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Land Control and Marginalisation Under Fortress Conservation: Insights from the Amrabad Tiger Reserve, India

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Abstract

Fortress conservation models, such as Protected Areas (PAs), are often critically examined as frontiers of land control driven by state or external actors, leading to dispossession and marginalisation of local communities. However, such analyses tend to reduce land control to its coercive outcomes, overlooking the processes and social relations through which it operates and produces differentiated impacts. This study addresses this gap by analysing how multiple sources of land control—including conservation practices, politically mediated development and welfare interventions, and local agrarian power relations—interact to shape marginalisation. Using qualitative methods—semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and oral histories—this research examines land control dynamics in the Amrabad Tiger Reserve, Telangana, India, a Protected Area embedded within a regional agrarian economy. The study employs an expansive concept of land control that incorporates historically rooted and shaped agrarian class and caste relations alongside conservation practices. The findings show that these interactions reproduce interconnected relations of oppression among caste, class, and land control. The historically discriminated against and oppressed groups amongst the generally considered marginalised communities—Dalit Madigas and Adivasi Chenchus—emerge as the most marginalised, even in spaces that previously enabled partial escape from such conjugated oppression. By demonstrating how PA-based conservation reshapes class differentiation, the study argues that marginalisation under protection is contextual, historically contingent, and differentiated, contributing to debates on equitable conservation and the agrarian political economy of conservation enclosures.

Keywords: fortress conservation; land control; agrarian relations; marginalisation; political ecology; conjugated oppression; India

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1. Introduction

Area-based or fortress conservation models (Protected Areas (PAs) in particular) that rely on enclosing land, excluding local populations, and limiting human disturbance are increasingly being promoted as central strategies for biodiversity conservation. Conservationists advocating scaling up PAs to cover half the planet [1] and others proposing 30% coverage by 2030 [2] illustrate this global push. In India, this is evident from the steep increase in the number of PAs and tiger reserves in the last decade [3]. However, critical studies—especially within Political Economy and Political Ecology (PE)—have theorised

PAs as capitalist mechanisms of land control that restrict resource access through coercion or legislation, producing unequal power relations and dispossession of marginalised groups [4–6]. Such studies often infer that conservation regimes are the central forces shaping marginalisation within PAs.

Post-structural studies criticise these explanations for overemphasising macro-economic forces, reducing outcomes to class-based winners and losers, and assuming a singular source of power rooted in conservation ideology [7–10]. These studies emphasise the importance of engaging with internal differences within communities and multiple intersecting power relations. While such work acknowledges micro-level power relations, it remains largely focused on specific domains such as relocation [8], tourism [11], and access to forest resources [9]. Limited attention has been paid to how agrarian relations—particularly those shaped by class and caste—interact with conservation to produce differentiated outcomes. This gap is significant, because many PAs in India are embedded within agrarian economies, where land control is central to livelihoods [12,13]. Although Siddhartha [14] has highlighted agrarian factors in conservation enclosures, the focus remains on policy rather than on local agrarian relations and micropolitics. Local agrarian relations—structured through caste and class—shape micro-power and the forms of contestation that emerge in response to protection. However, the roles of agrarian agency and class–caste relations in mediating conservation outcomes remain underexplored.

Critical agrarian studies emphasise the role of local agrarian capital and farmer agency in shaping differential outcomes of external interventions [15–20]. Another set of agrarian studies highlights how class relations intersect with caste, ethnicity, and gender to produce forms of social oppression [21]. These studies illustrate and emphasise the importance of jointly analysing the larger, alienating forces; the micro-power shaped around local asymmetries; and their interactions to gain an expansive understanding of marginalisation.

Building on these insights, this study integrates agrarian class and caste relations into the PE framing of protection as land control strategy by itself to examine how multiple processes of control interact. We ask the following question: how do protection-driven land control practices and agrarian dynamics shaped by class and caste relations interact to produce differential consequences for agrarian livelihoods and, thus, shape marginalisation amongst heterogenous groups of people living in the PAs?

This study draws on Peluso and Lund's [22] concept of land control to move beyond treating PAs as land grabs and on Lerche and Shah's [21] concept of conjugated oppression to analyse the nature of marginalisation marked by historically rooted caste–class linkages and the associated combined oppression of historically discriminated against and oppressed communities. Focusing on two core villages in the Amrabad Tiger Reserve (ATR), Telangana, this study contributes to the literature on the differential social impacts of conservation, agrarian political economy of Protected Areas, and achieving equitable conservation.

1.1. Land Control by Protection and Social Impacts—Protected Areas and Political Ecology

PAs, both globally and in India in particular, have been analysed for their profound social impacts, focusing primarily on land control strategies such as displacement, relocation, and restrictions on resource use [23–25]. Studies of PAs have largely treated land control as the determining force shaping outcomes [26,27]. The theorisation of PAs as new frontiers of land control [22] reinforces this view.

Traditionally, land control has been treated as a grab [28], with concepts such as green grabbing [29] extending this understanding to conservation. In this framing, PAs are analysed as outcomes of singular, coercive political–economic forces, often rooted

in capitalism, producing persistent marginalisation of already disadvantaged groups, particularly through dispossession of indigenous communities [23,30].

However, treating land control as externally driven obscures local micropolitics and contestations shaped by internal social differentiation. Post-structural studies, drawing on Foucauldian conceptions of power, conceptualise power as relational and embedded in social contexts. These studies examine micro-level contestations shaped by class, caste, and gender relations and their interactions with external conservation power [8,9]. They demonstrate that marginalisation of communities with protection is not singular, and its impact is felt differently by different groups, with winners and losers of protection who are not always necessarily aligned with a particular community identity or a livelihood activity. However, much of the literature on the social impacts of protection continues to privilege external forces, often overlooking caste and class inequalities within affected populations [31]. Tribal groups, for instance, are frequently homogenised, ignoring internal differentiation and the presence of other caste groups [32,33].

Moreover, the agrarian dynamics that are central to the historically existing and emergent forms of differentiation and power within agrarian communities and their interactions with the powers of protection remain underexplored. While studies such as Kabra [8] and Pandya [9] have analysed local power differentials, they do not fully engage with dynamic agrarian class relations. Micro-power is treated in those studies as either originating based on land ownership or pre-existing identity locations of caste, class, or both, and not agrarian class relations per se. In agro-forest landscapes that have evolved as agrarian frontiers, agrarian change and social differentiation are mutually constitutive [34,35]. Thus, the absence of agrarian analysis limits understanding of differentiated social impacts of protection in such contexts.

1.2. Evolution of 'Land Control'

The concept of land control, traditionally treated as an outcome or a grab, has been expanded to capture the multiple actors and processes through which control operates. Peluso and Lund [22] define land control as 'practices that fix or consolidate forms of access, claiming and exclusion for some time'. Employing this formulation, studies have highlighted that land control occurs not only through the state or external actors exercising coercive power, but also through processes such as boom crops [36], technological change, domestic capital, and small capitalist farmers [15,17]. This shifts analysis from viewing land control as a singular grab to examining multiple processes and actors involved in its production. However, this expanded framework remains underutilised in studies of conservation and Protected Areas [14].

1.3. Agrarian Class Analysis

Debates on agrarian change in the context of liberalisation and neoliberal globalisation often position transnational capital as the primary driver of peasant exploitation [37,38]. However, this perspective has been criticised for overlooking regionally specific agrarian relations and the agency of local capitalist farmers in shaping class differentiation [18,19]. For instance, Sinha [20] showed how capitalist farmers in Punjab continue to drive accumulation and class differentiation even during agrarian crises, highlighting the role of local agrarian capital.

Class analysis based on predetermined trajectories of capitalist development has also been criticised for failing to account for diverse empirical realities and for neglecting other axes of oppression such as caste, gender, and ethnicity. Bernstein's [39] concept of 'classes of labour' expands class analysis beyond proletarianisation to include diverse livelihood strategies across sectors. Lerche and Shah's [21] concept of conjugated op-

pression further emphasises that class relations are co-constituted with social forms of oppression such as caste, tribe, and gender. Yadav [40] demonstrated how caste and land ownership shape unequal access to livelihood diversification, reinforcing such forms of conjugated oppression.

This study builds upon Bernstein's concept of 'classes of labour' and Lerche and Shah's concept of 'conjugated oppression' to analyse how agrarian class and caste relations among communities interact with protection-driven land control practices to produce differentiated outcomes and shape marginalisation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Context

ATR was notified in 1983 in a Schedule V area in Telangana, India. Schedule V areas are designated for regions with high Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations and are governed by special legal provisions aimed at protecting tribal land and addressing issues of displacement and rehabilitation. The region was initially declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1978 and later designated as a tiger reserve in 1983. ATR is located on the Amrabad plateau of the Nallamala hill range, at the confluence of the Krishna River and the Eastern Ghats that stretch into the contiguous states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, India (Figure 1).

