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Orient BlackSwan

NATURE, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

Conservation, Governance and Transformation in India

Edited by

Nicolas Lainé and T. B. Subba

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Foreword

In May 2002, the world leaders present at the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (a convention created at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, 1992) agreed on the target 'to achieve by 2010 a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on Earth'. The United Nations accordingly designated 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. It is 2011 already, but the Biodiversity Target has not been met, the over-exploitation of biological resources continues, and the risk of dramatic biodiversity loss and degradation, if ecosystems are pushed beyond certain thresholds, remains as high as ever. In addition, as everyone knows, the earliest and most severe impacts of such changes will be faced by the poor. Some would say, as the phrase goes, the Titanic is sinking, and we are still playing the violin.

One of the major stumbling blocks on the road to sustainable use of natural resources is the fact that the social cost of biodiversity conservation policies is very unevenly distributed both among the nations of the world, and among social classes in each of them. It is now clear to everyone that the Promethean model of economic growth born in eighteenth-century Europe, which postulated that natural resources are inexhaustible, cannot be generalised at a global scale. But how to persuade the countries of the South, which have been pillaged, exploited or at best marginalised all along the growth process of the North, that they are now to put a brake on their own development policies for the common good? Equally unfair is the fact that, overpopulation in tropical areas—the Earth's greatest biological treasure—being commonly considered as the major threat to what is left of the world's biodiversity, it is the poorer classes of the poorer countries who bear the brunt of the protection and reservation policies decided by the governments. According to the dominant conservationist rhetoric, the

global patrimony of Nature is everyone's birthright, and the Earth's environmental resources are a common inheritance of all humankind, which should be held in shared trust for a common future. Thus attention is diverted from the fact that environmental degradation, in each country, is to a large extent an outcome of the disparities in income between the urban-based social elites and the rural underclass or the forest-dwellers, and that, on a global scale, it is the consumerist lifestyle of the affluent countries that uses up and squanders the larger part of the natural resources. In this sense, the North's pressing call for common sacrifices to save the Earth has sometimes been viewed as an elitist 'sacred groves for the rich' strategy.¹ Every human being, of course, has a stake in environmental preservation, and all local commons are fragments of a global commons. In addition, there is little doubt that the impact of a worldwide 'tragedy of the commons' will weigh most heavily on those least able to adjust, so that it is in their interest to adhere to conservationist policies. But the environmental politics of the countries of the North can nonetheless be justifiably criticised as biased, inasmuch as it implies blatantly unequal burdens on the South (see Sawyer and Agrawal 2000: 93–94).

The reasons why state biodiversity conservation measures are so often bitterly resisted by the resident rural folk on whom they are imposed are fairly obvious. The issue is first of all economic. The populations concerned mostly live from hand to mouth, and depend on their natural surroundings for sustenance. The key question for them is day-to-day survival, and it is a fact that their increasingly precarious economic circumstances in the contemporary context may lead them into ecologically unsound patterns of resource use. For them, the long-term development strategies and global conservation targets which follow from the transnational elite environmental narrative are understandably remote, if not plainly unintelligible concerns. As Erik Eckholm remarked in an influential 1975 publication concerning the ecological issue of firewood consumption, 'for more than a third of the world's people, the real energy crisis is a daily scramble to cook dinner' (Eckholm 1975). In India, the dislocation of traditional methods of resource exploitation consequent on the imposition of state regulations was already a constant source of popular disaffection and unrest under British colonial rule. A Deputy Commissioner of Garhwal significantly

reported in 1907 that 'forest administration consists for most part in a running fight with villagers' (qtd. in Guha 1989: 105). This tension has continued unabated after Independence, since the modernising and productivist national development policy set in motion by the Indian government has only accentuated the pattern.

But the misunderstanding is not only a matter of conflicting material interests. At the root, it is also a question of conflicting worldviews. Implicit in the international conservationist discourse is a western principle inherited from the Christian tradition, that of the radical discontinuity between man and the natural world.² This opposition between nature and culture is by no means a universal conception. As Émile Durkheim already noted a century ago in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) with reference to Australian Aborigines, most traditional societies view humankind as a constituent part of nature, although human society is recognised as more complex than any other form of social grouping. A case in point is the traditional Hindu cosmology, which holds that both the human and the cosmic domains are constituent parts of the all-encompassing order of *dharma*, and as such organically interdependent. More specifically, the social segments into which humankind is divided according to Hindu conceptions, namely castes, subcastes, lineages, clans or tribes, are so many different species of human beings belonging to a continuum which encompasses all existing varieties of living beings (*jati* originally means 'kind' or 'species' in the biological sense, and only secondarily 'caste').

