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Wildlife in the Backyard: Contemplating on Human-Wildlife Interactions by Community Radio in South India

Vida Silvestre en el Patio Trasero: Contemplando Interacciones entre Humanos y Animales por la Radio Comunitaria en el Sur de la India

Vida Selvagem de Quintal: Contemplando as Interações entre Humanos e Animais na Rádio Comunitária no Sul da Índia

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Abstract

The escalating scale of human-wildlife interactions turning into conflicts, poses a critical socio-ecological concern in India, similar to many regions worldwide. In addressing the issue, many institutions have recognised media as a valuable stakeholder. The current scholarship connecting media and human-wildlife interactions predominantly deals with media representation of conflicts. Furthermore, the literature lacks research insights into how community media engage with human-wildlife interactions, even though such media has extensive experience of engaging with environmental matters in many parts of the world. Addressing this gap, the paper focuses on a community media case study from the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Radio Kotagiri, the case discussed in the paper, is a community radio station located in the Kotagiri town of the Nilgiris district in the state; which is part of an ecologically rich and vulnerable mountain range in the country. Utilising the qualitative data -collected during the more extensive ethnographic study conducted by the author, and publicly available media content of the radio- the paper examines the engagements of community media concerning human-wildlife interactions.

The analysis reveals the dimensions of efforts by community radio in pursuing conversations on coexistence at the grassroots level, and its contribution to magnifying the realities of ordinary people concerning human-wildlife interactions in the region. While the radio station builds on the existing interests of its parent organisation and its resources regarding the subject, it aspires to be a platform capable of centring the socio-ecological matrix at work in narratives.

Keywords: Human-Wildlife Interaction, Media, Community Radio, Coexistence, Ordinary people, South India.



Resumen

El incremento de interacciones entre el hombre y la fauna salvaje, que se convierten en conflictos, plantea un problema socio-ecológico crítico en la India, similar al de muchas regiones del mundo. A la hora de abordar este problema, muchas instituciones han reconocido a los medios de comunicación como un valioso actor interesado. Los estudios actuales sobre los medios de comunicación y las interacciones entre los seres humanos y la fauna silvestre se centran principalmente en la representación de los conflictos en los medios de comunicación. Además, la bibliografía carece de estudios sobre el modo en que los medios de comunicación comunitarios abordan las interacciones entre los seres humanos y la fauna; a pesar de que dichos medios tienen una amplia experiencia en cuestiones medioambientales en muchas partes del mundo. Para colmar esta laguna, el artículo se centra en el estudio de caso de un medio de comunicación comunitario del estado de Tamil Nadu, en el sur de la India. Radio Kotagiri, el caso analizado en el artículo, es una radio comunitaria situada en la ciudad de Kotagiri, en el distrito de Nilgiris; que forma parte de una cadena montañosa ecológicamente rica y vulnerable del país. Utilizando los datos cualitativos -recogidos durante el estudio etnográfico más amplio realizado por el autor, y los contenidos de los medios de comunicación de la radio a disposición del público- el artículo examina los compromisos de los medios de comunicación comunitarios en relación con las interacciones entre los seres humanos y la fauna salvaje. El análisis revela las dimensiones de los esfuerzos de la radio comunitaria por mantener conversaciones sobre la coexistencia a nivel de base, y su contribución a magnificar las realidades de la gente corriente en relación con las interacciones entre los seres humanos y la fauna salvaje en la región. Si bien la radio se basa en los intereses existentes de su organización matriz y sus recursos en relación con el tema, resulta ser una plataforma capaz de centrar la matriz socio-ecológica en juego en las narrativas.

Palabras clave: Interacción Hombre-Vida Salvaje, Medios de Comunicación, Radio Comunitaria, Coexistencia, Gente Corriente, Sur de la India.

Resumo

O incremento crescente de interações entre humanos e animais selvagens, que se transformam em conflitos, representa uma preocupação socioecológica crítica na Índia, assim como em muitas regiões do mundo. Ao abordar a questão, muitas instituições reconheceram a mídia como uma parte interessada valiosa. Os estudos atuais que conectam a mídia e as interações entre humanos e animais selvagens tratam predominantemente da representação de conflitos pela mídia. Além disso, a literatura carece de insights de pesquisa sobre como a mídia comunitária se envolve com as interações entre humanos e animais selvagens, embora essa mídia tenha uma vasta experiência de envolvimento com questões ambientais em muitas partes do mundo. Para preencher essa lacuna, o artigo se concentra em um estudo de caso de mídia comunitária do estado de Tamil Nadu, no sul da Índia. A Radio Kotagiri, o caso discutido no artigo, é uma rádio comunitária localizada na cidade de Kotagiri, no distrito de Nilgiris; no estado, que faz parte de uma cadeia de montanhas ecológicamente rica e vulnerável do país. Utilizando os dados qualitativos -coletados durante o estudo etnográfico mais extenso conduzido pelo autor, e o conteúdo de mídia disponível publicamente da rádio- o artigo examina os compromissos da mídia comunitária em relação às interações entre humanos e animais selvagens. A análise revela as dimensões dos esforços da rádio comunitária na busca de conversas sobre coexistência em nível de base e sua contribuição para ampliar as realidades das pessoas comuns em relação às interações entre humanos e animais selvagens na região. Embora a rádio se baseie nos interesses existentes de sua organização-mãe e em seus recursos relacionados ao assunto, ela se revela uma plataforma capaz de centralizar a matriz socioecológica em ação nas narrativas.

