India: an outdated approach to national parks and people

The preservationist approach to forest protection, which considers people as a threat to nature, ignores the human and territorial rights of rural communities and indigenous peoples living in the forests, who in fact usually contribute to their conservation. The view of nature as a void space, at the same time beautiful landscape and store of biodiversity for humanity, is not only unrealistic -since practically all the Earth is nowadays a geographic space modified by human intervention- but also leads to social and environmental conflicts. Even if this approach has been largely superseded, it is still being enforced in some cases, such as in India.

Since the 1960's, the designation of an area as a National Park by the government of India has implied the forced removal of its indigenous inhabitants, perceived as detrimental to nature. A 'fence, guard and protect' policy has been promoted by both government and some conservationists, as reflected during the IUCN meeting in New Delhi held in 1969. The then adopted guidelines for protected areas only slowly changed during the late 1970's, when indigenous knowledge and its usefulness for resource management began to receive recognition. The obligation to allow indigenous people to remain within their territories and have them participate in the management of protected areas now applies to all nations, including India, that signed the Biodiversity Convention of 1992. However, the following case from North India shows that the old policy is still alive:

"We, the Van Gujjars, are an indigenous forest dwelling people and have been living in the foothills of the Himalayas for centuries. We spend the winter months in the forests of the Shivalik mountain range at an average height of 1,500 feet above sea level, and the summer months in the high altitude pasture lands of the Himalayas at heights between 8,000 - 12,000 feet. For centuries we have reared our buffaloes in these forests and pasture lands and that is all we know to make our living.

Our buffaloes are a mixture of the indigenous breeds Nili and Ravi. These small and tough animals have been with us for generations with very little mixture of outside blood. These buffaloes are forest buffaloes so they are very well adapted to the tough life of the forest and the long treks of nomadic life. No other buffalo are capable of walking from heights of 1,500-12,000 feet, facing all hardships of very scarce fodder during transhumance. Our buffaloes are part of our family and have individual personalities and names of their own like Bhuri, Makheri, Nukra, Lali, etc. Our women also own buffaloes in their own name and they have full rights to the milk and milk products. These buffaloes are very efficient converters of roughage into milk. Their milk is rich and has a very high fat content (as high as 10-12%). During the summer months millions of tourists and pilgrims come to visit these parts of the Himalayas. It is only our buffalo that supply the milk to these people and if we did not do so, the mountains would become garbage dumps of packets and tins. In this way we are supporting 'eco-tourism' in the Himalayas. During the winter months our buffaloes give thousands of litres of milk daily to the cities that are close to our forests.

Our buffaloes start migrating on their own when the weather gets hot in the month of March or April or when it becomes cold in the month of September (close to the snow line). At times if we are not ready to move, we have to physically stop them. If they are not disturbed they can reach their destinations even on their own. They are like any other wild animal of the forests and know how to

protect themselves against attacks from carnivorous animals. They have their own warning sounds and all of them gather together in a circle with the calves inside and can fend off any attack. This behaviour you will not see in dairy buffaloes.

Our buffaloes forage mainly on leafodder during the winter months and on the rich grass of the Himalayan pasture land during the summers. In winter we lop off branches from selected fodder trees making sure that enough nodal branches and leaves are left so that the tree may regenerate during the remaining period of the year. Also, we lop the branches just before the time of leaf fall of the particular species and in this way we ensure that the tree gets the full benefit of its foliage for growth. The herbivorous wildlife of the forests joins our buffalo in foraging on these lopped leaves. Buffalo manure provides a very rich fertiliser for the forests. On the one hand we take leaves from the forests but in return we provide it fertiliser. Also, it is in our interest to remove the weeds so that young saplings of fodder trees can grow since these would provide food for our buffaloes in the years to come. Anybody can see that wherever we Van Gujjars live in the forest, the wildlife thrives. In this way we live in complete harmony with the forests and their wildlife and that is the only reason that our way of life has survived through the centuries.

We are vegetarians and our diet is largely based on milk and milk products. Also, we believe in the Ghandian principle that the 'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed' and we own only so many possessions that we can carry with us on our transhumance. We see the outside world today in a vice-like grip of consumerism and we have consciously kept away from this. No one in our community drinks alcohol or gambles. We do not dance and play drums like other communities. We believe that the drum is the symbol of the hunt and this is against our ethics and morals.

We do not and cannot harm the forest in any way because our very survival depends upon it. The degradation of our natural resources, forests and wildlife has come about because of indiscriminate and unsustainable use of these resources. We protect and conserve our forests and wildlife. We know every species of tree, every animal and every bird, we note every fallen branch and tree, we recognise every sound in the forest and its meaning.

These forests have been our home for centuries and we feel safe and secure in them. We know that women and children can be left in the care of the forests, but this is not so in the cities. You will not find a single Van Gujjar's 'dera' (large circular thatched hut) with a covered doorway because we feel that if our doorways are covered then we are excluding the forest from our lives. After all we are a part of the same 'Kudrat' (nature) that provides for the forests, for their wildlife and for us. It is this compulsion that has kept us as vegetarians. If we do not live in harmony with our surroundings then we would suffer. Except for a few stray incidents of elephant attacks no wild animal has ever harmed any of us. We also understand that the protection of our forests' flora, fauna and wildlife is critical for the conservation of biological diversity in the country. Isn't this what our foresters, environmentalists, government and other people want?

In 1983 the State Government declared its intentions of converting our forests into a National Park. This is when our troubles began. The forest department told us that we would have to leave the forests and settle outside the new park boundaries. This we cannot do because we know that this would be the end of our buffaloes and without them it would be our end too. For centuries we have lived freely in these forests and have always considered them to be our own. We have never wanted to exploit the forests for money or any other consideration, which the forest department has previously done and now the tree smugglers and animal poachers are doing. We only take fodder leaves from the forest and return it through other benefits in ample measure. We have always

ensured that no harm comes to these forests which are a part of 'Kudrat'. But today the forest department chooses to call us trespassers and tries to lay the blame of its own bad management at our doors.

We hear stories of other forest dwelling people in our country who also have similar problems like ours and note that this developing conflict between parks and people can only be harmful to both. This, we are told, is also happening in other countries around the world. These struggles are certainly the manifestation of the assertion of rights, but the initiative is to protect the ecosystem and wildlife of the Shivalik range of mountains and our, the Van Gujiars', and local villagers' traditional rights. We should have the choice to permanently live in and around the protected area in an environmentally and economically sustainable manner."

Source: "Old-style forest protection in India" by Noud van Seters
Rainforest Medical Bulletin, Vol. 6, no. 1, June 1999