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Environmental history: An unconventional history?

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Abstract

Most historical works are based on traditional archival sources, chronicles, state reports, community narratives, folk literature, and vernacular sources, among other things, therefore there is a need to hunt for new evidence beyond Ranke's customary approach of writing history. Environmental historians, on the other hand, do not use similar sources and consider hills, rivers, woods, air, fields, and diseases, among other things, as more basic sources for analyzing historical events. When we talk about environmental history, we're talking about the human-nature relationship, which isn't just about nature. Where the past's ecological effects can't be overlooked. Nature must be placed in the context of the past, particularly the history related with humans. It is frequently made up of two cultures: humanities and science. Humanities is about culture of human, and culture of human is linked to the past. When we constitute humanity with science, we must use evidences, such as scientific findings, as part of the evidence for historical interpretation of historical events. We don't find nearly as much scientific detail in other historical literature as we do in environmental history. Scientific details add to the uniqueness and accuracy of this type of history writing.

Keywords: Disease, environment, ecology, humanities, science, nature, history writing

Introductions

Important issues of history were confined to a few significant figures tied to politics, courts, and legislatures before the innovation of 'environmental history.' In the 19th and early 20th centuries, power and nation state drove the formation of such history writing. Historians established new avenues of investigation after a while, as the globe shifted toward a more global perspective. Scholars have begun to peel back the layers of ordinary people's lives and thinking in order to better understand class, gender, race, and caste. What genuinely has shaped the surface layers of politics and other types of dominance can be found in this "History from the Bottom Up"^[1]. But now the question arises: who, in actuality, shaped the forms of politics and sovereignty? Another reformist group, the 'environmental historians,' emphasizes the necessity to go deeper into the earth's folds in order to uncover the true causes of historical events.

Most historical works are based on traditional archival sources, chronicles, state reports, community narratives, folk literature, and vernacular sources, among other things, therefore there is a need to hunt for new evidence beyond Ranke's customary approach of writing history. Environmental historians, on the other hand, do not use similar sources and consider hills, rivers, woods, air, fields, and diseases, among other things, as more basic sources for analyzing historical events. When we talk about environmental history, we're talking about the human-nature relationship, which isn't just about nature. Where the past's ecological effects can't be overlooked^[2]. Nature must be placed in the context of the past, particularly the history related with humans. It is frequently made up of two cultures: humanities and science. Humanities is about culture of human, and culture of human is linked to the past. When we constitute humanity with science, we must use evidences, such as scientific findings, as part of the evidence for historical interpretation of historical events. We don't find nearly as much scientific detail in other historical literature as we do in environmental history^[3].

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¹ Donald Worster, 'Doing Environmental History', in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, Donald Worster and Alfred W. Crosby eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 289.

² Worster, 'Doing Environmental History', 290.

³ Here it does not mean that scientific details were not used in history writing in the past. There are many historians such as Irfan Habib who tried to look into ecology, historical geography, cropping pattern, irrigation, and famine etc. but that's not environmental history because here the used information is limited and sometimes the evidences used in the isolation not in relation to its implication to human kind.

Scientific details add to the uniqueness and accuracy of this type of history writing.

Environmental history was initially proposed in the 1970s. Environmental historians such as Alfred Crosby, Donald Worster, and William Cronon gave the new discipline intellectual cohesion by establishing the relationships between human agency and the transformation of the world's ecology through imperialism, exploration, agricultural change, technological innovation, and urban expansion as central questions. Environmentalist movements sparked an active response from academics in law, philosophy, economics, sociology, and other fields. In environmental history, an interdisciplinary approach works quite well. In his work, Donald Worster discusses the three levels, each of which draws on a variety of outside disciplines and employs unique ways of analysis. The first is that nature has an impact on human history, and humans have an impact on nature. The second level is how human socioeconomic activities interact with the environment, generating reciprocal changes, and the third level is how individuals of the communities' view nature through literature, popular culture, myths, laws, and ethics [4]. As a result, historians must devise new methodologies, disciplines, and languages in order to write environmental or whole history.

Many environmental historians have utilized various methodologies and sources to demonstrate how nature shapes history. When the government seizes control of natural resources, it is actually seizing control of humans. Various measures were used by the British to keep colonies under control. Environmental historians have attempted to comprehend these metrics in a variety of ways. Ecological imperialism was coined by historians like Richard Grove, and green imperialism was coined by Alfred Crosby. Columbian discovery was the first phase in history when enormous interactions between the old and new worlds began. The phrase Columbian Exchange was coined by Alfred W. Crosby, who was the first historian to use it. He's referring to Christopher Columbus' landing in the New World. Plants, animals, and diseases have all changed as a result of this arrival. These are two ecological systems that are entirely distinct. In his article *The Early History of Syphilis: A Reappraisal*, Alfred Crosby uses disease as a lens through which to examine the history of contacts in places like Europe, America, Asia, and Africa, among other places. Using historical records and other sources, he uncovers various theories about the spread of this single disease. Man's spread around the globe, and that venereal Syphilis is a type of syphilis that originated in the Americas and was most likely brought to Europe with Columbus' return [5].

