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AUTOCRATIC ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

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Introduction

In this chapter, we focus on the autocratization of environmental governance in India since the coming to power of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. If we broadly understand autocratization to mean “democratization in reverse” (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), such a reversal has arguably occurred since 2014, as Modi’s authoritarian populist regime has consolidated (Widmalm 2019). Like other such regimes, Modi’s authoritarian populism is committed to the construction of a common sense that gravitates around a trope of economic growth and “development” that seeks to address frustrated subaltern aspirations in the context of rising unemployment while also opposing elitism and promulgating individual entrepreneurialism. This common sense is further wedded to a vitriolic rhetoric and politics of Hindu nationalism that expresses itself in autocratic forms through the policing of dissent, the targeting of “anti-national elements” both within and outside India, as well as communal and vigilante forms of violence targeting minorities (see Nielsen and Nilsen, this volume). This, in combination, pushes the Indian polity and public sphere in a majoritarian and authoritarian direction (Jakobsen et al. 2019; Nilsen et al. 2019) characterized by political unfreedom (Singh 2020).

In this chapter, we zoom in on the ways in which this autocratic turn has shaped environmental governance in fundamental ways. Earlier research on the linkages between political institutions and environmental policies tended to affirm that democratic institutions with robust legal systems that ensured freedom of speech, access to information, and enabled ecological lobbying generally improved environmental performance (Congleton 1992). While the opposite has been asserted for non-democracies, the relationship between political institutions and the state of the environment in fact varies across developing countries (Mak Arvin and Lew 2011). In a context in which we currently witness a rise in authoritarian populist regimes and a weakening of existing democratic institutions in many countries, we note that scholarly analyses of the relationship between these emergent regime types and environmental governance has only recently begun to emerge (McCarthy 2019). This chapter seeks to contribute to such emerging work by unpacking the linkages between authoritarianism, populism, and environmental governance in India under Modi. In doing so, we acknowledge the various positive environmental initiatives that have been undertaken by the Modi government. These include

important commitments to mitigate climate change and fight air and water pollution, and to invest in the transition to renewable energy. However, while such initiatives are undoubtedly important, we argue that Modi's broader agenda of prioritizing economic growth, enhancing the ease of doing business, and cracking down on so-called "anti-national" dissenters, has had decidedly negative consequences for India's environment and, indeed, for hundreds of millions of Indians.

The environmental stakes are high in India, a mega-biodiverse country that hosts about 10 per cent of the planet's biodiversity hotspots. The country's seventy million hectares of forests provide invaluable ecosystem services including biodiversity, water resources and climate change mitigation. They also provide direct livelihood support to more than 200 million people living in forests and fringe villages through the supply of fuelwood and non-timber forest produce (Lee and Wolf 2018). Yet, the high economic growth that has consistently been prioritized over other possible goals in the political economy over more than two decades – and which admittedly brought more than 250 million people out of poverty from 2005 to 2015, if only precariously so – has come about at the cost of significant degradation of natural resources and the environment. Indeed, in 2020, India ranked a lowly 168 out of 180 countries listed in the global Environmental Performance Index (EPI 2020). While the severe social and environmental challenges that arise from such "degradation-induced" development call for urgent interventions, we argue that what we witness under Modi's authoritarian populist regime is, rather, a relative disregard for key environmental challenges and a firm and growing commitment to economic growth, from which the regime derives legitimacy. As Palshikar (2019: 113–114) points out, Modi's authoritarian populism depends both on the support of corporate interests pushing an aggressive corporatized economy, *and* on the ordinary citizen being convinced that their economic wellbeing is a function of a strong nation – and therefore that the hurdles in becoming a strong nation (such as "anti-national activities") must be overcome. In the domain of environmental governance, this has manifested in the twin strategy of harnessing environmental policy and law to turn the environment into resources that can be incorporated into circuits of capital, while simultaneously intensifying policing and criminalizing environmental activists who are increasingly branded as anti-national enemies.

