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History of Environmental History of India: A Review of Historiography

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Abstract

Environmental history offers systematic documentation of human environmental relationship in the past. Fascinating literature on environmental history has been produced in the last three decades in India. This articles attempts to propose a historiographical review of this new frontier of historical inquiry. Three of the following aspects are highlighted: core areas covered under environmental history: broad trends that are used in structuring environmental history and further prospects to explore ecological dimension of India history.

***Key Words**: Environmental History, Conservation, Resources, Forests, Colonialism, Policies.*

Introduction

Environmental issues as an academic and public discourse acquired prominence world over after 1960s. Various streams of academic disciplines evolved separate sub-disciplines making environment as a focal theme. The quest of historians to provide historical background to ecological problems resulted in emergence of environmental history as a separate branch of history. In the last three decades, environmental history evolved itself as a fascinating historical enquiry in India. This article attempts to document a review of historiographical trends of environmental history in India. By doing so, particular attention has been devoted to the transformative trajectory of ideas and approaches that influenced the nature of environmental history of India.

This paper has been organized into three sections: first section defines what is environmental history, proposes a brief background of context of its emergence and brief review of literature: second section reviews the historical

approaches that evolved in the last three decades pertaining to environmental history and final section proposes future of environmental history and conclusion.

India has been a country which witnessed strong and steady growth of literature on environmental history. In the last three decades, several books and scholarly articles appeared on histories of forests, water, grasslands, pastoral communities etc. Attempt on a review of historiography is useful to understand trends of ecological history. The following studies attempted to propose a review of historiography Chkoborty (2000) Rangarajan's (2002), Hill (2008) and Sivaramakrisan (2009).

Context for emergence of environmental history

Three factors responsible for emergence of environmental history in India: contemporary environmental movement, writings of American environmental historians (Worster, 1977 and Crosby, 1995) and influence of Indian environmental movement starts from Chipko movement (Guha, 1989). Environmental activism in Indian and the Euro-American world acted as a catalyst for academia to evolve conceptual approaches to understand human environmental relationship. In this process writings of American historians on ecological history of America inspired historians across the world to locate ecological background in the past. It is this context environmental history emerged as a separate branch of history in South Asia with the main objective of documentation of the relationship between human beings and nature in Indian history.

In spite of a debate among environmental historians, there exists a broad consensus on essential framework. Mcneil (2003) proposed that environmental history can broadly be divided into thee categories i.e., material, intellectual and political environmental history. Thus, environmental history mainly deals with the interaction between human being and ecological factors such as soils, water, temperature, forests etc in the past. The following factors are given attention:

- Historical analysis of the interaction between biotic and aboitic world in general and interaction between human society and ecological conditions in particular.
- Documentation of forms of nature and culture interaction and highlighting ecological conservation practices, ethics, and attitudes embedded in culture.
- Analyses of forms of ruling regimes interventions in exploitation and conservation of resources of nature.
- Historical analysis of traditional natural resource management institutions such as communities, state, religion and other institutions.
- Documentation of livelihood patterns of communities such as pastoralists, shifting cultivators, hunting and gatherers with special focus on their dependency on living resources.
- Historical analysis of wild life management policies by various ruling regimes and material and ideological aspects associated with them.
- Analysis on ecological implication of exploitation of natural resources to local communities.
- Historical documentation of social conflicts in around natural resources.
- Analysis of socio-political movements which articulated for the rights of people over resources.
- Examines the role of scientific ideas and their impact on public policy systems of environmental conservation.
- Highlighting the role of intellectuals who strived for conserving nature with their ideas and activities. In any way retrieving the ecological wisdom our ancestors evolved.

The focal areas of environmental history suggest that it has chosen to fulfill four of the following ambitious tasks: firstly, diagnosis and documentation of environmental crisis brought about by industrial modernity, secondly, attempt to retrieve the cultural practices and ethical values human beings practiced toward nature before beginning of industrial era, thirdly, documentation of alternative patterns of resource management in order to support the effort of human beings to refashion the use of nature to safeguard themselves from extinction and finally environmental history is a guide for present and future generations who were trapped into environmental crisis.

Environmental histories of India-a review

Environmental history expected to document the human engagement with his physical environmental conditions. In South Asia, environmental history mainly confined to three broad themes: analysis on traditional resource management systems in pre-colonial period, documentation on ecological changes brought about by British colonial rule and finally reflections on human ecological relationship in independent India. The fact however is that overwhelming emphasis has been devoted to forest histories of colonial India to document the ecological impact of modern state system in India. This focus is perhaps due to two factors: firstly, British colonial rule instituted new methods of managing forests which initiated a sweeping shift in use of forests resources and secondly the legacy of colonial forest policies exercised strong presence in the post colonial India.

