



**Mahesh Rangarajan, K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds.** *Shifting Ground: People, Mobility, and Animals in India's Environmental Histories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 308 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-809895-9.

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## Environmental History in India

Research and writing about India's environmental history continue to advance rapidly, producing increasingly sophisticated analyses of key aspects of the dynamic relationships among humans, fauna, flora, and the physical world. While evidence of these relationships extends back over many thousands of years, the serious academic study of India's environmental history began only in the 1980s. Many of its first generation of scholars are still active. The editors and contributors to *Shifting Ground: People, Animals, and Mobility in India's Environmental History* represent some of the leading established scholars and also some of the most promising new ones in this young field.

This volume's introduction by Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan and the first chapter by Kathleen O. Morrison provide especially insightful and knowledgeable historiographies. They show how this field has reached what some scholars call a "third wave" of development. The best of the early scholarly works of environmental history brought to wider attention locally based conservation movements, most famously the "chipko" or "hug-the-trees" movement against deforestation in the lower Himalayas (notably, Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* [1989]). Simultaneously, scholarly studies of prominent species of animals highlighted their often threatened condition (notably, Raman Sukumar, *The Asian Elephant: Ecology and Management* [1989]). Other similarly innovative descriptive, celebratory, or declensionist studies of contemporary topics continue to emerge, with India's vast array of local ecological conditions for humans and nonhumans providing many urgent issues and problems to study.

Subsequently and concurrently, a second wave of environmental historians has added chronological depth to these ecological issues by tracing their origins to much earlier eras. Many studies concentrate on the British

colonial period (mid-eighteenth century to 1947), implicitly or explicitly contrasting that era with postindependence South Asia. But some research goes further back—to the earlier Mughal Empire (1526-1858) or even to the ancient Indus civilization (2600-1900 BCE). One of the earliest of such historically deep studies was Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (1992). The editors and several of the contributors to the book under review have also published such substantial and historically deep studies

The chapters in this edited volume largely reflect ongoing efforts to "shift [the] ground" of environmental history still further by deconstructing the categories by which current and historically earlier diverse and often contending groups have conceptualized the nonhuman world around them. To accomplish this destabilizing and rethinking of India's environmental history, the contributors to this volume have innovatively drawn on and combined new kinds of archives, including art as well as written records, oral traditions as well as literature, archaeology as well as botanical proxies for ancient climate change. Such work both enriches our understanding of the past and also makes far more effective our efforts at engagement with today's pressing environmental issues.

One of the central issues addressed by several contributors concerns the extent of continuities of ecological processes over long periods of time and also the degree of rupture caused by regime and economic changes. In particular, they show how we can problematize the standard ecological narrative of a more pristine past declining due to state (or human socioeconomic) interventions. That narrative most often highlights either British colonial interference in India's environment or, more recently, the economic liberalization of India's economy from the 1990s onward that stressed rapid development over environmental safeguards. In particular, Morrison convinc-

ingly questions three well-established narratives: that the Indus civilization's abandonment of its cities around 1900 BCE was due primarily to its deforestation of the surrounding region; that the rise of states on the Ganges plain around 600 BCE was due primarily to deforestation (since pollen and other studies suggest the region was savanna, not forest); and that radical disruptions in Deccan agriculture were due to the military defeat and sudden abandonment of Vijayanagara's imperial capital around 1565. She also argues against using misleading concepts like "climax ecology," since human and natural interventions make such a single steady state condition ahistorical.

Most of the other chapters likewise use new forms of evidence and analysis to complicate conventional understanding of what were really far more complex issues. In particular, Vikramaditya Thakur shows the multifaceted and conflicted roles of Bhil "tribals," revealing them as active agents, not merely victims, of deforestation and of displacement due to the big dams on the Narmada River during the postindependence period. Radhika Govindrajan locates the sacrifice of animals in popular shrines in the new Himalayan province of Uttarakhand within multisided contemporary debates about how one should be a Hindu.

Another strength of this volume is the analysis in several chapters of how particular species were envisioned and affected by various cultures. Shibani Bose traces what people thought about the rhinoceros, from the Indus civilization to the present. Divyabhanusinh uses Mughal literature and art to describe imperial attitudes toward lions, tigers, cheetahs, and elephants, especially in light of hunting. Julie E. Hughes similarly uses nineteenth-century Rajasthani literature and art to analyze Rajput uses and representations of the wild boar, including as evidence representations of their masculinity. Brian P. Caton draws from British records and writings about their efforts to control the breeding of horses and cattle in the Punjab, motivated in particular by military and economic agendas. Ghazala Shahabuddin studies the contemporary Indian state's conservationist and political responses to the 2005 extinction of the last tiger in the Sariska Reserve, including the nationalistic and ex-

pensive reintroduction of new tigers there in 2008, which overrode the interests of the local human population.

This presumption of mastery over nature by the Indian state in Sariska was in many ways a continuation of earlier British colonial pretentious pride in its imperial science as the means to control India's natural resources. Daniel Klingensmith shows how several Indian and British critics used the evident imperial failures to control the waterways of Bengal to sap imperial legitimacy during the three decades leading up to Indian independence. Arupjyoti Saikia considers how, during those same pre-independence decades, the colonial Forest Department's designated grazing lands within Assam's reserved forests became the site of tripartite political maneuvering among Nepali herders, east Bengali Muslim immigrant farmers, and local Assamese agriculturalists.

Overall, each of these essays demonstrates distinctive cutting-edge environmental history. However, while this collection presents many of the vital themes in this field, there is a noticeable paucity of work representing how gender informs both past and current environmental issues. The bibliography, for example, includes one of Bina Agarwal's early books but not her *Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry* (2010). Further, while many environmental processes cross the relatively recent national boundaries created in 1947, this collection does not address the distinctive environmental issues in postindependence Pakistan or Bangladesh (although some essays on pre-independence South Asia do include those regions).

Nonetheless, this volume stands as a remarkably fine collection of recent scholarship that provides impressive examples of many key aspects of the burgeoning field of Indian environmental history. The chapters are all clearly written and based on cutting-edge research. Collectively and individually, these chapters will stimulate and edify a range of readers, from specialists in environmental history in India or elsewhere to students and general readers concerned with specific species or the ways that culture informs conceptions of nature and affects the nonhuman world.

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