

MIDS WORKING PAPER NO. 203

**Beyond Colonialism  
Towards A New Environmental  
History of India**

**M. Arivalagan**

*Research Scholar*

*Madras Institute of Development Studies*

**mids** Madras  
Institute of  
Development  
Studies

MIDS Working Paper No. 203, August 2008

Beyond Colonialism Towards  
A New Environmental History of India

by M. Arivalagan

Rs.25.00

Madras Institute of Development Studies  
79, Second Main Road, Gandhi Nagar  
Adyar, Chennai 600 020  
Tel.: 2441 1574/2589/2295/9771  
Fax : 91-44-24910872  
pub@mids.ac.in  
<http://www.mids.ac.in>

## **Beyond Colonialism Towards A New Environmental History of India**

*What is seen, heard, and experienced in the field, these are  
“the nuggets around which you construct your questions.”*

- Corrine Glesne (1999)<sup>1</sup>

*The project of Indian history thus remains a mimicry of  
the hyperreal Europe, and is marked by lack and failure.*

- Ajay Skaria (1999)

### **ABSTRACT**

*In India, most studies on environmental history focus on diverse themes in the colonial period but fall into a stereotypical explanation. Nature’s degradation is mainly depicted from the archival documents. However, forest subjects glorify the colonial past even though the colonial authority destroyed the forests and uprooted their habitation. To question this stereotype, two questions have been drawn from the memory of Kanikkaran community; why does the community glorify the colonial past? If the community has positive light on the colonial past, what is their conception about nature? If these questions are addressed, the static understanding about the forest subjects and the unidimensional understanding of nature could be avoided in the historiography.*

*Keywords:* Kanikkaran (Kanis), colonialism, nationalism, environmental subjects, presentism, Tirunelveli.

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the 1970s and the ‘80s, India witnessed a range of popular protests. The popular protests were directed against the forest policies of the Indian state. On the one hand, the policies restricted the forest dwellers’ and peasants’ access to forest resources and, on the other, led to rapid environmental degradation. During this period, the Indian state’s efforts to build big dams also led to large-scale displacement of indigenous people from their native lands and resulted in organized protests and movements. This volatile political context not only provided the backdrop to establish environment as a self-standing sphere of social

science enquiry, but also gave rise to environmental history as a sub-genre of writing Indian history. The environmental history, extremely influenced by the agrarian studies of the 1980s, dealt with a variety of themes. These include colonial forest policies, access to common property resources, ecological imbalances, and protests by the locals on environmental issues. The first wave of environmental history placed its focus almost exclusively on colonialism and its 'negative' impact on the Indian environment/eco-system. The more recent studies have however taken up a more complex themes such as how policy implementation shapes the formation of identities and acts as ways of state-making, and how strategies of representing nature and landscape lead to political control by means of legitimizing state intervention. The first wave of Indian environmental history may be termed as 'nationalist' since its concern was what colonialism did for national/natural resources. The second wave of writings may be called as 'revisionist' as it revises many of the shortcomings of the nationalist school.

In this paper I critically review the literature produced by these two schools of Indian environmental history. I argue that a more nuanced understanding of Indian environmental history is possible only by a specific way of placing center-stage the environmental subjects, i.e. communities which work the environment for a living, their practices and world-views.

#### **THE NATIONALIST SCHOOL**

The nationalist school of environmental history primarily argues that the ecological and environmental ills of different regions of India are a direct outcome of the exploitative colonial policies. The policies were motivated by concerns such as revenue augmentation, expansion of agriculture lands, and attaining of sleepers for railways, etc. Focusing exclusively on the causality of the ecological disorder this school falls into the 'cause-effect' model analysis.

One of the first works to examine the impact of colonial policies on the environment was Elizabeth Whitcombe's well-known study (1995) on irrigation. It examines how the irrigation investments and dam-construction activities of the British Raj led to ecological degradation, salinity and malaria in the regions of Sind and Ganges basins in north India. Likewise, Micheal Mann's detailed study (1999) on the agricultural transformation in the region of Ganga-Jamuna Doab during the early nineteenth century focuses on the salinity and mass destruction of woodlands due to "the effects of colonial policy". It forced the villagers to convert more than 70 per cent of forest areas into agricultural lands to

pay out the revenue. Irreparable natural catastrophes like high level of moisture reduction in the air, spread of the saliferous soil by the sand carrying winds due to deforestation and the salinity level increased as a result of water logging in the agricultural fields. Subsequently, stringent famine and drought hit these areas. People could not endure diseases like malaria because of malnutrition. Villagers were forced to shift production from food to cash crops, leading to malnutrition. Moreover, they sold the agricultural lands to meet the tax payment requirements.

M.S.S. Pandian's study (1990) on agrarian transformation in southern Travancore during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, argues that the activities of the colonial state such as construction of dams (which was meant to expand agricultural lands) and the policy of reserving forests altered permanently the pre-existing relationship between forest resources and peasant communities. This forced the peasant communities to depend on the market for to buy inputs and sell the agricultural productions. He shows such commercialization of agriculture destroyed the earlier agrarian stability in the region. Further, he argues that the central concern of colonial policies was to augment revenue. Likewise, Laxman Satya (2004) shows that the colonial regime severely disturbed the pre-existing equilibrium between forests, common and grazing lands, and agriculture in the Berar region of Central India. As a consequence, it damaged the local ecology, made human life more vulnerable, and resulted in epidemics.