Palavras-chave: Interação Homem-Vida Selvagem, Mídia, Rádio Comunitária, Coexistência, Pessoas Comuns, Sul da Índia.

Conflicto de intereses:

La autora ha declarado que no existen intereses en competencia.

Introduction

Human-wildlife conflict² (HWC) in India has become a frequent topic of discussion today, with its scale growing significantly over the decades in the region. According to the data provided by the Indian Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) in Indian Parliament in December 2023, nearly 3,000 people lost their lives to tiger and tusker (elephant) attacks alone since 2018. Apart from the fatalities, such conflicts often result in property and crop damages, injuries, psychological issues and livestock loss for ordinary people (Bayani et al., 2016; Gulati et al., 2021; Rao et al., 2002; Veeramani and Jayson, 1995; Venkataramana et al., 2017). Like other places, HWC in India overwhelmingly and disproportionately affect communities, generally poor and marginalised, living near forest areas (Oommen, 2021).

Conversely, conflicts with humans also pose a substantial threat to wildlife species. A news report in 2022, citing the Union Minister of State for MoEFCC, notes that 348 elephants have perished due to electrocution alone since 2018 across the country. Electric fences built to protect lands from elephant raids are the primary reason for most deaths (Kava, 2022). While the growing body of scholarship about the increasing HWCs points to several reasons and suggests mitigation strategies, human-wildlife interaction (and conflicts) is estimated to continue, given the current socio-ecological conditions (Gureja et al., 2003).

In its recent attempts to formulate human-wildlife conflict mitigation, the Indian government has emphasised the role of the media as a valuable stakeholder. A 2023 document published by MoEFCC titled *Guidelines for Cooperation between Forest and Media Sector in India* notes that despite being a significant stakeholder, the major share of media engagement is limited to reporting HWCs after something adverse occurs. There have been studies investigating the media representations of human-wildlife conflicts in India and elsewhere (Barua, 2010; Bhatia et al., 2013; Crown and Doubleday, 2017; Lunney and Moon, 2008; Sabatier and Huveneers, 2018; Stafford et al., 2018). Much of these content analysis studies focus on some form of mass media, such as print, to look into the perceptions it creates among the public vis-a-vis wildlife.

However, no substantial scholarship is currently available on community media engagements with human-wildlife interactions in the country, even though such media operates with a focus on local contexts and issues. The present paper attempts to fill this research gap by demonstrating a case study from South India.

Radio Kotagiri, the case in focus, is a community radio station in the Kotagiri town of the Nilgiris (meaning Blue Mountains) district of the Southern state of Tamil Nadu.

² Human-wildlife conflicts are undesirable outcomes of human-wildlife interactions. Several regions are currently in a state where the habitats of humans and wildlife overlap. The paper prefers to use interaction to underscore the indispensable overlapping of humans and wildlife in regions close to forest patches, while conflict is one form of interaction.

The analysis in the present paper utilises qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews during the author's larger ethnographic work carried out in 2021-22, and media content created in the last three years by the radio and publicly available on its digital platforms.

The analysis seeks to capture the kinds of engagements radio does in relation to human-wildlife conflict, the objectives manifested in those efforts and the position of the community vis-a-vis the pursuits.³ The next section of the paper briefly introduces the Nilgiris, where the radio operates. Like any other community media, local context immensely shapes the interests and engagements of Radio Kotagiri as well.

The Blue Mountains

The Nilgiris is renowned for its historical and ecological importance. It is part of the Western Ghats, a 1600 km long mountain chain spread over six Indian states, and the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), the first of its kind in the country, established in 1986. Almost the entire district of the Nilgiris is a mountainous region with an elevation of 900 to 2636 meters above the mean sea level. The elevation mainly affects the region's climatic conditions, compounded by several other factors, resulting in low temperatures further lowered by the moisture content from the vegetation. More than half of the district's land, which is 143351 hectares, is reserved forest. Sholas and grasslands are among the vital forest types present in the region. Forest coverage is a crucial player in the hydrological cycles of streams in and around the hills, as it acts as an upstream source. The Bhavani in the south and the Moyar in the north are two crucial rivers originating in the district.

The district's economy is highly dependent on the cultivation of crops like potatoes, carrots, cabbage, tea, coffee, and spices. In addition, the scenic beauty consisting of steep hills, narrow valleys, rivers, waterfalls, fauna, and monuments attracts large numbers of tourists annually to the region, contributing a considerable share to the local economy. The land is a natural habitat for many flora and fauna and contains several endemic species (Daniels, 1993). For instance, the Nilgiris-Eastern Ghats are occupied with the largest population of Asian elephants in the subcontinent (Sivaganesan et al., 2004).