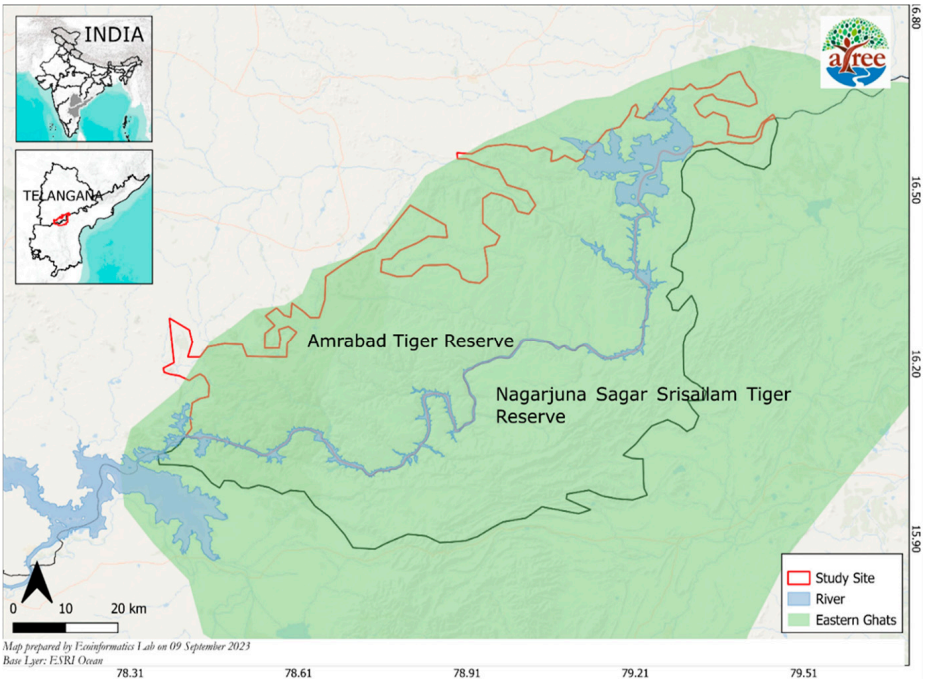

Figure 1. Amrabad and Nagarjuna Sagar Srisailam Tiger Reserves in the Eastern Ghats (reproduced from [41]; licenced under CC BY 4.0).

There are 18 tribal hamlets in the core area and 28 villages in the surrounding region [42]. This study focuses on two core villages—Vatvarlapalle and Sarlapally—located in the upper Amrabad plateau (above 700 m). These villages are inhabited by Chenchus (a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group), Lambadas (STs), and various non-tribal caste groups.

Although referred to as Chenchu hamlets, both villages have experienced long-term in-migration from surrounding agrarian regions. This migration of settlers is distinct from that in other Scheduled V Areas of Andhra and Telangana in terms of the socio-economic characteristics of the migrants. Migration and settlement in the Amrabad region are marked by the efforts of socio-economically weaker groups, struggling under the oppressive feudal conditions in agrarian villages, to secure livelihoods through making and owning land.

This is reflected in the caste composition of the study villages. Vatvarlapalle includes Chenchus, Lambadas, Scheduled Castes (SC/Dalits), Backward Castes (BCs), Forward Castes (OC), and Muslim minorities. Sarlapally includes Chenchus, BCs, SCs, and Muslims, but lacks Lambadas and Forward Castes. Within BCs of the region, internal stratification exists; however, only relatively dominant groups (e.g., Gollas and Mudirajus) explicitly identify by caste, due to their relatively stronger socio-economic position. Amongst these otherwise socio-economically weaker caste groups, Dalits (particularly Madigas) and Adivasi Chenchus have historically experienced caste- and tribe-based oppression in their native settings.

The demographic composition of these villages obtained from a local Anganwadi centre is as follows: Vatvarlapalle has 371 households (Chenchus 5%; Lambadas 25%; non-tribals 70%) (Vatvarlapalle, 2017), while Sarlapally has 150 households (Chenchus 43%; non-tribals 56%) (Sarlapally, 2017).

Terminology used in this study related to castes, tribes, and their identities follows administrative and local usage, often used interchangeably. Although the term 'tribe' has colonial connotations, it remains widely used in India, where such groups are constitutionally recognised as Scheduled Tribes (STs), with special affirmative measures. All caste communities apart from STs are locally and administratively referred to as non-tribals. 'Dalit' is a term and identity used by SCs, who have historically been positioned at the lowest level of the Hindu caste order, and the terms Dalit and SC are used interchangeably in this study. Chenchus identify themselves as Adivasis—a Sanskrit term meaning 'original inhabitants'—and use this identity to distinguish themselves from the other ST group, the Lambadas, whom they regard as outsiders and competitors.

The region has undergone significant agrarian transformation. Initially, subsistence-based Chenchu settlements evolved into mixed-caste agrarian villages through migrant settlement and land-making practices, even prior to formal conservation designation. During the 1960s and 1980s, forest lands were partially de-notified and revenue titles were issued [43]. Agricultural practices shifted from subsistence crops such as millet to commercial crops like genetically modified cotton. Concurrently, agrarian relations transitioned into a differentiated peasantry.

Within this agrarian context, conservation practices have increasingly started to regulate land use, particularly since the early 2000s, following the complete elimination of the threat of radical groups in the region. A key mechanism has been restricting cultivation on forest lands, which were historically cultivated, after the partial implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, which recognises the rights of forest-dwelling communities. However, while the Act allows multiple forms of rights, only limited Individual Forest Rights (IFR) titles have been granted, and only to STs. The rights of the Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs)—a category listed in the Act as eligible to claim rights upon fulfilling specified criteria—are largely sidelined. In the context of co-existing formal and informal land classification and use systems, as shown in Table 1, these restrictions have heightened contestations over land. Legal ownership and cultivation rights have become central to local power relations, belonging, and negotiation processes related to relocation. Relocation, rumours, and the actual on-ground convincing practices to relocate are a constant and recurrent theme in the entire region and in the study villages in particular. It appears to be an impending process.

Table 1. Formal and informal land classification and use systems in the study area.

Formal Land Classification	Informal Land Use System
Revenue land with individual revenue titles	Forest land with IFR titles
	Forest land within village boundary (without revenue/IFR titles)
	Forest land outside the village boundary and without any titles
	Forest land that is far away from the village boundary and is considered 'deep inside the forest' and without any titles

2.2. Conceptual and Methodological Framework

This study employs the expansive concept of land control for two key reasons. First, conservation studies often focus on outcomes of land control rather than its processes; second, this framework allows for analysis of multiple actors and mechanisms shaping control.

Following Peluso and Lund's definition of land control [22] as a practice that interferes with and consolidate forms of access, claiming, and exclusion, we examine land control by the communities through practices such as land making, ownership, cultivation, leasing, and informal or coercive appropriation of land. Land making—defined as clearing forest land for cultivation with the intent of ownership—is central to this region. Historically, such lands have been cultivated regardless of formal titles, either by the original claimants or through leasing arrangements. However, increasing restrictions on cultivation and pressures of relocation have made continued control over such land contingent on local power asymmetries. Communities rely on varying methods, depending on their positions of power, to contest and navigate through the restrictions imposed by the FD. Thus, the ability/inability to control the land that the communities made and held control over historically is contingent upon multiple axes of power asymmetries and is shaping marginalisation.

Land control by the protection regime is examined through regulatory practices that restrict or mediate access to cultivation. While conservation also restricts development interventions and forest resource use, this study focuses specifically on agricultural land use, given its centrality to livelihoods.

Marginalisation is analysed through the ability or inability of households to retain access to land and sustain agrarian livelihoods under these regulatory conditions. This approach—unlike those that examine caste-based land ownership, caste-dependent diversification of labour and capital, or processes of alienation and dispossession—focuses on the continued pursuit of agrarian livelihoods and is considered particularly relevant for this study. The ability to continue cultivation in this landscape implies not only livelihood security, but also recognition of histories of belonging, a significant position within village power dynamics and, most importantly, a stronger basis to negotiate the terms of relocation.

To analyse class relations, the study draws on Bernstein's concept of 'classes of labour', incorporating both agricultural and non-agricultural livelihood strategies. Class differentiation is assessed through landholding size, legal status of land, ability to cultivate, and diversification of labour and capital.

Based on these criteria, four class categories are identified:

- Small yet capitalist farmers;
- Differentiated peasantry;
- Landed wage labourers;

- Landless wage labourers.

These class categories are operationalised through multiple intersecting criteria, as presented in Table 2. The land size of each class category is indicative and interpreted alongside legal status, kind of access, labour, capital diversification, and livelihood strategies. Class positions and their differentiated outcomes are also shaped by differential capacities to negotiate institutional, political, and regulatory processes surrounding land control, particularly under conservation regulations. Political mediation and negotiation capacity are treated as important dimensions shaping class transformation and the differentiated social impacts.

Table 2. Criteria for classification of agrarian class categories.

