Striving for a Balance: 
Nature, Power, Science and India’s Indira Gandhi, 1917-1984

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Abstract
Indira Gandhi’s life (1917–1984) spanned much of the twentieth century. She was Prime Minister of the world’s largest democracy for two spells that totaled fifteen years. To this day, her environmental legacy remains one that divides critics from admirers. One sees it as a defense against ecological impoverishment, especially in her initiation of wildlife preservation and environmental conservation. The other views these as thin legitimization for an authoritarian style of functioning. The two are not antithetical, but neither does justice to the subject nor indeed to her times. Drawing on her decades of letter writing to and from her father Jawaharlal Nehru and her speeches, the article also looks in some detail at her executive actions as Prime Minister. Issues of nature can hardly be separated from the political problems that bedeviled India in the late 1960s. Serious food shortages led to increased reliance on US food aid, but the Indian bid for autonomy led to inevitable strains over the issue. The Green Revolution reduced reliance on the West. It was paralleled by a sustained engagement with conservation issues that continued beyond the 1971 war with Pakistan. Here, the Indira period is divided into two broad parts, with a leftward tilt, especially around 1969, and a shift to a more pro-business attitude after 1980. These changes were also evident vis a vis forests and wildlife. Ecological patriotism requires careful attention for saving nature, although statist intervention was a concomitant of India’s unique place in the Cold War later. As US contacts thawed; the opening was complemented by shifts in the political economy. Similarly, arbitrary slum demolition and forcible family planning were part of a larger shift to coercive policies during the 18-month long Emergency period. The article ends by asking how to study contemporary politics to better comprehend our ecological dilemmas. Even as ecological processes and economic exchanges unify the world, divisions between and within nation states are central to most issues. By looking at a key figure of the latter half of the twentieth century, the article hopes to shed fresh light on how to look at the relations of nature, science, and power.

Keywords: democracy, authoritarian, conservation, patriotism

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Indira Gandhi’s engagement with environmental issues was strongly evident during both her tenures in office as Prime Minister of the world’s largest democracy. Even a brief intellectual and cultural biography of India’s most influential Prime Minister in recent times (the post 1967 era) provides a good vantage point to examine the broader questions of conservation and livelihoods, democracy and authoritarianism and national sovereignty and international influence. It can also hinge on how one approaches the interplay of ideas and interests, of an awareness of a larger horizon as opposed to more prosaic issues of power.

Environmental issues held a special place throughout her political career at the top. This was so from January 1966 to March 1977, and again from January 1980 till her assassination in October 1984. Key interventions took place even at times of mounting international tensions or domestic political crises. November 1969, for instance was amidst the historic split of the ruling Congress party, reducing her government to a minority in the Lok Sabha. Yet, it was the very month she made a major address to an international conservation body in the capital.1 The first meeting of the newly created Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination (NCEPC) was on 6 December, 1971, even as the war with Pakistan had begun. Similarly, her letter to the chief minister of Bihar asking him...
to halt the diversion of forest land for a development project was sent from from Shimla in May 1972. She was at the hill station to negotiate with the Pakistani Premier Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war (Thapar 2006: 65). This should set at rest the idea, now current among scholars of different hues, that environmental concern was largely aimed at wooing a western audience especially in times of a chill in the Indo-US ties, during 1969–1971 or indeed after the Emergency was imposed and the basic rights of expression suspended in June 1975. There was a larger consistency in her engagement with such issues. It is less of a surprise that most biographers and students of politics have paid little attention to this dimension. The former set of scholars sees it as a spin off from her authoritarian ways and impulses, and the latter ignore it altogether (For instance, Malhotra 1989).

These two sharply opposed views; one seeing her as intrinsically authoritarian and the other as a benevolent presence assisting nature’s recovery are not antithetical. But one is overly functional and the latter serves to view political leadership in the abstract, almost in a vacuum, shaping but hardly touched by cultural and intellectual influences of the time.

Even more problematic is the role cast for her, as a savior. Over the last few years, there has been a swirl of controversy over the fate of the tiger, with proponents and critics of the new, more people-friendly strategies revisiting the time in 1973, when Project Tiger was launched. A close relative of a key figure in tiger conservation in her time recently recalled the ‘good days’ when the foundations of wildlife and forest conservancy were laid. Not unimportantly, Suraj, the spouse of the late Kailash Sankhala also mentioned regular calls from the PM at functions, both formal and informal, where the Director of Project Tiger could have the leader’s ear (Sankhala 2008). The tiger conservationist and photographer Valmik Thapar goes so far as to assert that, ‘if we have any ecological security left, it is due to Indira Gandhi’. The laws enacted in her time are seen by him as a bulwark against anarchy, and it is their erosion that is turning the tide against nature in India.

That her legacy is significant is not in doubt. In 2006, the Parliament enacted the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers’ (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, a legislative measure that allows for legal recognition of a title to the Adivasi or Scheduled Tribe cultivators on forest lands. This effectively reopens the question of where the frontier of farmland and forested land lies. A keystone of the arch from her time, the Forest (Conservation) Act (or FCA) of 1980, was thus remade in the twenty-first century India, 26 years after its enactment. Scientists and ecological activists, both from India and overseas found her a communicative and a serious listener. The futurist Buckminster Fuller, designer of the geodesic dome and the tetrahedral city, counted himself as an old friend. Over a decade and a half later, the polymath and critic of high technology, Fritjoff Capra felt in a one-on-one meeting that her silence was a signal for having, ‘a conversation of substance’ (Capra 1989). She was as much at ease with the ‘more with less technology’ of the former as with the more philosophical inclinations of the latter. This ease and familiarity with matters ecological had its local counterpart with the issue of the felling on the Ridge, the last outcrop of the Aravalli hills that was integral to the landscape of Delhi. She took steps to secure the city forest in the summer of 1980, when petitioned by a student group. What the group was unaware of was her central role a few years earlier in getting a key Indian Air Force installation modified to preserve the skyline as well as the integrity of the forest.

Neither an admirer nor a critic, therefore, did justice to the subject. Her engagement was part of a larger milieu of nationalist debates in late colonial India; and her legacy survived in part as its seeds fell on fertile soil. Part of the clue is provided by the fact that even a journalist and biographer who knew her quite well recently admitted to having simply, ‘gone along with the generally accepted view that not only was her formal education episodic and limited, but she had little interest in books or ideas’ (Malhotra 2006: 184). As the two volumes, edited by Sonia Gandhi, document her correspondence with Jawaharlal Nehru from 1922 to 1964 demonstrate, this was a misperception. Even the young Indira and we will see some of her subsequently, could differ and pretty sharply with ‘Pappu’ as she called Nehru. A second kind of evidence is the speeches at public fora. Although composed often with a team of writers, especially the polymath H.Y. Sharada Prasad, they still provide clues to a larger sense of engagement with issues not only of knowledge and power, but with the human-nature relationship (Sharada Prasad 2003: 15).

