

Environmental History of India and Modern Indian Poetry in English

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Abstract

The problem of rapid environmental degradation is one of the major issues which demands serious attention and response from almost every discipline of knowledge. The canon of environmental history has been formulated particularly to address this issue. Political, topographical and colonial histories have undoubtedly acted as major resources on the environmental history of South Asia. In recent years the pike in environmental degradation triggered by human actions have prompted to unearth environmental historicity in sources offering a critique of modern life and living and sources which act as documentations on such modern uprisings and its consequences. The present paper attempts to read Modern Indian poetry in English as documentation on the environmental historicity of Modern India. The paper attempts to assess the possibility of Modern Indian poetry in English with

all its unconventionality to speak for the implicit and unarticulated aspects of human personality and society which necessarily remains implicit in the environmental discourse or narrative.

Keywords

Environmental history, environmental historicity, environmental degradation, Modern Indian poetry in English

Following the degradation and crisis of the environment in various forms a need for a special branch of study and research that would deal with the historicity of the environment was strongly felt since the middle of the twenty first century. Although earlier environmental issues were addressed in different manners and through different mediums, a specific branch devoted to a systematic study on the environment was believed to play a significant role in manoeuvring the masses about the environment—its significance and the need for its conservation. Owing primarily to the efforts of naturalists and natural scientists, a systematic study on the environment started to develop in America and Europe. The scientific and methodical study on the environment in itself is a documentation of environmental history. Such documentations embodied the story of the destruction and the need for the conservation and preservation of the environment.

Since the past few decades environmental history has witnessed an enormous expansion of the field. Pointing out the increasing expansion of environmental history in the past few decades, Ranjan Chakrabarti rightly points out the importance and necessity of

archiving such documentations in his introduction to *Situating Environmental History* (2007). He says:

The historiography of environmental history has been expanding at such a remarkable pace in recent years that it is humanly impossible to keep pace with it...Initially, it appeared to be a device to arouse public consciousness to the environmental crisis the scientists, engaged in various branches of biology and ecology, had identified. However, it is increasingly being acknowledged now that the recent environmental crisis calls for an active and independent role of historians to develop a new paradigm for the future. (11)

Environmentalism as a discipline or sub-discipline in the broad spectrum of history is a much recent development. The historicity of the environment had so far been assessed through scientific, biological as well as literary facts and assessments. Owing to the diverse form of discussion the field embodies, the interdisciplinary facet of the field turns out palpable. It is not possible to measure the historicity of the environment only in terms of the 'historical' sources that have documented the environment so far.

Initially the Euro-American documentations on environmentalism or environmental history did not appropriately include issues of environmentalism on a global scale. The Euro-American documentations had primarily taken into account the story of environmental crisis and the story of the conservation and preservation of the environment in America and Europe particularly. For quite long since discussions on environmental issues began, environmental history of Asia, Africa and Australia for instance, remained of peripheral attention. However, of late environmentalists have succeeded to situate the

documentation of environmental history in the continents of Africa, Australia and Asia as well.

The insertion of Indian environmental history in to the domain of South Asian/ Indian historiography marked a sincere response to the growing degradation of the environment since the past few decades, the inclusion of which was also believed to spread awareness on the subject. Deviating from the conventions of mainstream historical studies the environmental history of India was a study of environmental subordination and marginality in terms of environmental justice and equality as well. Interestingly, later historians and environmental critics have discerned the manner in which environmental history in general has encompassed the terrain of the marginalised and the subordinated groups of people and classes (Egan, 2002). The narrative of environmental historicity in India is usually marked by principles of social justice and equality. Apart from making a general analysis of the major environmental issues at stake such as climate change, global warming, issues of deforestation, pollution, acid rain etc. environmental history of India cannot and has not overlooked the issues of the environmental/ecological problems in association with that of the marginalised and the subordinated groups of people and classes. The environmental history of India clusters the issue of the environment and the subordinated/oppressed people on the same platform to a great extent. To quote from one of the renowned environmental historians of India Ramachandra Guha who makes an important observation on the narrative of environmental history or environmentalism in India in his Preface to *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2000):