The chapter is structured as follows. We begin with a short historical overview of environmental governance in India. We then briefly discuss the autocratic turn under Modi, before turning to its impact on environmental governance. We subsequently single out two domains of environmental governance that we are particularly familiar with, namely forest governance and land governance. Although these two domains do not constitute an exhaustive account of the configuration of environmental governance in contemporary India (which would also include air, water, energy, etc.), we believe that the trends and processes we identify in these domains are diagnostic of a more general autocratic turn. The last section proceeds from the assumption that the ways in which a country responds to ruptures such as the Covid-19 pandemic can provide key insights into its governance context (Sareen et al. 2020). Against this backdrop, we analyze the autocratic undercurrent effecting significant changes to environmental governance during the pandemic. The conclusion summarizes our arguments about the autocratization of environmental governance under Modi.

A brief history of environmental governance in India

The first environment-related legislation in India was the *Forest Act* of 1865. The act consolidated state power to exercise exclusive control over designated forest areas, while the provision within the act towards accommodation of local communities' customary rights remained mostly on

paper. A subsequent Forest Act 1878 demarcated forests into “reserved forests” and “protected forests”. While protected forests were put under the sole control of the forest administration, within reserved forests, local populations were permitted limited usufruct access (Umashankar 2014). The Indian Forest Act 1927 eventually replaced the earlier Act of 1878, but the focus remained on the revenue-generating aspect of forests.

The early postcolonial decades were characterized by an overwhelming policy emphasis on nation-building through large-scale state investments in infrastructure, agriculture and industry. Environmental conservation received little attention, and only in 1966, when Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister, did environmental protection become *de rigueur* with strict implementation guidelines (Dutta 2020). Subsequently, the Wildlife Protection Act was passed in 1972, and in 1980 a committee was constituted which for the first time recommended the creation of a department of Environment in the Union government. Consequently, the Forest Conservation Act 1980 was passed, followed by the Environment (Protection) Act 1986. This act for the first time encompassed a comprehensive definition of environment as “water, air and land and the inter-relationship which exists along and between water, air, land and human beings, other living creatures, plants, micro-organisms and property” (section 2). Importantly, the act vested power in the central government to set environmental standards and grant environmental clearances for industries and activities.

While India thus expanded its legal framework for environmental protection from the 1980s, the liberalization of the economy simultaneously accelerated and led to increased industrialization, investments in modern intensive agriculture and growing commercial exploitation of resources (Williams and Mawdsley 2006). This brought to light the potential conflict between the environment and economic growth, with most Indian governments both then and now leaning more towards growth. This included the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government that preceded Modi, whose record on environmental governance was unimpressive. However, as we show below, this tilt towards economic growth at the expense of the environment has not only accelerated with the advent of the Modi government; it has also been pursued in a more autocratic manner than before.

Modi's new clearance raj

Modi brought the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) back from years of electoral decline to capture Parliament with a clear majority in 2014 (Jakobsen et al. 2019). The election campaign saw Indian capitalists rallying overwhelmingly behind Modi, including the likes of Mukesh and Anil Ambani, and Gautam Adani, who thrived under Modi's business-friendly regime (Jaffrelot 2019). A key means through which Modi – during his tenure as chief minister – sought to turn Gujarat into a favoured investment destination was the speed with which he ensured that all permits, licences, and environmental clearances could be obtained. Hence, a major target of his campaign rhetoric in 2014 was the ostensibly “policy-paralyzed” nature of the incumbent Congress Party that he alleged was caught up in what he spoke of as “the clearance raj”, a euphemism for India's national wildlife, forest, and environmental laws that – according to Modi – acted as a slog on investments and national economic development.

As several chapters in this book note, Modi's style of governing is highly centralized. As Manor (2020: 109) argues, “most ministers in the central government learn what their policies are from their senior bureaucrats who transmit messages from the PMO”. In the domain of environmental policy and governance, Modi's cabinet has worked to harness national policy to further the “ease of doing business” agenda, mostly by ensuring that permits and clearances – including environmental clearances – can be obtained swiftly by prospective investors. Within

the first three months of assuming office in 2014, the Modi government issued environmental clearance to 33 out of 41 proposals diverting more than 7,000 hectares of forestland for the purpose of mining, construction, and special economic zones. A major share of the diverted land was allocated to private corporations. The environmental clearance process was also digitalized to enable “ease of application” (Anon. 2014); within two years, the average time for securing environmental permits had been reduced from 600 to 192 days (Aggarwal 2016). The government seeks to reduce this further to 100 days – and even less for specific growth sectors such as real estate, where the target is 60 days (Manohar 2019).

