
Editors' Note

A furious torrent into which buildings collapse like houses made of cards; the horrified cry of a mountaineer at an Everest base camp –“where’s the camp?!” – With increasing frequency, images like these are flashed into our homes, disrupting our smug complacency about the world we live in, the world we have partly created for ourselves. Anthropocene, a term denoting the era of irreparable human influence on the earth, is soon to enter the official lexicon of geological ages. Starting from the last decades of the 20th century, we have been forced to acknowledge the effects of human activity on the environment that we live in. Our construction activities have changed the course of rivers, clogged the channels of sediment transportation, and despoiled natural beauty. We have become the meteors and comets of our own age. We cannot deny that our collective hubris, bred by our ‘conquest’ of nature, has been challenged by the disastrous consequences we are now encountering.

Are we then to retreat into a mindset which sees human beings as ‘victims’, helpless against the fury of the elements? Or, do we don the mantle of the co-creator of our environment? Should we plunder the earth as a consumer, or should we nurture its wealth as responsible custodians? Today, the choice can no longer be put off, for the crisis is already upon us. For centuries our conquests have ranged over nations, cultures and natural resources. The Darwinian idea that the fittest only survive the process of evolution, encouraged a competitive anthropocentrism which saw nature as the ‘other’, an entity which could be tamed and exploited for man’s increasing prosperity. The cycle is now turning towards a more inclusive vision of a living universe in which man is a co-creator. Elisabet Sahtouris in the Spring/Summer volume, 2014, of *Kosmos*, has written,

“The new view, revealing a conscious universe and a living Earth in which we are co-creators, takes us out of fatalistic victimhood to becoming consciously active agents of our destiny! It lifts the fog of

our self-image as consumers of stuff, giving us awesome rights and responsibilities to live out our full co-creative humanity.”

The ecological turn in humanities is a response to the complex issue of humankind’s relationship with the natural environment, and how this in turn affects aspects of our existence, ranging from politics to health. Eco-criticism, made popular by the likes of Cheryl Glotfelty, examines the ways in which our responses to nature reflect the larger power equations in society. The theme of this volume, ‘through the ecological lens’ is a general one which encompasses within it the various aspects of eco-humanities, such as, ecological history, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and ecosophy. The articles in this volume have approached the subject from different perspectives, but together they show that the time has come for the idea of ecosophy, which has been defined by Arne Naess as a kind of *Sophia* or wisdom, which shows us how to live in harmony with our surroundings.

This multidisciplinary, multilingual, volume accommodates the responses of Indian scholars who have looked at environmental issues from the standpoint of their experiences as modern day Indians. Standing at the intersection of the global and the local, their articles reveal how the tools of a philosophy which originated in the west, may be adapted to gain insights and speak about some of our most immediate crises and choices. India being a developing nation has the added responsibility of treading a path of sustainable development, which will accommodate the aspirations of those millions who have never enjoyed the benefits of an industrialised society. In a country that is poor in many aspects, but rich in natural resources, the temptation to exploit them for immediate gain is acute. Since the 1990s, eco-criticism has been gaining ground as an interdisciplinary field of study. Analysing texts through the prism of ecology, scholars have revealed how attitudes towards nature and landscape reflect broader attitudes towards power equations involving gender, race and economics.

The need for ecological wisdom has been emphatically articulated by Mili Samaddar in her essay in Bengali, entitled *Bipanna Bismay*. The catastrophic flash flood in Uttarakhand is taken as the central episode which leads on to the debate between development and conservation. Dr. Samaddar has shown how attending a workshop for Rabindranath Tagore's *Muktadhara*, in a remote island in the Sunderbans had opened her eyes to the ways in which men can relate to nature. Tagore in his play *Muktadhara* had anticipated the crisis resulting from the mindless greed of an exploitative state, looking out for the interests of a few pressure groups. The spontaneous and passionate love for nature which Tagore had depicted in his play finds a deep resonance with the apparently unsophisticated villagers of Sunderban. This is contrasted with the greed of the state government which has allowed unsustainable tourism and urbanization of Uttarakhand's ecologically sensitive area.