Apart from this, the NBR is home to more than 100 mammal species, including tigers, leopards, panthers, Nilgiri tahr, Malabar giant squirrels, Nilgiri martens, lion-tailed macaques, gaur (bison), Nilgiri langur, sloth bears, pangolins, dholes, civets, slender loris, and sambar deer. In addition, 80 reptile and amphibian species and several hundred butterfly and invertebrate species are found in the NBR.

³ The present paper does not engage with the reception or audience dimensions of the radio station in relation to human-wildlife interactions, which I believe is a potential area for a focussed future research.

Today, the region is highly vulnerable to many socio-ecological issues that threaten the stability of both human and non-human lives. Escalating human-wildlife interactions and conflicts is a salient issue in the Nilgiris and broader biosphere region. In the next section, the paper attempts to give an overview of the increasing human-wildlife interactions and conflicts in the Nilgiris.

Figure 1

Administrative boundaries of NBR



Source: Keystone Foundation, 2007.

Wildlife in the Backyard

If one searches for keywords like “human-wildlife conflict”, “Kotagiri” and “Nilgiris” on Google, it would lead to numerous news reports, articles, and research documents from recent years (Arasu, 2017; Gopalakrishnan et al., 2017; Menon, 2020; Menon, 2023; Micka-Maloy and Prasath, 2018; Ramakrishnan et al., 2015; Shaji, 2023; Sivapriyan, 2023; Thekaekara, 2019; Thekaekara and Thornton, 2016). All these materials signal the increasing scale of the issue on the ground and the rising interest in understanding and mitigating the pressures for humans and animals.

Living in Kotagiri for fieldwork allowed me to see how human-wildlife interactions are an everyday event for the locals. It gave me hands-on experience in navigating several encounters with wildlife, too. My experience showed that hardly a day passes without a gaur or wild boar crossing paths with you. A research report by Micka-Maloy and Prasanth (2018), for Nilgiris Field Learning Center, illustrates that human-gaur relations in Kotagiri are mostly conflictual. Gaurs, monkeys, and sloth bears coming into human settlements for food have become a mundane sight for many natives today. Occasionally, terrible incidents of aggressive encounters with animals or fatalities happen, heightening fear for life and safety in people.

For instance, during my fieldwork period, there was an incident of an elephant charging towards a public transport bus with many passengers on the Mettupalayam-Kotagiri road. The video of the tusker repeatedly ramming into the bus while the driver maintained utmost composure immediately went viral on social media. A few days after this incident, there was a hunt-down order for a tiger named T23 in the Masinagudi area of Nilgiris that killed four people and tens of domestic animals.

Research into human-wildlife interactions in India illustrates several reasons for the rising number of conflicts. In their report, Gureja et al. (2003) list many key causes identified across human-wildlife conflicts in the country. Depletion of the size and quality of available habitats for wildlife is the first and foremost reason they point out. The same has been iterated in several other pieces of research on the subject matter as well (Chartier et al., 2011; Venkataramana et al., 2017). Deforestation, encroachment, and expansion of human settlements are some of the reasons that recur in the literature.

Other reasons include more accessible and abundant availability of food outside wildlife habitats that leads to raids into human settlements and farmlands, growth of human and animal populations that saturate the capacity of existing habitats and various damages that create hostile attitudes towards animals (Gureja et al., 2003). A study by Gopalakrishnan et al. (2017) about the dynamics of human-wildlife conflict in Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand provides a fresh perspective that critiques the narrow focus of “human encroachment” discourse that prevails in studies and policies in India. According to them, the human encroachment picture is incomplete, undermining the role of state mechanisms such as forest management structures and practices.

Their interviewee sample from four taluks of Nilgiris, including Kotagiri, makes it an important work that sheds light on the HWC in the region.

Their research demonstrates that invasive species play a crucial role in hostile transformations of wildlife habitats. The inedible invasive plants reduce the food availability of herbivores, and the thick growth of invaders obstructs the free mobility of animals in their habitats. Even though some reports acknowledge this problem, it has yet to transpire into any considerable policy or action from the forest management structures⁴ (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2017). The study also reveals that some practices of the forest department to attract tourists also induce human-wildlife clashes in the region:

One point that our respondents repeatedly cited was that forest officials' decision to set up salt licks near the road to attract wildlife to places where tourists could see them. Since raw salt is not commonly found in natural habitats, elephants and other animals that approached these licks grew habituated to pure salt and set out to look for it in other locations as well. Elephants were said to raid houses and specifically hunt for salt, as in one of our case studies, where an elephant that attacked an Adivasi family on 5 May 2017 took salt and rice from the house kitchen. (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2017, p. 102).

They further argue that, while encroachment to protected forests is often used against poor and vulnerable populations as a reason for ecological crises, including human-wildlife conflict, powerful people continue to indulge in land-grabbing and constructions that disturb the resources and mobility of wildlife with impunity. In a nutshell, increasing human-wildlife conflict is the result of a combination of various factors, including practices of the state machinery, for an extended period. A historical reading into the state of land in the Nilgiris will illustrate that it suffers from centuries-long transformations that altered many socio-ecological components.