Standard conservation thinking has in fact long conveyed as much implicit ideology (such as the deeply ingrained myths of 'virgin nature' and savage 'wilderness') as explicit—and occasionally debatable—science. This discourse, with its underlying concern to restore 'nature' to its primeval self-regulating functioning by controlling or excluding the resident country or forest folk, all categorised as inherently improvident and wasteful, often hardly makes sense for the latter. These folk are in many cases among the world's most vulnerable, destitute and politically disempowered indigenous populations. Conservancy regulations as they see them simply jeopardise the ecological base of their daily livelihood and traditional lifestyle in the name of objectives which pass their comprehension. No wonder that, when frontally exposed to the authoritarian approach and material dictates of state environmental

agencies, they respond and fight for their survival as best as they can, using those everyday forms of popular resistance which James C. Scott has labelled as 'weapons of the weak'. Hence the endless story of those 'crimes against nature' which have been everywhere the obverse of the history of environmental conservation.³ Incidentally, these repetitive stories of transgressions against environmental regulations are a sign that the state, after all, is not as omnipotent as it may seem when it comes to controlling immense and at times hardly accessible expanses of wild terrain and their inhabitants. The gradual emergence, in the final decades of the last century, of alternative approaches advocating the participation of the local populace in the task of safeguarding the ecosystems on which its way of life is based, is at least partly due to this plain fact: the unilateral assertion of bureaucratic state authority is a difficult and costly solution, probably not viable in the long run, and an engine of social hardship and disaffection that may prove politically dangerous.

The idea that a participatory and democratic or community-oriented system of natural resource management is a necessity is by no means a recent discovery. It appeared in the mid-nineteenth century around the social theorist and reformer Frédéric Le Play (1806–1882) in France, a country with a strong tradition of centralised state power and the birthplace of modern scientific forestry. Le Play's advocacy of participatory forest management was a reaction against the punitive methods usually followed by French foresters since the beginnings of state forestry two centuries earlier, and their ideological postulation that the peasant way to manage natural resources was necessarily erratic, short-sighted and destructive. The same option in favour of community forestry and joint management of natural resources was defended at the time by Dietrich Brandis, the German founder of the Indian Forest Service and first Inspector General of Forests in British India in the 1860s and 1870s. But this option was cast aside by the colonial government while the Indian Forest Act was under discussion in the late 1870s, and the alternative adopted was the constitution of huge areas of state forests controlled and regulated by the Forest Department, in which legitimate dwellers were requalified as squatters (Guha 1996). The same Act, with minor modifications, is still in existence in India today, and state forests now cover 24 per cent of the country's forest area.

A decisive step in the opposite direction was however taken in India when the new National Forest Policy was presented to Parliament in 1988. This was at least partly a result of the action initiated by activists working among tribals and forest-dwellers (Fernandes and Kulkarni 1983). The new policy emphasised the necessity to safeguard the customary rights and interests of the tribal people, and proposed to associate them closely in the protection, regeneration and development of forests, as well as to provide employment to residents living in and around forests. Thus the older tradition associated with Brandis and others was, so to say, reinvented, and the fact that some forms of collective resource management may have existed in the past in the Indian countryside, among specific groups having survival interests in nature, was acknowledged (see Gadgil 1989: 249–51). This notable evolution was not specific to the Indian environmental scene, but correlated with the slow emergence since the late 1970s of the theme of community forestry at the global level, including in the policy discourse of major international agencies such as the World Bank and FAO.⁴ It is no secret, however, that there has long been a lack of enthusiasm on the part of Indian forest officials towards the implementation of this new orientation. But the policy directives issued since then from time to time by the government of India have nevertheless showed its determination to press for its enforcement and expansion throughout the country, and this emphasis was built into the Eighth Five Year Plan in 1990. By the beginning of the present century, notable progress had been made in terms of the number of Forest Protection Committees formed (nearly 62,900 in 2003) and the area covered (over 14 million hectares).

