



A Brief Historical Overview of Wildlife Conservation in India

V Pumkhansiam

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

* Corresponding Author: V Pumkhansiam

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Abstract

This article interrogates the historical trajectory of wildlife conservation in India, tracing its evolution from colonial-era hunting practices to postcolonial conservation policies. While modern conservationists look at the scientific and ecological necessity in response to environmental degradation and the extinction of wild animals, this study argues that environment and wildlife conservation in India have been deeply intertwined and shaped by socio-political and cultural practices of the indigenous or tribal community. Drawing upon the need to separate wildlife from human presence emerged as a mainstream narrative that informed global conservation paradigms, particularly through the U.S. national park model. This model has influenced postcolonial India's conservation policies, including the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, which introduced a strict classification of protected areas such as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and tiger reserves. These measures aimed to preserve biodiversity, wildlife and the environment; however, this model often excludes or marginalises indigenous and tribal communities who have historically coexisted with or lived in the environment. It highlights how the dominant conservationists' narrative frames these communities as threats to biodiversity, overlooking their ecological knowledge systems and sustainable practices of the tribal community. This article argues for a more inclusive conservation paradigm that recognises the rights and roles of local communities in managing and protecting ecosystems while also interrogating the colonial and ideological assumptions that continue to shape conservation discourse in contemporary India.

Keywords: Conservationists, Colonial Legacies, Wildlife Protection Act 1972, Tribal & Indigenous Communities, Ecology, National Parks

Introduction

This paper explores a brief history of wildlife conservation in India to provide an account of the modern conservation policies and initiatives undertaken since the colonial era. In doing so, it analyses the concept of 'conservation' and 'wilderness', which were essentially employed to justify the state initiatives in enclosing specific sites as reserved and protected areas. Moreover, it also highlights the plight of tribal or indigenous communities who were subjected to displacement and dispossession from their land and livelihood. The consequences of conservation initiatives are thus paradoxical, with different costs and benefits for the state, elites and the forest-dwelling communities.

The idea of wildlife conservation is an outcome of recognition that a depletion of nature is occurring at an unprecedented scale due to human interference. The primary objective is to mitigate such phenomena by providing a secure environment for natural flora and fauna to subsist through several policies and programmes. Besides curbing human activities that are assumed to cause destruction, it enclosed several identified areas as safe and secure places.

Mahesh Rangarajan writes, “Conservation, much like extermination, was often a project driven by small bits of evolving elites”^[1]. The colonial government initiated the project in India during the late nineteenth century. They introduced the notion of wilderness, which was aimed at securing certain areas for breeding wildlife. However, in contrast, during those times, most of the British administrators, military men and different officials were engaged in hunting expeditions and indiscriminate killing of wild animals during their leisure. Consequently, there has been a sharp decline in wild animal populations, such as tigers, lions, rhinoceroses, bears, leopards, and other valued animals in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, while the colonial period marked the beginning of official conservation initiatives by the state, it also saw an increase in engagement in hunting game by state officials. Whatsoever, the process manifests the claims of state legitimacy on restrictions and permissible rights over the wild, often subjecting the primordial rights of the tribes and indigenous communities to state laws.

As we understand it today, the meaning of conservation is a relatively new concept. It developed in a specific socio-political experience in world history due to the detrimental consequences of human intervention on natural habitat and the subsequent decline of wildlife. The conservationists, being apprehensive, perceive or view nature as in the process of dying in the world. To them, if the deterioration continues without check, a “doomsday” is imminent in the future of human civilisation. Therefore, a conservation initiative was inevitable to protect the wild and prevent species from extinction. A significant turning point was the “ideas of wilderness”, a historical and cultural construct that links modern love affairs with wilderness and subsequently to the founding of the contemporary national parks^[2]. This idea aimed to secure identified areas for protecting the environment in its natural setting. Another initiative was a memorial site that needs to be created as “last great places” in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries^[3]. These are modern conservation initiatives aimed at stopping further wildlife extinction and providing a safe and secure environment. In the process, while providing safe places for their habitat, hunting and unnecessary human intervention were illegalised. Moreover, wild animals are enumerated. Based on the decline in population and the subsequent threat of extinction, a category called “endangered species” was identified to provide a more focused conservation initiative. These were provided a safe habitat to ensure their breeding and increase their population. Therefore, while many are left to their natural habitat in the wild, few were categorised as endangered or near extinction, a catchword that connotes concentrated preservation effort in the conservation world. The United States National Park System has become a prominent model worldwide in the conservation initiative. National parks are initiatives of the state that established a closure and management system to provide a peaceful habitat and breeding ground for wildlife. This idea is associated with Eden, an uncultivated and uninhabited land. This aligns with

