



Decolonising Environmental Humanities Through Indigenous and Local Perspectives

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For decades, the study of environment and human-ecology relationships has been dominated by Western epistemological frames and the lens of colonial modernity. Environmental degradation has been viewed as mired in a cause-effect relationship with human industrial action wherein both, the former and the latter, are subject to an understanding based on perspectives derived from a Western context. In the edited volume, Biswas and Ryan attempt to debunk and dethrone this Western-colonial framework in understanding the environmental concerns in erstwhile colonies. In this sense, the collection of essays is an essential contribution towards the decolonisation of the field of environmental humanities and uncovers the precolonial sensibilities rooted in the cultural milieu of indigenous societies. They foreground indigenous ways of knowing and understanding through engagement with literary traditions, music, and anthropological case studies, sidestepping the challenge of postcolonialism's "theoretical entanglement with the modernity/coloniality power structure" (Alfaisal 2011, 24). The essays bring together a wide range of methodological approaches to draw out the integration between human - non-human relationships in indigenous articulations of nature.



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The volume is thematically organised into four sections. Each section brings out a crucial cultural, literary, or philosophical aspect of the environmental consciousness in wide-ranging socio-cultural contexts in India, lending the volume an expansive breadth and, at the same time, a systematic flow. The first theme brings out indigenous and tribal perspectives on environmentalism and spirituality, with a special emphasis on the tribes of the north-eastern part of India. In drawing attention to indigenous and local traditions, the theme is a vital step towards the emergence of decolonial environmental humanities as a promising intellectual field. Strong critiques of anthropocentrism emerge in the second theme that is centred around the theoretical and philosophical aspects of environmental studies. It stands in alignment with Chakrabarty's (2021) assertion that "the connected stories of the evolution of this planet, its climate, and its life cannot be told from any anthropocentric perspective" (151-2). However, while the theme promises to take the readers into the theoretical backdrop relevant to education, law and ethics, the chapters do not mention education at all. Despite the gap, the theme contributes and conforms to the larger conceptual framework of the volume. In contrast to the second theme, the four chapters in the third section constitute an organic harmony with the section's title and the overall theme of the book. The section lends a methodological and conceptual depth to the volume and renders it relevant for scholars from diverse fields, such as literature, anthropology, sociology and environment, to name a few, adding substance to the promise of the editors for a multidisciplinary approach towards environmental studies. They analyse different genres of literary formulations to reflect upon the complex, unfolding human - non-human relationships in the Anthropocene. Towards the end, the final section is the culmination of the volume with an exploration of myths, legends, and music to lend an important cultural dimension to the study of environment and sustainability. The section explores newer analytical methods and fields to approach environmental issues with and opens possibilities for transdisciplinary research. The neat and systematic organisation of the volume weaves the diverse range of essays together and takes the readers along the various themes seamlessly.

In the introduction, Biswas outlines the major trends in the global scholarship on environmental humanities, eventually shifting his focus to India. He raises pertinent concerns about the colonial association of conquest over nature with development and its reminiscence in postcolonial thought. He further questions the postcolonial perspectives for "negating the possibilities of connecting to a past that homes the eco-cultural sensibility in pre-colonial societies" (4). To challenge this, he conceptually weaves the collection of essays into two strands; one focuses on the human-nature relationships in

pre-colonial societies, and the other focuses on the interplay between colonialism, western theories, and modernity in environmental humanities. He uses the ideas of sustainability, morality, and spirituality propounded by Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi to criticise Western notions of development in favour of a localised approach that blends Western theoretical discourses with the environmental sensibilities of indigenous communities. His essay weaves the diverse works in this publication into a cohesive collection of methodological and theoretical propositions stemming from the Indian cultural context.

The focus of the volume on indigenous/tribal epistemologies, cultural practices, and traditions initiates a much-needed discussion and encourages further research on human-animal-spirit-nature relationships rooted in local consciousness. Beggiora's essay lays emphasis on the environmental consciousness in the cosmologies of native cultures using a case study from central India. His work is of particular importance for students of anthropology, philosophy and environmental education to understand the intricate relationship between indigenous thought and the concept of sustainability. In arguing in favour of Indian theoretical roots for the concepts of sustainability, emancipation, equality, human rights, and environmental protection in tribal cultures and Hindu literary traditions, he places indigenous cosmologies and native traditions at the centre of global debates on environmental theorisation. Pathak and Brahma analyse performative and festive practices of Garo and Bodo tribes in north-eastern India to unravel the human-nature relationships rooted in local indigenous cultures. Their work is an immensely important contribution in framing indigenous cultural performances as the embodiments of decolonial struggles and ecologies of care. Bhattacharjee's chapter on Khasis of Meghalaya, and their traditions of nature worship and sacred groves moves further in destabilising colonial and postcolonial intrusions into forest lands in favour of the intimate interrelationships between humans and nature in indigenous practices. By stressing on the significance of indigenous/tribal cultures to challenge the colonial and postcolonial notions on human-environment relationships, the authors help the readers perceive ecologies from a decolonial lens.