Environmental history has made inroads into Indian academia in the mid 1980s. One of the main reasons for this is that the ecological crisis generated by industrial modernity initiated by the colonial powers begun to shows their destructive symptoms (Bandopadhya and Shiva, 1988). In order to tackle them, ecological protection movements emerged world over. The American environmental movements and green party movement in Europe are well known examples. South Asian region also experienced similar process. Thus, environmental history emerged in the context of historians' quest to provide historical dimension to ecological problems. Studies focuses on common pool resource management systems did provide some space to historical background to forest policies (Singh, 1986, Nadakarni, 1989). Some studies offer exclusive historical analysis on ecological implication of European colonization world over (Richard, et al, 1987).

First systematic attempt of environmental history of India made by Ramachandra Guha in his several well researched articles (Guha, 1985, 1989, 1993). He demystified the notion that ecological consciousness is a contemporary phenomenon. He demonstrated the historical dimension of state intervention and people's response in the domain of ecologically sensitive Himalayan zone. He along with Gadgil attempted to evolve a systematic disciplinary framework for ecological interpretation to Indian history (Gadgil and Guha, 1992). Their model of ecological interpretation to Indian history as follows: hunter and gatherer period, pastoralist period, settled agriculture period, and colonial period and finally independent Indian period. The summery of this modal of history is that pre-colonial Indian sub content enjoyed ecologically sensitive practices which are altered by destructive colonial exploitation of nature. The main reason for ecological crisis in India according to this approach is introduction of capitalist forms of exploitation of nature by the British. This approach offers moral critique of the exploitation of nature and alienation of people from it by focusing on British colonial rule.

The approach of Guha and Gadgil reflects the rare convergence of Marxist notion of alienation of man from nature (Foster, 2001) and nationalist sensibility on environmental problem. Besides brilliant contribution to the existing corpus of historical knowledge, this approach also has following limitations. The entire argument of this approach is built with the premise of pre-British India as ecologically prudent and possessing eco-sensitive cultural practices. But this approach is built based upon limited samples of regional studies. Consequently, it does not give adequate attention to caste based inequalities and gender dimension in appropriation of natural resources in several parts of

India. Several recent studies questioned the validity of this approach and branded it as ecologically romantic approach (Guha, 1999, Freeman, 2001).

In spite of aforementioned limitations several regional level studies used this framework in order to document the exploitation of forests and alienation of forest dependent communities from nature. Some of the well known examples as follows: analysis of impact of colonial rule over pastoralist economy of Himalaya region (Dutt, 1998), Guha himself brought about a monograph on history of peasant resistance to colonial forest policies in Uttrakhand Himalayan region (Guha, 1989), Joshi's (1983) analysis of forest policies in Orissa state, the analysis of Murali (1995) on the transformation brought about by the British in forest utilization process in Andhra region and study on tribal regions of Tamil Nadu by Saravanan (1998). These studies have been influenced by two sources: firstly American environmental history writings which propose the modal of exploitation of nature by colonial state by the way of excluding customary users of resources and secondly Marxist notion of alienation of man from nature wherein Marx argued that the greed of capitalists destroys the organic relationship between man and nature. While applying this modal to write ecological history of India, the main argument propounded by these studies is that pre-colonial period was ecologically prudent and this was destroyed by British colonial rule and it is this framework of resource management system that remained framework of independent India. The historicism of these studies is to press for incorporation of indigenous modals for management of ecologically sensitive resources such as forests and water.

The foundational principles of aforementioned approach have been questioned by scholars from Euro-American world. Their argument constitutes another broad approach in environmental history can be termed as green imperialist approach. The main essence of this argument is that ecological problems are global in nature hence colonial intervention in Asia, Africa and Lateen American countries provided an opportunity to initiate ecological conservation measures to protect the ecologically sensitive resources. Grove (1995) proposes, ecological conservation principles were evolved by colonial scientists to prevent the ecological degradation in various colonies. In other words, the consciousness of scientific conservation of ecology according to Grove was indeed evolved by colonial scientific community which perceives it as a moral duty of rulers to protect ruled. He highlighted the contribution of scientists for conservation of forest to protect water sources that feed river systems in British India. In nutshell, this approach proposes that colonial rule in India attempted to safeguard fragile ecosystems with scientific methods. The following historians furthered the approach of Grove however with significant variations: Dytown (2005) brings out analysis on contribution of colonial botanical networks for conservation of ecology in colonies: Rajan (2006) traces the origin of environmentalism in the transcontinental forest management traditions formulated and practiced by the Western European countries, Barton (2002) assessment of commonwealth forestay treats colonial forest polices in India as an effort by the British to conserve forests which were already degraded due to excessive exploitation of pre-colonial ruling regimes, Hughes (2001) proposes that global environmentalism is a product of the British concerns in saving the degradation ecology in colonies, Beinart, and Hughes (2009) documents the colonial environmental sensibilities translated in the form of conservation policies Africa and Bryant (1996) shows how forestry as emancipatory and progressive discourse articulated in colonial Burma. This approach reflects the attitude of Whiteman burden theory wherein Euro-American world assumes the role of guarding the globe from ecological disaster. The main limitation of this approach is that historians articulate this approach mainly consulted the journals, commission reports and recommendations of colonial scientists. Local records which show the everyday interaction of colonial rule were not seriously consulted. Consequently, the role of colonial scientific community was romanticized without providing adequate space to various dynamics of their motives. Some of the recent studies demonstrated the fact that desiccationist discourse of colonial scientific community was actively used by colonial state in India to justify the control of state in forest management (Ravikumar, 2010). But in spite of these limitations, this approach exercise influence on researchers of environmental history who provided considerable space to colonial origins of environmentalism.

