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Change and Continuity in the Ecologies of South Asia over Five Centuries

By: Nayanjot Lahiri

Sumit Guha charts changes and continuities in the ecologies of empires in South Asia, engaging all the way in this long journey with imperially ruled landscapes.

Sumit Guha writes in the introduction to *Ecologies of Empire in South Asia* that a central aim of his book is to explore the relationship between humans and the environment across history: "How humans perceived and lived in the intersection of symbolic and pragmatic geography shaped their habitus, but the habitus made them just as much as they made the habitus." Human impact, as a reading of the book reveals, is explored in relation to villages and woodlands, hills, and meadows. In practically every instance, what figures here is how these landscapes were perceived and evaluated, used and abused – by rulers and administrative elites, as also by peasants and forest people.

Since Guha's is the analytical gaze of a historian, he looks at a specific space and time. His terrain is South Asia across five centuries that encompassed sprawling realms ranging from the Mughal to the Maratha and British empires. This ensures that he avoids "the tendency to tacitly consign the entire pre-British period to the hazy world of 'traditional India' and instead allows a delineation of major continuities in the two projects of empire as well as the radical changing resulting from the arrival of techniques derived from the Industrial Revolution." At its core, this is a book about political ecology, about nature and empire.

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Through his long career, Guha has combined a monumental curiosity about all kinds of subjects with a mastery of diverse historical sources and writings. The formidable range of books he has authored include works on economic and demographic history, questions of caste and ethnic identity, history and memory, and the environment. A hallmark of his oeuvre is his ability to move beyond the short chronology of modern India and explore earlier time frames while integrating insights from scholarship beyond South Asia. In 1999, Guha's *Environment and Ethnicity in India* began by questioning the archaeological record even as it discussed forest politics from 1200 till 1991. Some twenty years later, the public life of history in mediaeval Europe figured in his exploration of *History and Collective Memory in South Asia 1200-2000*. This is not a historian who is intimidated by the walls that separate the modern from the mediaeval or even from the ancient.

Nor is Guha intimidated by the vast literature that charts environmental trends across millennia. While he himself has looked at larger spans of time than most historians of South Asia, in writing his latest book, he is acutely aware of this work being only a small chunk in the long chronologies that dominate global research on ecology. What could smaller geographical areas and shorter periods of traditional historical enquiry add, he asks at the outset? As the book reveals, the interactions between human societies and land through time depended a great deal on inequality. Differentiation amongst people by class and community as a key element in the interface of humanity and ecology is entirely ignored by data bases on the global environment where, instead, it is an undifferentiated humanity that is configured.

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The six core chapters of the book encompass a range of themes. The first chapter is perhaps the most ambitious in its scope and considers how humans created "ways of seeing" geographical spaces before the emergence of inequality. Through examples from different parts of the world pertaining to early communities of hunters, various religions, and their cosmologies as also later empires, it reveals the various ways in which societies viewed space, with religious visions being rather different from those around economic geography. Chapter Two looks at South Asia in the 'Imperial Gaze'. It is here that animals that were used by empires figure – the elephant and its importance in warfare in India being central to political ecology.

The dependence of empire builders on gentry participation is the focus of Chapter 3. It reveals how in large parts of western India, while the intermediate elites helped create records as demanded by rulers – among other things, for extracting agricultural surplus – they also subverted from below. Here subalterns and their alternative subsistence strategies for evading elite control figure as well. Chapters Four and Five concern the village and its inhabitants and the offensive and defensive uses of landscape, especially forest tracts, respectively. Chapter Six is centrally concerned with colonialism, disarmament, and the closing of the forest frontier. In this way, ecological histories around local, regional and imperial geographies are scrutinised. The prism through which much of this is viewed is the sprawling political formation that we call the empire.

Empires in South Asia have a long ancestry. Instead of examining the archaeology of empires, Guha chooses a textual approach in alluding to its genealogy. He uses the *Arthashastra*, the most famous Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, in order to reveal key elements of later imperial features that figure there. He sees the roots of imperial geography in this ancient text in its wide view of the South Asian landscape just as the significance of surveillance in that text resonates with later practices. The visualisation of a money economy and thus, of mobile wealth, and an emphasis on the demarcation of boundaries to define territorial units, are seen as essential constituents of imperial control. This is also a treatise which discusses the different ways in which forests could be used which, inevitably, is seen as a resource to be exploited.

The Maurya to Mughal story in Guha’s analysis would have been further enriched if it had integrated the insights of an iconic early medieval text, the *Harshacharita*, which reveals a somewhat different relationship between the state and the forest. *Harshacharita* is a historical biography – of King Harshavardhana (c. 7th century CE) – where the forest centrally figures as the king wanders around the Vindhyas, in search of his widowed sister. Unlike the *Arthashastra* which sees forests and forest people from an exploitative gaze, here it is in part a relationship of dependence. Harsha cannot traverse the jungles without the help of the people of the forest since it was they who had local knowledge of the terrain.

In fact, in northern Madhya Pradesh, as R.N. Mishra’s 2018 work, *Ascetics, Piety and Power: Saiva Siddhanta Monastic art in the Woodlands of Central India*, on the forest highlights, from the eighth century onwards, another set of historical actors - Shaiva ascetics who established monasteries in the wilderness - facilitated the state’s engagement with it. It was they who helped secure the Vindhyan heartland, simultaneously offering support to traders by ensuring safe passage and facilitating the transformation of local forest warriors to feudal chieftains of the Gurjara Pratihara rulers.

