

# Vanishing Ecosystems

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At around 6:45 am on 8 January 2010, the door bell rang at Nayana Kathpalia's first floor residence overlooking the Oval maidan at Mumbai. Instead of the milkman, Kathpalia's staff was greeted by a loud volley and a man dashing down the stairs. The police discovered that the steel grill door at the entrance of her flat had deflected the bullet shot from a revolver. An abandoned gun with a live cartridge was found near her home. Within 10 days of this nasty attempt, Kathpalia's colleague, Neera Punj received a telephonic warning to withdraw a public interest litigation or risk harm to her family. The caller identified her daughters by name. The detective prowess of the Mumbai police – special squad, sniffer dogs and all, has yielded no breakthrough so far.

Kathpalia and Punj are co-conveners of CitiSpace, a non-governmental organisation, that protects public spaces from encroachment. Their work encompasses advocacy, lobbying and occasionally approaching the high court to protect Mumbai's vanishing parks, playgrounds and pedestrian spaces.

As Mumbai's activists and civil society grapple with how to respond to the heightened criminal nexus between the land mafia and those who work for the great commercial sinews of the city, it is a matter of considerable satisfaction and relief to learn about the success of citizens' initiatives in protecting ecologically-sensitive areas (ESAs) across the country.

## India's Notified Ecologically-Sensitive Areas

**(ESAs): The Story So Far** by Meenakshi Kapoor, Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon (*Pune: Kalpavriksh*, 2009; pp 107, Contributory Amount Rs 150.

## Protectors of Environment

The book under review is an excellent account of the manner in which environmental activists have campaigned, lobbied and lucked out in fashioning a framework to protect ESAs under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. Drawing on interviews with activists, bureaucrats and several decision-makers as well as a wealth of documentation, the authors have reconstructed with great clarity and precision the story behind each of the efforts in getting the ESAs notified.

Typically, ESAs are small regions of aesthetic beauty and sufficient ecological significance to warrant special attention. In parts of the world where town and country planning is a strongly ingrained cultural value, the need for such specific regimes does not arise. The continuing decline in the quality of urban living in India and the inability of our local self-government organisations, and indeed, state governments, to protect commercial and industrial overdrive, have impelled citizens to lobby for protection through courts and the upper echelons of the union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF). The ESA notifications generally impose a special set of town and country planning rules, limiting commercial and

industrial development within the notified region.

## Movers and Actors

The authors capably track the manner in which the MOEF was persuaded to notify Murud-Janjira, the Doon Valley, Dahanu, the Aravallis, Numaligarh, the Taj Trapezium, Mahabaleshwar-Panchgani, Matheran, Mount Abu as ESAs and the ongoing campaigns in respect of Panchmarhi, the Himalayas and the Sahyadris.

The authors identify the principal movers and actors who drove the process as well as the economic and political factors that have worked to dilute the force of these notifications. The narrative in each case is full of exquisite detail, local insights and peculiarities which lend a special authenticity to the treatment.

The book is interspersed with tables, maps and photographs that complement the fluent prose. The dogged persistence of Shyam Chainani, Debi Goenka, Samir Mehta of the Bombay Environmental Action Group and the tenacity of Nergis Irani and Kitayun Rustom of Dahanu shine through. (Although I seriously doubt whether Irani and Rustom would approve their description as "two Iranian farmers" at page 27 of the book.)

Amidst the uncertainty generated by violent attacks and threats on activist citizens like Kathpalia and Punj, the ESA story is a welcome affirmation of the ability of focused citizens to bring about significant improvements in environmental governance through persistence and some luck.

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