

Book Review

The Shattered Earth: Histories of Climate, Catastrophe, and Wilderness, ed. Mili Ghose, Delhi: Primus Books, 2024, i-xx, and 349 pages, ISBN: 978-93-5852-903-6, ISBN: 978-93-5852-904-3 (POD), Rs. 1750/-

The present volume makes a valuable contribution to the field of Environmental History, revisiting how global climate change has posed grave threats to human survival and the future of life on Earth. It brings together contributions from scholars worldwide, each offering original research that has earned them recognition and accolades in the field. The book is organized into three sections: **Part I, Climate and History**, which includes five articles; **Part II, Ecology, Forests, and the Wild**, featuring another five; and **Part III, Catastrophes**, consisting of four articles.

The editor aptly opens the discussion with the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and draws attention to the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report, which identifies rapid climate change as a direct consequence of human activities. In the subsequent pages, the editor outlines how scientists first recognized these changes and how, over time, environmental history emerged as a discipline.

In the first section (Part I), Donald J. Hughes's chapter 'Climate Change: A History of Environmental Knowledge' examines the temporality of global climate change from the late nineteenth century to the present, outlining three distinct phases. The first, extending up to about 1945, is characterized by hypotheses; the second, from 1945 to 1975, by the accumulation of evidence and the testing of hypotheses; and the third, from 1975 onward, by controversies surrounding the application of an apparent scientific consensus. Hughes argues that these phases reflect an overlapping realm of different discourses, with the relationship between science and society becoming increasingly intense in recent decades. Ronald E. Doel's chapter, 'An Unanticipated Legacy: How Cold War Military Concerns Created Knowledge about Global Climate Change,' explores how the neglect of polar warming by the military officials as a major environmental concern during the early decades of the Cold War persisted until the late 1950s. In contrast, post-World War II research, particularly the drilling of deep ice cores at Camp Century, revealed a history of rapid and dynamic climate change, providing evidence of global warming. Doel rightly observes that the environmental sciences long remained an artificial category, with little meaningful dialogue across disciplines.

Sajal Nag's chapter opens with the question of how environmental degradation has been overshadowed by the ongoing 'blame game' between developed and developing nations over resource protection and exploitation. The chapter primarily focuses on deforestation and its impact on the climate of North-East India. Drawing on statistical data, Nag highlights alarming indicators of climate change, such as irregular rainfall patterns and

shifts in bird migration, etc. Importantly, he also raises a critical question: why have deforestation practices, which began during the colonial period, still not been adequately addressed even today?

Kaushik Roy, in his chapter ‘Managing Environment: Disease, Sanitation, and the Army in British India, 1859–1913’, examines the racial mindset that shaped the British approach to environmental sanitation programmes. In the post-1857 period, the colonial state made substantial interventions to ensure proper food and accommodation for military troops. Over time, germ theory gained increasing prominence in the disease-ridden military camps. Drawing on corroborative data, Roy interestingly traces this evolution, from attempts to manage the tropics as an ‘exotic environment’ to the growing reliance on technology in combating diseases.

Ruby Maloni’s article argues that the monsoon in the Indian Ocean has functioned as a shared heritage for centuries. Her narrative traces the history of overseas trade, highlighting the roles of the Arabs, the Portuguese, and the seasonal patterns of maritime commerce shaped by the summer and winter monsoons. However, while the monsoon served as a regulatory wind system for navigation, its fluctuations, as she argued, and their supposed impact on agricultural production remain open to question.

Ranjan Chakrabarti’s article, ‘Rifle and Romance in the Jungle: Hog Hunting and Tiger Shooting in Colonial India’, sets the tone for the second section (Part II) by refining its thematic discourse. The essay positions the environment alongside race, class, gender, and ethnicity as a key parameter for uncovering power relations within society. Chakrabarti advances a compelling argument that hunting functioned as a signifier of power in colonial India, illustrating the complex ways in which British colonial authority interacted with indigenous society.

Dipanwita Dasgupta’s article examines the impact of climate change on water resources, with particular emphasis on floods and droughts in sub-Himalayan Bengal. The study investigates selected sub-basins of the Himalayan and peninsular rivers to assess the vulnerability of North Bengal, focusing on the pressure on water resources and the consequent effects on the agricultural economy. It also considers how international policy circles highlight the region’s migration patterns in relation to these challenges.

The chapter by Sahara Ahmed explores the discourses of forest officials on deforestation and its impact on climate, tracing how desiccationist ideas first emerged in the seventeenth century and were later popularized by scientific foresters. Iftekhar Iqbal, in his article ‘Ecological and Climatic Histories in Eastern South Asia: Towards a Transregional Trajectory,’ emphasizes that the eastern South Asian crescent, stretching from Jharkhand to Tripura and encompassing the Bengal delta, is bound together not only by cultural and popular mobility but also by shared environmental transformations such as deforestation, flooding, and earthquakes. Nirmal Kumar Mahato’s chapter examines the impact of environmental degradation, scarcity, and famine in the Manbhum region from a gendered perspective. It highlights how such scarcities during the colonial and post-colonial periods

further marginalized ‘Adivasi’ women, deepening their struggles within a patriarchal social structure.

The third section of the book (Part III) is the most cohesive, as it brings together articles on past catastrophes. It features specific case studies such as the 1950 Assam earthquake by Rajib Handique, the 1876 Bay of Bengal cyclone by Mili Ghose, and the 1770 famine in southwestern Bengal by Sekhar Mahapatra, all grounded in primary data and detailed analysis. Complementing these, Tirthankar Ghosh’s chapter examines natural calamities in northern Bengal between 1850 and 1900, drawing on colonial administrative records.

The editor deserves credit for bringing together in a single volume such important studies on climate change, environmental concerns, power, politics, and society, contributed by specialist scholars in the field. The crisp and effective foreword by Deepak Kumar further enhances the book’s appeal. In the twenty-first century, when unsustainable industries, wars, and fragile diplomacies have disrupted human life, a work of this kind holds immense value. That said, the first two sections might have been arranged more effectively to improve readability. Moreover, the opening section could have been strengthened by incorporating key references from environmental science and environmental history, since the editor briefly touches upon these themes. Finally, including a conclusion in the introductory chapter might have been avoided in order to preserve a more academic and professional tone.

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