Chapter One

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND SITUATING SOCIAL ECOLOGY

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GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND SITUATING SOCIAL - ECOLOGY

1.1 Introduction: Environmental History and Recent Thoughts

From time immemorial man’s continual interaction with his environment is something truly unique and remarkable. By ‘environment’ we mean our surroundings or the conditions of life and growth. It also envelops the various kinds of crisis related to water, soil cover, forest etc.¹ In recent years there has been a growing public awareness regarding different forms of environmental changes like green house effect, global warming, climate changes, rise in sea-level and land subsidence. It is as if, we are constantly reminded, in the “throes of an environmental disaster” which makes our future in this green planet uncertain.² Hence everything of importance is now judged through the environmental impact prism. In this larger scenario tracing global environmental history becomes both meaningful and pertinent.

By environmental history we mean “the historically documented part of the story of the life and death not of human
individuals, but of societies and of species, others and our own, in terms of their relationships with the world about them” . Thus one can say, environmental history is the study of human relationship and encounter with nature. Scholars of environmental history believe that as a self-conscious area of enquiry, the intellectual origins of environmentalism can be traced to the “encounter of the 17th c and 18th c western Europeans, especially naturalists, medical officers and administrators, with the startlingly unfamiliar environment of the Tropics and with the damage done to these environments by them” .

The views of one environmental scholar Richard Grove regarding history of western environmental concern is very interesting. Grove starts off by stating that the recent fear of widespread artificially induced climate change “has ancient roots in the writings of Theophratus of Erasia in Classical Greece” . He admits that “anxieties” regarding environmental degradation existed in the literature of Classical Greece, Imperial Rome and Maurayan India, but it was not until mid 17thC that a “coherent & relatively organized” awareness of the ecological impact of the demands of emergent capitalism and colonial rule began to develop, to grow into a full
understanding of the limited nature of the earth’s natural resources and to stimulate a simultaneous awareness of a need for conservation. Interestingly, the conservationist ideology which resulted was based both upon a new kind of evaluation of tropical nature and upon the highly empirical and geographical observations of environmental processes. It also encouraged more research into this sphere and helped in the establishment of number of botanical gardens all over the colonial world. This created a ‘context’ that led to rigorous analytical thinking” . He goes as far as to state that colonial rule “increasingly found conservatism to their taste and economic advantage, particularly in acquiring sustainable timber and water supplies” . Grove thus contends that modern environmentalism emerged as a direct response to social and ecological conditions of colonial rule.

One must understand here that concern for nature was reflected even earlier in the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides and also in the narratives of Braudel, Le Roy Ladurie, Bodin, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, More and Bacon. In pre-colonial India too, there was an existence of the philosophy of man-nature relationship. The seals of the Indus Valley Civilization, The
Vedic texts, the ancient Indian epics, the slokas of Upanishads, the Puranas and the smriti literature as well as the ancient Indian compositions like ‘Malavikagnimitra’ all demonstrated a concern for nature. Thus the Gods worshipped were often nature-inspired. Even tribal societies in precolonial India showed great reverence for nature, worshipped nature and judiciously used its resources for survival and not for greed. Thus traditional customs, rules and norms dictated the use of common resources and any violation of these was a punishable offence. Thus one cannot fail to notice the respect for environment in pre-colonial India. But one must understand that there is a distinction between environmental concern and environmental history. J.R. McNeil in his article “Observations on nature and Culture of Environmental History”, argues that there are three main strands of environmental history: material environmental history, that focuses on changes in the biological and physical environment, cultural/intellectual environmental history, that focuses on representations of the environment and what it says about a society, and political environmental history that focus on government regulation, law and official policy. At the same time one must understand that
environmental history represents a very broad term and hence remains as an open-ended subject. And it is precisely here that Grove’s views have led to a further rethinking of global environmental history. (For a detailed discussion on global environmentalism and its recent trends see ‘Environmental History, Recent Dialogues’ - (ed) by Mahua Sarkar, Gyan publishers 2007)
1.2 Ramchandra Guha and Global Environmental History