The major milestone in her appearance on the world stage with ecological overtones was undoubtedly, the speech at Stockholm in the summer of 1972. This famous, if often misquoted, speech at the first UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in June 1972 came at the zenith of her political career. After a shaky start as the world’s second woman Prime Minister in January 1966, she had faced down a division in her own party and gone onto win a two thirds majority in the general elections of 1971. War followed soon after, with victory in the battle to liberate Bangladesh, placing her among the few leaders to have successfully stood up to US President Richard Nixon. It was in the glow of victory that the invitation came in hand. It held out for her, ‘the promise of a setting that would behove a world leader’ who could use the stage to address a global audience (Parthasarathi 2007: 250–251). The speech was marked by an awareness of the inequities across nation states, which could be a barrier to joint action to keep the earth habitable. Nations could not be ‘preserved as museum pieces’ in the name of diversity. One earth could work as a concept only if the ideals of humanity faced up to the inequities of access to wealth and knowledge. Her most oft quoted line about poverty as an affliction acquires a different meaning when read as part of a longer epistle. She asked,

‘Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters? The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty. Nor can poverty be eradicated without the use of science
and technology. For instance, unless we are in a position to provide for the daily necessities of tribal people and those who live in and around our jungles, we cannot keep them from combing the forests for their livelihood, from poaching and despoiling the vegetation. When they themselves feel deprived, how can we urge the preservation of animals?’

Rejecting extreme views, she posited herself in favour of a more holistic view, blaming neither population growth nor economic affluence alone. The conflict was between conservation and reckless exploitation, not between progress per se and ecological values (Gandhi 1972).

HERALDS OF A NEW DAWN

Of course, speeches and interviews were but a small part of a long and tempestuous political life. Born in November 1917, at time of war, upheaval and revolution, she was the only daughter of Kamala and Jawaharlal Nehru. Her political and personal lives were intertwined from the start. Her life spanned much of the twentieth century, a time that witnessed a secular shift, a four-fold expansion of the number of humans on the planet. It is true that she was, for her first thirty years, more closely concerned with an equally crucial and historic change in politics, the emergence into freedom of new nation states, as the colonial era came to a close. A fourth of the world was under the Union Jack when she was born, but by the century’s end, there were four times as many nation states as in 1914, when the Great War began (McNeill 2000; for nation states see Hobsbawm 2006). How she reflected on and responded to these two major secular shifts had much to do with India’s engagement with issues of nature and power in her time. As her Stockholm speech indicated, inequities within societies could have much to do with how the tradeoffs of equity and ecology were made or unmade. An examination of her work cannot be delinked from her record in office and power, but a search must begin the realm of ideas and influences in the early years.

While a fuller treatment of the multiple engagements of Indian nationalism, with the problem of nature, lie well beyond the scope of this essay, Indira Priyadarshini Nehru is best seen against a larger backdrop. A rare only girl child in her generation and for her class, her familiarity with nature began early. Growing up in Allahabad, she was to be schooled at a variety of locations including Delhi and Santiniketan, Switzerland and Oxford. The Nehrus—and not just father and daughter—had a keen eye for natural beauty. This was indirectly reinforced by the Gandhian impact, for it forced a reassessment of lifestyles at a personal level. This had included an end to shikar, or ritual hunts, often a pursuit of middle class Indians in smaller towns and cities, on weekends.10 The world of nature was instead a balm for non-violent soldiers against the Raj. At times, as political prisoners they identified with animals that were victims. Writing of the Dehra Dun jail, Nehru was upset by the capture of a pangolin by a jail employee:

When asked by the goaler what he proposed to do with it, he replied with a broad smile that he would make a bhaji, a kind of curry with it.11

There were compensations. The drongo, an elegant and sprightly insect eater was among the birds she identified in early 1943. The Book of Indian Birds by Salim Ali, a German trained ornithologist, and the first Asian to be a Fellow of the Royal Society, was at her side on more than one occasion. In turn, her father identified the pangolin, an obscure small ant eating mammal by referring to FW Champion’s The Jungle in Sunlight and Shadow, a pioneering work of natural history photography of animals in the wild.12 In solitary confinement in Ahmadnagar fort, Jawaharlal wrote to his sister excitedly about the arrival of a pair of migratory wagtails, ‘the heralds of a new season’.13

This went beyond harmless pursuits of leisure among a nascent English educated middle class. It is difficult for us today to capture the sense of excitement about new developments especially in physics and chemistry in the years preceding and during the Second World War. This was the age of Einstein, Rutherford and Bohr. Two letters from Switzerland in early 1940 testify to a fascination with modern technology and the new frontiers of discovery. Chemistry could provide humans with artifacts in every way, ‘superior to the natural product’, she told Nehru. There was this new textile called nylon,

Elastic, strong, transparent and opaque, it can be made into anything from tooth bristle to women’s sheer stockings.

The more it is pulled the tighter it gets.

Every week saw a new discovery, with change a harbinger of new opportunities.14

It was never mentioned openly but her own health hinged on her vulnerability to tuberculosis, a disease that had already claimed her mother’s life. It was only as recent as 2001 that a perceptive biographer, Katherine Frank, herself a social historian of TB uncovered Indira’s long battle with what was always in her time referred to as ‘the problem’. Her month long stay in Leysin, in the upper Rhone valley, in the winter of 1939 was aimed at a cure. This ‘white frozen world of sickness and death’, did not work any magic and her departure from the mountain resort came soon after. It was only 17 years later with new post war drugs that she became ‘an unusually healthy and fit woman’. However, it is important to note how a dangerous organism had claimed the life of a parent (Kamala) and threatened her with ill health till the age of forty (Frank 2001: 145, 146–164; and on her cure Frank 2001: 239–240).

In this light, it is even more remarkable that she did not view science simply as a project of human dominance over nature. The American botanist, DC Peattie gets approving nods in a letter. He reminded all of how, ‘the life of all living things are interrelated’.15 Looking

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back, it is only natural that technology was seen often as a Janus-faced phenomenon by two Indians who had traveled Republican Spain and heard accounts of the bombing of Guernica by the Condor Air Legion, dispatched by the Fuehrer to aid the royalists against a doomed democracy.

