

People's History and Environmental History: A Historiographical Quest

RANJAN CHAKRABARTI

I

Introduction

The theme of the present essay—People's History and Environmental History—is remarkably close to my heart. I have always considered both social history and environmental history as people's history. The different variants of social history like 'history from below', economic history, cultural history, military history, gender history, sports history, history of medicine, and health, environmental and ecological history should be regarded as people's history. I would consider all such variants of social history as convenient apertures to understand the life and culture of the people. It is important to remember that all these labels are actually labels of convenience rather than of essences.

I will argue that we may expect to see intense activity in the field of environmental history in future. This particular field will continue to thrive, because the seeds of a new cultural history and people's history are firmly embedded in it. This history is likely to be free from the corrosive influence of Marxism and postmodernism and will be rich and readable. A people's history and/or a history from below is a type of historical narrative which attempts to account for historical events from the perspective of common people rather than leaders. There is

an emphasis on disenfranchised, the oppressed, the poor, the nonconformists, and otherwise marginal groups. The authors are typically on the left and have a Marxist model in mind, as in the approach of the History Workshop movement in Britain in the 1960s.

II

The swing

Lucien Febvre first used the phrase 'histoire vue d'en haut' (history seen from below and not from above) in 1932 when praising Albert Mattiez for seeking to tell the 'histoire des masses et non de vedettes' (history of the masses and not of starlets). It was also used in the title of A. L. Morton's 1938 book, *A People's History of England*. Yet it was E. P. Thompson's essay 'History from Below' in *The Times Literary Supplement* (1966) which brought the phrase to the forefront of historiography from the 1970s. It was popularised among non-historians by Howard Zinn's 1980 book, *A People's History of the United States*. Guy Beiner has pointed out that 'the Neo-Marxist flag-bearers of history from below have at times resorted to idealized and insufficiently sophisticated notions of "the people", unduly ascribing to them innate progressive values'.

There is a clear swing in the pattern of historical research in modern times. This

change is from a history from the top to a history from below. The study of social history has become important as a natural and inevitable result of this new shift. The steady expansion of this sub-discipline has pushed conventional political and diplomatic history to the periphery. The scope of social history was once stated to be ‘the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages’. This encompasses the human as well as economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the condition of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man towards nature, the culture of each age as it emanated from the general conditions of life and so on and so forth. This classic explanation of social history was given by George Macaulay Trevelyan (see, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries*, New York: 1942). It is a broad description, bringing within its fold almost all history with politics not quite left out. In the first edition of the book *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History* (1969), Tapan Raychaudhuri enthusiastically accepted the Trevelyan stand. Looking back however, about twenty years later, he found the Trevelyan position being not above criticism. The approach to the study of social history in the intervening period has undergone a qualitative transformation. The redefinition of the subject matter of social history has been now narrowed down. Christopher Hill in *People and Ideas in 17th Century England*, (Vol. III of *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill*, 1986), has opined that the purpose of social history is not a reproduction of the past in all its totality. ‘History in the first sense’, he observes, ‘is unknowable in all its totality ... most of what has happened to most of humanity is irrecoverable.’ History is a very

uncertain discipline. Social history is an even more uncertain sub-discipline. There is hardly any clearly articulated consensus as to the scope of the subject. Tapan Raychaudhuri later opted for an alternative definition—‘investigation of historical communities by methods of social anthropology or sociology’.

The efforts of historians like Jean Chesneaux, E. J. Hobsbawm, George Rudé, and E. P. Thompson have made us familiar with various forms of pre- and proto-industrial popular resistance in Europe and South Asia—certain types of crime, conflicts over forest laws, social banditry, millenarianism, food riots, movement for folk justice, and microscopic studies of popular culture.¹