It is true, however, that the number of committees actually functioning is very low. The causes analysed in the many reports produced on the subject are always the same: ineffective leadership, lack of community awareness and involvement on the part of the local people, deficiency of institutional government support, inadequate planning, etc. (Murali et al. 2003). The basic difficulty with these committees is that they are, like many other grassroot rural development structures, instituted by the state from above, and that popular awareness of the need for natural resource protection cannot emerge out of nowhere. Moreover, ensuring a fair representation and participation of subordinate groups (especially the poor and women) and an equitable sharing of benefits between all

members of the local communities is always a difficult issue, and this often threatens the progress of joint management of protected areas. The implementation of this new paradigm of conservation is still in its experimental stages, and we lack sufficient hindsight to assert with confidence that these efforts will prove a success in the long-term.

That poverty is often associated with ecologically unsound patterns of resource use can hardly be denied. But there is no simple answer to the question: is poverty the primary cause of biodiversity destruction, or is it a result of such destruction? In support of the second hypothesis, an enormous amount of militant socio-ecological literature has been produced the world over since the 1970s on the theme of the supposed spontaneous ecological wisdom or ethos of traditional societies. This literature logically implies that the main culprit for the depletion of the world's natural resources is the intrusion over the last centuries of the global capitalist economy, which has destroyed the ageless harmony between people and nature.⁵ This genre of ecological thinking which romanticises the 'traditional' has also flourished in India. It has certainly been an important counter to technocratic arguments about the environmental incompetence and irresponsibility of 'traditional' societies, and has inspired a lot of well-intentioned and meritorious grassroot social activism in favour of the empowerment of local communities. But it is also at times ideologically loaded with more disputable nativist, anti-modern or nationalist preconceptions. It is fundamentally based on belief, not on a truly unbiased and all-embracing scientific examination of facts. It overlooks much historical evidence which conclusively shows that pre-modern peasants and forest-dwellers were not born conservationists, as pre-colonial deforestation and the chequered history of sacred groves show, and that their social structure and behaviour was never modelled according to a superior and timeless unwritten law guaranteeing a perpetual homeostatic relationship with their natural surroundings. Such essentialising characterisations are of little help today in the search for appropriate solutions to biodiversity loss and environmental degradation, because they ignore or underrate the fact that the peasant or tribal groups concerned are not forlorn relics of an ecologically friendly golden age, but have had a long history of successive adaptations to contextual changes, and, more importantly, that they are not socially homogeneous, but strongly differentiated and

stratified according to economic standing, local power, gender and other factors, as most societies are.

In short, to correctly grasp the problems posed by the regulation of biomass consumption and the protection of biodiversity, and to devise appropriate solutions, we have little use for top-down ideological generalisations and preconceived categorisations. What we mostly lack is a sufficient base of careful grassroot-level inquiries, because every local case is specific in important ways, and bottom-up perspectives on how to evolve workable conservation and development policies. The state itself, which is so often seen as more part of the problem than of the solution, should not be systematically essentialised as a monolithic agent of oppression of helpless subalterns, as it may also prove to be a potentially benevolent, if distant institution. The papers collected in this volume, written by dedicated young scholars as part of their doctoral researches, precisely belong to this genre of solid, unprejudiced, and consequently useful and inspiring, analyses of the complexities of local situations. They contribute in their own right towards the advent of the only acceptable type of responses to our present environmental anxieties, those that incorporate equitable trade-offs between ecological sustainability and social justice.

Jacques Pouchepadass
October 2011, Paris

Notes

1. Sacred groves are patches of forests traditionally protected by local communities as sanctuaries of local deities.
2. As Lynn T. White, Jr. has shown long ago in a classic article, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' (1967).
3. See for instance Jacoby (2001), which focuses on conservation's impact on local inhabitants at the origins of the USA's first parklands, and traces the effect of criminalising such traditional practices as hunting, fishing, foraging, and timber cutting in the newly created parks.
4. Significantly, the theme chosen for the Eighth World Forestry Congress, 1978, was 'Forests for People'.
5. As regards, for instance, American Indians, see Krech III (1999).