Nehru and the young Indira were sure that science should be allied to life, and development to peace, not war. But how would the choices be made as freedom dawned in the middling years of the century? Nehru had cause to differ with Gandhi. Although known as the one who would speak the latter’s language when he was gone, his views of modern technology and large industry were different in content and emphasis. In his book, The Discovery of India, he was appreciative of Gandhi’s distrust of technology as a cure all. However, he himself was clear that there was a choice between two paradigms and one would be ‘dominating and paramount’. Planning would limit the evils of technology, while big machinery had to be accepted. By this time, if not earlier, it was the younger man who was more in step with the Congress’ mind. On freedom’s doorstep the future seemed to lie with industrialisation, not its alternatives. Steel mills and atomic power, not spinning wheels and village self-rule would be the centre piece of a new India. The latter could endure, but only as a complement to the former.

A PERFECTLY ENTRANCING PLACE

The coming of independence and Partition in August 1947 was a troubled time, but it opened up new horizons. Indira Gandhi became and remained till May 1964, the Prime Minister’s hostess and confidante. They lived that entire time in the Teen Murti House, a vast residence formerly occupied by the Commander-in-chief. With stately trees and flower beds, it also included an old hunting lodge, or shikar gah built by the fourteenth century ruler Feroz Shah Tughluq. Her sons Rajiv and Sanjay lived with their mother and grandfather. The love of animals continued. There were two tiger cubs, later gifted to a zoo, well before they had become adults, ‘muscles rippling with power and grace’. More famous was a friendly and photogenic red panda, presented on a tour of Assam. Nobody in the entourage quite knew what the creature was and it was only identified using ‘a book on Indian animals’. Soon joined by a mate, it was housed in a special tree house. Fed bamboo shoots by Nehru each morning, the pair spent their winters in Shimla (Gandhi 1981: 72-73.). This was an India where the Raj habit of hunts was alive and well. On a visit to the Gir Forest, the lion’s only home outside of Africa, Indira Gandhi wore a khaki coloured coat, to avoid alarming the big cats. Still shot by special permission, the prides were wary of humans (Divyabhanusinh 2005: 173).

Her exposure to peoples and cultures was also extensive. Preparations for the Republic Day pageant of 1952, found Indira Gandhi working closely with tribal dancers. Pupil Jayakar, close associate and keen cultural afficonado felt this was her first contact with the adivasi or tribal people (Jayakar 1988: 144). In August 1961, she was virtually present as the old map of European rule folded up in Africa. Over a dozen of its nations were on the doorstep to independence. She met with leaders of major Kenyan nationalist groups, but as always wrote home from the Indian High Commission. Meeting Jomo Kenyatta the future President of Kenya was not the only thing to report back to her father from Nairobi. The Amboseli game reserve, she wrote, was a “perfectly entrancing place” to view lions and lionesses, with her two sons.

Unexpected frolic took place right in front of my hut in the pale hours of dawn—elephants, giraffes, zebras, gazelles were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Horace Alexander, the Quaker and sympathiser of the freedom struggle had founded the Delhi Bird Watchers’ Society, of which Indira Gandhi briefly served as President. This was prior to her stint as Congress President in 1957. Malcolm MacDonald, the British High Commissioner was another enthusiast. To date, she is the only Indian Prime Minister (there have been 13 in all) to have headed a naturalists’ society in her younger days. An aide was amazed at how she and her colleagues had learnt to ‘recognise birds by their sound’ (Anon. 1950; Bhagat 2005: 151). However, politics and public life never left much time for such privacy. She once complained to a friend of how even nearing a glacier 16,000 feet above sea level, there were people with requests, all of whom ‘come only to get or ask something’.19

Nehru had all along been drawn to rivers, but she felt closer to the mountains (Gandhi 1958). Her elder son, Rajiv was a budding photographer whose pictures show his younger brother Sanjay fording a stream.20 It was the summer of 1960, and she was on vacation with her husband, the Member of Parliament Feroze Gandhi and their two sons. They were in Daksun, ‘a pleasant place, pine and fir forest and trout streams and all’. This was where bears came down from the wooded hills to gorge themselves on stores of maize and on the grain ripening in the fields.21 Still, ‘a kingfisher came right into our sitting room and a swift had perched on Rajiv’s shoulder’.22 Such joy was short lived. This all too brief holiday in Kashmir was just weeks before her husband Feroze Gandhi’s death. The moments of calm were but fleeting.

I DON’T EVER WANT US TO BEG FOR FOOD AGAIN

By the early 1960s, Indira Gandhi’s role in public life was larger than before: it became more central as Nehru’s health and political standing suffered after the China war of October 1962. It was no surprise she was Union Minister of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry in the ministry headed by his successor Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964–1966). The latter’s death and a bitter inner party succession struggle propelled her to the top in January, 1966. She would soon draw on a range of new ideas about water and wildlife, forests and the environment at large. However, there was a more pressing matter at hand: food or rather the lack of it in adequate amounts for those who needed it the most.
The India she came to lead in January 1966 was a country heavily, even excessively, reliant on the monsoon. Nature’s wrath was more evident than its beneficiary; and it was the food crisis that commanded immediate attention. Over 70% of India lived off the land. Her visit to Washington DC two months later, as she testified to the veteran journalist, Inder Malhotra, was aimed to, ‘get food, aid and foreign exchange without appearing to ask for it’ (Malhotra 1989: 95). Her visit to Washington was deemed a success. Charmed by the young Premier, President Lyndon Johnson asked the US Congress to double food aid to seven million tons. The World Bank increased lending to 1.5 billion dollars. Already embroiled in a land war in Vietnam, Johnson saw India as a bulwark of democracy in an Asia vulnerable to communism. India’s grain imports in the next two years would total 19 million tonnes. The first of those years alone, one out of every five kilos of grain harvested in the US headed India’s way. This was aid not outright purchase. India was to devalue the rupee and accept economic measures the US saw as essential. Even as she phoned the White House for more food, she told an aide that December of 1966, ‘I don’t ever want us to beg for food again’.