the dominant narrative of the conservationists that view nature to be understood as “untouched,” “virgin”, and “wild.” In the writing of Henry David Thoreau and others in the Western world, this catches the imagination of the masses and the imagined pristine state of peace and coexistence of nature. Protection of such ‘wild’ and ‘pristine’ land from exploitation and human encroachment is the beginning of conservation ideas. In doing so, it parallels the ideas of native or indigenous as ‘exotic’, ‘wild’ and ‘primitive’.

In India, the Conservation of Wildlife Act was introduced in 1972. The rationale and objective behind such a policy is to protect wildlife, a concern due to its decreasing population. The Act classified three categories of closure: wildfire sanctuaries, national parks and tiger reserves. In such areas, human activities like hunting and poaching were prohibited. The forest department employs several officials and staff to ensure surveillance on banned activities and punishment for norm defaulters. The emergence of such policies marked a critical juncture for the forest-dwelling populations. While it serves the conservation purpose, it poses vital questions on the primordial rights of the forest-dependent populations, especially the tribes and indigenous communities. Human activities must be banned to protect the wild, curtailing the livelihood rights of the people in the vicinity who depended on jhumming, hunting, and foraging. In the process, the tribes and indigenous communities become victims of displacement, which subsequently deprives them of their source of livelihood. Therefore, conservation policies are often paradoxical in the context of forest communities that have depended on their natural environment for several centuries.

The idea of wilderness

The origin of the idea of conservation can be traced back to two important historical events in the West. According to Jim Igoe, these are (1) the enclosure movement in England in the 18th and 19th centuries, which transformed the common property into private property, and (2) the expansion of the 19th-century United States models of ‘national parks’, which captured the imagination of the global elites^[4]. This new development in the west ushered in a movement that projects nature as ‘wild’ and ‘Pristine’, which should be devoid of any human habitation and destruction.

The enclosure movement in England dramatically transformed the property systems, with the state introducing several legislations such as the Enclosure Act. It was in line with what Hardin argued through a metaphor of an open pasture where he said, shared or open resources are on the verge of destruction and overutilisation due to individual rationality for maximisation of profit. Therefore, he proposed that the state or market should come to the rescue through regulations and legislation. In a similar line, the Act stipulates the enclosure of open resources that are held as commons. Thereafter, it introduced a private property system through legal statute for effective state control. Thus, a shift is witnessed from common property to private property or state property through statutory laws. The overall aim was to avoid

¹ Mahesh Rangarajan (2015). (2015). *Nature and Nation: Essay on Environmental History*. Ranikhet. Permanent Black. P. 26.

² Rashkow, E. D. (2014). *Idealizing inhabited wilderness: A Revision to the History of Indigenous People and the National Park*. *History Compass*. 12/10. 818-832.

³ Aiyadurai, A. (2018). *The Multiple Meaning of Nature Conservation: Insight from Dibang Valley, Arunachal Pradesh*. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol LIII No 39. P. 49

⁴ Aiyadurai, pg. 38

the destruction of nature by human activities.

The notion of a national park became a prominent modern protected site. It was a site established, maintained and managed by the government. The primary objective was to preserve the natural environment and ensure wildlife conservation. In doing so, based on scientific input, areas were identified, fenced and guarded. It provided a cordial atmosphere for the flora and fauna to subsist in their natural setting. Moreover, several animals were imported and enclosed for breeding purposes. Human intrusions in such areas were restricted with an appropriate protocol for entry to the site.