This disease grew common in Europe, and it was terrible for aborigines on Andaman Island. In the Andaman Islands, diseases such as syphilis, influenza, smallpox, and malaria cause death. In the Andaman Islands, the British attempted to tame the aborigines by introducing modern medicine. The discovery of syphilis, influenza, measles, and other ailments in aborigines presented opportunities for colonial governments to intervene coercively in aboriginal society, as Satadru Sen writes in his article *The Dying Savage*:

Work, Medicine, and Andamanese Extinction. The conquering was not easy in this region. The 'discovery' of epidemic disease among aborigines not only changed the understanding of the relationship between civilization and survival, but it also strengthened the idea that a savage body fit for manual labour was a contradiction in terms. The aborigines were subjected to 'work' and medicine as potent agents of dominance [6]. However, much as in other colonies, the British failed to outnumber the aborigines. Because the climatic circumstances were not favorable to the British, their tactics did not succeed here. We can read Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* to learn more about this topic. He discusses how climatic circumstances aided in the demographic takeover of various areas by individuals from the old world. Crosby sees two parts to this process: the outnumbering of aborigines by Europeans, and the manipulation of the environment through the adoption of their agricultural system, canal irrigation, and other environmental manipulations [7]. It's worth mentioning that in countries where the British were able to establish their ecological advancement, such as Australia, America, and New Zealand, they outnumbered aborigines, however in the Andaman Islands, they were unable to do so. However, in his book *Green Imperialism*, Richard Grove carefully examined the consequences of environmental change on Europe's overseas colonies, as well as the growth of environmental consciousness among scientists. He criticizes Crosby in certain aspects, claiming that Europeans did not remove ecological obstacles by removing colonial supplies, but rather protected the environment in order to endure the tropics' climate [8]. Grove's rationale of 'preservation' in the construction of embankments and railways in the mid-Ganga basin, as Vipul Singh contends, constituted an impediment to the natural flow of the flooding Ganga [9]. This is critical of Grove's argument. Nature determines not only the occurrence, but also the technologies and policies that determine historical occurrences.

Nature affected history, and human acts occasionally shaped nature through their own actions, although non-human elements sometimes had a greater impact on human actions. When we discuss the Anthropocene, we must also consider non-human forces. It is best understood through J.R. McNeill's *Mosquito Empire*, in which non-human actors such as mosquitos, monkeys, swamps, and humans are used as sources of history writing that changed and formed history of empire, war, and revolution between 1620 and 1914. The Greater Caribbean's unstable shifting ecologies provided perfect breeding grounds for mosquito species that carry two of humanity's most fatal diseases, yellow fever and malaria. Ecological change brought about by the formation of a plantation economy boosted breeding and feeding conditions for both mosquito species, allowing them

⁶ Satadru Sen, 'The Dying Savage', *Savagery and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 127, 128, 156.

⁷ Alfred W. Crosby, 'Ecological Imperialism: The Overseas Migration of Western Europeans as a biological Phenomenon', in *Global Environmental History*, J.R. McNeill and Alan Roe eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 168, 169, 177.

⁸ Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-15 (Introduction).

⁹ Vipul Singh, 'Where Many Rivers Meet: River Morphology and Transformation of Pre-Modern River Economy in Mid-Ganga Basin, India', in *Environmental History in the Making*, Estelia Vaz, Cristina Joanaz and Ligia M. Costa Pinto eds., (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 187.

⁴ Worster, 'Doing Environmental History', 290.

⁵ Alfred W. Crosby, 'The Early History of Syphilis: A Reappraisal', *American Anthropologist*, No. 71, 1969, 218, 219, 220.

to play a vital role in the early modern Atlantic world's geopolitical wars. Ecology affected history with exceptional vigour in this context, but its ability to do so was due to both historical accidents and human-caused environmental change. Environmental historians do not always employ human variables as sources of history, but they do use non-human aspects as well ^[10].

Human influences have been discussed by historians in the past, but environmental history contextualizes nature in the past in relation to humankind. However, in Vipul Singh's other work *Speaking Rivers*, he discusses a variety of diseases such as smallpox and cholera, as well as natural disasters like as floods, in the context of a vast number of deaths in the mid-Ganga region in 1770. It's important mentioning that he says these diseases aren't causing any serious problems. The cause of the famine in this case is not non-human elements, but rather official policies that failed to address malnutrition and food scarcity. The diseases were blamed by colonial officials, although the main cause was famine ^[11]. As a result, state decisions, which were determined by humans, shaped history rather than nature. A similar argument may be found in Brain Fagan's work, where he discusses the El-Nino, which is an irregular periodic activity in the ocean that causes draughts in various tropical zones. He mentions famine and draught at the same time. It's important mentioning that draught is a natural occurrence, whereas famine is a man-made occurrence; when the government is unable to offer adequate relief, famine may occur.

Many scholars refer to these consequences as 'climate determination,' although they cannot be comprehended without human intervention. Environmental historians refer to this as environmental determinism, which places climate in the context of human actions in the past. As a result, environmental historians defied historical conventions. Environmental history encompasses a wide range of topics. Regardless of the periodization of history, historians like Vipul Singh, Crosby, and Satadru Sen employ diseases, rivers, and other technological advances through colonial policies as their method of study. These include scientific, geographical, and archeological methods. Human and non-human influences can be seen influencing or shaping history in a variety of ways. All of these historical researches have been conducted in a completely different method than conventional history books. Where historians are attempting to elicit new answers and questions, as well as tackling the task of evaluating ideas as ecological agents, and where an interdisciplinary approach transforms this type of history into a total history. The limitations of environmental history have already been highlighted. As a result, environmental history broadens the scope of history to a greater extent.

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