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Concept of Environmental History

Dr. Debashish Roy

Associate Professor & Head, Dept. of History, Radhamadhab College, Silchar, Assam

Abstract

History of environment is always about human interaction with the natural world or to put it in any other, it studies the interaction between the culture and nature. Donald worster has recognised three cluster of issues to be addressed by environmental historians. Environmental historians recognise the way in which the living and non-living system of the Earth have influenced the course of human affairs. The first global environmental history written by the writers of the discipline outside the history. Environmental history as a separate subject actually arose in the Euro-American world as an offshoot of the post second world war wave of environmentalism. The literature on environmental history is far expanding. Large number of conferences and seminars on environmental history are held all over the world every year, India too, is not lagging behind.

Environmental history is the study of human interaction with the natural world overtime, emphasising the active role nature plays in influencing human affairs and vice-versa... The first, nature itself and its change over time, includes the physical impact of human on the Earth's land, water, atmosphere and biosphere. The second category how human use nature, includes the environmental consequences of increasing population more effective technology and changing patterns of production and consumption other key themes are the transition from nomadic hunter-gatherer communities to settle agriculture in the neolithic resolution, the effects of colonial expansion and settlements and the environmental and human consequences of the industrial and technological revolution.¹

History of environment is always about human interaction with the natural world or put it in another way, it studies the interaction between the culture and nature. The principal goal of environmental history is to deepen our understanding of how humans has been affected by the natural environment in the past and also how they have affected that environment and with what results. This is called the bilateral approach of environmental history.

Donald Worster has recognised three clusters of issues to be addressed by environmental history. The first cluster deals with the human intellectual realm consisting of perception,

ethics, laws myth and the other mental constructions related to the natural world. Ideas about the world around us influence the way we deal with the natural environment. Here we enter the second level of issues to be studied: the level of the socio-economic realm. Ideas have an impact on politics, policies and the economy through which ideas materialise in the natural world. With the impact of human actions the natural world we enter the third level of environmental history. This level deals with understanding nature itself, the natural realm. In the case of woodland history it is the way forest ecosystems have been working in the past and how they were changed by human action. Environmental history is an interdisciplinary subject.

During the last 40 years environmental history grew from an interest of some historians and natural scientists into a full-fledged academic discipline. In the United States environmental history gained a firm institutionalised base which is reflected in the fact that the annual meetings of the American Society for Environmental History established in 1975. In order to increase the profile of East Asian Environmental History and to improve communication between researchers world wide the Association for East Asian Environmental History (AEAEH) was created in 2009. So far AEAEH has held two bio annual conferences, in 2011 and 2013, that attracted an increasing number of scholars and that is set to be repeated at their conference in 2015.²

The task of environmental history is the study of human relationship through time with the natural communities in which they are part, in order to explain the process of change that affect that relationship. As a method, environmental history is the use of ecological analysis as a means of understanding human history. It studies the mutual effects that other species, natural forces and cycles have on humans and the actions of humans that affects the web of connections with non-human organisms and entities. Environmental historians recognize the way in which the living and non – living systems of the Earth have influenced the course of human affairs. They also evaluate the impacts of changes caused by human agency in the natural environment. William Green, in history, Historians and the Dynamics of change, observed that no approach to history is more perspective of human interconnection in the world community, or of the independence of humans and other living beings on the planet, than environmental history which supplements and often challenges traditional, economics social, and political forms of historical analysis.

An environmental historical narrative should be an account of changes in societies as they relate to changes in the natural environment. In the way, its approach is close to those of the other social sciences like history itself, environmental history is also humanistic enquiry. Environmental historians are interested in what people think about nature and how they have expressed those ideas in folk religions, popular culture, literature and art. That is at least in one of its aspects, environmental history can be a history of culture and ideas. It asks how attitude affect human actions in regard to natural phenomena and in search of an answer, describes what the significant views were on the part of individuals and societies. Environmental history is derived in part from a recognition of the implications of ecological science for the understanding of the history of the human species. The older history made

little contact with nature; it was concerned mainly with the political activities of human beings. When it deal with nature all, it portrayed the advance of culture and technology as releasing humans from dependence on the natural world and providing them with the means to manage it.. Environmental history, however, recognises the biological fact that humans are dependent on natural factor and subject to ecological principles.³

Global scale environmental history, like global and world history in general, stands upon the foundation of detailed local work and regional surveys. Scholarly work in global environmental history is now about two decades old. The first global environment history synthesis came not from professional historians such as Toynbee but from outsiders to the disciplines Stephen pyne, who like crosby appears in the volume, wrote looks on global fine history, while RamchandraGuha also among our authors – published a short history of environmentalism around the world. Pynes work, which grew out of his earlier studies of fire in American history, sought to discuss of fire in American history, sought to discuss every aspect of the human relationship with fire, from cooking and the physiology of digestion to the cultural perceptions of wildfires. Guha's treatise on modern environmentalism emphasised the contracts among the many social movements that go by that name. Joachim Radkau was perhaps the first to learning the training and sensibilities of the historian to general global scale environmental history. A platoon of professional historians brought out global scale environmental histories of one sort or another around the same time as Radkau's. Other scholars presented thematic slices of global environmental history such as deforestation or malaria, over several millennia. To date no one has chosen to followtheir example with respect to any other modern empires, such as the French Dutch or Japanese, all of which would make good subjects for environmental historians. Global environmental history has come a long way in a brief time. The persistent presence of environmental issues in modern life has made environmental history a permanent fixture of historiography unlikely to wither away any time soon. The mounting salience of climatic concerns, deforestation, water shortages and loss of biodiversity has convinced some historians, previously working for some environmental history, that it is no longer to write history without taking the environment, especially climate change into account. Furthermore, global – scale environmental history has benefited from the rise of world or global history has benefited from the rise of world or global history, an unintellectual response to the recent surge of globalisation and in the U.S at least a practical response to political pressure upon school curricula overtime the teaching of world history has slowly legitimized or at least begun to legitimise world history scholarship, including global environmental history. Someday someone will write a global environmental history of railroads of mining of war, of cattle,of the oceans, of religion, of odors, of things as yet unimagined. Global environmental history still has a long way to go.⁴