A number of studies which falls within the nationalist school of environmental history deals with deforestation. Mahesh Rangarajan (1996) and Ramachandra Guha (1989) have shown that during the early phase of colonialism, the British indiscriminately cut down forest trees for laying roads, ship building and railway sleepers. This resulted in considerable deforestation in different parts of British India. Subsequently, the British policy of sourcing the forests for wood became more systematic. The forest woods were classified into four categories, 'superior, auxiliary, accessory, inferior and worthless species', based on quality. The superior quality woods were axed for commercial purpose by the colonial state. (Rangarajan, 1996). Rangarajan has also argued that while the forest-dwellers were hunting animals merely for food and survival, the colonial conducted hunting as a leisure sport recklessly killing an unprecedented number of animals (2001).

Within the nationalist school, Michael Mann's study (1998) focuses on the use of famine for profit making by the colonizer in the region of Chambal-Jamna in north India, where the scheme of food for work (felling

and plantation) was implemented to counter famine conditions in the 1890s. The scheme was used as an instrument to control the famine-hit people and to involve them in other criminal activities. Furthermore, the episteme of 'scientific conservation' was strategically deployed to enhance the control of the colonial state.

The nationalist school taken up another important theme for analysis is how the British restricted the access of tribals and peasants to different kinds of natural resources on which their survival depended. While Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1995) examine how the 'eco-system people' (who make use of nature for their survival only collect those resources from their vicinity) have been exploited by the 'omnivores' (who can get natural resources from wherever they want, which is not only from the surroundings but also across the world through their political and economic clout). This categorization is made based on the concept of consumption. According to them, it helps to understand the socio-ecological classes of the natural resource exploiters. Bina Agarwal (2004) analyzes how the domination of man in local conservation institutions restricted the access of subaltern groups to natural resources and excluded women from administering the common property resources. Velayutham Saravanan's study (2001; 2003) examines how tribals were alienated from cultivable forest lands during the colonial and the post-colonial periods in Salem District of the Madras Presidency.

In the nationalist school, uprisings of forest dwellers against the colonial regime are registered by Saldanha (2000). It is noted as an earlier form of protest. The uprising was in varied forms when they were not allowed into the forest to access forest resources. Likewise, Guha (1985; 1989) examines the collective resistance and different forms of protests of the forest communities in the region of British Kumaon. The formation of collective resistance evolved from cutting across the communities. Guha tries to establish the resistance genre against colonialism.

Many of the studies within the nationalist school map out in detail how the colonial regime brought large areas of forests under its control and excluded the locals from them in the name of so-called 'scientific conservation'. The 'scientific conservation' was little more than an euphemism for the exploitation of forest resources for colonial needs. Significantly, the claim to 'scientific conservation' often took the form of 'desiccational discourses'. According to Vasant Saberwal (1999: 1), 'desiccational discourses' denote

...a specific, interconnected set of ideas, centered on the connections between deforestation on the one hand, and increased

erosion, flooding, and overall aridity on the other. A key characteristic of this discourse is the simplification of complex ecological phenomena, and, in turn, the attribution of culpability for land degradation to pastoralist, shifting cultivator, and other 'marginal' communities.

In other words, 'desiccational discourses' argued that the dependency of the environmental communities such as pastoralists and shifting cultivators on natural resources damaged the environments of other communities elsewhere. As Saberwal shows the colonial discourse on Himalayan degradation is an important case in point. It argued that forests served as some kind of sponge soaking up the rainwater, and claimed, 'Decreasing forest cover, as a result of wrong-use of land resources in the Himalaya is seen responsible for the annual flooding mayhem in the Indo-Gangetic plains...' (1999: 204). However, the theory of 'forest-acting-as-sponge model' has subsequently been questioned scientifically. Similarly, the so-called causal connection between shifting cultivation and soil erosion was also used to execute forest management principles. These management principles played major role brought large areas of forests under the colonial control. Such alarmist discourses were systematically used by the colonial authorities to have the traditional rights of the environmental communities over natural resources of different kinds.

As we have seen on a different but interconnected register in the nationalist school that claims the colonial regime as the singular source of environmental degradation in India. But, it celebrates the pre-colonial environmental practices of forest-dwellers and peasants as based on a symbiotic and non-exploitative relationship between humans and nature. This school also claims that the different streams of Indian religious thoughts were environmentally sensitive (Gadgil and Guha 1993). At one level, they argue that during the pre-colonial period, the forest dwellers, cattle grazers and peasants used natural resources primarily for their own survival without causing harm to the local environment. At another level, it is argued that Indic religions such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism never endorsed wanton destruction of nature. In contrast, Christianity and Islam as religious thoughts and practices are claimed to have led to large-scale and indiscriminate destruction of the Indian environment. Some pigments of environmentalism are applied in the canvas of environmental history for romanticizing of the Indian religious traditions by the nationalist school. Gandhian politics is a case in point. For instance David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (1995: 19) note, 'Gandhi's environmentalism has its roots in a deep antipathy to urban

civilization and a belief in self-sufficiency, in self-abnegation and denial rather than useful consumption.’

In environmental history, the commodity aspect of forest is largely focused in the analytical domain of forest laws (Ravi Rajan, 1998; Gadgil and Guha, 1992). Ravi Rajan’s primary concern is to reveal the origin and politics of forest laws and how shifting cultivation, soil erosion, forest protection and development of forests were used as instruments to execute the forest management principles, to collect the revenue from people and to bring the areas under colonial control. The colonial regime had started the execution of those principles, which had been already implemented by the colonizer in the African continent, from where; without any modification it was put in to practice by the colonial state in British Raj. The exploitative nature of colonialism is primarily explained in his study.

