

Forest Conservation Theory in India

Conservation of India's forest cover is a strong post-colonial notion in India, where the country has seen a paradigm shift away from commercial production forestry to protectionist forestry (Springate-Baginski, O., et al, 2013). India is among the top ten countries with high forest cover, and holds more than the 8 percent of the Earth's biodiversity (MoEFCC, 2017). Environmentalist institutions such as the World Wildlife Fund, together with a growing movement of urban citizens and ruling elite seeking to conserve national heritage, have been calling for the national conservation of wildlife since independence (Guha, 2003). The first concerted effort post-Independence was the Indian Forest Policy, 1952, that aimed to reverse the colonial exploitation of forests. The result of this nationalised focus, was the creation of protected areas, national parks and wildlife sanctuaries (Saberwal, 2003). Forest management in India has seen a strong emphasis on centralised management, originating during the colonial period and continuing after Independence. While the management objectives have changed over time, from hunting reserves to extractive objectives to conservation, the common notion that the forest should be controlled at the national level continues (Saberwal, 2003).

While state-led policies have brought a much needed focus to forest conservation, commercial logging and deforestation continued to be a threat. Environmental activist movements have often been credited for driving conservation into public attention, with the Chipko Movement in 1973 often considered one of the first effective environmental-social movements becoming an inspiration around the world (Shiva, V., et al, 1986). Similar movements grew around India in the following decades, such as "Save Silent Valley Movement", "Jungle Bachao Andholan" and "Appiko Movement" (Karan, P., 1994 and Mesaria, S., et al, 2015), consolidating a resistance against commercial forestry. These environmental movements shifted the conservation debate, establishing real human connection between people and their natural home.

It is widely documented that state-led conservation initiatives failed to consider the dependence on forest resources for livelihoods of local communities. Research has documented the harsh nature of evictions and treatment of local communities by the forest department, often without adequate compensation (Ambinakudige, 2011; West et al., 2004; Lockwood et al., 2006;). State-led projects, often referred to collectively as "fortress conservation", are based on the understanding that biodiversity preservation and human activity cannot coexist, with the former needed to be protected at all costs (Nautiyal, S., 2019 and Rai, N.D., et al, 2021). However, this view has been shown to be particularly narrow, with established interdisciplinary research highlighting the sustainable practices of the local and indigenous forest peoples and the linkages between ecological and social processes (Rai, N.D., et al, 2021). This has led to the resistance by Adivasi or indigenous forest groups, over the perceived injustices, loss of rights and traditional way of life (Domínguez, L., et al, 2020 and Ambinakudige, 2011), and eventually leading to the landmark Forest Rights Act in 2006, providing rights to traditional forest users (Bose, 2010).

The result of livelihood conflicts throughout India has been the realisation that conservation management needs to be rethought (Nautiyal, S., 2019). Alternative methods aimed to be participatory, including local communities in the process of conservation. Redford et al. (2008) conclude with a call for a more “socially responsible, long-term approach to conservation” (Kothari, A., 2008). The government experimented decentralising conservation with the “Joint Forest Management Program”, under a reformed Forest Conservation Act in 1980 and National Forest Policy of 1988, that sought to redress the needs of local populations (Maksimowski, S.A., 2011). This was a far more balanced and holistic than that of the 1952 Act, and looked at the restoration of ecological balance in forest conservation (Geography and you, 2018). Despite the increased recognition of the need for participatory conservation methods, successful outcomes are limited (Panigrahi, R., 2006). Purushothaman (2013) point to the heterogeneity and complexity of forest dwellers which is often not taken into consideration within participatory schemes, while Saberwal (2013) argues that initiatives romanticise the notion of “community” rather than politicising inequalities.

With the turn of the century, the concept of “ecosystem services” was coming to prominence in environmental literature, providing a framework to value and quantify the importance of nature to society (Lele, S., et al, 2013). In line with this, the rise of “payments for ecosystem services” has come to the fore as a market instrument to motivate changes in land use that degrade ecosystem services (Kissinger, G, 2013). However, in India this system is not wide spread with many scholars having cautioned that market-based approaches might modify human relations to nature that are counterproductive to long-term conservation goals (Singh, N.M., 2015). Perhaps more common to the Indian Context, is “eco-tourism”, an attempt to bring revenue streams into India’s natural wildlife, with conservation being one of the primary outcomes (Cabral, C, 2020). However, while eco-tourism has provided the much needed revenue for remote communities, the success for conservation is not well documented. Many challenges lie in finding the fine balance between creating tourist attractions and protecting and conserving delicate natural habitats (Brandt, J.S, 2018 and Maharana, I., 2000).

Forest conservation in India is still largely characterised by centralised protected areas, yet conservation policy and theory has developed a lot in an attempt to make conservation sustainable and just. At the same time, forests in India today still face the same threats that they did at Independence; commercial logging, and threats of deforestation for land use in agriculture and development projects, as well as new threats of fast-pace population growth and climate change. There is an ever-pressing need for research and development of theory as to how politics can be utilised to better understand and close the gap between policy and practice, and generate political will for conservation objectives within India (Chhatre, A., et al, 2005 and Springate-Baginski, O., et al, 2013).

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