Class Category	Land Type	Land Ownership (Indicative)	Capital Diversification	Labour Diversification
Small yet capitalist farmers	Revenue and/or forest land that is either recognised with forest titles or not	4–5 acres of revenue land	Expanding cultivation Investments in cultivation Financing Small business Education	Permanent employment in the formal (government) sector
Differentiated peasantry	Revenue land and/or forest land without forest titles	0.5–2 acres of revenue land	Limited yet varied expansion of cultivation by leasing additional land. Continued cultivation of commercial crops like cotton Education	Seasonal migration and employment, at least part of the year, by some members of the household in formal yet contract-based work and in informal sectors for seasonal wages Forest produce collection
Landed wage labourers	Revenue land under someone else's control and forest land, with some lands recognised with a forest title	Under 5 acres	Rental income from leased land directed towards social reproduction rather than accumulation	Daily wage labour Seasonal and precarious migration depending on mediators and money advances Forest produce collection
Landless wage labourers	No land or only forest land without recognition of rights over such lands	About or less than 2 acres	Reproduction rather than accumulation	Daily wage labour Seasonal migration Forest produce collection

Small capitalist farmers are characterised by ownership of revenue and/or forest land, with or without IFR titles. The qualifier 'small' is used because, in the Indian context—particularly in the Schedule V (agency) areas of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana—the capitalist class of farmers typically comprises large landlords with extensive landholdings. This category distinguishes them from the dominant capitalist farmer class in these regions. The revenue landholdings of these small capitalist farmers are typically around four to five acres, but they expand or sustain cultivation by purchasing, appropriating, or leasing additional land. They diversify capital through investments in cultivation, financing, small

businesses, and education, and diversify labour through access to permanent employment in the formal (government) sector.

The differentiated peasantry is characterised by holding either revenue land or forest land without titles. Their revenue landholdings are generally smaller (approximately 0.5–2 acres), and their ability to lease additional land is variable. They rely on labour diversification for at least part of the year or by some members of the household participating in formal yet contract-based work in informal sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and agri-processing units for seasonal wages and forest produce collection. Capital diversification in this group is limited, primarily involving education and continued cultivation of commercial crops such as cotton.

Landed wage labourers are characterised by formal ownership of revenue land; however, this land is often under the control of tenants or appropriators. They partly depend on rental income from leased land while primarily diversifying labour as daily wage labourers, seasonal migrants, and forest produce collectors. Their wage migration differs from that of the differentiated peasantry in the nature of this dependence. They rely on local mediators to access work. These mediators typically provide advances and recruit them into work in distant areas and under harsh conditions, often with inadequate basic amenities and low wages.

Landless wage labourers are those without any revenue or forest land or who own only forest land but without IFR titles. They cannot secure permissions to cultivate or take the land of others for lease, and thus cannot continue cultivation. They have no other source of livelihood or income but to diversify labour as daily wage labourers, seasonal migrants, and forest produce collectors.

Notably, the category of 'landed wage labourers' is treated as distinct from Bernstein's [16] and Pattenden's [44] category of 'classes of labour' or differentiated peasantry to highlight transitions in class positions, particularly among Adivasi Chenchus, under conservation pressures.

Caste categories—OC, BC, SC, ST, and minorities—are used as analytical groups. Given this study's focus on historical forms of oppression, particular attention is paid to the historically backward and oppressed castes of Dalits (Mala and Madiga) and ST groups (Chenchus and Lambadas). Gender is not treated as a separate analytical category, due to limitations in field access and data. Pressing and politically sensitive questions on relocation, land legality, cultivation restrictions, and livelihood insecurity left intrahousehold dynamics, and thereby the community-wide implications of gender differentiation underexamined. Though this study foregrounds multiple axes of differentiation and asymmetrical power relations in understanding marginalisation, inattention to gender relations—which shape intra-household relations over land control, labour allocation, livelihood access, and capacities to negotiate both within the households and with external actors and institutions—constitutes an important limitation of this study. Consequently, gendered variations in these processes may remain obscured. The conclusions and propositions advanced here should therefore be read primarily at the level of state–community, inter-community, and intra-community relations and differences. Greater analytical attention to gender can provide a deeper and more disaggregated understanding of experiences of marginalisation. It would also strengthen the study's proposition that marginalisation is produced at the intersection of contingent social realities and multiple axes of power relations and inequities operating within communities.

2.3. Methods

This study draws on primary data from two analytically focal core villages of ATR within a broader ethnographic case study with embedded village-level units conducted

between 2016 and 2018 across eight villages. The selected villages of this overarching project were categorised into five broad categories—-upper plateau mixed-caste villages, upper plateau exclusive Chenchu hamlets, mixed-caste villages from the plains, exclusive Chenchu hamlets from the plains, and buffer villages—based on the differences in caste and tribe composition, livelihoods and socio-political status of people and differences in the management regimes of buffer and core areas. The selection of villages was guided by a purposive sampling strategy aimed at capturing variation in caste composition, settlement history, livelihood patterns, and exposure to conservation regulations. This embedded case study design, with the tiger reserve as a single case and villages as sub-units of analysis, allowed for examination of how broader processes of state and societal control manifest across different socio-political contexts. This broader study constitutes the basis of the first author's doctoral research and forthcoming PhD thesis.

For the present study, which examines differentiated social impacts and marginalisation under protection in an agro-forest landscape, we chose to present the findings from the group of upper plateau mixed-caste villages. These village findings, while enabling the capture of inter-community and inter-regional variations in terms of the outcomes of protection, especially in shaping the story of marginalisation in the region, contribute in particular to the question of land control. These villages, with a history of contested control over land, documented settlement of multiple caste and tribal groups apart from the native Chenchus, and increasing agrarian class differentiation alongside the imposition of targeted, restrictive land control practices by the protection regime, offer a suitable empirical setting to explore the multiplicity of forces that shape land control and marginalisation in Protected Areas.

This study draws on 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews, 5 focus group discussions (FGDs), 12 oral history interviews with community members, and 10 interviews with forest department officials. The respondents for oral histories, interviews, and FGDs were selected using targeted snowball sampling techniques and theoretical sampling, which guided the iterative selection of respondent groups as new themes emerged after coding the initial set of transcribed interviews. Selection bias was addressed by initiating multiple sampling chains and ensuring representation across different caste and social groups, including Adivasi-Chenchus, Lambadas, Dalits, Muslims, and BC and OC communities. The interviews were conducted by the first author alone with villagers on broad questions related to the themes of land control, agrarian and non-agrarian livelihoods, development, and other livelihood concerns. Interviews lasted anywhere between 30 and 120 min and were conducted in Telugu, the local language. The number of interviews was determined based on the principle of data saturation, where additional interviews yielded limited new insights on the themes the study sought to explore. FGDs with about 4 to 6 participants, lasting about 60 to 120 min, were conducted with different caste/tribes and farmers from different castes actively working in favour of and against relocation. They were used to obtain information about the caste-dependent ability to legalise, cultivate, and retain control of the land they own; factors that drive relocation; and diversification pathways to agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Oral histories narrated by residents aged approximately 70 years, as well as those who were part of the initial phases of migration, were used to reconstruct migration patterns, land-making practices, and historical trajectories of land control. FGDs and interviews captured caste- and class-based variations in land access, cultivation, and livelihood strategies.

In Vatvarlapalle, with a significantly large non-tribal population, two semi-structured interviews each with Chenchus and Lambadas and eight with non-tribals were conducted. Oral histories of one Chenchu respondent, two Lambadas, and four non-tribals were conducted. Two FGDs with about six participants were conducted with non-tribals and

one with Lambadas. In Sarlapally, with a larger Chenchu population, four interviews each with Chenchus and non-tribals, one FGD each with Chenchus and non-tribals, and three oral histories of non-tribals and two of Chenchus were conducted.

Interviews conducted in Telugu were recorded, transcribed, and analysed manually using thematic coding. Qualitative coding adopting both deductive and inductive approaches was relied upon during the study. The analysis initially employed a deductively derived coding framework drawn from the study themes of agrarian livelihoods, practices of land control, land ownership, non-agrarian livelihoods, displacement, and political mediation. As new data emerged during the study, inductive codes such as land making, conditional land control, institutional reactions, and willingness to relocate were developed. Coding and analysis employed iterative comparison across interviews, as well as field observations to identify patterns of differentiation in land control by varied actors and across time frames, including diversification strategies of capital and labour under conservation-induced land control.

The use of multiple methods of data collection enabled triangulation of the findings. Observational data from field visits supplemented primary data. Secondary sources included government documents, civil society reports, archival materials, and literature published by the banned radical organisation; these were cross-verified with respondent accounts. As Telugu is the first author's mother tongue, engagement with the respondents occurred without language barriers, enabling deeper interaction and understanding. However, given the politically sensitive nature of the study that touches upon caste, identity, and conservation, reflexive attention was paid to potential researcher biases. The researcher occupied a position that was both insider in terms of linguistic and socio-cultural milieu and outsider as a socio-economically advantaged, academically inclined, city-based researcher, and these positionalities were critically reflected on throughout the fieldwork and analysis.

Ethical protocols were followed, including informed verbal consent. All interview data were anonymised. As the study focuses on caste- and class-based dynamics of land and livelihoods, respondents are identified by social group or profession, location, and year of interview.

3. Results

As outlined in the research context, the Amrabad plateau has functioned as an agrarian frontier shaped by sustained in-migration and land-making practices [41]. Migrants arriving across different periods and through varied pathways settled in what were originally exclusive Chenchu hamlets by clearing and cultivating forest land. These processes unfolded within broader political and historical conditions, including the Telangana armed peasant rebellion, state-led development interventions, and the continued presence of radical groups, which together shaped access to land, settlement trajectories, and emerging agrarian relations.

