



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation:

Grove, Richard. "Editorial." *Environment and History* 2, no. 2, South Asia special issue (June 1996): 127–8.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/2877>.

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1996. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publishers. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk>.

Editorial

This special issue reflects the rapid growth of research in environmental history that is now apparent throughout the South Asian region. Environmental history, according to Dr Rukun Advani of Oxford India, is now the most saleable of all topics in South Asian history. In fact, it even seems to have overtaken 'subaltern' history in popularity. And perhaps this is right and proper. The common historical experience of most South Asians has been deeply bound up with the ecology, politics and meanings of the natural world.

In one sense a first attempt to review the environmental history of the region had been made by Ribbentrop in his *Forestry in the British Empire*, published in 1889.¹ This was followed by E.P. Stebbing's monumental *The Forests of India*, a three-volume work to which a further volume was added by Sir Richard Champion in 1964.² While very useful, the major drawback in Stebbing's work, apart from its obvious institutional bias, was the absence of any footnotes or referencing to his sources, a problem which limited its value as a source-book. Other professional foresters also tried their hands at writing forest history, although some were clearly very limited in outlook by their training. The surveys of E.C. Mobbs are an example of this brand of history.³

The first work after Stebbing to take a methodical look at South Asian environmental history owed its commencement to a programme set up by Jean Filliozat at the French Institute in Pondicherry, in what was still then at least in name a French colony. Filliozat's recognition of the importance of the ecological dimension in economic and political history almost certainly owed something to the influence of the *Annales* school of French history, a school which took great account both of environmental influences and the empirical minutiae of local history. Filliozat recognised the need for environmental explanations in his detailed studies of the 17th century political history of the Pudukottai and the country of the Kailar potentates in Tamil Nadu. His work on Indian vegetation history continues at the French Institute in Pondicherry to this day, and is well represented by the work of Marlène Buchy on forest history in Karnataka.

Unfortunately, Filliozat's work, which began in about 1956, was not finally published until 1980.⁴ In the intervening years Elizabeth Whitcombe had thrown an empirical spanner into the works of the Cambridge school of Indian history with her *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India*, published in 1972.⁵ Whitcombe showed how, far from causing rapid economic development, the vast irrigation investments made by the East India Company after 1820 in the Indus and Ganges basins had brought ecological disaster in many localities, through widespread salinisation and *reh* deposition. (As Michael Mann has shown, this process was exacerbated by rapid deforestation during the same period.) But Whitcombe was well ahead of her time, and it was some years before other works in anglophone Indian environmental history began to appear. Two of the first of these were written by North Americans: the professional forester Robert K. Winters, and the radical Indianist political historian, Richard Tucker.⁶ With Tucker's article, the whole pace of work changed until, in the early 1980s, writers from a whole

variety of disciplines started to construct an increasingly coherent programme of research in the environmental history of South and Southeast Asia.

After Tucker it was perhaps V.M. Meher-Homji who, in 1982, continued to keep the thematic ball rolling, with his 'History of India's flora and vegetation';⁷ it is highly appropriate that this special issue of the journal should include a note by a scholar who has achieved so much in the field. As a Pondicherry protégé of Filliozat, Meher-Homji established a disciplinary foundation at a stage when natural scientists were starting to realise the value of a rigorous historical perspective in questioning some of their well-worn assumptions in ecology and conservation biology. Pastoral agricultural specialists had begun to do this in the mid-1970s and took their cue from research then going on in the field of African pastoralism. Today, however, the position has been at least temporarily reversed, and much of the agenda of tropical environmental history is being set in South Asia rather than in Africa. The recent publication by Piers Vitebsky of his *Dialogues with the Dead*, a path-breaking study of the ecological and mental worlds of the Sora People of Orissa, may be an indicator of at least one direction in which the field is turning.⁸

This special issue of *Environment and History* will, we hope, further showcase and stimulate the diversity of themes in South Asian environmental history. In particular we hope that the growing corpus of work by scholars in India and Nepal will encourage the rich potential of their colleagues in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma. A final word of personal thanks for their assistance on this issue is due to Betsy Flint and John Richards of Duke University. Their own work on the ecological history of the region is proving invaluable to many scholars in the field, and represents another major strand in the emergence of a coherent environmental history of the sub-continent.

RICHARD GROVE

NOTES

¹ B. Ribbentrop, *Forestry in British India*, Calcutta, 1899.

² E.P. Stebbing, *The Forests of India*, 4 volumes, Edinburgh, 1922 and (vol.4) 1964.

³ E.C. Mobbs, 'The early history of Indian forests', *The Indian Forester*, 67, (1941), 231-242. A comparable body of work, although much larger and more accurate, was that compiled by E.H.B. Brascamp, a Dutch colonial civil servant in the Dutch East Indies who published a long series of articles on VOC forest management in Java and elsewhere during the 1920s and 1930s in the *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal, Land en Volkenkunde van het Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kusten en Wetenschappen*.

⁴ Jean Filliozat, 'Ecologie historique en Inde de Sud: Le pays des Kallar', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française de l'Extreme-Orient*, Vol LXVII (1980), 103-123.

⁵ E. Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: the United Provinces under British Rule, 1800-1869*, Berkeley, 1972.

⁶ Robert K. Winters, 'Forestry beginnings in India', *Journal of Forest History*, 19, (1975), 82-90; and Richard Tucker, 'Forest management and imperial politics: Thana district, Bombay, 1823-1887', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 16, (1979).

⁷ V.M. Meher-Homji, 'History of India's flora and vegetation', *Scientific Review of Arid Zone Research*, Jodhpur, 1982, 145-171.

⁸ Piers Vitebsky, *Dialogues with the Dead*, Cambridge, 1993; New Delhi 1993.