The ideas of conservation and wilderness are intertwined with the Western value of capitalism and the very ideas of noble savages^[5]. Moreover, this is also in consonance with the colonial mission of civilising the native. In this narrative, the natives were seen as savages, and their resource utilisation was seen as wasteful and unsustainable. They were stereotypically viewed as destroyers of the forest and wildlife. Therefore, the coloniser takes the responsibility on themselves to civilise the native. The dual mandate to control nature and the native is the mission of the European coloniser. The conservation ideology is similar to the colonial mission in its form and content, where it promotes discipline and control through statutory legislation.

Conservation and commercialisation

The colonial interest in the forest and wildlife was simultaneously marked by two opposing notions of conservation and commercialisation. To pursue their interest further, scientific forestry was imported with scientific input from experts trained in the West. This became the fundamental principle and means to control forest resources by introducing several legislations and deploying forest protection forces as a vanguard to protect it from illegal activities and encroachers. This creates a domain that includes the state's right and duty to develop, recognise, document and preserve all land and resources^[6]. The legal statutes asserted the territorial sovereignty of colonial administration, which further justifies its modernisation process. Therefore, it guarantees them the legitimate right to conserve or exploit resources.

The colonial regime also began the commoditisation of forest resources by introducing monetary value over resources such as timber and denouncing the non-commoditised relations. Large-scale timber logging occurs with the expansion of railway tracts necessary for transporting goods. As opposed to conservation, timber logging causes large-scale destruction of forest areas with valuable timber. This served the colonial commercial interest with benefits harvested at the expense of sacrificing the privilege of the local inhabitants.

Cederlof and Sivaramakrishna (2005) express the modern-

day crisis in nature and forest conservation through 'ecological nationalism'. It can be seen in two contrasting views, the 'metropolitan-secular view of nature', as they are helpful for the economic and materialist benefit of the nation. The other contrasting view is from the 'indigenist or regionalist', where the community is against the modern nation-state encroaching on their land^[7]. However, in the indigenist and regionalist communities, the dominant community also appropriates nature for economic and political gain. Therefore, while modern conservation strives to save the environment, it becomes a site of social and political contestations. This is reflected in the continuous struggle between the state and local communities, and between the perception of natural resources as commercial goods or as means of subsistence.

The idea of conservation is also entrenched with the consciousness of nationalism from the urban upper middle-class, from the indignation of the glorious past, by rediscovering the past as wild and promoting certain animals as the national symbol. As Rangaranjan put it as, "As diverse as central Europe and Northeast India, conservation has become part of the nationalist project. Just as the architect of nations defined bounds in space and time, so too did they appropriate key animals as their nation's icons"^[8]. The nationalist consciousness among the middle class led to the reinvention and romanticising of wildlife and nature. Indigenous people and their land have been absent and vital for most of history. This has changed at the turn of the century, but not the indigenous people. They are still the most marginalised section of society. But wildlife and national sanctuaries become national interests, depriving the community of their rights and livelihood.

History of Wildlife Conservation in India

The modern state conservation started during the British colonial period in the 17th century. Writing on history of forest conservation in India, Guha has observed that, Forest act of 1865 and the legislation of 1878 had ensured that state could demarcate the 'valuable' tract of forest needed especially for the railway purpose and retain enough flexibility over the remaining extent of forest land to revise its policy from time to time^[9]. The Forest Act of 1878 directly put the British Colonial government in direct control of one-fifth of the land mass of South Asia^[10]. The imperial forest department was formed in 1864, following Lord Dalhousie's famous minute on the market in India and the introduction of the railway. The colonial government realised the importance of conservation for commerce and other purposes for future utilisation. This colonial scientific forestry does not include preservation of wild animals into the list.

India's first modern "protected area" was Hailey National Park, created in 1936 by the British colonialists (later known

⁵Frontani, H.G. (2005). Conservation and Globalization: A study of national parks and indigenous communities from East Africa to South Dakota, by Jim Igoe. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004. XII+183pp. African Affairs, Volume 104, Issues 416, Page 551-553.

⁶ Nancy L Peluso and Peter vandergeest (2001). Genealogies of the Political Forest and Customary Rights in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The Journal of Asian studies. Vol. 60. No.3

⁷ Cederlof, G & Sivaramakrishna, K (2005). Ecological Nationalism: Nature Livelihood and Identities in South

Asia. Delhi: Permanent Black.

