

## BOOK REVIEW

### Social Ecology

Edited by Ramchandra Guha

*Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology.*

X + 398 pp., Index, Oxford University Press, Delhi (1994) Rs. 425/- (Cloth)

Social Ecology edited by Ramchandra Guha brings together some interesting essays written on the social ecology of India. The book is divided into four sections under diverse themes - Nature and Culture; The Sociology of Resource Use and Abuse; Competing Claims over Nature; and Towards Environmental Renewal. The book deals with Social Ecology as a field in the making and not as a discipline of Sociology. Of all the thirteen articles, only two have been contributed by sociologists and four by anthropologists. The other contributors include three economists, two environmentalists with an academic background in technology, two scientific ecologists, an energy scientist, and a historian. The editor's criterion for inclusion has been the relevance of the contribution to sociological reflection and research and not to formal disciplinary affiliation of the author. Editor has given his own reasons for omission of three important themes - trends in population; exploration of transnational and global ramifications of the environmental debate and social policy.

Nature and Culture Section includes articles by Radhakamal Mukerjee, M. Gadgil and K. C. Malhotra, Joan P. Mencher, Madhav Gadgil and V.D. Vartak and Michael R. Dove. Radhakamal Mukerjee's article 'An Ecological Approach to Sociology' is an excerpt from his earlier article, published in 1930. Mukerjee emphasizes that the relationship between nature and culture is both interactive and dynamic, with humans trying to mould the environment to their own ends. Mukerjee's essay is reflective and theoretical. In the second essay 'The ecological significance of caste', Gadgil and Mal-

hotra propose an ecological explanation for the stability of the caste system. Based on field data from peninsular India, they show how different endogamous groups or *Jatis* living in the same regions have so organized their use of natural resources as to minimize inter-caste competition. Devices of resource partition and territorial exclusion ensured that individual *Jatis* and often individual families or lineages within them, had a monopoly over a specific resource in a particular territory. These practices promoted the sustainable use of natural resources thereby facilitating the long term persistence of caste. Gadgil and Malhotra combine theory with empirical research.

In 'Ecology and Social Structure : A Comparative Analysis', Joan Mencher is concerned with the influence of ecology on the social structure of Kerala and Madras. She has based her analysis on the different ecological conditions of these two areas and related these to authority relations, caste practices and forms of transportation.

In Gadgil and Vartak's essay 'Sacred Use of Nature', nature worship in the form of sacred groves has been described. The authors believe that sacred groves, mostly dedicated to mother goddess cults and preserved through strict taboos on the removal of wood, originated in the hunting and gathering stage. Michael Dove's essay concludes this section by interpenetrating nature and culture. This essay blends anthropological and historical approaches, textual and contextual analysis.

The Second Section 'The Sociology of Resource Use and Abuse' deals with perspectives on the interactions of nature with culture. Three of the readings in this section focus on community management of natural resources - its characteristic forms, and conditions for persistence or breakdown. Mukerjee narrates how in many agrarian regimes the most effective use of water has characteristically relied on collective effort. In 'Technology, Management and

Control', Sengupta analyses the technology as well as social organization of water management. While the construction of artificial catchments and channels relied on a skilful use of the terrain, their management was undertaken by both landlords and cultivators.

Elizabeth Whitcombe essay on 'Canal irrigation and Ecological Change in Colonial North India' highlights some negative consequences of the great canal works built by the British in northern India. Problems of soil salinity, water logging and the spread of malaria have been specified.

Dr. Jodha discusses the role of common property resources in the economy of rural people. Common property resources (CPR), broadly speaking are the resources accessible to the whole community of a village and to which no individual has exclusive property right. In the dry regions of India, they include village pastures, community forests, waste lands, common threshing grounds, waste dumping places, watershed drainages, village ponds, tanks, rivers/rivulet and riverbeds etc. While the author himself chooses to highlight the relevance of his findings for development planning and public policy. From a research point of view his essay also point to an area neglected by most analysis of agrarain society. In his study of the 'Other Energy Crisis', Vidyarthi documents the co-sequences for the poor of deforestation, the decline of patron-client ties, and changes in cropping pattern. Kurien and Achari explore the causes and consequences of conflicts between artisanal fisherfolk and large trawlers off the Kerala coast.

The essays in III section further pursue the differential access of classes and communities to nature, highlighting the conflicts that may

arise when two or more groups covet the same resource, albeit for different reasons. Elwin's narration of Baiga's anguish over economic loss caused by curbs on *bewar* (Swidden cultivation) which led to an irreparable injury to Baiga life and spirit. Ramachandra's essay, also set in the colonial period, documents the history of militant peasant resistance to state forestry in the Kumaun Himalaya. Sukumar's essay investigates the conflicts between large mammals and human populations living in and around national parks and sanctuaries. He offers a number of suggestions for mitigating these conflicts, from the managements of animal habitats and populations to the provision of adequate compensation of affected villages.

The two concluding essays have a far wider sweep. At once reflective and programmatic, they offer acute diagnoses of the social processes behind ecological degradation, even as they outline the elements of an environmentally benign, and socially humane, strategy of development. Reddy's and Anil Agarwal's essay, while concerned primarily with the developing world, both essays contain a series of suggestive comparisons between environmental concerns in rich and poor, or first and third world countries. While penned by an energy scientist and environmental writer, respectively, both contributions combine a grasp of the ecological context with a nuanced understanding of changing social structures.

As a volume, it provides a compact and analytically sophisticated overview of environment and society in contemporary India. It should be of much interest to administrators, activists and development of professionals.

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