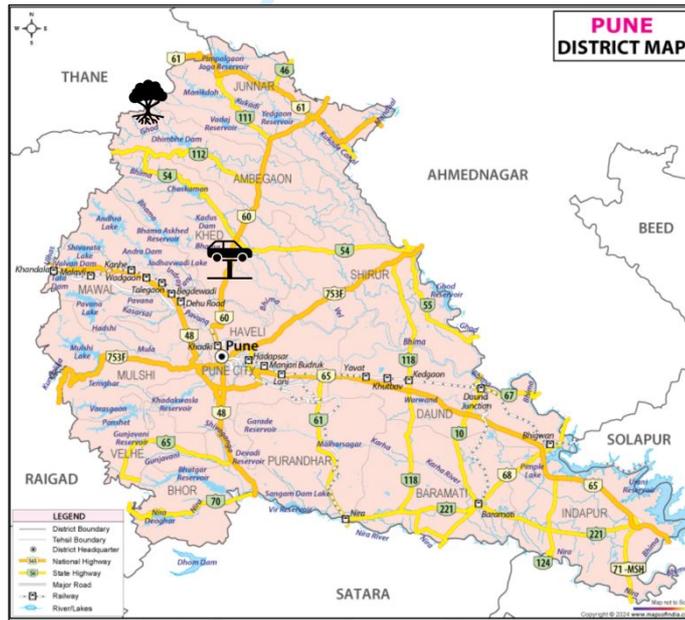


Figure 4: Pune district map with approximate locations of BWLS and the Chakan Industrial Area (Authors adapted using the map from Maps of India, 2025)

Villagers and Indie-NGO (a grassroots organisation headquartered in Pune) members narrated how villagers had traditionally depended on these forests for most needs: food (e.g., wild vegetables, tubers, hunting of certain species), firewood, grazing cattle and built homes using forest materials (wood when allowed otherwise mud and a

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3 shrub called Karvy, *Strobilanthes callosa*). Markets were distant and infrequently used:  
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5 Koliwadi was accessible only by foot. The coming of the sanctuary in 1985 disrupted  
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7 these relations producing conflicts with local forest department (FD) officials tasked to  
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9 conserve the area following protectionist logics even though no villages have been  
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11 relocated (see Borges, 1996; Govt of Maharashtra, 2021: 63). This relationship was  
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13 further complicated since sanctuary lands are interspersed with villagers' homes and  
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15 private lands ('*Malki*')<sup>4</sup>, that host farms and also commercially-valuable NTFPs e.g., *Hirida*  
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17 (*Terminalia chebula*) which even the FD recognises as an important income source for  
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19 locals. Community cooperation is therefore key to any conservation effort and stringent  
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21 restriction has given way to accommodating certain uses (e.g., NTFP collection is allowed  
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23 but hunting is not). Simultaneously, villagers are nudged to reduce their direct forest  
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25 dependencies. This shift in the FD's approach is also an outcome of the more recent  
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27 changes to India's forest-governance architecture, especially through the Scheduled  
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29 Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). It is  
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31 here Indie-NGO played a crucial role.

### 32 2.3 The FRA and Indie-NGO's intervention

33 The FRA gave constitutional legitimacy to long-standing demands by India's forest-based  
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35 communities that traditional uses of forestlands be safeguarded (Bijoy, 2008; Kashwan,  
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37 2017: 117–145). It provides 'collective rights' to common resources (pastures, fish) and  
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39 NTFPs<sup>5</sup> and 'individual rights' over cultivatable land. It also provides village *gram-sabhas*  
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41 (village assembly of all adult members) rights to manage and conserve their recognized  
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43 forests i.e., 'community forest resource (CFR) rights' (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt of  
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45 India & UNDP, India, 2014). Bolstered by the legislation, Indie-NGO began working with  
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47 some villages in and around BWLS to assist villagers in claiming forest rights (especially  
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49 CFR) and establishing community-led conservation. Indie-NGO began engaging with  
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51 Koliwadi in 2008, and two members (Indie-NGO-member-1 & Indie-NGO-member-2)  
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53 continue to engage with them although now activities are co-led by a few Koliwadians,  
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55 who have joined Indie-NGO as community workers (Villager-3, Author-1's key field  
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57 consultant is one such community worker). During and because of this nearly 16-year  
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59 engagement community-forest relations have transformed in multiple ways (see Section

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<sup>4</sup> Instances of landless among these villages is quite low (Borges, 1996; Govt of Maharashtra, 2021: 62)

<sup>5</sup> In Maharashtra even commercially valuable produce e.g., Bamboo and Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) were transferred from the FD to gram sabhas' control in 2014 (Aredath and Lele, 2024; Sahu, 2020)

6). However, Koliwadi's rights claims under the FRA, filed as early as 2014, are still unrecognised. Villagers' tenurial insecurity over these lands thus remains—a point crucial to our argument. To the Authors' knowledge none of the nine villages inside BWLS have had their rights recognised. More generally, the FRA's lacklustre implementation, especially of its CFR provision<sup>6</sup>, has hampered its ability to democratise forest conservation and governance in favour of forest-based communities: a fact now well-documented and much lamented by critical scholars and scholar-practioners (Broome et al., 2017; Choudhury and Aga, 2020; Kumar et al., 2017; Rights and Resources Initiative et al., 2015).

### 3 Methodology: Collaborative ethnography and data generation

This research stems from a multi-year and ongoing collaboration between Indie-NGO and Author-1 formalised in January 2020. It was initiated by Author-1 who intended to ethnographically theorise around radical alternatives to mainstream conservation (see Büscher and Fletcher, 2020; Dawson, 2016) in Western India under the ambit of her doctoral research project<sup>7</sup>. Author-1 is an Indian woman who has spent over 15 years living and working in Pune, including with non-governmental, non-profit organisations (NGOs). The decision to work with Koliwadi was taken jointly by Authors and Indie-NGO, especially informed by a process documentation exercise Author-1 undertook on Indie-NGO's intervention in BWLS, prior to commencing her doctoral project (between March-September 2020). Author-1 has also interviewed conservation stakeholders from other parts of India (academics, activists, NGO workers, retired FD officials and villagers) on themes such as forest rights, harms of mainstream conservation and radical conservation alternatives—general insights from which inform this paper's perspectives. Its contributions are therefore best understood as part of a wide-ranging, collaborative attempt to deliberate on conservation alternatives towards which Koliwadi serves as one crucial concrete case.

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<sup>6</sup> Government records do not give the percentage of forestlands under CFR: that data is clubbed under collective rights. However, CSOs estimate this figure as ~1.1 million ha (as of July 2016) against a total CFR potential of ~34-40 million ha, not including five states in North-East India and Jammu & Kashmir (CFR-LA, 2016: 11; Rights and Resources Initiative et al., 2015: 5-6). These rights can impact ~200 million forest-dwellers. Most CFRs have been recognised in Maharashtra, with ~0.72 million ha under communal governance: a success accorded mostly to the large number of CFR titles allocated in Eastern Maharashtra (*Vidharba* Region) and to a general coalescence of CSOs and social movements in the state (Agarwal and Saxena, 2018: 11; Maharashtra CFR-LA, 2016: 9; Sahu, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> University doctoral funding commenced in November 2020 which is also when Authors 2 and 3 formally joined the research.

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3 The methodological approach is probably best described as a collaborative  
4 ethnography that involved working with these various stakeholders to greater or less  
5 extents (Rappaport, 2008; Ingold, 2017; Campbell et al., 2018; Budach, 2019). For  
6 Author-1, Pune is not solely a 'case' but also her 'home'. Her ambition to work with  
7 grassroots organisations in Pune stems from that affective attachment and from her  
8 former experience of working in NGOs. She thus operated from the 'spaces-in-between'  
9 (i.e., between a researcher, former NGO worker, former Pune resident among others) in  
10 the multiple field 'sites' from where 'data' emerged (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Parashar,  
11 2019). Authors are cognizant of these biases, unavoidable as they are in social science  
12 (see Sayer, 2010 on theory; for ethnographic reflections see Singh, 2009; Dutta, 2018;  
13 Parashar, 2019). In keeping with its collaborative spirit, intelligible efforts have been  
14 made to discuss findings from this research with all research consultants to the extent  
15 possible (a longer reflection on this collaborative process is in the Appendix and Author-  
16 1's thesis).

