

BOOK REVIEW

Jairam Ramesh, *Indira Gandhi: A Life in Nature*, Simon & Schuster, New Delhi, 2017, pp. 467

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Jairam Ramesh, economist and Member of Parliament, has attempted to ‘paint a fresh portrait’ of Indira Gandhi. In penning *A Life in Nature*, Ramesh seeks to uncover the naturalist in the politician and, more ambitiously, to trace an entire country’s tense tryst with ecological conservation through the lens of Indira Gandhi’s life and experiences. Ramesh tells us, for instance, of a child slowly cultivating an interest and a deep knowledge of insects, birds, and trees. He speaks of emerging social and political networks in independent India, as the young Mrs. Gandhi is introduced to familiar (and perhaps iconic) names in the country’s conservation history. In this rendering, the Teen Murti House in Delhi is portrayed as a site where relationships were forged—between Gandhi and her family and those who were to become her trusted aides—as she grappled with complex questions of development and the concomitant ecological repercussions.

A crucial and fascinating part of *A Life in Nature* is Ramesh’s account of the tumultuous 1970s and the early 1980s. Embedded within Ramesh’s narrative are telling snippets collected from unpublished letters, memos, notes put on official files, and recordings of meetings. This, in fact, is a ringside view of multilayered deliberations and political calculations that often took place behind the scenes. In the process, we revisit some of the crucial milestones in India’s chequered ecological history. The massive Sardar Sarovar hydel project, the beleaguered and embattled refinery project in Mathura, the iron ore mining project in Kudremukh, and the Silent Valley dam in Kerala, for instance, are posed to us as dilemmas confronting an individual with the unenviable task of balancing multiple regional, political, and economic interests. We see concerns for employment, infrastructure, and food security being deployed against ecological impacts—even as stubborn bureaucrats and political stakeholders are cajoled, threatened, and placated to set up policies and institutions to address ecological conservation.

Reading into the past is arguably fraught with tensions. How, indeed, does one access, recover, and (re)discover meanings and intent in actions and words

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long gone by? To begin with, the predilection to undermine crucial context has to be circumvented. As one sets out to examine events and responses in the past, using the handy lens of contemporary ideological discourse is hardly free from considerable risks. To complicate matters even further, multiple interpretations abound, as one tries to enter into the world of well-known political figures. Ramesh does grapple with these methodological questions, as he delineates the pressing concerns of the 1960s and 1970s: the crippling food crisis and the deteriorating economic conditions, the somewhat frustrating back-and-forth between various states and the Indian government on several matters, and the near-absence of institutional structures for addressing ecological concerns. Indira Gandhi's multiple interventions are placed in precisely this context, as Ramesh simultaneously traces the painstaking building of some of our best known environmental institutions and policy frameworks. At a time when the project of institution-building is often seen as *passé*, we are reminded of what its non-existence can result in.

This apart, the question for us is: does Ramesh help us to understand the dynamics between nature and power in independent India? As he admirably sifts through hitherto unknown and unaccessed sources, does he provide us with fresh insight into how trade-offs between ecology and equity are manoeuvred within the overarching paradigms of political power and economic ideologies? Ramesh succeeds in convincing us that for Indira Gandhi the conflict was between conservation and 'reckless' exploitation and not necessarily between 'progress' and ecological values. One is nevertheless left a trifle bit disappointed with his treatment of the broader questions. *A Life in Nature* could have benefitted from a nuanced analysis of how Gandhi dealt (if at all) with societal fractures around caste, ethnicity, and gender—and the implications thereof for the environmental question in India. Given that adivasi and other identity-based movements were fast gaining ground in India during this period, this absence indeed seems curious.

One hoped in vain, moreover, for a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes political manoeuvring that might have accompanied the green revolution, and the somewhat ignominious sidelining of R.H. Richharia and his concerns, which surely had the potential of furthering our understanding of the fraught interplay between power, institutional autonomy, and transnational interests. In recounting (at great length) Gandhi's well-known speech at the first UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972, Ramesh reminds us of her legacy in shaping our environmental policy vis-à-vis the global North. However, beyond referencing allegations of the association of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with a certain government-supported conservation programme, the book largely refrains from addressing a crucial debate over possibly unsavoury international influences in environmental governance and policymaking. Again, Ramesh leaves us no more illuminated on what a shift in Indira Gandhi's later years from a socialist rhetoric to a pro-business attitude meant for the country's ecological history. In this, one

senses a missed opportunity for analysing the possible ecological ramifications of shifts in economic policy. That being said, Ramesh's account reveals the vexed processes of balancing diverging interests and the need for building enduring institutions for environmental conservation, and is an eminently readable one for those interested in India's ecological history.

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