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Animal Pasts, Humanised Futures: Living with Big Wild Animals in an Emerging Economy

India's environmental pasts today provide contrasts not only with Japan, North America, and Europe but also with societies until recently under colonial domination or rule. India is among the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, China, and South Africa are also included) that are widely seen as emerging economies in the new century. Yet there is a second feature that distinguishes India, namely that since 1950, it has been a constitutional democracy. It has in this respect had a less troubled past than Brazil (with its spells of military rule) or South Africa (where apartheid crumbled only in the wake of the Cold War). The twin features of economic expansion and political democracy complicate the story of human relations with the wider environment.

Nowhere is this more sharply in evidence than with respect to the large animals that share living space with over a billion humans in the country. Here, historic legacies are critical: there are tigers in 13 Asian countries, but the largest numbers with the widest genetic diversity are in India. Lions, now extinct in all of West Asia, not only subsist in the Gir Forest in western India but have expanded their range more than five-fold in the last decade. The strains of cohabitation are enormous, and most large wild vertebrates have experienced major shrinkage of living space and numbers in the last two centuries. Elephant raids on crops afflict half a million cultivators, most with plots smaller than two hectares. In a mostly rural country with a large number of domestic ungulates for milk and meat, wool and hides, it is notable that one third of all large carnivore diets consist of such tame stock. Even the high Himalayas, with their wolves and snow leopards, have high levels of conflict between shepherds and predators.

It is common today to speak of the end of nature or to offer requiems for the wild. India has had a human presence for millennia, and the Ganga valley, the demographic centre for 2,000 years, has known rice cultivation for four times as long. It is difficult to think of any patch of land or water body that is pristine in any serious sense. Past ages often saw a seesaw movement, with land being cleared but subsequently overgrown with thicket and jungle when farming was abandoned as rivers shifted course, or as the rains failed repeatedly, or as revenue demands forced peasants from the area.

In an ideational sense, too, nature and culture were rarely seen as separable. The hierarchies of humans in the caste-based social order were often mapped onto the natural world. Similarly, royal or warrior domination of the forest in the hunt was a surrogate for war. People and animals criss-crossed boundaries, clashing over as well as cohabiting the same spaces. Nature-culture boundaries were and are permeable.

The *Arthashastra*, a manual of statecraft possibly from the third century BCE, laid down different road widths for the city, the village, and the elephant forests, the latter being places where the great beasts were trapped to be tamed for armies. Mughal rulers had an empire that spanned much of South Asia and beyond for 150 years, ending in the early 1700s. They kept cheetahs for hunting antelope, a custom so well known in India that in China the trainers were mostly Muslims from the subcontinent.

While there was no sense of harmony or peace with nature, there is still little doubt that recent centuries saw a break with the past. British rule, first under John Company and then the Crown, came to an end in 1947. One of the hallmarks of British rule, especially after the revolt of 1857 was crushed, was a more complete domination of the countryside. Princes and the landed aristocracy swore loyalty to the Crown and turned their martial energies on animals of the forest. Their hunting parks and the forest reserves, carved out to meet industrial demand by the British, were protected from agricultural expansion. Often, harsh labour levies and limits on grazing, burning, hunting, and fishing were used as means to reorder these spaces to supply trophies and timber.

In 1947, India's new rulers were confronted with this legacy, as the jewel slipped away from the Crown. How could politicians enable the pursuit of equality in a society of deep hierarchies? It was inevitable that social and economic inequities would collide with the promise of equality. Ensuring change via the ballot box and courts, via peaceable protest and dialogue rather than the bomb or the gun, would be a challenge. History can decide whether this objective has or has not been met.

For our purposes, what matters is that there was an attempt to assimilate the best of the old with the promise of the new. In the 1940s, Premier Jawaharlal Nehru intervened to save the lions of the Gir from trophy hunters. Similarly, the first Indian Governor General, Rajaji, gave up hunting rights in the Shivalik hills, and the tract is now a national park in his name. To be sure, the creation of a democratic edifice was seen as stable only

if it was accompanied by the artifices of modern industrial growth. In the case of the great Nagarajunasagar dam in south India, where an ancient Buddhist stupa was imperilled by reservoir waters for fishing, there was a successful transplantation to a new site overlooking the lake. Nature, like culture, seemed essential to give the new state deeper roots in the past.