The honeymoon was short lived. There was a storm of protest for the PM at home, not the least, within the ruling party. Relations soured by July. Washington never came through with the quantum of assistance it had promised. India soon condemned the American bombing of North Vietnam. From ‘understanding’ America’s anguish in Vietnam to ‘condemning’ the bombing, she traveled a great ideological distance between March and July of 1966. That latter month saw her in Moscow, where the statement called for a halt of bombing of Hanoi and condemned ‘imperialist and reactionary forces’. Relations became bitter, even as Indian reliance on American largesse had, perforce, to continue. In 1967, she sent personal greetings to Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh on his seventy-fifth birthday. Three years later speaking at a conclave of the non-aligned countries in Lusaka, she drew parallels between the nuclear peril and what was ‘more insidious’, daily pollution of the environment. What crossed the line was clear: the chemical contamination of animal and plant life in Vietnam (Gandhi 1970: 55). Ecological warfare was a symbol of assault on nature as much as on freedom. Charming Washington had given way to standing up for Asia and Africa.

Yet, a strident stance abroad required serious reform at home. This was clear on the public platform. A year into her Premiership, at varsity convocation in Bangalore, she sketched connections between water scarcity and denudation of forest cover. Hydel projects and mines were imperative, but ‘our building zeal is not accompanied by respect for the needs of conservation’. Nor was this a matter of choice. For, there was a clear linkage between the widespread drought and the factor. She rued the fact, that, ‘We had cut down many forests’ (Gandhi 1967: 15, 17). It was even clearer in the executive action on the farm front. The Green Revolution, focused as it was on high yielding varieties and higher prices to cultivators in a few select regions were a concomitant of such conservation. Its roots, earlier, literally lay in the induction of C Subramaniam to the Agriculture Ministry under her predecessor in 1964. ‘CS’ as he was known, gave the work of Indian scientists already in touch with Norman Borlaug, and a driving force at the very apex of the polity. Results were not long in coming. Speaking to a gathering of Asia’s scientists in 1968, Mrs. Gandhi was at pains to refute the image of peasant conservatism. Tobacco and groundnut farming had been transformed: ‘similar changes’ lay ahead for cereal crops (Gandhi 1968: 27).

The overall farm growth rate figures actually showed a dip from the previous period, falling from 2.9% (1961–1965) to 2.1% in the succeeding four years. However, these were misleading. The output of grain increased by 5% a year, from 1966 onward, for a period of fifteen years. At a time when Malthusian fears were the fashion, this was more than twice the rate of growth of India’s population. More important was the food stock kept by the federal government which increased to nine million tonnes by 1971 (Panagariya 2008: 71–73). By then, the acreage of hybrid wheat varieties had increased to over four million hectares (Gandhi 1980: 123).

It was ironical that it was the Rockefeller Foundation, which facilitated cooperation of American and Indian scientists. The aim was to get hybrid seeds for the farmer. President Johnson assisted in such a shift, seeing himself as a driving force for change. Subramaniam reflected years later that the President saw himself as a District nawab (or overlord). Himself an agronomist, hailing from the cultivating community of Gounders in Tamil Nadu, CS was clear that the motive force for change came from Indians themselves, and not the Americans. Looking back it is unclear if America was being used more by India than the other way round. Yet, it was touch and go till late in the day, with shipments of food often held up when they were needed most. The transformation also had a critical political dimension. The rise of the Maoist insurgency at Naxalbari, a village in West Bengal in May 1968, and later elsewhere in the country made it imperative to raise agricultural production and generate rural jobs. The Green Revolution did not put an end to food imports or indeed to hunger. What it did do was to make India less reliant on the vagaries of the monsoon or on US food aid. When food imports soared in 1976, India bought over 12 million tonnes, but paid for it. The aid era was at an end (Panagariya 2008: 72).

Such a narrative cannot possibly do justice to the complexity of events, but the denouement does reveal two inter-linked facets of Indira Gandhi’s India. Agricultural intensification and nature protection went hand in hand. The two were complementary or at least seen to be so. More than that, preservation was part of a larger nationalist enterprise with the leadership throwing its weight behind innovators precisely at a time of maturing internal and external crises. There was more to saving forests and wildlife than the fates of the wild. Higher yields per acre meant more land did not have to be ploughed up in order to grow more food. There was a shift to intensive cultivation as opposed to government sponsored colonisation as had been the case in the tarai (wet grassland and marsh) in north India in the Fifties.
AN ABUNDANCE OF IRONY

Preserving nature was integral to the effort and has often been seen as a flagship. In a telling sign of the times, around 1972, the Bengal tiger began to be referred to as the Indian tiger.27 It was a patriotic enterprise, with Indians being asked to rally around to save a heritage in peril, natural as much as national. The forester Kailash Sankhala had long exchanged his shot gun for a camera, getting the PM to even name two tiger cubs in the city zoo. As a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellow he submitted a research report detailing the decline of the species due to overhunting, poaching and loss of habitat.28 Exports of big cat skins had already been banned. Sport hunting by safari companies, a valuable source of foreign exchange also ended. When a Task Force reported in September 1972 that the tiger required safe havens where it could live and multiply with adequate cover and wild prey, a nationwide effort was launched the very next April. As Indira Gandhi said, Project Tiger abounded in irony. The species was in a struggle to survive in the land that had been its abode for millennia.29 A major concomitant of these efforts was the widening of horizons of wildlife to extend to all uncultivated flora and fauna and not just birds and animals. Each tiger reserve, and there were nine in all, had core zones closed off from tree felling by foresters, grazing of cattle or human habitation.30 Radical preservation won advocacy from key opinion makers outside the government such as M. Krishnan, naturalist and photographer par excellence.31 Also a Nehru Fellow, he saw the Project as a turning point in securing India’s unique identity, no less linked to irreplaceable natural features as to monuments or cultures.32 Saving the tiger was a route to a larger appreciation of landscapes, arid or wet, hillside or desert: they were not simply seen as raw material or potential arable or as waste (Ishwar Prakash, 1975). Such ecological patriotism put pristine nature at the centre of a project for the nation state.