Total history

The Trevelyan-approach has been superseded by a fresh one adopted, for instance, by Lucien Febvre, Duby, Braudel, Mandrou, and Ladourie of the *Annales* school. In France, a spirited reaction to the history as event produced a new brand of social history, namely total history. The association of scholars like Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel and Ladourie fostered the emergence of a new school of historians—the *Annales*. They evicted from their subject-matter high politics, and diplomatic relations of nation states. In its place they sought after whole history of human experience. They understood that the human experience was the composite result of the interaction of many phenomena, many of which were either autonomous or only partially subject to human volition. They inherited from Durkheim the notion that the individual could only be comprehended within his social

context. This external context could be understood by the same kind of logic as that employed by natural science. This total history was therefore a history that sought a synthesis of all the material, physical, and mental forces that had shaped the life of man in the past. Bloch and Febvre sought to create a historical discipline that would bring together geography, economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, philology, and any other relevant human thought on natural science in order to produce a total picture of past societies, a picture that would relate all the forces at work into an interacting hierarchy. It was a crucial turning point in the philosophy of history. History ceased to be the story of elites and became that of the ordinary men, hitherto deemed by professional historians to be without history. By 1970, social history seemed to turn round the Past and Present-Annales axis. This new intellectual earthquake was about to sweep everything before it and turn everything upside down.

A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* was published in 1938 (London: Victor Gollancz). This particular book, unlike others on popular history of England, such as G. M. Trevelyan's *English Social History*, has dealt with the lives and struggles of people. However, that does not imply that he ignored other factors of history, though he has dedicated himself in understanding the way society changes. He gave particular emphasis on economic situation and how this alters society on a wider scale. He, for instance, was concerned with the changing role of cavalry during the Thirty Years' War. This new cavalry was without protective covering and mounted on lighter and swifter horses. It mainly depended on the

speed of its impact and on pistol fire leading to the breakage of the formation of the enemy. This is the cavalry of the Thirty Years' War and of Rupert, a cavalry that reflects the structure of society in an age of transition between feudal and bourgeois. However, it was mainly composed of Gentlemen and their followers. Morton never fails to admit and celebrate the struggles of ordinary men and women, ranging from the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 and 1450 to the strikes resulting in the creation of new unions.

Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society by Gareth Stedman Jones (1971) is a good example of people's history. At the time, the largest city in the world, Victorian London intrigued and appalled politicians, clergymen, novelists, and social investigators. The book basically unfolds the nature of the poor of East London during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, opening with valuable details of the structure of the London economy which led to the under-employment, low wages and inescapable misery. It also goes on to analyse the attitude of the non-poor towards these problems with the help of Charity Organization Society and public policy, especially in the context of housing and public health. This book should be credited for analysing the policy during the crucial period of change from the age-old and general assumption that 'the poor are always with us' to the recognition that poverty could be and should be eradicated.

Another noteworthy example of people's history is Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York: 1978). All students of popular culture must owe their intellectual debt to Peter

Burke's seminal study. In a wide-ranging work, Burke established a power model of cultural change in early modern Europe. The term popular culture has been interpreted by him as the culture of 'ordinary people' or the 'subordinate class', those belonging to the level just below that of the elite, though not necessarily excluding the elite. The author, though inspired by the thought-provoking observations of Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, and Christopher Hill, was certainly indebted to the leading figures of 'Annales School' for the formulation of his idea of popular culture. Interestingly, the book operates on two levels, the first is diachronic. The second level is essentially synchronic, that means we are not looking at a popular culture but a multiplicity of popular cultures. Thus, the subject of study is the contemporary co-existence of the local cultures and sub-cultures, and of the pan-European elite culture of the court and the university, in their various reciprocal influences, mutual benefits and frictions.

Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States: From 1492-Present* (New York: 1980) is 'a brilliant and moving history of the American people from the point of view of those...whose plight has been largely omitted from most histories'. This book has contained vivid details and telling quotations. This particular award-winning classic revolutionized the way U.S. history is taught and remembered. It became so popular that more than two million copies were sold.

III

Environmental history

With the rise of environmental history in the 1970s, a further turn in history writing is

noticeable. Fernand Braudel, the well-known French historian and the leader of the Annales school, made a laudable attempt to write a total history of the Mediterranean world giving adequate importance to the role of geography and climate behind history in a *longuedurée context* (Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols., New York: 1972). There is no such history of Bengal. Historians who researched history of Bengal mostly thought of history in ideological and political lines. They wrote hundreds of pages to understand the political forces that led to the Battles of Plassey and Buxar, but did not care to historicize the riverscape, waterscape, landscape, climate and the natural world in the midst of which all these political events were unfolding. Alfred Crosby, the author of *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, chronicles a parallel development that transformed global ecology forever, the trans-Atlantic movement of plants and animals in which Europe transported staple crops like wheat, oats and fruits along with pigs, horses and goats to the Americas, where they were unknown and which sent back to Europe the New World products like maize, potatoes and beans. The continents on opposite sides of the Atlantic, otherwise so different, began to become biologically and ecologically alike as a result of the discovery of America (Alfred W. Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, New York: 1972). Fernand Braudel and Alfred Crosby were able to raise new and fundamental questions because they conceived history, unlike many of us, in ecological, biological and cultural terms.