Although the region was formally designated as a wildlife sanctuary in 1978 and later as a tiger reserve in 1983, cultivation in forest lands continued for several decades, supported in part by weak enforcement of conservation regulations and the broader political context of the region. Under these conditions, Chenchu/Adivasi settlements historically dependent on forest-based livelihoods gradually transformed into mixed-caste agrarian villages. Variations in migration histories, land access, and livelihood diversification increasingly contributed to the emergence of differentiated agrarian classes.

Following the decline of radical influence in the early 2000s, conservation governance intensified, particularly after the partial implementation of FRA between 2010 and 2012. This marked a shift from relatively permissive conditions of land use to the active regulation of cultivation, especially of forest lands that had long remained under community use.

Restrictions on cultivation increasingly became central to local concerns, as control over land and the ability to continue cultivation became closely tied to notions of belonging, power relations, and negotiations around relocation.

The following sections trace these transformations by examining evolving forms of land control, class differentiation, and their interactions across four broad time periods: (i) 1940s to early 1980s (prior to protected area designation), (ii) 1980s to early 2000s (period of weak enforcement under continued radical influence), (iii) early 2000s to pre-2010 (transitional phase before FRA implementation), and (iv) 2010–2018 (post-FRA implementation and intensification of cultivation restrictions).

3.1. From 1940s to Early 1980s: Land Making and Frontier Formation

Telangana remained under the rule of the Nizam until 1948 as part of the princely state of Hyderabad. Under the feudal system of land administration, forests were largely treated as subordinate to agrarian interests, with forest cultivation permitted [45]. Administered initially through revenue departments, forests were used primarily for timber extraction and revenue generation, while settlers were allowed to clear and cultivate land [46]. Although the forests of Amrabad were notified as reserve forests by the late 19th century, governance continued to prioritise extraction and cultivation rather than conservation, creating conditions conducive to frontier expansion and land making by the communities.

In 1942, a 'Chenchu reserve' was created following the recommendations of Fürer-Haimendorf to protect Chenchus from exploitation by traders and outsiders [47]. Alongside this, the 'Chenchu Scheme' (1946) sought to promote agriculture among Chenchus [47,48], marking an early phase of state intervention into livelihood transformation, settlement, and access to land in the region.

From the 1940s onwards, a range of administrative and political interventions—including infrastructure projects, forestry operations, revenue reforms, and the reclassification of Lambadas as Scheduled Tribes in 1976—facilitated the arrival of migrant labourers who later settled as cultivators. Previously categorised as a Backward Caste, Lambadas' reclassification, widely viewed in the region as a politically driven rather than purely reformist intervention, further enabled their settlement in Scheduled Areas, where legal protections could be leveraged [49]. The period between 1965 and 1975 witnessed significant in-migration into the region [46,47].

Despite the region's designation as a Scheduled Area and the presence of land transfer regulations favouring Scheduled Tribes migration and settlement—including by non-tribal groups—continued [50]. This reflected the broader political context shaped by the Telangana armed peasant rebellion and the subsequent presence of radical groups, which constrained the effective enforcement of state regulations [51,52] and initiated a slew of development and reformist interventions, including the issuance of revenue titles to lands made by outsiders [43].

As part of the Chenchu Scheme, 18 Scheduled Caste (Mala) families were settled in Vatvarlapalle and were allotted land and plough bullocks along with Chenchus [47]. However, the allotted land was largely uncultivable and had to be cleared manually (oral history, Mala farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017). This process of land clearing—undertaken collectively—marks an early phase of state-supported land making [53]. Despite these efforts, Chenchus were often unable to sustain cultivation due to limited resources and began leasing out land. This created early conditions for the entry and consolidation of migrant cultivators [47].

The availability of wage labour, coupled with the normalisation of forest clearing for cultivation, enabled migrants—particularly Dalits and Backward Castes—to access land through labour rather than purchase. Chenchus further enabled this process by leasing their

land or informally transferring access to their customarily held land. Migrants who were unable to secure land in their native agrarian settings viewed forest land as a resource that could be claimed through labour. Unlike other Scheduled Areas dominated by Forward Castes [53], the Amrabad region witnessed settlement primarily by lower socio-economic caste and tribal groups [54], (focus group discussion, villagers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017), creating a distinctive frontier setting for subsequent agrarian and class differentiation.

Power and Class Relations Before 1980

During this period, state interventions focused on development and settlement, often sidelining the regulatory role of the forest department (interview, forest range officer, Amrabad, 2017). The forest department's activities remained largely extractive, with limited emphasis on conservation (focus group discussion, villagers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017), enabling continued community-led land making and cultivation.

As customary holders of land surrounding their hamlets, Chenchus initially exercised some control over access to land (oral history, Chenchu farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017). Given their long-standing economic marginalisation, control over land within the hamlets emerged as an important opportunity for Chenchus in ways it had not previously been. However, continued migration and the Chenchus' increasing dependence on migrants for monetary needs gradually weakened their position, both socially and in terms of retaining control over their land (interview with Lambada farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017).

Migrant cultivators, primarily from Backward Castes and Dalit communities, relied on their labour to clear land and establish cultivation. Early cultivation was largely subsistence-oriented, focusing on millet production and involved sharing produce with Chenchus through lease arrangements (interview, BC farmer, Sarlapally, 2017). The labour-intensive nature of land making, combined with limited surplus generation, constrained capital accumulation and restricted the emergence of strong class hierarchies during this phase.

However, early processes of differentiation began to emerge. Lambadas, benefiting from their Scheduled Tribe status and location within Scheduled Areas, were better positioned to access—and in some cases purchase—land from Chenchus. These differential capacities of access and acquisition laid the foundation for more pronounced patterns of class differentiation that emerged in later periods.

Overall, this phase was characterised by land control exercised by communities through labour-based land making, alongside development-oriented, reformist, and political interventions by the state. Together, these processes laid the foundation for the differentiated class relations that emerged in subsequent periods.

3.2. From 1980s to Early 2000s: Weak Enforcement and Radical Influence

During this period, the region was formally designated as a wildlife sanctuary (1978) and later as a tiger reserve (1983). However, these conservation measures were superimposed on existing forest management systems and had limited immediate impact on everyday land use and local governance (interview, beat officer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017); (interview, BC farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017). Local communities were largely unaware of these changes in environmental governance, and no formal processes of consultation or awareness-building were undertaken. As one respondent noted, "We knew that this is 'forest', but we came to know that our village is in a tiger reserve much later. . . when we saw the signboards" (focus group discussions, BC farmers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017).

In practice, the designation remained largely nominal. The forest department continued its earlier focus on timber extraction and forest produce collection, with limited emphasis on conservation enforcement (oral history, Chenchu farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017; oral history, BC farmer, Sarlapally, 2017). As a result, protected area designation did not

substantially alter existing practices of cultivation, resource use, or local land control during this phase.

Two key interrelated developments shaped land control dynamics during this period: first, the consolidation of Maoist (Naxalite) influence in the region from the 1980s onwards [45,46,52]; and second, the continued influx and settlement of Lambadas and other communities into forest areas [46] (interviews, villagers, Vatvarlapalle and Sarlapally, 2017–2018). Together, these processes shaped the land control dynamics, land relations, and negotiations over local authority.

By the mid-1980s, Maoist groups had established significant control over the region. They influenced decisions related to land and forest use and, at times, authorised extraction and cultivation practices. Local organisations affiliated with the movement, such as the *rythu coolie sangham*, played an important role in regulating access to forest resources, effectively undermining the authority of the forest department [54]. The presence of Maoist groups also constrained state enforcement. Forest officials had limited access to villages and often avoided regular monitoring due to security concerns (interview, forest range officer, Amrabad, 2017). In many cases, local governance operated through negotiations shaped by the influence of radical groups.

This political context had differentiated effects on communities. Chenchus experienced pressure from both Maoists and state forces and, in some cases, relocated to larger villages for security reasons (oral history, Chenchu farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017). At the same time, migrant communities—particularly Dalits and Backward Castes—benefited from the weakening of state control. The presence of Maoists created conditions under which settlers could clear forests and expand cultivation with reduced risk of intervention by the forest department (oral history, BC farmer, Sarlapally, 2017; oral history, Mala farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017).

Many respondents emphasised that the Maoist presence enabled them to establish and extend cultivation. Both early settlers and new entrants relied on these conditions to make land. In some instances, even state officials informally engaged in land making through local arrangements, although such cases were limited (interviews, late settler families, Vatvarlapalle, 2017–2018).

State-led interventions during this period further shaped land relations, though unevenly across villages. In Vatvarlapalle, events such as the 1983 fire and subsequent political attention led to the distribution of residential titles and later phases of revenue title allocation. Infrastructure improvements, including electrification, were also introduced. In contrast, Sarlapally benefited less from such interventions, reflecting differences in location, population size, and political significance. These uneven interventions contributed to differentiated conditions of settlement, land access, and agrarian development across villages.

Encouraged by the absence of restrictions and, in some cases, the allocation of revenue titles, settlers continued to clear forest land and expand cultivation. Although migration into the villages slowed by the 1980s, land-making activities continued until the early 2000s (focus group discussion, Madiga families, Sarlapally, 2018).

This expansion of cultivation, combined with changes in cropping patterns—from subsistence crops such as millet to commercial crops including maize, castor, red gram, and eventually cotton—contributed to increasing differentiation within the peasantry. Variations in land access, timing of settlement, and differential capacities to diversify into education and employment began to shape emerging class differences among communities.