A new wave began to take clearer shape in the 1970s, spurred, by the critiques launched by the environmental movementand its concerns about pollution and resource shortages. Since that time, it has been a vibrant field of endeavour but has not made much of an inprint upon the reigning ideas of economics. Environment history also take a shape in the 1970s,

again drawing inspiration from the environmental movement and again reacting against a professional tradition that had written nature out of history. The historical profession as it emerged in the nineteenth century, owed its culture and tradition mainly to German universities. The proper concerns of historians exemplified in the work of such influential titans as L. Von Ranke (1797-1886), T.B. Macauley (1800-1859) and H. Von Treitschke (1834-1896) ---- were high ideas and the conduct of state or nation. The focus on the search for the historical truth as revealed by written documents, especially official ones, reduced the place for geographical or climate reasoning and speculation.⁵

Like ecological economics, environmental history maintains that nature is not merely a backdrop to human affairs but an integral part, one that evolves and changes just as culture does indeed environmental history, while different in different hands is always about the change in relation between societies and nature. Sometimes it emphasizes the human role in changing the environment. And at other times it focuses on environmental constraints upon human behavior. For all its charm and promise environmental history sometimes seems like a dismal science. Now it is a popular subject & taught at hundreds of universities of the world.⁶

Environmental history as a separate subject actually arose in the Euro-American world as an offshoot of the post-second world war wave of environmentalism. Interestingly, the subject was dragged into the academic arena by the natural scientists, who recognized the political and historical significance of their subject, rather than by the history on 1967 was traces on the Qhodian shore by Clarence Glacken. Quite a number of scholars; following a Glackens footsteps, made environmental history intellectually acceptable in the U.S.A major English contribution was *Man and the Natural World* by Keith Thomas, (1983). With the publication of Alfred Crasly's *Ecological Imperialism* in 1986, the subject reached another landmark. However, the continents of Asia or Africa did not properly feature in any of these works. In fact the Annales school (the association of scholars like Marc Bloch, Braudel and Ladorie has been nurturing the seeds of environmental history since the 1970s through in a different way. To the scholars of Annales School, the natural environment too, among other things, appeared to be an important consideration in the understanding of the structures of the past.⁷

Environmental history of the U.S grew out of the history of conservation as an ideal and as a social movement. One of the most prominent American environmental historians is Donald Worster. To Worster it is a history of ecology, with roots in the history of ideas that questions the development of modern ecology. To write environmental history according to Worster's program, one must first understand nature itself. Worster is the first to acknowledge that this is not a easy task. He argues that the problem lies in the fact that nature, like culture has a story. The solution is to turn to the natural sciences, which thus become Worster's assisting theories and on the basis of them not the least, the theory of the eco – system to build a new knowledge base for environmental history. The historian should thus ask how it is possible to use this definition of eco systems to better understand the history of human society. With the help of modern science in the form of ecology, the

historian will be able to discover new correlations regarding people and the past. Thus history must proceed via ecology to get nature. As Worster writes “environmental history aims to bring back into our awareness (the) significance of nature and with the aid of modern science to discover some fresh truths about ourselves and our past.”⁸

Environmental history shares a lengthy border with historical geography and historical ecology. Roughly speaking, the environmental historians, the historical geographers and historical ecologists try answer similar sorts of questions through their methodologies vary. Environmental historians, on the other hand are expected to work alone. It has been argued by scholars that climate history too shares a porous border with environmental history.⁹ Until about 1970 ‘environmental history’ was term used Chiefly by Quaternary Geologists and Archaeologists. As such it rarely dealt with historic human interactions with the environment. The breakthrough came in 1969 when an American Henry Bernstein, taught a course called ‘Environmental History’ at Strawberry Will College in the University of London, Nevertheless the term ‘Environmental history is somewhat misleading in understanding the largely borrowed historiography of the discipline if such it is. Global environmental history is not new. In many aspects its development predates the term environmental history and in a real sense was already being used by the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰

The literature on environmental history is far expanding. Among the publishers who are regularly publishing looks on environmental history mention may be made of Cambridge University Press, Texas University Press, University of Washington Press, Ohio University Press, Arizona University Press, Columbia University Press and University of California Press. Among Indian publishers Oxford (India), Indus, Monohar, Concept. Books are showing great interest in environmental history. A large number of conferences and seminars on environmental history are held all over the world every year, India too, is not lagging behind.¹¹

Most importantly, a significant group of ecologist took the natural community as the subject of their science. The older history saw no important relationships beyond those within human society, but environmental history emphasis in its narratives the importance of the interrelationships of the human species to other species and the conditions that make life possible. The older history, when it recognised that nature and the environment were present, treated them as a backdrop, but environmental history treats them as active forces.¹²

Endnotes:

1. [https://in.wikipedia.org/wiki Environmental-history](https://in.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental-history).
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5. John R. Inc Neill (ed) “Environmental History” *As if nature existed*, Josi Augusto Podua Oxford, 2010, New Delhi. P-3 Mahesh Rangaram
6. Ibid
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8. Ibid, p-x
9. Ibid, p-xi
10. Ibid, p.37
11. Ibid, p. xx
12. op, cit, n-3, p-5