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COMMENTARY

A Call to Redefine 'the Field' in Nature Conservation Studies in India

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nature conservation has undergone significant shifts since the early 2000s. To begin with, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the arm of the United Nations that steers the global conservation agenda, has become an increasingly neoliberal institution—it has marginalized concerns regarding the impacts of capitalism and, instead, has promoted market-based tools for conservation and sought partnerships with a range of industries including mining corporations (MacDonald 2010). A second change is that in some parts of the world, there is militarized management of protected areas (PAs). The default assumption of the states/organizations involved is that poachers are linked to terrorist or drug-trafficking networks and thereby pose a major security threat (Duffy 2014). Similarly, some states favour the establishment of vast PAs as an assertion of geopolitical power. This is commonly seen in the case of marine protected areas (MPAs), which have a history of territorial dispute. Such MPAs may continue to be accessed or managed by military establishments (De Santo 2020). Finally, and in contrast to these top–down trends, there has been a surge in calls over the past few years to decolonize conservation by directly challenging the Global North's fundamentally unjust and racist approach (Mbaria and Ogada 2016; Aini and West 2018). These threads extend to India, too, as recent studies indicate that nature conservation here is closely linked to issues of neoliberalism (Ramesh and Rai 2017), national security (Muralidharan and Rai 2020), and social

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discrimination (Kabra 2019). Now more than ever, nature conservation is not just about saving biodiversity—it is a domain marked by economic, political, and social contestation.

These realities raise an important question with respect to conservation research: what exactly do we mean by 'the field' today? Where do its boundaries lie? Although we tend to treat this concept as self-evident, I propose here that we first need to acknowledge that the field is a constructed notion; second, recognizing the politics integral to its construction can help us redefine its boundaries in more progressive ways. I draw parallels between conservation science and anthropology because the latter began with a similarly narrow view of the field but has radically evolved over a few decades.

2. EARLY CONNECTIONS

Anthropology has much in common with nature conservation with respect to the idea that doing research in 'the field' is an integral part of the disciplinary identity. This is because around the late 1800s, anthropologists borrowed heavily from natural scientists who practised their craft outdoors—the latter chose a limited and distant area (the field) within which they carried out intensive, systematic, and direct observations (fieldwork). Therefore, similar to primatologists of that period who studied animal communities in their 'pristine' state, anthropologists took a naturalistic, albeit racist, approach to studying so-called primitive human communities in their 'native' states. The anthropology of this period was simply an extension of natural history. However, by the late 1900s, anthropology underwent a metamorphosis. For example, it dispensed with the reductionist nature–culture dichotomy; became sensitive to how power relations between researchers and the researched influenced the production of knowledge; and revised the traditional idea of 'the field' (as a culturally exotic and geographically distant place) to bring more European places, institutions, and communities under its analytical gaze. It even examined how institutional structures and funding trends a priori disqualified the work of most researchers from being recognized as 'rigorous' because to meet this yardstick, one had to have the social capital of an athletic, white, middle-class male, or equivalent (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

3. THE INDIAN SITUATION

Most conservation researchers in India appear to follow the orthodox standards of the nineteenth century. As one scientist said, for many of us, "nature is simply where culture is not".[1] Therefore, we still maintain what Gupta and Ferguson (1997) describe as "a hierarchy of purity" with respect to field sites: research carried out in human-inhabited areas of any kind—industrial or non-industrial—is not valued as much as research conducted in 'wild' sites. For many of us conservation scientists, 'real fieldwork' still involves spending long periods of time in a site that is as notable for the presence of flora or fauna as for the absence of any (obvious) human activity. If we cannot readily find such sites in today's world, we engage in discursive erasure: we describe them in our studies as though they were uninhabited or disconnected from modernity. But how relevant and ethical is such an understanding and treatment of the field, given the current changes occurring in the domain of conservation?

I argue here that this traditional concept of the field is not an innocent one; it comes laden with colonial baggage and contributes to the social injustices perpetrated by hard-line conservation models. This is because such a narrow delimitation of the field as pristine nature confines the researcher's gaze to the proximate causes of degradation and perpetuates the 'traditional' conservation narrative that local communities and practices pose the single greatest threat to nature. It forecloses the possibility of tracing the drain and damage caused by urbanization, industrialization, and elite ways of life, as these remain outside the boundaries of the field (as it is usually defined) and, therefore, are closed to academic scrutiny. This and the absence of reflexive writing in the natural sciences (which dominate conservation research in India) mean that as an academic community, we have little understanding of how our gender, caste, class, linguistic ability, etc. might influence our access to the field and, in the process, either limit or facilitate the production of conservation knowledge in the Indian context. Even our popular articles often unthinkingly reproduce the colonial 'green hero' tone of narration and shed little light on lived experiences and dilemmas associated with doing fieldwork.

[1] Kartik Shanker, 2013. He made this comment as a general observation and not as a statement of his own position.

4. RECHARTING THE FIELD

Recognizing these pitfalls of typical conservation studies, some researchers look for ways "to add a social component". However, with this we run the risk of tokenism and, worse, we find that our analytical frame continues to be impoverished. This is one reason why we still publish far more studies on the damaging effects of firewood, grazing, and non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection in India than we do on mining, luxury tourism, or misguided corporate social responsibility projects. A second reason is that the neoliberal orientation of the IUCN and other major conservation organizations limits the funding available to certain types of studies (a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this article). Nevertheless, I suggest that to make any significant change to the status quo, we need to need to take a leaf from the contemporary anthropologist's book and revise our ideas of the field. We need to accept it as a multidimensional, socially constructed space that has biodiversity, history, politics, culture, etc. Even if our focus is on the former, we could at least acknowledge the existence of these other dimensions in our descriptions of study areas.

Fortunately, we do have some conservation studies in India that show us how an expansive notion of the field can enrich our efforts; for example, the well-known "Report of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel" (Gadgil 2011) delves into the key ecological, economic, and social factors that make this a composite social-ecological landscape. It critiques the effect of "conservation by exclusion" coupled with "development by exclusion" and, instead, advocates an adaptive co-management approach for biodiverse areas, i.e., an approach that recognizes the existence and rights of people in "wilderness" areas as well as the value of incremental, experiential learning in conservation practice (Berkes and Turner 2006). Other examples, albeit on a limited scale, include conservation projects for turtles (Sharma 2006), elephants (Evanescence Studios 2014), and leopards (Ghosal and Kjosavik 2015).

It is only with such efforts that we can begin to truly do justice to the complexities of undertaking conservation, particularly in the Global South. Our training institutions also need to incorporate insights that the conservation community has acquired from hard-earned experience; for instance, a working knowledge of the stratifications in Indian society, regional economies, and struggles around environmental justice would certainly give fresh researchers a sharper sense of reality and a more ethical orientation, which would preclude the need for them to reinvent the wheel with each study. We need to develop a more realistic sense of 'the field' individually and institutionally so that we can chart a progressive vision for nature conservation in India.

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