The historiography of environmental history of India or South Asia is fast expanding and at present there seems to be no dearth of books in this field. A large number of monographs and edited volumes has been published on various aspects of environmental history in recent times. Interestingly, comprehensive accounts of the environmental history of India are fewer. Much of these works are specific case-studies harping upon regional ecological or forest histories, histories of land use, natural calamities or environmental movements in the colonial or post-colonial contexts. A brief historiographical sketch is given here by reviewing a limited number of works published in recent times.

Christopher Hill's 2008 book made an attempt to present a total chronological history of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka from the perspective of the mutual relationship between humankind and the environment. Hill reveals how the civilizations of this geographically diverse region came into existence through their interactions with the physical environment—a relationship with particularly strong social and spiritual dimensions because of the interdependence of the predominantly agrarian population and the land. His focus swings from ancient irrigation techniques and adjustment of peasant societies to the environment, to the forceful thrust of British imperialism on the natural world, the effect of post-colonial technology, and the interaction of religion with ecological issues. But the scope of the work, though laudable, is too large and ambitious to handle in a single volume as attempted by the author.

Deepak Kumar, Vinita Damodaran and Rohan D'Souza edited their 2011 anthology

as a follow-up account of the 1998 book titled *Nature and the Orient* edited by Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran and Satpal Sangwan, which collected several dozen essays on the various aspects of environmental history of South Asia and for many years it helped scholars to open up new research frontiers. As such, it served a number of purposes and presented a broad overview of the historiography of environmental history of the region, to develop further on the research programme laid out by Grove, especially the ecological impact of colonialism and the colonial environmental knowledge systems, and, more broadly, to publicise the necessity of taking the empire as a useful scale of analysis in environmental history between the constraints of the local and the global histories. The volume emphasizes the empire-wide interconnections that fashioned South Asian environmental history from the eighteenth century onwards. Angela Mendonca *et. al.* eds., *Natural Resources, Sustainability and Humanity: A Comprehensive View* (2012) aims to study the mutual relationships of humans and the natural world through time and on diverse sites. It sees environmental history as consisting of three levels. The first deals with nature itself as it affects human history. The second shows how the human socio-economic structure interacts with the environment, causing reciprocal changes. The third is intellectual, showing how individuals and groups represent nature in the realms of literature, philosophy, religion, and popular culture.

Sajal Nag's work, published in 2018, argues that environmental history is not merely a history of forests or rivers, but also of agriculture, climate, economic

practices, and human culture. There is no aspect of environment which has not felt the impact of the presence of humans. The planet earth and its inhabitants are currently in the throes of the most devastating human-made crisis for survival. In an attempt to enhance our understanding of the environmental crisis, this particular collection of essays focuses on a wide variety of environmental events ranging from understanding climate from logbook of East India Company to the construction of the ideas relating to Himalayan tropics, the environmental cost of damming the Damodar river to water politics of south India, impact of the Tsunami of the 1737 as well as of 2004-05, politics over earthquake rehabilitation and the Sarna movements of Eastern Indian tribals.

Critical Themes in Environmental History of India (2020) edited by the present author addresses the fundamental questions of environmental concern in today's world and enquires into the complex patterns of the human-nature interaction within the discipline of Environmental History in India. This book delves in history to address a number of critical themes in environmental history like rivers, water bodies and water, forest, land-use, wildlife and the issue of the history of climate in India. It focuses on the methodological and historiographical aspects of environmental history and raises new questions to open up new windows leading to fresh research questions.

Climate history is recently emerging as an integral component of global environmental history. Climate history calls for an in-depth understanding of the cosmic connections between water resources on the one hand and deforestation, rainfall, soil erosion, climatic change, global warming,

drought, famine, and various natural calamities on the other. Human societies had found ways to adapt to the hydrological regimes and processes in the Bengal Delta and South Asia—the variabilities, scarcities and excesses that occur over space and between seasons.

