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## Ecology and the politics of survival: Contests over natural resources in India

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### Abstract

This study is a descriptive and theoretical discourse of the politics of survival in India, which interrogates the ecological conflicts as having underlying battles of justice, identity, and sovereignty. The three-way conflict between the state, capital, and communities; the historical reversal of common people in the colonial and postcolonial state; and the appearance of ecological democracy as the value system are all traced back. The paper symbolizes the conceptualization of survival politics as a paradigm shift in environmentalism, which is founded on conservation of livelihood and acknowledgment by the application of political ecology, ecofeminism, and postcolonial theory. It connects the resource wars in India with the other realities of global nature and environmental and climatic justice movements by indicating that the best way to achieve actual ecological justice is through physical democratization of nature, decentralizing it, making it reach the masses, and making it become as empowered as the masses, as the moral duty of the masses.

### Objectives

- To sum up, the theoretical basis of ecology is a contention area in India, socially and politically.
- To investigate the reconfiguring of environmental problems as an autonomy struggle, as a struggle to obtain justice and identity through the survival politics.
- To understand ecological democracy as the inclusive government that is sustainable.

**Keywords:** Politics of survival, ecological democracy, resource conflicts, political ecology, ecofeminism, postcolonial theory

### 1. Introductions

In India, the ecology is in a much far worse state where the biodiversity or conservation cannot even be implemented, and instead it is a highly political landscape where the access to natural resources such as land, water, and forest is the embodiment of the structures of power over time and historical injustice. India has wonderful biological diversity, which is associated with social stratification, caste and tribalization, and the unequal development between the rainforests of the Western Ghats and Himalayas and arid plateaus along with coastal areas. As a result of its ecological, cultural, and social-economic diversity, one of the locations to view the politics of survival in this specific case is India because the possibility of accessing natural resources is often the dependent factor on everyday life, as well as the livelihood security (Gadgil and Guha, 1992; Sen, 2022) <sup>[1, 2]</sup>. In this context, Roy (2018) <sup>[3]</sup> and Pattanaik and Sen (2023) <sup>[4]</sup> observe the feature of resource contestations when it comes to identity, livelihood, and existence itself and not isolated environmental conflicts.

This essay will use a theoretical explanation and description of how the politics of survival and ecology interacted in the natural resource conflicts in India. The intent is not an empirical but a theoretical one: to trace the growth of how social inequalities, capitalist and state intervention, and allocation of resources commit to the growth of a long-term approach of ecopolitics where living becomes political. To be able to make resource governance a space of operationalized power, there are a few key terms that have been defined, such as ecological politics, survival, contestation, and resource commons (Gadgil and Guha, 1992; Klingensmith, 2014; Sen, 2022) <sup>[1, 5, 2]</sup>. In the study, through theoretical and historical analyses, it is explained that the concept of power, identity, and survival was never separated from the environment governance in India (Sen, 2022; Roy, 2018) <sup>[2, 3]</sup>.

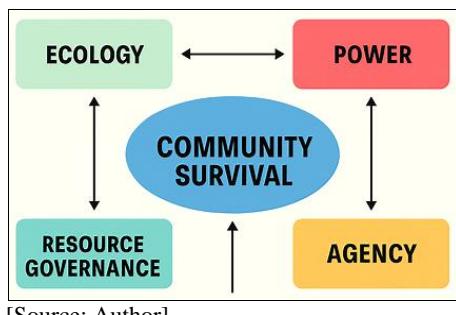
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## 2. Theoretical Framework: Ecology, Power, and Survival

The intellectual drive owing to a politics of survival in the ecological studies is the cognisance of ecology as a controversial place where power, wealth, and social classes shape the victors and indeed the losers. This point of view was formally narrated by the tradition of Land Degradation and Society by Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield (1987)<sup>[6]</sup>, which had contended that land degradation and resource utilization be examined through a perspective of a regional political ecology by incorporating ecological processes in relation to the political-economic structures, historical contexts, and socio-economic inequalities (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987)<sup>[6]</sup>. The decisions on land and the use of resources in this strategy are proving that the inherent power dynamics between the land users, the state, and the capital depend on environmental considerations besides the environmental factors.