Overall, this phase is characterised by the domination of radical groups, weak enforcement of conservation legislations, and state-led populist and development-oriented interventions shaped by electoral considerations. Together, these factors variously en-

abled continued land making by both earlier settlers and new migrants. Variations in land access and changes in cropping patterns gradually shifted subsistence-based agriculture towards accumulation and contributed to differentiated agrarian relations among the communities. Some early settlers—Lambadas in particular—transitioned to capitalist farming, whereas later entrants remained within the categories of differentiated peasantry or capitalist farmers, often with limited concerns regarding the legality of the lands under their cultivation. Except in the case of Lambadas, these processes of class formation were not strongly caste-dependent and were shaped largely by the timing of migrant arrival and settlement. However, in the later periods, especially following the implementation of FRA and the intensification of restrictions on cultivation in forest lands, legality increasingly became central to communities' ability to retain control over land and sustain their agrarian class positions.

3.3. From Early 2000s to Pre-2010: Transition Under Intensifying State Control

During the early 2000s, the political and administrative landscape of the region underwent significant changes. The state-initiated negotiations with Maoist groups in 2004 were followed by intensified efforts to suppress the movement [55]. By 2009, Maoist influence in the Nallamala region had largely declined [56,57]. This shift marked a transition in governance, with the state gradually reasserting control over the region and the conditions under which land use and land control had previously operated.

Alongside the reassertion of state authority, conservation governance began to strengthen. The establishment of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in 2006 and the introduction of institutional mechanisms such as base camps in 2009 increased monitoring and surveillance in the region (interview, base camp watcher, Sarlapally, 2017). Villagers reported growing restrictions to forest access, including limits on cattle movement, prevention of new land making, and fines for activities perceived to harm wildlife.

Although the FRA was enacted in 2006, its implementation in the state was delayed until 2010–2011. During this transitional period, some IFR titles were issued selectively to STs—particularly Chenchus and Lambadas—while other communities cultivating forest lands remained without legal recognition. These developments marked the beginning of a shift from relatively permissive land use conditions to a more regulated regime, which would intensify in the subsequent period.

3.3.1. Land and Class Relations Before the Onset of Restrictions

Despite these emerging regulatory shifts, this period continued to reflect many features of the earlier frontier phase. The combined influence of state interventions, radical presence (until the early 2000s), and community practices had enabled widespread access to land and agrarian livelihoods. The region continued to function as a de facto open frontier, even after its formal designation as a tiger reserve.

Importantly, traditional caste-bound hierarchies of agrarian villages were partially reconfigured in this frontier context. Migration into the region—largely by socio-economically marginalised groups—provided opportunities to access land through labour, offering partial exit from entrenched caste-based inequalities in their native settings.

However, access to land and its legal status varied significantly across villages and communities. In Vatvarlapalle, revenue titles were distributed in two phases (1960s and 1980s), with households receiving up to five acres [44]. Early settlers across caste groups secured revenue land (Table 3), while later arrivals—particularly SC-Madigas—obtained smaller holdings, typically between one and two acres.

Table 3. Castes and the legal status of the land they made.

Village	Tribe/Caste	Nature/Legal Status of the Land Made/Owned
Vatvarlapalle	Chenchus	Revenue land
Vatvarlapalle	Mala	Most Malas possess revenue and forest lands, though forest lands remain without IFR titles. Some later-settler and larger Mala households rely exclusively on forest lands without IFR titles.
Vatvarlapalle	Madiga	Some Madigas possess limited revenue land, while others cultivate forest lands without IFR titles.
Vatvarlapalle	BC-Pioneers and socio-economically stronger castes	Revenue and forest lands without IFR titles.
Vatvarlapalle	BC-Weaker castes	Only forest lands without IFR titles.
Vatvarlapalle	Religious minorities—Muslims	Revenue and forest lands without IFR titles.
Vatvarlapalle	Lambadas	Revenue and forest lands with IFR titles.
Vatvarlapalle	OCs	Revenue and forest lands without IFR titles.
Sarlapally	Chenchus	Revenue and forest lands with titles.
Sarlapally	BCs	No BC groups possess revenue land. BC-Gollas, the pioneer settlers, made lands within the village boundary. The other BC groups made lands within and outside village boundary. All of the BC lands are forest lands. However, the forest lands that are outside the village boundary are locally differentiated on the basis of distance from the village boundary. None of these lands possess IFR titles.
Sarlapally	SC-Mala and Madiga	Forest lands outside the village boundary and deep inside the forest without IFR titles.

Over time, increasing population and subdivision of land reduced average landholding sizes, which enhanced clearing of forest lands even by those who had revenue lands. By 2017, Vatvarlapalle had approximately 800 acres of revenue land and an additional 300 acres under cultivation in forest areas.

In contrast, Sarlapally did not witness the distribution of revenue titles to outsider settlers. Although only Chenchus held revenue land, villagers continued land-making activities in anticipation of future regularisation, particularly given precedents in nearby villages such as Vatvarlapalle. Sarlapally, with 150 households, has about 450 acres of cultivable land, of which nearly 100 acres are revenue land. However, most of the non-recognised land within the village boundary belongs to the socio-economically better-off BC group of Gollas, owing to their early settlement in the village. The land outside the village boundary belongs to both lower BC and SC castes.

Across both villages, despite differences in land type—revenue versus forest land, and location within or outside village boundaries—there were no significant restrictions on cultivation during this period. Communities broadly retained access to land, enabling continued agrarian livelihoods.

3.3.2. Emergence of Class Differentiation

While access to land remained relatively widespread, this period witnessed the consolidation of class differentiation within the peasantry. Variations in land access, timing of settlement, and the differential capacities to diversify income sources increasingly shaped socio-economic hierarchies. All outsider castes, previously belonging to lower socio-

economic positions and exhibiting no distinct class differences, emerged as either capitalist farmers or differentiated peasants.

State policies of positive discrimination played a role in these processes. Lambadas, due to their Scheduled Tribe status, were able to legally purchase land from Chenchus and access government employment more easily (interview, Chenchu farmer, Sarlapally, 2017). Similarly, SC-Malas, as early settlers with revenue land, benefited from affirmative action policies (interview, Madiga farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2018). These processes also facilitated greater integration of Lambadas and some early-settler groups into administrative and political networks, which later shaped their differential capacities to navigate and negotiate the restrictions imposed on cultivation.

Early settlers across caste groups who were able to consolidate landholdings expanded their economic base through livestock rearing, leasing additional land, and investing in education and employment. Some Forward Caste and Muslim families transitioned to small-scale commercial activities, including hotels or provision stores, trading, input supply, and agricultural financing, further strengthening their economic position (interviews, non-tribal agricultural dealers, Vatvarlapalle and Sarlapally, 2017).

These processes consolidated distinct class positions within the region. Lambadas, Forward Caste settlers, Muslim households, SC-Malas, and relatively stronger BC groups—particularly early settlers—transitioned to being small capitalist farmers. In contrast, later settlers, including lower BC groups and SC-Madigas, remained as differentiated peasantry, with limited landholdings but continued access to cultivation. The following discussion presents caste- and tribe-wise class positions and relations amongst the communities living in the region.

3.3.3. Adivasi Chenchus: Landed Wage Labourers

Chenchus in Vatvarlapalle hold a significant share of revenue land, often considered among the most fertile in the village (focus group discussions, BC farmers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017). However, many are unable to cultivate due to limited resources rather than lack of knowledge, contradicting the dominant state narrative that Chenchus do not know how to cultivate (oral history, Chenchu farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017). As a result, a large proportion of Chenchu land is under the control of Lambadas and economically stronger Backward Caste (BC) groups through informal leasing and appropriation (interview, BC farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017).

These arrangements are often mediated through debt relations, including advances provided during emergencies, which bind Chenchus into long-term tenancy arrangements. So, the majority of Chenchus in both villages diversify as part-time daily wage labourers in the local agricultural fields or the government's rural employment works, part-time forest-produce collectors, or as contractual labour working with the agents at the construction sites. Some Chenchus, irrespective of their relations with the land and agriculture, find contract-based employment in the base camps set up by the tiger project as tiger trackers and a few as beat officers. Their land is either leased out or, in some instances, cultivated by their relatives. Thus, the majority of Chenchus in these villages are landed yet end up as wage labourers, and a few fits in as the differentiated peasantry retaining control over their land. In both scenarios, Chenchus wield control over their lands in the form of extracting rent or regaining formal control over their appropriated land through periodic state interventions to restore their land. Non-tribals emphasise that "'Chenchus' land is forever their land only. No matter what happens" (focus group discussions with the non-tribal farmers of Vatvarlapalle and Sarlapally, 2017). Consequently, most Chenchus function as landed wage labourers, deriving limited rent from land while diversifying into daily wage labour, forest produce collection, and contractual work.

3.3.4. SCs (Mala and Madiga): Small Capitalist Farmers and Differentiated Peasantry

SC-Malas, particularly in Vatvarlapalle, benefited from early settlement and access to revenue land, as well as state-led affirmative action policies. Many households combined cultivation with diversification into education and formal employment, allowing them to consolidate their position as small capitalist farmers.