The nationalist school has added exceedingly to our understanding of the environmental history of India. The factors that shaped it during the colonial period, they are marked by a number of important analytical problems. First and foremost, this literature gives centrality to colonialism as the cause of environmental degradation in India. By and large, it views environmental change as mono-causal. As a result, even while the literature addresses environmental concerns and changes, for most part, it turns out to be a history of colonialism. Second, the views and voices of the environmental subjects are to a large degree silenced; in a sense, the historians of the nationalist school speak for them instead of allowing the environmental subjects to speak out. If at all the environmental subjects figure in this literature, they figure only as responding to the oppression of colonialism by means of different forms of protests. Their subjectivity is thus treated as though defined only in relation to the colonial regime and its exploitative practices. Thirdly, being nationalist in orientation, it produces an environmental golden age out of the pre-colonial past and uncritically celebrates Indic religious thought and practices.

#### **THE REVISIONIST SCHOOL**

The revisionist school evolved along with the nationalist school yet found its fuller articulation only during the 1990s and after. Instead of treating the colonial regime, the local communities and the environment as pre-given, fully-formed and homogenous, this school primarily treats all these entities, which in their complex interaction account for the environmental changes, as evolving, heterogeneous, and following multiple historical trajectories. In other words, it unsettles the binary

opposition between the colonizers and the colonized which is central to the nationalist school.

The works of K. Sivaramakrishnan (1999) and Arun Agrawal (2006) conceptualize the relationship between the colonial state and the environmental subjects as mutually constitutive and changing. Sivaramakrishnan explores the dynamic changes and contestations between the forest dwellers and the colonial authority in the eastern India over a period of one-and-a-half centuries. He shows that the colonial forest principles were evolved in the intersection between the colonial administrative discourses and discourses of protest produced by the forest-dwellers, who showed their aggressive protests against British interventions in forests during the early phase of colonialism, the colonial state did withdraw the implementation of its forest principles. Subsequently, it had to introduce them in modified forms. As Sivaramakrishnan shows, '...through conflict and co-operation between a differentiated society and a heterogeneous colonial state in the making, rural social relations and colonial power were mutually transformed' (Ibid: 4-5). He treats the colonial state not as pre-given and as something which was being made and re-made in its interaction with the environmental subjects. Moreover, he argues that the process '...not only highlights the ecological and social peculiarities of the regions, but, more importantly, shows how the manner in which culture, nature, and power are spatially constituted and expressed, influenced processes of state making' (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 2). In other words, Sivaramakrishnan's methodology deftly sidesteps the 'cause-effect' model of the nationalist school. In keeping with the spirit of pluralizing the ever-changing practices of state-making, he traces the origin of colonial forest policies within the colonial bureaucracy to at least three sets of competing and mutually influencing of practices: firstly, '...as a set of material technologies imposed on trees, grasses, and wild animals; second, as a legal regime aimed at appropriation and monopoly in the extraction of natural rents; and third, as a system of rational knowledge that, ironically, became the site of a struggle among technocrats who vied for professional recognition at the upper levels of bureaucracy' (Ibid: 3). We shall see more on this theme soon.

Arun Agrawal's research on the Kumaon region also argues that the formation of the colonial forest principles as well as the environmental subjects was caused by multiple and contesting influences. He argues that during the early twentieth century, the forest principles were used as instruments to bring the forests under the control of colonial authorities. However, faced with protests, the colonial state

formed a committee which recommended that ‘...villagers should be permitted to govern their forests under a general set of framing guidelines’ (Agrawal 2006: 5). These forest councils which were formed based on the recommendations of the committee, had been taking environment-related decisions since the 1920s. Agrawal calls them as regulatory communities. At present, there are more than three thousand village forest councils in the Kumaon region. As Agrawal argues, the environmental subjects thus created were a product of a range of processes. They ‘...emerge as a result of the involvement in the struggles over resources and in relation to new institutions and changing calculations of self-interest and notions of the self. These three conceptual elements- politics, institutions, and identities - are intimately linked’ (Ibid: 5).

Studies by Akhileshwar Pathak (2002) and Gunnel Cederlof (2005a) which analyse the contradictions in the processes of implementing colonial forest laws, also fall broadly within this rubric of studies which treats the colonial state and forest laws not as pre-given but evolving. The implementation of colonial forest laws (which were, as mentioned earlier, treated as scientific, neutral, and meant to conserve the forests) was shaped with multiple and unforeseen difficulties. This was not merely because of the protests made by the forest dwellers whose traditional rights over natural resources were violated by these laws, but also because of the differences in understanding among the colonial officials about the nature of the pre-existing property rights among the indigenous communities. While the District administration adopted the local customs as the basis of law-enforcement and established a conflict-free relationship with the pastoralists in the Nilgris in south India, the Presidency level administration took a different view. It claimed ‘absolute right’ over communal land in the name of so-called ‘national interest’ and ‘sovereign rule’ by one sections of colonial administrators. These contradictory approaches to the rights of the local communities produced a chaotic situation on ground. The local custom was however abandoned over time and ‘...the South Indian hills were slowly integrated into the dominant administrative principles of the plains’ (Madras Presidency) (Cederlof 2005a: 77). The implementation of the common law order thus produced much confusion even while it eventually alienated the local communities from accessing natural resources.