Colonial interest in the region was a pivotal moment in the historical development of the Nilgiris. It became part of the imperial rule following the British victory in the third Anglo-Mysore war in 1799. Although the Nilgiris was not an isolated region prior to colonial settlements (Prabhakar and Gadgil, 1995), the changes brought by the British regime increased the mobility in the region, including the construction of roads and railways, and migration. The first major path was a bridge one constructed in 1821, followed by the construction of Coonor Ghat road in 1832, a metalled road from Mettupalayam to Coonor in 1871, and the regime started building Nilgiri railways in 1891 (Veale, 2010).

⁴ Recently, steps have been initiated by the forest department to clear tracts of invasive species in the Nilgiris. Refer to the Times of India report here: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/coimbatore/forest-dept-clears-375-hectares-of-mtr-of-invasive-species/articleshow/97267101.cms>

During this time, small towns around Ooty, Coonoor, Kotagiri and Wellington emerged. With the increasing population, Europeans and other migrants from the different surrounding regions expanded resource demands, such as firewood, in the hills. By 1847, the total number of migrants outnumbered the population of already existing hill communities such as Toda, Kota, Irula and Kurumba (Prabhakar and Gadgil, 1995).

The colonial administration of forests was also flawed in many ways. For instance, discussing the case of grassland management in the Nilgiris, Joshi et al. (2018) argue that the regime's interactions with these patches of land were not based on an ecological understanding of the land. They write:

The huge ensuing effort to transform the native vegetation in this landscape, ostensibly to “restore” it, appears to have been rooted in the misperception that the grasslands of these mosaics were the outcome of deliberate fires and extensive cattle grazing by indigenous communities and it was thus necessary to reforest these in order to restore their integrity and productivity. (p.2)

The forest administration of the regime from 1861 to 1875 had two significant dimensions. On the one hand, they promoted more fuel wood, coffee, and tea plantations, clearing the forest land. Conversely, efforts were made to preserve shola vegetation to ensure water availability and reduce soil erosion (Joshi et al., 2018). The exotic plant species introduced to meet fuel wood demand in the region soon became invasive species, spreading aggressively in the geography (Joshi et al., 2018). Even after India's independence, the practice of turning forest land into plantations continued (Prabhakar and Gadgil, 1995; Sasmita et al., 2021).

Within the impetus given by the National Forest Policy 1952, large areas under the control of the Forest Department were converted to plantations to provide raw materials to industry. Attempts were made to convert 90 per cent of the grasslands into wattle and eucalyptus plantations (Prabhakar and Gadgil, 1995, p. 164). Thus, the degrading quality of forests and deforestation of Nilgiris, resulting in HWCs, are historically contingent issues, including different regimes that have governed the landscape since the 19th century. Today, it disproportionately impacts poor people in the region who already fall short of access to basic amenities. The next section of the paper lays out a cursory overview of participatory communication, which aims to provide a basis for understanding community radio.

Participatory Communication, Media and Environment

The concept of participatory communication gained momentum as a process distinct from diffusion and vertical models of the dominant paradigm in the late 20th century (Huesca, 1995; Pavarala and Malik, 2007; Scott, 2014). The central proposition was that the participation of stakeholders (mainly marginalised communities) in processes

related to development would cause a more democratised form of social transformation contrary to the trickling down of benefits, owing to its dialogic and power-sharing nature (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Thomas and van de Fliert, 2015). It underscored the necessity of incorporating lay people, their experiences, knowledges, perspectives and desires into dialogues to address developmental issues.

This shift has been profoundly influenced by the work of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (2005), who argued for a dialogic model of education, where impoverished people are understood as capable of reflecting and acting on their realities.

It was resisting the expert-centric learning model, where people are treated merely as receivers of information and deemed lacking the capacity to think, articulate, and act. In contrast, conscientisation (Freire, 2005) involves processes whereby humans, as subjects, critically reflect on the socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality. It emphasises the significance of voice (Coudry, 2010), which is the fundamental ability of people to give account of their worlds.

In the media landscape, participatory communication signifies the ownership and management of media by historically marginalised communities aiming towards their interests concerning development (Pavarala and Malik, 2007). Huesca (1995) notes that, in the 1980s Latin America, participation and democratisation have become baseline motivating principles for alternative media theorisations. Consequently, community media is perceived as a materialisation of these principles:

Community radio is thus characterised by access, public participation in production and decision making, management by listeners, and its operations rely mainly on the community's own resources. This involvement of community members distinguishes it from the dominant state and/or commercial stations that are operated for profit, propaganda, power, politics and privilege but are neither accountable nor accessible to the public. Community radio works as a cultural broadcast mechanism that adapts perfectly to reflect the interests and needs of the community it serves and offers people of the marginalised sectors an opportunity to express themselves socially, politically and culturally. (Pavarala and Malik, 2007, pp. 17-18).

It is the social reorientation of mass media to recognise and amplify the agency and voices of people who otherwise stand outside media infrastructures and ownership. While it might not be an immediate fix to social issues, it is conceived to have the potential to strengthen participatory democracy at the grassroots level (Pavarala and Malik, 2007).

