



NTFP

LEAF LITTER

Summer Solstice Issue

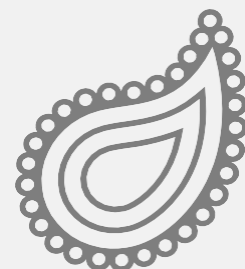
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Cover page: *Kigelia africana*, also known as the sausage tree occurs throughout tropical Africa. The word *Kigelia* has its origin in the Bantu language



Negotiating disparities

In most climate change negotiations and discussions, as in the COP meetings, India stresses the fact that its contribution to carbon emissions is far lower than the developed nations. And rightly so. As of 2021, per capita fossil carbon dioxide emissions were 4 tC (total carbon) for the USA; 2.2 for China, 1.7 for the EU and 0.5 for India. In recent decades, India's growing economy and population have made it the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), after China and the USA. In 2021, India emitted 3.9 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, about 7% of the global output. However, per capita emissions in India are far below that of the US and China; this is the leverage India uses while negotiating how long it will take to cut down on emissions, and by how much. India also demands funds from developed nations for submitting to these norms.

India does not fail to let the developed nations recognize the disparity when they deal with developing countries. In particular, India categorically rejects their suggestion that India cuts its dependence on fossil fuels according to their time line. Considering that the west's growth over the years was fuelled by pollution, they have little moral right to stall India – or any other developing nation – from going the same way.

But a little scrutiny is in order. India, or any other country for that matter, is not homogenous. Studies reveal that India's rich, the top 20%, has a carbon footprint seven times larger than its poorer households (those who spend < Rs 140/day).¹ The disparity between the rich and the poor needs to be stressed as India's top one percent own 40.5% of its total wealth; only 3% has

trickled to the bottom 50 percent of the people.² The number of billionaires increased from 102 to 166 in 2021, while the poor struggle for basic necessities. The poor and the middle class in India are taxed more than the rich.

For the poor, the bulk of their emissions come from food and electricity, the main spending areas. If all Indians take to consuming as the rich and the super rich do, the country would emit 50% times more carbon dioxide equivalents than at present. Among the very poor and marginalized, at least economically, are the indigenous and forest dwelling peoples, about 9% of the population. Most of them live in the forested belts of central India, the Eastern and Western Ghats, the north east states, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These are the peoples who have been the guardians of the country's resources, both below and above the ground, and whose lifestyles have hardly left any carbon footprint, but whose collective carbon 'share' is claimed by our leaders as the rightful share of the nation, but used exclusively by the rich. In the international arena this is a scrutiny that India seldom needs to face, as the lines that are drawn are between nations, and not what happens within nations. It is probable that the same scenario unfolds in many of the African and Latin American countries, and in other parts of Asia.

It is time that India faces up to this internal disparity in lifestyle and economics among its peoples and comes up with development policies that are pro-poor. Simultaneously, it could think about a 1 or 2 % wealth tax on its billionaires and use the funds towards eradication of mal-nutrition among the poor, and the restoration of its closed mines.

Madhu Ramnath

¹<https://carboncopy.info/indias-rich-emit-7-times-more-than-countrys-poor-study/>

²<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-64286673>

A spring trek through Saranda forest

Rohan Mukerjee



Amit Jamuda

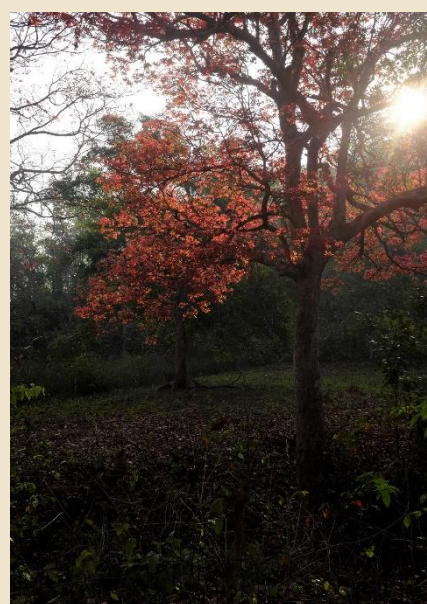
On an early spring morning in March, I accompanied young Amit Jamuda for a trek through the *Darka Daa* forest area surrounding Mamar village. Mamar is in the Saranda Forest region in Manoharpur Block of West Singhbhum Block, Jharkhand. My guide Amit is Keystone's Community Resource Person Inda Jamuda's nephew. Amit is pursuing his Intermediate studies from the neighbouring town of Manoharpur. However, having been born and raised in Mamar he has a rich knowledge of the diverse variety of trees and plants in the forests surrounding his village. He enthusiastically shared his knowledge with me pointing out a variety of wild food, Non-Timber Forest Produce

(NTFP), trees and plants along our trail, also highlighting their uses and benefits.

Saranda, once Asia's largest Sal forest, is currently under threat as a result of intensive mining activities principally for Iron Ore which has far reaching negative implications for the ecology of the region as well as the indigenous communities like the Ho people of Mamar who have depended on these forests for their survival for thousands of years. Fortunately, the region continues to harbour rich and diverse forest areas like the *Darka Daa* forest area around Mamar.



Kusum/ Baru (Ho)



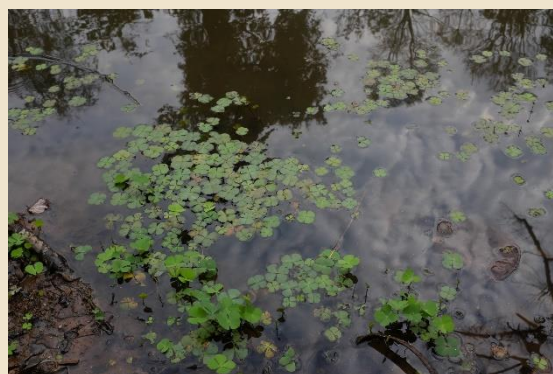
Kusum/ Baru (Ho)



Large siyali vine

Our first stop was a small pond adjoining the forest where *Chatom Aah* (*Marselia quadrifolia*), a perennial uncultivated green leafy vegetable found near water bodies, was growing abundantly in the shallows. We then passed a giant Banyan whose canopy was tinged with red as a result of the tender new red leaves that were sprouting alongside mature green and yellowing older leaves. In a clearing a little beyond the Banyan we were treated to a far more extravagant leaf flushing phenomenon. A few *Kusum* trees (*Schleichera oleosa*) had lit up the area with their bright red new leaves. At a time when most other trees in the forest are leafless these vibrant new leaves make the *Kusum* tree stand out. The young leaves appear red because of a pigment called Anthocyanin which belong to a major class of phenolic phytochemicals. The higher concentration of phenolics as well as higher visibility to predators deter leaf eating insects. Anthocyanin also protects the vulnerable young leaves from the harmful radiation of the sun, till the time they are ready to cope with it. The *Kusum* known as *Baru* in Ho is a very beneficial tree with multiple uses. Later Inda Jamuda shared that the bright red tender leaves are boiled and eaten as a vegetable. The small berry shaped tart fleshy fruits are eaten and are a favourite

among children. Oil extracted from the seed is much valued. *Kusum* oil is used to apply on the body and in cooking. Inda shared that when cooking with *Baru tel* they heat the oil and before cooking they add a little water which immediately turns to steam after which the oil is ready for use.