On the basis of my own work in India I had imagined environmentalism to be principally a question of social justice, of allowing the poor to have as much claim on the fruits of nature as the powerful. But living and teaching in the United States I was to come face-to-face with a rather different kind of environmentalism, which shifted attention away from humans towards the rights of plants, animals and wild habitats. I have ever since been fascinated by the diversity within the global environmental movement. (vi)

Besides marking the diversity of environmental issues on a global scale, the above excerpt also seems to be loaded with the concerns that surmount Indian environmentalism or environmental historicity. Subaltern historicity most significantly marked the initiation of the marginal and subordinated histories into the domain of historical studies, environmental historicity in this sense to a great extent seems to echo the resonance of the subaltern theme by deviating against the central tendencies and inclinations in the historiography of a nation or a region and forming a history of the subordinated and subservience class and aspect of the society, region and nation which it sees in alliance with that of the environment.

Perhaps the very nature and facet of the environment is multifaceted, comprehensive and heterogeneous. It is different and connotes different significance to all the living and non-living organisms that define it and are also defined by it. As such it is not wholly worthwhile to visualize and conceptualize the environment and the issue of environmentalism amidst a single parameter. An interdisciplinary outlook or approach to environmentalism has been fruitful in promoting thinking beyond set boundaries and format and thus act as conducive in resolving the crisis to a certain extent. A historical response and understanding on the environment or the ecology in any context cannot possibly ignore the biophysical problems related to extreme weather, climate change, global

warming, pollution, population, acid rain, catastrophic flood, severe storm and rain, unbearable summer, diseases without taking into account the reality of human consciousness, human sensibility and sensitivity to the transitions around them, modernity, industrial uprising, human greed, sense of place, land and people, issue of race, class, gender that have more than often found significant elaboration and amplification in poetry. Since environmental disasters have more than often been defined by human actions and attitudes an understanding of environmental history as inclusive of human environment relationship might prove to promote an engaging discussion on the subject. With new trends in historical analysis promoted by the advent of postmodernism, prominence on alternative history, on individual history, on memory as a source of history, multiplicity of voices and multiple modes/methods of expressing them started gaining momentum. It must be brought to light here that since the early nineteenth century insistence on an interdisciplinary mode of historical analysis was being thought over by some of the historians. Some of the historians and scholarly minds were in consensus that:

The growth of significant knowledge depends upon an accumulation of more and more complex bodies of information, and these bodies of information in turn are the results of more and more complex methods of analysis. What all of this points to is the fact that interdisciplinary teaching and research should not be understood as a way of replacing specialization, but as a new kind of specialization which builds on and integrates the specializations of the discrete disciplines (Horn and Ritter 429).

Historiographical trends till the nineteenth century usually took account of politics and matters related to nations and states. Although several new dimensions such as economic and social history started forming significant branches of historiography by the twentieth century, biophysical dimensions and possibilities remained side-lined. Inspired by the works of social philosophers such as Charles de Montesquieu the scenario started to change slowly and gradually with random accounts or narratives of the geography, climate and topography of battlefields, however, biophysical dimensions remained far from being the focal point of historiography and remained much at the periphery. Things started to change with the French Annales School of Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel who provided a much more inclusive aspect of the ‘document’ which far from only being an imprint of the written and official statements also started incorporating all kinds of remnants from the past counting “artworks, transformed landscapes and so on” (McNeil et al. 4). Meanwhile interdisciplinary trends in historiography started to accelerate with the addition of psychological, economical, social and cultural scopes in historical analysis. The transformed aspect of the document most importantly contained a discourse between geography and history. Notably, Braudel was much inspired by the Brazilian historian and anthropologist Gilberto Freyre who in his book *Northeast* (1937) proposed an understanding of history in association with the “philosophical and even aesthetical and poetical in the study and interpretation of the region” (McNeil et al. 5). However, such ramifications were not easily accepted by most of the historians until the late twentieth century when the drastic consequences of the Second World War and the new development

in natural science primarily that of ecology triggered the move for a collaborative assessment or study between history basically human history and the environment with an aim to amplify the field making it much more analytical rather than constrained and narrow. As such the emergence of environmental history as a sub theme in the historiography of nation and world history marks an important uprising in historical studies.

