

BOOK REVIEWS

Forest and Tribal Livelihood: Changing Behaviours and Attitudes, Lancy Lobo and Jayesh Shah. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2017. Pages xxiii+288. Price: 1050

The title of this book is a bit daunting: Forest and tribal livelihood: Challenging behaviours and attitudes. Is it a case of too many intersecting domains I asked myself. Would the authors be able to do justice to all that is involved? Indeed, to me there were three main challenges in reviewing this book. The first was a personal challenge. Would I be able to understand the book and following that would lay readers be able to comprehend it? For more often than not academics/scholars write for specialized audiences and the uninitiated reader is left gasping for breath in the sea of jargon. So then is the text lucid and readable yet rigorous enough?

The second challenge was that the authors try to deal with the complexities of change: a tremendous dialectic, a highly interactive dynamic between changes in tribal behavior, attitudes, ecology, society and forests, both as a socio-ecological and legal entity. But are they able to do justice to the same without compromising the lucidity of language?

The third challenge was the consistency of argument. Would the book be cohesive throughout its 250 pages? Have they been able to analyse objectively or is it some ideological rhetoric born out of the authors' wishful thinking that bears no resemblance to reality? Having analysed the situation, have they offered feasible solutions? I did not want to be in the embarrassing position of having to say that the book is not worth reading.

It is in meeting these three challenges that the book came as a pleasant surprise and the authors have done a tremendous job. Often the literature reflects a very static understanding of forests and tribals. Forests are taken to mean the physical land under the forest department and plantations imply forests. Homogeneity and uniformity assumptions extend to the terrain: variations in the nature of the forests according to the slope are rarely considered in the analysis of forests. Following the Indian film world, tribals are depicted as simpletons wearing grass skirts and singing and dancing around bon-fires in the light of the summer moon. This book however is different. Tribals are represented as human beings no different from anybody else, with their aspirations and ambitions that change in accordance with global dynamics. And forests are not treated as a static land mass.

Indeed, this is the beauty of the book. In lucid language, but with the precision of a surgeon, the authors dissect and lay bare layer after layer, the changing character of the forest, tribal livelihood and their interactions and the aspirations of locals inhabitants. The authors do not treat anything as a static category/phenomena but try to capture the emerging dynamics. This is a break from the static portrayals of the 'other' and of the human nature interactions as say in the Empire Cinema of the 1930s. It is not, as the authors implicitly argue, a matter of simple binarisms: living with or living off forests. The logical consistency of argument is carried throughout the book.

The book goes into the issues of mega projects, dams, displacement and destruction of forests, cultures and people. It reviews the legacies of our forest laws and shows the inherent flaws of considering nature and people living in it as something that has to be controlled. The authors throw light on the mystery of increasing forest cover without forests. The meanings of forests in the statute books and in popular imagination as well in the cognition of the people living in the vicinity are explored in depth. Then the book analyses the nexus of dependence on forests, migrations and lopsided policies in a very interesting way.

Is the book based on just raw theoretical analysis which many, especially the Forest Department, does? Instead of producing such banal literature, the authors ground their work in solid empiricism. They went to 184 villagers across the fourteen talukas of eleven districts in Gujarat and conducted a comprehensive ethnographic survey as well as a questionnaire using mixed methods technique. They unravel the whole issue of the relationship of the people with their natural environment. They tackle how local inhabitants are living in, living out of, and dependent upon the forests as their immediate source of livelihoods. In this regard, they tried to understand the whole cosmology and multiple meanings of change and in tribal and forest relationships and come out with very interesting and relevant findings. There are some very interesting insights as well.

To many of us working in this sector it has always been a big puzzle that why the forest areas of Gujarat have not been the sites of Maoist activity? There were nascent initiatives in the 1980s in some districts but they did not grow. What was it then both in policy and practice that led to this? The reader gets the answer in the book but at the risk of being a spoiler it lies in the acceptance by the state of people's developmental needs vs. holding on to barren patches of departmental lands under archaic laws. However, this came as a result of a long process of struggle by the people and the activists.

The book has another surprise. The analyses are carried out from a gender perspective. Gender is interpreted in the relational sense and not just men and women. Using the analogy of the Chipko movement, the authors argue that people want development but on their own terms.

The book is an interesting read in the total. It raises many issues and debates. But it does not end just at that. It seeks to provide solutions. For me the most interesting part is the way the issue of the 33 per cent forest cover syndrome has been debunked meticulously. The authors use land capability classifications using satellite imagery to scale and classify the land, slopes forest and enumerate its details empirically. They stress that quality should take precedence over quantity. Thus the lands above 35 degrees slope, they argue, should be kept for the promotion of dense forests while the rest of the so called forest lands, mostly degraded forests, should be given to the gram sabhas as village commons. The book develops the solutions in great detail, specifying the role of each stakeholder. The interesting part is that even the solutions are based in the empirical reality of Gujarat.

In the end, I have few requests to the authors. Do not just confine the findings to the book only. I suggest that they publish select portions, especially the solutions to the problems you have proposed. It could be circulated in popular media as well as academic journals. This will enable mobilization of public opinion against rampant industrialization at the cost of people and nature. Everything cannot be done, every issue cannot be discussed in one book. Secondly, the authors have collected a lot of ethnographic material but used only a part of it in the book. I suggest that they publish small articles from them in greater detail especially the perceptions of men, women and children about the changing nature of interactions between forests and human beings. Thirdly, they have collected data extensively about forestry and forest management in the former princely states, like Baroda and Junagarh. I suggest that they publish them as monographs.

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