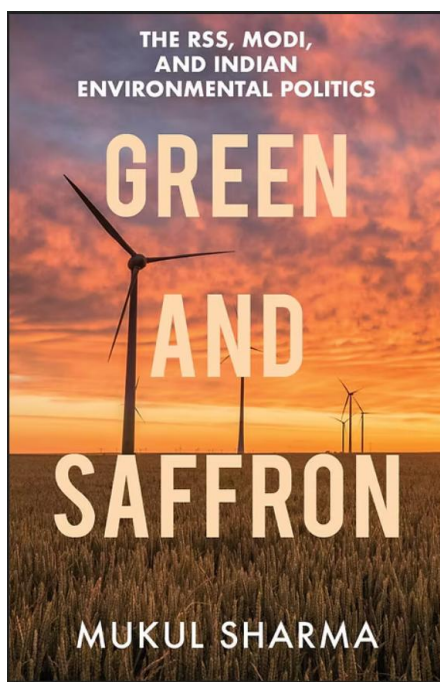


BOOK REVIEW

When Green Wears Saffron: Ideology, Authority, and the Politics of Indian Environmentalism

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Mukul Sharma. 2024. *Green and Saffron: The RSS, Modi, and Indian Environmental Politics*. Permanent Black and Ashoka University. 404. ISBN: 9788178246857.



The question of who speaks for the environment, and in whose name, has rarely been more politically charged in India than it is today. Scholarly literature on Indian environmental politics has long celebrated the country's environmental movements as expressions of subaltern ecological wisdom and democratic resistance. This literature optimistically portrays India's ecological conflicts as examples of community-based environmental politics acting as a counterweight to the predatory state. That optimism now requires serious revision. Mukul Sharma undertakes this revision in this substantially expanded and retitled edition of his 2011 work. Where the first edition examined Hindu

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nationalism and Indian environmental politics as parallel trajectories, this edition names the convergence explicitly: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Narendra Modi are now directly named in the subtitle. With a new foreword by Jonathan Olsen, a new chapter on climate change and renewable energy, and approximately 50,000 additional words, this edition of the book is the most comprehensive account on its subject available in any language.

Sharma's central argument is straightforward: environmentalism and Hindu nationalism have forged a deep, mutually reinforcing relationship in contemporary India, and this relationship is structural rather than contingent. Sharma draws on threads from across political ecology, environmental history, and discourse analysis, combining textual analysis of RSS publications, particularly the *Organiser*, with extensive fieldwork and historical-ethnographic case studies. The prologue grounds the argument by opening at a Kosi River worship fair in Bihar's Khagaria district, where landless Dalits, dominant-caste organizers, and a community managing floods through goddess worship all appear before a single theoretical claim is made. Environmental meanings—the prologue shows—are never politically innocent. Caste, religion, and power saturate it before any ideologue arrives to put it to use.

Sharma begins by identifying the five axes around which green and saffron converge: ultra-nationalism; the desire to make a Brahminical Hindu tradition the governing ecological framework; the emphasis on authority, discipline, and social order; structural hostility towards Muslims, Dalits, and Christians; and programmatic communal politics. Chapter 2—the most theoretically grounded section—traces these axes by analysing four recurring themes in RSS publications: the construction of a sacred Hindu Motherland embodied by rivers and ancient soil; the feminization of rivers as icons of Hindu purity that are under perpetual threat; the invocation of an ancient “Holy Science” as the source of modern environmentalism; and the projection of Modi as the world's environmental saviour. The chapter's sharpest contribution is its analysis of how the RSS and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) approach climate change. Unlike the European far right, which Olsen (1999) has documented as grounded in eco-nationalist and eco-authoritarian ideological formations, the RSS and BJP do not deny climate change. They instrumentalize it, linking Vedic wisdom to solar energy, blaming Muslim invaders and Western colonialism for India's ecological degradation, and positioning a Hindutva civilization as the planetary solution. In addition, India's PARAMPARA document at the United Nations Climate Change Conference 2015 in Paris—which presented air-drying clothes and cycle rickshaws as “ancient Indian practices”—is among

the book's most illuminating examples of the right-wing government's approach to climate mitigation using so-called Indian traditions (MoEFCC 2015: 264).

The following chapters consider three landmark case studies, each analysed against the grain of the celebratory literature surrounding it. Anna Hazare's Ralegan Siddhi watershed programme, Sunderlal Bahuguna's opposition to the Tehri Dam, and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-funded Vrindavan Conservation Project each receive sustained scrutiny. Sharma asks: What political formations are these forms of environmentalism associated with and whose interests do they ultimately serve? The Dalit residents of Ralegan Siddhi—who describe their caste-based exclusion from the village's environmental governance—provide the book's most important testimony. The Tehri Dam opposition's entanglement with Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) networks demonstrates how legitimate ecological arguments can be taken up by an ideological movement that serves a vastly different politics. The chapter on Vrindavan reveals how an internationally funded conservation scheme was colonized from within by Krishnaite revivalism, producing a conservation that expelled “impure” elements from a sacred landscape while international funders chose to look elsewhere.

The book's most significant and novel contribution is the introduction of the concept of “techno-corporatism” in Chapter 6: a centralized, corporate-driven approach to renewable energy that profits a small number of massive firms, with the Adani Group receiving sustained analytical attention. Sharma traces how the Gujarat model reshaped the state into a hub for corporate investment in renewable energy. The chapter demonstrates that Modi's Yoga diplomacy, the Lifestyle for Environment campaign, and the deployment of godmen as solar energy brand ambassadors are not curiosities but components of a coherent ideological project that ties the Hindu civilizational identity to capital-intensive energy infrastructure. This argument expands scholarship on Indian climate governance in ways that have not been attempted before. The last chapter synthesizes the book's findings into five defining features of Hindu environmentalism: eco-nationalism; the Brahminical tradition as the natural ecological framework; eco-organicism that naturalizes caste hierarchy; a politics of purity and pollution directed at minorities and Dalits; and techno-corporatist climate governance. In the Postscript on RSS *shakehas* conducting nature prayers and Environment Day observances, Sharma shows that the saffronization of Indian environmentalism is not only a state project but also a cultural one, reproduced at the neighbourhood level.

The book has limitations that deserve serious engagement. The empirical base for the three core case studies remains unchanged from the 2012

publication. Readers seeking post-2014 observations on Ralegan Siddhi, Tehri, or Vrindavan will not find them in this edition. The gender dimension—while observed in the text—does not receive the analytical treatment the subject demands. Sharma notes the position of women in Ralegan Siddhi's ecological order but does not theorize it with comparable rigour. Consequently, the book concentrates overwhelmingly on the saffron side of the convergence. It focuses far less attention on why secular and left-leaning environmental organizations failed to build an effective counter-discourse.

These concerns exist alongside the recognition that this is a work of genuine importance. Sharma's book forces readers to rethink three decades of scholarship that treats Indian environmentalism as inherently progressive. He asks: What happens when certain forms of environmentalism become available for authoritarian capture? The insights provided in the book are uncomfortable, rigorous, and long overdue. Scholars of environmental governance, political ecology, and Indian politics, as well as policymakers working on climate justice, should read this book carefully and critically. What the RSS and Modi have built is not a corruption of a "purer" form of environmentalism; it is a distinct environmental politics, one that fuses ecological care with majoritarian nationalism rather than opposing it. Sharma's book equips us to understand, analyse, and contest it.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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PARAMPARA: India's Culture of Climate Friendly Sustainable Practices.

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