This shift from an overly commercial view of nature to a more holistic appreciation of nature as a common heritage had a social and political context. November 1969, when the government banned tiger skin export, was also the month when chief ministers came together for a conference on land reforms.33 The end of sport hunting companies was a blow to the owners, many of whom were former princes, a class whose privileges were now abolished for good. The abolition of the privy purses of princes, a holdover from the time of their accession after independence, was a major battle cry of the Congress, as it entered the general election campaign of 1971. The campaign to ‘Save our Skins’ against the fur trade got under way around the same time as the Finance Ministry raided black marketers and hoarders. Bank nationalization rallied those who had had little access to credit; nature protection looked like a similar defense of a common wealth against loot. These “carefully chosen targets” were past oppressors, whether princes, bankers or conservative judges. However, they gave her legitimacy for larger schemes including those that sought to “make room for nature”.34

Both Krishnan and Sankahla formed a part of a larger milieu that marked the early years of the new Prime Minister. This is not the place to go into detail, but a few parallels will suffice. Their call for sustained state action was in line with the wider political agendas of her left wing advisers, once she took on the old Guard or Syndicate in 1969. Her Secretary and former Foreign Service diplomat, the erudite P.N. Haksar, provided ideological rationale for the government takeover of 14 private sector banks. Crackdowns on smugglers and black marketers were a hallmark of the Minister of State K.R. Ganesh. The Coal Minister and former communist, Mohan Kumaramangalam piloted the Bill to nationalise the coal sector. In all these cases, there was a pitting of the interests of many versus the few, and of an attack on privilege.35

The mood lasts till after the general elections of 1971, which the Congress won on the slogan of abolishing poverty. It carried over to the State Assembly polls of 1972, after the Bangladesh war. She had faced down the party bosses, then the US, and now ruled via loyal followers both in New Delhi and in all but one state. As an astute observer later recalled, 'The poor man in the village began to walk with a bit of swagger, because of a combination of naiveté and a genuine awakening of consciousness'.36

‘Hands off’ nature had its flip sides. It was no coincidence that the word ‘sanctum sanctorum’ with its quasi religious overtones was used to describe the core zones of the tiger reserves.37 Unlike in the 1950s when Salim Ali urged Nehru to save a wetland, or the late 1960s when studies by the Smithsonian informed efforts to secure the lions of the Gir Forest, science took a back seat. Indian foresters claimed prior and superior knowledge over ‘their’ tigers. The Smithsonian’s Director complained of ‘an evolving nationalistic pride’ and he was not far off the mark (Lewis 2003: 235-236). Yet, Indian relations with the United States were in the deep freeze from 1970 on, as Nixon tilted towards the military regime in Pakistan. India may have closed doors to America, but a leading UN agency got involved with efforts to save crocodilians. Soon after, the British naturalist Gerald Durrell’s Jersey Wildlife Trust was allowed to advise on saving the pygmy hog, a rare small mammal in a sensitive border state in Assam. A leading European expert even researched the Kashmir stag in the Dachigam sanctuary to help evolve protective strategies. Project Tiger itself was to get a million dollars from the World Wildlife Fund. It was significant that its key leaders were European. Prince Bernhard was Dutch royalty and Guy Mountfort a British advertising czar.38 In fact, far from being nationalists with a blind spot, the Indians had played their wildlife wealth to advantage and wooed the Europeans in place of the Americans.

In the early Seventies there was still a heady dose of nationalism. It was all the more heady as it evoked the specter of a crisis. Just as agricultural scientists, long at work, were to be at the forefront of new techniques in the farm, so too were there new thinkers on the ecological front. Conservation, like agricultural innovation was driven by a sense of crisis. Failure meant disaster, success was all. Indira Gandhi gave them an ear and much more, a milieu in which their ideas
acquired force and momentum. It also reached back into the past. The movement to have national parks in India was for a proponent ‘as old as Indian history’, and it was common place to cite Asokan edicts of the third century BCE (Anon. 1973; Sankhala 1970a: 1). This evocation of the tiger as a symbol of unity reached its apogee as Project Tiger got underway after 1 April, 1973, barely a year and 18 days before the nuclear tests at Pokhran. Later in 1974, India launched a space satellite, named appropriately enough after a fifth century astronomer, Aryabhata.

Getting out of one crisis did little to avert another. By 1972, the mood was changing. Narasimha Rao put it dryly. ‘The more the euphoria’, he wrote, ‘the deeper and quicker the disillusionment’ (Rao 2000: 647). War had brought in 10 million refugees. Agriculture suffered under successive droughts in 1971 and 1972. The Arab Israeli war of October 1973 was accompanied by the oil price shock. Finally, prices of consumer goods rose by over 20% a year for two successive years. By mid-1974, the polity was heading for a breakdown. A year later, the Prime Minister when unseated by a court in a disputed election advised the President to evoke Emergency powers. For the first time since its independence, India, was no more a democracy.

Yet, the Emergency was built on notions of centralist governance with a large middle class constituency. It had an appeal along advocates of conservation that was easy to miss. One common rallying point among preservationists was the issue of the states’ rights over forests. The country’s top ornithologist had long advocated leasing of wetlands by the Centre. State governments were also a target of attack for abetting forest conversion to farm land in a host of ways. Only ‘an integrated authority’, wrote the irrepressible Krishnan, could avoid the mantle of protection from being taken apart altogether. They may not have been unaware that the Prime Minister too was thinking aloud on similar lines. The Forty-second Constitution Amendment carried into effect in January 1977 did much to weaken the democratic edifice, but it also placed ‘Forests and Wildlife’ on the concurrent as opposed to the States’ list. This meant that both the federal and state governments had jurisdiction. However, in the event of a difference, it was the Union whose will would prevail. It is significant that even after she lost power in March 1977, and the opposition Janata Party came to power, it did not undo this provision.

Conservation got a boost as its darker side became apparent. Ironically, while shutting out American wildlife biology, Indian foresters also reinforced their own monopoly over wildlife watching and monitoring. Nowhere was this as stark as in the pugmark-based tiger counts, whose results became a subject of controversy. Greenough has drawn parallels of the small pox eradication and tiger protection campaigns. Actually, there was a game of numbers, but it was with the multiplication of the striped beasts and the rising numbers of sterilised humans in the Emergency. By 1976, Project Tiger officials were claiming a surge in tiger populations. An expert team from western conservation organizations questioned this, but the report was not known to anyone in India till well after the Emergency. The Mid Term Assessment did more than call for more science-based studies. It also asked for a far more accommodative approach for village level livelihoods in the buffer zone of the Tiger Reserves. It hardly caused a ripple. Although hardly radical, it looked at the landscape as two biologists and a civil administrator would. It was at variance on key issues with the way foresters saw preservation simply as an issue of enforcement.

The issue of sterilisation by coercion was more explosive and at a human level far more serious. It did much to undermine the Congress’ rock solid support among the under classes on whose strength it had won such a huge mandate only a few years earlier. It was estimated that the target of 23 million sterilizations would be met in thirty-six months. Three million sterilizations were carried out in just the first five months from July to November of 1975 (Frank 2001: 407). Backed by her son and heir apparent Sanjay Gandhi, it also focused neo Malthusian fears on the poor, the Scheduled Castes and the religious minorities. It was also closely linked to urban slum demolitions, especially in Delhi. They stand out, even by hindsight, as the one time when the number and population of slum dwellers actually declined due to coercive displacement. As with centralist impulses for preservation, the concept of unauthorised slums predated the Emergency. The latter transmuted power into authority overnight, enabling coercion to be exercised out in the open (DuPont 2008; Tarlo 2000).