Soumya Bhattacharya's article, which dwells on Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's novel *Aranyak*, explores the divided psyche of a man who has to work as a cog in the wheel of the State's developmental plans. Bhattacharya shows how a strong ecological consciousness works within the Romanticism of Bibhtibhusan, as he traces the protagonist Satyacharan's journey from the city to the village, which is presented as a journey from the centre to the margin. Satyacharan's initially romanticised vision of natural landscape and the people inhabiting it soon leads to a bitter realisation of the degradation wrought upon both by the forces of a capitalist economy. His own role in perpetrating this makes him feel guilty ever after.

Dr. Kavita Mehrotra, in her article entitled *Badalta Parivesh Aur Manushya*, has located the bond between man and nature in the context of the changing environment. She has explored the irony of man who despite standing helpless in front of nature and its infinity, assumes himself as superior to nature and continues to exploit it. Believing in materialistic existence, he considers physicality to be

the only truth. As a result of this, however, his outer as well as inner nature, are being affected adversely.

Professor Abha Jha, in her article *Paryaavaran Aur Aaj Ka Maanav*, has provided a beautiful account of the relationship between human beings and nature, and substantiated her view through the works of the famous poets in Hindi such as, Jaishankar Prasad, Pant and Nagarjun. Nature, always tries to maintain a balance with the drastic changes imposed upon it by human beings, but the latter tends to forget that his origin is rooted in nature, and it is nature which nurtures him. Man, instead, conceives nature as a consumable non-entity and tries to control it. This, in turn, leads to his fall.

In *Padmaavat Mein Prakriti Prem*, Dr. Vasundhara Misra, has described the beauty of nature with reference to Padmaavat, the famous work of Malik Muhammad Jayasi – an eminent Sufi poet in Hindi literature. Dating back to 1540, Jayasi, in his celebrated work, has provided the readers with a detailed portrayal of the beauty of the six seasons, as they change, and the way in which this reflects not only the transience of nature but also the psychological subtleties of the characters in the book.

In contrast to this, the following two eco-critical essays in this volume dwell on the representation of the schism between man and nature in the narratives of our times.

Somrita Ganguly's *Gendering the Greens: An Ecocritical / Ecofeminist Reading of Seamus Heaney's Works* provides an eco-feminist reading of Seamus Heaney's poetry. The conflation of landscape and woman in his metaphoric representation of Ireland reveals his perceptive realisation of the disastrous consequences of a phallo-centric culture propagated by the Judeo-Christian tradition. This has resulted in the hideous progenies of rape and degradation of women, as well as the blood-spattered history of Irish resistance to English colonisation.

Sonal Kapur's essay, *On Ghazala Meer: (Re) mapping the Land –as-Woman Metaphor in Vishal Bharadwaj's Haidar*, extends the land-as-woman reading of textual representation to the domain of cinematic narrative. Interpreting *Haidar* through the prism of semiotics, eco-feminism and performativity theory, she has examined how Bharadwaj's film, released in 2014, has used the land-woman equivalence to represent the subversive force of the absent referent. The central female character, Ghazala Meer, the object of desire and domination, is divested of individual subjectivity by the male protagonists. Even as they frame their actions with her as the centre of their greed for power, she annihilates herself in an act of defiance and self assertion, thereby disrupting the convenient male narrative. Kapur reads into this story, a metaphor for Kashmir itself, a land of mythical beauty, over whom nations play out games of domination. In the process the phenomenal existence of the land and its people become irrelevant. In Kapur's interpretation of the denouement of the movie, the snows catching fire symbolises the annihilation of the landscape, and the myth of its beauty is replaced by the actual reality of a scarred geography.

The article entitled *Nataraja – A Symbol of Harmony and Beauty in Nature* by Souraja Tagore has consciously been placed at the centre of this volume, as it talks about a past which is now irrevocably lost to us, but whose teachings remind us of an ecosophy which had once been envisaged in Ancient India. She examines the iconography of the Nataraja to explain how its combination of the five elements (*panchabhuta*), fire, air, earth, water and ether, expresses the desire for an existence in harmony with the rhythm of nature; a desire that finds expression in the perfect poise of the dancing Nataraja. In a post-industrialised world such a wonderful equipoise has become a distant ideal.