Cederlof’s study of the Nilgiris significantly departs from the narrative of ‘violent conquest and organized resistance’. This genre is central to the arguments of the nationalist school of environmental history. Nature of the relationship between the colonial regime and the

local communities was contradictory. In unraveling the fuzzy and multi-faceted, she productively uses the categories such as 'contact zone' and 'transculturation'. While 'contact zone' stands for how 'the interaction between colonizer and colonized displays internal conflicts of the two parties, and different interests and identifications transgressed and blurred the major divide', 'transculturation' is 'a phenomenon of how subordinate groups select and invent from material transmitted by a dominant culture (in norms, language, institutions, hierarchies, etc.)...' (Cederlof 2005b: 250). On the basis of these categories, she shows that the 'confrontation [between the colonial regime and the local communities in the Nilgris] did not appear in open revolt but in various forms of resistance. This was articulated in petitions, depositions, refusal to appear for questioning, delaying of investigations by being absent, refusal to accept payment (or 'compensation') for loss of land, ruling out the validity of earlier agreements, filing court cases, and so on' (Ibid). In other words, they deployed everyday forms of protests against the British forest policies instead of open organized protests.

On a different register, Anand Pandian (2004) argues that the sources of the self of the environmental/agrarian subject cannot be reduced to the colonial encounter alone, though the colonial encounter did play a critical role in shaping local identities. In other words, he argues that the process of self-making by environmental/agrarian communities cannot be reduced to colonialism and its practices. The Kallar reclamation programme was initiated by the British government in the Cumbum Valley during the 1920s. The reclamation programme tried to 'reform' Piranmalai Kallars, a most backward caste branded by the colonial administration as a 'criminal tribe', by means of agricultural development and education. Dam irrigation and sedentary agriculture were conceptualized as the right means to make Kallars give up their old ways of 'crime' and to fashion a new modern selfhood for them. Foraying into history, folk and classical literature and ethnography, Anand Pandian (2004: 16) shows that the refashioning of the Kallar selfhood exceeded the language of reform deployed by the colonial state and found its articulation in a language of Tamil interiority and affect. As he notes, the problem of rural selfhood was 'elaborated between the procedures of colonial administration and moral outlook of the cultivating citizenry, a modern endeavor that won its intelligibility in an order language of Tamil interiority.' He also shows that the Kallars' relation to the landscape and the very activity of cultivation were key sources of the agrarian moral universe and that of the environmental/agrarian self.

The revisionist school has also traced the different ideological

influences that contributed towards the competing perspectives that the colonizers held about the Indian landscape/environment. In pluralizing the colonial moment, the work of David Arnold (2005) is important. He shows that, being totally different from the romanticized views of the Orientalists, the 'traveling gaze' of the colonial officials, as evident from travelogues, botanical studies and diaries, depicted Indian landscape as full of both disease and deceitfulness. The beauty of the Indian landscape was, thus, never pristine. Such negative discursive construction of what Arnold terms as 'tropicality', gave the colonial authorities the mandate to rework the Indian landscape or environment. Christianity and Benthamite Utilitarianism too had contributed towards such a mandate for colonial intervention though different from the 'traveling gaze' of the colonial officials. The key Utilitarian concept of 'improvement' helped in legitimizing the colonial regime's desire to rearrange the Indian landscape.

If the revisionist school has conceptualized colonial power as varied, evolving and refashioned by local communities, it has also captured the relationship between natural resources and the indigenous communities during the pre-colonial and the colonial period as not merely one of non-exploitative symbiotism but also of power and exclusion. In other words, it looks at the indigenous communities not as homogenous but internally divided. Using the categories of 'ecological zone' and 'cultural economy', David Ludden (1978) has shown that the fertile lands in river belts of Tampirabarni, in the Tamil-speaking region were controlled and cultivated by the upper castes for a millennium. He underscores the role of cultural economy in such land control and argues that it was the caste system that enabled the upper castes to exercise control over fertile lands for such a long stretch of time. In a perspective differing from that of the nationalist school, David Ludden shows that the cultural economy of caste which was part of the indigenous social arrangement was unsettled by the colonial regime and, as a consequence, agrarian resources were reallocated to other communities lower down in the caste hierarchy. Similarly David Mosse's (1997) study of the indigenous irrigation institutions and systems of water management and distribution within and across villages shows that the management of common property resources was not merely based on environmental consideration and notions of equity. They were shaped by multiple considerations based on caste, religion, and local-level politics. Thus, the resource management practices of the local communities were informed by caste and gender disparities and the systematic exclusion of subaltern communities.

The work of Vasavi (1996) shows how the social memory of the environmental subject is used to explain the expertise of colonial administration when it handled the famine relief programmes successfully in Bijapur district, Karnataka, in the early eighteenth century. Initially, it was negated because of other reasons (Already, the subaltern people had been getting relief from the traditional distribution system; it had a close relationship with caste hegemony. Moreover, people hesitated to get food from the outer cultural sphere particularly from the colonizer and feared that the religious conversion might take place if they get the famine relief from the colonial regime), later, locals hugely participated when it implemented with locals' understanding (It had broken the villagers' dependency on the traditional distribution system) and initiated public works (bundling and laying roads) at the regional level. Here, oral literatures are used to interpret the colonial administration from the colonized people's perspective.