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Introduction

NICOLAS LAINÉ AND T.B. SUBBA

Even an illiterate person knows that nature is under tremendous stress today. One also knows that if the plundering of nature continues, the future of humanity is uncertain. The entire world will be a loser no matter who wins the debate on carbon footprint—the North or the South. Nature does not recognise the division between the North and the South, the rich and the poor, the informed and the ignorant, etc., no matter how important they are for the people living in different parts of the globe. It has its own ways of teaching man. Its lessons are most of the times described as calamities, disasters, global warming and so on; but instead of trying to learn from and understand this face of nature, the modern man merely tries to manage, control and create ‘preparedness’ against nature’s ‘fury’. How can he learn from that which he is supposed to control, manipulate, and manage? Even if he wishes to learn from it he is seldom capable of doing so for he is trained to acquire only compartmentalised knowledge and anything that is holistic, symbiotic, and symbolic is bypassed by his system of knowledge.

In order to be able to learn from nature he first needs to unlearn whatever he knows because this requires a different kind of learning from the one we receive from educational institutions. The latter take us away from nature rather than connect us with it, it tells us about nature but does not allow us to be part of it, it teaches us how to protect ourselves from the nature’s ‘vagaries’ but not how to live with it. Nature and man live on the same planet, but they do not seem to live on the same plane. Human attempts to come closer to nature have seldom been with a pious motive. We present this book to keep such concerns alive.

The overall theme of this volume may not appear novel for many. In India or elsewhere a lot of books have been published on environment in the past decades by people who have a lot more knowledge on the subject than we possess but they are perhaps as callous about it as

we all are. We have abiding interest in matters of nature but we do not pretend to be 'experts' ourselves in the field. This book just happened, but we are happy that it did.

This volume is divided into three parts, each dealing with different ways of apprehending nature and from which result specific forms of interactions between nature and society, or between the ecological and the social systems. By using the terms 'nature' and 'society' in such a manner, our aim is not to lend credit to a dichotomy that we consider insignificant nor is it our aim to revive the epistemological debate which has opposed nature and culture in western countries and has animated social sciences and humanities from the beginning. This debate is now outdated; many publications with flourishing examples¹ have shown how 'nature' is socially and/or culturally constructed and finally remains an artifact (Dwyer 1996: 157).

What we wish to focus on is what we consider as new manners of thinking and acting on nature today. Since the second half of the last century a worldwide movement towards our relations with nature was initiated and this has resulted in a global consciousness regarding the importance of natural resources, biodiversity, etc. Thus we believe that with it the modalities of interaction between man and nature have changed. We have identified three of them by using the terms conservation, governance and transformation. They may not be the most appropriate ones, but we have selected them because they reflect the content of this volume and our initial intentions.

One of the consequences of this global movement is the emergence of new actors—like NGOs working towards environmental protection. In India, like across the world, they represent today almost every level of decision-making from local to supranational. The apparition of such groups and their growing role in nature's management today are here to remind us of the complexity of what we call 'nature' in our modern world and the various ways it is represented in people's minds. As stated by Marie Roué, one should always keep in mind that 'indigenous peoples, NGOs, developers, when they share the same place, have radically different practices and visions with regard to nature' (Roué 2003: 597). This is not only true for the conservation of nature but also for its use, management, transformation and development, as shown in the three different parts of this book.

In India, the history of environmental protection from British rule and beyond is well-documented and known since the accomplished work produced by Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil² (1992), and yet we thought it necessary to exemplify the ongoing process which finds echoes in every part of the country. Our book is thus a humble contribution to the understanding of the changes in the modalities of interaction between nature and society in contemporary India.

Most of the chapters from the first two parts, dedicated to conservation and governance of nature, deal with major decisions taken in the country regarding nature after Independence. Of these, the decision of the Apex Court to impose a ban on timber in 1996, and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (STOTFD) are perhaps most important, as they have impacted the nation as shown by many case studies in Parts I and II. Indeed, although the decision to ban timber felling was taken more than 15 years ago, the consequences of it are not over and there are still weekly petitions debated in many Indian courts in the country. On the other hand the historical and unprecedented decision concerning the rights of forest dwellers and local population on their surrounding environment was received with a lot of criticism because of lack of clarity in the initial proposal (see Roy Burman 2008). There is no doubt that with its implantation in the entire country, STOTFD has the capacity to redefine Indian landscapes and serve as a tool to thwart development projects. If we take a wider view of what happened in India since 1996 we can say that the latter is the consequence of the former. In other words, the ban motivated (if not accelerated) the local people to get back the rights they had been deprived from.