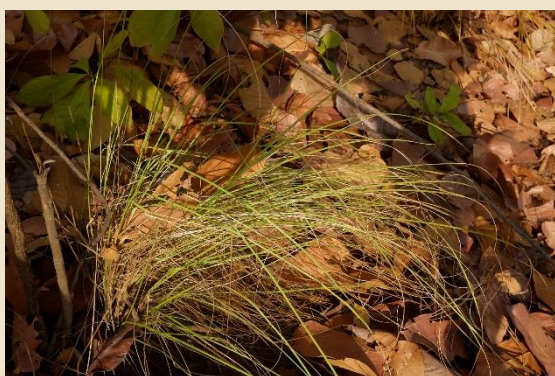
Chatom Aah found near water bodies throughout the year

As we made our way deeper into the forest Amit pointed out a number of different wild food and NTFP trees and plants for which he shared names in the Ho language. These included –

- Serali (*Randia dumetorum*)– A thorny plant, whose tender leaves are made into a vegetable preparation. The leaves are made into a sabji (vegetable dish).
- Ranu Redh – a climber whose root is used to make local rice brews like Rossi and Hadiya. Sadly, such natural fermenting agents are being replaced by harmful chemicals in most areas.
- Loaa (Ho) or Dumar (Hindi) – they use the fruit as a vegetable when raw and also eat it ripe.
- Hootar Baha (*Indigofera cassioides*) also known as *Jirhul* across Jharkhand and Odisha –

currently the shrubs had a profusion of pods and a few remaining leaves and seed pods. This shrub has vibrant pink flowers with flowering in January and February. The flowers are eaten as a vegetable.

- Kukui Sanga (*Dioscorea pubera*) – a wild tuber whose climber tends to dry up during this season.
- Drung Sakam (Ho) which is also known as *Siali Patta* in Odisha and *Mahul Patta* in MP (*Bauhinia Vahlii*) – This thick and sturdy vine is found across the forests of the region and its leaves constitute a valuable NTFP, being used to make plates, bowls and packing material.
- Kita or Wild date (*Phoenix acualis*)– the mature leaves are harvested and used for making mats which are used for drying paddy and for other domestic uses.
- Jono – a wild grass used to make brooms
- Bachom (*Eulaliopsis binate*) - a grass used to make the rope for Khatiya (a cot)



Bachom grass used to make the rope for khatiya

In the course of the trail, I realised that not only did Amit have a substantial knowledge of the different wild foods and forest produce found in the forests

around his village, he also knew where to find specific trees and plants. While discussing different wild foods he shared that *Bhurui* (*Gardenia gummifera*) is another fruit that they eat. He asked me if I was up for a climb as *Bhurui* shrubs tend to be found on hill tops and he knew of a place where we could find some. I agreed to the climb and after slipping and sliding up rocky slopes and making our way through dense undergrowth we made it to a hill top with a lovely view of the surrounding landscape. Here we found several *Bhurui* shrubs with white flowers and new leaves in the process of emerging. Fruiting would commence



Ficus/Banyan

within a month.

Towards the end of the trail while I was photographing a particularly tall Kusum tree I came across a substantial quantity of extremely large dried leaves under a leafless tree. Amit informed me that the leaves belonged to the Riyu tree (*Dillenia pentagyna*) which has a sour fruit that is used to make sabji and Achar / Pickle. Interestingly a few days later in while I was visiting Kheria Sabar villages of Bandwan Block, Purulia District, West Bengal, community resource person Jiban Hansda showed me the same tree which happened to be fruiting. The tree had small raw green fruits and a few remaining yellow flowers. This was a slightly confusing specimen as the top half was taken over by a Peepal (*Ficus*

Religiosa) and the small leaves towards the top belonged to the Peepal. Jiban shared that in Santali the tree is known as *Sahar* and they also use the sour fruits for vegetable and pickle preparations.

An interesting observation I made during the trail was that unlike the forest areas I had visited in other parts of Jharkhand and West Bengal like in East Singhbhum, Sundar Pahari and Purulia, these forests had a lot of dead wood on the forest floor. This is ecologically beneficial as Deadwood plays a key role in processes such as soil formation and nutrient cycling. As wood decomposes it returns important nutrients to the soil, supporting new growth. It also supports a variety of species, which depend on dead or dying wood to complete their life cycles. A possible reason for this phenomenon could be the fact that the villagers in this area do not engage in commercial trade of firewood only collecting enough firewood to meet their domestic needs thereby reducing the extraction pressure on both living trees and vital deadwood. This is possibly making a positive contribution towards the overall health of these forest areas.



Deadwood

I really enjoyed my time with Amit exploring the rich diversity of Saranda's remaining forest areas. It was really encouraging to find a young man like Amit who was pursuing studies away

from his village but was still in tune with the traditional way of life and practices of his community. However, this is not the case everywhere and in several other areas I have come across Adivasi youth who have lost touch with their traditional practices and knowledge especially with regards to traditional food systems as they gradually shift towards increased market dependence and associated modern food items and diets. There is an urgent need to ensure a balance between modern education and retaining traditional knowledge among youth belonging to indigenous and rural communities.



Flowers and new leaves of Bhurui; ripe fruit eaten

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Forest Conservation or Destruction Bill ?

Pandurang Hedge

During the last week of March 2023 the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill (FCAB), 2023 was introduced in the Lok Sabha. It aims to amend the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 which provides strict guidelines of seeking approval from the central government to divert forest lands for non forestry purposes. The bill exempts certain categories of lands from the purview of the Act to fast track strategic and security-related projects of national importance, to provide access to small establishments, habitations on the side of public roads and railways, and to encourage plantation on non-forest land.

According to the established procedures, the Bills are referred to the Standing Committee. In this case it should have been sent to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Science, Technology, Environment and Forests. Departing from this, it has been referred to a select committee of Parliament in the Lok Sabha, basically with the MPs from the ruling party that will ensure a smooth passing of the bill.

Is it a deliberate move to keep away Jairam Ramesh, an opposition MP, who is the chairman of the Standing Committee? We'll never know. However, we need to ask the fundamental question whether the proposed bill, once it becomes an Act, will be able to conserve the dwindling forests resources? And what are its implications on the millions of forest dwellers who eke out their livelihood from the forests?

The FCAB lists forest lands and projects that are exempted under the purview of the FCA. Forest clearance is not needed for projects that fall within 100 kms of the International boundary or Line of control. It means that the ecologically rich and bio diverse areas along 15000 kms of international border are open for destruction in the name of this strategic project. The entire Himalayan region, the Eastern states, the fragile islands of Andaman/ Nicobar and the only remaining forests in the Western Ghats on the West Coast can be diverted without any checks and balances.

In order to harness the rich forests of Central India, the FCAB has evolved another strategy. Forests up to 10 hectares can be cleared by Para military forces in left wing affected areas. Obviously, no forests are to be left to be conserved or protected, the overarching control is omnipresent in support for developing an economic model that is based on extractive resources.

Further exemptions for eco tourism resorts, and making way for 'silvicultural' operations and establishment of zoos/safaris is a clear indicator of allowing the private sector to take control of the forests. Henceforth forest areas can be leased to private or corporate entities for afforestation purposes to meet the target of

creating a carbon sink of 2.5 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent by 2030. In plain terms it is commodification of forest resources to help the corporate sector to access the global carbon market.

What is intriguing is the sweeping power given under the bill that states 'any other like purposes, which the central government may, by order specify'. This ambiguous terminology negates the entire purpose of the proposed bill, and is not only regressive but gives total authoritarian powers without any checks and balances to protect natural resources.

The Conservation of Forests has to go hand in hand with the participation of forest dwellers. The Forest Rights Act 2006 is a medium through which this is assured, as the Gram Sabha has to give permission for any kind of diversion of forest land in their village. In contrast to this the FCAB violates this statutory provision. As a consequence, this will have negative implications on millions of Adivasi communities.

Over the years the central government has systematically weakened the institutions that are the foundations for functioning of participatory democracy. Following the same ideology and with the aim of 'ease of doing business' it has sought to dilute the FC Act that laid a solid foundation to conserve the remaining natural forests in the country. Even before the Bill was introduced, the central government has issued notifications and rules to circumvent the FCA, to make way for linear infrastructure projects that took toll of the forests.

The present government has to realise that the narrative of building a strong nation is

feasible only through the protection and conservation of primary forests that provide national security through provision of water, soil and clean air that are the basic assets of mankind.