There were limits to the process. An aide recalled an incident in late 1976, where the PM was visibly shaken when shown a report about school teachers being coerced to get ‘volunteers’ for vasectomy. She began to search of ways to end the impasse.

THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD

The Emergency era ended suddenly in January 1977, as the Prime Minister had the House dissolved and called for elections. Her party’s rout was total and it was out of power for the first time in three decades. However, she was back in office in just 18 months. The period of 1979–1980 marked a turning point in political fortunes for the leader who was back at the helm, again with a massive two thirds majority.

Where did all this leave preservation? In a sense, now the sense of crisis was less on the wildlife front and more of a rapid expansion of the existing programmes. By the end of the Eighties about 4% of the land area was under sanctuaries and parks, as compared to one eighth the figure in 1970. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 remained the key legal instrument, but programmes such as Project Tiger were now routinised. Its Director even wrote a paper entitled, ‘What to do when you have succeeded’. The tiger, like India, seemed to bask in success.

Yet, there was a cauldron of brewing conflicts. Some had their genesis in the first Indira period, but had taken time to crystallise. What had begun as a project of protection driven by the Prime Minister’s Office became an article of faith for
political leaders of different parties. When an International Symposium on the Tiger had been held in February 1978, when she was out of power, her former associate and now bete noire, Jagjivan Ram, had inaugurated it. Protecting tigers for their own sake had once been a radical, even outlandish idea. It had become a new orthodoxy.

Looking back what is striking is how far displacement of residents, by 1977, became itself the sine qua non of wildlife preservation. It was often the first rather than the last response. Initially, it had been confined to a few select habitats of rare species: the swamp deer (Cervus duvaucelli branderi) in central India or the Asian (or Indian) lion (Panthera leo persica) in Gujarat. A handful of tiger reserves followed suit, the issue of habitat contiguity and prey availability taking priority over continued human habitation. Those that moved out—whether pastoralists, Adivasi (or for that matter non-tribal) cultivators or fishermen, often found coping with new styles of production arduous. Displacement from conservation areas for wildlife was not new: there were a few precedents. They became an ideal for foresters to strive for. Conflict could be violent. There was serious, bloody confrontation in the buffer zone of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, where the forcible eviction of refugees led to violence and massacre. This incident in West Bengal, long forgotten, took place in 1978, and has been documented in detail by scholars. A Left Front government elected in 1977, and one with an enviable record of land reform and devolution undertook such violent displacement. Yet, when it came to dealing with refugees settled on government forest estates earmarked for tiger habitats, its response was brutal (Jalais 2005, 2009). There were other instances of closure of access, including one in November 1982, leading to police firing in Ghana, the waterfowl reserve in Bharatpur. Here, the issue was not eviction, but tightening of controls, as the site went from being a mere sanctuary to a national park. Deprived of grazing access overnight the villagers broke the rubble wall and entered the park. Police firing followed. The government stood its ground and did not give way. Eviction if possible and enclosure if not was becoming a norm.

The fate of the forest was a keen subject of contest. As with the Emergency era regulations, administrative fiat and coercion had the ear of the officialdom. The Forest (Conservation) Act in 1980 made Union government clearance mandatory for the clearance of forest areas of over ten hectares. This centralised powers, even as there were new pressures on forest land due to agricultural extension and large industrial projects. By October 1982, she lectured state forest ministers on how the country needed some really ‘hard measures’ to halt denudation of hill catchments. The difference was that in the India of the Eighties, public opinion mattered a lot more. The Congress’ victory had in part been enabled by a sweep of most parliamentary seats reserved for the Scheduled Tribes. By 1982, many Adivasi groups were up in revolt against a new proposed Forest Bill. A Delhi-based group put it simply, calling the legislation part of an ‘undeclared civil war’. Forest officers were to be given magisterial powers of detention; customary access would be effectively criminalised.

The issue brought together a multi-hued coalition of opponents: liberation theologists and tribal mass organisations, as also, urban ecologically aware youth and human rights groups. A fusion of ecological and justice themes emerged in the course of the campaign. The Bill was never tabled. The multiple shades of green, or of green merging with other colors of a more radical or liberal hue, did not always lead to rejection or repression. In fact, it was striking to see how personal ties were central to Indira Gandhi’s politics. This had been a marked feature of her first term. Now, even as her party lacked leaders of experience as in the past she drew on a wider ecumene. By 1980, protests against monoculture taken up by the Chipko movement in the Western Himalayas from 1973, had their counterparts elsewhere. In the Jharkhand plateau the cry against commercial forestry pitted the sal (Shorea robusta) against the Sagwan or teak (Tectona grandis). Livelihood was in opposition to commerce. It was around this time that there was a shift in the policy. This did not end the clear felling of mixed natural forests for monocultures, but at least it was no more a policy. A major project for pine plantation, for paper pulp in Bastar, central India, was shelved after a review (Anderson and Huber 1988). In 1982, even as it stepped back from the Forest Bill, the Union government also passed orders against leasing out government forest land to private companies. Of course, state governments often went their own way, and leases such as those in Madhya Pradesh, the state with the most extensive forest acreage, were never cancelled (Chambers et al. 1989: 236).

The larger rubric of the conflicts was between rival resource users; increasing demand for biomass from industry was contending with usufruct right holders. If the government came down more clearly on the side of the forester, it was part of a larger secular shift in the politics of the Congress. Indira Gandhi’s politics had edged away from socialist rhetoric and populism to a more ‘pro business’ attitude. Critical changes in the licensing policy eased technology imports, and capacity expansion with wealth creation, not redistribution, was the focus of the policy. This was symbolised by a dinner in her honor in an elite Delhi hotel. The host was Dhirubhai Ambani, already India’s largest producer of polyester, the synthetic fibre that would over time displace cotton as the poor man’s fabric. New policies to assist private investment in electronics were integral to the larger economic changes. It was around this time that Wipro, a company known for its vegetable oil business entered the software business, as did Infosys, and today’s software giants were set up. If silicon and not steel would define the century up ahead, the beginnings lay here in the late Indira period.

