EDITORIAL

Reflecting on the Past and Welcoming the Future

Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt* and Pranab Mukhopadhyay**

Ecology, Economy and Society (EES) began its humble but hopeful journey with its inaugural issue in April 2018. The founding editors were renowned professors Jayanta Bandopadhyay, Kamal Bawa, and Kanchan Chopra, each of them a doyen in their domain. They brought their years of experience of building the Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE) to an aspiring journal that aimed "to highlight and provide examples of…diverse approaches to the study the links between ecology, economy, and society" (Chopra 2018, page 3). As it happens in the journey of every institution, the founding editors have now handed over the baton to a team comprising Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Jagdish Krishnaswamy, and Pranab Mukhopadhyay. These editors represent the next generation of INSEE members.

The group of founding associate editors has also undergone a transition. Vikram Dayal, Rohan D'Souza, Harini Nagendra, Rucha Ghate, Jagdish Krishnaswamy, and Pranab Mukhopadhyay have now completed their terms as associate editors. A new set of colleagues have joined the team—Nandan Nawn, Joyashree Roy, and Rumi Shammin. Some members of the editorial team—Suresh Babu, Julien-Francois Gerber, Haripriya Gundimeda, Veena Srinivasan, and Sudha Vasan—continue as associate editors, with Asmita Kabra providing stability as the managing editor. Overall, there has been a seamless integration of new colleagues into the journal's editorial collective.

We start by expressing our gratitude to the founding editors and welcoming the colleagues who have now joined us.

* Professor, Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, and The Australian National University, Australia. kuntala.lahiri-dutt@anu.edu.au

** Professor in Economics, Goa Business School, Goa University, India. pm@unigoa.ac.in.

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The editorial team and the advisory board continue to have significant diversity in knowledge domains as well as geographies, age, and gender. This is expected of a multi-disciplinary journal like EES. As a result, the journal has moved from strength to strength over the years. In 2018, the journal was on the UGC-CARE list in India, and it started getting indexed in Scopus by 2021. In 2021, EES also got listed on the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and was accepted into the Free Journal Network in 2022. Even though there are concerns about the use of index measures to judge the quality of a research journal, some benchmarks are helpful for self-reflection. The Scimago website[1] places EES in the third quartile. Considering EES is a young, independent journal, this gives us a warm glow feeling.

The high quality of research published in EES is being noticed globally, and citations per document have been slowly but steadily rising. For example, so far, the "most downloaded" articles are Magotra et al (2020), Bindra et al (2020) and Bhattacharya (2020). The "most cited" articles are Kabra (2019), Fanari (2019) and Chopra & Das (2019). International collaborations stand at nearly one-third, indicating that the journal caters to an international audience.

The location of EES in the Global South, and the fact that it is an independent open-access journal brings multiple challenges. Some of these are financial and administrative, and others are academic. EES asks for no author publication charges (APC). This is possible only because of the unwavering support of INSEE. Additionally, EES has received some financial support from the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), Foundation for Ecological Security, the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment and independent donors.

The inaugural issue of 2018 carried an editorial, one research paper, two commentaries, two reports, two thematic essays, three book reviews, and two notes from the field. In addition, it had seven pieces in the conversation section. The journal has grown significantly since then. The current issue carries four research papers, four book reviews, one thematic essay, and one insight from the field. Since its first issue, EES has carried special sections which specifically focussed on rehabilitating degraded ecosystems, the commons, new epistemologies of water in India, and ecological distribution conflicts in India. In this issue, the theme explored is political ecology; it has

[1] https://www.scimagojr.com/journalsearch.php?q=21101049095&tip=sid&clean=0

been edited by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, Sudha Vasan, and Asmita Kabra. It offers six research papers, one commentary, and one insight from the field.

The increasing number of submissions and their quality give us hope that EES is providing researchers a much-needed space for interdisciplinary conversations. Its popularity is also indicative of the scholars' desire to explore the challenges that growing economies pose to the environment and society.

The current issue brings together a specially curated collection from the domain of political ecology. However, we at EES are yet to have an accurate balance in terms of the biophysical and social sciences in the conceptual framing and evidence analysed. Consequently, the interpretation of ecology can vary. This is not uncommon, and other emerging interdisciplinary fields also reflect such partiality to one or other areas. For instance, political ecology is clearly more inclined towards the politics of resources and the environment, as humans co-constitute these elements. This inclination is evident in the papers in this issue that use a conceptual framing of political ecology.

The field of political ecology emerged in the 1980s as a new analytical tool to explain within a singular framework both environmental and distributional issues. It drew upon the broader field of political economy to argue that environmental degradation does not affect everyone in society in the same way. While development interventions initiate environmental change, those who are economically, socially, and politically more powerful are able to extract a larger share of the benefits, whereas an unfair burden of the costs are borne by those who are less powerful.