Though in the preamble to the FCAB claims about our country's rich traditions of preserving forests, and biodiversity, the detailed exemptions and additions result in obliterating these traditions and pave way for commodification through permitting private companies to own and lease forest land.

If this amendment is enacted into an Act, there will not be much to conserve, so it is ironical that the Act be called the *Van Sanmrakshan (conservation)* and *Samvardhan (enhancement) Adhiniyam*. When the proposed bill goes against the spirit of conservation and enhancement of existing forest areas it should be called Forest Destruction Bill 2023!

Pandurang Hegde is an activist based in Sirsi, Karnataka



Changes in forest policy

Mridula Chari

Some major developments in 2023 are shifting -the way forests are viewed and treated. This article is an attempt to map some of these developments.

The first change is the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980. A proposed amendment to the act will exclude forested land on revenue lands from being treated as forests. This is in contravention to a Supreme Court order which recognized forested areas outside forest maps as entitled to the same protections as notified forests.

At the same time, Parliament amended the Energy Conservation Act of 2001 to introduce a formalized carbon credit trading scheme that it hopes will accelerate India's goal to achieve net zero emissions by 2070.

And in the 2023 Union Budget, the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986 would be amended to include a green credit programme that would financially encourage the state, the private sector and individuals to conduct more sustainable processes.

A closer look at these seemingly disparate developments shows they are connected to how we understand forests and their "usefulness" to achieving India's global climate goals.

Act developments

The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act sets the stage for this transformation, beginning with these statements that reduce the importance of forests to being simply carbon sinks for net zero emissions:

"WHEREAS, the importance of forests is to be realised to enable achievement of national targets of Net Zero Emission by 2070 and maintain or enhance the forest carbon stocks through ecologically balanced sustainable development;

AND WHEREAS, Nationally Determined Contribution targets of the country envisage creating carbon sink of additional 2.5 to 3.0 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent by 2030;

AND WHEREAS, the country envisages an increase in the forest and tree cover to one-third of its land area, which is to be given impetus with an enhanced growth trajectory;"

Not only are these aligned with India's goals for the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions that India submitted to the United Nations in 2015, they are also aligned with India's National REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) Strategy of 2018.

Meanwhile, though the structure of the Green Credit Programme is not yet publicly available, the government has already circulated a draft framework for India's newly formalised carbon markets. Discussions with stakeholders, particularly those from industries, have already begun.

National carbon market

A national carbon market might finally bring some clarity to how forestry projects are financed, assessed and evaluated for impact.

This is important, given that international climate finance can be extremely dodgy when it comes to developed nations. It is important to understand how international funds might flow into any national carbon market that is established. Don't miss this recent Reuters investigation that found that countries had claimed Italian gelato stores in Asia, an Argentinian film and a Japanese coal plant in Bangladesh as projects funded by climate finance.

Two recent forest carbon projects in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh have been supported by the European Union and the World Bank. An investigative research paper by Ashish Aggarwal about these projects shows that the projects managed to sequester only 37% and 3% of their goals due to low or no carbon revenues.

The underlying assumption of forest carbon finance is that agriculture (or in India's case, industries) is more lucrative than forestry so forest owners need to be compensated for lost revenue and incentivized not to cut down trees in that area. While market-driven programs like the commodification of carbon credits are often critiqued, state-led programs do not face the same scrutiny.

In countries like India, carbon forestry has “not led to the transformation of practices but instead towards re-packaging existing programs under new headings with more continuity than change,” says a 2022 paper by Forrest Fleischmann and others. They add, “Carbon finance relies on the

presence of enforceable rights, representative and accountable institutions, clear incentives and symmetrical power relations. [...] Without those, carbon finance can incentivize the undermining of human rights and biodiversity – without storing carbon. [...] Forest carbon finance is having fewer positive impacts and more negative impacts than would be possible with an approach that emphasizes political reform.”

A final loose end is the Trees Outside Forests in India program, funded by the United States Agency for International Development and India's Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. This program aims to expand tree cover outside forest areas to promote carbon sequestration. Apart from questionable methods to assess actual carbon sequestration, given the amendment in the Forest (Conservation) Act, this program might then apply to areas that are currently considered and treated as forests. It might be necessary to observe how or whether these have any impact on one another.

Policy instruments

It is not just acts that are getting amended. In its long-term low-carbon development strategy of 2022, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change lists the following public policy instruments that contribute to India's goals for carbon sequestration in forests:

- The National Forest Policy (1988), which aims to bring 33% of the country's geographical area under forest and tree cover.
- The National Afforestation Programme (NAP) for afforestation of degraded forest lands, with a focus on “the

poor”. National Mission for a Green India (GIM): A mission under the National Action Plan for Climate Change to “protect, restore and enhance the decreasing forest cover of India.” NAP and GIM have since been merged.

- National REDD+ Strategy 2018: REDD+ aims to achieve climate change mitigation by incentivizing forest conservation. The strategy seeks to address drivers of deforestation and forest degradation and develop a roadmap for enhancement of forest carbon stocks and achieving sustainable management of forests through REDD+ actions.
- Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA): The state collects CAMPA funds from infrastructure developers who cut down forest lands. This is the primary source of funding for forest afforestation.
- Other schemes include the Forest Fire Prevention and Management Scheme (FFPMS); Nagar Van Yojana (NVY); School Nursery Yojana (SNY); Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) (In 2015, the centre issued guidelines to bring GIM goals to MGNREGS); National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM); Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT); and tree plantation by states.

It is concerning that India has declassified certain areas as forests even as it channels funds towards afforestation initiatives funded by CAMPA, which might in turn weaken the already tenuous Forest Rights

Act. In a 2019 publication, Sharachchandra Lele warns of the implications of using CAMPA funds for forestation activities. “If carbon-centric forestry is prioritized for the sake of INDC3, then forest governance will get further re-centralized, [...] something predicted globally for REDD+ as well,” Lele says. “Resolving the governance issue will be crucial to improving the synergies and reducing trade-offs between carbon sequestration, local livelihoods, and conservation, and for seeing lasting impacts on the ground.”

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Cheesy Japaneesy

Wytze Ramnath

Hollywood's problematic cultural appropriation is nothing new, but some steps to try to fix these outdated approaches have been taken; replacing false ethnic representations (blackface/ redface/ yellowface, etc.) with 'originary casting' (Shohat and Stam 1994). Yet, there is still a lot of work to be done, and progress is a slow process. In comparing Rob Marshal's 2005 *Memoirs of a Geisha* and David Leitch's 2022 *Bullet Train*, it becomes clear that after seventeen years, the cultural appropriation of Japanese representations has not changed in Hollywood Cinema. Both these movies are based on books, *Memoirs of a Geisha* was written by American writer Arthur Golden, who faced backlash and was sued for defamation as he broke his promises of confidentiality, was factually inaccurate and hugely misunderstood the culture. *Maria Beetle* (2010) by Japanese author Kotaro Isaka adapted into *Bullet*, was well received. These films have more in common such as the lack of Japanese actors on screen. *Geisha* faced more backlash for this as none of the female leads was Japanese, casting Chinese and Malay women ('Geisha Film-Makers Defend Casting' 2005). Both Japanese and Chinese viewers were upset by these choices, yet the American filmmakers defended their choices (2005).

Bullet faced similar backlash and accusations of whitewashing, yet the author did not mind, stating that these were not real people and that they were "ethnically malleable" and therefore not necessarily Japanese (Kohler 2022). Similar criticism was drawn to the location of filming as neither film was filmed in Japan, but in California (Barrie-Anthony et al. 2006). In *Bullet*, the train travels through animated graphic backgrounds, which was the best option in regards to being filmed through the Covid-19 pandemic (Rich 2022). So how is it that so many of the same problems still exist after more than a decade since the backlashes for *Geisha*? I argue that the capitalist Americanizational approach towards The Other uses these problematic factors to communicate a twisted understanding of verisimilitude that only considers the perspective of the West. Otherwise, why would *Bullet Train* embody factors that made *Memoirs of a Geisha* so controversial?