The growth story was better than in her first stint in power and this was not just so for large industrial houses. Growth rates through the 1980s were at a steady clip coming close to 6%; almost double that of the rocks decade of the Seventies. These changes were counterbalanced by higher rates of growth, especially so in agriculture. Farm growth rates were high, as the Green Revolution spread beyond North West India, helped by diesel pump sets for drawing groundwater, and the growth
of credit. In 1983–1984, it was pegged at as high as 8.1%. These figures are dry as figures can be, but do indicate a very different context form that of the Seventies (Panagariya 2008: 84). As with the politics of ecology, the economic scenario was a mixed one. The overall drift was clear, but there were checks and balances. It is plausible that more farm and non-farm job creation took some of the edge off natural resource-related conflicts and tensions.

This rapprochement with industrialists had its external counterpart. Despite the outbreak of a new cold war especially around the Afghan issue, India entered into a closer dialogue with Reagan’s America. Economics was never too far from either his mind or the Indian PM’s. This also helped cement Indo-American ties in biological research, with a bounty for new research programmes. A new generation of wildlife biologists outside of the Forest Department and working on a range of habitats were beneficiaries of the thaw.

**NOT STARTING FROM GROUND ZERO**

The storm over large dam projects soon found her at the centre. She was not an advocate of appropriate technologies. Her remark to Capra in 1983, is worth re ecting on, ‘If I could start from zero, I would do things differently. But I have to be realistic. There is a large technological base in India which I can’t throw away’.

The issue, she told the physicist, was how to choose the technology appropriate to the task at hand. There was, she freely admitted an issue of technology ‘destroying the existing culture’. She might have added, not just cultures but the integrity of ecosystems was under threat. She was both part and parcel of a tradition of commissioning large projects. There is an uncanny echo of Jawaharlal Nehru, who used a similar idiom in a closed door meeting of Gandhi’s closest associates only weeks after his death. Industrialisation was not a matter of choice or simply of survival; it was imperative for the defense of India. Speaking as he was, only weeks after the winter war of 1947–1948 over Kashmir, his words had an urgency none of the senior Gandhians missed (Gandhi 2008: 64).

By 1980, the legacy of large projects was all too real. In just thirty years ending in 1980, India had built nearly 900 large dams, more than any country after the US, USSR, Japan and China (Khagram 2005: 37). Yet, Indira Gandhi was aware of the larger debate on dams. Prior to her electoral rout in 1977, she had ordered a comprehensive environmental impact assessment of all large and medium irrigation projects. Although nothing came of this, it does show a keen awareness of larger issues (Khagram 2005: 42). By 1980, the senior civil servant, B.B. Vohra, a Punjab Indian Administrative Service officer, with a special interest in land and water issues, had honed together a sharp critique of large multipurpose river valley projects. She had given teeth to his ideas by creating Land Use boards, although these were but paper tigers (Vohra 1980). In her case, there was more of a willingness to look at options, mainly for ecological rationale as in the cases of Moyar and Silent Valley. Big dams were as integral to Indira Gandhi’s world view as to the late Jawaharlal Nehru’s. Neither was an uncritical admirer, but both were advocates (Rangarajan In press).

In 1974, she inaugurated stretches of what would become the Rajasthan Canal, one of the largest human made inter basin water transfers in the country’s history. The veteran actor Sunil Dutt’s *Reshma aur Shera*, also commemorated the canal in a memorable film. Fittingly, the hero loses his life in bringing waters to the parched land. Such projects were difficult to accomplish given that large rivers ran through more than one state. In 1974 and again in 1981, she got the chief ministers of the riparian states of the river Narmada around a table. Contrary to the image of an inveterate centraliser, she was often cautious about state-level aspirations, urging the two key states along, rather than issuing a *diktat* to the two Congress chief ministers. On the second occasion, in 1981, much more than earlier, these were men who owed much to her politically. Arjun Singh in Madhya Pradesh and Madhavsinh Solanki were state leaders of the populist alliances of the ‘so-called lower’ castes and the *Adivasis*. However, even here, there was only so much the Union government could do. Larger critiques of the Narmada projects that combined displacement and ecological dimensions had been compiled by 1983, but were yet to reach centre stage. Political leaders were faced with a prosaic question. This was of how to divide the wealth of waters not whether or not to dam their flow. The riparian states differ for construction, in 1978. He agreed to the scheme in return for letting the left wing state government go easy on his pet project: Prohibition. Indira Gandhi, then in the Opposition, was unable to get her state Congress unit to distance itself from the proposed dam. The grass roots campaign of the mass people’s science movement, the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad gained impressive support; and scientists the world over appealed against the dam. A committee of experts, headed by naturalist Zafar Futehally, investigated the project; but, more importantly, the larger committee continued to lobby Desai’s successor, Charan Singh. In January 1980, as Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi had to devise a way out. Her sympathies clearly lay with advocates of preserving a site critical as a rain forest. However, she publicly admitted to being under pressure. There were, after all, legitimate regional level aspirations for power and water. North Kerala, a backward region had legitimate demands that could not be overlooked (Gandhi 1983). It took until 1983, for the M.S. Swaminathan Committee’s report to secure the rain forest, while developing alternative sources for power and irrigation.

This was not the only such case where her intervention was critical to staving off a hydel project. The Moyar Dam that...
would have inundated the Mudumalai wildlife sanctuary in neighbouring Tamil Nadu was also set aside (D’Monte 1985: 74–75). This was even more critical as it formed part of a vast habitat of intact forest and scrub comprising of as many as four large Protected Areas. If both Silent Valley and Mudumalai remained intact to this day, any assessment would have to give some credit to her openness to the idea of ecological integrity and species diversity. The (NCEPC), to be superseded in November 1980, by the Department of Environment, had played a key role in the turn of events. However, in the Silent Valley case, she had gone beyond the committee or the newly constituted Department of Environment. Any such lobbying had self-evident limits.

Prime Ministerial authority could only be invoked in exceptional cases. As in so much else, her personal role may have averted the crises, but it came at the cost of sound institutional mechanisms. The power of the office and the person who held it was central to her aura. It is tempting to ask if each such crisis really needed intervention at the highest level, and that too in a country the size of western Europe and with well over half a billion people.

Much of her career at the top had been about the push and pull between populist development ideas and elite conservation agendas. There was little doubt that she espoused both very categorically. However, there was a pronounced and clear shift towards growth first than over redistribution. Already by the mid Seventies, many of her left wing advisers had gone from the scene. The easing of import restrictions for industry, although limited, was to be of great significance. These included initiatives for a more stringent legislation on forests and a much more successful enactment of the Forest Conservation Act that gave New Delhi a decisive say in the conversion of forest land to alternate use.

