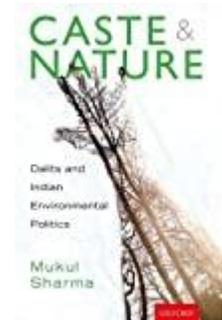




Mukul Sharma. *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics.* New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxxvi + 296 pp. \$53.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-947756-2.



Reviewed by Shatam Ray (University of New Mexico)

Published on H-Environment (May, 2022)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Shatam Ray on Mukul Sharma, *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*

Reading Mukul Sharma's *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics* in the present conjuncture feels urgent and necessary. Both environmentalism (as a discrete mode of thinking) as well as environmental politics have long played an important role in thinking about postcolonial governmentality in South Asia, both within and outside the academy. The eruption of unprecedented protests against the three “farm bills” that were hastily introduced by the Government of India (in 2020) as well as the specific geographies within which these protests found their most ardent support is a relevant point of departure here. Seen from the lens of environmental crisis, the three farm bills bookend the period of increased farm subsidy and institutional support to harvest crops as well as extension of farm relations—what nationalist hyperbole often celebrates as the “green revolution.” Within this timeline, both state regulations as well as free-market agriculture continue to produce an independently act-

ing, agentic “peasant.” That this farmer (and her agency) is located within long-held, tenacious relations of caste, gender, and ecology is often ignored within statist discourses of improvement. It is not a coincidence, of course. As scholars of agrarian societies have argued elsewhere too, the precise point of state intervention is to produce a “modern” peasant whose material realities transcend all colonial/precolonial limits. So while caste, gender, and ecological limits are recognized—at the point of departure—the resultant peasant that emerges after state interventions is one that is no more constrained by these vestiges of India's past.

As Sharma has deftly argued in his book, this logic is not contained within government-led agrarian improvement schemes but has cast its long shadow elsewhere too. To demonstrate how pervasive this practice is, Sharma's monograph is organized through the lens of what he calls “ecocasteism.” Within this understanding, ecocasteism is a set of (historical) relationships

through which caste first articulates an idea of what Gopal Guru has called a “social ecology,” an ideological artifice that allows for settling key issues of access to natural resources and labor within a social order and subsequently producing caste-mediated visions of “nature” (pp. xix-xx). Sharma goes further to identify how strands of “eco-naturalism” and “eco-organicism” are two subsets of this process, which, despite its outward rhetoric, seems to confirm or suggest a return to a natural order of things. In these ideas, while nature is considered to be a cosmic abstraction that can never fully be mastered, the caste oppression that undergirds this “state of nature” is left unacknowledged. To Sharma a return to the state of nature cannot be decoupled from the violent caste order that birthed and undergirded it in the first place and is at the heart of why caste reproduces itself in all forms of toxic environments.

This remains central to the technocratic and technological solutions sought through initiatives such as the Sulabh International. In his first chapter, “Eco-casteism,” Sharma steers his readers through the many strands of environmentalism in India that, under the guise of “indigenous knowledge-systems” (pp. 11-14), tend to reproduce a vision for the Dalits (and to be sure, their emancipation) that are in continuum with the violent realities that have hitherto shaped their routine life. For most commentators on the subject—activists and academics alike—a turn to environmental mode of thinking is to harken back to a precolonial, indigenous relationship with nature that Sharma argues was not only the premise of caste subjugation but also merely presents a discursive possibility for the so-called backward castes to “integrate” themselves with the forward caste value systems. Nowhere is this “environmental blindness on questions of caste” (p. 3) more visible than in the much-lauded Sulabh International initiatives in the elimination of manual scavenging. Sifting closely through the literature put out by Sulabh Publications and the words of their founder, Bindeshwar Pathak, Sharma illustrates the workings of

eco-casteism in fine detail. To him, the compassion that Pathak visibly exhibits toward the class of manual scavengers is prefigured by a benevolent paternalism and the presumed historical “superior qualities of Brahminism” (p. 38), resultantly producing the Brahmin as the *only* agent of reform. Moreover, the dovetailing of Pathak’s Gandhian ethic with that of the present dispensation’s Hindu majoritarian designs portends another visible cause for concern, though Sharma does well not to dwell on it too much.