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19 Specific to Koliwadi, since October 2020 Author-1 has visited Pune four times  
20 (overall stay nine months) with the timing and duration of these visits being also shaped  
21 by practical and ethical considerations. During the visits Author-1 spent time living with  
22 villagers in their homes and working in Indie-NGO's office. Data collection involved  
23 conducting in-depth interviews, participant-observation<sup>8</sup> in villages and in Indie-NGO's  
24 office, and keeping extensive field-notes (Bryman, 2016). During her village stays,  
25 Author-1 went on multiple forest walks with villagers and visited the Bhimashankar  
26 Temple. Outside of primary data and published literature, Indie-NGO reports and the FD's  
27 BWLS Management Plan were vital data sources. Interviewees for recorded interviews  
28 (most conducted between June and August 2022) were purposively chosen using  
29 snowballing and opportunistic sampling techniques (Bryman, 2016: 415, 419). In  
30 Koliwadi, members from 11 households were interviewed covering major caste, tribe and  
31 livelihood categories (4 households were Adivasi, 7 Scheduled Caste, and in each  
32 recorded interview oftentimes multiple members joined the conversation). Researchers'  
33 security and interviewee willingness were also factors influencing interviewee selection  
34 and format, in which Author-1 was guided by her key consultants Villager-3 and Indie-  
35 NGO-member-2. Conversations with villagers largely focused on understanding how  
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59 <sup>8</sup> Bryman (2016: 436)'s category of "partially participating observer" where "observation is not necessarily the main data source.  
60 Interviews and documents can be as significant" appears suitable here.

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3 villagers related to forests and the how PA conservation, as managed by the FD, had and  
4 was unfolding in BWLS. This meant discussing, to a certain degree, other aspects of  
5 villagers' lives e.g., aspirations for their children, lack of public services and other  
6 personal stories of hope and loss.  
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10 For Indie-NGO, both members heavily involved in the intervention were  
11 interviewed. Indie-NGO-member-1 is a researcher-activist. Indie-NGO-member-2 is a  
12 social worker, and over the years has taken greater charge of managing the intervention.  
13 In the FD's case only those who agreed to talk to Author-1 and were involved in wildlife  
14 conservation in Maharashtra were interviewed (only one individual, FD-official-1, gave  
15 permission to record). All interviews, including those in *Hindi* and *Marathi*, were  
16 translated and transcribed manually by Author-1: she is fluent in Hindi and has a high-  
17 level understanding of Marathi (some translation assistance for Marathi was provided by  
18 Villager-3 and another host family member during interviews). Transcripts and  
19 fieldnotes were coded using a qualitative software and manually, generating codes  
20 deductively. Codes also emerged inductively from applying relevant theoretical  
21 frameworks (see Lund, 2014 on iterating between theory and case; Sayer, 2010).  
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#### 33 **4 How does mainstream conservation estrange people from nature?**

34 One early insight from Author-1's interactions with Koliwadians was their inability to  
35 imagine a secure future for themselves and their children that involved forest-based lives.  
36 This seemed puzzling for a community whose material circumstances, in its own words,  
37 have recently improved as a direct consequence of collectively asserting these same  
38 forest-based lives. The puzzle can be partially explained by what is now well-documented  
39 within the political-ecology of mainstream conservation<sup>9</sup>: an estrangement or alienation  
40 from nature—including when communities are not evicted but access and use is  
41 nevertheless curtailed—produces material deprivation in communities that have  
42 traditionally lived in and with nature (Agrawal and Redford, 2009; Brockington and  
43 Wilkie, 2015; Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016; Kabra and Das, 2022; Rangarajan and  
44 Shahabuddin, 2006). Koliwadi has a first-hand experience of such deprivation. This  
45 alienation exacerbates what Marxists term a metabolic rift in the “ ‘interdependent  
46 processes of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself’  
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59 <sup>9</sup> By mainstream conservation we mean fortress, top-down community-based and neoliberal approaches (Büscher and Fletcher, 2020:  
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”(Marx in Foster, 2013: 5) that they argue is causing all manner of ecological crises (Clark and York, 2005, 2008; Foster and Clark, 2020; Longo et al., 2015).

Outside of material harms, political-ecologists also document mainstream conservation’s many intangible harms e.g., to knowledges, epistemes (Dawson, 2023; Fletcher et al., 2021; West et al., 2006). Indigenous voices offer poignant rendering of these harms and those inflicted by (capitalist) development that justifies mainstream conservation<sup>10</sup> (Dungdung et al., 2022; Simpson, 2017; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Xaxa and Devy, 2021). In tragic similarity to other nations, India’s treatment of its Adivasis has largely presupposed that Adivasi ‘backwardness’ needs to be remedied through mainstreaming policies (Dungdung, 2014: 597–98; Dungdung et al., 2022; Xaxa, 2021; Xaxa and Devy, 2021), that over time negatively impacts Adivasis’ relations to their cultures and heritage that are also deeply intertwined with nature. The repercussions are starker for fortress conservation: Sen and Pattanaik (2015)’s analysis in another PA in Maharashtra documents the wide-ranging “Ecological Alienation” tribes are experiencing not only as an obstruction of their livelihoods but also as an obstruction of cultural associations. A similar assessment is made in Eastern Kenya, where Kareri (2021) finds that Indigenous groups living in the fringes of the Tsavo and Chyulu Hills National Parks experience alienation from their cultural heritage post eviction.

Scholarship on *Environmentality*—or how environmental practices shape subjects—also documents how forest-dweller subjects are (*re-*)*made* under mainstream conservation to produce neoliberal subjectivities (Anand and Mulyani, 2020; Fletcher, 2010; Fletcher et al., 2019). More optimistically, some scholars here explain how ordinary people’s (affective, sacred) relation to surrounding natures informs their actions to safeguard them, reinforcing such affective, alternative subjectivities (Grant and Le Billon, 2019; Montes et al., 2020; Sony and Krishnan, 2023). Neera Singh (2013, 197)’s work on community forestry in Odisha, India, elucidates how embodied practices of caring for forests instils forest-dwellers with pride producing progressive, affect-based “forest-care giver” subjectivities, experienced as a being-in-common (Singh, 2017). In contrast, Koliwadians, hampered in their capacity to use surrounding forests, came to be treated as forest encroachers and thieves (in bureaucratic parlance, forest-dwellers are often labelled as ‘encroachers’, Bijoy, 2008; Xaxa and Devy, 2021). This rupture to their

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<sup>10</sup> The ‘extract here, preserve there’ logic.

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3 environmental-self can further demystify why Koliwadians continue to express  
4 insecurity over forest-based lives.  
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7 However, more is revealed by accounting for how the material and immaterial  
8 effects of fortress conservation intermingle with the (disruptions of the) neoliberal  
9 present. This is where alienation proves handy, allowing us to conceptualise the harms  
10 of capitalist conservation (and capitalism more broadly) across time and scale by  
11 observing the subjective-objective interplay i.e., studying it as the dialectic that it is. While  
12 a few scholars have employed (a Marxist notion of) alienation to enunciate the effects of  
13 mainstream conservation (4.1), we contend that these contributions do not channel the  
14 full potential of studying alienation as a “distorted relation between the subjective and  
15 objective” (Llaguno, 2023, p. 493; see also Dunlap & Sullivan, 2020). This required an  
16 explicit theory of alienation of the self (or self-alienation), for which we draw upon Rahel  
17 Jaeggi (2014)’s exhaustive exposition *Alienation* that relies heavily on the concept’s  
18 social-philosophical lineage (4.2).  
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28 Combining Marx with Jaeggi permits a better tracing of the *multiple* ruptures to the  
29 forest-dweller self as they manifest in Koliwadians’ current forest-based relations. Our  
30 framework takes cue from the wide-ranging (i.e., beyond ecology) attempts to critique  
31 and transcend capitalism by recognising it as a social system whose moral, ethical and  
32 functional inconsistencies need delineating (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 115–164). While  
33 more novel in (mainstream) conservation studies, scholars have already combined  
34 Marxism with philosophical and psychoanalytical insights to unpack other  
35 environmental issues (see Malm, 2022, 2023; Margulies, 2022; Swyngedouw, 2022;  
36 Malherbe, 2021, 2023 work is on a separate but relevant theme of organising for  
37 anticapitalism).  
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#### 51 **4.1 Alienation by conservation: from nature, in labour.**

