

**Jairam Ramesh.** *Indira Gandhi: A Life in Nature..* New Delhi: Simon & Schuster, 2017. 464 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-81-933552-4-4.

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Work in postcolonial Indian environmental history is thin and this new book by Jairam Ramesh, *Indira Gandhi and Nature*, is a welcome contribution to this field. It makes for fascinating reading, especially as the lady herself has had such a checkered reputation as one whose unpopular policies in office, of which there were many, included the government-enforced sterilization program as a form of population control. It is hard to imagine that she had another side, which was a lifelong commitment to nature, particularly to India's forests and wildlife. This is indeed what the author focuses on in a sympathetic portrayal in the context of her environmental protection activities from the late 60s to her death in 1984. Steering clear of controversial political debates, Indira emerges in this narrative as a "naturalist" prime minister with an interest in birds and plants from a very young age. Drawing on a variety of unpublished material including letters, memos, and speeches, it offers a well-written and lucid analysis of a period when she was instrumental in framing policy that took cognizance of the environment and questioned the unbridled economic developmental agenda of an emerging postcolonial nation. The historical background and context of these postcolonial debates could be better delineated in the book.

There is a consensus that much of India's postindependence forest history drew upon its colonial foundations and the draconian forest reservation system of the Raj; what is less well researched, however, is the systematic destruction of forests and wildlife in the decades after independence, in the wake of the political and developmental challenges after 1947. The mapping of this history is still to be done. For example, news reports from the 1950s record how India had become a hunter's paradise for Americans who wanted to shoot tigers. The reports further noted that the Indian government created a network of princely hunters to organize these shoots from Assam and Bengal to Central and United Provinces, Bihar and Rajasthan. For the sum of one thousand dollars visiting Americans could spend one month big-game shooting in India, bagging not only a tiger or two but also panthers, antelopes, bison, and even bear.

Despite Nehru's interest in nature and encouragement of his daughter's interests in natural history, this did not translate into serious government policy in the 50s and 60s. The anthropologist Christoph Von Fuhrer-Haimendorf, who worked in Andhra Pradesh from the 1950s until the 1970s, notes the widespread destruction of forests in the wake of new settlers entering Kond tribal territory in Adilabad in the 60s and 70s. The illegal cut-

ting of forest led to complete deforestation in some areas. The bamboo forests of Adilabad were entirely decimated by the Sirpur paper mills. As Haimendorf noted in 1981, the decline in tribal prosperity in an area exposed to development by recent settlers can only be described as colonial and what was shocking was that this destruction of people, wildlife, and landscapes happened in the context of the public commitment of the Andhra Pradesh Government to tribal welfare. Similar pressures on landscapes and people occurred in other areas such as the large mountain regions in the states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, and Jammu and Kashmir in the period 1950 to 1970, a time that saw increased settlement in the fertile valley floors and cultivation constantly pushed onto steeper slopes by population growth. Millions of hectares of the topsoil receded, as did the forests, under the combined pressures of uncontrolled herds of goats, sheep, and cattle and wood-gathering for home consumption or sale.

While this was the context for Indira Gandhi's initiatives, her active enforcement of environmental policies seems to have effectively slowed down the process. This is a theme well explored in the book. Ramesh argues that by 1969 she was moving decisively toward wildlife protection. This included the insertion of a paragraph in the fourth five-year plan highlighting the importance of the environment in the context of rapid urban development. The initiation of the protection of Siriska National Park followed in 1969, and her administrative style of sending several letters to chief ministers of states highlighting issues of protection of forests and wildlife as a matter of "national heritage" seemed to bear fruit. Lending her ear to the lobbying of people such as the pacifist Horace Alexander and the ornithologist Salim Ali and heeding international forums such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature in 1969 enabled the conservation of a few bird sanctuaries. On July 1, 1970, the government declared a moratorium for five years on the shooting of

tigers. Their populations had already plummeted. She took a personal interest in Operation Tiger, which was launched in 1973, in passing the wildlife protection bill, and in challenging the constitutional hurdle that stipulated wildlife conservation as a state subject. Ramesh devotes a lot of space to Indira's speech at the 1972 Stockholm Conference, which he argues went down in history as a remarkable one that clarified the differing developmental and environmental interests of a new nation. The setting up of Bandipur and Mudumulai sanctuaries in 1974 and the Gir lion sanctuary in 1975 was particularly insightful on her part. Other national parks followed, including Dudhwa in 1977, moved by other princely campaigners in the form of Billy Arjan Singh, and the Gulf of Kutch Marine National Park in 1982. Some environmentally harmful projects still got the go-ahead, such as the Mathura refinery, with implications for the Taj Mahal, and the naval training establishment at Chilka Lake. Nonetheless, her interest in wildlife conservation is apparent from her many missives recorded in the book regarding a variety of animals, snakes in Guindy, crocodiles and turtles in Orissa, and the lion-tailed macaque severely endangered in the shola forests of south India, and through her interactions with numerous naturalists including two young American primatologists who tried to save the monkeys. Forests also occupied her interest and 1978 saw her involvement with activists in the Silent Valley project, the Tehri dam project, and Chipko while playing close attention to the environmental consequences of big dams. Pollution, drought, and floods were frequent references in her speeches and it is quite clear from the book that without her much more would have been lost in the interest of unrestrained development in the 70s and 80s. The saving of the Adayar estuary from port development was one of her last environmental acts before her assassination.

Ramesh is dismissive of the claims made by some writers that Indira Gandhi was an authoritarian environmentalist, except with regard to the

creation of the 1980 Forest Act, which declared that no state government could make any order denotifying a reserved forest without the permission of the central government, which he sees as a shrewd, top-down environmental move that cut the rate of diversion of forest land for nonforest purposes. He cites her frequent battles with some chief ministers, such as Arjan Singh, over the planting of eucalyptus in Bastar and the struggles over the Backbay reclamation in Maharashtra as showing the limits of her power. This is the best rehabilitation that Indira Gandhi could ever achieve, skillfully done by an able writer. Her frequent references to the environment, her friendly interactions with a variety of environmentalists, her numerous letters relating to environmental issues are all carefully highlighted in the book and point to her acute awareness of the importance of the environment in the context of the enormous developmental challenges that India faced. That her approach to the problem also encapsulated the most dictatorial population policies and antidemocratic initiatives that postcolonial India has ever witnessed lies at the heart of her mixed legacy.

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