Starting with the most fundamental layers of film understanding, one notices all the semantic elements in both films create meaning: the props, costumes, makeup and set design give the viewers an understanding of the characters, setting and plot. Taking the semantic approach toward these films creates a syntax of 'Asianness' (Altman 1984). This 'Asianness' is not explicitly negative though, as from an American standpoint (as of the directors, one of the authors, and the intended Hollywood audiences) is constructive as it creates verisimilitude (Neale 2012). Although these depictions are problematic in many ways and complete with inaccuracies and discrimination, these ideas of 'Asianness' sell the believability of The Other (in this

case, Japan) and fit into viewer expectations of an Oriental genre film (2012).

Writing about Western depictions of the East very quickly calls for Edward Said's (1973) concepts of *Orientalism* which boil down to the ontological and epistemological distinctions between the East and the West. Ironically, with this concept and these films, these decisions and depictions come from the West. For example, both films are English-speaking, even if the characters and settings are not of English-speaking normality. This difference between Eastern depictions of the Orient versus the Western representation is immense, and when looked at in film through the concepts of Neale, Altman, and Said become quite obvious and difficult to unsee.

This happens to many countries in the East, but very often to Japan. Wester Wagenaar (2016) argues that Japan has now become the face of Orientalism and that with Japan, two types of Orientalism arise: traditional Orientalism and techno-orientalism. Techno-orientalism bears a resemblance to technology, robots and innovation, contrasting with the older and more traditional ideals of orientalism like samurai and geisha (2016). In his article *Wacky Japan*, Wagenaar (2016) states that there is now a third form of Orientalism, which he calls Wacky Orientalism, which is the form in which Japan is now being perceived in the media and popular culture. He concludes that the West judges them as being weird and uses this framework of Japan's perceived bizarreness to set the standard for what is normal (2016).

Though Orientalism is used to keep a power balance in place, the Japanese themselves also align with this very

concept (Nishihara 2005). Japan has been aware of its prejudiced representation, being exposed to political/ military pressures from the West since they started modernizing, and that this discourse is deeply intertwined with the Occident's power structure (2005). This concept does not only bring anti-Western thought either; Japan having been a colonizing country themselves, can come under scrutiny yet are in a pivotal position wherein they understand both sides of Orientalism (2005). These above concepts all play key roles in understanding the layers embedded in the films in question, namely themes of Americanization/capitalism, 'weak' Japan vs. 'powerful' America, and the commodification of culture.

With both the films in question being American-made, The Other is clearly defined as the Orient, even though it is where the movie is set. American capitalist themes are easy to spot in both films, reiterating the perspective of the West, and their perceived power balance. In *Geisha*, the Disney ending of the female protagonist (Chiyo) finding love is a signifier of this. This happily ever after end indicates the American Dream narrative; it dictates gender roles and social norms in a Western way (Garlen and Sandlin 2017). The chairman, who becomes romantically involved with Chiyo, symbolizes these themes. Semantically, his Western clothing and money are elevated through syntax to signify power and freedom (Altman 1984). This is reiterated by the renting of geisha and buying virginity by similar characters (Marshall 2005). Money plays a big role in this movie: the buying and renting of people, and the power it has to change the lives of these poorly depicted characters, reflects American capitalistic ideology,

glorifying the haves from the have-nots, or, the Occident from the Orient (Said 1978).

In *Bullet*, the choice to cast A-list Hollywood stars says a lot. Brad Pitt, a well-established actor is symbolic of America, with cameos from similar symbols like Sandra Bullock, Channing Tatum and Ryan Reynolds. The cast is expanded with prominent participation from British, Black and Latino roles, injecting an international, yet very Western appeal. Though this film is set in Japan, its focus on foreigners is exclusive, with the characters in the book altered, and Tokyo chosen as the starting destination as “its international nature would support the film’s multiracial cast” (Kohler 2022). These accusations of whitewashing and using multiracial casts also point to the focus on profit in Hollywood as this was “part business decision” (2022). The semantics in *Bullet* make for a very ‘Asian’ feel, with smooth animation, and comic book-like effects (Hadfield 2022). This shows that Hollywood still has misconceptions about Japan, with signage typos and the Japanese characters’ cell phones ten years out of date (2022). The depiction of geisha were similar, and many were uncomfortable with the way both the director and author of *Geisha* portrayed and miscommunicated them as Japanese courtesans (Acar 2021). Still, both films doubled their respective budgets (‘The Numbers’ 2023).

As Said argues, the objective of Orientalism is to maintain a balance of power (1978). In these films, it is noticeable that this balance of power leans in the favor of the West. In *Geisha*, the chairman’s Western clothing and attitude pair with his power and freedom, implying that the ones that deal with the West, or on

their terms, profit (Altman 1984). These differences between the chairman and the others indicate indeed who is the Other, regardless of setting and place. Towards the end of *Geisha*, the Second World War occurs, turning our protagonist’s life upside down. With rubble at her feet, the focus shifts to now pleasing and entertaining the Americans as a means to rebuild their own culture (Marshall 2005). America brought destruction, with references to the atomic bombs dropped, yet no punishment is hinted at, and it seems as though America gets away with this monstrosity unscathed (2005). The same happens in *Bullet*, where the Hollywood A-listers exit the train into the rubble of a completely destroyed town, yet are able to walk away without any repercussions or regrets (Leitch 2022). The most powerful characters are all foreign, and it can be argued that if an Oriental character does rank higher in the power hierarchy, it is for profitable reasons such as ‘inclusion’ (Hadfield 2022).

At the same time, the West sees itself as the savior of the East, with these forms of destruction supposedly serving an alleged better ending. In *Geisha*, it is WWII, which has implications of stopping communism from taking over and hence saving Japan from itself (Marshall 2005). It is the same in *Bullet*, where again the Orient has been saved from itself through Occidental intervention, with the destruction considered a minor side effect to be rebuilt into ‘something better’ by the Orient.

After WWII, with the West now occupying the East in *Geisha*, the commodification of Oriental culture is conspicuous. The texts as a “cultural phenomena signified the Oriental as a sexualized and exoticized object to be

commodified by the West” (Akita 2006). The semiotics and feeling created through syntax give the end of this film a very Oriental feel, and the underlying Western perspective now rears its head, and Altman (1984) and Neale’s (2012) concepts become explicit and easy to digest. As Sayuri states “Any streetwalker with a painted face and silk kimono could call herself a geisha”. Portrayed through this ignorant disregard for another’s culture, the focus on money rather than one’s own culture, as is the case for Pumpkin (Sayuri’s friend from the okiya) (Marshall 2005). This commodification instills Said’s Orientalist balance of power, reducing the value of anything outside the Occident (1978). This Western attitude and ideology are expressed in the American Colonel’s comment in describing Sayuri, saying “Sayuri is one of the mysteries of the Orient I told you about”, implicitly objectifying her as a commodity with a price tag, and later trying to buy her (Marshall 2005).

The same is reflected in the semiotics of *Bullet*, wherein “the signage contains multiple typos” and “that all the Japanese characters use old-school ‘Galapagos phones’ rather than smartphones” which were already a decade out of date (Hadfield 2022). Yet it is this exact misuse and misinformation that gives Hollywood’s audience a feel of the Oriental, even if it is incorrect, and maybe especially if it is incorrect (Neale 2012). The train itself embodies Wacky Orientalism, bringing together a mix of both traditional Orientalism and techno-orientalism, being a commodified object in itself, in service to foreign subjects (Wagenaar 2016). More props walk this fine line such as “yakuza, electric toilets, vending machines, a ubiquitous anime

character named Momomon and a whole lot of neon” (Hadfield 2022). Set in Tokyo, the city operates only as an “international setting”, rather than a homeland or place for development – it is a place to go *through* and not *remain* in (2022).