The discipline of environmental history encompasses a huge terrain from natural sciences to literature as well. Notably, such a documentation of environmental history besides the scientific sources also relied equally on both the written as well as the oral tradition. Folk culture, folklore, literature, poetry, songs, riddles, music and art serve as important sources of environmental historicity. These sources contributed to a great extent and went in behind the making of the environmental history of these regions.

Unlike the environmental history in America and Europe where it was basically promoted by natural scientists and naturalists, in case of Asia, Africa and Australia such documentations were marked to be in association with the economic, social and cultural histories of the continents. Besides, historical documentation also followed literary sources, religious scriptures and manuscripts, folk culture and tradition, art and music as well. The veracity of literary sources serving as important documents and texts for environmental historicity can be specifically marked in the literature of South Asia and of India in particular.

The matter is not the existence of the environment in absence of humans but the co-existence of both defining what is called ecology. Biophysical, climactic conditions, topographical, geographical knowledge indubitably defines environmental history. At the same time, it should not be too far-fetched to claim that an understanding of human attitude, human actions and psyche moulded to a great extent by the times and situations also carries the possibility to act as a more elaborate, profound and comprehensive evidence of the environmental history of the times. The sense of relationship of human beings with the environment finds manifestation in various forms and manner out of which it is poetry that also truly symbolizes and represents such a relationship. It cannot be underrated that it is the poetic voice that offers a truly intimate and broad view of the relationship of humans with the environment, of the impact that extreme environmental changes can have on the common people and thereby showcases an embodied environmental history, an environmental history that not only takes count of the arable land but the non-arable land as well.

The increasing amount of the degradation of the environment in its various facets compelling attention from every discipline of thought have enforced literary studies to engage discussions in this aspect as well. As such the broader sub-discipline of environment and literature within the discipline of literature has developed over the years responding to the environmental crisis in different ways and approaches. Interestingly reacting against the dominant Anthropocene atmosphere environmental literature has been engaged in multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary aspects to come out with a better

understanding of literary text from any context that could be viable to the contemporary environmental issues at stake either thematically, content wise, methodologically or in terms of arousing practical involvement. The connotation or association of modern Indian poetry to the environmental history of Modern India in particular can be said to be a gesture in this manner.

The dawn of development and advancement usually associated with modern India post-independence is not without its shortcomings, particularly when speaking of the environment. Most of the environmental historians have agreed upon the fact that although, India had witnessed a tremendous growth and enlargement in the industrial and technological sector enabling to transform India into the line of modernity, it had simultaneously paved way for environmental destruction the outcome of which is being apparently visible in the present times. Notably, Modern Indian poetry in English since post-independence has addressed certain issues and concerns that might overtly seem to be far-fetched from the issues of climate change or global warming or any other environmental disorder of the time, however, on close analysis and study they seem to deal with issues and concerns that have the potentiality to be interpreted as important documentations on the environmental history of India post-independence. It cannot be denied that poetry is usually considered as a craft of imagination and fancy (to use Samuel Taylor Coleridge's oft quoted terms) but the potentiality of poetry to deal with and respond to the reality of the times and act as a quintessence of history is a fact that also cannot be denied completely.