As in many newly independent nations, and drawing on both American and Soviet experience, industrial expansion was seen as critical for making the country economically self-reliant. Projects included large dams and steel mills, land clearance to settle the refugees of Partition, and the founding of new cities as state capitals—Chandigarh in the north and Gandhinagar in the west. The destruction of forest and marsh land was considerable, and in many cases, like the killing of crocodiles for rewards in reservoirs, nature was seen as inimical to the creation of national wealth. Peoples and settlements relying on forests lost out considerably as imperial strictures on access were tightened, this time to help national development.

Yet the correctives to these trends were not absent. The larger debates and discussions, not merely in the Congress party but in the wider movements for freedom, social reform, and economic change, generated not one but many views of nature. Nehru reflected on this in a letter written exactly a decade after independence. On 15 August 1957, he asked the chief ministers of India's states to ask how large projects would impact "the economy of nature, established through the ages." "Evil consequences" of schemes had to be assessed as well as their gains. He wrote:

We have many large scale river valley projects that are worked out by engineers. I wonder, however, how much thought is given before the project is launched to have an ecological survey of the area and to find out what effect it would have on drainage system and the flora and fauna of that area.¹

Such concerns demonstrate the limits of power in independent India. The country did not experience wholesale uprooting and destruction of land, pasture, and forest-based

1 Jawaharlal Nehru, "No. 67. Letter to Chief Ministers, Independence Day, 15 August 1957," in *Letters to Chief Ministers, Volume 4, 1954–1957*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal (Delhi: OUP, 1988), 543–44. Such doubts as Nehru expressed need to be set in the context of his wider record of promoting such projects. See Rohan D'Souza, "Damming the Mahanadi River: The Emergence of Multi-purpose River Valley Development in India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40 (2003): 81–105.

production regimes, as was the case in post revolution China after 1949. Nor did it have the kind of relentless agricultural extension of the kind promoted in other parts of the Asian mainland. Nehru's letter was written in 1957. The previous year, Secretary Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, in the USSR, had launched the Virgin Lands Campaign to expand agriculture to marginal lands. In 1958, Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward in China sought to "grow grain on the top of mountains and the bottom of lakes." Both these huge campaigns failed. The conquest and subjugation of nature, so central to the vision of change, was humbled in part by nature's elements, though at immense human cost.²

In common with many other parts of the world, India experienced political and social upheaval at the end of the sixties, with ecological concerns being one key component. Many of today's parks and sanctuaries were delineated in this and succeeding decades. These parks account for six percent of the landscape—not so small an area in a land with 350 people per square kilometre. It was no coincidence that many of these sites incorporated parks that had been created by princes and imperial-era forest reserves. In many case, there remain serious conflicts of access and rights, except that the struggle now is for legal recognition of usufruct.

Economic expansion generally brings opportunity—life spans in India have doubled to 68 years since independence—but it can also deepen inequities or even reduce opportunity, depending on the model of development. What is critical in the Indian context is the sheer scale of resource-related conflicts. These are matched in scale only perhaps by continent-sized states like Brazil and China. But unlike Brazil and China, India is a largely rural society and, despite huge changes, is still home to the largest number of poor people on earth.

The challenge is not to freeze growth but to plan its unfolding. Here, the legal enactment of entitlement rights has been a key recent development. The Forest Rights Act 2006 is one example, giving a measure of tenurial security to smallholders who have been present for decades. More importantly, community rights were given legal recognition; diversion of forest land now requires local council (Gram Sabha) permission. In

2 Judith Schapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); William Taubman, *Nikita Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 262–63 and 266–67.

the now well-known Niyamgiri hills case of 2010, the proposal for a major bauxite mine was rejected due to local disapproval. A major consequence was to secure an elephant corridor. Such a step of course pales against larger defeats but it gives ground for hope. Democracy secures liberty, but it is still grappling with the challenge of equality.

India—like South Africa and other former colonies—struggles on not one but many fronts. Yet, even as the apartheid regime was crystalizing in the late 1940s, India was embarking on the experiment of democracy on vast scale. Concomitant with this (and this is not exclusive to India) has been the dilemma of how to make spaces for nature even as the human footprint expands and often disrupts the webs of life. Contrary to doomsday predictions, the broader picture has room for cautious optimism. If larger wild animals survive in stable populations in even a fraction of the landscape, part of the credit must go to those who share their spaces.³ This is not to romanticise human-nature relations, for the future of these relations rests on the wider ability not only to make spaces for nature but also to provide security to those who pay the costs. The future also hinges on the ability of democracy to regulate powerful economic interests. As with much else, nature's fate rests on the potential of human institutions and practices to rise to the challenge. Peace with nature requires peace among people.

3 Vivek Deshpande, "Vidarbha Tiger Walks Hundred Kilometers, Braves NH in Search of a Mate," *Indian Express*, 6 October 2013.