Environmental scholar, Ramchandra Guha has tried to trace environmentalism with a global scope, in diverse ecological and national context. In his book ‘Environmentalism, A Global History’, he has provided a brief survey of the ideas and movements that have shaped environmentalism around the world. During environmentalism’s first wave in the 19thc and 20thc, naturalists, officers, philosophers – all responded to industrialization and modern state power with 3 different ideals about proper relationships between humanity and nature. This gave birth to the three generic modes of environmentalism which Guha calls as “back to the land”, “scientific conservation” and the “wilderness idea”. The first was the “moral & cultural critique” or response of poets, naturalists, philosophers like Wordsworth, Ruskin, Morris and Carpenter to the 19thc industrialization and urban pollution. Their veneration of land and the pastoral village was romantic and this has a strong impact on later Indians like Gandhi & Tagore. The second was reflected in the efforts of 19thc naturalists, foresters, colonial officers and scientists like G. Marsh, D. Brandis and Alexander von Humboldt – who strove to
responsibly and efficiently utilize the resources of nature and the wilderness, especially the forest. In this way they believed they could tame the excesses of industrial society. Interestingly this ideal views science and enlightened state regulation of human use of the environment and natural resources as crucial to sustainable yields, progress and prosperous societies. The third response represents the ideas of John Muir and Aldo Leopold, who view human agrarian civilization and urban industrialization in pessimistic terms. They held that nature was whole before human civilization began changing and destroying it. It therefore combines the elements of morality, science and aesthetics. This phase witnessed the establishment of the first national park in the world – the Yellow Stone National Park in 1872 in the U.S. What is truly striking is that diverse environmental movements and conflicts from around the world trace complex connections back to these three divergent and competing ideals.

The second phase of environmentalism co-incided with the post II world war period which saw the U.S. leading the world in industrialization. It gradually evolved from an intelectual response into a series of mass movement. Rachel Carson’s “The Sea Around US” (1952) and her famous work “Silent Spring” (1962), shook
environmentalists around the globe and gave a “clarion call” for a ‘New Environmentalism’. Moreover, it helped environmentalists to appreciate that in nature nothing exists alone and there is an intimate essential relation between plants and other plants, between plants and animals, that nature is in sum “an intricate web of life whose interwoven strands lead from microbes to man.”

Other intellectual contributions further enriched the movement, like North American D.Lowenthal’s path-breaking biography of George Perkins Marsh (1958) and Samuel Hay’s “Conservation and the Gospel of ‘Efficiency’” (1959). Geographer Clarence Glacken’s “Traces on the Rhodian Shore”, set an agenda for environmental history that was applicable on a world scale and extended into several disciplinary areas. From 1970’s along with such organs as ‘Friends of the Earth’, a parallel intellectual movement grew up with the publications of path breaking books like D. Worster’s “Nature’s Economy” (1977), Keith Thomas’ ‘Man & the Natural World’ and Crosby’s ‘Ecological Imperialism’ (1986). The last was particularly important as it set a radical global agenda for environmental history, describing the
colonization of the "white colonies of Americas, Australias and New Zealands through the deliberate as well as accidental agency of crop, weed, animal and disease transfer". The environmental history in Africa, Australia and Asia, although influenced by the global environmental sensibilities, essentially derived its strength from the upsurge of the "history from below" and from the increasing interest in material culture. During this second phase activists in the U.S., Germany & elsewhere brought environmentalism mass appeal and divergent goals in the form of deep ecology and environmental justice movements. Soon environmental movements from the global south challenged the ideals and policies of the rich post-industrialized northern environmentalists and socialism and communism confronted the environment in unique ways as well. In recent decades environmentalists from around the world have gathered in Rio, Kyoto and elsewhere to debate and develop an increasingly unified global environment movement. All this resulted in the emergence of new enquiries and trends surrounding environmentalism and the expansion of the scope of modern environmentalism. This is, in short, the history of global environmentalism.
1.3 The Philosophy of Social Ecology