52 Alienation in and through capitalism has received significant attention since Marx first  
53 discussed it in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (Marx, 1975: 241–293; Saito,  
54 2017: 29–51). Labour, a potentially creative process in which humans transform nature  
55 to meet their needs, turns under capitalism into a source of various forms of alienation:  
56 from the product, from the labour-producing process, from humans’ creative capacities  
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3 and from other humans (Swain, 2019). This alienation is made possible through an  
4 original separation of humans from their ability to directly subsist through nature—  
5 which Marx (1976: 874–75) termed primitive accumulation—a point highly prescient to  
6 fortress conservation in particular and to mainstream conservation in general.  
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10 Kelly (2011) uses ‘primitive accumulation’ to signify processes by which PAs either  
11 evict locals from common lands, or restrict their use of them. Although PAs are typically  
12 State owned unlike enclosures of the English commons that became the private property  
13 of wealthy landlords, Kelly (2011) argues that PAs do often become extensions for rent  
14 seeking (on rent see Andreucci et al., 2017). In private eco-tourist ventures, locals  
15 typically have little voice, get a fraction of the revenue, and uneven consequences abound  
16 for different subgroups (see Pandya, 2023, 2023 on women). Hiraldo (2018) outlines the  
17 alienating tendencies of such processes in the case of a neoliberal State-backed  
18 privatisation of Senegalese mangroves, done on the pretext of protection and eco-  
19 tourism. Such conservation-induced primitive accumulation is experienced by locals as  
20 alienation from natural spaces and from their fishing labours. Unable to access the  
21 mangroves, locals find themselves increasingly subordinated by capital—their  
22 relationship to nature reconfigured to comply with the needs of eco-tourism (see also  
23 Duffy, 2015; Laudati, 2010). The State’s overarching role in such value-grabbing and  
24 value-redistributive processes is key (Andreucci et al., 2017), true also for Koliwadi. Even  
25 in less harmful interventions, alienation can seep in as Cepek (2011)’s ethnographic work  
26 with the Cofán, an Amazonian Indigenous group, reveals. Collaboration with Western  
27 conservationists is experienced as alienated labour e.g., in monitoring biodiversity Cofán  
28 use alienated means (tech devices e.g., computers) that generate alienated forms of  
29 western-scientific knowledge (e.g., tables capturing different species numbers).  
30 Interestingly, and aligning with our own analytical thought process, Cepek (2011: 508–  
31 509) is sceptical that Cofán’s environmental subjectivities are altered in such encounters;  
32 rather it is alienation that the Cofán experience as “means and end of an externally  
33 antagonistic force”.  
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#### 54 **4.2 Self-alienation**

55 Jaeggi (2014) describes self-alienation as a ‘relation of relationlessness’ experienced in  
56 one’s practical relations to the world i.e., alienation is experienced *in* doing and not *from*  
57 some inner or original ‘essence’ that one has lost connection to: “If one is not an agent in  
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3 what one does, is not present in one's life but is instead driven by it, does not identify  
4 with what one wants, and is not involved in what one does, this does not imply that one  
5 is somehow 'really' someone else. And yet there is... an analyzable deficit or  
6 contradiction, in what one does", a deficit that characterises self-alienation (Jaeggi, 2014:  
7 159). Being alienated in relations to oneself and the world (both are co-constitutive)  
8 signifies a deficient relation, not an absent one. One only experiences alienation when one  
9 *has had* some form of relation (in our case a relation to forest-based lifeways). This  
10 deficiency takes several forms: inauthenticity; detachment in social and personal  
11 relations; doing things only because they are a means to an end in a never-ending cycle;  
12 reification i.e., things taking on a dynamic of their own; unfreedom in action; and the  
13 absurd (think Kafka and Camus).

14  
15 What undergirds this exploration of self-alienation is an analysis of *how* one comes  
16 to make sense of one's relation to the world, not *what* one substantially arrives at. In this,  
17 Jaeggi borrows from philosopher Ernst Tugendhat's conceptualisation of 'a good life' in  
18 modernity. For him, examining *how* a subject develops her understanding of what a good  
19 life is key, as is *how* she attempts achieving it (Tugendhat in Jaeggi, 2014: 34). Thus, how  
20 one decides if something is good for oneself (or not) becomes more important than what  
21 is ultimately decided as good, sidestepping the problem of prescribing a universal 'good'.  
22 Similarly, for Jaeggi, alienation has to do with how we come to terms with the world and  
23 with our place in it: e.g., we are alienated if we are indifferent towards how we act in the  
24 world. Conversely, acts become de-alienating precisely because we do them differently.  
25 They are done freely without coercion and ultimately for their own sake (Kambartel in  
26 Jaeggi, 2014: 207). The analytical emphasis is on the structure of the relation as opposed  
27 to the substance or content of its goal. And this is only possible when one studies the 'self'  
28 as a practical and relational being lacking 'original' essence—a conception Jaeggi borrows  
29 from Hegel and existentialism but one long present in Eastern and Western philosophical  
30 thought<sup>11</sup>.

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#### 4.3 Towards Conservation-by-alienation

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<sup>11</sup> " 'An individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action'" (Hegel in Jaeggi, 2014: 205). In Buddhism, to take one example, a central idea is that of the conditioned self, stemming from past actions spanning millions of past lifetimes. This however draws upon its fundamental tenet of the illusory nature of the 'self' (or better non-self, Anattā). There is also an emphasis on the equivalence of the self and other (sentient beings) from where compassion arises (Pelden in Shantideva, 2007: 182-183)

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3 The above theoretical insights inform our conceptualization of conservation-by-  
4 alienation that we argue is perceptible in contexts such as Koliwadi. When people are  
5 separated from nature under fortress conservation, acts of social reproduction are  
6 separated from acts of production. Even if they are absorbed into (top-down)  
7 conservation labour i.e., eco-tourism, forestry, being unable to directly live off the land  
8 involves a “ ‘profound forgetting of nature’ ” (Plumwood in Llaguno, 2023b: 496).  
9 Simultaneously, a new kind of nature—inside the fortress and one labelled as pristine—  
10 is produced and acts as a reifying force. This new nature inhabits a separate space that  
11 locals are typically debarred from. If they do enter, they come to see themselves as  
12 encroachers or thieves, as Koliwadians did. When life-giving nature is foreclosed, people  
13 can no longer affirm themselves through it. It becomes difficult to appropriate such a  
14 nature in meaningful ways, which for Jaeggi constitutes a form of self-alienation. Instead,  
15 they come to use this nature in a restricted sense, purely to subsist. They may use it  
16 unsustainably, unable to apply rational and collective forms of governance, their spiritual  
17 relations to nature becoming untenable. This amounts to an alienation from nature  
18 induced by mainstream conservation.  
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31 These alienating tendencies are aggravated by neoliberal capitalism, where nature is  
32 relentlessly extracted for profit and when conserved, is visualised as a capitalist  
33 commodity. This is the political-economic context many forest-dwellers are finding  
34 themselves in, even if they continue to inhabit their traditional lands. The alienation from  
35 nature, especially manifest in the tendency to monetarily benefit from it, that abounds  
36 outside in the capitalist world seeps into ways of seeing nature inside the park, altering  
37 local socio-ecological practices. This may be accentuated in cases where communities’  
38 long-standing tenurial claims are denied despite the presence of rights-based  
39 legislations, as remains the case in Koliwadi. When outsiders—big conservation NGOs  
40 and the forest bureaucracy—see forest-dwellers treat nature in ecologically *ignoble*  
41 ways, their default solution is more mainstream conservation. Schemes to promote  
42 greater separation and/or to offer monetary incentives discouraging routine forest-  
43 dependencies are introduced because the (only alleged) way to save nature is to  
44 barricade or sell it (see Büscher et al., 2017; Foster, 2022; Wilson, 2016). This perverse  
45 logic of reinforcing mainstream conservation on forested spaces and on forest-dwellers  
46 we term as conservation-by-alienation. The next two sections illustrate this empirically.  
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## 5 Koliwadi estrangement by the sanctuary

### 5.1 *I do not understand why the sanctuary was created, and done without my consent.*<sup>12</sup>

While some villagers knew how BWLS had been created, they did not fully understand why their opposition to it was not recorded and, moreover, not incorporated into the sanctuary's notification decision. They remember that a multi-year effort of surveying local forests led by a woman scientist lies behind its creation, "Like you one madam had come. And [through her] for the 'Shekru' they made this sanctuary" (Villager-1). Villager-2 relayed, "they [survey team] together told the government that if you make a sanctuary around here that animal [Shekru] can stay well secured and protected". Villager-4 recalled the formal consultation FD officials had with the villages being directly affected by the sanctuary and said, "After that meeting, all the villagers around came to know and declared that they will not leave their lands. Then the FD officials said, 'We will give you the same amount of land elsewhere'. The villagers responded, 'We are not going to leave our village and go anywhere. We don't want land. Where will we go leaving our farms?'. Other residents opined that Koliwadi was too small in size to be considered as having any opinion in the eyes of the State. Also, "all the people here were illiterate so they were never asked and did not know there is now a sanctuary in these lands." (Villager-2).

We see how State-backed fortress-style conservation attempted to separate people physically from their lands through a discourse of nature that prioritises a singular species—and its jungle habitat—whose guardianship villagers are deemed incapable of. In fact, their presence and their life-activities are perceived as an active threat to its habitats (especially through firewood and grazing, see Borges, 1996; Borges & Rane, 1992). These are foreign understandings of the forest for a people who have hitherto been living amongst it. A new, alien knowledge—generated through foreign methods by outsiders (see Cepek, 2011)—becomes the rationale for protecting a now inviolate nature and for subsequent restrictions on villagers' activity in it (see relatedly Mitra, 1994). Rifts in knowledges are also evident in how an official describes the 'knowledge' underpinning the FD's conservation approach, "See this Forest Department runs [on rules] you know that were made by Brandis who we call the father of forest...it is made on a scientific basis. The people who are in that are only from a science

<sup>12</sup> Sub-section headings in Section 5 and 6 paraphrase the common sentiments expressed by research consultants and are not to be taken as direct quotes.

