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Unravelling India's Many Natures: From the Past to Contemporary Times

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Two new volumes on nature in India today "offer a nuanced understanding of India's threatened ecosystems and the contested relationships between people and nature-an understanding that is essential if we are to better protect nature as we navigate an uncertain climate future."

In the university where I work, I teach topics around environment, sustainability and climate communication. I have often reflected to myself and with my students that these can be quite depressing issues to engage with. The world around us seems be amidst a litany of loss-planetary boundaries are being breached, tipping points of irreversible change are approaching fast, and species extinction rates are reaching unprecedented levels in human history.

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At the same time, as a teacher, I also feel a sense of responsibility-to nurture hope in my students and equip them to face the uncertain future that awaits them. This is easier said than done. But what I and several of my colleagues who teach similar topics tell our students is that hope lies in better understanding why we find ourselves in the middle of a planetary crisis, and, more importantly, in how this knowledge can help us find pathways for a better future.

When it comes to nature and environment in India, it is knowing that protecting the county's unique diversity of ecosystems and landscapes will require us to understand them from a contextual perspective and through a historical lens. We must also acknowledge the nuances of contemporary challenges and contestations. This complexity of human and nature relationships in the expanse of India is still being unravelled one layer at a time. As the country undergoes changes in its demography, development priorities, governance, and socio-economic features, the human relationship with nature is constantly being redefined in different landscapes and with different species.

The two books *India's Forests: Revisiting Nature and History* and *Nature Contested: Ecology, Society and Environment in Contemporary India* are timely publications. They offer a nuanced understanding of India's threatened ecosystems and the contested relationships between people and nature.

Nature shared and compared

Both books share a common editor, Mahesh Rangarajan, the well-known Indian environmental historian, who has authored and edited many books on India's forests and wildlife. The collections share more than a common editor though: they both highlight that nature in India has not merely been a backdrop, but has deeply shaped and influenced communities and societies across the country.

Both volumes have co-editors, whose own unique scholarship is reflected in each of the books. The co-editor of *India's Forests*, the historian, Arupjyoti Saikia, has written extensively on the environmental history of Assam. The influence of the co-editors of *Nature Contested*-Ravi Agarwal, the Founder Director of the environmental NGO ToxicLinks, and Rinki Sarkar, who researches urban and environmental issues-is evident in the breadth of themes explored in the volume, particularly the focus on questions of environmental justice.

Thus, while the two books share common themes, they contrast human-nature relationships across different landscapes, marked by co-existence and contestations. *Nature Contested* has eight chapters covering a broader canvas in terms of ecosystems ranging from forest to coastal to cities, while the 10 chapters in *India's Forests* are exclusively on forests. Further *India's Forests* looks at forests through a historical lens, while *Nature Contested* has a more contemporary focus.

A bit about each volume

India's Forests is not an easy read. But it is a must for anyone interested in the environmental history of the country's forests. This book begins by acknowledging the contribution of Ramachandra Guha's *The Unquiet Woods*, published 35 years ago when India's

forests were being shaped by environmental and social concerns amidst the fast-paced development of the country. Since Guha's work, contributions by many scholars have brought out the nuances of forest landscapes in India.

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India's Forests adds another layer of deep scholarship, which as the editors say in the introductory chapter, rethinks, "the role, scope and place of forests in society, history and ecology, and also revisit familiar tropes of state-society-nature relationships". While focusing on forests, the geographic breadth of the book is quite vast, from the forests of Travancore to the Himalayan regions of what is Himachal Pradesh today. Between this north-south stretch, chapters also dwell on landscapes in central India, the Indo-Ganga plain and parts of Rajasthan. *India's Forests* also covers a vast temporal period from the pre-historic to the modern, and the emphasis on this historical breadth, as the editors say, is an invitation to rethink long held views about forests in India by both scholars and citizens. The methods of research and inquiry are among the most compelling features of this volume-ranging from a careful study of archaeological evidence and old village records to a close reading of ancient texts, and ethnographic field work.