Placing both *Bullet Train* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* in the framework of the concepts of Altman, Neale, Said and Wagenaar exposes a side of Hollywood that many do not notice, or pay enough attention to. The exploitation of the ideas of the Orient, and the continued myths of the structures of power between the Orient versus the Occident are not something of old and continue in popular media today (Said 1978). These movies can be boiled down quite simply to display the concepts in question, leaving us with a rather transparent product: Altman’s (1984) semiotics/syntax theory is applied to what we see on screen, which in turn gives us a certain feeling. This feeling, paired with public appreciation and expectations, enters the films into generic corpuses where they can ‘belong’ and deliver verisimilitude (Neale 2012). However, the verisimilitude that is delivered depends on the power balance as these movies come from the Occident, and so represent the Orient in a way that can not be considered equal as they are inherently biased (Said 1978). Holding on to representational ideas of the past, but mixing them with newer stereotypes and perceptions, brings us to the third level of Said’s 1978 concept of Orientalism which Wagenaar (2016) has named Wacky Orientalism. This framework brings out prejudice and favoritism, promoting the Occident, and confirming through these movies that “Hollywood hasn’t lost its knack for topsy-turvy visions of Japan” (Hadfield

2022).

Bullet and *Geisha* embody what Said (1978) predicted: The Orient will perceive itself as the Occident perceives it. These films confirm the perception that the idea of the Orient has been transmitted to itself, hence, they are less critical of films that perpetuate this process (1978). Even as long as seventeen years after *Geisha*, *Bullet* shows us that Hollywood has yet to rid itself of their fixations of cheesy Japanese.

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Countering Extractivism

Malvika Gupta and Felix Padel

The assault on India's environment has reached a level of great danger for future generations. Water sources are under huge threat in particular. The mining and metals industries are at the heart of this assault. On one side, these industries contribute significantly to India's GDP, and offer many new jobs and opportunities. On the other, they have dispossessed thousands of communities and threaten thousands more. They drain and privatise scarce water sources and obliterate some of India's last forests. Most of the promised jobs are degrading and offer little or no job security, due to weakened labour legislation. Those of us who have witnessed ecosystems and livelihoods devastated at close hand often wonder how to communicate an understanding of what is at stake.

In Latin America, 500 years of devastation by mining, and more recently by oil companies, has led to an understanding of and resistance to 'extractivism' that India needs to learn from. In November 2018, indigenous peoples in Ecuador organised a march across the whole country against all extractive projects.¹ In India, such concerted resistance is inconceivable in any state. Many projects meet strong local resistance, but there is relatively little co-

ordination between movements, and no political party has a policy of opposing extractivism.

'*Open veins of Latin America*' (1971) opened a new awareness on the ferociously marginalised topic of mining. Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano summarizes the history, from conquistadors' lust for gold, through Bolivia's infamous Potosi silver mines, to cash crop plantations such as sugarcane, coffee and bananas that extract land and water. Extractive projects have militarised the dispossession of communities, involving the violent overthrow of left-leaning governments in Guatemala, Chile and other countries.

Since that book's publication, vast copper mines gouge huge craters in the landscape in Chile, Ecuador and elsewhere. Brazil's extensive expansion of coal, iron and bauxite mines, with steel and aluminium factories and mega-dams on the Amazon tributaries to fuel them, were a blueprint for the expansion we have witnessed in Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand – especially regarding the boost in aluminium production. Though Brazil is larger in size, India long ago overtook it in production. When *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (Samarendra Das & Felix Padel) was published in 2010, India was hovering around no.5 or 6 in aluminium and steel production. Now it's easily no.2 in both, as well as in coal, after China. China's production is nearly ten times more than India's, but dropping, while India's is rising.

¹<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/11/15/ecuadors-indigenous-march-over-600km-to-demand-an-end-to-mining>

To many, this is a cause for celebration – but only from lack of comprehension of the real costs. Regarding water, the Wuppertal Institute in Germany calculates that producing one tonne of steel consumes over 40 tonnes of water. Producing a tonne of aluminium consumes over 1,300 tonnes of water. Can India afford this? The context is one of dropping water tables and increasing numbers of villages dependent on water deliveries by truck. Labour is mercilessly exploited, ecosystems destroyed, and large corporations frequently fail to pay their taxes and electricity bills.

One of the world's single worst mining scenarios is the cobalt mines in Congo. Siddharth Kara's book *Cobalt Red: How the blood of the Congo powers our lives* (2023) is a work of courageous investigative journalism, that tears the veil off the slavery-in-all-but-name that traps 100,000s of Africans into a life of squalor and danger, and reveals how, in effect, every single mobile and electric car company is complicit in this supply chain. Calling electric cars 'green' appears a supreme example of 'green capitalism'. For one, there's nothing green about the lithium used in the batteries; for another, new lightweight electric cars use new aluminium, fused with plastics and therefore unrecyclable; quite apart from questions about where the electricity comes from.

Greenwash works across continents and organisations. Carbon offsets are basically an accounting trick, when one understands how CDMs work: 'Clean Development Mechanism' projects are approved almost automatically,² so a sponge iron factory

gets CDM money just for buying 'cleaner' technology from Scandinavian countries, and a new dam gets credits just for not burning carbon, officially counted as 'renewable energy' despite destroying huge areas of forest and fields. Lepcha protesters in Sikkim have been particularly vocal on the outrage of CDM credits coming to the dams on the Teesta river.³

India's industrial transformation began under Nehru. During the 1960s, India became the world's most indebted country to the World Bank for its Damodar Valley dams and expansion of coal mining. The story of how steel and aluminium factories were built rapidly in joint venture with companies from other countries is too little known: the steel plant in Rourkela was built with German aid, the Korba aluminium factories with Soviet and Hungarian engineers, Hindalco and Indal were set up in joint venture with Kaiser and Alcan (US, Canada), Nalco with Pechiney (France), and so on. The immensity of displacement of Adivasi and other villagers by the mines, factories and megadams involved completely contradicted Nehru's sympathetic words about tribal people developing according to their own genius in his Panchsheel policy. Few remember how Lohia confronted Nehru over mass displacement by the Rihand dam in southeast UP, and the highly subsidised price at which hydropower was sold to Hindalco's Renukoot factory. One of aluminium's dirty secrets is that producing it can only make a profit if such subsidies are allowed.

The expansion of mines and factories since Nehru is on a scale too few comprehend.

²<http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/carbon-trading-0>

³ <https://carbonmarketwatch.org/2013/03/27/mega-dams-and-cdm-fraud-in-sikkim/>

Coalgate in 2011 was a smoksecreen, in the sense that it laid all the emphasis on irregularities in bidding for coal deposits and deposits not being utilised – which could have been seen as beneficial! - while masking how the Prime Minister's Office overruled Jairam Ramesh as environment minister calling for a third of India's accessible coal deposits, under prime forests and tribal communities, to remain "No Go" areas for the foreseeable future. Instead, against world trends, India is currently aiming to extract all available coal, to fuel an overall 'development plan' that is quite unsustainable for future generations. Meanwhile, those heroic campaigners and lawyers who question this and are perceived as slowing down this coal extraction are punished without pity.⁴

The hidden costs of producing aluminium and steel explain why the so-called 'developed' countries have closed down most of their steel and aluminium factories and underground coal mines during the last 15 years. Instead, metal production with all its environmental and economic costs is externalised onto 'developing countries', where people are encouraged to believe they're overtaking the West, unaware of how much damage these projects' unthinking expansion does to ecosystems and human lives.