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3 background...[Points to the BWLS management plan document and says] We make this  
4 using a scientific background” (FD-official-1, August 2022).

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6 Our analytical emphasis is on the vast gulf in knowledges and desires between those  
7 who created the sanctuary and those who already lived there. These alienated  
8 knowledges and desires are deemed more valid, and impregnated with greater power  
9 lead to the creation of sanctuary in a process that did not meaningfully involve villagers.  
10 In fact, their opposition seems to have been ignored. This induces forms of self-alienation  
11 because alien knowledges and desires cannot be successfully integrated into one’s  
12 relation to the world (here, forest) and because the sanctuary’s notification process  
13 hampered a capacity to be self-determined in that relation. Instead, it appears rigidified.  
14 Successful appropriation of ‘sanctuary making’ was not possible: self-appropriation  
15 requires active engagement and an appropriative relation is a “relation of penetration,  
16 assimilation and internalization” in which what is appropriated is also altered (Jaeggi,  
17 2014: 38). None of this is evident from how villagers discussed the rationale and process  
18 of sanctuary-making. Below we show how this self-alienation was exacerbated by the  
19 sanctuary’s material restrictions.  
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### 33 *5.2 My forest-based life activities are violated. I am forced to steal and bribe.*

34 While some form of State reservation of forests existed since 1903, the creation of the  
35 sanctuary made everyday life for villagers much harder since the access and use of  
36 multiple forest resources was now heavily restricted. Koliwadi’s remote location and its  
37 small size meant it was particularly vulnerable to the FD’s heavy handedness. With  
38 increased surveillance, villagers were now harassed for activities previously routine e.g.,  
39 collecting firewood, selling NTFPs. Some villagers see selling medicinal plants as a good  
40 service because as Villager-2 says, “it helps cure disease” and “so the people who bring it  
41 are good”. It is then a form of creative life-affirming labour, i.e., “free and conscious human  
42 activity” which fortress conservation, and its capitalist, dualist underpinnings, turned  
43 into an “act of dehumanisation” (Marx in Saito, 2017: 30). Villagers narrated that when  
44 found selling NTFPs in the Temple, their shops would be destroyed and materials  
45 confiscated. To escape this fate, they sometimes bribed the FD-rangers. Villager-2 recalls,  
46 “We used to have a shop in Bhimashankar but if the FD saw us, they would close it, shut  
47 it and take it away. They could ask for bribe or penalty as well... We would try to reason  
48 with the FD: ‘this is a matter of our livelihoods. We cannot survive without it...pay some  
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3 attention to our needs also". Criminalisation of locals' activities in PAs is ubiquitous  
4 across the globe (West, Igoe and Brockington, 2006; Kareri, 2021) as is corruption (e.g.,  
5 Torri, 2011 finds this in India's Sariska Tiger Reserve).  
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10 Prohibitions and criminalisation made villagers' subsistence complicated, affecting  
11 material security. This is evident in Indie-NGO-member-1's description of Koliwadians'  
12 homes when s/he first visited as, "very, very dilapidated, because they could only do  
13 Karvi structures...[people] were very poor... had no electricity, no water." (see also  
14 Borges and Rane, 1992). Since villagers were not (or refused to be) evicted, they  
15 continued to live in and depend on the forest but in a deficient way. Their connection to  
16 forests heretofore sustaining them became severed. This amounts to an alienation from  
17 nature. The forest-labour of collecting and selling NTFPs—one of the few sources of cash  
18 income—became alienated labour conducted under degrading conditions, one could be  
19 'caught' (Swain, 2019). At times, villagers secured permissions to collect wood by getting  
20 'passes' but this remained a form of subjugation that acknowledges the FD's power over  
21 them and the forest. In the event of confiscation and bribing, value generated was lost to  
22 an external force, the FD: an entity that uses villagers' forest-based activity to dominate  
23 and exploit them, even if that entity cannot be strictly characterised as capitalist  
24 (although States profit from nature-based tourism either directly or through rents from  
25 private tourism enterprises by altering property relations, Andreucci et al., 2017; Kelly,  
26 2011). Thus multiple forms of alienation—from nature, from labour as a free conscious  
27 activity and its product—Marx identified were suddenly and forcefully present in  
28 villagers' forest relations.  
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43 These objective conditions produced a sense of fear and hatred towards the FD  
44 officials. Villager-3 explains, "People were afraid of them. Some villagers did not even like  
45 to talk to them. They left the spaces where the FD would come". Similar attitudes  
46 developed towards forests that were transformed into the FD's sanctuary. In a joint  
47 conversation Author-1 had with Villager-4 and Indie-NGO-member-2, the latter said,  
48 "Villagers also felt that if because of the presence of this forest, our identities or rights are  
49 being violated, so why don't we just get rid of this forest...[then] the sanctuary would also  
50 not exist". Paradoxical but as they both explained if people's life-activities are as  
51 interlinked with forests as Koliwadians' were, this routine harassment hampered those  
52 linkages producing helplessness and frustration. Furthermore, the criminalisation of  
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3 villagers' activities meant that they started to regard their forest-based life-activity e.g.,  
4 taking firewood as 'stealing'. In the same interview, Villager-4 described how villagers  
5 would hide wood underground and use it when FD-rangers were not around. However,  
6 when a newly transferred FD-ranger discovered these underground pits, multiple  
7 villagers were arrested (~2001).  
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12 Although stealing might be considered a form of resistance, it is testament to  
13 villagers realizing that their former relatively free life sustaining activity (and relation)  
14 of walking or collecting items of need from the forest has been disturbed. This alienates  
15 them from their forest-dweller self, manifest in their inability to appropriate their role as  
16 forest-dwellers—a role they and their ancestors had been better able to make their own.  
17 Without presuming that roles stay unchanged for forest-based communities, our claim is  
18 more that the manner in which Koliwadi's objective conditions changed hampered any  
19 possibility of affirmative role appropriation (Jaeggi, 2014: 87–89). We assume that  
20 stealing, bribing and paying penalties do not lead to positive self-relations. Instead, self-  
21 alienation manifests as an inability to integrate oneself into the world (ibid.,: 129). A  
22 sense of detachment ensues. Activities in the forest cause harassment and shame, and  
23 villagers can no longer be meaningfully present in their forest-based relations.  
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33 By paying greater attention to disruptions in relations to their forest-dweller self  
34 and to everyday forest-based activities (even as they are necessarily interrelated), we  
35 show how Koliwadians' understanding of *what the forest is* and *who is it for* was  
36 fundamentally altered via fortress conservation. Despite the progressive work  
37 undertaken since 2010, we argue its subtler effects continue to linger and get exacerbated  
38 within neoliberalism.  
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## 45 6 Successes of collective action and (estrangement by) neoliberalism

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48 With the support of Indie-NGO, *Koliwadians* have made remarkable strides in countering  
49 the sanctuary's disruptions and in reclaiming their forests. They have engaged in a  
50 dialogic process to foster collectivisation, democratic decision-making and now celebrate  
51 local cultures (Figure 5) with the explicit goal of asserting their forest rights using the  
52 FRA (especially CFR rights that transfer responsibility of forest governance and  
53 conservation to communities). While rights are still unrecognised, Koliwadians'  
54 collective-action has enabled them to have better access to their forests and also to  
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3 electricity and potable water they previously lacked. Outside of securing improved access  
4 to basic needs, Koliwadi has voluntarily and collectively experimented with different  
5 forms of ecologically-sustainable livelihoods and conservation. This required  
6 negotiations not only with local FD-rangers but also with senior officials in the FD and  
7 other departments responsible for rural governance, usually based in Pune city. Multiple  
8 interviewees recalled this struggle (“*sangharsh*” in Marathi) with pride and attributed it  
9 to their sustained and collective efforts that Indie-NGO provided the impetus for  
10 (Koliwadians’ have thus successfully appropriated certain aspects of their forest-based  
11 lives, see Jaeggi, 2014: 199–200, 205–208, 217–218).

20 One prominent example of collective livelihoods is the establishment of  
21 community-owned eco-tourism, resources for which required government support<sup>13</sup>.  
22 Another prominent action was to ban hunting, including by outsiders, between the years  
23 2014 and 2018. While both projects are currently on hold, they attest to Koliwadians’  
24 commitment (and capacity) to take charge of their forests and forest-based livelihoods.  
25 In sum, through this partnership a legitimacy of villagers’ use of forests and forest-  
26 dweller lifeways has been asserted and experienced, not least in relation to the FD. These  
27 successes are not to be discounted. Yet, our historical analysis indicates that such  
28 attempts at de-alienating forest-community relations interact with neoliberalism’s  
29 estranging forces dialectically over time to produce new forms of alienation.