In a significant methodological move to recover the environmental subjects as varied and diverse, Gunnel Cederlof and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2005) of the revisionist school have argued that enframing environmental history within larger binaries such as metropolitan vs. nationalist (an analytical frame which is common in the nationalist school) will be inadequate for the task. They note that only local histories of particular communities can recover the environmental subjects. Thus, one needs 'to persuade historians and natural scientists to embark not just on grand themes in environmental history and discourse analysis, but on very local, small scale histories of single communities and their experiences of ecological pressures and change overtime, as part a broader social agenda aimed at local empowerment and environmental awareness' (Grove *et al* 1998: 17).

In the spirit of treating the local communities as dynamic and not static, Sumit Guha (1999) offers us a different picture of the pre-colonial period. His study conceptualizes the pre-colonial period as one of people 'changing, adopting, and innovating' (Ibid: 6). The forest had been used by different communities for different purposes. And the pre-colonial period was marked by migration in search of economic prosperity, tribute extraction by local chieftains, interaction among different communities, and crossing of boundaries between castes and 'tribes' by communities. Given such a complex set of practices, he argues that the colonial categories such as tribal or aborigine, which treat the forest communities as static and tied to fixed localities, are analytically more constraining than illuminating. Further, he notes that the linear teleological account of treating societies as evolving from forest dependency to agricultural

dependency or from the food-gathering stage to food-production stage does not capture the actual dynamics of pre-colonial society. For him, there was ‘... no single trajectory through historic time’, but instead many. In critical ways, Sumit Guha’s argument moves off from the depiction of the pre-colonial period as an environmental golden age by the nationalist school of environmental history.

Likewise, Agrawal’s detailed work (1999) on the negotiating skill of a migrative agro-pastoral community, Raikas, with peasants and bureaucrats searching other alternatives for livelihood in a drought prone area of the northern district of Rajasthan in the post-colonial period. Dependency on the village grazing lands for cattle grazing was broken by the arrival of modern agricultural technological advancements (like chemical fertilizer, tube-well irrigation and fencing around the fields) and the conversion of the common grazing lands into the cultivational lands of the individuals. The complexity of collective migration (It is conducted based on multiple causes like the process of decision making to select the routes to go along with their cattle for grazing and to avoid the roadside cattle robbery, prospects of economic gain, hierarchy in informal organization of the community and mobility also play an important role) of the community is explained instead of the common rhetoric of “mobility is natural to risk”. The study moves away from the essentialist categorical explanation to fragmented agency to portray the adoptive and active role of the subjects.

The struggle over natural resources between locals and the state is prevalent in the literature on environmental history. In it, the locals were portrayed as sympathetic beings or molded in the resistance genre whether in the colonial or postcolonial period. But, the study of Nandini Sundar (2007) gives a different picture of the dynamics of the resistances of forest dwellers (it took place when the development projects are implemented by the state to control and displace the forest community from the forest area. Since the pre-colonial period, it has been used for their livelihood) and encounters of state administration to map out the genealogy of the state from colonial to the post-colonial period, in the Bastar region of central India. Sundar studies the social memories and rituals to explain the resistance activities of the foresters and to map the changing the modes of resistance and resisting agents against the state over the time, be it colonial or postcolonial. The economy, society and politics of Bastar region were changed by colonialism ‘through the imposition of alien structures of government, through unequal integration into larger capitalist processes, and through epistemological means’ (Ibid: 11). In the colonial period, the state had floated the epistemologies

of 'development', 'tribes', 'aboriginals' and 'frontier areas' to control the forest communities and forests. 'The policy followed by independent India did not differ substantially from that of the colonial state, either in its benevolent or repressive aspects' (Ibid: 189). To address the 'tribal question', Nandini Sundar emphasizes the need to move away from 'the idea of harmonious pre-capitalist village communities which are as much a myth as the notion that activists are motivated by a desire to keep tribals in museums. The question today is one of the effects of capitalism and the struggle for democracy at large, which is fought in culturally specific ways. In the process, culture too is created anew' (Ibid: 189-90).

As mentioned before, not only does the postcolonial state use pre-given notions on the forest communities such as 'aboriginals', 'tribes' 'wildness' to denote the so-called 'backwardness' and 'uncivilized', but, a self claiming (In pre-colonial period, to valorize, people willingly called themselves as *Jangali*) phrase, *Janglijati* – the 'wild caste' or 'forest caste' is also used by the foresters of the Dangs in the forested region of the western India. The self claiming and ascribing phrase of wildness has heterogenic characteristics. The work of Ajay Skaria (1999) looks at 'constructions of wildness which were so inextricably linked to the notions of civilization as to make any opposition between the two pointless and misleading' (Ibid: viii). According to the classical Indian texts, not only was wildness 'central to kingship and authority' but was also catalyst to the state-making process in the pre-colonial period that is totally absent in the historical exercises. In the mid-nineteenth century, it 'had become the negativities through which the civilizing processes of colonialism and nationalism defined themselves in the age of modernity [due to settled agriculture, centralized state power and so on]. The wildness of *jangal* and the *jangali* had come to be contained within Kiplingesque exoticism or caste-tribe sociologism' (Ibid: xii). In the postcolonial period, wildness is coupled 'with marginality, social and ritual inferiority, and political powerlessness' (Ibid: xi). This characterization was made by British Raj. In the historical exercise, the forest communities are interpreted by the themes of colonialism, imperialism and nationalism. So, it could not capture the subaltern voices properly. To address the methodological issue of critical historiography ('the subject of Indian history usually speaks from within a metanarrative that celebrates the nation state; of this metanarrative the theoretical subject can only be a hyperreal "Europe", a "Europe" constructed by the tales that both imperialism and nationalism have told the colonized' (Ibid: 3)), Skaria explores the storytelling performance of the communities because, "Storytelling is a major aspect of Dangi life, and the past provides a means to reflect on

and socialize the present”. The cultural memories are cautiously used to capture the present meanings instead of the past alone. Both the studies of Nandini Sundar and Skaria identified the epistemological continuum of the colonial animation; it continues to be exercised by the ‘development regime’.

