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Speaking for Nature’s Spokespersons

By: Ashish Kothari

The early environmentalists featured in ‘Speaking with Nature’ offer insights crucial for restoring our connection with nature. Modern India must embrace these insights to avert the looming ecological collapse threatening our survival.

Ramachandra Guha’s return to writing on environmental matters is to be celebrated. Over the last couple of decades, he has mostly applied his skill for uncovering historical insights and conducting sharp analysis to myriad other topics, including the life of M.K. Gandhi, recent Indian history, and cricket. Before that, his work on ecological history (alone and with Madhav Gadgil) brought refreshing accounts that gave us new insights. Now, he comes back to this field with his latest book, *Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism*, an account of 10 early thinker-practitioners who have contributed enormously to environmental consciousness in India, but not been adequately acknowledged as having done so.

Most important, they [the individuals featured in the book] all stressed the need to consider nature in human thoughts and actions, and, in this way, to paraphrase the book’s title, spoke with and for nature.

Guha’s earlier work on the subject sought to dispel the myth that “environmentalism” is a pursuit only of the elite and the rich, or only of “developed” countries, a myth that has been prominent in academic literature emerging from the West. I recall a meeting with him in the early 1980s, soon after we had established our environmental group Kalpavriksh, to discuss his essay on the subject in *Economic and Political Weekly*. He was sharply critical of the tendency to think of American-European studies on environmentalism as being “global”.

He continues such critical thinking in this book, and does so with his customary panache for delving deep into the writings and actions of the people he features. The approach results in a treasure trove of historical nuggets and socio-political insights, though with some shortcomings, to which I shall return later. The book contains a number of delightful surprises for even someone like me, active in environmental movements for nearly half a century.

The people featured in the book are all from before India’s iconic ecological movement Chipko (1970s onwards), which, according to Guha, is the movement that modern Indian environmentalists consider the earliest (I question this below). This is an eclectic set, with no obvious connections among them—Rabindranath Tagore, J.C. Kumarappa, Albert and Gabrielle Howard, Radha Kamal Mukherjee, Mirabehn (Madeleine Slade), Verrier Elwin, Patrick Geddes, M. Krishnan, and K.M. Munshi. But Guha does indeed bring out interesting threads linking them—that they were profoundly environmental or ecological in their approach without explicitly calling themselves environmentalists, that they located themselves in the socio-cultural milieu of India, and (for the most part) connected the environment to other issues, including those of livelihoods, and that they combined theory or philosophy with earthy action and practice. Most important, they all stressed the need to consider nature in human thoughts and actions, and, in this way, to paraphrase the book’s title, spoke with and for nature.

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Beyond these commonalities, the life of each of the people featured has unique aspects, which remain relevant to today’s times. Tagore’s stress on the transformation of education into a liberating force, with its first tenet of bringing up children in close contact with nature, has urgent lessons for today’s dominant system that converts young people into members of an unquestioning, alienated, ecologically illiterate, and passive workforce. Kumarappa, taking forward Gandhi’s ideas, focused on an “economy of permanence” that is located within environmental limits, promotes localised self-reliance, and prioritises dignified labour rather than mechanisation and mass production. This is a crucial antidote to the currently dominant economic model, which is exploitative of nature and people.

The Howards documented the wisdom of traditional agriculture and stressed the need to continue methods that are ecologically regenerative, which only now India’s agricultural scientists and policy-makers are beginning to acknowledge as a cure for the poisoning of soils, water, and food that Green Revolution techniques have caused. Mukherjee advocated an interdisciplinary approach to research

and knowledge generation, emphasising building on community or traditional systems, which much of modern academic and research institutions have ignored.

Mirabehn, another Gandhian featured in the book, weighed heavily towards community-driven methods of managing the commons, as opposed to the centralisation of power in the hands of government departments that took place in colonial times (and continues till today). Elwin embedded himself within Adivasi societies, and became a powerful voice for mainstream India to recognise their wisdom, knowledges, and cultures. While he managed to bring some of this into independent India's policies, in practice, Adivasi societies continue to be uprooted, forced into “mainstream” ways of living, and treated as anachronisms in the rush to modernise.

Geddes's foresight in prioritising environmental and heritage issues in urban planning was astonishing, and so very relevant in today's cities, which have become polluted cesspools and scenes of extreme inequality in living conditions. Krishnan's exquisite prose and eloquent photographs brought alive not only big animals, but also the diversity and beauty of small creatures, mostly neglected in modern conservation initiatives. And finally, Munshi's initiation of Van Mahotsav (forest festival) events as a way of focusing on the importance of trees and their place in culture was an antidote to considering forests and trees as merely sources of timber or other economic resources.

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One of the many things a reader will pick up in the book is the intersectionality of the environment with social and cultural aspects of life in India. Most of the people featured explicitly brought these links into their work, stressing the need to transform relations of gender, caste, class while dealing with environmental issues. This is not universal, though.