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Looking at the book’s exploration of India in mediaeval and early times, there are a couple of compelling themes relating to representations of landscape that are worth highlighting. One is the way in which it deals with the seeming paradox of the Mughal empire’s geographical details being recorded in Abul Fazl’s *A’in* (in textual descriptions and through numerical lists) but with no maps. The reason was that unlike transoceanic empires whose personnel had to travel over vast stretches of water, the Mughal courtiers, officials and armies moved over the land and along well-known navigable rivers. In other words, their landscape representations did not require mapping since both communication and control could be exercised without it.

The other theme concerns how the village was delineated, through the demarcation of boundaries that would only have been known at the local level. The mental map, for instance, in a Maratha 18th century document reveals how a boundary dispute between three villages was eventually resolved. This was done by marking the boundary in 27 places with markers like a memorial stone on a mound, a rock near a road, a sandy spot under a tree where three paths met – in other words, through landmarks that only locals would be able to identify. This is how larger administrative structures often worked, by depending upon crucial local knowledge. The back and forth between imperial administrators and ground realities at the local level, is brilliantly done here, and is an important hallmark of many of the book’s chapters.

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In the same way as with arable spaces, there is a wide-ranging exploration of woodlands, where again, Guha provides a range of examples of the strategic use of forests by local groups and by imperial formations. Large, organised insurgencies using forests smouldered in the vicinity of garrisoned towns such as Jalali, between the Ganga and Yamuna rivers. Insurgents who lived hidden between the dense forests and thick bamboo groves between the Ganga and the Yamuna rivers, in the vicinity of garrisoned towns such as Jalali, were described in the 13th century *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, and they were found in the very area mentioned by Ibn Batuta in the 14th century as having rebellious Hindus.

In a similar vein, Francisco Pelsaert, an officer of the Dutch East India Company, is known to have noted in connection with the Mewat region, that while it was only about 60 miles from the imperial capital at Delhi, "owing to the hills and forests, it is mostly in rebellion against the King." Indeed, he added elsewhere that the country was intersected by many mountains, and the people there recognised "only their own Rajas, who are very numerous."

On the nitty-gritty of warfare in relation to woodlands, there are numerous instances of massed cavalry losing formation and scattering if they entered forest or thick brush. Francois Martin witnessed an extended encounter between a Mughal detachment and the Marathas around Pondicherry. Pressed by a couple of hundred Maratha cavalry and three hundred infantry, the Mughal forces withdrew into the woodland. The entry to the thicket was fortified, and the Mughals fired from cover, so the attacking horsemen had no advantage and retired.

Significantly, unlike many academic forays into mediaeval India's hunting traditions, this is not a work that is preoccupied in any detail with how hunting places were recreated as cultural spaces. I suspect that may well be because that is a crowded scholarly space. It is entirely possible, though, that if Guha engaged with it, he may well have provided a more rounded picture than is currently available of the different layers of agents in royal hunts – from the 'powerful few' to the 'feeble many'.

At the ideological level, forest closure was fiercely critiqued in newspapers and comprehensively challenged by Mahatma Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*. Among ordinary peasants, there was active resistance on the ground, often under local elites, through an assertion of customary practices.

So, how should British rulers be visualised in relation to the imperial regimes that preceded it? Guha persuasively argues for seeing the colonial phase as a time of unprecedented change. This was partly because of the outcome of technologies that formed part of the spread of the Industrial Revolution and also as a consequence of changing power relations. The creation of a network of railroads and its impact on forest is well known. In rebellious regions, the aftermath of the great uprising of 1857, was life changing. Villages, towns and forts were destroyed in large numbers – even where there had been small insurgencies. One of these was a Baroda village whose inhabitants fled in the face of a punitive expedition. Following this, the entire village was burned to the ground and the recommendation was that a fresh site be chosen for the creation of the village at some distance from the old location.

The sprawling bureaucracy that came to govern India could be equally life changing. Take the case of the imperial forest department that was established in 1864. Initially, it was in a bureaucratic tussle with the Revenue department which quite clearly was more inclined to agricultural expansion, rather than forest protection. However, the forest department's deployment of 'science' i.e., the idea that rainfall was dependent on the tree cover, and consequently, deforestation led to denudation-induced drought, converted some senior members of the civil service. Eventually, by the 1930s, thanks to the forest department controlling and demarcating one-fifth of British India, large areas that were historically ungoverned came to be ring-fenced against both local villagers and seasonal itinerants.

This did not go unchallenged. At the ideological level, forest closure was fiercely critiqued in newspapers and comprehensively challenged by Mahatma Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*. Amongst ordinary peasants, there was active resistance on the ground, often under local elites, through an assertion of customary practices. However, notwithstanding such resistance, what was pushed forward by India's British rulers was not something that the Mughal empire or earlier rulers had the capacity to undertake successfully.

In this way, Guha charts changes and continuities in the ecologies of empires in South Asia, engaging all the way in this long journey with imperially ruled landscapes. The prose style of the book is precise and academic but, in the end, one is left with a feeling that Guha has succeeded in highlighting, through this monograph, why the historian's craft is central to understanding environmental change. He does this through the rigorous exploration of a region where he shows how perceptions of and impact on the land is dependent on where you are located in terms of social hierarchies and political power relations.

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