The subfield relating to climate and history has been already opened up by scholars like Sam White (*The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, 2011) and Zheng Jingyun and others ('How Climate Change Impacted the Collapse of the Ming Dynasty').

Sam White explores the significant and far-reaching consequences of the Little Ice Age in Ottoman lands. The author shows how extreme cold climate and drought sparked off the destructive Celali Rebellions (1596-1610). This rebellion exerted an adverse effect on Ottoman fortunes and eventually led to their collapse. Based on the reconstructed temperatures, rainfall changes, and occurrences of extreme climate events, together with historical records on financial deterioration, food crises, and the frequencies of widespread unrest, rebellions and wars, Zheng Jingyun and his colleagues identified the principal ways in which climate change contributed to the collapse in the Ming dynasty. This study contributes to an understanding of the climate-related mechanisms behind the collapse of the Ming dynasty and provides a historical case study that improves our understanding of the nature of interactions between climate change and social vulnerability.

Climate has also made its way into another important sub-theme of environmental history in recent years, namely, health and epidemics. To cite just

one example from the recent publications, Anthony McMichael (*Climate Change and the Health of Nations: Famines, Fevers, and the Fate of Populations*, 2017), an Australian epidemiologist, highlights the historical connections between environmental change and human health over the last 5000 years. The book discusses about societies gaining advancements in personal wealth and material comfort at the expense of natural resources. As the author looks back at the shifts in climate patterns and their effects on humans, he notes, for example, the decline of ancient Mayan cities. Desiccation in the eighth century BCE resulted in water shortage, decline in food production and stress on the social and political system. The book reveals how the breakup of the Roman Empire, the bubonic Plague at the time of Justinian, and the mysterious collapse of the Mayan or Harappan civilizations all have roots in climate change.

The scholars are now curious to know the relation, if any, between the ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 and global climate change. All viruses and bacteria are products of nature unless they are biotechnologically engineered or artificially invented in laboratories. There is no hard evidence of a direct link between climate change and the outbreak of COVID-19 yet. Climate change may indirectly affect the COVID-19 response, as like all other viruses it may thrive under specific weather conditions. Generally, most emerging infectious diseases, and almost all pandemics in history originate in wildlife, and there is evidence that increasing human encroachment on the natural environment may facilitate the emergence of new diseases. Consolidation of health infrastructure, surveillance of infectious disease in wildlife, livestock and humans, and protection of biodiversity and the natural world reduce the risks of future outbreaks of other new diseases. ■

NOTES

1. Cf. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959 and *Bandits*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1981, revised edn.; George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981; Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow, eds., *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England*, London: Allen Lane, 1975; E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, No. 50, Feb., 1971, pp. 76-136; *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1975; Vic Gatrell; Bruce Lenman; Geoffrey Parker, *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500*, London: Europa Publications, 1980; Jean Chesneaux, ed. *Popular Movements and Secret Societies in China, 1840-1950*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972; *Peasants Revolts in China: 1840-1949*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1973; Sartono Kartodirdjo, *The Peasants'*

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London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1957; Stephen Fuchs, *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions*, New York: Asia Publishing House, 1965; Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, New York: The Viking Press, 1972; Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of Millennium*, Fairlawn, New Jersey: Essential Books Inc., 1957; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971, etc.

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- 3 Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing, 1972.
- 4 Radhakamal Mukerjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, Kolkata: University of Calcutta, 1938.
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- 8 Anthony McMichael with Alistair Woodward, Cameron Muir, *Climate Change and the Health of Nations: Famines, Fevers, and the Fate of Populations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- 9 Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- 10 Richard Grove and Vinita Damodaran, 'Imperialism and Environmental Change, Unearthing the Origins and Evolution of Global Environmental History from Edmond Halley to John Richards: 1676-2000', in *Does Environmental History Matter: Shikar, Subsistence, Sustenance and the Sciences*, ed. Ranjan Chakrabarti, Kolkata: Readers Service, 2006.
- 11 <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-climate-change> accessed on 21 November 2021.
- 12 Ranjan Chakrabarti, *Situating Environmental History*, Delhi: Manohar, 2021.

* Former Vice Chancellor of Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, the author is currently Professor of History at Jadavpur University.