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Politics of Pixels: Role of Satellite Remote Sensing in Shaping and Sustaining Fire Suppression Policy in India

Yadav, Kapil

Kings College London/ Leverhulme Center for Wildfires

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Abstract

Satellite Remote Sensing (SRS) is becoming central to the study of fires in the 21st century. Various advantages of SRS are put forward such as objectivity, neutrality and reliability of SRS data, its synoptic vision, and extensive coverage; as a result of these claims, satellite imagery acquires the power to offer information that is unmediated and free from prejudice of authorship. This study takes a critical approach, attentive to the politics of production and analysis of satellite imagery. It looks at the practice of SRS science and technology in India, in the last three decades, to examine how SRS produces the fire reality that it attempts to understand. The study finds that most SRS studies do not acknowledge the complex, diverse and often interlinked socioeconomic causes of fire and mostly rely on generalised assumptions such as an increase in population, slash and burn cultivation, carelessness, without any supporting data. Many SRS studies find a common ground in their implicit notions on seeing human use of fire, increasing fire frequency and human presence in forests as something to be always avoided. This study argues that the 'true' reality constructed using SRS imagery around forest fires is not neutral, apolitical, and simply given, but a result of subjective concepts and categories that fit well within the institutional arrangements and the dominant discourses on forest fires and indigenous fire-use. A more critical approach to SRS is needed that recognises the ecological role of fire in open ecosystems and the social dimension of indigenous burning practices.

Keywords: critical remote sensing, fire policy, environmental politics, forests, forest fire, STS

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