Sharma’s eco-casteism critique lies in recognizing two registers of elision, what Gyanendra Pandey has called elsewhere “unarchiving of history.” One, that the present solution to the planetary crisis lies in a technological solution that returns back to an imagined Vedic harmony with nature and even if not consciously, ends up being an apologia for the *varna-jati* order it produced. Second, in such an environmental discourse the so-called lower castes are presented as absolutely devoid of their own visions of environmental relationships and hence the only solution available to them is integration on Brahminical terms. He counters the latter in his subsequent two chapters, “Dalit Environmental Visions” and “Ambedkar and Environmental Thought.” The purpose of these two chapters is to redeem the multivocal visions of the environment that have shaped Dalit folk and knowledge systems as an important means of redressing a violent denial of access to material resources as well as dignity to the so-called lower castes. And another attempt by Sharma is to rescue Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar from the conventional tropes of a “Dalit thinker” or legal jurist and instead present his politics of caste annihilation as being informed through an environmental lens. In his own words, Sharma employs a range of Dalit products to help us understand how these “unquiet ecological worlds” are also “ideas and actions encompassing the relationships between humans and nature,” including the social norms that govern these conjunctions (p. 62). The “Dalit products” of songs, poems, and religious

and folk traditions that populate Sharma's second chapter reconstruct a world of soil, toil, and animals that is unambiguously conscious of the simultaneous exploitation of earth and *shudra* people. The vertiginous scale of Sharma's chapter moves between everyday Dalit symbols and stories from all across the subcontinent as well as the deliberative writings of "Mahatma" Jotirao Phule and E. V. Ramasamy Periyar.

In his third chapter, Sharma reads Ambedkar with an environmental sensibility to understand why, precisely, the environmental movements have left Ambedkar out of their cannon while still retroactively celebrating Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indira Gandhi. He reminds us that Ambedkar was deeply aware of how nature was shaped by caste. Drawing from his life experiences of exclusion and denial, Ambedkar knew that water and other elements lose their vitality to "pollution" as soon as a Dalit comes in contact with them. In fact, Ambedkar had a threefold schema of nature that mirrored the marginalization of Dalits in society: an "external nature," "universal nature," and "social nature" (p. 120). However, Ambedkar was a modernist par excellence. Instead of resigning himself to the tenacity of "community" (that which stands outside capital) as a site of resistance to colonial modernity, Ambedkar recognized that community is *precisely* what kept segregated and unequal castes alive. In the second half of the chapter, Sharma reconstructs Ambedkar's writings on technology and modernity as a means of liberating people from caste-based communities. In the way he posits it, this is Sharma's attempt to present an alternate vision to the technocratic utopia that Pathak and his acolytes in Sulabh espouse that is still rooted in reenvisioning the relationship between man, machine, and nature.

Despite these narratives, the questions remain whether Dalit environmentalism could produce a preservationist ethic while fighting for resource reallocation, and whether Dalit social movements

are themselves aware of the entanglements of the "nature question" in their political struggles. It is easy to read into descriptions of gods, land, water, and air something called an "environmental ethic," which might be wholly absent as a fully formed body of ideology as Sharma seems to suggest. To address these concerns (though Sharma never explicitly says that), Sharma's final two chapters provide us with the possibility of environmental struggle and struggles for material emancipation cohabiting. In chapter 4, "Dalit Memories and Water Rights," he reiterates the centrality of water in maintaining life as well as power relations in different communities. Through case studies rooted in two different experiences of the northern state of Bihar, Sharma tells us about the struggles of Lok Shakti Sangathan (LSS) and how they weave a counter-claims narrative on water rights by invoking their own mythic stories of Deena-Bhadri and Eklavya. Through a twin focus on cultural-religious icons and water rights, the chapter "seeks to show how Dalit employ their water politics to question caste" (p. 163), in the same manner that eco-feminism questioned patriarchy a generation earlier. The struggles focus not just on water rights but specifically on rights to fishing in government-managed pond(s) adjacent to a village of Mallah, Musahar, and Kumhar castes. What is worth mentioning is the role of Dalit women in organizing and leading the first set of struggles in the Madhubani district. In his final chapter, "The Dalit Mountain Man and the New Commons," Sharma links his work to a much broader historiography on the "commons" globally, exploring a range of spatial assemblages as examples of politics of the commons before landing on the story of Dasrath Manjhi, "the mountain man." Manjhi's story received wider recognition in large part thanks to a biopic that was released in the Hindi language in 2015. In many ways, and Sharma even hints as much, Manjhi's remarkable story—he single-handedly created a 16-foot-wide pass at the heart of a once impenetrable 360-by-25-foot-high hill—continues to