Over the past quarter-century, a broad social and ecological philosophy has emerged under the name ‘social ecology’. While the field of ecology focuses on the relationships between organisms and their environments, social ecology is a philosophy concerned with the relationships between humans and their environments.\textsuperscript{12} In its deepest and most authentic sense, a social ecology is the awakening earth community reflecting on itself, its future.\textsuperscript{13} In the words of its leading exponents it is “a coherent profound critique of current social, political and anti-ecological trends” as well as “a reconstructive, ecological communitarian and ethical appeal to society”.\textsuperscript{14} Thus ‘Social Ecology’ is basically a philosophy concerned with the relationship between humans and their environment.

Sociologists while working within a model of society divide it into four broad bands – the economy or the forces and relations of production or questions relating to the production, distribution and
allocation of goods and services, the polity or the relations of power and authority between different social groups as well as institutions which regulate power relations – notably the law and the state, the social structure or social arrangements critical to the reproduction of social units – family and kinship, caste and community and finally, culture which embodies characteristic forms of collective self-expression as well as ideas and ideologies which influence social life whether religious or otherwise. But when an ecological perspective is added as a fifth basic category – the ecological infrastructure of human society i.e soil, water, flora, fauna, climate etc.- the picture becomes truly interesting. This ecological infrastructure powerfully conditions the evolution and direction of human economic life, political relations, social structure and ideology. Simultaneously, human participation or intervention itself ‘reshapes’ the natural environment.¹⁵ Hence Guha correctly points out that “while humans are unique amongst the earth’s creatures, they do not stand above or apart from nature. Thus many social facts can only be properly understood and explained with reference to the natural environment within which humans live, survive and reproduce”. The above explanation thus provides the basic categories of social ecology –
culture, polity, social structure, economy and ecological infrastructure. Social ecology, according to Guha, rests on the awareness of the biophysical and socio-cultural domains. Hence it involves the study of the reciprocal relations between the ecological infrastructure, on one hand and the social-cultural and politico-economic domain on the other.\textsuperscript{16}

Clark in his essay ‘A Social Ecology’ points out that as a philosophical approach social ecology investigates the ontological, epistemological ethical and political dimensions of the relationships between the social and the ecological and seeks the practical wisdom that results from such reflection. It further seeks to give us as beings situated in the course of real human and natural history, guidance in facing specific challenges and opportunities. In doing so, it develops an analysis that is both holistic and dialectical and a social practice that might best be described as an eco-communitarianism.\textsuperscript{17}

The lineage of social ecology is often thought to originate in the mutualistic communitarian ideas of the anarchist geographer Kropotkin (1842-1921). However, it is rooted much more deeply in the
thought of another great anarchist thinker, the French geographer Elisee Reclus (1830-1905) who developed a far-ranging “social geography” that laid the foundation of a social ecology, as it explored the history of the interaction between human society and the natural world, starting with the emergence of homosapiens and extending to urbanization, technological developments, political and economic globalization and embryonic international co-operation. Reclus envisioned humanity achieving a free, communitarian society in harmony with the natural world.18

Many of the themes in Reclus’ work were developed further by the Scottish botanist and social thinker Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) “a scholar who sought to understand the dynamic inter-relationships between human societies and their natural environments” .19 He himself described his work as “biosophy” or the philosophical study of the biosphere. Geddes has focused on the need to create decentralized communities in harmony with surrounding cultural and ecological regions and proposes the development of new technologies or neotechnics that would foster humane, ecologically balanced communities. Thus his vision is of an...
organically developing co-operative society. Interestingly, Geddes orients his work around the concepts of “Place, Work and Folk”, envisioning a process of incorporating the particularities of the natural region, humane, skilful and creative modes of production an organically developing local cultures into his “Eutopia” or good community. He calls his approach a “sociography” and applied it in a detailed regional survey as a means of achieving community planning that is rooted in natural and cultural realities and grows out of them organically. He thus makes an important contribution to developing the empirical and bioregional side of the socio-ecological tradition.20
1.4 Geddes-Mumford-Mukherjee tradition of Social Ecology