In addition to its vast and diverse topography the continent of Asia also registers a huge variation in terms of its cultural, racial, linguistic, historical, religious, literary and environmental features. This might also possibly be the reason why Asia has drawn scholarly attention since ages. Amidst the diversity in which the continent proliferates, traces of commonality in terms of language, race, ethnicity, geographical and environmental experiences have also been deciphered that connects the countries together which otherwise remains politically disconnected. True to this, it must be mentioned here that since ages Asia has been well-known for its rich flora and fauna. Although the different parts of Asia and the sub-parts as well experience different climactic situations and conditions, its topography in terms of exquisiteness and magnificence remains unprecedented. South Asia one of the important sub-parts of Asia is no exception to such splendour of Asia. Comprising of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh, South Asia entails rich cultural, literary, political, social and religious history. It has undoubtedly been the storehouse of wisdom and majesty and also a reservoir of rich natural resources, so much so that the richness in it was used even at times aggressively by the invaders who made South Asia a seat of political and commercial activities.

India, a significant part of South Asia is blessed with a landscape and an environment that has been celebrated by poets and writers since time immemorial. The inexplicable mention of the landscape and the scenic beauty of the region cannot be necessarily overlooked in almost any important literary text including the epics,

importantly. The landscape of the continent has been the much-referred element and concern of most of the poets who have addressed the subject in their poetry either as a metaphor, or as an imagery or as a subject in itself. This is not to say that poets and literary artists celebrating the landscape of India were blind to some of the major environmental issues pertaining to the region both at the micro as well as at the macro level.

Historians while documenting the history of environmentalism in India, usually mark the beginnings of environmental dilapidation in the region with that of the advent of colonialism and imperialism. The large-scale exploitation of the natural resources of the region during the Raj not only brings to mind the immediate concern over the “legitimate use of the natural world” but also implicates thought over the unresolved power relations that determine or influence such illegitimate or massive exploitation of the natural resources. (*Critical Themes in Environmental History of India* 4). However, it must be pointed out here that the story of environmental exploitation cannot be necessarily constricted amidst the parameters of imperial or colonial discourse alone. There has been ample substantiation on the exploitation of the environment from the earliest times ever. Although environmentalists have noted the history of environmentalism in India or South Asia to be implicated in the history of colonialism and imperialism by and large, analysis on the subject has outlined the contour from a much earlier period:

Like the flowers gathered from *Palas* trees, over time humans had brought about changes in the land, long before the coming of the East India Company to these shores. Colonial rule and its multiple dispossessions, its subjugation of the waters, hills, lands and people should

not lead to a Golden Age view of the past that preceded it. The British were not the first European power in the land though they were the last and the most decisive. (Rangarajan 3)

During the pre-colonial era issues of climate change which was often considered notable in the rise and fall of the Indus valley civilisation, behind the fall of the Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, were serious environmental problems prior to the process of European colonialism. Again, the issue of deforestation which was a major problem during the colonial rule as a result of the railways, was also a serious setback in the Gangetic plains prior to the advent of the railways and commercialisation boosted by colonialism or imperialism. Besides, problems of hunting, considered a major sport during the Mughal Empire, water management system in medieval Rajasthan and control of wetlands and grass are certain environmental difficulties that were there even before the coming of the Empire. (Rangarajan 3). However, it cannot be denied that such problems accelerated during the colonial period and further amplified insatiably as India started climbing more and more the ladder of modernity which Ramachandra Guha identifies with that of American modernity (*Environmentalism: A Global History* 66).

At present when the entire world is fighting and taking measures against climate change and global warming, South Asian countries and India in particular have not remained much behind in standing in solidarity in such an effort. Besides problems of deforestation affecting ecological changes, urbanisation, animal hunting, water management, pollution control, population control, garbage and waste disposal, issue of land are some of the major environmental issues that constitute the discourse of

environmental historicity. At the same time the obligatory association or relation of the human beings with the land, with the environment constituting their life and living, their culture as well as the distribution of the natural resources amongst all the classes of the society which leads to the question of environmental justice and equality cannot be overlooked. Significantly all strata of society are being unswervingly or circuitously affected by grave ecological crisis. When we go through the lines:

Fisherfolk are faced with the exhaustion of fish stock, shifting cultivators with the declining availability of forest land. Millions of the urban poor are shelterless and without adequate water supply. Irrigated farmlands are turning saline and whole coconut orchards are dying of disease...The ever-growing numbers of Indians, their exploding appetite for consumption and their wasteful patterns of resource use have together conspired to ensure that all segments of society are in the midst of one resource crunch or another. (*Ecology and Equity: The Use and abuse of Nature 2*)

Undoubtedly, such environmental problems have ever since been reacted and responded to theoretically, through serious activism, through political propagandas, through movements and through art, music, folk culture and literature as well. The diversity in ecological problems has prompted diverse ways and theoretical methodologies to understand and respond to the problems at stake (*This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, 1992).

