

**Urbanization and Environment**  
**Prof. Jenia Mukherjee**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur**

**Module - 04**  
**Urban environmental social sciences frameworks**  
**Lecture - 24**  
**Urban Environmental History: South Asia (SAUEH)**  
**Part I.A.: The Prelude: Inception and The Initial Wave (SAEH)**

So, now with this, we enter into the South Asian context and the aim here is basically to discuss South Asian urban environmental history, which is a very recent you know at a new enterprise in that sense. But I thought it wise to kind of you know discuss the overall environmental history so far as the South Asian context is concerned. Because this will then help us to contextualize urban environmental history within the larger you know ambit of environmental history on one hand.

And it will also enable us to understand that why I mean the environmental historians really did not discuss the urban for a long period of time. So, initially, why and how you know this journey actually started and when it started, what were the key themes of discussions or analysis and why the historians you know were propelled by these themes actually.

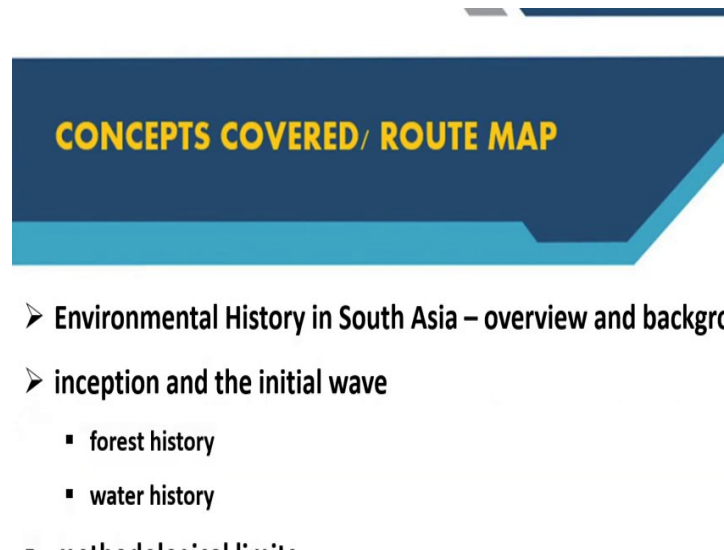
So, again, I know that you know this is a course on urbanization and environment and so, it was quite tough decision for me. I was not being able to decide that whether you know I should, there should be two lectures on the I mean so far as the overview of South Asian environmental history is concerned.

But then, I thought that you know I should do this. Because I thought that I mean this will be important because this number one will expose you to the large variety of works you know to the rich variety and diversity of works that we have so far as South Asian environmental history is concerned.

And then, why there was a period of urban neglect for a long period of time and what is the urban imperative right now. That is actually kind of motivating the historians to take up you know South Asian urban environmental history. So, this next two lectures these

two lectures would be dedicated to South Asian environmental history in general, where I would provide a state of the art analysis so far as this particular domain is concerned.

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So, yes, in this lecture, I would be talking about environmental history in South Asia. In general, provide you with an overview and background. It is quite interesting actually and then, this lecture will limit remain limited, within the inception phase and the initial wave of South Asian environmental history.

Everything is very decent actually like South Asian environmental history, it only started its journey in the 1980s and it became a very rich ground within few years actually. So, we will discuss that and two major like subdomains within South Asian environmental history are forest history.

So, for a long period of time, scholars were only concentrating on forest and again, I will discuss why and how and then, after that like the scholars also started discussing water history. So, irrigation had been a main theme, had been the main theme for some time and then, you know now there have been some more advancements in the field of water history.

So, I will also discuss the methodological limits that some historians are discussing these days so far as the initial period or the initial wave of South Asian environmental history is concerned. And how I mean this has this is not now limited to the limits of

methodological limits, but it has the historians now have been able to you know kind of address some of these limits by more nuanced narratives, which will be actually discussing in our next lecture.

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**Environmental History in South Asia**

- Italians launched microhistory; Britons developed an anthropological history; French historians invented the Annales approach; U.S. birthplace of environmental history
- South Asia (India) – a rich ground

Within South Asia, indeed within all of Asia, environmental history-writing begins to appear strongest in India (McNeill 2011).

Only in India...have environmental historians attracted the attention of their foreign colleagues

So, Italians launched microhistory, Britons developed an anthropological history; French historian, they are like they are renowned so far as Annales history or the Annales approach is concerned and U.S is actually regarded as the birthplace of environmental history and we drew a lot from the U.S and not only we drew, but we also informed the U.S and Ramachandra Guha wrote this path breaking seminal volume.

Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez Alier of course, 1997 volume on Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South, where they discuss that yes, we can borrow a lot from U.S history; but you know our context is different. So, our history or the history of the Global South has to be different from the history of the Global North.

So, but again you know this is how journey started, but now I think we have walked I mean we have we are like we have made a whole lot of advancements in this journey and we have taken a very long route and we have crossed paths, where we can little bit of kind of I am not saying that these frames of analysis are not significant.

But we can now little bit shelves them to an extent because there have been whole lot of advancement and more thematic variations and more nuanced and very sophisticated

analysis that environmental historians are really coming up with. So, yes, U.S. was the birthplace of environmental history and immediately, South Asia also became a very rich ground so far as environmental history is concerned and more specifically, India, the Indian subcontinent.