39 While all villagers and Indie-NGO members greatly acknowledged the positive  
40 aspects of the changed forest-governance regime, some highlighted a few unintended and  
41 unwanted outcomes this change had led to recently (~2019 onwards). We attempt to  
42 explain some of these outcomes by examining the rationale interviewees gave for their  
43 emergence. These rationales reveal the effect the regional political-economy is having on  
44 places such as Koliwadi, an insight further developed through conversations with FD  
45 officials and Indie-NGO members<sup>14</sup>.

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58 <sup>13</sup> Maharashtra government’s *Dr Shyamaprasad Mukherjee’s Jan-Van Vikas Scheme*.

59 <sup>14</sup> Given the sensitive nature of some statements here, quotes are sparingly used. Instead, groups whose opinions we cite are  
60 mentioned in {}.



Figure 3: A wild vegetables festival in September 2022. Since 2010, such festivals have been proudly organised by women from Koliwadi and other villages that Indie-NGO collaborates with. Outsiders including government officials and media often attend. Source Author 1 received it from Villager-3.

### 6.1 Money disrupts the collective.

Multiple interviewees {villagers, Indie-NGO-members} commented that in recent years Koliwadians have become de-collectivised to some degree. When explaining the cause for de-collectivisation, some blamed rising incomes and improved material conditions multiple villagers have secured. Three basic reasons were identified. *First*, villagers now had better access to incomes, electricity, water and even a road. With urban centres expanding, markets are more accessible where different goods could be procured. This is historically uncommon for villages in this area. Interviewees opined that with many needs being met individually i.e., through the market, the grounds to engage in collective struggles had reduced. This is different from earlier times when, “**even if there was no food in the house, everyone was together and had the same mindset**” (Villager-5).

*Second*, there is the manner in which income from medicinal plants is generated. Relevant features being: (a) Medicinal plants are collected and sold separately by individual households. One factor behind which is that villagers have traditionally

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3 harvested certain plants separately, as they occur on private lands and not on common  
4 forest lands {Villagers, Indie-NGO members}; (b) Since the FD stopped interfering,  
5 incomes from medicinal plants have risen substantially because villagers sell often and  
6 there is no confiscation or bribing, so value is retained {Indie-NGO members, villagers}.  
7 Although points of sale are informal and temporary (Figure 3) and tourists seasonal, the  
8 level of incomes being generated is unusual for Koliwadi and potentially for surrounding  
9 villages. As a consequence, more villagers—and their extended families—have started to  
10 engage in this livelihood. Villagers seem to be competing amongst themselves for  
11 customers. Money and competition were acting as divisive forces. Villager-6 remarked  
12 that money makes people, “proud and full of themselves”, which affects collectivisation.  
13 This resembles the Marxist contention that one effect of capitalism’s alienating logics is  
14 that even people from the same ‘classes’ compete, “people are less likely to challenge the  
15 system...they are less likely to look for collective solutions to their problems. Instead they  
16 will accept the logic of the system, and compete to get ahead within capitalism” (Swain,  
17 2012 ch. 3, para 14).

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*Third*, with villagers having television and mobile phones, a reduced desire to  
socialise together was cited {villagers}. COVID restrictions (~1.5 years) further affected  
the capacity to socialise and discuss, among other things, such feelings of disaffection.  
However, since September 2022 villagers are attempting to bring forward these issues  
and resolve conflicts {Indie-NGO members, villagers}. Author-1’s FGD in Koliwadi in  
October 2023 where this research’s preliminary findings were discussed was in similar  
vein.

Aside from de-collectivisation, another unintended outcome was villagers’ reduced  
forest dependency. Homes were now made from cement and some families use gas  
cylinders for cooking reducing the need for wood, and as mentioned above, markets  
increasingly service multiple needs including for grocery items. Consequently, the  
everyday material connection to forests and associated ways-of-being—built by walking  
routinely in the forest and collecting items—were being lost {Indie-NGO members,  
villagers}. This hints at an estrangement from nature now induced directly by commodity  
markets.

Another possible estrangement of villagers’ from nature can be ascertained from  
what was a contentious point amongst interviewees: the outcome that medicinal plants  
were less easily available in surrounding forests as compared to before {Indie-NGO

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3 members, villagers}. Some interviewees blamed those selling medicinal plants for this  
4 depletion, attributing it to their desire to sell (and make money) without adequate  
5 concern for the plants' regeneration capacities. Others disagreed either denying such  
6 depletion or stating that surrounding jungles never had certain plant varieties being sold.  
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8 In the latter's view, it was also impossible to assess how much Koliwadians were actually  
9 collecting since forests have been open to outsiders. Most, however, conceded that  
10 villagers now go much further away from Koliwadi to collect medicinal plants.  
11  
12 Recognising this as a threat to the future sustainability of forest-based livelihoods, Indie-  
13 NGO and villagers have made efforts to grow certain medicinal plants (e.g., through home  
14 gardening) but these have been unsuccessful so far. It is outside our research scope to  
15 assess the ecological veracity of these claims. What is important for us is that some  
16 interviewees cited this perceived (albeit contested) change as having unwelcome  
17 impacts on Koliwadians' forest and inter-personal relations.  
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## 28 *6.2 We are unsure why our rights remain unrecognised: we feel very bad, what to do!*

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30 Foregrounding the above concerns is the State's continued apathy towards Koliwadi's  
31 forest rights, which remain unrecognised. This creates a limbo stage where villagers can  
32 freely use forests now but are unsure for how long. In fact, in 2022 these rights were  
33 rejected but Indie-NGO-members have filed a complaint against this rejection given its  
34 non-compliance with FRA guidelines. Without rights, any meaningful enactment of  
35 community-led conservation is also hampered because conserving surrounding forests  
36 remains the FD's mandate. This was starkly evident when villagers explained that  
37 although they do not hunt themselves, they are now unwilling to confront outsiders  
38 hunting in these forests (something they did previously). In a hunting incident when  
39 outside hunters were caught, the FD refused to honour the terms of the ban which  
40 villagers and the FD had previously agreed to. Additionally, the lack of recognition makes  
41 these lands more vulnerable to stricter wildlife protection laws. This was noted when,  
42 during Author-1's 2022 visit, villagers were informed about a government circular that  
43 declared many parts of the Western Ghats (including areas around BWLS) as Eco-  
44 sensitive Areas (ESAs)<sup>15</sup> (MoEFF, India, 2022). Some villagers displayed visible angst and  
45 anger was directed towards the FD (Author-1's fieldnotes). Finally, lack of CFR rights also  
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60 <sup>15</sup> Industrial and polluting activities are restricted in ESAs. Author-1 later noted that the circular stated that no locals would be displaced (MoEFF, India, 2022: 121). However, at the time, villagers interpreted it as potential eviction orders.

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3 hinders the motivation to institute collective forest governance. In fact, Koliwadi already  
4 has detailed micro-plans as per the FRA (made in 2019) but those remain just 'plans'  
5 without recognition.  
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8 Most villagers could not understand why despite filing their claims as early as 2014,  
9 rights are still unrecognised. When queried, they tended to blame the FD and district  
10 authorities or faulted themselves for not keeping up with bureaucratic procedures. A few  
11 acknowledged that it could be because Koliwadi is located inside the sanctuary. This is  
12 indeed plausible since PA lands are directly under the FD's control. In fact, the FD's BWLS  
13 Management Plan did not acknowledge the presence of CFR claims in sanctuary villages  
14 (Govt of Maharashtra, 2021: 203). Local FD officials tended to brush away such claims,  
15 challenging their veracity. Some expressed a general frustration with the FRA and with  
16 vote-bank politics that thwart their conservation efforts. We discuss this next, but from  
17 the above we surmise that villagers continue to experience forms of (State-induced)  
18 unfreedom in their forest-based relations. Of import is the relationship between self-  
19 alienation and this unfreedom to determine one's life because while they are not the  
20 same, there is "no unalienated self-relation without self-determination" (Jaeggi, 2014:  
21 200).  
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### 35 *6.3 Stepping outside the sanctuary: thinking with political-economy.*

36 Author-1 often heard from FD officials that while the FRA was a necessary legislation,  
37 communities were prone to misusing it. People who no longer depended on the forest  
38 were filing 'illegal' claims; this needed to stop. While officials clearly understood that  
39 conservation models that ignored local needs were unjust and unviable, it was also clear  
40 that locals have 'changed'—especially in places such as BWLS that are not as remote. As  
41 FD-official-1 remarked, "People have a lot of alternatives. So we see that [*sic*] things are  
42 not the same in 2022 as they were in 1950...They are barely dependent on forests". In  
43 such contexts, the most effective conservation strategy was to reduce any direct  
44 dependency people have on forests by creating forest-independent livelihoods such as  
45 strawberry farming, providing milch cattle and offering natural-gas cylinders and  
46 efficient water-boilers to reduce firewood dependencies. The logic of complete alienation  
47 made sense. For an institution with the historical—read colonial scientific forestry—  
48 legacy of India's FD, this is a logical conclusion to arrive at (on the FD's history see Barton,  
49 2002: 38–61). However, we would be remiss in thinking that this captures the full story.  
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3 A strategy of complete separation is better understood in a context where (a  
4 neoliberal policy driven) exploitation of natural resources has become India's dominant  
5 approach towards managing them. In August 2023 India's government disclosed that  
6 between 2008-9 and 2022-23 up to 0.306 million hectares of forests were diverted for  
7 non-forestry purposes— 34% for mining and road construction, and 19% for defence,  
8 coal plants and for laying transmission lines (Press Trust of India, 2023). The weakening  
9 of existing environmental safeguards is now commonplace e.g., the Forest Conservation  
10 Amendment Act, 2023 (Elizabeth, 2023; Sekar, 2024; Rao, 2024). Some FD officials  
11 remarked that India's forests were in great difficulty with 'lots of fragmentation' taking  
12 place. Fragmentation was increasing human-wildlife conflict especially where big  
13 carnivores still roam. Heavy pressure on forestland was arising from 'any sort of  
14 development'. Moreover, some officials admitted that compensatory afforestation  
15 programmes (i.e., under CAMPA legislation)<sup>16</sup> in their experience do not work (see also  
16 Coleman et al., 2021; Fleischman et al., 2020).

