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# India's Ecological Past

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The two volumes of *India's Environmental History (From Ancient Times to the Colonial Period and Colonialism, Modernity, and the Nation)* edited by Mahesh Rangarajan and K Sivaramakrishnan are a valuable contribution to the rapidly expanding discourse on environmental history. Focusing on a variety of themes comprising ecology and archaeology; literary imageries and states of nature; animals, places and politics; the company state and India's environment; agrarian change/forest transformations; environment, identity and power; animals, poetics and politics; environment, dearth and development and contested landscapes of development, these volumes range from the prehistoric times to modern, contemporary times. Representing a broad spectrum, the anthology creditably knits together and weaves the understanding of environment around diverse and wide cross section of papers.

History is a mosaic where the political, economic and environmental cannot be separated. And yet till a few years back, at least, in the context of environmental history, the precolonial period was found to be, as if, bereft of history and a mere "benchmark" as the editors of this anthology point out, to understand the changes in the late 19th century. These volumes convincingly put to rest this long-standing bias. However, it still irks to note that volume I which concerns itself with the precolonial period pays scant attention to the medieval period (roughly 13th century to 18th century CE). It is true that there are only a few specific works on the theme of environment for this period but if we accept and implement the understanding of "agrarian environments", many significant writings for the period can be identified that can explain the "medieval" environment. However, having said that, it needs to be acknowledged what the editors have emphasised the importance of reassessing the period, 13th to the 18th centuries

## BOOK REVIEW

### **India's Environmental History: A Reader (Vol 1: From Ancient Times to the Colonial Period; Vol 2: Colonialism, Modernity, and the Nation)**

edited by Mahesh Rangarajan and K Sivaramakrishnan  
(*Ranikhet: Permanent Black*, 2011; pp vii + 464; ix + 614,  
Rs 1,850.

CE – in view of the archaeological, literary and pictorial evidences. They observe that the source material on early and medieval India should be re-interrogated in the context of the issues like forest and water disputes, conflicts over rural and urban spaces in relation to land, water, animal, plant or mineral wealth.

Despite the grievance about the inadequate space to the medieval past in the anthology, it is pertinent to argue against rigid periodisation of history and facilitate its transcending for a smoother understanding of developments and transition of knowledge to appreciate, like the editors say, a millennia-long history of India's ecosystems and their interface with human desires and ambitions, triumphs and failures. "Highly artificial" and "pervasive divides" between the natural and humanistic disciplines and more significantly the labels of ancient, medieval and modern periods, prevents one from establishing the connections that are significant and indispensable. What is necessary is "more than mere dialogue or synthesis" and "a sense of wider perspective".

### **Precolonial Ecological Systems**

Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan explain the challenges faced by the premodern environmental history by highlighting two instances – one relates to a species of tree, *shorea robusta* (sal) that was widely prevalent and endemic in the Indian subcontinent and the other to the question of wildlife history. Since a range of animals and birds, their distributions, relations and representations are noticed in different historical periods, it would be appropriate,

suggest the editors, to use art as a source to improve the historical knowledge of the wild in the different periods. Indian painting can then emerge as a potential source of information with the collaboration between art historians, cartographers, naturalists, zoologists and wildlife ecologists.

Moreover, the specificities of geography and ecology should necessarily be considered since India has a vast and a varied landscape. Apart from this, the features like the sea, high slopes or the desert were never a barrier to human movement across times. This evidently recognises that the Indian subcontinent was neither sealed off from the world nor deprived of human contact and therefore, as the editors observe the human ecological impact on the subcontinent was not as mild as is assumed but probably enhanced by the contact with distant places and people.

In other words, pre-industrial or precolonial past was not idyllic, as some have argued but its ecological systems were transient, uncertain and constantly changing although all changes may not have been contributed by human beings; some changes in nature could have been sudden and cataclysmic, as the editors point out. The impact of human action and interactions with the material and biotic environment in early India has been clearly established by archaeological researches (some of which have been reproduced in the section on "Ecology and Archaeology" in volume 1) that also challenge "any linear sequence of human-nature relationships". To prevent resuscitation of linear historical narratives in environmental history, early history, suggest the editors, should concern itself more with relatively new fields of inquiry in modern history.

