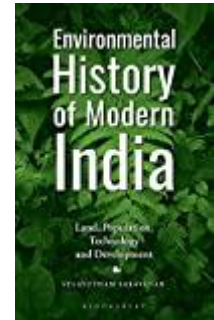


Velayutham Saravanan. *Environmental History of Modern India: Land, Population, Technology and Development.* New Delhi; London: Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt. Ltd, 2022. 276 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-93-5435328-4.



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Amanda Lanzillo on Velayutham Saravanan, *Environmental History of Modern India: Land, Population, Technology and Development*

To understand contemporary environmental threats in India, as well as the approach of the modern Indian state toward land use, environmental degradation, and urban growth, one must contend with the legacies of colonial environmental policies. In *Environmental History of Modern India: Land, Population, Technology and Development*, Velayutham Saravanan traces the impact of state policies on key environmental challenges facing modern India. Covering over two centuries of history, with a particular focus on the last 160 years, the book highlights how histories of extraction, pollution, unplanned urbanization, and unequitable land use have shaped India's contemporary environmental challenges.

Given this range, *Environmental History of Modern India* will be of interest to scholars across several fields, particularly those who seek to understand the intersections of the economic, social, material, and environmental legacies of colonial-

ism and postcolonial governance. The book's most significant contributions include its studies of the continuities between colonial and postcolonial forms of environmental exploitation, as well as its insights into the shifts in regional environmental policy and practice. Moreover, particularly in its later chapters, it emphasizes not only the large-scale historical picture but also the ways that human communities in India are impacted by environmental threats and policies, with a notable focus on tribal and caste-marginalized people.

Environmental History of Modern India is organized into seven thematic chapters, along with overarching introduction and conclusion chapters. Certain themes—particularly the impact of growing demands on land and water resources and the failures or limitations of state policies—tie many of the chapters together. However, each chapter takes up an individual question or focus, and they highlight different moments in time. To-

gether, they ultimately allow readers to engage with both continuity and change across what Saravanan terms “conflict(s) between land, population, environment and development” (p. 242).

Following the introductory chapter, chapter 2 provides an analysis of the history of land use in India from the precolonial period through the present, focusing especially on the ways land was brought under cultivation or into infrastructural facilities between 1800 and 2017. Chapter 3 focuses on population growth and demographic shifts, addressing related concerns ranging from the relationship between colonial land revenue policies and famine, and the successes and limitations of postcolonial family planning and health infrastructure.

Chapters 4 and 5 ask how the colonial and postcolonial Indian states have pursued environmental protection, highlighting limitations and contradictions in policies. Chapter 4 builds on the discussions of colonial policy in the previous chapters to focus more explicitly on colonial forest policy and the ways that it sought to extract and exploit Indian natural resources. This is among the most analytically rich chapters in the book, and it emphasizes shifts in colonial policy that took place before and after the enactment of the Indian Forest Act of 1878, as well as colonial rhetoric and policy related to environmental protection. Chapter 5 traces the adaptation and reorientation of many of these colonial-era policies in the postcolonial period. Saravanan argues that key elements in environmental protection were neglected in India until the 1970s, and although some regulatory laws have been passed since then, important areas like water pollution remain unaddressed.

Chapter 6 returns to a longer-term perspective, studying the ways that the colonial and postcolonial states acquired and used public land over the course of approximately two hundred years. A particular strength of this chapter is Saravanan’s analysis of the resettlement and “rehabilitation” of

communities who were forced from the land because of state acquisition. Chapter 7 turns to an important contemporary form of pollution and waste, electronic waste, highlighting an emerging challenge that Saravanan argues should inform the future of Indian environmental policy. The final chapter before the conclusion, chapter 8, returns to the human impact of environmental policies. As in earlier chapters, Saravanan is especially attentive to the ways that socially marginalized communities are often further harmed and disadvantaged by both environmental threats and state environmental policies.

In addition to the important arguments developed through the individual chapters, this book will also be useful for scholars of Indian and global histories of the environment because it provides an impressive compilation of data and statistics reflecting environmental change in India. These statistics have been carefully compiled from underutilized colonial and postcolonial sources. Presented in a series of tables throughout the text, this data will undoubtedly inform future historical studies on topics ranging from extractive industries to population growth and from land use policy to electronic waste.

Throughout the book, Saravanan connects the theme of population growth and environmental degradation to urbanization, and the data he provides in this area is especially detailed. However, compared to the rich analytical interventions in areas such as forestry conservation, water resources, and landholding, the sections on urbanism seem primarily intended to open future areas of research. Saravanan highlights linkages between population growth, urbanization, and environmental and ecological damage in postcolonial India. But questions about how dense urban settlements might ultimately be reoriented toward or intersect with environmentalist aims are largely left for future scholars. Readers who are interested in the relationships between urban growth and the environment in India might also read

Saravanan's book alongside the work of scholars of urban ecology such as Anne Rademacher, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Maan Barua, and Natasha Cornea.

Environmental History of Modern India is a significant scholarly contribution due to both its detailed presentation of data and its efforts to connect major disparate themes in the history of the

environment in India. By offering a large-scale and long-term history of key environmental policies in India, it places contemporary challenges in context and reveals ongoing conflicts rooted in extractive practices, inequitable land acquisition, and forms of pollution and waste.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

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