

Nature calls

A rare set of essays examines how conservation systems crafted in an era of state dominance can work better in a time of private enterprise, civic action and science, writes **Mahesh Rangarajan**

Aniversaries are a time for not only celebration but reflection. 1969 was a critical year in the history of nature conservation in India as wildlife and forests moved near the top of the agenda not only in the public eye but also at the highest levels of government.

The political and economic legacies of that era have had many scholars but this is a rare volume that takes a relook at how far the laws, policies, projects and programmes of an earlier age have fared over the past two decades of economic reform.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a ten-fold expansion of the acreage of parks and sanctuaries, new Bills such as the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972 and Forest Conservation Act eight years hence. Air and water pollution, displacement by large dams and industrial disasters such as Bhopal, however, do serve as reminders that it was not a story in which law or executive fiat resulted in an era of beauty, health and permanence.

The dozen authors here fittingly include ecologists and anthropologists, historians and policy analysts. The book's quest goes well beyond the realms of nature. It examines how systems crafted in an era of state dominance can work better (rather than break down and collapse) in a time of private enterprise, civic action and science.

These three strands: government, industry and civil society activism are often in collision, but can they at all ever act in concert? How difficult this can be in practice emerges in divergent ways. The great Central Indian forest has been reshaped by centuries of human presence but the present levels of extraction of fodder, fibre and wood may seem to pose an intolerable strain on renewal. Ecologist Meghna Agarwala carefully unpacks how different floral species respond in varying ways to high levels of biomass extraction. We may be living through a "blip in geological time" where it is unclear whether frequent fires have not corroded the resilience of the forests.

The Chilgoza pine is a rare endemic tree species that occurs only in the north-west Himalayas. The largest patch is in Himachal Pradesh. Its nuts were harvested with strict controls at the local level until recently. But as the economist Rinki Sarkar shows, as apples became the driver of incomes in Himachal Pradesh, those who harvested pine nuts prudently have stopped doing so. The harvesting is entrusted to migrant labourers. Prices have risen and the offtake now imperils the rare pine tree species itself.

A more positive picture at the level of local views of nature emerges from other parts of the country. Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh has recently been in the news as a Tiger Reserve that may close to local users. As members of the Nyishi Scheduled Tribe who live there see it, records Ambika Aiyadurai, "Tigers are our brothers." Not only do they not kill the big cats, but their hunting is governed by taboos and controls. As much as highway construction or large dam building she sees statist controls with no care for local customs as deeply inimical to the search for harmony. Mayank Vikas shows this with the green zones of the Ridge in Delhi and Haryana where he argues local pastoral groups saw their common lands enclosed by the British and then the New Delhi government. In neither case do the authors suggest the government step away: but it needs to listen, moderate its action and take all local knowledge board.

The nub of the problem is with institutions. Often their vision is at odds with design as well as