Many of Geddes’ insight were later integrated into the expensive vision of society, nature and technology and carried forward by two of his outstanding disciples – the American historian and social theorist Lewis Mumford and the Indian sociologist Radhakamal Mukherjee. Thus Geddes – Mumford-Mukherjee together reflected a group of like minded ecologists who did not fit within the three distinct modes of environmentalism and in their analysis they combined reason with passion. Indeed, Lewis Mumford (1895-1986) is one of the most pivotal figures in the development of the social ecological tradition. The philosophical basis for Mumford’s social analysis is what he called an “organic” view of reality, a holistic and developmental approach he explicitly identifies as an “ecological one”. Following Geddes and prefiguring bio-regionalism Mumford believed that the local community must be rooted in the natural and cultural realities of the region.

Radhakamal Mukherjee, the Indian pioneer in social ecology, insisted that any social group must be considered in relation
to the interwoven chain of biotic communities to which it is inextricably linked – the plant, the animals and even the insects which are indigenous to a region. In a series of books and articles written in the inter-war period, Mukherjee explained his theory of social ecology. While the influence of Scottish ecologist Patrick Geddes and the French historian L. Febvre is noticeable, he also kept pace with the developing discipline of scientific ecology and drew fascinating parallel between ecological influences on the plants, animals and human worlds respectively. He emphasized on the “web of life” on human, economic, political and social relations and tested his theoretical ideas through empirical studies of different geographical regions. In the region that he most closely studied, the Indo-Gangetic plain, he found exhaustion and depletion everywhere – in form of deforestation and soil erosion and declining yields – all this in place of the renewal and enrichment of nature, which should legitimately be man’s goal. He thus called for an “alliance with the entire range of ecological forces” through the imparting of new values. In his book “Social Ecology” Mukherjee notes that “the aggregation of life in a given habitat is discernible as a complex web with threads of reciprocity binding together all inhabitants for collective subsistence. Besides, social
ecology posits competitive co-operation as giving the living community its characteristic pattern and organization. According to him in a symbiotic society of plants and animals, cooperation is instinctive, impersonal and vital and not conscious or moral.\textsuperscript{24} It is this interconnectedness of all life which demands a modest, gentle and cautious attitude towards nature rather than the arrogant. Geddes-Mumford-Mukherjee tradition of social ecology goes beyond the partial visions of other traditions of environmentalism. Its key analytical category “ the region” brought together the three realms – of the wilderness, the country and the city, which other schools tend to view in isolation. For a regionalist, “ progress always works simultaneously for the preservation of the primeval wild and the restoration of a stable rural community and form an urban – industrial complex that is sustainable without being parasitical”.\textsuperscript{25}
1.5 Murray Bookchin and the tradition of Social Ecology

Ecological regionalism, the main thrust of social ecologists, has been further developed by Murray Bookchin. He begins with a general perspective on society and nature that is close to Mumford. But he goes on to make crucial contributions that broadens the theoretical basis of the communatarian, organistics and regionalists tradition developed by Reclus, Geddes and Mumford. In short, Bookchin develops and expands the tradition of social ecology in important ways. Of particular importance is his emphasis on the central role of the developing global capitalist economy in ecological crisis as well as new things like mutalistic and ecological dimensions of tribal societies. He has developed a radical philosophy which emphasizes on such concepts like dialectical holism and many modes of relatedness which help one to discover and realize “our social and ecological responsibility” – our capacity to respond to the needs of the human and the natural communities in which we participate. He has therefore emphasized on the complexity of relationships between people and with nature along with the importance of established social structure. Bookchin in his essay “Social Ecology Versus Deep
Ecology –  A Challenge for the Ecology Movement” defines social ecology as a coherent form of naturalism that looks to evolution and the biosphere. To separate human beings and society from nature is to dualize and truncate nature itself, to diminish the meaning and thrust of natural evolution. Therefore social ecology is a term that is uniquely rich in meaning. To social ecology nature is natural evolution which is nature in the very real sense, that it is composed of “atoms, molecules that have evolved into amino acids, proteins, unicellular organisms, genetic codes, invertebrates and vertebrates, amphibians and reptiles, mammals, primates and human beings – all in a cumulative thrust toward ever greater complexity, ever greater subjectivity and finally, ever greater mind“ .