By 1983, the political picture was fast deteriorating. This was helped, in no small way by the crisis in her own party. The economy picked up pace. However, her party lost its hold on two southern states that had stood by it even in 1977, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Furthermore, concomitant with her pro business stance, she also began courting Hindu cultural nationalism, especially in handling sensitive issues of identity in two border states where Hindus were in a minority. The die was cast by the time of the army action in the summer of 1984 in Punjab. Her assassination in October ended a long and tempestuous life. When asked whether she was losing her grip, a journalist close to her publicly said, she had never regained control after her return to office. In a private correspondence a year earlier, Indira Gandhi had quoted Yeats, ‘Things fall apart. The centre cannot hold’ (Malhotra 1989: 285).

ROOM FOR ALL OF US

Historians of the late twentieth century India can scarcely avoid the record or the legacy of its first woman Prime Minister. Her action and words counted even before she came to power and in the interregnum when she was out of office. In a speech to the heads of state and government gathered at the Non-Aligned Summit in Delhi in 1983, she spoke of how the earth had ‘room for all of us’. Of course, in the eyes of both critics and admirers, especially so of her environmental record, it looked rather different. There seems to have been room for only one of us. Indira Priyadarshini Nehru Gandhi was a product of a vibrant and active nationalist awakening. It was one that engaged with issues of ethics and science, technology and nature to a far greater extent than we often give credit. She was a statist, and in her father’s mould, a moderniser. But far more than him, she was deeply sensitive to more than just the call of the wild or the question of making room for nature in the worlds’ second-most populous country. In fact, in the Seventies as in the Eighties there was close correspondence between her political turns and her environmental policies. If in the first, she took a leftward course, there was coincidence of targets in politics as in conservation. The Eighties saw a movement to the centre-right and there is no doubt at all that the authoritarian impulse of the Emergency was alive and well, although in homeopathic doses. The absence of works of the timbre of Discovery of India may indicate less in terms of scholarship, but there is no doubt at all of the quality of intellect that grappled with dilemmas of development. By the Eighties, it was more than the economy that had matured. As democracy struck deeper roots, new impulses came to the fore. This was as true of the forest as of the polity as a whole. Institutional disarray and decay were masked by her sense of energy and engagement with crises. Nature was framed for her by the nation state, for its birth and reinforcement were central to her life. In keeping with the shifting kaleidoscope of the Congress’ ways, there was empathy for the under class, but less of a recognition of rights than a careful dispersal of patronage.

Looking back there is little doubt that the legacy is one that divides as much as it unifies. Contrary to the challenge of a contemporary history that is marked by detachment or distance, over time, there is only more to move the student of her record to empathy as much as outrage, admiration as much as criticism (Guha 2008a). In common with other political leaders, her ideas and practices evolved over time. As her conservation initiatives collided with state powers, federal government structures and the aspirations of the poor, especially rural and tribal people, threatened by parks, forests and reserves, she learnt to conflate her ideals and nationalism.

Her personal inclinations and the demands of practical statecraft were an ever changing mix. In general, there were two critical paradigm shifts in Indira Gandhi’s approach to questions of conservation in the period after 1969. There was a growing affinity that developed between her autocratic approach to government and nature, after 1972. This was concomitant with her general deepening hold on power, both at the federal and state levels, to a level unprecedented in independent India. Many of the initiatives were to outlast her defeat and even her return to office. However, equally significant, was the fact that there was another shift, signs of which were evident in the mid Seventies, but which was to fructify fully after 1980, of a more authoritarian and centralised framework. This took time to mature and was never fully
hegemonic, being locked in conflict with aspirations her earlier populism had been shaped by.

This still leaves us with a question with larger philosophical implications. Was Indira Gandhi an ecological nationalist by ideological conviction, or was she opportunistically nationalist to justify the expansion or arrogation of federal and statist powers in the area of nature conservation? As with all else, there is no easy way of unwrapping the puzzle. There was much that was driven by the impulse to centralise powers. It was no coincidence that the subject of forests and the environment were placed on the Concurrent List in the Forty-second Amendment, enacted during the Emergency. Similarly, there were major gains in terms of New Delhi’s clout over forest areas and designated natural zones in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, it was far too mechanical and simplistic to see the one as the outcome of the other. There was a larger drift towards centralisation and also to the accretion of the power above, but this does not deny or detract from the depth of concerns that were often ecological and nationalist. This was clearest in her emergence as a spokeswoman for a carefully crafted position, as an advocate of a Southern way of looking at planetary predicaments that emerged in 1972, and was reiterated in 1980 at the world fora. More so, the efflorescence of nature reserves and the halt to specific dam projects had deeper roots in a notion of a nation, where nature had a place. There was no doubt her initiatives were intensely and deeply political, but that did not detract from a significance that went beyond her immediate political concerns.

She engaged more closely with issues of ecological nature than any Indian Prime Minister and had a worldview far more nuanced, developed and sophisticated than that of her late father, Jawaharlal Nehru. There is little doubt that there were authoritarian elements on the projects of saving nature or remaking the environment, but the shadow cast by them was not all encompassing. The access to women and men of science and the ability to engage with diverse activists, Gandhian or nature lovers had roots in an older more eclectic style of nationalism. This larger ecumene outlasted her left wing advisors, supporters and colleagues, whose influence had waned by the mid Seventies. It did not and indeed could not prevent her and the larger forces arrayed with her, from coming up with strong radical and populist opposition by the early 1980s.

A quarter century after her passing, the issues and legacies of the times she lived in are very much with us. It is a complex record that calls for critical reflection about the nature of power and of knowledge and the manifold ways in which they are intertwined in our world. In many ways it is a history that is very much part of the living present. It calls from moving on from mere condemnation or iconic acclaim towards historically informed reflection and debate.

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Notes

2. Greenough 2003; Guha 2006: 125–151 (appropriately titled ‘Authoritarianism in the wild’).
4. Thapar 2006: 304. An earlier instance of such a view can be found in Sankhala (1993), who wrote of the tiger poaching in Rajasthan that, ‘had She (Indira) been there, many heads will have rolled’.
5. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dweller’s (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. See the special issue of Seminar, August 2006 and the various articles in the debate section of Economic and Political Weekly, 19 November, 2005, Vol. 40. Unwittingly or not, the latter coincided with the 88th birth anniversary of Indira Gandhi.
9. Gandhi 1992. The volume on the earlier period while not used in this essay is an equally insightful source (Gandhi 1989).
20. The photo is published in Gandhi 1994: 9. This family holiday was a rare moment together in an estranged marriage but foreshadowed tragedy. Her husband Feroze died two months later, aged only 48 years. Frank 2001: 256.

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