As Manor (2020: 97) reminds us, economic liberalizers need not be neoliberals by default. Nor are they by definition autocratic. However, we arguably detect an autocratic strand in Modi’s efforts at economic restructuring at the expense of the environment. Notably, the dilution of the environmental clearance regime was implemented with very little preceding debate with key stakeholders, and without taking any steps to strengthen monitoring or other key environmental governance mechanisms, thus allowing the diversion of forestland for non-forestry purposes to proceed apace. Similarly, the National Board for Wildlife (NBW), which has the power to review all wildlife-related matters and approve projects in and around national parks and sanctuaries, has been significantly reconstituted. With Modi as the chairperson, the number of independent experts on the board has been reduced from 15 to three, and the board packed with “subservient officials” (Kaul 2017). But more significantly, its role as a deliberating and statutory policy-level body has been weakened. Thus, whereas the 47-member board used to have regular monthly meetings under the previous government, the NBW has reportedly not held a single meeting during Modi’s prime ministership. All policy decisions and clearances have instead come from a much smaller standing committee (Kukreti 2020).

Comparably, a high-level committee established early on in Modi’s first term to review and overhaul the gamut of laws on protection of wildlife, forests, and environment was severely criticized by the opposition, civil society, and environmental actors for being undemocratic and non-transparent, leading to its recommendations being struck down by a parliamentary committee. Nonetheless, several laws that have a direct bearing on environmental governance have been changed or diluted. This includes the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013, Wildlife Protection Act 1972, National Forest Policy 2018, Indian Forest Act 1927, and the Coastal Regulation Zone Act 2018. In addition to causing an overall weakening of environmental protection, the changes to these laws have also partially undermined legally enshrined rights of vulnerable groups in society, including the dispossessed, indigenous people, and forest-dwelling communities.

In addition to harnessing the legal and environmental policy framework to further the economic growth agenda, Modi’s style of governance saw an increase in policing of environmental groups and activists. A confidential but “leaked” report by India’s internal intelligence agency labelled Greenpeace India and other environmental organizations and activists as “anti-national” and accused them of negatively impacting India’s GDP growth by several percent per year because of their opposition to environmentally damaging large-scale industrial projects. This was followed by what one observer called a “crackdown” on India’s green NGOs (Bidwai 2015). The criminalization of environmental dissent under Modi entered the global spotlight when India entered the list of top contenders for the “deadliest countries for environmental activists” according to a Global Witness (2017) report, foregrounding India as one of three countries (alongside Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo) where the situation had considerably worsened. Killing of environmental activists had increased threefold from 2015 to 2016, “against a backdrop of heavy-handed policing and the repression of peaceful protests and civic activism”, the report argues (Global Witness 2017: 6).

To summarize, the autocratic turn in environmental governance under Modi has combined “quick and decisive” and highly centralized action from above, mostly without popular deliberation, with increased policing of environmental activists. This has resulted in the dilution of environmental safeguards, violation of rights of vulnerable populations, and a much narrower space for popular participation and civil society engagement. In the following sections, we provide analyses of the authoritarian turn in environmental governance in the specific contexts of forests and land.