In important ways, the revisionist school has provided us with a much more complex and nuanced account of the environmental history of India and revised several misconceptions of the nationalist school. To sum up, first, it has captured empirically how both the colonial regime and the local communities were mutually constitutive of each other. In other words, it shows that the will to power of the colonial state was not all that absolute but was constrained by the responses of the local communities. Second, the local communities were neither mere victims of the colonial rule nor valiant protestors. Their relation to colonialism was rather one of multiple negotiations which ranged from open protests to cooperation. Third, the revisionist school also unsettles the nationalist historian’s romanticization of the pre-colonial indigenous community as informed by environmental virtue. Instead, the indigenous communities emerge in these studies as based on heterogeneity, power, and exclusion, and static but highly mobile and dynamic. Finally, in the name of developmentalism how the colonial epistemology continues in the postcolonial period is also captured.

#### TOWARDS A NEW PRESENTISM

*“[...] by using a form of words by Foucault: not so much a history to help us understand the world in which we live then, but rather a series of ‘histories of present’.*  
- Keith Jenkins,(2003)

*...the burden of protecting the environment ... often fell heaviest on the most marginal members of society...*  
- Karl Jacoby (2007)

*...two Public Interest Litigations (PIL) have been filed against the FRA [Forest Rights Act] in the Madras (Madurai Bench) and Andhra Pradesh High Courts.*

*The Madurai petition, filed by T.N.S. Murugadoss Theerthapathi, grandson of Diwan Bagadur Murugadoss Theerthapathi, a former zamindar of Singampatti in Tirunelveli district, argued that the FRA*

was repugnant to all other laws aimed at protecting forests and preserving wildlife and hence ultra vires the Constitution.

*The petition said the Act provided for vesting in an individual or family or community the rights of up to four hectares of land, conversion of villages, and diversion of forest land for civic requirements. Such provisions, it argued, would be against the national forest policy, which envisages at least one-third of the total land area under forest cover.*

- Venkitesh Ramakrishnan (2008)

It is more than evident from the above account of the revisionist school's forays into India's environmental history that it has succeeded in restoring the environmental subjects as significant and heterogeneous players in such history. Their subjectivities and identities are no longer represented as the direct result of colonialism. Yet revisionist school suffers from the important problem of reading the presentist concerns of the historian into the past, instead that of the environmental subjects.

It may be useful here to begin with a critique of a state initiative programme. In the present context, post-colonial state provides lots of funds for Agro projects in 'dry land' (It had been used for cattle grazing, collecting of green manures, taping palm juice from palm trees and collecting fire woods by the pastoral, peasant, palm juice dropper communities and agricultural laborers by villagers] to convert them into greens on the impact of environmental protective discourse. Pandian's micro-level study (1990) examines how the scheme alienated the dry lands from the land holders and helpful to the big agro companies to earn huge profits through the project in Kalakad and Cheranmahadevi blocks, Tirunelveli District.

The second account of the critique of the present-day environmental activism made by Amita Baviskar (2005a; 2005b). According to her, motivated by their own middle-class understanding of the environmental issues and framing their concerns in grand global thematics, the activists miss out on the everyday issues of the local people and their perspectives on them. Often, this leads to the alienation of the local communities from the activists. As she notes, '...to remain 'ideologically pure' and undertake a politically more ambitious and risky strategy [by the activists] is seen by many tribal leaders as arrogance, made possible by the economic security that activists can always count upon due to their literature skills and middle-class family background' (Baviskar 2005a: 63). Similar to the position of the activists, the shaping

of history-writing, even in the case of the revisionist school, is informed by the historians' own presentist concerns. In a certain sense, this is inevitable since writing the past is always informed by the concerns of the present.

However, if we look into the past by taking into account the concerns of the environmental subjects of the present-day, the very nature of the environmental history may undergo a different kind of transformation. Let me give an example from my on-going field work in Tirunelveli District among the forest community of *Kanis*. From the late nineteenth century onwards, *Kanis* were subjected to immense hardships by the colonial regime. Their movement within the forests was increasingly restricted and they were forced to migrate from one place to another to carry out plantation work. Yet the community today remembers the colonial period in a positive light and celebrates it. Speculatively, the reason for such a representation of the colonial past could be the postcolonial misery of the environmental subjects. This seems to be true at least in the case of the *Kanis*. The forest areas of Kalakkad and Mundanthurai which are located in the hill inhabited by the *Kanis* were proclaimed as wild life sanctuary in 1962 and 1976 respectively. In 1988, both these areas were brought together and jointly notified as Kalakkad–Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve Forest. After this announcement, the *Kanis* are being systematically harassed by the forest authorities of the postcolonial Indian state. To borrow a phrase from E. P. Thomson, *Kanis* as today's environmental subjects are 'haunted by the legend of better days'.<sup>2</sup> If the environmental history of India is written by taking into account the postcolonial misery of the environmental subjects and their presentist concerns, we will get at a history which is truly subaltern.