### **Elephants, Horses, Hunters, Tribes**

The changing landscapes and differing experiences in early India are vividly represented in the literary imageries of nature. Romila Thapar's paper "Perceiving the Forest: Early India" is a profound expression of these and other features. Aloka Parasher-Sen weaves the stories of hunters, tribes and barbarians into the forms of statecraft emerging from around sixth century BCE.

Emphasising the importance of elephants as a strategic resource from the forest, Thomas Trautmann succinctly argues that elephants and horses, wars and politics were closely connected across times. Basing himself on the evidences of *Arthashastra* and Greek accounts, Trautmann discusses these features during the Mauryan period in his essay "Elephants and the Mauryas". Moving away from forests and wildlife, Daud Ali focuses on the significance of gardens, particularly pleasure gardens in early Indian court life. These essays are a pointer to mutuality and adaptation in human-nature relationship. In other words, these relations are not merely about conflict or coexistence, antagonism or harmony but as the editors say, these papers take a step forward to explain "liminal spaces and grey zones".

There was nothing fixed about the "forest line" in precolonial India. However, any shifts in it had consequences not only for the people but also the animals. Simon Digby and Jos Gommans in their articles "The Supply of War-Horses" and "The Silent

Frontier of South Asia, c 1100-1800 CE" respectively discuss animals, war and conquest. Divyabhanusinh, on the other hand, provides a pictorial and literary evidence to explain hunting during the Mughal period and reflect on changing human relations.

Sumit Guha's paper on the commons provides an interesting insight. It suggests a low population density and the availability of huge empty spaces that needed to be settled. Integrating data from palaeoecology, archaeology and history, Kathleen Morrison studies environmental, social and political transformations in south India, particularly the environmental and cultural history of the Western Ghats over the last two millennia, focusing on the period between the 15th and the 17th centuries. The fourth section "The Company State and India's Environments" in volume 1 comprise the essays of Richard Grove, Gunnel Cederlof and Michael Mann. Grove, in this contentious article argues that science at the periphery, especially in India and Australia, lay at the cutting edge of new knowledge and theorisation. Cederlof, however, argues

that the company's administrators did not represent one single colonial force. In the context of the early 19th century Nilgris, which was divided between different jurisdictions, she discusses the implementation of new legal and land systems in this hill-region. Michael Mann suggests direct imperial control over forests which had become a norm by the early 20th century. British forest policy, by then, was dominated by such administrators who stood for conservation of forests but it may be worth noting that conservation to them did not mean preservation of forests but an assurance against exhaustion of forests and maintaining the timber supply.

### Scholarship on Diverse Aspects

The introduction to volume II puts together some very relevant and cogent issues like forests and agrarian landscapes, problematic binaries and historical trajectories and contested knowledges. It asks whether colonialism was merely about aggrandisement or did the encounters have other, "greyer dimensions". Forests, the

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editors suggest, are a prism to view not only the ecological pasts but also a contested terrain with multiple meanings, a site to understand strife and harmony. They raise a question of enormous current significance, viz, what the forest really is or what it ought to be for, pastoral ground or tree reserve, “a place of usufruct rights or exclusive princely or departmental control” or is it a land for big dams or for mines or for national parks.

In this context, it can be stipulated that studies that use historically situated comparative approaches to understand histories of environment may prove valuable for they can locate Indian forest history in a larger global context and provide connections with the contemporary period. As one looks at the variety of these

environmental issues, one notices evident fluctuations between compelling continuities and harsh breaks with the past. Changes or breaks with the past happened in the last decades of the 19th century when the imperial state was at its high point of consolidation. Breaks occurred yet again in the Nehruvian era when India was engaged in pushing its developmental projects. Shifts in both these periods were not without deep ecological consequences. And, then, the last three decades since 1980 have witnessed seismic shifts in the economic climate. So, as the editors of these volumes argue “the path to democratising nature is littered with potholes” and “nature as issue divides as much as it unites”. Volume II is indeed voluminous containing a wealth of data in its rich, insightful

papers that leave you breathless by their discussion on a variety of issues ranging from gender, tribe, pastoralism, water, forests, dearth and development.

The value of this book lies in its scholarship and remarkable ability to unify essays on diverse aspects of environment. While it believes in the importance of environmental history, it advocates the need to historicise environment and contextualise it in *longue duree*. The volumes meet the appetite of not only those interested in environmental history but should also satisfy scholars of south Asian history and individuals with social concerns.

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