Up until 1973, environmental problems in India were treated as marginal or subordinate. It was with the protests in the “western foothills of the Himalayas, villagers

contested rights to forests” in Jharkhand “where *Adivasi* or tribal peoples preferred sal to teak” in Zuari, Goa, Mavoor, on the river Chaliyar, Kerela where protests against air pollution caused by the industries have resonated environmental history as a prime concern and area of study (Rangarajan xvii). Such a turn towards environmental historiography resonated much the subaltern turn in Indian history and started strongly defining or characterizing the contemporary historiography concerning South Asia or Indian history. As marginalised histories like the subaltern history counted heavily on oral writings, poetry, folklore and art it shall be quite significant and interesting to mark the response of Modern Indian poetry in English towards the most serious problems facing our country and the entire planet and read it in a parallel line with that of the environmental history of India.

Modern India and its modern environmental problems possibly find reverberation in Modern Indian poetry in English. Characterised by the diverse and wide-ranging set of subjects, concerns and themes the premise of modern Indian poetry in English is comprehensive enough to be inclusive of every minute and infinitesimal aspect of existence. Indian poetry in English being resonate with ideas of nationalism, patriotism, mythology, spiritualism and religious uprising necessarily defined or characterised Indian poetry in English prior to independence. Post-independence Indian poetry in English prefixed with the term ‘modern’ has certain traits attached to it that makes it quite unconventional compared to aspects of poetry followed earlier. Such unconventionality which often makes Modern Indian poetry in English a source of foremost criticism and scrutiny is importantly marked by the occurrence of issues and style that was initially

peripheral or at the marginal level of address and attention. As for instance aspects of the ‘self’ started to gain prime attention within the realm of Modern Indian poetry in English. The individual, his/her individuality started gaining ample prominence in the hands of the modern poets. Subjectivity in approach was highly valued. What was emphasised upon more firmly was articulating the dominant changes in the social, political and cultural sphere affecting the society and the individual post-independence. Hence, aspects of individual experiences, of the self, personal desire, aspirations as well as apprehensions, discontent, alienation, multifarious personalities, in other words the psychology of the modern man remain some of the most significant aspects that characterise the domain in which the modern poets have very often concentrated upon. In association with the self, aspects of society and politics remain inevitable features of attention. As such, urbanisation and its ever-increasing impact on the society, on the individual and culture became important features of Modern Indian poetry in English. Even issues of language and poetic subject-matter, content and style also formed the subject itself of the Modern Indian poetry in English. Technically as well Modern Indian poetry in English marks a deviation from poetry prior to independence in terms of the language, form and style in which it indulges in.

The canon of Modern Indian poetry in English constituting of poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arun Kolatkar, Adil Jussawalla, Agha Shahid Ali, Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, R. Parthasarathy, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre, A. K. Mehrotra, Sharat Chandra and many more is loaded with issues and concerns that are of

diverse and varied features and hence remain beyond generalisations. As such the “different tastes, aesthetics, standards and styles” (King 2) that mark modern Indian poetry in English cannot be necessarily clubbed under a specific standard. Speaking of Indian poetry in English and its vast range of diversity, A. J. Thomas brings to observation the individual identities primarily true of metropolitan cities of English poetry namely, “Bombay Poetry”, “English poetry of the Northeast” and “the roving poets, sometimes diaspora, sometimes Indian” (6).