Bookchin is of the opinion that social ecology is the recognition of the often overlooked fact that nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep seated social problems. Hence present ecological problems cannot be clearly understood, much less resolved, without resolutely dealing with problems within society. More concretely economic, ethnic, cultural and gender conflicts among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations.
we face today – apart from those that are produced by natural
catastrophes. In social ecology, a truly natural spirituality centers on
the ability of an awakened humanity to function as moral agents in
diminishing needless suffering, engaging in ecological restoration and
fostering an aesthetic appreciation of natural evolution. Social ecology
calls upon us to see that “nature and society are interlinked by
evolution into one nature that consists of two differentiations, first or
biotic nature and second or human nature” . Bookchin has also
highlighted the role of social hierarchy and domination in society from
which arose the idea of dominating nature. Thus, one can say that
social ecology is an appeal not only for moral regeneration but also
and above all, for social reconstruction along ecological lines. It
seeks to redress the ecological abuses that society has inflicted on the
natural world by going to the structural as well as the subjective
sources of notions like the “domination of nature” – which is seen
as a product of domination within society. Hence social ecology
challenges the entire system of domination itself. It constantly
emphasizes the fact that human beings must play a supportive role in
perpetuating the integrity of the biosphere.
1.6 Conclusion: Social Ecology and the Sundarbans

Social ecology is at the present moment in a stage of rapid trans-
reflection and expansion of its theoretical horizons. Clark is of the
opinion that the project of social ecology “will certainly gain impetus
through the awareness of global ecological crisis and deterioration of
the community”. He is optimistic about its future and points out that
“it will be moved and inspired” by its love of humanity in all its
magnificent manifestation of life on earth and its awe at the mystery of
being able to accept human limitations. The philosophy and tradition
of social ecology with its emphasis on holism and interconnectedness,
can actually attain a special meaning in the present research project on the Sundarbans. Indeed the unique flora and fauna of the Sundarbans have ‘naturally’ influenced the economy and livelihood pattern, the culture, religious belief and ideologies of the people in this region. The harsh environmental realities of Sundarbans have been adapted by the settlers of the region. In this dynamic eco-habitat, life of the people has been always at the mercy of Mother Nature. Whether in the clearing of forests for settlement and reclamation purposes or depending on the forest resources for survival, the ecological constraints, dominance and challenges have been a constant companion of the inhabitants. Hence, in Sundarbans, social ecology has attained a new meaning and dimension. It would be truly interesting to explore and unravel this aspect of the Sundarbans during the colonial period.
1.7 References


2. Guha Ramchandra- ‘Social Ecology’ (Oxford Publications); pg3


5. Ibid - Grove pg 1,2


7. Ibid pg 44

8. Ibid pg 57


10. Ibid- R Guha; pg25

11. Ibid- R Grove (ed) Nature and the Orient; pg 4,5

13. Clark John (art)‘A Social Ecology’ (Anarchy Archives)
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15. Ibid - Ramchandra Guha ‘Social Ecology’ (Oxford Publications); pg 5

16. Ibid - pg 5,6

17. Ibid- John Clark art ‘A Social Ecology’ (Anarchy Archives)
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18. Ibid - Clark


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23. Ibid- Ramchandra Guha ‘Environmentalism’. pg 80

24. Mukherjee Radhakamal - ‘Social Ecology’ (Longman’s, Green & Company, London); pg 86

25. Ibid- Ramchandra Guha ‘Environmentalism’; pg 80-83

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27. Ibid - Clark


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(also found in M Zimmerman edited ‘Environmental Philosophy’)

30. Ibid - Bookchin

31. Ibid - Bookchin

32. Clark John (art) ‘Future of Social Ecology’ (Anarchy Archives)

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