[This paper is a part of my ongoing doctoral research under the supervision of Prof. A.R.Venkatachalapathy. I express my gratitude to my supervisor for constant support and encouragement. I owe my thanks to Prof. K.Nagaraj and Prof. Padmini Swaminathan for initiating a course work on English. My thanks are due to our English teacher, Dr. Manjula Rajan, who has helped to develop my writing skills. I am immensely grateful to Dr. M.S.S.Pandian, Visiting Fellow, CSDS, who spent his valuable time for editing my draft. I would also like to thank Dr. M.Vijayabaskar, Assitant Professor, MIDS, and fellow research scholars Jayashree, Ann, Mani and Raju for their comments. My sincere thanks are also due to an external referee for commenting on the paper.]

#### NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Madison 2005: 26
- 2 Thompson. E.P., 1968: 297

## REFERENCES

- Agarwal, Bina, 2004, "Gender Inequalities: Neglected Dimensions and Hidden Facets", *Malcom S. Adiseshiah Memorial Lecture Series*, Madras Institute of Development Studies.
- Agrawal, Arun, 1999, *Greener Pastures: Politics, Markets, and Community among a Migrant Pastoral People*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Agrawal, Arun, 2006, *Environmentalism: Technologies of Government and the making of subjects*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Arnold, David, 2005, *The Tropics and the Travelling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800-1856*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Arnold, David and Ramachandra Guha, 1995, "Introduction: Themes and Issues in the Environmental History of South Asia," in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds, *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.1-20 (Paperback Fifth Impression 2003.)
- Baviskar, Amita, 2005a, "Tribal Politics and Sustainable Development," in S.N. Pawar and others, eds, *Environmental Movements in India*. New Delhi and Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Baviskar, Amita, 2005b, "Cultural politics of Environment and Development: The Indian Experience", *Malcom S. Adiseshiah Memorial Lecture Series*, Madras Institute of Development Studies.
- Cederlof, Gunnel, 2005a. "The Toda Tiger: Debates on custom, utility, and rights in Nature, South India 1820-1843," in Gunnel Cederlof and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds, *Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods and Identified in South Asia*. New Delhi: Permanent black.
- Cederlof, Gunnel, 2005b, "The Agency of the Colonial Subject: Claims and Rights in Forestlands in the early Nineteenth-Century Nilgris." *Studies in History*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 247-269.
- Gadgil, Madhav and Ramachandra Guha, 1993, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gadgil, Madhav and Ramachandra Guha, 1995, *Ecology and Equity: The use and abuse of nature in contemporary India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Grove, Richard, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan, 1998, "Introduction", in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan, eds, *Nature and the Orient: Essays on the Environmental History of South and South East Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-26. (Paperback Edition 2000)
- Guha, Ramachandra, 1988, "Ideological Trends in Indian Environmentalism."

- Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXIII, no. 49, pp. 2578-2581.
- Guha, Ramachandra, 1989, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Guha, Ramachandra, 1985, "Forestry and Social Protest in British Kumaon, 1893-1921," in Ranajit Guha, ed, *Subaltern Studies IV*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.54-101.
- Guha, Sumit, 1999, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jacoby, Karl, 2007, 'Classifying Nature: In Search of a Common Ground between Social and Environmental History' in Ranjan Chakrabarti, ed, *Situating Environmental History*. New Delhi: Manohar, pp. 45-58.
- Jenkins, Keith, 2003, *Re-thinking History*, London and New York: Routledge (1991).
- Ludden, David, 1978, "Ecological Zones and the Cultural Economy of Irrigation in Southern Tamilnadu." *South Asia* (New Series), vol. I, no. 1.
- Madison, D.Soyini, 2005, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage.
- Mann, Michael, 1999, *British rule on Indian Soil: North India in the First half of the Nineteenth Century*, Benedict Baron (Trans.). New Delhi: Manohar.
- Mann, Michael, 1998, "Ecological change in North India: Deforestation and Agrarian Distress in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab 1800-1850," in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan, eds, *Nature and the Orient: Essays on the Environmental History of South and South East Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 396-420. (Paperback Edition 2000.)
- Mosse, David, 1997, "Ecological Zones and the Culture of Collective action: The History and Social Organisation of a Tank Irrigation System in Tamilnadu". *South Indian Studies* 3, pp.1-88.
- Pandian, Anand, 1996, "Land Alienation in Tirunelveli District." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXXI, no. 51, pp. 3291-3294.
- Pandian, Anand Sankar, 2004, "Landscapes of Redemption: Cultivating Heart and Soil in South India," unpublished PhD thesis, University of California.
- Pandian, M.S.S., 1990, *The political economy of agrarian change: Nanchilnadu, 1880-1939*. New Delhi, Newbury Park and London: Sage Publications.
- Pathak, Akhileshwar, 2002, *Law, Strategies, Ideologies: Legislating Forests in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rajan S. Ravi, 1998, "Foresters and the politics of colonial agroecology: The case of shifting cultivation and soil erosion, 1920-1950." *Studies in History*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 217-236.

