

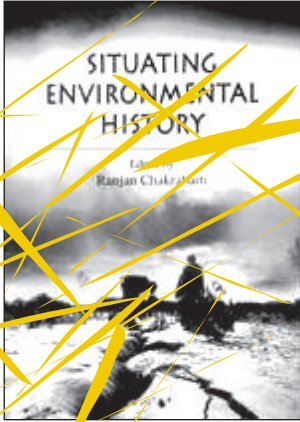


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# Library



**Ranjan Chakrabarti (ed.)**  
***Situating Environmental History***  
**Monohar Publishers**  
**New Delhi 2007, pp. 396**

## **Debojyoti Das**

The book under review here has come out at a time when human destiny is threatened by unsustainable growth and mass consumption trends. Environmental History as a new sub-field within the discipline of History has recently gained popularity in academic circles in the Indian sub-continent thanks to the publication of seminal works by Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil, Richard Grove, and K. Shivaramakrishnan, among others. These authors have reconstructed South Asia's ecological history, looking primarily at colonial intervention and its aftermath. The present volume, edited by Ranjan Chakrabarti, comes as a timely contribution. It is a collection of essays, based on local environmental narratives of South and South East Asian countries, that look at different time frames and provide in-depth analysis of local environmental histories through case studies from India and beyond. The essays are classified under four headings: "understanding environmental history", "communities at the margin", "management of nature" during the colonial and postcolonial period, and a section on "beyond India".

The book begins with a crisp introduction by the editor himself, which seeks to trace the roots of environmental history and its distinctiveness as a sub-field within History. Chakrabarti poses some very significant questions as he outlines the nature, scope and objectives of

Environmental History, and carefully debunks pre-conceived notions of environmental history as a discipline lacking a methodology.

The book investigates ecological issues concerning water, health, sanitation, global warming and forestry. It also examines themes such as governance, regulations, advances in science and technology, European perceptions of the oriental environment, and the changing material culture of South Asia.

In the opening chapter of the book, entitled “Classifying Nature: In Search of a Common Ground between Social and Environmental History”, Karl Jacoby sets the ball rolling as he explains, quite convincingly, the need for a more sophisticated dialogue between social and environmental history in the context of environmental studies in the United States; a dialogue, argues Jacoby, that seems to be lacking in the contemporary literature on environmental studies.

In the second chapter, Alok Kumar Ghosh points to the internal conflict within our understanding of our environment, opposing the state to civil society and environmental groups on issues such as forest dwellers’ right to land, water, and other natural resources. He sees the state as taking a domineering and authoritarian attitude vis-à-vis the will of the masses. Environmentalism is a multi-faceted mosaic, understood quite differently by the rich and the poor, by city dwellers and peasants. To quote Ghosh, “Environmentalism of the ‘they’, the urban and rural poor, the *bustee* – dwellers *and* the industrial workers are just the opposite – ‘they’ have an antithesis, a survival approach, no questions of sophistication, no questing of romantic love for nature.” p.72.

In his paper “Forest, Land Use and Water in Colonial South Asia: Issues from Agrarian and Environmental History”, Arun Bandopadhyay builds a strong case for colonial environmental history as a tool for understanding the present ecological crisis in South Asia. He gives a broad outline of the tension between agrarian history and environmental history and argues that many of the significant questions concerning globalization and environment are rooted in colonial economic history. This is however doubtful.

Archana Prasad’s paper “Marginal People and Politics of Anti-Modern Development: Revisiting the Indian Environment” goes beyond the environment vs. development dichotomy that has held sway in the Indian school of environmentalism so far. Prasad argues for a radical political economic perspective. She pitches her opinion contrary to the

long held idea of keeping tribes isolated from the market, and makes a case, instead, for an equitable exchange of goods and ideas between the tribal and the peasant world, citing cases from erstwhile united Bengal and Assam. Market capitalism and liberalization, she argues, impede equity. Prasad claims that the asymmetrical interaction between the tribal and the peasant world could be transformed to bring parity and address the root cause of tribal underdevelopment, and thus fill the vacuum in India's environmental struggles.

The second section of the book contains two essays focusing on subjects at the margins of all development projects – women, and tribe and forest dwellers – and their fight for their own perception of “justice” and “legitimate claims”. Vinita Damodaran's paper “Tribes in Indian History” raises significant questions regarding the revisionist argument and shows through her study on Jharkhand how the colonial accounts led many of the revisionist critics to conclude that distinct tribes never existed.