What defines a 'developing country' – from even a cursory analysis - seems above all the presence of an aggressively exporting arms industry, not least in the clean-seeming Scandinavian countries. Sweden had its Bofors scandal; and it was Alfred

Nobel who turned Bofors from an iron to an arms producer. Many believe he only instituted the peace prize to draw attention away from perceptions that he was an 'agent of death'.⁵ Arms companies depend closely on mining companies. Like them their sales involve large-scale corruption, and are central to the world and national economies, yet remain largely out of view, little studied by students of economics; though a key causal factor in all the world's armed conflicts.⁶ Every piece of military hardware sold to Ukraine and elsewhere has to be replaced by mining and metals factories, and UK sales include depleted uranium, used in shells that have polluted large areas in Iraq and elsewhere with dangerous toxic dust for generations to come.⁷

The concept of extractivism emphasizes extraction of underground resources, especially of carbon deposits and minerals, but also of water - the water table has dropped dangerously in much of India, China, USA, Australia, the Middle East and elsewhere – as well as the extraction of land from people through plantations etc. While conventional climate science emphasizes links between carbon emissions, global warming and climate change, by measuring CO₂ particles per million, this destabilising depletion of groundwater is little highlighted, and nor is mining. Official world policy focuses on achieving 'net carbon zero'. This depends on 'developed countries' importing the metals they need, including for arms manufacture, from other countries, such as India, whose current

⁴<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/05/india-coal-adani-modi-crackdown/>

⁵ <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/alfred-nobel-dynamite-inventor-dies-italy>

⁶ <http://www.theshadowworldbook.com/>

⁷ <https://scheerpost.com/2023/03/22/uk-to-give-ukraine-depleted-uranium-shells-despite-russian-warning/>

plans are to continue expanding coal production until 2050.⁸

Ecuador has witnessed a fusion between indigenous consciousness and leftwing politics that has little parallel in India. Oil projects have devastated parts of the Amazon rainforest and the lives of indigenous communities; and similar oil prospecting has been implemented violently in Peru and Bolivia since, including the controversial TIPNIS project against indigenous resistance implemented by Evo Morales.⁹ The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities in Ecuador (CONAIE) has a policy of opposing all extractive projects and the escalating debt and neoliberal policies that they entail.¹⁰

Rights of Nature is a principle first articulated in Ecuador and brought into the country's Constitution in 2008, and proclaimed soon after by indigenous peoples in the Cochabamba Declaration in 2010.¹¹ In India, conservationists and tribal rights activists too often remain in bitter conflict.¹² Communities are still being displaced from land where they have always lived in over 500 designated sanctuaries and national parks.¹³ India's remaining areas of biodiversity are divided between these areas set aside for wildlife and 'national sacrifice' areas earmarked for mining and industrialisation. What is the

future for all those communities with over hundreds of years evolved livelihoods based on respect for nature, and restraint in what is taken from it?

India's oil and gas projects under land (as opposed to under the sea) receive little focus: Cairn Energy, an originally Scottish subsidiary of Vedanta, is already extracting oil in Barmer district, Rajasthan. In Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and other states in Northeast India, prospecting for oil has met stiff resistance, cruelly suppressed, and oil spills have already caused havoc.¹⁴

The expansion of coal, bauxite, iron ore and other minerals, and proliferation of metal factories, poses immediate threats for countless Adivasi and other communities still living as sustainably as anyone in the country. We need to understand the meaning of extractivism. If future generations are to have a fair quality of life, we have to start reversing the learning,¹⁵ taking indigenous peoples as our teachers,¹⁶ as we work out how new economic models that aren't based on unsustainable extraction of what politicians and economists call 'resources', but what Adivasis understand as sources of life.

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⁸<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/energy/the-end-of-coal-58909>

⁹ <https://theecologist.org/2019/jan/30/highway-threatens-bolivian-national-park>

¹⁰https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/anti-extractive-politics

¹¹ <https://www.garn.org/universal-declaration-for-the-rights-of-mother-earth/>

¹² 'In Defence of the Land', by Malvika Gupta and Felix Padel, in *Ecosophies of Freedom: Suturing Social, Ecological & Spiritual rift*, Milind Wani ed. Pune: Kalpavriksh, 2023

¹³<https://www.counterview.net/2023/03/karnataka-tribal-network-opposes.html>

¹⁴<https://cramanipur.wordpress.com/2020/07/25/baghjan-oil-spill-rethinking-oil-exploration-in-indias-north-east/>

¹⁵<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/economy/reverse-the-learning-57776>

¹⁶ <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Chomsky-World-Indigenous-People-Only-Hope-for-Human-Survival-20160726-0040.html>

Are Indian forests shady enough ? Some thoughts on the language of forest governance

Madhu Ramnath

Language, *n*.

The music with which we charm the
serpents guarding another's treasure.¹⁷

Language is a curious thing. Words and phrases can be left 'open' to interpretation, or misinterpretation, and used to serve the context that prevails. The context, usually, is in the interest and belief of the party in power.

We had understood a forest to be a naturally grown area of trees and associated species, as any lay person is likely to do, without bothering about its "legal" status. This was something the Supreme Court directed the state to do after the *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad vs. Union of India and Others* [(1997) 2 SCC 267] case, allowing the provisions of the Forest Conservation Act (1980) to be valid more extensively, without the limitations of 'notified' forests alone. Areas in government records recognized as 'forest' came under the ambit of the FCA,

and 'clearances' were needed if they were to be diverted for non-forestry purposes.¹⁸

Apparently, this last judgement of the Supreme Court was prone to misinterpretation as well as hindered strategic development and infrastructure. There were many non-forest activities in the pipeline that required 'forest clearance'. To rectify this aberration, an amendment to the Act has been introduced, called The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill, 2023. This Bill does away with the earlier view of forests – meaning the 'dictionary' meaning of forests – and asserts that only *notified* forests come under the FCA, and that too only lands notified as forests after 25/10/1980.

The requirement for forest clearance in forest areas is enshrined in some sections of the Forest Conservation Act 1980, an Act sometimes known as *Forest Clearance*, as one had to refer to it before giving clearance for any land that was diverted for non-forestry purposes. To overcome this hurdle, some new sections are now inserted into the Amendment, such as:

1A. (1) The following land shall be covered under the provisions of this Act, namely:—
(a) the land that has been declared or notified as a forest in accordance with the provisions of the Indian Forest Act, 1927 or under any other law for the time being in force;
(b) the land that is not covered under clause (a), but has been recorded in

¹⁷Bierce, Ambrose, 1967; *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, Penguin, UK

¹⁸Under Section 2 of the FCA

Government record as forest, as on or after the 25th October, 1980:

Provided that the provisions of this clause shall not apply to such land, which has been changed from forest use to use for non-forest purpose on or before the 12th December, 1996 in pursuance of an order, issued by any authority authorised by a State Government or an Union territory Administration in that behalf.....¹⁹

Various forest areas that will be exempt from the FCA after the amendment include forests within a 100 km of India's international border, forests upto 0.1 ha along roads and railway lines, and upto 10 ha in areas related to security-related infrastructure (including the paramilitary and left wing extremism). Some of these diversions, like the last mentioned, are already going on in large parts of central India. Overall, such diversions, citing national and internal security, though most legitimate, could still be assessed for their biodiversity. Without this we will not know what we stand to lose, leave aside compensate for the loss.

Many environmentalists see this as a regressive step. The Bill ignores the fact that in states and areas with *un-notified* forests that host endemic, rare, endangered and threatened species, the provisions of the FCA are the only safeguards. If removed from the ambit of the FCA such lands can be diverted for non-forestry purposes without much ado. Across the Indian landscape, there are vast forest

tracts that are recorded as forests but not *notified*; these include the Himalayan region, the central Indian region and the Western and Eastern Ghats, as well as small forest tracts across the country used as 'nistar' by the local communities.