In contrast, sections of Malas and most SC-Madigas, who possess smaller or non-titled landholdings, remained differentiated peasantry. Madigas of both villages, apart from relying on cultivation, diversify as forest produce collectors and daily wage labourers, temporarily migrating to cities to find low-skilled jobs at construction sites or with manufacturing units through their limited social networks. Although with differences in diversification, especially in the nature of work and working conditions, this group of Malas and Madigas fit within differentiated peasantry owing to their ownership of land and ability to cultivate either in revenue or forest lands.

3.3.5. Lambadas, Forward Castes, and Muslims: Small Yet Capitalist Farmers

Lambadas occupy a central position in the agrarian structure, combining ownership of revenue land with control over Adivasi lands [53]. Their Scheduled Tribe status enables access to land transactions within Scheduled Areas and facilitates relatively easier entry into government employment. They have diversified into non-agricultural activities, including businesses and agricultural financing, further strengthening their position. These advantages enhanced their ability to engage with state institutions and political actors, and to leverage formal channels in their support, particularly when restrictions on cultivation emerge that threaten their class and livelihood strategies. Forward Caste and Muslim households exhibit similar patterns of capital accumulation and diversification. These groups constitute the dominant capitalist farmers in the region.

3.3.6. Backward Castes: Internal Differentiation (Capitalist and Differentiated Peasantry)

Backward Castes exhibit significant internal differentiation. Dominant groups such as Mudirajus (Vatvarlapalle) and Gollas (Sarlapally) have consolidated control over land through ownership and leasing and diversified into agriculture, business, and employment. They function as capitalist farmers.

In contrast, other BC groups with smaller holdings rely on labour diversification, including wage labour, seasonal migration, and informal employment. These groups align more closely with differentiated peasantry.

Overall, this period was characterised by the reassertion of state authority and the strengthening of conservation institutions. However, frontier conditions that enabled access to land by the communities largely persisted, with most groups retaining the ability to cultivate. At the same time, these conditions began to show signs of closure through the emergence of legality-centred differentiation in land control and class relations, increasingly shaped by the linkages between caste/tribe location and the legality of land. The class differentiation that began in the previous period consolidated further through variations in land access, tenure security, and diversification strategies.

3.4. The 2010–2018 Period: Post-FRA Implementation and Intensification of Land Control

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), was first implemented in Telangana in 2009. It was, however, observed to be partially and selectively implemented, primarily for tribals, through 'early yet state-driven rushed and coercive processes' by the state government as a land title distribution scheme before elections [58,59]. Moreover, only 43.5% of the total claimed land (7.61 lakh acres) was recognised with Individual Forest Rights (IFR) titles [60]. Tri-

nadharao [60] highlights the poor acceptance of IFR claims, the high rejection rates, and the non-recognition of Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFDs) rights and Community Forest Rights (CFRs) as major pending issues. This uneven and incomplete recognition of rights introduced a new legal basis to the already contested control over land. Further, the formation of Telangana as a separate state in 2014 strengthened forest administration through increased resources reflected in the expansion of ATR ranges from two to four. The enhanced administrative capacity translated into greater vigilance and stricter regulation of cultivation in forest lands.

3.4.1. Restrictions on Cultivation and Legal Demarcation

Following the partial implementation of the FRA, the forest department (FD) started to exercise active control over land by imposing restrictions on cultivation in forest lands lacking legal recognition or titles (focus group discussion, BC farmers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017). Implementing the FRA as an 'act meant only for tribals' meant that only the Lambadas in Vatvarlapalle and Chenchus in Sarlapally managed to secure IFR titles (Integrated Tribal Development Authority (ITDA) records, Mannanur, 2018). The non-tribals, as a group, and their forest lands were thus rendered illegible for cultivation.

Against this first official legal demarcation of previously contested—yet cultivated and community-controlled—forest lands, FD personnel increasingly prevented cultivation from around 2012 onwards during successive cropping seasons, claiming that these lands were forest lands that had to be reclaimed by the department. 'Who told you to cultivate?' and 'Get permission from officers' are phrases that farmers often hear, followed by related consequences (focus group discussion, SC farmers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017).

3.4.2. Negotiation, Political Mediation, and Inconsistent Enforcement

With the sudden imposition of restrictions, villagers attempted to secure permits both collectively and individually. Most, depending on their socio-economic positions and networks, relied on political connections and local mediation to negotiate with political parties and FD personnel. The regional and local power differentials, shaped by caste, class, and political connections, undermined the uniformity of restrictions and produced inconsistent enforcement practices.

Among the core area villages where agriculture is a key livelihood, there was a strong focus on restricting cultivation in forest lands in Vatvarlapalle, Sarlapally, and Kudichintalabailu—mixed-caste villages of the highlands/upper plateau—compared to villages in the lower plains, even though they also fall within the core area. The core area villages in the plains are larger settlements with a strong dependence on agriculture, providing consistent employment for agricultural labourers, cultivating commercial crops such as chilies and cotton, and being numerically dominated by Forward Castes (Reddys) and ST-Lambadas [47].

Even within the two study villages, restrictions varied. Vatvarlapalle experienced a complete ban on forest land cultivation between 2013 and 2016, with some relaxation after 2016. In Sarlapally, despite the ban, farmers were allowed to cultivate after securing permission from the Divisional Forest Officer. However, even with permits, cultivation was allowed mainly in forest lands within village boundaries. Lands located farther away were restricted irrespective of permits.

For villagers who had never previously faced restrictions on cultivating the lands they had made, these regulations marked a significant shift in land relations. In a region that historically enabled both locals and migrants to gain control over land, these restrictions abruptly curtailed the communities' long-standing hold over land. This form of control differs from earlier FD interventions in that previous measures had not completely obstructed

access to the means of production [59] (interviews, villagers, Vatvarlapalle and Sarlapally, 2017–2018). Moreover, the current restrictions are selective and inconsistent in terms of where they are implemented, how strictly they are enforced, and for how long.

3.4.3. Intensified Land Control Through Multiple Ways

Villagers recall their active participation in the Telangana state movement and express frustration that despite the formation of a separate state to which they had contributed, restrictions on cultivation continued to intensify. Villagers involved in the Telangana movement relied on political connections to influence and prevent forest officials from regulating cultivation. Consequently, until 2014–2015, restrictions were widely regarded as 'something that can be managed' (interview, Lambada farmer, Vatvarlapalle, 2017).

From 2015 onwards, the state introduced the flagship plantation programme 'Telanganaku Haritha-Haaram,' aimed at achieving 33% tree cover. The FD increasingly relied on plantations both as a conservation strategy and as a means of countering political interference and retaining control over land. 'Forest lands under cultivation are claimed for plantations' (interview, OC farmer (woman), Vatvarlapalle, 2017) became a key justification by the FD. Even when villagers approached officials through political representatives, permission was often denied once plantations were established: 'Had the plantations not done in that field, I would have permitted. But with plantations done, I cannot' (focus group discussion, BC farmers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017).

Since plantations were often carried out in lands located far from villages and in lands that Chenchus rely on for seasonal forest produce collection, the worst affected were late settlers—particularly SC-Madigas, weaker BC groups, and Chenchus depending on their habitat lands.

Other practices further reinforced these dynamics. Trenching emerged as another land control strategy. While officially aimed at reducing human–wildlife conflict, it was widely perceived as a means of demarcating land boundaries. By 2017, trenches had been dug around villages, often leading to contestation. Farmers argued that trenches would permanently convert cultivable land into forest land: 'The trench will become the new boundary…' (interview, BC farmer, Sarlapally, 2017). Decisions regarding trench placement were also perceived to be influenced by powerful actors and contractors.

The 2017–2018 Land Records Updation Programme (LRUP) intended to regularise land records across Telangana, failed to resolve land ambiguities [61]. Many villages were excluded from even conducting that programme, effectively rendering them non-revenue villages. The incomplete implementation of LRUP, combined with gaps in FRA implementation, provided the FD with grounds to assert control over land. As one forest officer noted: 'Now, with the completion of the revenue survey… lands without revenue titles… were obviously our (forest) lands' (interview, Forest Range Officer, Amrabad, 2017). For non-tribal farmers in Sarlapally, this reinforced exclusion across multiple fronts—FRA, revenue reforms, and conservation regulations.

3.4.4. Relocation as a Parallel Control and Exit Strategy

In 2015, a Government Order (GO) was issued to relocate people living in core areas of tiger reserves. Although relocation had been proposed earlier, including during the early 2000s and later with NTCA packages, it had not materialised until 2018.

Relocation remained a sensitive issue due to public and political concerns about displacing Adivasi Chenchus from their natural habitats, leading to regional mobilisation and political contestation. Therefore, similarly to cultivation restrictions, relocation efforts too became selective. While initially targeting all core villages and Chenchu hamlets, by

2015–2016 the focus remained on non-tribal populations in relatively smaller agrarian villages like Vatvarlapalle, Sarlapally, and Kudichintalabailu.

Non-tribal farmers, who had long sought titles for forest lands, were denied with statements such as: 'It is a core area. Your land cannot be converted into titled land' (focus group discussion, villagers, Vatvarlapalle, 2017); (interviews, villagers, Sarlapally, 2017–2018). With increasing restrictions and no prospect of legal recognition, especially for those without revenue land, relocation emerged as a potential exit strategy. However, relocation processes were eventually stalled, leaving villagers uncertain about future outcomes.