⁸ Rangaranjan. 28

⁹ Guha, R. (1983). Forestry in British and Post-British India: A Historical Analysis. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 18, No. 44. Pp 1882-1896. P,1884

¹⁰ Sramek, J. (2006). "Face Him like a Briton": Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India, 1800-1875. Victorian Studies, Vol 48. No. 4.

as Jim Corbett National Park) ^[11]. This becomes the forerunner of protecting wildlife and other species in the country. The larger share of conservation goes into the forest, and the forest produces. The absence of wildlife protection, especially in the Northeast, was due to the relative autonomy of the Tribal communities.

In independent India, most forest areas have been turned into national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, game reserves, and other such categories. The model on which these protected areas are based was borrowed from the West and applied virtually as it is. The elites were the pioneers in the movement for the conservation of wildlife and natural resources. In this process, prominent personalities like Samir Ali and Indira Gandhi, the former prime minister, played pioneering roles. The first Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 was enacted in India during the rule of Indra Gandhi. The state started the protection of tigers, lions, elephants and many other species. Several national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, tiger and elephant reserves have been established and expanded in India since the early 1970s. Many such sites originated in the imperial past, which were known as hunting grounds for the landed aristocracy, princes, and imperial officials. Around four decades ago, a new 'ecological patriotism' combined with a deep concern over the extinction of rare species impelled primary emphasis on saving nature ^[12]. These conservation ideas are deeply rooted in romanticising nature as a species that can become extinct on the earth. It also emphasises promoting the imagined glorious past of the rich wildlife heritage.

With the introduction of the Wildlife Conservation Act in 1972, the then Indira Gandhi government in 1976 amended the Constitution of India to bring forests on the concurrent list so that the central government could legislate on them for forest conservation and wildlife protection ^[13]. Since then, the state has become at the forefront of promoting conservation policies in the country. This hard-pressed conservation of nature and wildlife was possible with the support of the urban middle class. The loss of heritage sites and other endangered animals is cited as an example of the promotion of conservation. The introduction of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which was subsequently amended in 1982, 1986, 1991, 2003, and 2006, creates the different categories of PAS (national parks and sanctuaries). This limits the right to live inside PAS, restricts the harvesting of natural products, and establishes a centralised and exclusive management system ^[14]. The Wildlife Conservation Act and subsequently the Protection of Wildlife Act mark the watershed in the history of conservation initiatives in Independent India. This act protected the endangered species, both flora and fauna, in the country. The act prohibits human settlement in the designated or protected areas and displaces the earlier inhabitants. Therefore, in the process of implementation, many tribal and indigenous communities were displaced from their land and livelihood. In some way, the protection of wildlife and forests has similar functions. They had excluded the community living in the forest in the name of protection. It dislocated them and dispossessed them of their livelihood resources.

Conclusion

Looking at the history of conservation in India reveals a complex entanglement of colonial practices, elite-driven conservationists, and the marginalisation of the indigenous or tribal community. During the colonial days in India, protection was focused on conserving forests for their commercial needs, although wildlife protection was limited. However, post-colonial shows the conservation of wildlife and forests with stricter control or bifurcation of tribal or indigenous lands. Driven by the Western model of segregation of protection of wildlife and forest, implementing the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 led to stricter protection and control of tribal lands and their alienation. As conservation is far from a neutral or scientific endeavour, it has served as a tool of power and dispossession, especially for those closest to the forest or tribal people. Wildlife and forest conservation history failed to address those living in the forest. Tracing the history of wildlife and forest protection in India, although the idea was to conserve and protect forests and wildlife by the state, conservationists, and environmentalists, it failed to address the community that lives and whose culture is deeply entangled with the forests.

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¹¹ Lasgorceix, A & Kothari, A. (2009). Displacement and Relocation of Protected Areas: A Synthesis and Analysis of Case Studies. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol 44 No 49.

¹² Rangarajan, 331.

¹³ K. Sivaramakrishnan (2011). Thin nationalism: Nature and Public Intellectualism in India. *Contribution to Indian Sociology*. Vol 45. Issue. 1. P. 95

¹⁴ Ibid.

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