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Reigning governmental logics were conservation unfriendly. However, the FD's  
calls for protection antagonised 'pro-development' agencies and publics with politicians  
often labelling the FD as 'anti-development villains'. Against such a political-economic  
context, it is unsurprising that forest reserves such as BWLS are for the FD the last bastion  
of 'undisturbed' nature to be protected from all human activity. Explaining the future of  
BWLS, FD-official-1 says, "it will stay protected because of buffer zones, the shock  
absorbers, the Eco-Sensitive Zone—in that hotels, resorts, industries can't be set up." This  
attitude to completely barricade forests becomes further intelligible when witnessing the  
transformation of lands in Pune district.

While Pune was historically a military and educational hub, and so always an  
important centre for industry, recently it has borne the brunt of India's aggressive  
neoliberalisation—most obvious in its high concentration of SEZs (~11 declared  
between 2006 and 2011, Jenkins et al., 2015; Wikipedia, 2025). Governments often  
declare SEZs in lands occupied by small landholders and forest-dwellers mainly in favour  
of transnational export-oriented industries<sup>17</sup>. Private real estate accompanies industrial  
expansion. As Sampat (2008, p. 26) outlines, "the requirement of surplus capital or profit  
to regenerate itself through fresh investment given the coercive laws of competition thus

<sup>16</sup> CAMPA also 'produces' monocultures that cannot be community-owned (Bhuria and Bhuria, 2021). Views are personal, informally expressed in Author-1 conversations. Quotes are paraphrased to protect these individuals.

<sup>17</sup> In Pune, mostly Information Technology and Automotive manufacturing corporations.

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3 gets met through real estate and infrastructure development. These ‘improvements’ of  
4 an otherwise ‘underdeveloped’ countryside further create the environment for  
5 investment.” Levien (2015, p. 153)’s work on SEZs in North-West India shows that real  
6 estate speculation “dramatically exacerbated pre-existing class, caste and gender  
7 inequalities”. Despite receiving relatively higher compensation for their land, farmers  
8 later felt cheated as land prices rose dramatically and jobs did not materialize as expected  
9 (Sathe, 2017 concludes similarly for some SEZs in Pune; on Pune’s neoliberalisation more  
10 generally see Apurva, 2020). Such State-endorsed private-capital led development has  
11 produced sharp levels of social, spatial and environmental inequality in Pune. The share  
12 of people living in informal under-resourced settlements (colloquially, slums) has  
13 increased from 15% (1961) to 40% (2011), mostly housing rural migrants  
14 (Krishnamurthy et al., 2016). The city’s overall population has also increased by ~6-10  
15 times between 1950 and 2011, attributed greatly to the influx of gig workers. The city’s  
16 expanded boundaries have subsumed 57+ former villages since 1997. The built-up area  
17 has increased 7.5 times from 1973 to 2013, and unplanned and unauthorised  
18 urbanisation is rife (Butsch et al., 2017). Air pollution, water scarcity and green cover loss  
19 now afflict many parts, and the pressure on agricultural lands has affected small farmers  
20 and local food sustainability, e.g., between 2015 and 2018 over 4739 hectares of arable  
21 land was lost from 140+ villages with a potential annual livelihood loss of 413  
22 agricultural labourers (Garud and Rao, 2021).  
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#### 41 *6.4 Exacerbated self-alienation through neoliberal marginalisation.*

42 The State-backed transformation of land to capital that deprioritises rural livelihoods  
43 compromises the viability of those livelihoods. This is further exacerbated by mainstream  
44 education that tends to marginalise rural, especially Adivasi knowledges and lifeways  
45 (Xaxa, 2021). Villager-2 explains that despite several attempts to formalise their  
46 knowledge of forest-medicinal plants, the Central Government has not issued them  
47 licenses claiming that they have no ‘degrees’ on it. This hampers the legitimisation of their  
48 ayurvedic practice, making it harder to visualise it as a future livelihood source especially  
49 for their children. Villager-5 remarks, “If they [children] stay outside, they can earn a  
50 living. The thing with the Bhimashankar [sale of medicinal plants] is that sometimes it  
51 works, and sometimes it does not work well.” Villager-5 already has two of three children  
52 working in Chakan, despite acknowledging that life in the village was better. Multiple  
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3 villagers relatedly expressed affective emotions towards forests and generally speaking  
4 prefer forest-based lives to urban ones, “It is not good in the city. Here because of the  
5 Jungle it is good. There is no pollution...After breathing the air from trees and from these  
6 Ayurvedic medicinal plants, villagers do not get any big illness. We can’t live in cities like  
7 this”.

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12 It is evident that the choice to live in the city (that a few villagers have tried) is  
13 increasingly being determined by factors that have a dynamic of their own (or of  
14 neoliberal capital), producing self-alienation (Jaeggi, 2014: 55–56). Self-alienation also  
15 emerges because an unviable life must surely appear as an invalid one. One response to  
16 which could be indifference and detachment, especially when dominant perceptions of  
17 Adivasis are of being “primitive, uncivilized, lazy and hedonistic” with policy aimed at  
18 remedying their “social backwardness” (Xaxa, 2016: 231).

## 25 26 7. Concluding Discussion

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28 By diminishing the validity of forest-based livelihoods, neoliberalisation jeopardises the  
29 progressive gains made by Koliwadians that reinstated the feeling that their forest-  
30 based lives are significant and deserve State protection as the FRA also mandates.  
31 Aggravating the situation is the lack of rights recognition, now overdue by a decade. While  
32 occurring under different material realities, temporal phases and arising from different  
33 immediate causes, this invalidation must feel familiar to that induced by fortress  
34 conservation that deemed villagers’ forest-based life-activities as detrimental to the goal  
35 of conserving a ‘pristine nature’. We argue that in both the separation from nature and  
36 from nature-based lifeways ultimately impairs Koliwadians’ relationships to their forest-  
37 dweller selves in a way that is difficult for them to appropriate meaningfully and distorts  
38 their understanding of what the forest is for—even as its manifestations vary. Local FD  
39 directives also endorse separation, even though reprimand and punishment have  
40 transformed into monetary incentivisation and bolstering non-forest-based livelihoods.  
41 An expansive notion of alienation, that emerges from Marxist political-ecology and social-  
42 philosophy, helps to see the compounded effect of the separations induced by older and  
43 newer forms of capitalist conservation (and capitalism) that manifest (at least) as the  
44 continued insecurity and uncertainty villagers feel towards forest-based lives even  
45 though material relations (using, accessing forests) are not nearly the same. This then  
46 better explains their ongoing forest-based practices.

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3 We contend that environmentality (with its gaze on processes of subject-making,  
4 including as a consequence of agents embodied practices, Grant and Le Billon, 2019;  
5 Singh, 2013; Sony and Krishnan, 2023) or political-economy and distributive injustices  
6 (the traditional political-ecology approach, Peet et al., 2011) would entirely miss the  
7 alienation, and its practical effects, in Koliwadi. Overarchingly, our paper reinforces the  
8 call to devise structural-ethical responses to the intensifying socio-ecological crises of  
9 capitalism (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 127–130; Jaeggi, 2016; Llaguno, 2023a, 2023b). Here  
10 alienation serves as a vital construct to study the disruption between the  
11 subjective/psychological and objective/material (Harvey, 2018). A theory of alienation  
12 that rejects a fixed, unchanging human ‘essence’ (i.e., forest-based identity, Cepek, 2008).  
13 Instead, it operates on the logic that countering an alienated self requires a successful and  
14 meaningful appropriation of the external world, in which the conditions of the external  
15 world are acutely implicated. This is also why Koliwadi’s progressive rights-based  
16 struggles—so as to make their forest-based lives their own—require a widespread  
17 systematic overthrowing of capitalist relations in which we are all (however unwillingly)  
18 complicit but also key protagonists for change.  
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For Review Only

## APPENDIX

In this appendix, we provide additional information on the field collaborations that inform this research. A reflection on the ethics of such collaborative encounters is also provided.