- Rangarajan, Mahesh, 1996, *Fencing the Forests: Conservation and Ecological change in India's Central provinces, 1860-1914*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rangarajan, Mahesh, 2001, *India's Wildlife History*. New Delhi: Permanent Black & Ranthambore Foundation.
- Saberwal, Vasant K., 1999, *Pastoral Politics: Shepherds, Bureaucrats, and Conservation in the Western Himalaya*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Saldanha, Indra Munshi, 1998, "Colonial Forest Regulations and Collective Resistance: Nineteenth Century Thana District," in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan, eds, *Nature and the Orient: Essays on the Environmental History of South and South East Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 708-733. (Paperback Edition 2000).
- Saravanan, Velayutham, 2001, "Tribal Land Alienation in Madras Presidency during the colonial period: 1792-1997." *Review of Development and Change*, vol. VI, no. 1, pp. 73-104.
- Saravanan, Velayutham, 2003, "Colonial Commercial Forest Policy and Tribal Private Forest in Madras Presidency, 1792-1881." *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XL, no. 4, pp. 403-423.
- Satya, Laxman D., 2004, *Ecology, Colonialism, and Cattle: Central India in the Nineteenth Century*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sivaramakrishnan K, 1995, "Colonialism and Forestry in India: Imaging the past in present politics." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 3-40.
- Sivaramakrishnan K, 1999, *Modern Forests: State making and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sivaramakrishnan, K and Gunnel Cederlof, 2005, "Introduction – Ecological Nationalism: Claiming Nature for Making History," in Gunnel Cederlof and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds, *Ecological nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods, and Identities in South Asia*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, pp. 1-40.
- Skariya, Ajay, 1999, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sundar, Nandini, 2007, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-2006*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (1997).
- E.P. Thompson, 1968, *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Pelican.
- Tucker, Richard, 1998, "Non-timber Forest Products Policy in the Western Himalayas under British Rule," in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan, eds, *Nature and the Orient: Essays on the Environmental History of South and South East Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford

University Press, pp. 459-483 (Paperback Edition 2000).

Vasavi, A.R., 1996, "The Millet Drought: Oral Narratives and the Cultural grounding of Famine-relief in Bijapur." *South Indian Studies* 2, pp. 205-233.

Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, 2008, "Hope and Fear", *Frontline*, vol.25, no. 4, pp. 4-8.

Whitcombe, Elizabeth, 1995, "The Environmental costs of Irrigation in British India: Water logging, Salinity and Malaria," in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds, *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 237-259 (Paperback Fifth Impression 2003).

\*

## Recent MIDS Working Papers

### 2008

- 202 Pain, Politics and Persistence: The Power of Powerlessness  
by Rajakishor Mahana
- 201 Adapting capability approach to understand the life experiences of the  
poor: Making a case from the survey of literature  
by Ann George

### 2007

- 200 Exploring the Importance of Excess Female Mortality and Discrimination  
in 'Nativity' in Explaining the 'Lowness' of the Sex Ratio in India  
by D. Jayaraj
- 199 Welfare Pluralism: A Post Modern Rationale in Policy Making  
by K. Jayashree
- 198 Making It Relevant: Mapping the Meaning of Women's Studies in  
Tamilnadu  
by S. Anandhi and Padmini Swaminathan

### 2006

- 197 Understanding the Struggle for Panchama Land  
by C. Jerome Samraj
- 196 Urban water conflicts in Indian cities: Man-made scarcity as a critical  
factor  
by S. Janakarajan, Marie Llorente and Marie-Hélène Zérah

### 2005

- 195 Drought, Agriculture, and Rural Livelihood: A Case Study of Bolangir  
District, Orissa  
by Mahendra Nayak
- 194 Farm Level Land and Water Productivity in Tank Irrigation: Some  
Methodological Issues  
by K. Sivasubramaniyan and R. Sakthivadivel
- 193 Water Governance: A Historical Understanding of Mahanadi River  
Basin, Orissa  
by Sushanta Kumar Mahapatra
- 192 Creative Social Research: Rethinking Theories and Methods and the  
Calling of an Ontological Epistemology of Participation  
by Ananta Kumar Giri

-----

## MIDS Publications

- Gender Inequalities:  
Neglected Dimensions and Hidden Facets  
by *Bina Agarwal* Rs.60
- State, Households and Markets in Education  
by *Jandhyala B G Tilak* Rs.60
- Whither the Indian Village?:  
Culture and Agriculture in “Rural” India  
by *Dipankar Gupta* Rs.60
- Cultural Politics of Environment and  
Development: The Indian Experience  
by *Amita Baviskar* Rs.60
- Dalit Studies as Pedagogical Practice:  
Claiming more than just a ‘Little Place’ in the Academia  
by *Sharmila Rege* Rs.60
- Globalization: Its Portents for Indian Culture  
by *U. R. Anantha Murthy* Rs.20
- Development as a Human Right or as Political  
Largesse? Does it make any difference?  
by *Upendra Baxi* Rs.60
- அவல நிலையில் தமிழக ஆறுகள்  
தொகுப்பாசிரியர்: எஸ். ஜனகராஜன் Rs.95
- திராவிடச் சான்று:  
எல்லிஸும் திராவிட மொழிகளும்  
தாமஸ் ஆர். டிரவுட்மன் Rs.150
- ஒரு நகரமும் ஒரு கிராமமும்:  
கொங்குப் பகுதியில் சமூக மாற்றங்கள்  
எஸ். நீலகண்டன் Rs.150

### Madras Institute of Development Studies

79, Second Main Road, Gandhi Nagar

Adyar, Chennai 600 020

Tel.: 044-24412589, 24412295

Email: pub@mids.ac.in • Web: www.mids.ac.in