As a methodology, political ecology not only heralded a disjuncture from the Benthamite utilitarianism of the greater common good, but also shifted scholarly dialogues on nature–society relationships to class-based analyses within other social hierarchies. Political ecology also asks questions about justice, autonomy, and agency. Scale is integral to these analyses, and the papers in the special section show how the methodology can be deployed at multiple scales, yet recognizes the specificity of contexts and places, and most importantly, puts politics at the heart of our thinking about ecological questions.

A little bit of self-questioning is necessary here. Over the years, political ecology has turned into a much more heterogeneous field than it was when originally conceptualized. This transformation—or maturity of the

methodology—was enabled by significant research that adopted post-structuralist, social constructivist, and new materialist approaches.

To use an example, let us briefly see how the underground—the part of the Earth that is below our feet—has been considered by political ecologists. Using a new materialist approach, Kaika and Swyngedouw (2000) show how an extensive water infrastructure under urban centres remains hidden, opaque, invisible, underground, locked into pipes and conduits, and act as passages that render how societies fetishize commodities (such as water). Others such as Bebbington and Bury (2013) explain the underground through the Cartesian view of space as either empty (to be put to use by society) or a container of things (or stuff, resources for extraction). Melo Zurita (2021) disagrees, and argues that before humans started constructing infrastructure projects, underground spaces were—and still are—an essential part of cosmologies. Indeed, the underground was not only sometimes crucial to survival, it was also a space of refuge, providing vital ingredients to sustain life. Deploying a feminist political ecology perspective, Lahiri-Dutt (2022) maintains that the underground is neither a purely natural (container of resources) nor a mental construct, and can be seen as being constantly redefined and co-constituted as a humanized, and even a gendered, place.

Wider debates in political ecology reveal the productive tensions in the field. Knudsen (2023) suggests that although political ecology has posed critiques of modernist views of science, broken binaries to draw attention to multiple realities, and distributed agency to the subalterns, the time has come to move away from studying events and interactions, and to create a new ontology that can illuminate the kinds of unseen mechanisms and trends that can illuminate the world as stratified, from a critical realist perspective. This slight shift away from new materialism, Knudsen believes, will bring political economy back into political ecology. However, the challenges of discussing the ontology of environmental problems that are embedded in human experience and discourse remain. Forsyth (2023) adds a slightly different angle to this invitation by arguing that political ecology asks not only what is ecologically real but also how, and with what politics, ideas of reality are made and used. He suggests that the task now is to examine how ideas of ecological realities are created, how (and why) some persist while others dissipate, and the inclusion or exclusion of different perspectives in social research.

Strands of these debates, we hope, can be detected in almost all the papers published in the special section of this issue, irrespective of whether they are part of the special section. For example, "Who Accesses Solar PV? Energy

Justice and Climate Justice in a Local Government Rooftop Solar Programme" assesses how the Darebin City Council of Melbourne, Australia, addresses the issue of energy justice through The Solar Saver programme that enables seniors, low-income residents, and tenants to install solar PV in their homes at no upfront cost. These urban residents are at risk of energy poverty and disproportionate climate impacts throughout the world. Therefore, the study has great value for replication in other contexts. The research paper, "Exploring the 'Green"', uses a historical lens to review the environment and ecology of pre-colonial Assam, while another research paper debates questions of private property rights and forest conservation outcomes using empirical evidence from West Bengal. In the special section, articles range in topics including extractivism in Turkey and East India; the environmental crisis in the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam; the complexities of rural drinking water policies and their implementation realities in southern Bihar; and how discourses of toxicity are contested by various stakeholders in the Yamuna floodplains in the Delhi metropolis. The critical lens of race analysis is added to the global consideration of political ecology by Mukul Kumar, in his article dissecting who creates, and who suffers as a result of, industrial disasters.

Adding further richness to this issue is Simon Batterbury's and Denisse Rodriguez' commentary titled "Emancipatory Political Ecology Pedagogy in and out of the Classroom". It deals with how political ecology pedagogy can be taken outside of the classroom, and it is of great relevance to a global audience of researchers.

Finally, this issue features four book reviews and two insights from the field. The first one analyses how conservation and urbanization, despite conflicts, are taking place in Bannerghatta National Park in Bengaluru. The second one analyses gender-based, contextual preferences in arranging marriages in Brahmaputra chars in Assam. Together, these articles showcase the journal's growing ability to deliver on its stated mandate of methodological pluralism and inter-disciplinary research.

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