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay paper “Role of Women in the Joint Forest Management Programme: Case Study of Two Forest Villages of West Bengal” is the only paper based on empirical research work. Bandyopadhyay interprets his field-data and observes that a simple expansion of basic public amenity is not enough to come to terms with patriarchy. The article points to the limitation of decentralized governance and the complexities attached to the problem of women empowerment in Joint Forest Management (JMF).

The third section of the volume comprises six articles examining the nature of colonial intervention and the policy of the Raj on various issues, including the control of tropical diseases. The first article by Kaushik Roy, titled “Managing the Environment: Disease, Sanitation and the Army in British-India, 1859-1913”, focuses on the colonial armies' battles with nature as they confronted hostile climatic conditions in their pursuit for the expansion of the empire. The paper narrates in detail the colonial government's response to pandemics and its public policy on health and hygiene. However, as the author observes, the environmental sanitation programme of the British in India was tinged with racist assumptions. Indian soldiers in the British army were regarded as the prime carriers of vector-borne diseases. Accordingly, the discourse on the control of epidemics placed more stress on personal hygiene and the participation of natives in the improvement of public sanitation than on the extending of health care facilities to the native population.

Arabinda Samanta's paper "Plague and Prophylactics: Ecological Construction of an Epidemic in Colonial Eastern India" presents a historical account of plague epidemics and explores how the disease became endemic in colonial eastern India during the closing years of the nineteenth and the opening decades of the twentieth centuries. He shows how plague was constructed in official perceptions as a disease associated with dirt and filth. The British strategy towards control of plague epidemic was primarily based on prophylactics, rather than at medically combating outbreaks. This, the author argues, amounted to an ecological construction of the disease.

Amal Das looks at the environmental decline that followed the colonial development project in and around urban clusters in Calcutta. In the paper "Industrial Workers, their Environmental Crises, and Empire: Perspectives on Colonial Bengal", Das posits that industrialization, population stress and colonial development projects in and around the city were the main cause of the formation of slums that became the breeding grounds for plague outbreaks. The colonial apathy towards the extension of medical facilities to the natives was overshadowed by the Raj's understanding of the spread of epidemics being directly linked to the unhealthy living conditions and unhygienic sanitary practices of the natives. Thus, both Samanta and Das argue for an ecological construction of the disease in colonial towns and the metropolis.

Sahara Ahmed's paper "Conflicting Claims: The Colonial State Forests and Forest Dwellers in the Jalpaiguri District, 1869-1947" makes an attempt to explore how colonial expansion in the Jalpaiguri district of Bengal was inextricably connected with the question of conservation practices in the region.

Jagdish N. Sinha's paper "Congress and Conservation: A Look at the NPC Reports" discusses the Congress concerns on environmental issues as reflected in the NPC report. In his paper "Genetic Change and Colonial Cotton Improvement in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century India", Sumit Guha presents a very interesting case of genetic changes in Indian cotton as a result of colonial attempts at improving the crop. More specifically, he brings forth historical evidence of farmers growing foreign varieties of cotton in Indian soil that later led to hybridization of the crop. This is indeed a very stimulating and original contribution.

In the final section of the book we find essays that look at environmental issues from a different perspective. The introductory paper by

Rita Pemberton, “Shaping the Caribbean Environment: The Impact of India,” examines popular aspects of Caribbean life and India’s interaction with and influence on its environment through the introduction of exotic species in the region during colonial rule. In the second paper, “West Tennessee, Cotton Cultivation, and the Environment, 1820-60”, Lawrence Gundersen examines the environmental impact of intensive cotton cultivation in West Tennessee from 1820 to 1860. In the concluding paper, “Fire, Fume and Haze: Environmental Disorder in Southeast Asia and ASEAN Response”, Tridib Chakrabarti discusses the dramatic ecological crisis that confronted Southeast Asia following the Indonesian forest fire of 1998. He examines the ASEAN response to this emerging regional crisis, which has global implications, as it has contributed to global warming and climate change through loss of forest wealth. The scientific community see this as a major ecological crisis that threatens to jeopardize the geo-static balance of mother earth. This “beyond India” section thus focuses on a number of issues concerning the local ecology of nation states, and traces regional exchanges of experiences in the management of native forests (see especially Pemberton’s paper).

To conclude, the book is an excellent work of scholarship that brings in diverse ecological issues under the broad canvas of environmental history and tries to establish the significance of the discipline within the discourse on ecology, conservation and environmentalism. All the papers raise very important and pertinent questions that broaden the agenda of environment history in South Asia. They look at state formation, colonial perception of the oriental environment, the history of pandemics, gender roles in joint forest management, and many other aspects of global environmental history. The book will be an important reader for scholars interested in environmental history in South Asia and beyond.