### 1. Indie-NGO collaboration, field visits and a reflection on the ethics of collaborative ethnography

In January 2020, while she was still living in Pune, Author-1 entered into an agreement with Indie-NGO for Author-1 to undertake research on cases of community-led conservation in Maharashtra, especially where Indie-NGO members directly engage with communities. Koliwadi is one such case. This research would be conducted under the ambit of her doctoral project that aimed to ethnographically theorise radical<sup>1</sup> alternatives to mainstream conservation (Author-1's doctoral thesis). Funding for the doctoral project was only secured in June 2020. The project formally began in November 2020, which is when Authors 2 and 3 formally joined the research team. For Indie-NGO the project was an opportunity to engage with the academy to (i) co-develop understandings of how such conservation unfolds (especially when thinking about its implications for systemic change) and (ii) have documentation of the same. For Author-1, it provided the opportunity to (i) learn from Indie-NGO members' rich on-ground experience of supporting community conservation and Indigenous rights struggles and (ii) gain access to a concrete case, and to communities who would otherwise be sceptical of a (unfamiliar) researcher's presence.

Between March and September 2020, in the capacity of an independent research consultant for Indie-NGO<sup>2</sup>, Author-1 created a Process Documentation report on the intervention Indie-NGO is carrying out with villages in the BWLS area. The experience of writing this report, which involved studying donor reports and internal programme documents, and interviewing Indie-NGO-members (1 and 2) was a critical precursor to subsequently jointly identifying Koliwadi as a case-study for the present research. That decision was taken after Author-1 made an exploratory visit to Koliwadi in November 2021 facilitated by Indie-NGO. Collaboration and transparency between Author-1 and

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<sup>1</sup> Rejecting the tendency to (i) treat humans and nature as wholly separate or wholly same (they instead are made from the same matter but exhibit different properties), and (ii) treat nature as a commodity serving capitalist ends.

<sup>2</sup> These were services Indie-NGO asked Author-1 to provide under a separate contract signed between Author-1 and Indie-NGO. Author-1 agreed and produced the report.

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3 Indie-NGO also marked the subsequent research stages most notably field visits to  
4 villages, discussing insights from those visits, and to the extent viable keeping Indie-NGO  
5 members (1,2) updated with the written texts on findings and theory. Meaningful  
6 attempts have also been made to share 'results' with other collaborators e.g., in October  
7 2023 a FGD was held in Koliwadi with ~25 villagers and Indie-NGO-member-2 to discuss  
8 the preliminary findings of this present research. That occasion, in which Author-1 was a  
9 key participant, was also used to reflect on the future of Koliwadi's forest-based  
10 livelihoods and villagers' unrecognised forest rights claims. FD-official-1, key consultant  
11 for this present research, and other FD officials are contacts established independently  
12 by Author-1. Author-1 has met FD-official-1 and discussed relevant research themes and  
13 findings (to the extent possible) in her all visits back to India/Pune.  
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23 Undoubtedly, tension marks certain aspects of these collaborative encounters but  
24 inspiration for such collaborative work comes from the understanding that working with  
25 and across different positions can lead to "potentially transformative knowledge about  
26 contemporary challenges" (Campbell, 2018: 89–90). Our methodological approach is  
27 thus best described as a collaborative ethnographical one. The "underlying spirit" is "that  
28 of working, learning, and moving together toward positive social change" (Wali in  
29 Budach, 2019: 199) by cooperating on various aspects of the research process; making  
30 transparent the limitations of such encounters and the positionalities of different  
31 collaborators (Rappaport, 2008; Campbell et al., 2018).  
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39 Field visits: The length and duration of Author-1's visits was influenced by practical and  
40 ethical considerations. One the former, mainly around COVID-19, funding and  
41 international immigration stipulations; the latter mainly around intruding in villagers'  
42 personal spaces since Author-1 lived in villagers' homes and Author-1's own health and  
43 safety. The first visit (November-December 2021) was exploratory in nature, wherein  
44 discussions with Indie-NGO-member-2 and Villager-3 were conducted. This is also when  
45 Author-1 first interacted informally with some Koliwadians. Between June and August  
46 2022 the bulk of the recorded interviews including with FD-official-1 were conducted.  
47 The main objectives of the following visits (October 2023 and January 2025) were to (a)  
48 share her research 'observations' in a reflective dialogical process with Indie-NGO  
49 members, villagers and with FD official-1 and (b) meet villagers especially host family  
50 members.  
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3 Stays in the village in 2022 were spread across Koliwadi and a neighbouring village  
4 called X (which lies outside the sanctuary). This was done partly for logistical reasons  
5 (Author-1 was dependent on Indie-NGO contacts for stay) and partly purposefully to  
6 understand the different experiences villagers have had depending on if their villages lie  
7 inside the sanctuary borders or not<sup>3</sup>. In this paper, however, only data from and on  
8 Koliwadi has been analysed since Koliwadi's forest-community relations is the object of  
9 study<sup>4</sup>. In October 2023 and January 2023 Author-1 only stayed in Koliwadi.

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15 Ethical considerations and reflections on collaboration: Initial stays in villages  
16 overlapped in part (1-2 days) with India-NGO-Member-2 who helped make  
17 introductions. In both village X and Koliwadi, before she visited households to meet  
18 villagers and conduct interviews, a village-level meeting was called by Indie-NGO-  
19 member-2 and by Villager-3 (who serves as community worker for Indie-NGO). In the  
20 meeting, villagers were informed about Author-1's visit and its purpose, and she  
21 introduced herself and her proposed work. They could raise concerns or comment on  
22 Author-1 being there if they so deemed fit. All these attempts, imperfect as they may be,  
23 were to ensure that meaningful consent was gained for the Author-1's proposed work in  
24 and with villagers. Consent was also taken before each interview.

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33 Outside of consent, host families were also materially compensated for the costs of  
34 hosting Author-1. In that, Author-1 followed the guideline set by Indie-NGO, which has a  
35 strict protocol for researchers or other visitors who stay in intervention villages. Indie-  
36 NGO has significant experience—spanning decades—of collaborating with Indian and  
37 international researchers and scholar-activists. Monetary compensation was made for  
38 food and stay to host families. Separately for interviews where host family members  
39 provided translation assistance Author-1 provided separate compensation in discussion  
40 with Indie-NGO. It is impossible to materially compensate for the time, love and warmth  
41 villagers, especially host families, showed (and continue to show) towards Author-1.  
42 Author-1 does not see these interactions as a one-way or one-time transaction and  
43 considers herself enmeshed affectively with some of her host family members with whom  
44 her relationship is an ongoing one<sup>5</sup>. Admittedly, these relations do not neatly sit with her  
45 position of being an academic researcher, currently based in another continent, and the  
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58 <sup>3</sup> Expectedly X's villagers had been less impacted by the sanctuary's restrictions.

59 <sup>4</sup> For obvious reasons, interactions with FD-official-1 and other FD-officials discussed villages in the BWLS area more generally, not  
60 revealing Author-1's interest in Koliwadi.

<sup>5</sup> As an example, the visit in January 2025 was made after the project and funding contract ended.