Forests

Since 2014, the Modi government has attempted to revise many of the existing forest and environment laws, while continuing to grant forest clearances in favour of development projects that adversely affect Adivasi, forest-dwelling populations and wildlife. The land rights granted to forest-dwelling communities via the Forest Rights Act 2006 – which, as stated in the Act, was introduced to undo the “historical injustice” caused by the seizing of forest areas by colonial and post-colonial regimes – have been particularly targeted. The government has refrained from amending this Act directly, instead working with other laws towards the same end. Thus, amendments proposed in 2019 to the Indian Forest Act 1927 sought to confer more power on forest authorities at the expense of forest-dwelling communities. According to observers, the amendments bordered on bestowing a “degree of veto power with the forest bureaucracy over the Forest Rights Act, 2006” (Sethi and Shrivastava 2019). The Modi government has also promoted forest conservation through large-scale afforestation and forest restoration for carbon sequestration. While forest conservation and restoration may be environmentally beneficent, new clauses specifying enhanced penalties on “violators” are likely to adversely affect marginalized forest-dwelling and tribal communities who have historically depended on protected areas for livelihood. Momentarily, these proposed amendments have been stalled by nationwide protests from environmental groups, who argue that their passage would undermine the hard-won rights of forest-dwelling and tribal communities who have historically been subjected to often violent repression by the forest department.

Other governmental efforts that in effect undermine legally enshrined rights to forests and land have been enabled by India’s Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement to creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes through afforestation by 2030. India has sought to realize this goal through the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act 2016 (CAFA) and Rules 2018. In short, CAFA seeks to offset the loss of forests cleared in one place for industrial, infrastructure, and other non-forest projects by acquiring an equal amount of land (including degraded forestland) elsewhere and creating new forests. In this context, the law considers “plantations” as forest cover, meaning that many newly afforested areas are actually plantations. Species prominent in these plantations are invariably non-indigenous and commercial species – including rubber, eucalyptus, teak, and pine – that come with massive social and ecological costs, often alienating local communities in and near new “forests”. As in the other cases discussed above, these local communities are mostly tribal and forest-dwelling groups who are rarely considered stakeholders or consulted in the process.

Establishing afforestation and plantation activities under CAFA is usually done through fencing targeted sites, posting guards, installing CCTV cameras, and fixing signboards that restrict the entry of tribal and forest-dwelling communities (Saxena 2019). Such coercive and non-consensual forms of exclusion have met with criticism from civil society organizations, and with active resistance from local communities. Such resistance can arguably be read as a reaction to the increasing concentration of power in the hands of the forest bureaucracy. However,

the fact that this bureaucracy is authorized by law to access the considerable afforestation funds that the state has been accruing for years, means that the state bureaucracy effectively wields a firm control over much forestland (Lele 2017). This recentralization of power in the hands of the state in effect undermines the rights of Adivasi and other forest dwellers under the Forest Rights Act.

Local opposition notwithstanding, the Modi government also promotes large plantation programmes under its Green India Mission, launched in 2014. The target is to raise 5 million hectares of new green cover by 2024 (Ghosh 2017), but as was the case with the afforestation initiatives discussed above, no distinction is made between forests and plantations. Aside from state-run plantation programmes, big private investors such as the Indian Tobacco Company and JK Paper Limited have acquired hundreds of thousands of hectares of agricultural lands under the Green India Mission in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, for raising plantations of mainly eucalyptus.

Transitions in the field of forest governance under Modi have clearly followed a path of authoritarian populism. This has been realized through centralized, top-down processes of implementing new policies; further re-centralization of political and economic powers in the hands of the state and private investors; and erosion of social, political, and ecological rights of marginalized groups, for example, through forced and even violent evictions or exclusions from forestlands.

Land

Changes in the domain of land governance have primarily been designed to facilitate the commodification of land and making it available for investors (Levien 2018). From the mid-1990s, land emerged as a major factor in India's post-liberalization system of competitive federalism. In a context in which India's federal states have an increasingly free hand to attract private capital directly, the ability of state governments to offer affordable (or free) land to investors became an important component in inter-state competition. While a new Special Economic Zones Act 2005 ensured business-friendly conditions of operation, the colonial Land Acquisition Act 1894 – which enshrined the state's right of eminent domain – was used as a legal instrument by later governments to dispossess small farmers and Adivasi of their land, often for real estate (Searle 2016), mining, high-tech industries, or simply land speculation.