In parallel, participation has gained traction in environmental communication, especially against the backdrop of the present ecological crisis. It is now seen as an instrumental step in sustainable environmental governance and crisis mitigation. Harris (2019) argues that “participatory communication is one way of bringing the voices in the margins into the environmental debate, thereby disrupting the centres of media production” (pp. 10-11).

According to her, participatory media serves as a tool for communities to create awareness among themselves and share their knowledge and perspectives on environmental issues and their connections to their lives. In a sense, it is about retaining a certain sense of agency with people to place themselves in the environmental discourse whose realities are unequally affected by ecological crises. It transcends the transmission of environmental knowledge and information to ordinary people, indulges in the socio-ecological dimensions of issues, and focuses on people who deal with the matters in their daily lives. Community radio, as a participatory platform, has been demonstrated to have positive impacts on fostering climate change conversations (Chavinda, 2023; Foxwell-Norton et al., 2022; Harvey, 2011), disaster preparedness (Ahsan and Khatun, 2020) and socio-environmental activism (Segall, 2021) in different parts of the world.

While the idea of participation appears positive and exciting, it has received strong criticisms for often being limited to seductive rhetoric in institutional agendas rather than becoming part of “required worldviews and skill sets of the individuals formulating the policies and agendas, and even not always of those doing the work on the ground” (Thomas and van de Fliert, 2015, p. 40). Scott (2014) discusses some pertinent questions on the practicalities of participatory media and the complexity of participation in local contexts mired in power relations.

Tacchi (2018) advocates understanding voice from the perspective of vulnerable people to have a refined understanding of the idea, which might be different from what researchers/practitioners might look for. In essence, these criticisms highlight the complex reality of participation and participatory communication, which are quite different from how they appear on paper. In NGO-led community radios in India, participation often occurs largely in the realm of content production rather than ownership (though the rhetoric of media of, for, and by the people is prevalent) since the state policy only recognises educational institutions and civil society organisations as eligible licence holders.

A Sketch of Radio Kotagiri

Radio Kotagiri 90.4 FM is a community radio station established in 2013 with the support of the Keystone Foundation, an NGO that primarily works in the Nilgiri Biosphere Region. Although the state monopolised the radio sector in India for a long time, since its initiation during the colonial era, the community radio movement in India had breakthroughs in the early 2000s.

The long-fought struggle to access airwaves finally became a reality in 2006, when the government policy included non-profit organisations eligible for seeking licenses, revising the previous guidelines that only included educational institutions. It enabled organisations like the Keystone Foundation to facilitate community radio stations like Radio Kotagiri nationwide. It covers places within the 15 km radius of Kotagiri town, the maximum radius of coverage allowed for community radio as per state policy. According

to one of the parent organisation's founding directors, a bureaucrat who knew their works as a former district collector suggested the possibility of a community radio to them.

The organisation was already supporting a community newsletter run by and for indigenous communities in the Nilgiris. Hence, Radio Kotagiri was conceptualised as an extension of existing community media, and a few people involved with the newsletter formed the first radio team.

It started with a daily hour of fresh content and was upgraded to three and a half hours of broadcasting by 2014. Much of the initial content was songs, folktales, stories, riddles, interviews, and vox pops. Gradually, it expanded subject matters to agriculture, biodiversity, gender, history, social awareness and health. Today, it broadcasts for 12 daily hours and is run by a small team of local people who work full-time and voluntarily. Most of the broadcasting happens in Tamil, since it is the link language in the region. The radio now has an active social media presence, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Spotify, taking its programs beyond the stipulated 15 km radius. They often upload audio versions of several programs, sometimes with video, on these platforms, which anyone with an interest and resources can access.

Figure 2



Indian Bison, An evening view from the radio station

Source: Keystone Foundation, 2007.

Programming on Human-Wildlife Interactions

Over the years, Radio Kotagiri has broadcasted many hours of programs on different facets of biodiversity and the environment. In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the radio station's focussed engagement with the subject of human-wildlife interactions. For instance, during the pandemic, a specific program was conceptualised to discuss wildlife titled *Iyakaiyudan Uraiyaadal* (Conversations with Nature). Although they simultaneously had another program on the environment called *Iyarkaiyin Kural* (Sound of Nature), the team decided to give particular focus to wildlife, realising the immediacy and importance of the subject to the local context.

It was designed as interviews with a native wildlife enthusiast and photographer who works in the biodiversity unit of the parent organisation. In each episode, they choose one animal to talk about, and the discussion includes its descriptions, behaviours, significance in the ecosystem, and interactions with humans, if any. They initiated another program, *Sagavazhvukkana Parvai* (Perspective for Coexistence), in which local people are interviewed about human-wildlife interactions. It gives a lively picture of the grassroots realities of human-wildlife interactions and the ways they are experienced and perceived by ordinary people.

Likewise, one of the earliest projects undertaken by the radio station was about snakebite awareness, and it was a mission supported by the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, a reptile zoo and research station in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Apart from such independent programs on the subject, human-wildlife interactions also appear in other programs. For example, an episode from their program on familiarising science deals with research on gaur-human interactions in Kotagiri.

In the program, the speaker, who is also involved in the long-term study on the gaur-human interactions project by the biodiversity team of the Keystone Foundation, explains their research objectives, methods, field sites, and findings. It is a unique monitoring project dealing with wildlife interactions in urban settings.