It establishes a material foundation of an ecosocialist world (e.g., Ecosocialism: An Introduction, Engel-Di Mauro, 2024); however, it would become elevated to a higher level by the commodification of nature buttressed by the growth of capitalism, where ecological commons become a tool of profiteering, spurring ecological unfairness and ecological dispossession.

Also, via the relation of ecological dominance and social dominance, the notion of ecofeminism as politics propagated by Ariel Salleh (1997)<sup>[7]</sup> contributes to survival politics: the exploitation of nature can be the exploitation of the marginalized people along gender, class, caste, coloniality, and other lines. Environmental battles, in his opinion, also constitute physical autonomy, livelihood, and dignity since ecology, gender, and social justice are inseparable (Salleh, 1997)<sup>[7]</sup>.



[Source: Author]

**Fig 1:** Conceptual Framework of the Politics of Survival in India

## 3. Historical Context: Colonial Legacies and Resource Governance

The British colonial government ensured that centuries-old rights of community were gradually eliminated by means of forest laws and substituted by a centralized control regime that marked the beginning of the transition of natural commons of India into state-administered resources. Another law that has proven to be important is the Indian Forest Act of 1878, which converted big portions of forest into government property and therefore opened up forests that were managed as communities and criminalized behaviors of grazing, shifting cultivation, and harvesting of forest products (Environmental Studies Institute, 2024)<sup>[8-9]</sup>. The centralization of the authority over forests was an even more powerful instrument with the help of the Indian Forest Act, 1927, by defining the concept of organized reserved

forests and protected forests, introducing a rigid system of access control, and permitting commercial logging in the necessity to increase state revenue (Environmental Studies Institute, 2024)<sup>[8-9]</sup>. These laws introduced the view that the rights traditionally belonging to tribal and agrarian communities, which were based on forests, became the privileges that the state permits. Such societies had been relying on forests as fuelwood, fodder, minor forest, medicinal, and subsistence farmers (Tribal Policies in British India, 2023)<sup>[10]</sup>. Though the policies of the recently independent India changed and encouraged the conservation of forests, the intellectual tradition of centralization remained: most of the forests remained the property of forest services, and the right of the tribals was incredibly narrow (India Water Portal, 2020)<sup>[11]</sup>. Some communities that lived in the forest were thus deprived of their means of earning a living, ancestral land, and practices founded on sustainable development.

## 4. The State, Capital, and the Community: Triangular Contestations

The political ecology in India has natural resource conflicts that are mostly triangular, involving the state, corporate capital, and local communities in the country. The state institutions, as well as the private capital, tend to support each other, leaving behind the marginalized population, which is dependent on the resources within the state institutions. The state has played a facilitated role over extractive industries such as mining, dams, and massive infrastructure in the business since the 1990s; the relaxation of regulations was made available to corporate actors through lease provisions. This has driven the communities living in forests and agriculture on the fringes of the ecological frontiers (Scandrett, Shah & Narayan, 2019)<sup>[15]</sup>. Such processes, where forests and land are considered as commodities that can be negotiated rather than remembered as resources of the environment, give very small considerations to the traditional rights of the local community. The trend is also referred to as extractive and racial capitalism by others, which is concerned with organizing extraction based on caste and tribes. The outcome is nature commodification and deprivation of people of their livelihoods, especially the indigenous and lower-caste (Banerjee-Guha & Saha, 2023)<sup>[12]</sup>.

Most of these changes are found through legal and institutional countermeasures, especially the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA), which tries to change this relationship by recognizing the community forest right and resource sovereignty to village-level organization Gramme Sabha. The given mechanism can address the state-capital nexus because it grants the local population access to the legal rights of forest land and minor forest products and allows regulating the use of the available resources (Dayal and Sharma, 2024)<sup>[13]</sup>. However, the efforts to achieve such a decentralized state are delayed by bureaucratic paralysis, efforts to resist such a system across different departments, as well as elite capture within communities, and that alone institutional design fails to provide resource sovereignty (Policy & Society researcher, 2023). They are still practiced, finding structural power imbalances in the practice of many Gram Sabha's that are not marginalized by law despite successful exercise of their rights in the form of livelihood improvement and sustainable forest management (Dayal and Sharma, 2024; Devarajan and Khemani, 2023)<sup>[13, 14]</sup>.