The aforementioned studies prepared a systematic framework for eco-centric history in India. Gradually the disciplinary scope of environmental history was enriched by two trends: focus on regional level ecological histories and application of new analytical approaches to explore the human environmental relationship. Post-structuralist approach with particular reference to Foucauldian notion of governmentality has been invoked for analysis of forest policies. The salient features of this approach as follows: rejection of structuralist modal for understanding forest policies: highlight the plural nature of policy and practice of forest policies: emphasis on socio-economic and topographical context for environmental policies adopted by the British. The main argument this approach is that presence of power dynamics in colonial policy circles at one level and in hierarchal system of Indian society at another level shaped the policies for management of forests and other environmentally sensitive resources. The following studies were brought out by using aforementioned approach: Sivaramakrishnan (1999) study of colonial forest policies in Bengal, Saberwal (1999) study on pastoralist communities in Himalayan region, Alem (2007) work on pastoral communities in Himalayan region, (Agrwal 2006) analysis of forest policies in Uttrakhand region, Skaria (1999) study on the Dang tribes of Western India, Phillip (2003) documentation of tribal communities in South India, and Cedolf (2005) study of on the response of tribes in Nelgiri district to colonial land policies, and Sabrwl and Lele (2004) study on role of elite in capturing the benefits from colonial rule well known examples.

Environmental history at crosses roads

Having narrated the evolutionary trajectory of environmental history writings, it is worth to devote some space for prospective future trends of environmental history in India. India owing to its vast diversity in terms of topographical, demographic, geographical and socioeconomic structure offer exciting possibilities for regional level studies on environmental factors. Till now environmental history focused on impact of colonial rule on Indian ecology with particular reference to forests. The following potential factors still waiting for the engagement of historians to bring them out to life:

- History of water policies in different regions of India
- History of soil fertility management methods, strategies and policies
- History of traditional organic measuring practices of tribes, particularly of North east.
- Role of women in conservation of ecology, eco-feminist studies are still very less in India.
- Role of colonial rule in shaping urban environment (Urban environmental history not yet explored by historians).
- History of mining policies in different parts of India and nature of mining policies formulated by the British.
- Environmental history of ancient and medieval periods is still less focused areas.
- Ecological ideas of intellectuals, poets and philosophers need to be brought out in different parts of India.
- Documentation of conflicts within Indian society for accessing ecologically sensitive resources.
- Histories of botanical gardens in British which offered exiting solutions for ecological crisis.

Historians however cannot directly influence the development process. But they always contribute by giving a proper direction to development process. The contribution of environmental history can be divided into three broad themes: firstly, it has highlighted the eco-friendly aspects of local communities and thereby pressed the policy makers to have a positive opinion about the needs of local communities and secondly, it has highlighted the concept of equity in environmental management in India. As a result of these changes robust reform process in natural resource management were initiated. Influenced by the advocacy environmental history writings, community centric developmental modal was initiated in forest and water management system in India. Finally environmental history

writings will have deep impact upon the attitude of younger generation on the need to protect environment without compromising the human welfare.

Conclusion

Change is the essence of human existence. Academic world is not an exception in this regard. Disciplinary changes in social science are fast occurring in a quest to capturing the ever changing human reality. Environmental history attempt to provide past background to ecological issues thereby aids the process of finding solution to ecological crisis. Environmental history itself underwent sweeping changes in terms of focus, nature and approach. The evolutionary trajectory of environmental history in the last thirty years or so shows the ability of historians in India to expand the scope of it by pushing the frontiers of research. The main purpose of this article is not the put forward an abstract intellectual reflection of historiography on environmental history rather to register a fundamental understanding of environmental history which is essential to promote eco-sensitivity to save the planet earth from extinction.

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