

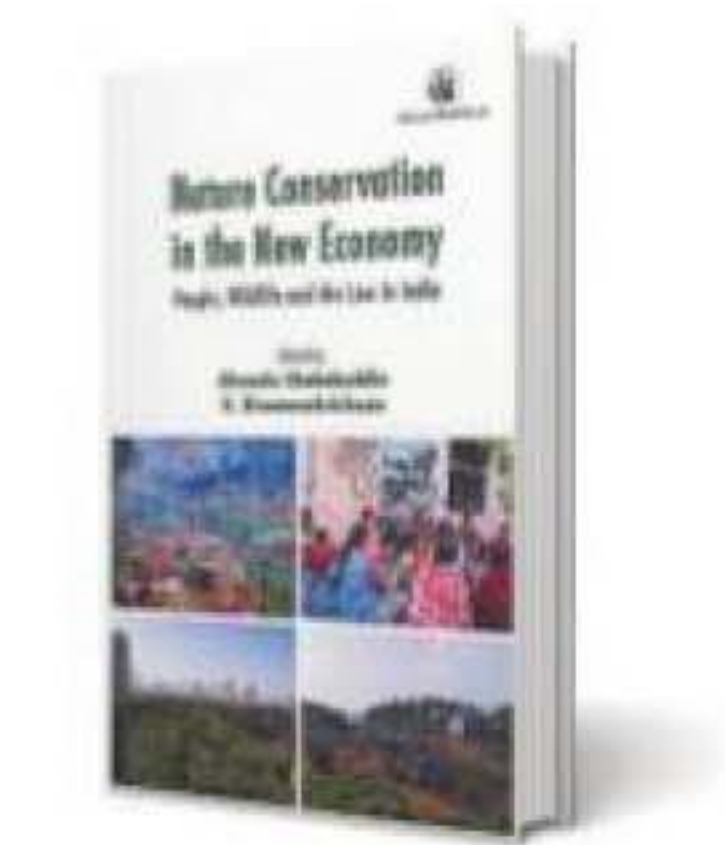
# Beginning a new conservation

A taut ethnographic work that offers new imaginaries for preserving natural environments

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GLOBAL ECONOMIC liberalisation is posited as a set of processes that promote GDP growth, but come at the cost of high levels of income inequality while threatening the natural environment. In India, economic liberalisation was the path to development chosen in 1991, and reinforced by subsequent governments into the present day. This form of development, as is suggested in the press, is at loggerheads with environmental conservation.

Therefore, when questions of the human environment arise, the struggle to breathe clean air has to battle for pole position with industrial growth as issues of national importance. Today, the National Capital Region struggles for breath every winter, and huge oceanic dead zones linked to climate change have developed off the Maharashtra coast. It certainly appears that we need to rethink our path to development, if we are concerned about meeting the basic needs of life in future generations. It is at this juncture that a timely literary offering by Ghazala Shahabuddin and K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Nature Conservation in the New*



**NATURE CONSERVATION IN THE NEW ECONOMY**  
GHAZALA SHAHABUDDIN,  
K SIVARAMAKRISHNAN  
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312 pages  
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*Economy*, provides crucial intervention. The book is a nuanced take on the kinds of change the past decades of economic liberalisation in India have really heralded. Using a series of case studies presented by multiple authors, a reader can piece together how the new economic system has affected various parts of the country, including those ignored by the 24x7 news cycle.

In this context, the arc of most authors' arguments is one of decline, where powerful corporate interests bring their capital-centric logic to bear on nature, to the detriment

not only of wildlife and natural resources, but also of resource dependent communities. However, a crucial chapter by Meghna Agarwala, Ruth DeFries, Y.V. Jhala and Q. Qureshi forces us to rethink this standard discourse by tracing the long history of human-influenced ecological change in central India. The implication of this research is that nature conservation itself appears to take a destructive liberalised form in central India, by disconnecting people from resources through practices of displacing people away from forests. Instead, they show that the more those people depended on particular plants and animals, the more likely those species



Thousands of flamingos visit the Sewri Mudflats in Maharashtra every year. *Express*

were to continue to thrive in those forests. Similarly, the beautifully written piece by Ambika Aiyadurai, details a complex weave of rituals, taboos and superstition that interlink the Mishmi people of Arunachal Pradesh with their environment. The forest and wildlife are, in some ways, just an extension of people, through past lives, spirits and stories. Yet, these people are also viewed as an enemy of conservation, given that their skilled hunting and habits of taking souvenirs — such as hornbill casques, appears to provide authorities with proof that people are defaunating forests. This wonderful ethnographic work is set in the context of high levels of economic development that are proposed in Arunachal Pradesh, as it becomes central to new geo-political tussles and configurations. “The clash of world-views”, writes Aiyadurai is enhanced not only by the increasing presence of outsiders in the form of government officials intent on developing or conserving — such as the forest department, but also by the infiltra-

tion of new cultural influences, such as Christianity or Hinduism. Her work suggests that hunting, once converted from a spiritual activity to a mundane one, will likely be even more difficult to control.

Urbanisation in the NCR is tackled by M. Vikas in a chapter about Delhi's forests and Neha Sinha in a chapter about Gurgaon's wetlands. Updating these chapters to reflect the latest debates about tree felling and land conversion in the NCR would have made them much more relevant, but still they bring interesting historical and policy dimensions to bear on the issues. The chapter on coastal zone regulations by Kohli and Menon is in similar need of updation, although they predict the dilutions to the environmental protection aspects of the CRZ Notification in its current form. They present an interesting analysis of how policy itself contributes to creating conflicting priorities and bureaucratic processes enable the creation of perceptions about increasing environmental protection while working against those very

goals in practice.

These chapters, as well as those of Shahabuddin and Sarkar, provide interesting and detailed glimpses into local cases of socio-economic change producing socio-ecological change. One of course wishes for the opportunity for editors to have a greater voice in helping the readers interpret the patterns emerging from this volume. The editors themselves highlight the inadequacy of current scientific thinking, given its disciplinary bounds, to be able to make sense of such complex issues. This initiative of drawing together scholars from multiple disciplines, and their perspectives on seemingly disparate problems, to draw out threads of commonality across place and time is highly recommended for readers seeking a deep dive into nature conservation in India.

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