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3 tensions that this 'researcher' position places when describing and performing these  
4 relations: this is a familiar dilemma multiple scholars experience and have written  
5 illuminating accounts of (Dutta, 2018: 37–55; Parashar, 2019; Singh, 2009: 88–115).  
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8 Parashar (2019) discusses the role of research interlocutors or research brokers,  
9 the latter term she coins based on her work in India and Sri Lanka, albeit in landscapes of  
10 armed conflict. A research broker is a "facilitator, a navigator, an enabler, a capacity  
11 builder who by affiliations and local knowledge introduces the researcher to the world of  
12 research subjects...brokering involves knowledge transformation both by the broker and  
13 researchers...a research broker may perform three pivotal roles to the conduct of  
14 research: As knowledge managers (monitoring the flow of contents of information),  
15 linkage agents (as an interface between researcher and repositories of knowledges), and  
16 capacity builders (by regulating the access to the sources of knowledge". Author-1 sees  
17 Indie-NGO and its members esp. Indie-NGO-member-2 and Villager-3, whose family hosts  
18 her in Koliwadi, as playing research broker roles in villages. Author-1's reliance on them  
19 inevitably influenced who was interviewed in Koliwadi, although Author-1 tried to cover  
20 as many households as possible, and some interviews were carried out without Villager-  
21 3 and all except one without Indie-NGO-member-2. Her multiple visits back to Koliwadi  
22 also mean that over time more villagers have warmed up to her, e.g., the FGD in October  
23 2023 received more participation and interest.  
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36 Authors recognize the advantages and pitfalls of such collaborations, unavoidable  
37 as they are in field-based research. Some attempts to mitigate pitfalls have been made by  
38 continued engagement with the research consultants and by triangulation with other  
39 sources of data e.g., published material (academic and grey) on BWLS (e.g., Borges, 1996;  
40 Borges and Rane, 1992; Lakhanpal, 2019; Mokashi and Diemont, 2021; Singh, 2006),  
41 assessment reports done by external evaluators of Indie-NGO's intervention, FD's BWLS  
42 current management plan that FD-official-1 gave Author-1 a hard copy of (Govt of  
43 Maharashtra, 2021).  
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50 Positionalities: In line with the demands of writing up collaborative ethnography and  
51 anthropological encounters, we provide additional information on Authors  
52 positionalities as it impacts this research while noting that fluidity and dynamism  
53 underpin any (neat) description of 'positionality'. A similar fluidity or blurring of  
54 boundaries exists in the much discussed insider/outsider/in-between situatedness of  
55 social science researchers (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015; Parashar, 2019). This is as much  
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3 true for researchers working in a cultural and social context they may be regarded an  
4 insider to (e.g., Global South researchers housed in international academic institutions  
5 going back 'home' to do research on/in, the case for Author-1) as it is for contexts where  
6 one might be regarded as a complete outsider (e.g., Global North researchers  
7 investigating issues in unfamiliar Global South contexts). Positionalities are affected by  
8 such spatial affiliations as they are by other affiliations of caste, class, gender etc.  
9 (Parashar, 2019). Time is also an important arbitrator since as researchers keep going  
10 back to the field (as Author-1 has attempted to do), positionalities shift and interactions  
11 become infused with affect, emotion and relational obligations.  
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19 In this article many of these (fluid) positions are at play. Authors 2 and 3 European  
20 men and experienced social scientists within international academic institutions. They  
21 have partnered with communities and research interlocutors for their field-based  
22 research set in both Global North and Global South contexts. They have however not  
23 visited the field site or India. Author-1 who conducted the fieldwork is an Indian woman  
24 with a transdisciplinary training and work-experience in business corporations and  
25 NGOs prior to joining the Academy. Although she no longer lives in Pune, engaging with  
26 BWLS and Koliwadi is part of her intention to partake in transformative change in the  
27 region through research and engagement with grassroot organisations. She this is a  
28 region she comes from, such long-term engagement becomes feasible—even as such  
29 partaking is not without its difficulties and complexities (see Parashar, 2019).  
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39 Reflecting on one aspect of such complexity, since this is field-based social-science  
40 research set in India—where caste and religion are important arbitrators of social  
41 interactions and relations (Kabra, 2009; Mosse, 2018)—a brief even if imperfect  
42 commentary on Author-1's positionality on these axes is provided below (see also  
43 Author-1's doctoral thesis). The usual caveat that Parashar (2019) and Singh (2009) also  
44 allude to apply i.e., positions are multiple, constructed and negotiated in and outside the  
45 various spaces in which research is done.  
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51 Author-1 was raised in an inter-religious household and grew up in military  
52 cantonments across several parts of India until the age of 21 where members of all  
53 religious and caste backgrounds tend to live together in government housing. This means  
54 that caste or religious affiliations tended to have a relatively low impact in her formative  
55 social relations, admittedly atypical for India. At the same time, by virtue of growing-up  
56 and having lived in India for much of her life, she is intimately familiar with how caste,  
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3 religion (alongside categories of gender, class etc.) intersect to produce various kinds of  
4 inequities. During her time in Koliwadi, none of the villagers in her formal and informal  
5 interactions seem concerned or influenced with Author-1's caste or religion. This could  
6 be because her name easily identifies her as a member of a minority religion in India (i.e.,  
7 her name reveals the irrelevance of caste in her case)<sup>6</sup>. It could also be that because  
8 villagers themselves come from historically marginalised communities i.e., Scheduled  
9 Tribes and Scheduled Castes, and have experienced the negative weight of caste, tribal  
10 and religious identity, they tend to deemphasise these in interactions with outsiders. This  
11 is especially relevant in the current political context where communal tensions and  
12 violence against minorities and marginalised peoples have reached unprecedented levels  
13 under Narendra Modi's 14-year plus prime-ministerial regime. It could also be that the  
14 longstanding work by Indie-NGO on collectivisation and political mobilisation—that  
15 deemphasised caste and religion given also its divisive capacities—is reflected in how  
16 villagers perceive such aspects of their (and outsiders') identities. This is potentially  
17 truer for Koliwadi where villagers come from different tribes and castes but still managed  
18 to successfully collectivise. It is hard to say which, all or if other factors explain this  
19 reduced emphasis on caste and religion, which also marked Author-1's interactions with  
20 Indie-NGO members.

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What did seem pertinent was where Author-1 lived and came from, and where her  
parents and partner (was she married, had children? being often asked) came from. Here  
it was evident Author-1 was an outsider since her native village (if any) was Pune city  
and her current 'home' village i.e., where she lived during her interactions with villagers,  
was an outside village (in Marathi "*bahar gaon*" as villagers called it) which was very far  
away. At the same time, her ability to understand Marathi, speak Hindi, enjoy and cook  
local food, and having lived experience in Pune, where her parents still live, meant she  
was also treated as an insider in some respects, developing greater affinity with women  
(Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Parashar, 2019). A similar familiarity of space (NGO work) and  
place (i.e., Pune) may explain some of the openness Indie-NGO members showed towards  
Author-1, since both members have lived in Pune for decades. This is also true for FD-  
official-1 who seemed re-assured by Author-1's professional and family background, and  
that she was from Pune.

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<sup>6</sup> It is often names, especially surnames, that makes it easy to identify people's caste and religious affiliation in India.

## 2. Themes and format for Recorded interviews

Table 1 Interview with villagers in Koliwadi

Key Themes	Format	Length
1. Villagers use of forests, changes to use in the recent decades. 2. Worldviews underpinning forest-community interactions. 3. Knowledge about the BWLS and how it came about. 4. Impact of BWLS on villagers' forest use and understanding of that forest use 5. Knowledge and use of the Forest Rights Act. 6. Impact that Indie-NGO's intervention has had on relevant aspects of villagers relations to forests and village level development. 7. Relations with the Forest Department and the State. Changes to that as it links to villagers' understanding of 'who the forest is for' (pre-sanctuary, post-sanctuary and post-Indie-NGO intervention). 8. Sale and collection of forest medicinal plants NTFPs (pre-sanctuary, post-sanctuary and post-Indie-NGO intervention). 9. Notions of a good life: ideas about their children's future in the forest or outside of it. 10. Life in the city versus life in the forest. 11. Collectivisation and challenges to that, especially in the last 4-5 years. 12. Influence of markets and urbanisation in city of Pune 13. Forest conservation practices and their impact. 14. The collective hunting ban by Koliwadi - why it was instituted and why it was stopped. 15. How the lack of recognition was affecting villagers in different ways. 16. Future of conservation, sustainable forest-based livelihoods, and FRA processes.	In person. Interviewed individuals. Sometimes groups of 4-5 people would join and talk together.  Language: Marathi and Hindi.	On average 30-40 mins.

Table 2 Interviews with Indie-NGO members

Key Themes	Format	Length
1. Nature and history of their association with the community forest-governance processes in Koliwadi. Why they (personally) began working in Koliwadi, and how that work evolved. 2. Their impressions of what has happened and is happening in Koliwadi focussing on (a) collective forest governance; (b) democratic decision-making; (c) changes to villagers' material conditions; (d) villagers' use of forests; (e) villagers' understanding of who the forest is for; (f) villagers' relationship to the outside world.	In person & Online  Language: English and Hindi	~90 minutes

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. History of collectivisation and process of claiming forest rights under the Forest Rights Act.</li> <li>4. Relationship to the Forest Department: evolution of that.</li> <li>5. The collection, management and spending of medicinal plants, and associated revenue.</li> <li>6. Forest conservation practices and their impact.</li> <li>7. Challenges and tensions faced in relation to community forest-governance and community collectivisation.</li> <li>8. Views on their future work in Koliwadi.</li> <li>9. The wider lessons for community forest governance.</li> </ol>		
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**Table 3 Interview with FD-official-1**

<b>Key Themes</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Length</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Personal history of association with India's forest bureaucracy.</li> <li>2. History of Forest Department, and its changing role in India.</li> <li>3. Understandings of conservation.</li> <li>4. Challenges and opportunities in their work with forest-dwellers, and variations within forest-dweller groups based in different parts of India.</li> <li>5. Challenges they face in implementing their conservation mandate.</li> <li>6. Views on the Forest Rights Act</li> <li>7. Views on the state of forests in India and its future given the political-economic focus on economic growth. Relatedly, the role of the incumbent government and politicians in impacting what forests are used, conserved or diverted for.</li> <li>8. FD's conservation policy in BWLS, and its associated work on generating livelihoods for forest-dwellers</li> <li>9. Their hopes from researchers, people, civil society and the government in terms of supporting the protection of forests in India.</li> </ol>	<p>In person Language: English and Hindi.</p>	<p>~60 minutes</p>

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