

Terrible trade-offs

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More than a quarter century after economic liberalisation policies were implemented in India, the country's ecology, environment, and human-nature relationships are under extreme stress. The imperatives of development and growth have undeniably had an impact on biodiversity and conservation. An obsessive focus on short-term economic growth has meant that trade-offs in terms of environmental deterioration have been accepted as necessary, even inevitable.

India has a number of conservation laws, policies and programmes. While successful in pockets, these have largely failed to provide sufficient protection. There is increased demand to free up protected areas for new roads and railways, mines, and industrial projects. At the same time, conservation laws and policies place restrictions on people's rights that have led to a groundswell of local resistance. While old approaches seem insufficient to tackle the scale and intensity of the problem, new ways of thinking are gaining ground – such as the idea of placing monetary values on ecosystem services provided by rivers and forests, or of opening up spaces for social and private entrepreneurship in conservation. Understanding how conservation works in the 21st century can no longer, therefore, be the sole prerogative of the forest officer, ecologist or wildlife biologist. Fields like environmental economics, political science, anthropology and sociology, and ethics and philosophy must be included, to develop a broader understanding of how India can shape its conservation strategy going forward.

This is the goal of *Nature Conservation in the New Economy: People, Wildlife and the Law in India*. A collection of thought-provoking essays edited by Ghazala Shahabuddin and K Sivaramakrishnan, the book provides a multidisciplinary landscape view of the challenges of conservation in contemporary India's economic and regulatory landscape, where governmental policies, ethical imperatives of justice and democracy, and economic considerations of growth and profit collide and collaborate in an uneasy dance. Bringing together nine case studies that range from the forests of the Western Ghats to central India, the western Himalayas and northeast India, and cover challenges of conservation in critical ecosystems from forests and cities to wetlands and coasts, this book presents a rich tapestry of the contemporary challenges facing conservation.

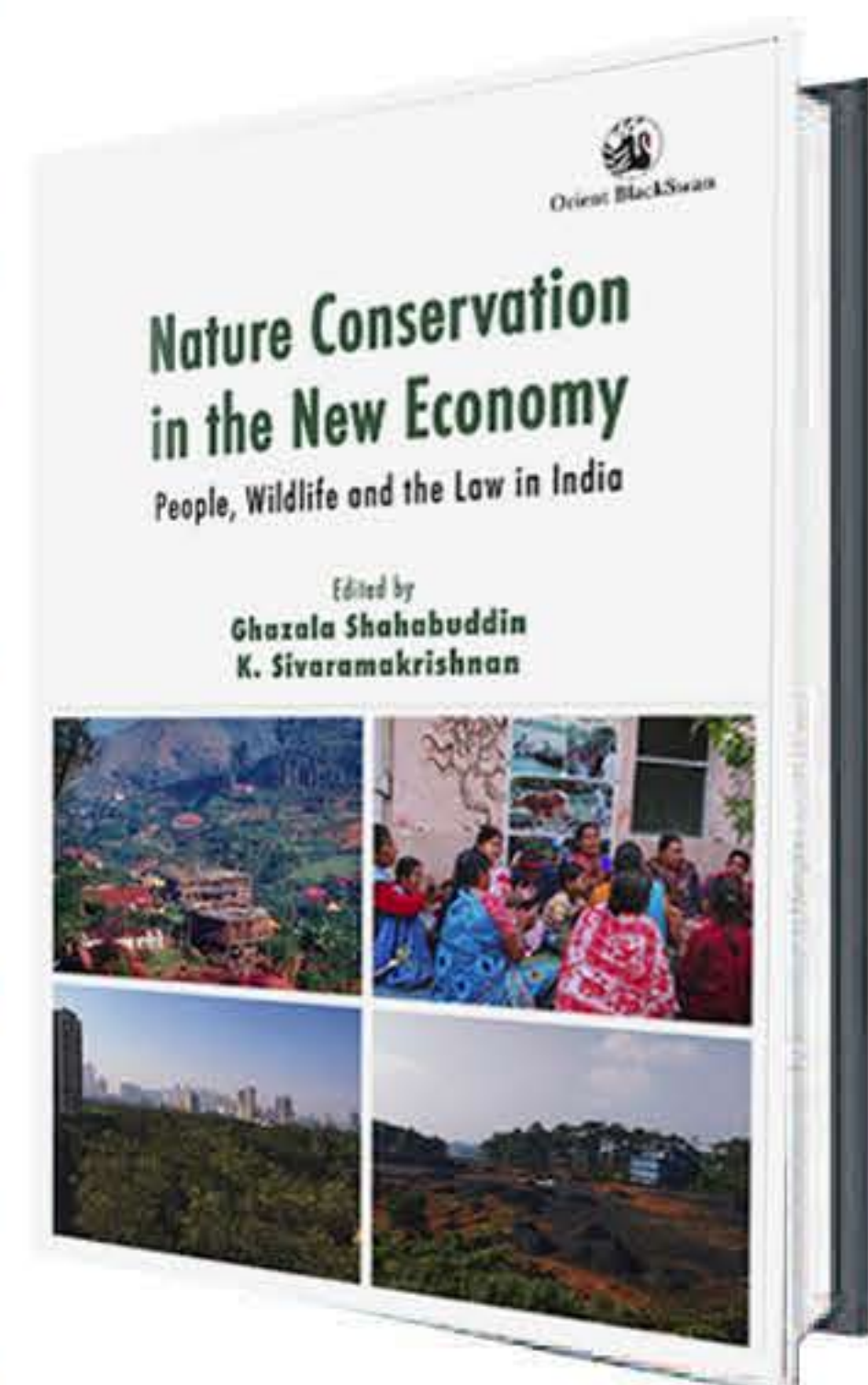
A detailed look at case studies can provide a sense of the scope of the book. In one of two chapters on the little-studied forests of northeast India, Rajkamal Goswami and T Ganesh describe the changes in the Jaintia Hills. Now gaining importance because of its strategic location, the forests in this region – mostly controlled by community management – have steadily lost ground to limestone mining and the growth of cement industries. The authors identify the North-East Industrial Investment Promotion Policy of 1997 as having played a major role in driving deforestation in this region, with seven large cement factories being established in the community forests of Jaintia Hills within a decade of this policy. Most of the industries that have come up are owned by large industrial groups, including a French group that now owns thousands of acres of once-biodiverse forest land.

In another fascinating piece on India's wetlands and streams, often reviled as 'dirty', treated as wastelands, and even mislabeled as drains, Neha Sinha of the Bombay Natural History Society documents how India's wetland conservation policies focus on large, impressive water bodies such as Ramsar sites, while leaving out the everyday wetlands, streams and 'drains' that provide critical functions of natural sewage treatment, ground water recharge, flood control, and biodiversity protection. In this process, modern India is steadily wiping its wetlands out of existence, turning them into cemented drains, roads, power plants, airports, and industrial parks. Yet wetlands are one of the most important weapons

the country has in its fight against flooding induced by future climate change – a fact that we fail to recognize. How else can we explain the fact that Mumbai, much of which is poised to go underwater in a few decades because of climate change, continues with its mad mission to build a second airport on the Navi Mumbai wetlands?

This book could have been more cohesive. It comes across more as an ensemble of chapters on related themes than as an integrated collection. But this is an inevitable challenge with any book that tries to cover new ground such as this. In a world where GDP rates are always on the front page, but conservation rarely makes it even to the middle pages of the daily newspaper, such books are sorely needed to provoke new thinking and action.

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■ Nature strikes back: Floods in Dadar TT, Mumbai, on September 4, 2019 PRATIK CHARGE/HT PHOTO