Guha notes that the Howards were not mindful of caste dynamics in agriculture. For Krishnan, nature was such a great passion that social dynamics do not figure in his writings. The biggest exception, however, may be Munshi, who, as Guha himself notes, was religiously biased (the chapter on him is titled “The first Hindutva environmentalist”). To me, his inclusion in the book is a puzzle. In many of his actions, including the establishment of the explicitly communal Vishwa Hindu Parishad, his social outlook was regressive.

I would even say that his ecological outlook was single-minded, focused so heavily on trees and forests that it neglected other ecosystems, and may have led to grasslands and scrublands being planted over with trees, negatively affecting their unique flora and fauna. When I asked Guha about this in a conversation we had while launching his book in Pune in January 2025, he said that he acknowledges this but still feels that Munshi, as the union minister of food and agriculture, was important in bringing environmental issues into policy-making.

There are so many historical gems peppered through the book, it is difficult to pick out a few. Tagore's eloquence in describing not only the beauty and grace of nature, but also it being permeated with emotion and spirit just like human society. Kumarappa's advocacy of creating states in India based on river flows and watersheds rather than languages, a precursor to today's bioregionalism movement. Geddes' stress that water (especially rivers) and trees have to be at the core of town planning. Mirabehn's evocation (similar to that of Tagore) of the rhythms of nature—“There was a time when man lived in harmony with that rhythm, and until he again finds and follows it, there can be no true Freedom for him.”

Guha also points to several instances where some of these individuals challenged consumerism (a favourite topic for Gandhi too), or stressed the need for deeper forms of democracy than merely participating in voting or only trying to influence a centralised state. These are crucial issues for today, reeling as we are under the impacts of excessive consumption by the rich, and suffering as we are from the failures of liberal, electoral democracy.

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Now for some critical observations (other than the one on Munshi, mentioned above; and other than the lack of gender balance in the choice of people to feature, which Guha himself regrets). First, Guha's assertion that Indian environmental activists are “monumentally ahistorical (and) nodded respectfully to Chipko but no further back” can be disputed.

Many in the movement have referred back to the famous Bishnoi community action in Rajasthan, 300 years back, in which over 350 of its members were axed down trying to defend *khejdi* trees they held to be sacred; or to Adivasi movements against British incursions into their territories; or to the mobilisation against the British trying to take over forest governance in the Kumaon hills (on which Guha himself has written); or to *vasudhaivkutumbakam* and other exhortations in religious texts from ancient times; or to Gandhi and his writings from the early and mid-20th century; or to the people’s movement led by Senapati Bapat against the Mulshi Dam in Maharashtra.

Indeed, some of the people involved in these could well have featured along with the 10 that Guha has written about, though perhaps he did not because they have left no written record behind. Others like trade unionist Shankar Guha Niyogi, who wrote eloquently about how the “peacock no longer dances” due to mining and industrialisation in eastern India, have also been inspirations. (Guha clarified at the Pune launch of the book that Niyogi did not figure in the book because its time period is pre-1970s; he has written separately about his combination of trade unionism and environmental concerns.)

Second, Guha says that “environmentalism” is only 200-250 years old. Given that he adopts John McNeill’s definition of environmentalism “as the view that humankind ought to seek peaceful co-existence with, rather than mastery over, nature”, this is debatable. Such a view has been held by myriad Adivasi peoples and other “ecosystem people” (to use a term that Gadgil and Guha use in their two-volume ecological history of India) for millennia. Practices such as conscious restraint on hunting and fishing during breeding seasons, or norms regarding the felling of trees (including in the Bishnoi community cited above), all of them based also on worldviews that respect nature, would be clearly in the domain of environmentalism by McNeill’s definition.

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In the Pune conversation, when questioned about this, Guha clarified that the global scale of the ecological crisis has been evident only in the last two to three centuries, and so movements challenging this are from this period. But while the global nature of the problem being recent does figure in the book, it is not mentioned as a qualification of the term “environmentalism”.

Third, a paradox. If, as Guha avers (and I agree) that today’s environmentalists have not been so aware of the writings and work of the 10 people featured in the book, then how can they be said to be the “origins of Indian environmentalism”? Each of them can be said to be an environmentalist, but do they add up to the phenomenon of environmentalism if they were (for the most part) unaware of each other, not linked with each other in collective movements, and not explicitly in the vision of post-Chipko environmentalists? I would argue that the origins of Indian environmentalism lie in the movements and individuals I point to in my first and second points above, not in (or not mainly in) these 10 individuals.

Notwithstanding these issues, this book needs to be read not only by those in environmental movements of India and the world, but also, more importantly, by those in government, civil society, and businesses, who shape economic and social policies. In relatively clear and sometimes even poetic prose that makes compelling reading, Guha points to myriad approaches in the work of the people featured that are relevant to the multiple crises we are engulfed in. Modern India would do well to learn from and adopt these if we are to rebuild a harmonious relationship with the rest of nature, and through this also save ourselves from the ecological collapse that is staring us in the face—to achieve, as Mirabeau put it, “true Freedom”.

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