However, in many states such dispossessive practices were met with strong resistance as local communities refused to part with their land (Nielsen 2018). In response to the pressure of popular anti-dispossession movements, the incumbent UPA government in 2007 set in motion a process to introduce new legislation with enhanced rights for landowning and land-dependent communities. However, private developers in pursuit of land simultaneously pressed for legal changes that would make it *easier* to acquire land for private accumulation. The outcome of this tug of war was the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013, a compromise piece of legislation that was strong on guaranteeing rights to rehabilitation and resettlement for the dispossessed, but weak in terms of limiting the potential for overt misuse of eminent domain.

With neither side enthusiastic (Nielsen and Nilsen 2015; 2017), industry groups started to lobby for legal changes (Verma 2015). In response, and in a manoeuvre that was arguably in line with his business-friendly outlook, Modi sought to amend the 2013 Act shortly after being elected. This was done in autocratic fashion by bypassing parliament and introducing an ordinance (in December 2014) that modified key provisions in the said Act. Several so-called consent clauses that granted affected communities the right to block land dispossession for

certain projects were removed. And, while the 2013 Act included mandatory social impact assessments – a key mechanism through which the negative local impacts of land dispossession are assessed, in consultation with local stakeholders – for all projects except irrigation, the ordinance did away with this provision for several types of projects. Several other clauses that bestowed rights and protection on affected communities were also eliminated. For example, the definition of public purpose for which the state can dispossess people of their land was expanded to enable land acquisition for private hospitals and educational institutions; and the stipulation that acquired land lying unused for five years must be returned to its original owner was removed (Ramesh and Khan 2015: 124–130).

In March 2015, the Modi government sought to turn the ordinance into law. In response, social movements and farmers' organizations protested the bill as an infringement on their hard-won legal rights to be treated as stakeholders, as well as to compensation and rehabilitation. The proposed bill ultimately foundered, leading Modi to repromulgate the ordinance by decree three times, until it finally lapsed for good in August 2015. Nonetheless, the Modi government would continue to dilute protective clauses related to the right to consent, compensation, and resettlement, by encouraging the individual states to bring about state-level amendments in line with the lapsed ordinance (Kohli and Gupta 2017). In theory, such state-level legislation cannot override national legislation unless it has received the assent of the President of India. However, Modi's Finance Minister in 2015 assured the states that such consent would be readily forthcoming. Modi's critics have likened this reduction of presidential assent to a mere formality to a "pernicious misuse of a constitutional provision" (Ramesh and Khan 2016).

As in the domain of forest governance, then, changes in the domain of land governance have followed a comparable autocratic *modus operandi*. Important legislations have been implemented via ordinances rather than through parliamentary procedure. The effect of the legal and policy changes discussed above has been to weaken a series of existing rights of land-dependent communities to enable the transfer of land to investors. Notably, efforts towards this end continue today. The government think-tank NITI Aayog continues to stress how land acquisition laws – that, as we argued above, ensure at least some measure of rights-based protection for small and marginal farmers and Adivasi – stand in the way of accelerated economic growth. Significantly, as Indian policy-makers and economists now debate how the economy can best recover from the damage inflicted on it by the Covid-19 pandemic, "simplifications" to the central land acquisition law remain high on the list of prioritized reforms (Pandey and Arnimesh 2020). In the final section, we analyze further select changes introduced during the pandemic and the associated lockdown that affect environmental governance.

Under cover of Covid

In late March 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic spread worldwide, Modi introduced one of the strictest nationwide lockdowns in the world. It remained in place until 30 May, after which it was lifted in phases throughout 2020. Less than two weeks before the lockdown, the Modi government had put out a draft proposal to amend existing environmental impact assessment (EIA) norms. The draft proposal was roundly criticized by environmentalists and experts, with one scholar calling it "one of the most dangerous" of the many new laws and amendments introduced by Modi during the pandemic. The amendment, it was argued, would "deny citizens the social, legal and political forums available to protect the environment from bad government decisions" (Menon and Kohli 2020). More specifically, critics pointed out that the draft notification thinned out the regulatory requirements across most project sectors, and significantly curtailed or weakened existing appraisal, monitoring and compliance procedures,