Beyond programming, the radio also addresses the matter through offline engagements. On 24 September 2022, they joined hands with the biodiversity unit of their parent organisation, the Nilgiris Forest Division, and Aayudham Arts Group for a street play on human-wildlife interactions. For anyone looking into these engagements of Radio Kotagiri, it is hard to miss the role of their parent organisation in terms of the resources they extend towards the radio.

Historically, civil society organisations have been significant players in the community radio sector in India. It is evident from the active participation of several organisations in the community radio movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the country. The relation became particularly integral following the policy declaring civil societies as eligible licensees to improve their participation in development and social change. It created conditions wherein non-governmental organisations could leverage community radios to further their organisational goals (Pavarala, 2020).

In addition, community radios, failing to generate revenue for sustenance on their own, often rely on their parent organisation to meet expenses. Within these relations, parent organisations become influential figures shaping the workings of radios. Pavarala (2020) critiqued the excess influence of parent organisations as the NGOization of community radio. A relevant point for our discussion here is that community radios supported by NGOs often align with the interests of their parent organisations. In other words, the goals, outlook, and ambit of parent organisations contribute to radio's character and emphasis on specific areas of work to which the organisations are already committed.

Human-wildlife interaction has been a long-standing interest of the Keystone Foundation, which has worked on the NBR for the last three decades on many socio-ecological issues, including conservation. The keystone campus and people associated with the organisation appear in a 2012 documentary, *Gaur in My Garden*, directed by Rita Banerji, which discusses human-gaur interactions in the Nilgiris. It documents encounters with gaurs that became part of their everyday life. From its inception, the organisation has been focussed on what they call “eco-development matters”.

The establishment of the organisation itself was closely linked to wild bees and honey-hunting communities in the Nilgiris. Over the decades, different projects of the organisation have done numerous research and have been involved in addressing socio-ecological issues in the NBR. It is reflected in Radio Kotagiri as well, shaping their focus on biodiversity. In terms of programming, the radio station shares relations with other units of the parent organisation primarily in two ways.

First, those units can collaborate with Radio Kotagiri to communicate with local public regarding the subjects they work on. For instance, the Biodiversity Conservation unit joins hands with the radio station to talk about invasive species. Second, the radio station can leverage the parent organisation's resources to create programs. *Iyarkaiyudan Uraiyaadal* was an outcome of the latter.

Pursuing on Coexistence

Radio Kotagiri's engagements with human-wildlife interactions appear to have two major interests. One is to encourage the local public to think more about their environment, and the other is to stimulate conversations on co-existing with wildlife. *Iyarkaiyudan Uraiyaadal* is a suitable example to illustrate both of these points. Talking about the importance of radio dealing with subjects such as human-wildlife interactions, the host of the program mentioned that the dynamics of human-nonhuman interactions have tremendously changed in the region, which he has observed as a native.

According to him, while human-wildlife interaction is an everyday reality of people, they hardly pay much attention to these issues while navigating their livelihoods.

Nevertheless, understanding fellow animals with whom people share their space and resources remains vital. That is where he locates the role of Radio Kotagiri and its actions on human-wildlife interactions. In other words, the objective of creating conversations about the matter on the ground is partly a reflection of the lived experiences of the broadcaster himself, a community member. The point has been noted in other studies that record that the community broadcasters' experiences, reflections and commitments influence the workings of community media (Huesca, 1995; Pavarala and Malik, 2007).

An interesting aspect of the whole program is the resource person, a locally renowned face for wildlife photography and conservation. He often takes part in rescue missions of wildlife from human settlements in the region and is contacted by locals for the same purpose. In our interview, he said he acquired his knowledge of wildlife through self-learning and years of observing wild animals around him. He also survived a gruesome gaur attack in his teenage years which did not deter him from continuing his passion towards wildlife conservation later. He is of the belief that humans must care for wildlife since they cannot vocalise their issues.

According to the host, although he was an easily accessible resource person for Radio Kotagiri because of his association with the biodiversity unit, his known enthusiasm for wildlife and “fan following” on social media added value to the program. The resource person believes in the philosophy of a participatory approach to conservation, as we can deduce from the following except:

Whatever you do, you must work with the community because they are the ones facing problems in their life. Even when we do research, a part should be theirs and what they need. (Interview, 09 September, 2021).

His real-life commitment to motivating people to have less conflicting relations with wildlife is also mirrored in the program. Many times, the program not only profiles animals but also places them in relation to human settlements and lives, thus capturing the many ways the two cross each other's paths. Further, it suggests possible actions to lower the chances of encounters leading to conflicts. In his words:

Why this show is a success [is] because we talk about what happens in this place, not telling too much “science”. We talk about people's problems. So many people call me to tell me that the program is nice; they mostly watch the ones that are posted on Facebook. (Interview, September, 09, 2021).

His reference to science here was about the quantitative understanding it frequently produces about animals, such as physical features, standard behaviours, food and so forth. While these are essential dimensions to understanding wildlife, as he agrees in the interview, telling merely these details might not be the best way to capture the socio-ecological issue at hand.