3.4.5. Interactions Among Multiple Land Control Strategies of Protection and Their Impacts

The combined effects of restrictions, plantations, and stalled relocation impacted caste and class groups differently. Despite attempts to negotiate through political networks, relocation increasingly appeared as the only exit option for those exclusively dependent on unrecognised forest lands, who were therefore more eager for it to materialise. In contrast, those with access to land and better diversification strategies approached relocation more cautiously, considering it as one among several options.

Villagers adopted multiple strategies, including relocation, to navigate the restrictions imposed on their cultivation. All non-tribals, irrespective of their access to land, relied on their political clout to negotiate for better relocation packages with necessary amenities and titled land, while the villagers of Sarlapally attempted to shield the negative impacts on their livelihoods by agreeing to the authority of the FD, saying 'allow us to cultivate until we are relocated. We are not saying no to relocation. We are ready to go whenever you take us out' (oral history, BC farmer, Sarlapally, 2017). At the time of writing, Sarlapally, along with three other core area villages, has been selected for relocation, while Vatvarlapalle is expected to be relocated in a subsequent phase due to its size. Although it remains unclear whether relocation will involve the entire village or only non-tribals, media reports of ministers disbursing cheques to villagers indicate that relocation in ATR has officially begun.

On the whole, the FD exercised control not only through direct conservation strategies but also by leveraging gaps and inconsistencies in other state interventions. These interacting mechanisms enabled the FD to exercise strong and authoritative control over land, leaving limited scope for communities to retain access or continue cultivation in unrecognised lands. However, the impacts of these combined control strategies are contested and navigated by villagers in different ways, depending on their historically developed positions of power, which led to the emergence of differentiated impacts, realised differently by different caste groups. These differentiated impacts are elaborated on in the next section.

3.4.6. Differentiated Social Impacts and Marginalisation

Once the FD started to gain its hold in the region, with the decreased threat from radical groups, it relied on multiple strategies to assert control over forest lands that had long remained under community control. However, these interventions faced varying forms of resistance, negotiation, and accommodation across groups, and were implemented unevenly rather than exactly as conceived.

Although the restrictions were seemingly imposed on forest lands—particularly those cultivated by non-tribals—the communities' ability to cultivate and control land varied. The interaction between these selective land control measures and pre-existing class relations has culminated in a reconfiguration of class relations, where caste- and tribe-based landlessness and inability to cultivate have emerged as prominent features.

3.4.7. Differentiation Within Marginalised Groups: Downward Mobility of the Most Oppressed Groups and Relative Shielding by Others

The historically and traditionally considered marginalised castes—Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes—who faced landlessness in their native villages managed to variously achieve the class positions of capitalist farmers and differentiated peasantry with access to land in the frontier, and remained so until the impositions of restrictions and other land control measures by the protection regime. However, with the onset of restrictions and contestations from multiple directions, Lambadas, pioneer settlers belonging to stronger BC groups, and SC-Malas—who managed to achieve the capitalist class positions prior to the imposition of restrictions—consolidated their class positions. In contrast, SC-Malas, Madigas, and weaker BC groups, who made lands later and deeper within the forest but managed to function as differentiated peasantry before to imposition of restrictions, were severely and variously affected.

Restrictions effectively eliminated the primary means of livelihood of these groups. Even among differentiated peasants with access to land who had partly diversified their capital and labour into seasonal, informal, and contract-based work, securing livelihoods increasingly depended on social networks and contacts to find employment. However, sections of SC-Malas who had diversified into informal- and formal-sector jobs much before the onset of restrictions were able to navigate these effects by relying on alternative livelihoods.

Farmers from socio-economically weaker BC groups, who were largely dependent on forest lands, were unable to continue cultivation and had to leave the village in search of work even during the cropping season—the first time ever since they had settled in the village. They attempted to retain their class position by negotiating for cultivation permits or relying on networks to secure employment. Most entered low-skilled informal-sector work in private companies and the service sector in cities on monthly wages.

SC-Madigas, a historically discriminated against and oppressed caste of the agrarian social order, who had earlier achieved differentiated peasantry status, possessed weak networks in the informal sector. With the loss of access to forest lands for cultivation, they increasingly relied on daily wage labour as agricultural labourers or construction labourers. SC-Madigas have thus shifted into landless wage labourers, as restrictions curtailed not only access to their own forest lands but also opportunities to cultivate others' lands amid growing competition over legally cultivable land.

In Vatvarlapalle and Sarlapally, Dalits recalled the relative absence of caste-based discrimination and compulsion to perform traditional occupations during earlier phases, which enabled them to establish more dignified livelihoods compared to their native settings. However, with new conditions of landlessness and limited employment opportunities, some elderly Madigas have returned to caste-bound occupations such as skinning dead animals and performing ritual duties (oral history, Madiga farmer, Vatvarlapally, 2017). The community, which previously functioned as differentiated peasantry, has thus shifted into landless wage labour class, once again tied to caste-based occupations and class central to their historical discrimination and marginalisation.

3.4.8. Adivasi-Chenchus: Formal Rights Without Effective Control over Land

The Adivasi-Chenchus—who, like the Madigas, have historically faced oppression due to their tribal location—also experienced livelihood impacts under restrictions. While their formal land rights provided some protection, their limited ability to retain effective control over land, combined with increased competition for recognised land, further constrained their already fragile livelihood base.

Although their class position—landed wage labourers—technically remained unchanged before and after restrictions, the nature of this condition has shifted. Earlier, their inability to cultivate was largely due to a lack of resources to initiate cultivation; after the imposition of restrictions, it is due to both lack of capital and a lack of access to land. They are now effectively resigned to a condition of 'inability to cultivate'.

Moreover, increased competition from the socio-economically stronger Lambadas in accessing formal employment, limited social networks, constrained diversification into non-agricultural activities, and reduced access to forest produce under the combined effects of incomplete FRA implementation and strengthened protection have pushed them into precarious wage labour.

3.4.9. Retention and Consolidation Among Dominant Yet Traditionally Considered Marginalised Groups

ST-Lambadas, who were historically less burdened by their tribal location and benefitted from affirmative action associated with their administrative classification as STs, retained their position as small capitalist farmers. The same broadly applies to stronger BC groups and pioneer SC-Malas. They did so partly by drawing on their class position—securing access to limited legally cultivable land through lease or purchase—and partly by negotiating with the FD to permit cultivation or prevent their lands from being taken up for plantations or trenching.

Capitalist farmers among Lambadas and other caste groups, facing land shortages due to restrictions, increasingly leased Chenchu lands at competitive rates. This further reduced the availability of revenue land for cultivation among those belonging to the differentiated peasantry.

3.4.10. Reinstatement of Conjugated Oppression Under Protection

On the whole, the combined or conjugated oppression of caste and class that historically shaped the land relations—particularly landlessness—was partially disrupted in the Amrabad region through frontier expansion, land making, and community control over land. As pioneers and settlers occupying forest lands, historically marginalised groups variously became differentiated peasants and, in some cases, capitalist farmers.

However, conservation and its land control practices, particularly after 2012, unsettled these gains. Only a few, such as Lambadas, forward castes, stronger BC groups, and pioneer SC-Malas, retained their class positions owing to historically specific advantages, diversification strategies, and capacities to negotiate restrictions. In contrast, historically discriminated and oppressed groups—SC-Madigas and Adivasi Chenchus—were pushed further down from their earlier class positions into landlessness and precarious wage labour, facing pressures not only in sustaining agrarian livelihoods, but also in continuing to reside in the villages.

These findings suggest that marginalisation with protection is not uniform across the communities. Rather, it is produced at the intersection of historically shaped and contextually contingent power relations among the communities and the power of conservation. Protection thus emerges as a force that reinstates a form of conjugated oppression, where the interconnected relations between historically discriminated and oppressed castes, their class positions, and their control over land are re-established, even in regions where these relations had previously been partially delinked. To clarify the directions of class change and differentiated outcomes discussed above, Table 4 synthesises changes in class positions across social groups under interacting land-control strategies.

Table 4. Differential impacts of interacting land-control strategies: changes in class positions across social groups.

Caste/Tribe Group	Class Position Before Imposition of Restrictions	Trajectory of Classes Post Imposition of Restrictions	Key Mediating Factors
ST-Lambadas	Small capitalist farmers	Retained and consolidated capitalist position	Administrative ST status and IFR recognition; early settlement and historically constituted class position; diversified capital–labour portfolio; differential capacity to negotiate institutional and political processes; and continued access to cultivable land through lease/purchase arrangements.
Pioneer SC-Malas	Small capitalist farmers	Retention	Early settlement and historically constituted class position; access to revenue land and affirmative-action enabled diversification into formal and informal employment; continued access to cultivable land and alternative livelihood options.
Early-settler stronger BC groups	Small capitalist farmers	Retention	Early settlement and historically constituted class position; diversified capital–labour portfolio; greater capacity to negotiate institutional and political processes; continued access to cultivable land through lease arrangements and conditionally permitted forest-land cultivation.
Late-settler SC-Malas and weaker BC groups	Differentiated peasantry	Retention under erosion of cultivable land access	Late settlement; dependence on forest lands, conditional permits, and the availability of legitimate cultivable land; limited capital–labour diversification relying on informal employment and social networks.
SC-Madigas	Differentiated peasantry	Shift from differentiated peasantry to landless wage labour class	Loss of access to forest-land cultivation and limited access to legally cultivable land; weak labour diversification and informal labour networks; increasing dependence on agricultural and construction wage labour alongside renewed reliance on caste-bound occupations.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Caste/Tribe Group	Class Position Before Imposition of Restrictions	Trajectory of Classes Post Imposition of Restrictions	Key Mediating Factors
Adivasi-Chenchus	Landed wage labourers	Formal class position retained, but intensified inability to cultivate; shift to precarious labour	Limited effective control over recognised land despite formal rights, shaped by competition over legitimate cultivable land and unequal bargaining power in negotiating cultivation and lease arrangements; weak and precarious labour diversification, including bonded migrant labour; reduced access to forests and forest-based livelihoods.