Nature Contested expands the imagery of nature constructed and contested beyond forests to a range of ecosystems. The introductory chapter foregrounds nature amidst the current global realities, which are a result of The Great Acceleration, to which India too is a major contributor. The eastern and western coasts of India, lakes and ponds in the hi-tech IT capital of Bengaluru, the forgotten rivers of Chennai and lost *poromboke* (commons), floodplains of the Brahmaputra in Assam, forests of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Keralam, and the air of the capital New Delhi, all form a part of this nature, both contested and constructed.

The editors in the introductory chapter of *Nature Contested* say, "Democracy is good for liberty, but what will it additionally need to tackle the dilemmas of ecology? That is now our question of questions". This dilemma between governance and environmental outcomes in *Nature Contested*, when viewed through the lens of political ecology as environmental justice and not just as the protection of nature, is a running thread through the book.

Another interesting feature of both collections is that one chapter in each seems a little different from the rest and thereby adds its own flavour to the volumes. In *India's Forests*, Chapter 6, "The Lion and the Unicorn" is the solitary chapter that looks at faunal species, here through the charismatic lion and the one-horned rhinoceros. In *Nature Contested*, the anomaly is "Relating with Contested Nature" (Chapter 8) where the air in the national capital Delhi is shown as a contested resource.

What lies within…

While each of the chapters in the two volumes has offers fascinating insights, some I found to be especially interesting, and I reflect here on what they stood out for me.

In *Nature Contested*, in "Fluid Boundaries" (Chapter 2), Divya Karnad, who grew up along the Coromandel Coast writes about migration among fishers. This is a fascinating chapter that opens with the idea of oceans in motion and extends to looking at the movement of fishermen themselves. We often think of fishers as being rooted in a specific location, with fishing villages as fixed places along the coast. But in this chapter, fishing itself is revealed as a deeply transient activity, with fishers moving from one place to another-often following fish catch. The State and capitalists brand them "roving bandits and disruptive migrants" plundering the oceans beyond their home range. But this essay provides a counter narrative, showing how migrant fishers can assimilate into areas they migrate to, build institutional arrangements in the distant areas, and contribute to economies, both local and home. It argues that for the negative image of migration to change, migration needs to be normalized, and ways found to involve migrant fishers in fisheries management.

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"Adivasis" is a term we are familiar with in the context of India's forests, but "The Forest Belongs To Us" (Chapter 6) introduces us to a rarely heard term ,"Dalit Adivasis", drawing our attention to the millions of Dalits who also live and depend on India's forests, and asks, "How do the politics of forests (largely centred around Adivasis) appear when viewed through a caste lens?". The chapter is based on research done by Anand Vaidya in the forests of southeastern Uttar Pradesh, where Dalit Adivasis are involved in a struggle to claim rights under the Forest Rights Act 2006. The discussion forces us to reorient our current thinking about the caste-tribe

distinction -that of Adivasis as fighting for their forests against the State and capitalists, and Dalits struggling to secure their rights in agrarian and urban settings.

Meera Anna Oomen's "Conflict, Coexistence and Conservation" (Chapter 7) in *Nature Contested* looks at entanglements of species, especially animals that feature in human-wildlife conflict but paradoxically are valued for social, economic or cultural reasons. The larger context for this paradox that she lays out is the difference in how species are seen in a traditional worldview guided by cultural perspectives as against in modern conservation practices that are exclusionary. Oomen explores these entanglements using the example of the Indian wild pig, one of the most common species historically involved in human-wildlife conflict across India.

A major marauder of crops, the pig has been hunted as vermin but at the same time has been accorded significance in rituals, religion and culture. But as Oomen highlights, what lay underneath these entanglements was also a subtle ethic of sustainable resource extraction. The chapter then contrasts this with the modern ethic of exclusionary conservation, driven often by an urban elite whose concerns adre reflected in formal laws. These laws prevent hunting, but they only lead to increased human-wildlife conflict and an erosion of the historical customary relationships between human communities and species. Conflicts may persist, but what the historical relationship of the pig and people makes us think about is the models we can engage with for mediating human-wildlife conflicts in India's complex social and ecological system. And what conservation models-top-down scientific ones or bottom-up traditional ecological knowledge of communities-can we look at that are ecologically sound and environmentally just for the landscapes where people and wildlife coexist? A genuinely challenging question that reframes how we think about conservation altogether.

