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BOOK REVIEW

THE NEED OF CONSERVATION LAWS COHERENT WITH COMMUNITIES FOR COMPLETE SUCCESS

S. Suresh Ramanan & Lalit Upadhyay

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Though most of us know that Jammu and Kashmir is politically, economically and culturally very different from the rest of India, few are really conversant with ground realities. Kashmir spells handicrafts for many and shahtoosh shawls are much coveted - lightweight but not light on the wallet! When I recently joined the Sher-e- Kashmir

University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology of Jammu for doctoral programme, I tried to understand the region and it was then that I happened upon Saloni Gupta's *Contesting conservation: Shahtoosh trade and forest management in Jammu and Kashmir*.

This book is published as part of the series 'Advances in Asian Human - Environment Research'. The series aims to elucidate and portray humans-ecosystem interactions, in highly populated regions of the world. While the series aims to be interdisciplinary, this particular book focuses on forest and wildlife sciences. It also highlights the state's rich biodiversity and conservation efforts. With 240 pages and 9 chapters, the book mainly deals with two subjects in the context of conservation: (i) banning the trade in Shahtoosh shawls (ii) introducing the Joint Forest Management (JFM) concept in the state.

Shahtoosh shawls are made from the fur of Chiru, an antelope protected under the wildlife law, 1972. It is illegal to trade in shahtoosh in parts of India as per the Wildlife Act. All laws enacted in the Indian parliament have an exact replica in Jammu and Kashmir, modified to suit local conditions. This holds good for conservation laws too. In the very first chapter, the author states that the international trade ban on shahtoosh shawls was implemented in the state only in 2002, after a tough legal battle in the Jammu and Kashmir High Court by the Wildlife Protection Society of India. This judgment brought the Chiru, the Tibetan Antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*), from Schedule II to Schedule I of the Jammu and Kashmir Wildlife (Protection) Act and thereby gave complete protection. I would also like to bring the attention of the reader to the fact that the Convention on International Trade on Endangered Species - CITES - declared trade in shahtoosh illegal in 1975. Though India was a signatory to the CITES in 1976, trade continued till 2002. This raises questions on a geopolitical aspect of the Indian constitution which are not within the purview of this review. In any case, there exists much literature on the shahtoosh shawl and its intricacies. So, what

THE NEED OF CONSERVATION LAWS COHERENT WITH COMMUNITIES FOR COMPLETE SUCCESS

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exactly does this book offer that is different?

Chapter Two briefs us as to the origin of the special provision and its political diorama of Jammu and Kashmir. This is attributed to the special status provided in the Indian Constitution – Article 370. The author also

Contesting conservation: *Shahtoosh* trade and forest management in Jammu and Kashmir, India

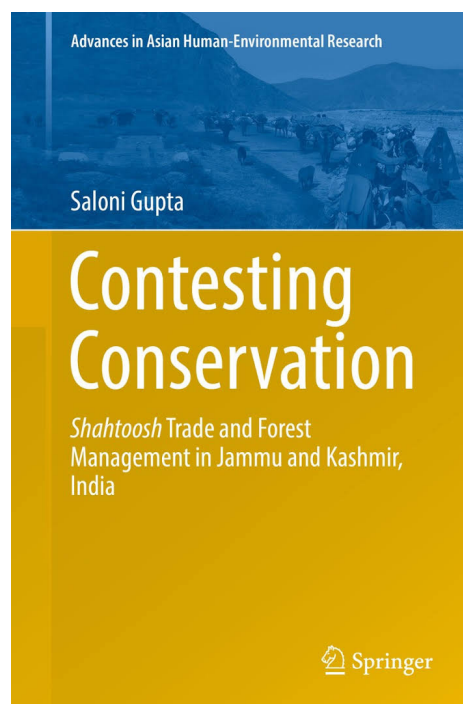
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explains the research methodology adopted and the constraints faced during the study. The ban on shahtoosh shawl production is good news for the conservationist but not for locals. Tourism and handicrafts are the main sources of income in the state. In this context, the author answers the question: 'Can the sustenance of people be sacrificed for nature conservation?' Though it depends purely on the situation, the author strongly argues that the decision should not be taken in a hasty manner. Given due considerations of the demographics of the state, the author concludes that some do reap the benefit of the ban: illegal traders. The trade in shahtoosh continues even after 2002.

Chapter Three presents a figure which might really indicate the size of the trade network (p.44). The chapter concludes that the failure of conservationists to understand regional politics and socio-economic relations is a hurdle to their success. The author fears that the very purpose of the ban might be defeated by illegal trade.

Chapter Five, aptly titled "The Micropolitics of the Ban on Shahtoosh: Costs and Reparations", sums it all up and it's my favourite chapter. Some of the bitter truths of the shahtoosh trade are pointed out here: (i) the public is not aware of the source of wool and they are mostly carried away by false propaganda (ii) the weavers are miserably exploited by a few influential traders (iii) the trade for chiru wool is done by barter system and the list goes on. I spoke to some Kashmiri students on campus and they were also not aware of the facts. This was really intriguing and this book will come as an eye-opener for them. The book provides other useful insights, as well.

The second half of the book focuses on joint forest management. After reading the previous chapters, one

can really understand ground realities and attitudes. As with the shahtoosh ban, the implementation of the Joint Forest Management was not very successful. The author, again, points a finger at caste politics and the disparity in economic standards. The style adopted is similar to the one she used for the shahtoosh issue. She begins with an introduction to forest management in the state (Chapter Six) and follows it up with details of the implementation of the JFM in Chapter Seven. Finally, Chapter Eight deals with the micropolitics of implementing joint forest management.

The second part of the book might not be that interesting to wildlife biologists. However, in the last chapter, the author points out the similarity in the two conservation actions taken in the state. Though the shahtoosh ban hampered the economy, the JFM attempted to aid and revamp livelihoods. Both attempts failed due to various reasons, including militancy. However, the take-home message for readers, especially conservationists, is that conservation policies should be based on local realities for long term stability. Otherwise, with the State as a dictator, one can only hope for partial success. There is a need to balance conservation hegemony and community needs.

This book is the outcome of the author's doctoral research work at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Regrettably, each chapter's abstract is written carelessly. However, the author is to be commended for the delicacy with which she highlights various aspects of the problems and conflicts in Jammu and Kashmir (p.32). Overall, the book enlightens readers and stresses the need to focus on socio-economic backgrounds in nature conservation efforts.





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