Recently, India's total forest cover was made known by the Minister of Environment and Forests and Climate Change, Bhupendra Yadav, to be **7,13,789** square kilometers, about **21.71%** of the total geographical area of the country, which is less than the prescribed national policy and commitment of 33%.²⁰ It is an additional 1,540 sq km from the period 2019-21, which is good news.²¹ To understand *how* good the news is, we need to dismantle the various terms used in calculating the extent of India's forest. We need to ask, *What is 'forest cover'?*

According to the India State of Forest Report (2021), *All lands more than 1 hectare in area, with a tree canopy density of more than 10 percent, including tree orchards, bamboo, palms etc., occurring within recorded forest and other government lands, private, community or institutional lands, are included in the assessment of forest cover.*²²

What is important to note here is that forest cover includes "... tree orchards, bamboo, palms, etc...". Furthermore, forest cover (the 71.38 m ha) includes two categories known as Tree Cover (9.57 m ha) and Trees Outside Forest (29.29 m ha), both *outside* Recorded Forest Area (RFA).

¹⁹http://164.100.47.4/BillsTexts/LSBillTexts/Asintroduced/80_2023_LS_ENG329202330923PM.pdf

²⁰<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1807650>

²¹<https://geographyhost.com/forest-cover-in-india-important-statistics/>

²²<https://fsi.nic.in/isfr-2021/chapter-2.pdf>

Tree Cover is a part, or subset, of Trees Outside Forest; TOF refers to all trees outside Recorded Forest Areas, irrespective of the size of the patch; Tree Cover refers to tree patches, or isolated trees, with areas less than 1 ha. To put it in context, in 2021, the forest cover outside RFA was 38.86 m ha, which the government wants to have removed from the provisions of the Forest Conservation Act 1980, and open it up to all manner of development and infrastructure.

Where do certain qualifications, like < 1 ha, or terms like, ‘area of stand’, come from? After the Kyoto Protocol (COP 9), a technical ‘definition’ of forest found its way into Indian forestry. The precise structural definition was left to the capacities and capabilities of individual countries. This dealt with the following: a. crown cover percentage, (suggested tree crown cover 10-30%, India adopted 10% for itself), b. suggested minimum area of stand (area of stand 0.05-1 ha, India adopted 1 ha), and c) suggested minimum height of trees, potential of tree at maturity *in situ* 2-5 m, India adopted 2 m).²³ It is notable that India, in its definition of forest, took the barest minimum in all the ranges.

Of the 21.71 % of India’s total geographical area that is forest, the category Very Dense Forests cover only 3.04 %; Moderately Dense Forests and Open Forests cover, respectively, 9.33 % and 9.34% of the rest. In the 5 north

eastern states only 10.95 % of the geographical area is covered by Very Dense Forest; and the last reports showed that there has been a decrease in forest cover in these states.²⁴ The remaining forests in these states, especially Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, now come under the purview of the new FCA 2023 Amendment; much of these forests are *situated within a distance of one hundred kilometres along international borders or Line of Control or Line of Actual Control, as the case may be*,²⁵ and are vulnerable to diversions proposed in the newly amended Bill.

By attempting to prevent one kind of misinterpretation the amendment encourages another. Terms like ‘public utility’ can mean anything as in common usage this pertains to roads, dams, powerlines, etc., none of which may be objected to if they require clearance of forest lands. Other threats that can be inferred from the list of non-forestry activities proposed include the

vi) establishment of zoo and safaris referred to in the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, owned by the Government or any authority, in forest areas other than protected areas;
(vii) eco-tourism facilities included in the Forest Working Plan or Wildlife Management Plan or Tiger Conservation Plan or Working Scheme of that area;
and(viii) any other like purposes, which

²³

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1795070>

²⁴<https://www.nezine.com/info/dHFxbzdXOUUpDdDgzemtkaw9Rb1E0dz09/india-state-of-forest-report-2021-:-less-than-11->

[per-cent-of-total-area-in-india%60s-northeast-is-covered-by-very-dense-forest.html](https://www.nezine.com/info/dHFxbzdXOUUpDdDgzemtkaw9Rb1E0dz09/india-state-of-forest-report-2021-:-less-than-11-per-cent-of-total-area-in-india%60s-northeast-is-covered-by-very-dense-forest.html)

²⁵http://164.100.47.4/BillsTexts/LSBillTexts/Asintroduced/80_2023_LS_ENG329202330923PM.pdf

the Central Government may, by order, specify.....

Tourism has wrecked havoc in many fragile landscapes, like Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, most hill stations, and increasingly in central India. Despite the damage it causes very little effort is put in to give the usually added prefix “eco” it’s meaning. In fact, a major reason for human conflicts with wildlife, the accumulation of garbage, noise pollution and a strain on local sources of water is the growth of tourism. With the exception of a few protected (forest) areas, such commercialization of nature has been detrimental to both the environment in general and wild life in particular. The ‘country’s rich tradition of preserving forests’, invoked in the Bill, is invisible when commerce is possible. With the now explicit loop-hole of allowing private parties to engage in this industry in forest areas a door has opened to anything from land grab to timber smuggling. The ‘Statement of Object and Reasons’²⁶ states that the amendment will allow the *assigning of forest land by way of lease to private entities and for clearing of naturally grown trees for the purpose of reafforestation.*

Why would the forest department want to do that? Reforestation is about naturally grown trees, involving the collection of native seeds, their germination, and ultimate planting of saplings, all requiring a lot of expertise and monitoring. The complexities of natural forest ecosystems are far beyond our abilities to recreate; plant associations, fungi, various fauna,

the inter-relations of below-ground organisms, all play their specific roles. Tampering with any of these few such ecosystems that have evolved over thousands of years – in order to do some reafforestation – is not commendable.

Another reason mentioned in the Statement for the Bill is that it will help mitigate the effects of climate change, and fine-tune India’s commitments at the international level. It says *achieving the national targets of Net Zero Emission by 2070 and maintaining or enhancing the forest carbon stock have emerged at national and international levels. Further, keeping in view the aims and objective of the country to increase the forest or tree cover for creation of carbon sink of additional 2.5 to 3.0 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent by 2030, and to carry forward the rich tradition of preserving forests and their bio-diversity symbiotically by enhancing forest based economic, social and environmental benefits, including improvement of livelihoods for forest dependent communities, it is necessary to broaden the horizons of the Act.....*

It might be worthwhile looking at the states that have increased their forest cover. As pointed out earlier, the term forest cover may also include ‘tree orchards, bamboo, palms, etc.’ Andhra Pradesh had increased its forest cover by 647 sq km; the state presently has 162,000 sq km under palm oil. Telengana increased its forest cover by 632 sq km;²⁷ 510 sq km in the state are under palm oil. The figures for Odisha are 537 sq km of forest cover increase and 189 sq km of palm oil; for

²⁶http://164.100.47.4/BillsTexts/LSBillTexts/Asintroduced/80_2023_LS_ENG329202330923PM.pdf

²⁷<https://horticulture.tg.nic.in/OilPalm/OilPalm.htm>

Karnataka it is 115 sq km of forest cover increase and 360 sq km of palm oil. It is not to suggest that all forest cover is plantation but the definition of forest cover does obfuscate the distinction between natural forests and plantations. In addition, viewing our forests primarily as a carbon sink, has encouraged monocultures whose carbon stocks can be calculated, and then traded or flaunted about in carbon markets.

Again, with regard to net zero and carbon stocks, it is puzzling that we need to make our existing legislation more conducive to clearing forests – rather than to conserve what we have – in order to plant anew. (More than 76 % of India's geographical area is devoid of any forest). And would it not better to lower our carbon emissions, meaning, cut down on our consumption? Despite our oft proclaimed commitments to net zero and the NDC of 2.5-3 billion tons of CO₂ equivalent, the amendment is silent about what we will *not* do, or *abstain* from.

There is ample scope, even without the proposed amendment, for massive silvicultural operations and reforestation on abandoned lands, such as in closed mine sites. In the erstwhile districts of Surguja, Korba, and the other districts of Chhattisgarh, there are old growth sal forests, home to various fauna including elephants, that have been protected by the local people for generations. It is only in the last few decades that these forests have been encroached upon by companies – almost preempting the now-tabled amendment to the FCA – and disrupted the livelihoods of the ‘forest dependent communities’ referred to in the Statement.