The articles in *India's Forests* are not as easy a read as *Nature Contested* but its chapters are no less interesting, taking us through many stories of India's forests, some of which truly stand out for their fresh look. Shibani Bose in "'Digging' Tales from Sylvian Trails" (Chapter 1) presents infrequently used archaeological evidence to map ancient forests and in the process helps dispel some strongly held environmental thinking that regions such as the Indo-Ganga plain were unbroken dense monsoon forests. It actually comprised a mosaic of forests and grasslands-the latter far more extensive than it was thought to be-interspersed with settlements. Thus, the idea of pristine nature is challenged by archaeological evidence from different parts of the country. Another interesting aspect argued by Bose is that archaeobotanical evidence shows contacts between communities in distant regions from a very distant past. One example is of the sandalwood tree that grows in dry regions in Mysore and Tamil Nadu being found in what is Gorakhpur district in Uttar Pradesh as far back as 600-200 BCE.

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"The Lion and the Unicorn" essay on faunal species is possibly the easiest read in the volume. The author, Divyabhanusinh, has written several books on both the lion and the rhino, as well as the cheetah. But here he is looking at how the two species have fared under human pressure, what the commonalities are even though one is a carnivore and the other an herbivore, inhabiting vastly different spaces today. What strikes you very quickly is how low the numbers of these two species are even today, and how close they, especially the rhino, came to being decimated. The decimation of both species was the outcome, of course, of hunting, but also because of social political crises that they faced: in Junagadh, the home of lions, during Partition, and in Nepal where upheavals contributed to a declining population of rhinos in the region.

One interesting nugget from 1901 is that the then Gwalior state that had lost its population of lions refused lions that could be relocated from Junagadh and instead brought African lions, showing that even politics around species relocation has a long history that persists. This was the first attempt at translocation of lions-and sadly all were wiped out. The author's "important takeaway" is that "megafauna need mega habitats". This raises a question for us today: species must be protected, but should we in a vastly different context from the West, continue to adopt the western fortress conservation model that comes with environmental injustice for indigenous communities?

"Shifting Cultivator, Peasant, Forest Dweller" (Chapter 8) by Maya Ratnam is another deep dive into sedentarisation policies initiated during colonial times and their impacts on the Baigas, an Adivasi community for whom the forests of central India were and are home. Ratnam outlines in detail how easily an Adivasi community was cast as "lazy, unproductive and peripatetic", and ecologically destructive because they practiced *bewar*, a form of shifting cultivation. This narrative led to the erasure of a whole way of life and unfair confinement of the community to Baigachak, a reserve for the transformation of the shifting cultivator to a sedentary peasant. This chapter is based on the doctoral work of Maya Ratnam during which she found that while *bewar* may no longer be practiced, it is talked about in different ways-either as a practice that needs to be revived or continue to be banned. And of course, not to be talked

about at all when it comes to the State.

To read or not to read….

Undeniably, both books are works of deep scholarship. Which of the two to pick up and read will depend on the frame of mind of the reader. *Nature Contested* is accessible in its writing for a wider audience, while *India's Forests* is an academic tome whose readers would be the more seasoned environmental historians. They are both invaluable contributions to understanding the ecological landscape of India, from historical to contemporary times. What both books do is provide interested scholars and researchers with a wealth of fascinating questions to pursue, and mysteries to unravel about India's ecosystems. Importantly, both books challenge the idea of a pristine nature and show the intricate human-nature relationships that have shaped ecosystems and people's lives in India. And perhaps in this deeper understanding lies our hope for building a future that is more ecologically sustainable and socially just for generations to come. Like my students.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author do not reflect the views or position of the author's institution.

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