Apart from the conservation and governance of nature, the large-scale transformation of landscapes inducted by the rapid economic growth and the new aspirations of the country is also an important phenomenon in modern India. Human interventions on natural environment redefine inhabited spaces as well as identities. As shown in the last part of the volume, the urban explosion and/or the construction of infrastructure such as dams or roads has had consequences on the relationships between different social groups and their territory. This part also deals with the set-up (policy and stakes), process and consequences (often

the displacement of populations) of such projects in three different states of India.

Finally, this volume offers a wide variety of case studies representing a large panel of approaches and methodologies (from Sociology, Economics, History, Anthropology, and Development Studies), using different levels of analysis and representing different points of view. As editors, we are satisfied to note that the volume reflects current environmental debates in India and concerns for the twenty-first century. We shall feel more satisfied if the present volume can stimulate some debates on issues of our common concern and motivate new researches in the field of nature.

This book has emerged from the proceedings of the 11th workshop of AJEI in India, which was hosted by North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong in February 2008. Initially we wanted the workshop to provide an opportunity for French and NEHU doctoral students to meet, interact and learn from each other, but when we held it NEHU students were out of campus on winter vacation. Yet the occasion was valuable because it was a rare opportunity for the French students and senior scholars to meet each other. Most young doctoral students from various social and environmental sciences were meeting for the first time in their lives and it was some experience for them to present their methodologies and findings before a group of senior scholars from France as well as NEHU, and learn from their expertise. We therefore feel gratified that we could organise this workshop for young French doctoral students, who subsequently worked very hard for more than one year under the guidance of their respective supervisors as well as the experts we had identified to finally give us something that we are proud to include in this volume. For most of them this publication is the very first in their lives. Hence, it is very special for them, if not for their career.

It is also special for us editors because it brings together, perhaps for the first time in the history of India, such a large number of French scholars working in different parts of India, not knowing each other and yet working under a common area of research called nature. The geographical coverage of India in this volume is also perhaps unprecedented. It is only perhaps coincidental that there is no chapter on the

southern parts of India because French scholars are working on south India as well. Otherwise it has chapters on western India, central India, north-eastern India, the eastern Himalayas, central Himalayas, western Himalayas and northern Himalayas. We have not seen many books on India having such a wide geographical coverage, not even in French.

We are very happy to have got the cooperation of some of the best known scholars in France to write the introductions to the three parts this book contains—introductions that cover conservation, governance and transformation. They have not only introduced the chapters but also worked on the theoretical and conceptual contexts within which those chapters could be best presented. We would like to acknowledge their intellectual services to the young doctoral scholars as well as to the editors of this volume. We sincerely thank Joëlle Smadja, Frédéric Landy and Loraine Kennedy for this. We would also like to express our sincere thanks to Jacques Pouchepadass for having accepted our request to write the Foreword to the volume. Without these four senior scholars throwing their intellectual might behind this book our introduction would have been longer but with a lot less substance.

The publication of this book has been made possible through the support and cooperation of many persons and institutions. Our sincere thanks goes to the following senior researchers who contributed to the scientific value of the volume by agreeing to be part of the advisory committee that examined the chapters included in this volume and gave valuable suggestions for improvement: Joëlle Smadja, Marlène Buchy, Véronique Dupond, Sylvie Guillerme, Loraine Kennedy, Ajit Kumar, Frédéric Landy, Philippe Ramirez, Blandine Ripert and M. C. Behera.

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Finally, we would like to thank all AJEI members who have contributed to the volume and given their advice and encouragement for this publication.

Notes

1. Among many others see Descola and Palsson (1996), Ellen and Fukui (1996) and the more recent theoretical essay of Descola (2005).
2. Pioneering in the discipline of Environmental History in the country, their work is rapidly becoming popular and has served as a departure point for many other scholars (see Saikia 2005 on Assam, and Skaria 1999 on Gujarat).

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'Confronted by the rapid transformation of nature and the social relations in which it is embedded, social science analysis must ... innovate.... This volume is a valuable contribution towards refreshing this discipline.... [I]t offers fresh information and insights about environmental and social change and ... demonstrates that the future of this field of study is in promising hands.'

Amita Baviskar

Sociologist, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi

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