The beginnings of modern Indian poetry in English formally commencing with the poems of Nissim Ezekiel, his collection of poems, *A Time to Change* (1962) saw the same period as that of the beginning of modern India right after independence distinct by the sway of industrialisation and modernisation. Ramachandra Guha notes this period as an important phase in Indian environmental history for it marked a major period of transition—transition affecting the ecology. Guha remarks the post Second World War scenario in India as a period of “rapid industrialization” that was thought to “end poverty and unemployment and make for a strong and self-reliant society” (*Environmentalism: A Global History* 65) Delineated basically as the “development decades”, the period was typified by its proclivity of as Guha observes “becoming exactly like America and living like Americans” (*Environmentalism: A Global History* 66). The extensive use and “abuse” of nature seen in terms of the massive use of the natural resources, setting up of atomic power stations and still mills were the known ways of accomplishing the above stated task. But for

Guha this period of transition was what he calls the “age of ecological innocence” (*Environmentalism: A Global History* 66).

Now this “age of ecological innocence” saw an unprecedented increase in the rise of green-house emission, burning of fossil fuel and extensive use of the natural resources. Modern Indian poetry in English starting with Ezekiel did not overtly express or responded to issues of environmental degradation as documentary sources on the environment have done. However, the issues with which such poetry dealt with possibly foregrounds issues that are closely knitted and tied up with the environment. When modern Indian poets like Ezekiel, Mahapatra, Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Kolatkar, Daruwalla, Chitre, Jussawalla, Shahid Ali, Eunice De Souza, Manohar Shetty, Imtiaz Dharker, Sujata Bhatt and others voice alienation, split personalities, domestic problems, hunger, poverty, imageries of animals and birds, issues of land in connection to identity and home, congested landscape and hypocrite characters, sense of place, warfare, political unrest, metaphor and reference to nuclear weapons they are supposedly portraying a kind of reality in their poems. Such facets actually speak for a kind of reality—the modern reality of modern India. There are possibilities that the metaphors, imageries, symbols used in reference to the content might be connotative of a kind of reality which seems to supersede all other realities or at best defines all other realities. And that reality might possibly be that of the environment and the problem of environmental degradation of modern India which remains inseparable from human existence and essence.

Although the environment might not find resonance explicitly and unambiguously in the poems, the various associations of which the metaphors, similes and imageries are connotative of suggest the varied agencies in which the environment and most importantly some of the environmental issues/problems can be sensed. To excerpt from Bruce King:

the younger poets were more likely to write about life in the city and their personal desires and discontents. Their emphasis was more on the aesthetic, ethical or interpersonal than on politics, nationalism and mythology. The new poetry was part of the post-independence modernization of India society and emerged first in, and is still often a phenomenon of, the larger urban areas. (11-12)

The reality of urban India inclusive of its shortcomings and inadequacy is an important implication pertaining to the environment. While portraying the changes in society in their poems through poetic characters and situations the modern poets can be possibly said to embody the transition that modern India was going through in terms of its environmental dilapidation.

Thematically and content wise it is significant to note that Modern Indian poetry in English cannot be said to be blind towards some of the major environmental issues at stake, namely that of urbanisation and its impact on the environment and the human psyche, of waste and garbage disposal, war, militancy and political unrest provoking use of nuclear weapons and bombings thus causing unprecedented damage to human lives and the environment, of the issue of land which is very central in any postcolonial discourse finds resonance in modern Indian poetry as well, of hunting and animal jeopardize, water

management, of environmental justice, equality and power relations etc. All these and many more such issues on close analysis can be found redundant in the poems which provide a possibility to enhance and interpret the environmental history of modern India in the Modern Indian poetry. It shall not be too far-fetched to say that the subaltern turn in South Asian historiography not only promoted the unearthing of marginal histories like that of environmental history but also encouraged the reading and interpretation of history from different agencies of knowledge and acquaintance. Poetry being one amongst such agency probably contains the likelihood and prospect for construing and understanding environmental history from a much deeper level. A level which enables to comprehend the extent to which matters related to the environment and ecology can be suggestive of influencing and manipulating individual lives and living.

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