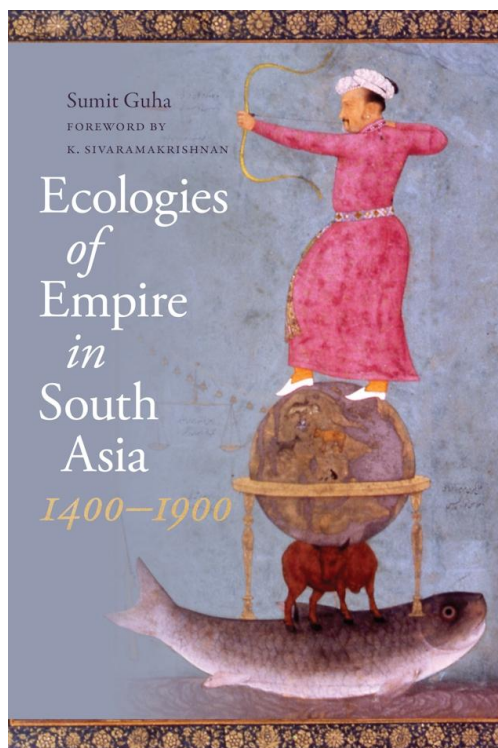


BOOK REVIEW

Empires and the Anthropocene

Lavanya Suresh *

Sumit Guha, 2023. *Ecologies of Empire in South Asia, 1400–1900*. 268. University of Washington Press. ISBN (paperback): 978-81-7824-677-2.



Sumit Guha's book, *The Ecologies of Empire in South Asia, 1400–1900*, is an analysis spanning multiple centuries, exploring the relationship between political power, inequality, and the natural world in the Indian subcontinent. Comparing the environmental legacies of the Mughal and British empires, Guha shows that the establishment and administration of these empires were not just about tax revenues or territorial expansion; they also involved a fundamental reshaping of entire landscapes, both their flora and their fauna, to suit the sovereign agenda. This book is a perfect example of a

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study of political ecology that situates the current climate crisis within the context of deep history.

Environmental history has come a long way since Ramachandra Guha (1993) noted that its emergence in India occurred mainly in response to contemporary ecological movements. The departure starts with his seminal work with Gadgil (1993). Sivaramakrishnan's (2008) work added to the growing body of historical research on ecosystems and imperialism in South Asia. Sumit Guha himself has long been a pioneer in engaging with multiple perspectives through his work on the deep history of South Asia (2009). In the book under review, Guha scales the analysis to the level of empires, addressing a critical gap in the literature by foregrounding the inextricable link between technologies of measurement and record-keeping and inequalities of power.

Guha's method relies on a painstaking scrutiny of little-used archival sources, including Persian administrative records, Maratha documents, and British colonial files. He tracks an epistemic shift: the transformation of local knowledge, rooted in sacred cosmologies and hunting ranges, into aggregated information in the service of centralized power. Central to his methodology is the concept of "enviroming" (p. 5), a term that refers to the knowledge-based representation of the material world in which humans are embedded. Guha argues that humans neither affect nor comprehend the environment equally; hence, the book uses deep historical time to demonstrate the enduring nature of environmental inequity.

The book moves from historiographic critique to how frontiers are established and made concrete. Chapter 1 sets the tone and engages directly with political ecology, focusing on inequality as an ecological driver. Guha establishes his theoretical foundation by critiquing standard climate-change models, such as the History Database of the Global Environment (HYDE). He argues that most environmental datasets that examine deep history oversimplify the matter by making Modernist assumptions—such as the idea that population is a predictor of environmental impact—which fail to account for social inequality, the primary driver of ecological change, as he demonstrates in the book.

The uniqueness of this narrative is that it examines how inequities have historically been perpetuated by state-driven technologies that impact ecosystems at the landscape level, an argument demonstrated in Chapter 2, which showcases the shift from a land-centric Mughal Empire (1526–1600) to the primarily maritime British Raj. He shows how local knowledge remained opaque to the imperial gaze for decades, until the British deployed

novel efforts to map and manage their domains with mathematical precision.

Mapping was a tool that created and perpetuated inequality, with consequent impacts on landscapes. The legibility and dissemination of geographical knowledge also enlarged British power. Further, using evidence from Marathi-speaking West India, Guha documents in Chapter 3 how empire builders needed elite participation. These elites had preferences, such as for white polished rice, spices, and ghee, which shaped land use in favour of specific flora and fauna, profoundly moulding both society and the environment through landlord power.

By focusing on the interlinkage between social and ecological change, Guha rejects the stereotype of the unchanging peasant in a village unaffected by imperial rulers. In Chapter 4, Guha instead draws a mental map of a village, where everything beyond the village is not the “wild”, but arrayed in a gradient from fields to grazing land to defecation sites to the forest. The village itself is a sturdy yet specialized socio-ecological entity, and its creation involves replacing forests with fields and vice versa. Village boundaries were dynamic, changing with ecological conditions such as floods, the availability of grazing land, and monsoons—a feature that the empire sought to curb and make more static.

However, this is not just a story of an empire’s capacity to change landscapes but also a story of conflict. In Chapter 5, the book shows how human conflict plays a key role in shaping ecosystems. Building an empire had a biotic impact, affecting local characteristics from water to stone, captured elephants, domesticated horses and oxen, and forced human labour. People had to change their farming systems and subsistence strategies in anticipation of warfare. The biotic demands of moving armies and active contestations changed the face of the land.

Guha also explores animal history, particularly its effects on woodland composition, as animals were part of the history of defence, aggression, and leisure by the elite.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, brings together the two key processes tracked throughout the book. The first of these is the transformation of the earth due to the unequal effects of human actions that subordinated the many and empowered a few. Second, the growth in measurement technologies and geographic knowledge paralleled the rise of empires. This impacted land surveys and shaped the role of the industrial–military nexus in enabling deeper market penetration, irrevocably changing flora, fauna, and land by the early twentieth century.

This book is a fine-grained account of the state and ecological evolution in South Asia in the late eras of empire. However, its massive scope of 500 years and multiple empires that ruled in that period occasionally leads it to gloss over regional nuances, as the sheer volume of state records, which are the main source of information, skews the narrative toward a state-centric perspective.

Nevertheless, Guha's work remains highly relevant to contemporary Anthropocene scholarship, which often tends to sever human history from natural history (Gathey 2021). By centring empires in the story of the Anthropocene, Guha provides a necessary corrective to depoliticized climate narratives, arguing that ecological science cannot be conducted in isolation from the examination of human power structures. This book will be of interest to students, policymakers, and academicians who are interested in a nuanced history of climate change in the Indian subcontinent. Ultimately, *Ecologies of Empire in South Asia* is an important contribution not only to the field of environmental history but also to historically embedded climate science.

Data Availability Statement: This is a book review, which does not have any original primary data included in the work.

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