A final point of concern are the many sacred groves in India, all of them created and protected by local communities. Most of these groves host endemic species and are spaces that give refuge to a variety of flora and fauna, and usually not in ‘notified’ forests and often extremely biodiverse. Some groves in central India have already been encroached upon meddled with due to CAMPA projects and funds. There has been no consultation with the local communities whose groves these are, quite contrary to the Bills intention of ‘improvement of livelihoods for forest dependent communities’.

Those working with the village communities on the implementation of the Community Forest Rights (CFR), bring to notice many such areas of village landscapes, all examples of forest patches that host springs and wetlands, rare tree species, and seasonally visiting fauna. Such tracts of forests are given protection by the people – all in un-notified forest areas – and we would do well to consult the people before the Bill is made into an Act.

To conclude, what one sees as a trend, brought into focus by this amendment Bill, is a general dilution of all safeguards to our environment, including those invested with the Gram sabha, the most basic and grounded of our village institutions. Imperceptibly, the language of forest conservation, of adivasi lives, and of rural India itself, has changed. The term ‘forest’ itself, apart from the dictionary meaning of *an area of vegetation in which the dominant plants are trees; forest constitute major biomes*,²⁸ included several other

²⁸Oxford Dictionary O Science, OUP, UK, 1999

meanings. In Tamil, *kā* refers to forest as well as a pleasure-grove and garden; *kānal* would be a grove or forest on a seashore, or a forest on a hillslope. In Malayalam, *kānal* could also mean very dry jungle. In Durwa, *meram* refers to grass-land, and also open forest. The vernacular terms referring to a forest are as diverse as the kinds of vegetation, their locations and their qualities, all suggesting a richness of perception and experience of the biome itself. This diversity and plurality has been manoeuvred into a set of terms suited to negotiation, like net zero, carbon sequestration, and other words in the lexicon of climate change, all far removed from the people who live and depend on the forests they live in. If there is an instance of missing the woods for the trees this is definitely it!

*Madhu Ramnath facilitates the NTFP
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*The language of forest governance in
India is far removed from the people*



Incidental Lifers

Satheesh Muthu Gopal

The most exciting moment for any bird watcher is a lifer. A lifer is when a birdwatcher sees a bird species for the first time in his/her life in the wild. I started bird watching in 2010 and I already knew some of the common species before I moved into the real birding world. Since I started observing the species in the field, the first couple of years were filled with lifers. Wherever I went, wetland or forest, the lifers always brought me happiness. And there were instances where I got lifers even though my primary focus was not birding at that point in time.

The Barn Owl



photo by Om Prakash

Vanodaya is a Bangalore based NGO working for wildlife conservation. I joined Vanodaya in 2010 and I was involved in many wildlife conservation activities. We had many wildlife enthusiasts in the group and we used to meet every week on Sunday morning in Cubbon Park at 8 AM. Though

most of them are working professionals, everyone is passionate about wildlife and we sacrifice the Sunday morning hours to meet and discuss the activities. Once I reached the usual place before the scheduled time and one of my friends had also reached there. We observed a different behaviour of crows. The crows were mobbing around the bush and they were trying to pull something from there. When we approached closer we saw the Barn Owl (Tyto alba) hiding inside the bush. It was a lifer for me. We chased away the crows and left the place to leave the owl on its own.

Once in Chennai, I saw the Indian Eagle Owl being mobbed by crows. The barn owl is one of the widespread bird species that exist on all the continents except Antarctica. Barn owls are the natural pest control in farming lands. They hunt rodents and help farmers produce their crops. Farmers in Israel are placing artificial nest boxes for Barn Owls and the owls are accepting the nest box and they are breeding. Though they are widespread in many countries, they are not common. It took a decade for me to see a second Barn Owl, it was flying in the Palani Hillock around 9:00 PM.

The White Cheeked Barbet



photo by Satheesh Muthu Gopal

In 2010, I was eager to see a new bird species. Once I found a small green bird passing just in front of my home in Bangalore, in the early morning hours. I observed the same instance for the next couple of days and found where it went: it was perching on the mango tree nearby. I observed its appearance for a while and found it was a White Cheeked Barbet (*Psilopogon viridis*). This is one of the common species in Bangalore. Most of the Bangaloreans would have heard its call. They make a high pitched call: “ku-turr” which can be heard in the city, even today, thanks to the remaining trees which still provide a habitat for this bird. These birds are very well camouflaged by their colour and therefore hard to spot, but their unique call is helpful in identifying this species.

The Indian Blue Robin



photo by Om Prakash

We finished our birding trip in the Nandi hills in 2011 on one of the cold days. We were able to find many species including a few lifers for me. We saw the Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, the Puff throated Babbler, the Asian Paradise Flycatcher etc on the same day. While leaving the hills, I stopped my two-wheeler at one spot (maybe instinct) and I decided to spend a couple of minutes. I noticed some

movements just near the road, close enough for me to not to have to take out my binoculars, and then I saw a beautiful small bird with white brows. It was the Indian Blue Robin (*Larvivora brunnea*). They breed in the Himalayas and then fly all the way to South India to spend the winter. I saw this bird again a couple of times during the winter, but the very first sighting of this bird was memorable.

The Egyptian Vulture



photo by Raveendran Natarajan

It was a cold day in Agra and it was my first visit to the Taj mahal. This world wonder is indeed beautiful. We had taken a lot of photographs and we were approaching close to the monument. I saw the bird sitting on one of the four pillars, I took a picture of it and found that it was an Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*). Once the Egyptian Vultures were a common and widespread species but now they are very rare, particularly in South India. Due to the usage of Diclofenac for cattle, the bird population has declined by more than 90% as they were consuming the carcasses of the dead cattle. The decline of the Vulture population has been studied for all the species and the experts found Diclofenac is one of the major reasons. Arulagam is an NGO base in Tamil Nadu that works with the forest department to protect the

Vulture species. They are creating huge awareness campaigns about the dangers of Diclofenac.

The Painted Spurfowl

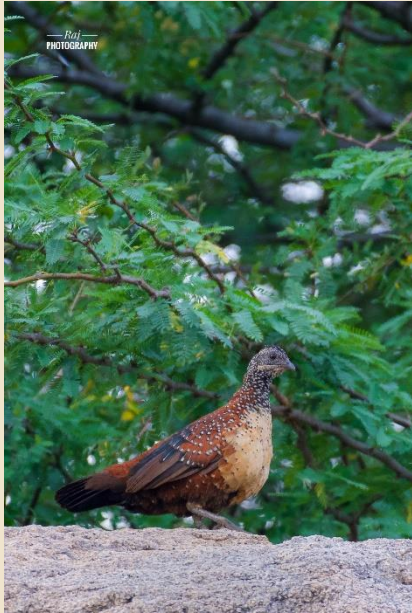


photo by Raj

Once I was returning from Kabini to Palani, when I found a pair of colourful birds moving on the roadside in the Sathyamangalam forest range. Though I couldn't get a chance to take photographs I immediately referred to the guide and found they were Painted Spurfowls (*Galloperdix lunulate*). The Painted Spurfowls are resident birds but uncommon. I found them a second time 5 years later, in the Palani hills, interestingly I found them at the same location.

The Wire-tailed Swallow



photo by Om Prakash

It was monsoon weather in Bangalore. I had finished my lunch at the office and I was going back to my cabin. I found a few Swallows near the fountains and I was curious to know why because this is not the right time to see the Barn Swallow. They were not Red-rumped Swallows either so I observed them for some time and then one of them came close to me and it was perched on the ideal slab. I could very clearly see the long two tails and I took a photograph with my mobile. It was a Wire-tailed Swallow (*Hirundo smithii*).

Observing nature closely helps to understand the changes and challenges faced by nature nowadays. Though I had experienced very long birding trips without lifers, nature sometimes surprises in its own way.

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Flowers of Spring



Woodfordia floribunda



Bombax ceiba



Shorea robusta



Careya arborea



Butea monosperma



Tinospora cordifolia



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