In addition to tribal cultures, an emphasis on Hindu literary traditions to decolonise philosophical and policy-based understanding of human engagement with nature forms the core of two essays in the volume. Sharma and Biswas' chapter delves on sacred and ancient Hindu religious texts, such as Vedas, Puranas and epics, to draw the human - non-human integration in Indian philosophical traditions and religious practices. They argue that Hindu scriptures and traditions do not posit self and other in binary opposition; rather, all life emanates from the same source. According to them, such ideas could help the

humankind create a sustainable way of life in the Anthropocene. In another chapter, Parasain unpacks the philosophical underpinnings of environmental law and policy. Focusing on the fundamental right to life, he adopts a critical stance on the anthropocentrism inherent in the Indian Constitution and its classification of the environment as property. He relies on the spirit of Dharmic tradition, derived from the Dharmashastras, to guide the legal system towards fresh and dynamic perspectives on the meaning of life. However, while treating Hindu religious texts as authoritative, he overlooks the elements of social inequalities and hierarchies embedded in these texts, namely, those of caste and gender. His arguments would be stronger if he had analysed the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution in juxtaposition with an equally critical reading of the Hindu texts. While the two chapters are important contributions towards decolonising the field of environmental humanities, a chapter on literary contributions from other religious traditions in the subcontinent, such as Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, or Islam would have made the volume more encompassing and substantive.

Interestingly, several essays in the volume present an analysis of various literary productions written in different genres which work to centre the readers' attention on the ways in which the literary works negotiate with and even raise questions of conservation, ecological balance, and environmental politics. De analyses two novels to offer a decolonial bioregional perspective of how the indigenous community of Kodavas in the Western Ghats of India interacted with multiple species from the precolonial to postcolonial times. Apart from her ingenious insights into the multispecies conviviality, her bioregional conceptions of "living-in-place" and "reinhabitation" (131) are important contributions to decolonise environmental humanities. Moreover, there are three chapters that present strong critiques of ecologically devastating industrialisation and urbanisation through literary analyses. They critically examine literary works to bring out the politico-ecological struggles and mythic mobilisations (Venugopal and Rangarajan), mourning and hope (Sarker), and resistance strategies, and ecotopian possibilities (Mukherjee) embedded in their narratives.

In three essays, Amitav Ghosh's novels are interpreted for their epistemological contributions to ecological understanding and imagination. Roy uses myths and legends in Amitav Ghosh's work to offer an ecocritical perspective into the Anthropocene. In another essay, Samkariya analyses Ghosh's retelling of a popular folk parable to reflect on non-Western ontologies, agency of non-humans, and environmental consciousness. The chapter by Mondal elaborates and expands on the term secular by philosophising it as closely related to human relationality with non-humans and the environment and the responses to the world. In a dense and convoluted series of arguments,

he draws the term 'derangement' from the works of Amitav Ghosh to redefine secularism and analyse the crisis of ecological consciousness.

The last chapter of the volume by Sharma, Chaubey and Singh is a methodological and a theoretical innovation in the field as the authors view environmental catastrophe utilising the lens of popular music. They present a detailed analysis of the lyrics of a popular song and its cinematography to understand music and environment together in these efforts of raising public awareness on issues of sustainability. They open avenues to analyse music for fresh insights into the "more-than-human world" (231) and propose ecomusicology as a means for public pedagogy.

The volume is a valuable contribution to the field of environmental humanities as it decentres Western colonial perspectives in favour of indigenous epistemologies and roots ecological consciousness in locally situated frameworks. While treading the path towards epistemic decolonisation, the contributing authors move towards equalising the multitude of epistemic perspectives that have hitherto been disregarded. They do not slip into the slope of cultural and epistemic relativism that could threaten to pose challenges for the project of decolonising knowledge itself (Mitova 2021). In doing so, they open possibilities for decolonial research in varied fields, such as environmental education. In educational spaces, decolonial narratives provide an impetus to learner centred education as they displace the Western perspective of liberal individualism in favour of indigenous approaches to conceptualise childhood and knowledge (Thornton et al. 2019). Therefore, the collection of essays is an important step towards decolonising the field of environmental humanities and unlocks gateways into new methodologies and multidisciplinary research.

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