In other words, the program is interested in getting people on board to think of their relations with another entity (wildlife) in the ecosystem by focussing on contextual

dimensions such as human-wildlife interactions. Similarly, in the collaborative street play of Radio Kotagiri, the team portrayed everyday instances of human-wildlife interactions from the region and gestured how conflicts can be avoided in such situations.

Concluding remarks made by a radio team member after the play reminded the public once again about the principle of coexistence, which is indispensable in the present living conditions. As we can see, coexistence is a theme that has been repeatedly stressed in radio engagements. It is often defined as a sustainable state in which humans and animals adapt to sharing space and resources (Mekonen, 2020).

Coexistence has grown exponentially in the last two decades within the larger sphere of conservation discourse. Nevertheless, coexistence is not a newfound principle in the Nilgiris region. People have shared this land and resources with wild animals for ages. For instance, a handful of interviewees told me how they had better-balanced equations with animals in the past, which gradually changed with larger socio-ecological transformations of the land.

While people and animals shared the land, the conflict rate was much lower, and their sightings in human settlements were not like what they are today. Life of Indigenous people in the region has always been inseparable from navigating wildlife every day.

However, as research, experiences, and reports rightly point out, the scale and dynamics of human-wildlife interactions have changed drastically. Research on wildlife behaviours in urban settlements in Nilgiris has only started to grow in recent years. Given this, sustained conversation on coexistence, as seen in Radio Kotagiri's case, is a tiny step in the interest of healthier human-wildlife relations in the region. At least, it helps to keep the subject lively in public consciousness by persisting on the topic through various ways of engagement.

Notwithstanding these positive sides, many of the engagements mentioned above emphasise individual actions and attitudes, which are only a few pieces of the puzzle of human-wildlife interactions in this context. While awareness is an essential facet in larger efforts, talking to people seems to be in the safe zone compared to talking with people.

In other words, fixating on individuals or technical information obscures the larger structures and their relations to the subject matter and its entanglements with the day-to-day lives of common people.

It is not about exonerating people regarding their impairing actions but to visibilize several “elephants in the room” that often remain absent in conversations. Talking with people stands a better chance to tease out the way matters unfold in everyday life and its linkages to institutions and other dimensions which need to be brought to the fore. It is where their initiative, Sagavazhvukkana Parvai, stands out in several ways.

A Window to Lived Reality

Sagavazhvukkana Parvai (Perspective for Coexistence) is a programme created by Radio Kotagiri with the support of Foundation Segre, a Switzerland-based organisation for conservation through their IUCN, Save Our Species partnership. This program highlights voices from the local villages regarding wildlife-human interaction and people's experiences and perspectives on coexistence. It is one of those programs of Radio Kotagiri that can be fully accessed on its Facebook page.

While the original radio broadcasting only carries the voice recording of the program, the Facebook version consists of videos of the interviews as well. Therefore, you not only listen to the person but also have a glimpse at the location where the interview is being conducted. While the earlier programs of the radio uploaded on digital platforms rarely had videos of program recordings (many such uploads have videos made out of still images accompanying the voice recording), it is now increasingly common to have videos of interviews on the radio's social media handles.

I will now elaborate on an episode to provide a more detailed picture of Sagavazhvukkana Parvai. It will illustrate how the program opens a window to several aspects of lived realities of human-wildlife interactions on the ground. The episode of Sagavazhvukkana Parvai, uploaded on the Facebook page of Radio Kotagiri on 07 September 2022, takes us to Ambedkar Nagar, a village in Kotagiri. The opening shot of the video has the interviewer, a young man from the radio team, and the interviewee, a young woman from the village, with a background of a mud road, a parked auto rickshaw, large rocks, some bushes and plants and several tile-roofed houses situated on an elevated space from the road.

The interviewer gives his opening lines about the program and talks about the place from where they are recording this episode. Subsequently, the interviewee was asked to introduce herself and say a few words about her residential history in the village. She replies that she was born and brought up in Ambedkar Nagar. He starts by asking about her experience of human-wildlife interactions in the area. Meanwhile, a monkey appears in the background, and the camera pans to focus on the monkeys.

No one in the frame cares to bother about the monkey troop, and continues their conversation. She explained how spotting wildlife inside human settlements was an occasional thing during her childhood and how people used to take pictures and upload them on social media. However, over the years, the rate of interactions increased, and it became a mundane event. He then asks her about interactions leading to conflicts and the reasons that are observed to be causing such undesirable outcomes.

She begins by explaining how habitat and food loss affect animals and how human settlements become a source of food. The increasing availability of such food changes the expectations and behaviours of the animals, she adds. Then she goes on to talk about the way they dump all the food waste near forest boundaries since there is no

other space for them to deal with the waste. She points to the non-functionality of the government's waste collection mechanisms, which were active for a short time. She also gives an example of a conflict that happened in Ambedkar Nagar a few years ago involving monkeys raiding houses for food.

When asked about the way in which humans intrude into forests for materials such as firewood, she shines a light on how necessities compel people to take those routes. Many households in the area are poor and cannot afford to cook in gas stoves. It means they are forced to forage firewood to meet their daily needs, she adds. She also mentions that the lack of toilets in many individual houses in the area and the non-existence of common toilets result in increasing human-wildlife interactions.