**Table 1:** Comparative Overview of Key Resource Contestations in India (Post-1990)

| Movement/Region | Resource Type | Key Actors             | Core Issue                     | Outcome                |
|-----------------|---------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Niyamgiri Hills | Bauxite       | Dongria Kondh, Vedanta | Indigenous rights vs. mining   | Project halted         |
| Narmada Valley  | Water         | Adivasi, State, NGOs   | Displacement, dam construction | Partial rehabilitation |
| Kudankulam      | Nuclear       | Fisherfolk, State      | Livelihood vs. development     | Ongoing negotiation    |

## 5. Ecology, Identity, and the Question of Justice

In India, however, the problem of identity politics and the question of ecological conflict are meant to be more or less/directly linked and this is why we can feel like suggesting that the war of the land, the war of water, and the war of forest is a war of representation, a war of dignity, and a war of belonging. Ecological government too contributes to the continuation of social discrimination like the Dalit and Adivasi people who now have been displaced of their ancestry world to either develop or preserve. Therefore, the caste problem and gender disparity are predetermined and closely related to the environmental injustices. Ecological justice in these models would have been the historical marginalities, even the co-existential epistemologies as

opposed to distributive issues or division of gains and losses. What the eco-feminist scholars are able to do is identifying the extractivist ideologies in terms of the ethic of care and reciprocity of women in their daily toil in the natural systems. According to such perception, politics of survival deal with reinstitution of cultural and moral relationships with the environment in addition to reclaiming the resources. This way, these local efforts will render one more morally responsible through association of such to global environmental and climatic justice discourses. Sustainable futures would put in question gendered knowledge and different cosmologies and other voices of the subalterns in the actual definition of the concept of justice.

**Table 2:** Thematic Dimensions of Ecological Justice in India

| Dimension  | Description                                   | Representative Movements             |
|------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Gender     | Women's ecological resistance and ecofeminism | Chipko, Narmada                      |
| Caste      | Dalit environmental struggles                 | Tamil Nadu pollution protests        |
| Indigenous | Adivasi territorial claims                    | Niyamgiri, Jharkhand mining protests |
| Climate    | Adaptation and local resilience               | Sundarbans, Bundelkhand              |

Source: Author

## 6. The Future of Survival Politics: Towards an Ecological Democracy

The current direction of the ecology politics in India is an innovative paradigm of ecology democracy, which is based on participatory politics, environmental rights and the moral coexistence with both human beings and non-humans. Like the paradigms that dwell on approaching development as point of reference, the ecological democracy envisages politics, which considers development as bound on sustainability and not growth. The specified transformation makes the issue of seeking an alternative approach to running the things the center of the priorities' first and second place respectively. This is the voice of the civil society forces and the legal suits by the population or even the academic movement stating the vision of eco-citizenship of environmental responsibility and democratic democracy, which is increasingly becoming a voiced one. Among the most significant shifts in the norms of introducing the right to healthy environment, it is possible to mention the meaning of the right to life which can be comprehended in the law. The vision of ecology democracy is descriptive, the idealization of new relations between the society and the nature, between the survival and infinity planetary, active and oppositional position of the survival politics.

**Fig 2:** Trajectories of Ecological Democracy in India [Source: Author]

## 7. Conclusion

Politics of survival, in India, prove that nothing is a periphery, but however, it is the basic stage of the discussion of the justice, identity and government issues. The neoliberalism in mining is what puts the ecological struggles in the needs of respect, livelihood, and dignity. It is a descriptive and theoretical in nature and it is pointing to how the conceptualization of ecology should be transformed into ecological politics, politics of survival by revisiting the categories of justice, democracy and the sovereignty in a new ecological state of survival. This is why the future of the resource politics in India must be determined through the creation of ecological consciousness according to which the lack of equality in the society can be paid with the environmental sustainability.

A long-term conceptualization of the politics of survival would also be anticipated to establish the relationships between the local struggles and the global ecological justice movements. The Indian tourism is a sign of wider discussions on indigenous sovereignty, natural resource climate justice, and democratization. By placing the Indian resource issue in the given context of the worldwide situation, the problem of the politics of survival is transformed into a local paradigm and input into planetary ethics. According to this view, there is stress on the global solidarity where it is combined with decentralization, community empowerment, and moral responsibility to redefine progress that is closely related to ecological democracy. In this regard, the concept of survival politics ensures ecological justice on the global level and that of national resilience.

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