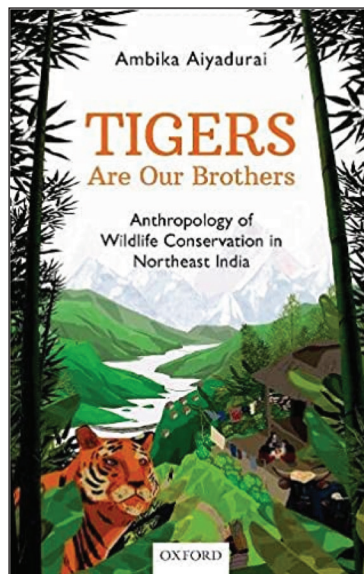

Book Review

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Ambika Aiyadurai, *Tigers Are Our Brothers: Anthropology of Wildlife Conservation in Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2021, pp. 215

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The cover of the book could easily deceive one into thinking that this is yet another staid book on folk tales, maybe with a dose of conservation weaved in! But as you start reading, you realize that the author has adopted an unusual narrative. It meanders between that of a travel diary and a peep into the notebook of an anthropologist feasting on her first-hand experience with a little-known tribe of India, the Idu Mishmi. While there are also attempts at introducing the reader to the subtle nuances of international geopolitics in an area that straddles the



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Indo-China border, as well as dwell on the reality of inter-tribe rivalry prevalent in Arunachal Pradesh. In addition, there are also numerous gentle insights into the 'realpolitik' of the world of conservation and the challenges it faces. All of this is done in the backdrop of the discovery of tiger cubs in a hitherto unknown tiger habitat in the remote Dibang valley, the amusing discussion whether the tigers are Indian or Chinese! The consequent scramble to extend conservation and the concept of protected sanctuaries is beautifully showcased when the concept is shown in contrast to the idea of coexistence that is ingrained in the Idu Mishmi belief system of tigers being their brothers! While this apparent lack of convergence of the concept of conservation in the two worldviews is beautifully laid out, it is apparent that the author makes an effort to look at the happenings through the eyes of a modern conservationist while being respectful of the worldview of the local inhabitants. This approach of the author is what lends the book its uniqueness.

The narrative tries to straddle the divide between the efforts of the modern state apparatus to initiate and implement conservation measure in an area occupied by tribes with a tradition of hunting but with an ingrained respect for wildlife and nature. The canvas is laid out with a sensitivity and understanding that is amazing. The background of the author partly explains this. Ambika did her master's in wildlife sciences and took up her first professional assignment to study man-animal conflict and the conservation of Asiatic wild dogs or Dholes in Arunachal Pradesh. She immediately realized that conservation has more to do with man and human society than with the animal itself and realized that her education and training were inadequate for the job. This made her study for a second master's, this time in anthropology, environment and development, followed by a PhD in anthropology. This probably explains the multiple lenses the author wears to study any situation and thereby produce a rich and interesting picture.

The weaving together of multiple strands into a single narrative where conservation is seen from numerous perspectives is certainly refreshing. The fact that the success of any conservation effort would require the building of a strong partnership between the population of the area, conservation agencies, and the state actors is brought out beautifully. What makes the book stand out is the weaving together of the past and the present, of myths, folk traditions and modern-day conservation laws and practices, all in a smooth and readable manner.

If Ambika Aiyadurai tried to take conservation away from the inhumane world of facts and figures and instead posit it as a part of a beautiful tapestry that includes myths and legends, people and spirits, and animals and forests, all coming together to create the reality we call life, she has done a good job. In case the reader is looking for a dry treatise on conservation, this is not the book I would probably recommend. Instead one may venture towards the elaborate bibliography for that!