Going to the forest during darker hours to relieve oneself leads to higher chances of encountering wild animals. She makes an appeal to the forest department and government to help them resolve these amenity issues, so that they can reduce the risk of conflicts in the area. She explains how people use water, firecrackers and stones to scare away wildlife if any conflict arises. Even though the number and character of human-wildlife interaction are changing, she believes coexistence is the only option. The episode ends with the interviewee saying “I like to thank Radio Kotagiri. We wish to see our village develop more. A lot of outsiders come to see us. This is the first time being interviewed like this. Thank you.”

As we can see from this one episode, several dimensions of lived realities in relation to human-wildlife interactions in the region get unpacked through this program. It unravels the intersections of socio-ecological matters and teases out the absence of institutional interventions that could help reduce conflicts between humans and wildlife. This gap is exemplified by the issues related to waste management, cooking gas affordability, and toilets, as mentioned above. Moreover, the program fosters a space for common people to be part of the conversations on the subject rather than being merely receivers of interventions.

In doing that, it highlights their experiences and perspectives on human-wildlife interactions and gives them a space to express their aspirations for a better future. Adding to that, it sheds light on rarely made connections regarding human-wildlife interactions, such as people being unable to afford cooking gas, forcing them to enter forests. On another level, the program also helps anyone to widen the scope of thinking through human-wildlife conflict in the region by squarely placing it in raw realities. Nevertheless, the program does for some moments touch upon the need of awareness among the public and maintains a soft tone rather than outright criticism of institutions.

Even when community radios in India are known to have limited participation (Backhaus, 2022), Radio Kotagiri dealing with human-wildlife interaction presents an interesting case from the above analysis. The local nature of the medium allows it to have continued engagement with the subject on and off air, which needs urgent attention and intervention in the region. On the one hand, it is committed (aligning with its parent organisation's goals) to create a more conscious public understanding of

their entanglements with the ecology they co-habit (Iyarkaiyudan Uraiyaadal). While the fertile ground to engage in the subject is already present within the parent organisation due to its decades-long involvement in the matter, it also reflects the interests of people belonging to the community (as broadcasters) to intervene in the ground realities that give momentum to the communicative actions.

The engagements over magnify the principle of coexistence, which is a long-standing norm of life in the region that is increasingly being threatened because of the escalating scale of human-wildlife interactions. On another level, it strives to ground environmental issues on the lives of people, giving it contextual density by underscoring the socio-ecological matrix (Iyarkaiyudan Uraiyaadal, Sagavazhvukkana Parvai).

Further, it has seen doing democratisation of access to research outputs (episode on gaur-human interaction research) on the subject to larger communities, which otherwise gets confined to research publications, presentations and policy tables.

Most importantly, it goes to community members in order to know about their lives in relation to human-wildlife interactions. Not only does it amplify the voices (Couldry, 2010) from the ground up, but it also pushes the understanding of what human-wildlife interaction means in the day-to-day lives of common people in the region.

People could appeal to the larger structures to address their issues that aggravate the chances of adverse human-wildlife interactions. Transcending the focus on individuals, which centres in many of its engagements, radio programming also brings structures to the fore and lays it open to see how they are part of the socio-ecological matter at hand.

This can be understood through what Huesca (1995) writes about participatory alternative journalism as “co-operatively constructed versions of reality” (p. 113). Although to call what Radio Kotagiri does participatory alternative journalism would be a considerable stretch, it seems unravelling several invisible dimensions of human-wildlife interactions in the region through people's lived experiences.

Conclusion

The pressing crisis regarding human-wildlife interactions at the level of conflict is rapidly growing in India. The South Indian region of Nilgiris is a fitting example that witnesses increasing conflicting encounters. By now, it has come to light that human-wildlife conflict is a result of many reasons, including historical practices and the transformation of socio-ecological environments.

It puts great pressure on the most vulnerable populations and wildlife, posing a risk to their life and wellbeing. While media has been recognised as a valuable stakeholder in addressing the issue, community media is not much discussed in relation to the subject.

Therefore, this paper highlights a community media case study and explains its engagements with human-wildlife interactions. The analysis demonstrates that the radio station amplifies the principle of coexistence through its efforts and serves as a platform for sustained conversation on the subject, grounding it in the socio-ecological realities of the place.

Their programming also spotlights the lived realities of people, brings forth seldom visible dimensions of human-wildlife interaction in the region, and highlights the role of larger structures in this socio-ecological matter. However, human-wildlife interactions will remain an issue that needs committed institutional policies and support, especially from government machinery, considering the growing scale of conflict.

For instance, large-scale invasive plant removal, thus rejuvenating food options for wildlife within forests, falls into the domain of the forest department. Similarly, ensuring access to basic amenities for its citizens is one of the responsibilities of state. In Nilgiris, it can help lower human-wildlife interactions as well.

Participatory media infrastructures are not meant to replace any institutional interventions and they often work with a lot of constraints. However, it seems like a platform to continue foregrounding the issues that matter to local life, like human-wildlife interactions.

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