Stemming from the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the impact of nature on man and the reverse, the impact of

technological interventions in nature and the effect of capitalism on the environment, has become the subject matter of historians. The narrative of continuous human progress is increasingly being challenged by studies which focus on conservation and environmental issues, and how ecological history impacts the course of human struggles. Gargi Chattopadhyay, in *Sagar: A Land of Promise? C. 1770-1850*, provides an overview of the role played by this island in the maritime history of India. Although associated nostalgically with our forefathers who used to brave the vagaries of nature to take the annual dip, the island also has a rich history moulded by natural and historical factors which have played their part in creating and recreating the island, in the course of time. Its worth as a deep-sea anchorage was noted in the mid-seventeenth century by European travellers and sailors. At present too, it is being considered as a mooring space cum port for ocean liners. Chattopadhyay's study spans the island's history from the late medieval period to the present day, providing insights into hitherto uncharted aspects of its history.

In *The Menace of Arsenic: Effects on the Common People of Bengal*, Paramita Chakrabarty argues how the effects of environmental pollution impact the weaker sections of society. In a comprehensive study of the problem, Chakrabarti has explored the social, psychological and medical viewpoints to show how alarm bells are ringing in various quarters with regard to this problem. The history of humankind is not only to be found in its mega events, but in these continuous everyday challenges which affect the life and habitat of people.

A gradual consciousness of the environment resulted in the emergence of *Environmental Sociology* in the 1970's. Neeparanya Guha quotes Riley E Dunlap in her article on Environmental Sociology, where she states that it arose from the widespread social awareness of environmental problems and the mobilisation of support for environmental protection. She traces the emergence of

Environmental Sociology linking it to traditional Sociology and goes on to show how it has become an immensely popular discipline. She touches upon its vast scope where she highlights the very real and at times cataclysmic environmental problems which are in actuality social problems that have to be dealt with, involving society as a whole.

Shreya Bhattacharya gives an insight into the human impact on biological diversity in her article entitled ***Globalization and wildlife: An insight into the human impact on biological diversity***, where she presents a picture of the very real threat that the environment is facing with the gradual encroachment of man upon it. Human intervention has had a ripple effect which is felt by nature, man and animals. She has briefly touched upon the problems brought about by destruction of the natural habitat by man in the name of globalisation.

Man has had to face certain consequences for every stride forward that he has taken. It brings to mind Newton's third law which states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Man has taken giant steps in technology which has looked after his well being; side by side it has thrown up certain adversities. Adrita Ganguly has looked into the effect of mobile radiation in her article on ***Tower Tension: Understanding the noxious effect of Mobile Tower Radiation***. Mobile phones play a very important and essential role in modern life, cutting across rural and urban populations. This has led to the mushrooming of mobile transmission towers all over the land. Ganguly's article cautions us about the dangers of radiation and how it is detrimental to man.

Modern day political and ecological activism seems to be fulfilling the forebodings of writers like Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. ***The Voice of the Subaltern against the Cacaphony of Industrialisation***, by Upasana Roy Barman deals with the various aspects of the ecological movement started in 20004 by the Dongria and Kutiya Kondh tribes, to save their Niyam Raja (The Niyamgiri Hills), from

the gigantic bauxite mining industry , The Vedanta Alumina Limited. The first part gives an overview of the whole process of industrialisation begun by the Vedanta Company. The second part talks of the symbiotic relationship between the hill and the people. The third part brings out the power relation that emerged out of the process of capitalist development and the resistance put up by the tribal population of the region. It is concluded that this struggle cannot just be termed as a mere conflict, but as an alternative discourse. Such a discourse is bound to become more vociferous, as the conflict between the subaltern and the privileged classes intensify in the post-globalised world.

A crisis of conscience regarding the geography and society we change in the name of development is not the preserve of literature alone. An ecological model of development through environmentally wise public policy was mooted by Fred Riggs. *Ecology and Administration: Revisiting the Prismatic model of Fred Riggs* by Souradeep Sen, accounts for the roots of the ecological approach within the area of public administration. Beginning by explaining the significance of the approach to the concept of bureaucracy, Sen follows with an analysis of Fred Riggs' treatment of the ecology of administration and his contribution to the development of this particular model. Lastly the article focuses on the criticisms levelled against the model with an aim to make alterations so as to make it suitable to the present times.

This volume, which has been a little over a year in the compiling, is the contribution of the Humanities Section of The Bhawanipur Education Society College, to the ongoing debates which are revolving round ecological concerns and their implications for the power equations and developmental concerns of our times.

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