

Sen, A. *A Political Ecology of Forest Conservation in India*. Earthscan/Routledge. 2022. (pp. 202) Hardback (ISBN: 978-0-367-44067-1). Hard copy: ₹ 10,214. Kindle: ₹ 2,793.

A Political Ecology of Forest Conservation in India

Extending over 25,000 sq. km in area, the Sundarbans have attracted considerable conservation attention as they are the largest expanse of mangrove forests in the world. They form a part of the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta and consist of a maze of islands, marked by strong tidal and river action as well as cyclones. Moreover, they are the only mangrove forests to harbour a population of the Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) (Singh et al. 2015), an endangered species. The Sundarbans are bifurcated by the India-Bangladesh boundary line, and the smaller section of over 9000 sq. km falls within India. This is a designated biosphere reserve, within which lies the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR) and over 50 islands inhabited by various types of marginalised communities who have either sought refuge here on their own or been actively settled by the state at different periods of time. However, livelihoods are often precarious, and therefore, conservation restrictions on forest access and use have contributed to different forms of power struggles. It is this intersection that Amrita Sen engages with in her book, *A Political Ecology of Forest Conservation in India*. In her words, she explores the question, ‘How does conservation redefine material-social organisation in vulnerable regions?’

Overall, this is an ambitious work because it broadly follows the trajectory charted by *Forest of Tigers* (Jalais 2010), which is a nuanced and eminently readable anthropological account of the environmental politics of the Sundarbans. Nevertheless, in this book, Sen makes an earnest effort to revisit much of this terrain by taking an interdisciplinary approach: she attempts to integrate archival documents, folktales, census records, etc. with her own observations and interviews (from 9 months of fieldwork) to describe the dynamics of forest-based livelihoods in two villages around the STR, Emilibari and Patharpara. Her references reflect a willingness to engage with a wide range of literature from environmental history to more-than-human geography. Foucauldian ideas such as governmentality, surveillance, state- and subject-making, and biopower are mentioned across the text and indicate the author’s conceptual line of interest; unfortunately, they are not explored with sufficient depth and remain somewhat detached from the observations. Consequently, the book appears to lack a coherent narrative and instead reads like a collection of different papers. The disconnection permeates the writing style as well. For instance, research methods are described under the curious sub-heading “Field Apparatuses” (53) although the author seeks to bring an ethnographic sensibility to her work,

and there is insufficient explanation of how the numerous tables are related to the arguments presented. Nevertheless, the book contains several interesting sections.

In Chapter 1, which serves as an introduction to the book, Sen presents an overview of how different communities present their claims to the resources in STR and how these are linked to the politics of identity. Chapter 2 delves into environmental history—it serves as a strong contrast to the unpeopled wilderness narrative of conservation because it describes how the Sundarbans were a part of regional and global networks of governance as well as trade. For example, artifacts belonging to the Mauryan empire (c. 322–185 BC) have been found in this region and from the writings of Ptolemy (1 AD); it was known to the Roman empire as a significant port. In the eighteenth century, it was acquired by the East India Company, and after extensive surveys in the nineteenth century, the first map of the Sundarbans was published in 1830. Apart from tracing the changes in forest laws, Sen also mentions the explosive population growth: from 65,000 people in 1872–1901 during the first census to over 40 lakhs in 2011.

Chapter 3 describes the social structure of the two villages using the twin themes of ‘power over’ and ‘power to’. It tries to demonstrate how state welfare schemes themselves contribute to the marginalisation of these communities while the villagers respond by drawing on diverse strategies to assert their claims. Specifically, a combination of site-based power (or constraints) and the elected kinships of *dharma atmia* challenge the idea of caste-based occupations and instead create a mixed community of ‘forest workers’ who may either belong to a Scheduled Caste (for e.g. Paundrakshatriya) or a Scheduled Tribe (Bhumij). This chapter also describes the rituals involved in worship of Bonbibi and Manasa and the role of *bawali* or tiger charmers in regulating the practices of forest workers.

The following chapter focuses on how non-indigenous communities such as the forest workers of the Sundarbans acquire ecological knowledge and tailor their extraction of resources (honey, prawn seed, fish, etc.) to adapt to the precarious landscape they inhabit. In doing so, this chapter seeks to correct the tendency of both conservation and forest rights’ discourse to valorise indigenous communities. At the same time, Sen does not shy away from describing the fissures within villages: local elites are able to capture significant economic benefits through connections to village councils, the forest department, and local politicians. The marginalised, in contrast, face serious difficulties in obtaining compensation or even in completing funeral rites when a forest worker is killed by a tiger. In Chapter 5, which is perhaps the most original

contribution of the book, Sen adds a new facet to livelihood-conservation studies by exploring connections between forest governance and electoral politics. This section describes how the 'Forest Rights Act', as it is commonly known, has become a vote bank issue in the Sundarbans and how local politicians influence the implementation (or lack thereof) of conservation laws through active campaigning and networking with village elites, as well as in more indirect ways such as through the backward classes welfare department or the *gram sansads*. Sen also interrogates the idea of decentralisation as it exists in the Joint Forest Management Committees and describes how these too can get hijacked by village elites.

The final chapter on nonhuman subject-making presents a flood of current ideas and would have benefitted from more careful argumentation and editing. For instance, page 171 alone skims over the state of nylon fencing, deforestation, production of animality, state exercise of corporeal power, and the moral ethics of conservation. In the concluding section, Sen refers to how a shared experience of poverty does not necessarily create a sense of solidarity, instead resulting in opportunistic claims-making by groups that form and dissolve according to context. She also summarises how electoral politics intersects with forest governance and constrains the livelihood opportunities of forest workers. Owing to these factors as well as the focus of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (2006) on forest dwellers (rather than the broader category of forest dependents), the forest workers of the Sundarbans continue to occupy precarious social and material positions.

On the whole, the sections on local power inequalities and how these are exacerbated by electoral politics as well as welfare schemes are a welcome addition to current literature. Through these, Sen provides an important reminder that the

'local community' is as much of a myth as 'pristine wilderness' and that political ecologists need to be more attuned to ground realities if they wish to truly engage with the needs of the vulnerable. This book might be of interest to institutional libraries but may be beyond the reach of individual readers as both the hard copy and the Kindle versions are very expensive (INR 10,214 and 2,793, respectively).

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