thus reducing the level of public scrutiny. Additionally, the notification enabled projects which had begun construction activities – or were simply operating without obtaining a clearance altogether – to apply for post-facto clearance. The notification also centralized decision-making by doing away with the requirement that committees be set up in consultation with state governments, thus giving the central government more control over the constitution of regulatory authorities and expert committees. Importantly, the draft considerably undermined the importance of social decisions and public consultation with project-affected communities: the time period for the public to submit responses to project-related public hearings was reduced from 30 days to 20, and the timeline for completing the public hearing process reduced from 45 to 40 days. This reduction of time is significant as it disproportionately affects marginal communities in remote areas where information is not easily accessible. Moreover, in the draft notification, many projects now fall entirely outside the purview of public consultations altogether (Menon and Kohli 2020; Kumar 2020; Gupta et al. 2020).

Due to the lockdown, the meetings of the different panels, boards, and committees involved in granting environmental clearances were cancelled. However, they resumed in April over videoconferencing to “help clear proposals for seamless economic growth”, as the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) tweeted. During April and May, a full 191 projects were up for clearance through videoconferencing, sometimes leaving as little as ten minutes for a given panel to deliberate on each project (Gokhale 2020). Indeed, on a single day in April, more than 30 proposals affecting tiger reserves, sanctuaries, eco-sensitive zones, wildlife corridors, and other forest areas were cleared or discussed at virtual meetings (Ravi 2020). Among the many projects thus cleared were several big infrastructure projects and open cast coal mining in ecologically sensitive areas (Aggarwal and Ghosh 2020). This speeding-up of the clearance process in the context of a nationwide lockdown significantly reduced the scope for public deliberation insofar as affected communities could not send evidence or representations to the said panels, much less gather in public meetings to vent grievances or protest decisions. Nor could expert panellists do necessary field visits to verify facts independently.

This autocratic turn is further evident in how changes to environmental legislations and policies introduced under Covid-19 have further centralized decision-making, weakened public consultation and participation, and intensified the persecution of environmental activists under lockdown. In July 2020, the government ordered that the websites of three environmental advocacy groups – Fridays for Future (FFF), Let India Breathe, and There Is No Earth B – be blocked. The domain name owner of the FFF – the Indian chapter of the movement initiated by environmental activist Greta Thunberg – was served legal notice from the Delhi police under sections of the draconian anti-terror law, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967. The notice accused FFF’s site of containing “objectionable contents and unlawful activities or terrorist act, which are dangerous for the peace, tranquillity and sovereignty of India” and ordered it blocked. The three groups thus targeted were spearheading a public awareness campaign and a petition against the changes introduced by the EIA draft notification discussed above (Huria 2020).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the autocratic turn in Indian environmental governance that has arguably occurred under Modi. This autocratic turn has been driven by the twin pillars of Modi’s authoritarian populism, namely aggressive business-friendly growth-oriented economic policies, coupled with a centralization of power and a strong fist to hold dissenters down. In the domain of environmental governance, this had manifested in a policy approach

that proactively works to enlist and weaken existing environmental laws and regulations to make natural resources available to investors: environmental clearances have been made easier to obtain, lands and forests made simpler to acquire, and monitoring mechanisms significantly weakened. The ways in which this has happened have had an evident autocratic undercurrent, as seen in recurring efforts to bypass parliament and the judiciary, weaken consultative forums, and dent existing legally enshrined rights to forests, lands, rehabilitation, and resettlement. Activists and civil society groups who have “come in the way” of this policy approach to protect environment and marginalized communities have been subject to increasing policing, criminalization and persecution over the past seven years. This has taken place in the context of widespread suppression of peaceful protests and a shrinking of democratic space for civic activism. The apparent intensification of autocratization under the Covid-19 pandemic does not, we believe, bode well for the future. Not only does it threaten to undo the advances made through years of post-colonial struggle by marginalized and tribal communities and environmental groups; it also brings to a standstill future courses of green activism and progressive environmental legislation.

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