escape the environmentalist archetype. Received writings on Manjhi are content to emphasize his grit and unrelenting toil, rather than seeing how Manjhi was deeply afflicted by the diversion caused to his Musahar people (and the immense personal loss Manjhi suffered in his lifetime) by the engulfing mountain, and his labor transformed an obstructionist mountain into a democratic passage: one common over another. That Manjhi's story is not told as an environmentalist one but rather as an exceptional life is a poignant reminder of the eco-casteism with which Sharma had begun this book.

As has been pointed out, the book is not only well researched and argued but also urgent. In its compilation of essential Dalit resources, Sharma has handed any student interested in a wide range of subjects a veritable primer of environmental thinking and social movements. While a certain *savarna* bias in Indian environmentalism could well have been suspected, Sharma's eco-casteism is an intellectually fecund point of departure that realizes that critique. This reviewer did have some reservations especially when considering how sometimes it seems that the author is collapsing environmental activism on the ground with academic environmental histories and scholarship, the latter being more cognizant of the caste-class-nature matrix. Moreover, despite his best efforts to shed light on embedded power relations through his dissection of eco-naturalism, Sharma does tend to uphold in his schema a nature/culture binary. Not to belabor the point, but the nature is always given in Sharma's narrative—water, soil, forest. It is an idea of "nature" that comes to us from the European Enlightenment and preserved in the heydays of colonial conservation. As an alternate approach, scholars have begun to think in terms of "entanglements" and the intractability of separating humans and their "nature." While the most remarkable of these thinkers would be Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and others, I am instead inspired to present this critique through a deity that featured in Sharma's own

text. Sharma speaks of Bisilamma, a deity worshipped in and around Bangalore who "wants to burn under the sun, shiver in the cold and get drenched in the rain" (p. 87). Instead of protecting herself (or her followers?) or even "representing" some hybrid space, Bisilamma is salient *precisely* because she is legible as a deity only when she is entangled with the environment—unforgiving or otherwise. Another problem of working with a culture/nature duality is that it inadvertently begins to mimic some of the problems of framing and epistemology of the very eco-casteism it sets to critique. As many of us are aware, such was the charge levelled at many traditions of writing within social history and then the postcolonial "subaltern studies" too. These traditions created two sharply severed realms of elite/subaltern discourse and practice and only a later generation labored to see the convergences among these groups. Sharma's work is illustrative of that juxtaposition of elite/subaltern discourse toward the environment (to be sure, Sharma does at least once in the book critique the "subaltern" approach to community, though one may not be too wrong to consider his work in the tradition of social history). Another instance of the larger methodological continuity that I remarked upon can be evinced from Sharma's treatment of Ambedkar. At best, I remain agnostic toward his environmentalist reading of Ambedkar's vision, which is perhaps not much different, in its execution, to the "green washing" of Indira Gandhi, Nehru et al. in recent times.

None of these objections are significant enough to eclipse what Sharma has achieved in this book. That this is a work born out of deep empathy for its historical subjects will be made obvious to any reader. Mukul Sharma has given us an intellectual tradition that builds on the immensely diverse and variegated lived experiences of its Dalit subjects as thinkers, laborers, and women. This book, I am no doubt, will inspire a new wave of research in the field.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Shatam Ray. Review of Sharma, Mukul. *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56853>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.