NR44 / Decolonising India’s forests: Community Stewardship, Epistemic Justice and Conservation

Topic : Research

Chair : Dipika Adhikari (The Australian National University)

Second Chair : Suchisree Chatterjee (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Significance of the panel topic

Adivasi communities in India face persistent forest tenure insecurity despite constitutional protections and forest rights legislation. This panel examines how colonial legacies embedded within forest governance structures continue to marginalize Indigenous knowledge systems and customary tenure practices. The intersection of conservation policy, community stewardship, and decolonization efforts remains underexplored in contemporary scholarship. Along with the structural and governance aspects of colonial control, the landscape has been imagined as a colonial subject, and the entire imagination of the landscape has been in conflict with the indigenous imagination of geography. While the policies have continued in post-colonial times, the imaginations of geographies have also continued uncritically. This particular position created a gap in understanding indigenous epistemologies of their own landscapes and hence created a gap in knowledge production on their articulation of the forest.Extensive literature on environmental jurisprudence and legal pluralism highlights tensions between state-centric forest management and community-based governance. This panel contributes to understanding how epistemic conflicts shape tenure security outcomes and explores pathways toward genuinely decolonized governance frameworks that center Adivasi agency while addressing conservation and Indigenous wellbeing.

Research question(s)

The panel invites papers addressing:

1. How do colonial epistemic frameworks persist in contemporary forest governance institutions affecting Adivasi forest tenure security?
2. How has the forest as a bioregion been perceived by the state as a legal category of land since the colonial period, as opposed to being experienced as a habitat by the forest-dwelling communities?
3. What role and influences do different actors—state agencies, civil society organizations, Adivasi communities, and legal institutions—have in either perpetuating or dismantling colonial forest governance systems?
4. How does legal pluralism create (or not) spaces for recognizing customary forest tenure claims alongside statutory frameworks?
5. How do competing conservation paradigms impact Indigenous forest tenure security and wellbeing?
6. What lessons can inform institutional reforms toward decolonized governance of forests?

Papers may adopt theoretical, empirical, or methodological approaches to these interconnected questions.

Context

India's forest governance reflects deep colonial continuities, where the state remains positioned as primary forest custodian despite the Forest Rights Act (2006) recognizing community rights. The transformation of forests into "forest subjects"—objects of bureaucratic management rather than Indigenous homelands—exemplifies ongoing epistemic violence. Adivasi communities navigate complex legal landscapes where customary practices often clash with statutory frameworks. Recent environmental jurisprudence attempts to acknowledge Indigenous forest rights and Indigenous knowledge systems, yet systemic challenges persist. This context of legal pluralism, epistemic conflict, and institutional resistance makes examining decolonization processes urgent for achieving both tenure justice and effective conservation through genuine community stewardship.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The panel seeks diverse contributions:

1. Theoretical papers exploring decolonial frameworks, epistemic justice, and legal pluralism in tenure governance;
2. Empirical papers examining case studies of community forest rights claims, activist strategies, institutional responses, or conservation-tenure conflicts across Adivasi regions;
3. Methodological papers addressing participatory research approaches, Indigenous knowledge documentation, or collaborative frameworks that center Adivasi perspectives.

We particularly welcome papers analyzing: forest rights implementation experiences, customary tenure recognition processes, environmental jurisprudence evolution, community-conservation relationships, institutional learning mechanisms, and comparative analyses across different Adivasi contexts or with international Indigenous land rights movements.