4. Discussion

Stressing the need to focus on agrarian dynamics while understanding micropolitics—even when the study area is a conservation enclosure such as a tiger reserve, but with a history of serving as an agrarian frontier—this study shows the nature of the micropolitics that is constituted and the importance of foregrounding such a context in studying the social outcomes of protection. By examining the impacts of the contemporary forces of protection as they interact with agrarian relations and other forces of the state—and by foregrounding the multiple historical ways through which local power asymmetries are constituted—this study probes deeper into the differential outcomes of protection and how they unfold in relation to historically sedimented relations of power, ultimately shaping marginalisation in the region.

This attention to local agrarian dynamics complicates critical narratives that too quickly and too linearly connect conservation interventions and their social outcomes to macro-structural inequalities of capitalism or state-making and to a notion of fixed marginalisation of already marginalised groups. This study finds that the land control-oriented practices of protection do not operate on the ground as a set of given, centrally driven, linear, and isolated practices, nor do they marginalise all marginalised groups equally. Rather, conservation impacts are mediated through agrarian class and caste dynamics among communities, their politics and political influences, and the political interests and commitments of an electorally inclined state. The study therefore suggests that the social impacts of conservation cannot be understood by treating land control as external to local communities and originating from protection alone, or through fixed categories of 'local communities' or 'marginalised groups.' Instead, the social impacts emerge through interactions among protection practices, agrarian relations, and historically constituted power asymmetries, producing differentiated and contextually shaped forms of marginalisation. The differential outcomes are reflected in divergent class trajectories across SC-Madigas, Adivasi-Chenchus, Lambadas, SC-Malas, and BC groups.

Taking an expansive definition of land control, contrary to approaches that theorise PAs as land control in themselves and associate land control only with protection practices, this study brings together a range of decisive activities by different actors to gain, retain, or contest control over land within a single analytical frame. Thus, land making by different communities, leasing arrangements (formal and informal), appropriation through purchase, debt, or manipulation, imposition of restrictions by the FD, and partial implementation of reforms are analysed together.

By employing the concept of land control across state, non-state, and agrarian actors within a historical perspective, this study highlights the constant and active interplay

between different forces. It demonstrates how power balances shift over time, with different actors gaining or losing ground across periods. It also shows how the conservationist state at the local level adapts its strategies, often relying on loopholes in the implementation of other Acts to respond to pressures from local actors and regional political dynamics.

Viewing land control as originating from multiple sources and interacting through ongoing contestations and counter-contestations between communities and conservation interventions brings to the fore that emergent marginalisation—particularly the loss of agrarian livelihoods—is uniform neither across time nor across communities, and may vary even within the same community.

This study, employing an expansive concept of land control, illustrates:

- How protection-led land control practices are dented by actors who previously held control over land;
- How some castes within the traditionally considered marginalised communities escape or shield themselves from regulatory effects by relying on alternative land control mechanisms such as leasing or finding employment; and
- How protection-driven regulatory land control practices, together with those of capitalist and differentiated classes of farmers, dispossess actors who were historically the most disadvantaged due to caste and tribe positions.

Historically discriminated and oppressed groups—Madigas (among Dalits) and Chenchus—are pushed down by the interaction between protection-driven land control and the land control practices of relatively less-affected groups. In contrast, Lambadas—despite being classified as STs and often treated as the most marginalised in conservation contexts—along with SC-Malas and some forward BC groups belonging to the capitalist class prior to restrictions, were able to retain their class positions.

There are studies that emphasise the varied outcomes of displacement as a result of conservation and development projects due to local power asymmetries, and how these processes further drive inequalities and reinforce hierarchies [8,62]. The present study—through its focus on caste, agrarian class, and historically contingent land relations—extends this understanding of differential impacts. It argues that protection-led land control practices not only directly and differentially affect communities, but also interact with other forces and local micropolitics.

By demonstrating how historically discriminated against castes and tribes—SC-Madigas and Adivasi Chenchus—are pushed out of their earlier control over land into precarious wage labour, while allowing other traditionally considered marginalised groups to retain control over land and either consolidate their class positions or remain relatively less impacted, this study argues that protection, in interaction with local power differentials and its immediate social outcomes, reinstates a form of conjugated oppression in which caste/tribe location, class, and landlessness are reconnected—even in contexts that had previously enabled partial escape from such relations.

The form of conjugated oppression that emerges following the imposition of restrictions renders Madigas and Chenchus—historically oppressed castes and tribes among Dalits and STs—unable to continue cultivation, pushing them into daily and migrant wage labour. The class relations that emerge in this phase represent a deeper form of conjugated oppression (extending beyond what Lerche and Shah have shown), in which not only social oppression and class relations, but also control over land, are co-constituted.

This form of conjugated oppression compounds the exploitation of historically oppressed groups, while enabling the continuation or consolidation of class positions among relatively better-placed castes and tribes—even in contexts that had previously disrupted such relations. This becomes possible through the interaction between protection regimes and local agrarian and caste/tribe-based power differentials. The ATR, which once enabled

socio-economically weaker groups—particularly Dalit communities—to break away from the conjugated oppression of caste and class in their native villages, is now being reconfigured as a site for the reproduction of such oppression, albeit in a new form; characterised by offering some of those caste groups the space to escape, shield themselves, or adjust without significant negative impacts on their socio-economic conditions, while casting a wider net over a narrower group of historically discriminated against and oppressed communities by re-linking caste, class, and control over land.

By integrating agrarian relations into the analysis of the social impacts of protection regimes and their land control practices—an enquiry aligned with a classical political ecology approach focused on asymmetrical power relations and equitable resource governance—this study shows that:

1. Area-based conservation, with its focus on land control, acts as a force that transforms differentiated peasantry into landless wage labourers.
2. Marginalisation under protection in an agrarian polity is neither linear nor homogeneous; rather, it is produced at the intersection of contextually contingent social realities shaped by state formation processes, historically sedimented agrarian hierarchies, and the land control practices of protection regimes.

On the whole, this study, by showing the active and historic interplay of land control practices originating from multiple actors and interests and the selective nature of land control enforcement shaped by political mediation and the uneven legal status and legitimacy accorded to lands under cultivation, argues that land control-centric fortress models of conservation, particularly in regions that historically functioned as agrarian frontiers, produce differentiated social impacts—with some groups becoming marginalised, while others, including sections of the marginalised, retain or consolidate their class positions—and may thereby not only undermine the effectiveness of conservation action, but also place the broader ideology of conservation itself at risk. Rethinking exclusionary land control practices as the dominant operational strategy through which conservation goals are pursued and pursuing equitable conservation are therefore highly relevant, but require close attention to the regional and contextual factors shaping land relations and differentiated marginalisation rather than relying on homogeneous categories of 'local communities' or 'marginalised groups.'

5. Conclusions

This study contributes theoretically to the political ecology (PE) approach of locating natural resource conflicts within asymmetrical power relations by proposing an integrated approach that brings together historical, class-based, and caste-based agrarian relations with protection practices to understand the social impacts of protection. It also contributes to the agrarian political economy of forest frontier regions by underscoring the role that Protected Area (PA)-based conservation can play in shaping class differentiation.

By illustrating the differential impacts of protection, this study demonstrates how those less negatively affected by protection rely on their historically constituted class positions, in conjunction with protection practices, to further shape social outcomes and marginalisation. This finding suggests that studies of the social impacts of protection regimes beyond ATR should adopt a pluralist and interactional perspective on social forces, situated within regional histories to better understand how marginalisation is shaped contextually.

The study also suggests that national and global conservation policy regimes—often justified through science-based rationales and promoting the expansion of fortress conservation models—need to account for how on-ground interactions between protection practices and other social forces shape both conservation outcomes and their transformation into political processes. Further, efforts aimed at achieving equitable conservation

must recognise that marginalisation under protection is neither uniform nor homogeneous. Actions towards equitable conservation should therefore avoid monolithic approaches targeting specific livelihoods or communities and instead remain attentive to ground-level realities, adapting interventions to context-specific outcomes.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

PA	Protected Area
PE	Political Ecology
ATR	Amrabad Tiger Reserve
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SC	Scheduled Caste
BC	Backward Caste
FRA	Forest Rights Act
OTFDs	Other Traditional Forest Dwellers
FD	Forest Department

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