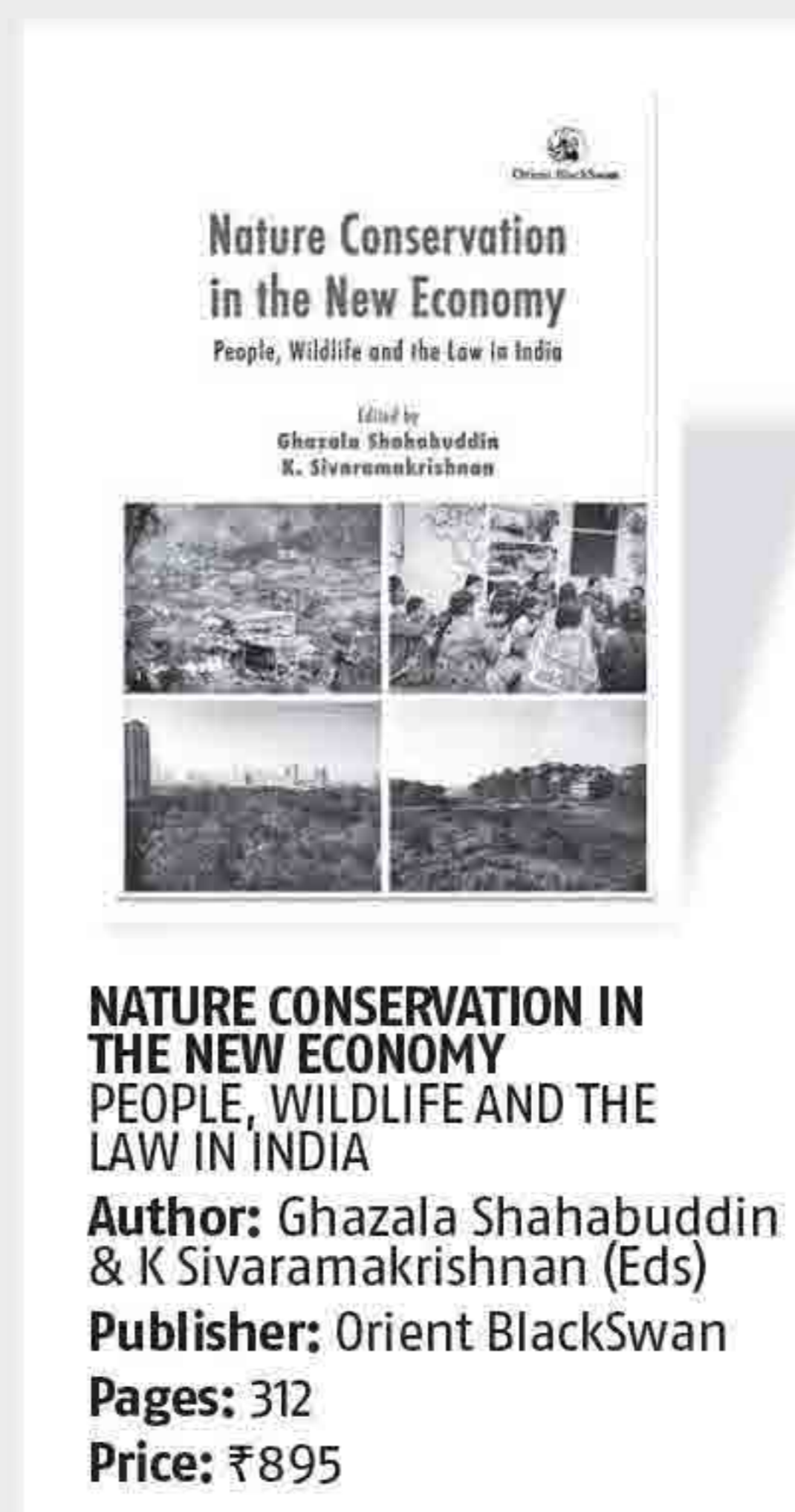
execution. In a paper aptly titled "Water Under the Bridge", Neha Sinha shows how wetlands, though vital for water recharge and biological diversity and a slew of livelihoods, are being drained and destroyed in part due to a loophole in the rules themselves. Rivers in full flow as well as the seasonal or perennial *nallahs* (rivulets or streams) simply do not figure in the definition itself. This simple omission in 2010 then disempowers attempts to

protect critical tracts like the Najafgarh *jheel* (or lake) near Delhi. Manju Menon and Kanchi Kohli go even further: changes in coastal zone regulations in 2011 allowed for local livelihoods to be taken into account. Little has been accomplished in practice.

The government is now not the main driver of investment and sees its core role as one of promoting private investment. In a country with vast numbers reliant directly on cultivation, stock raising, fishing or gathering forest products, the rapid conversion of arable land and coast, forest and hill into a mining strip, township or highway as the case may be is an issue beyond nature and its natural heritage. The gap is waning between brave official claims and actual ground-level dramas where short-term gain overcomes long-term views of ecological integrity. This is the common thread between the overharvesting of pine nuts and

the annihilation of wetland and coastal ecologies. The consequences may be invisible but with the wealth of scholarship and experience, much damage can be moderated if not avoided.

Law and government have much to catch up on. Most critical is the need to go beyond the silo-like view of departments and beyond the insights of specific disciplines. Synergy across fields of knowledge resulting in a holistic view of the nature-human conundrum: this is what the book stands for, and in its own small way exemplifies.



NATURE CONSERVATION IN THE NEW ECONOMY
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THE GAP IS WANING BETWEEN BRAVE OFFICIAL CLAIMS AND ACTUAL GROUND-LEVEL DRAMAS WHERE SHORT-TERM GAIN OVERCOMES LONG-TERM VIEWS OF ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

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