And you know it started growing, it grew with “extraordinary exuberance” and of course, I am quoting McNeill here. J.R. McNeill again a very renowned environmental historian, who wrote this piece called the historiography of environmental history. And this is such an important informative piece, where he maps you know the development of environmental history in different parts of the world, different corners of the world from Asia to Latin America to U.S. to Europe to Caribbean toward North and he says that you know South Asia environmental history actually grew very fast with “extraordinary exuberance”.

And so, within South Asia, indeed within all of Asia and this is something which J.R. McNeill tells us or makes us aware with aware of. So, indeed within all of Asia, environmental history writing began earliest and appears strongest in India. So, you know we can definitely flaunt this before the world.

So, only in India again, I am still I mean I am the emphasis, I am continuing with this emphatic arguments and which I think South Asian historians, environmental historians are quite proud of and definitely, we can flaunt. We have the; we have the reason to flaunt this.

So, only in India, McNeill says that I have environmental historians attracted the attention of their fellow historians as successfully as in the U.S. and this is not us this is something which is coming from J.R. McNeill.

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## Why India?

- **1970s – the New Social Movements**
- **Indian scholars' involvement and engagement with social and environmental struggles**
- **availability of historical records (“gazetteers of the Raj”)**
- **easy access, through English, to work done elsewhere**

Now, how did this journey actually start and why did this begin? So, why India? So, 1970s is a period which is considered to be the era of the new social movement. Again, there is a debate among the sociologists and the environmental historians on this because the sociologists like D. L. Sheth, they are more I mean they are more happy I mean they are happier actually to consider these movements that flooded the Indian scene, movements like ‘chipko appiko’.

And then, little adhere the ‘narmada bachao’ movement against the construction of the ‘Sardar Sarovar Dam’ I mean the ‘Sardar Sarovar’ project against the construction of the Narmada dam in the river in the Narmada river. So, sociologists think that you know this should be properly described or explained as new social movements.

But environmental historians think that this is the era this was the era of environmental activism because environment was the was at the core and regarding I mean the people were fighting, they were protesting actually to protect the environment. That this is also fact that you know when they were trying to protect the environment, they were definitely thinking of protecting their own livelihoods because their livelihoods depended on the ecosystem services from the environment or you know the ecosystem services from this from the river or from the forest.

But at the same time, you know the historians argue that you know for the first time, environment was in the political agenda and environment was such an important focus.

Environment was the central tenet of the social agenda and political commitment. So, I mean this period should be described as the period of environmental activism and due these movements like 'chipko', 'narmada bachao andolan' should be you know kind of designated as environmental movement.

But whatever you are comfortable with, you can use that; you call it new social movements, you call it environmental movement whatever it is; but of course, the wave of protests actually kind of flooded the Indian scene, the Indian subcontinent. So, and Indian scholar started involving and engaging with social and environmental struggles.

So, while sociologists, they immediately started you know kind of analyzing and assessing the nature and pattern of these movements, historians they you know started providing a temporal lens to this. So, by this, I mean that you know as plenty of historical records were actually available in the form of "gazetteers of the Raj" several proceedings you know land revenue records, then fiscal other fiscal records.

So, pile of documents you know whole lot of mountain of documents, mound of documents actually. So, whole lot of like very rich colonial archive which enable or which made this the possible of South Asian environmental history which actually made possible the journey of South Asian environmental history.

And then there is one particular idea that you know which again I read J.R McNeill's article and he said that you know that the colonial archive is so very rich and the precolonial archive is not rich in that sense and everything is here is actually written in English and English, the South Asians could easily access and so, you know the precolonial period, we have less reports and also as a medium is not English.

So, I mean the archive is not very fertile or not very how do I say? It is not very helpful in that sense to construct and to formulate and write South Asian environment. But I think today, we cannot accept this anymore because the Aligarh historians they have shown that you know they have really worked with Persian chronicles and precolonial medieval sources to show I mean to actually kind of bring out the environmental components in South Asian history, in Indian history in such an efficient and effective manner and this is the book for example, from the popular People's History series "Man and Environment and the Ecological History of India", where we have you have everything from the pre-historical period from prehistory to the modern times.

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## Movement Scholarship

- environmentalism/environmental activism – environmental history
- 1970s – 80s: country-wide resistances in defense of community rights
- the class angle
- critique of state policies in contemporary India



So, yes, coming back to my earlier point that how environmentalism or environmental activism actually kind of promoted or facilitated the journey of South Asian environmental history. So, 1780s, there were country wide resistances in defense of forest rights, which actually pated the state against the community and the reach against the poor, the transnational corporations against the sons of the soil.

So, this of course, a class angle very much in this whole story and so, the there was a strong critique, a radical critique of these state policies in contemporary India and historians and or some scientists like including ecologists like Madhav Gadgil, so they started probing into the colonial past.

And as I also mentioned in my earlier slide, that it was easier because an archive are very rich and unexplored, underexplored archive uncharted terrain was already there waiting for the South Asian environmental historians you know to be accessed and analyst analyzed.

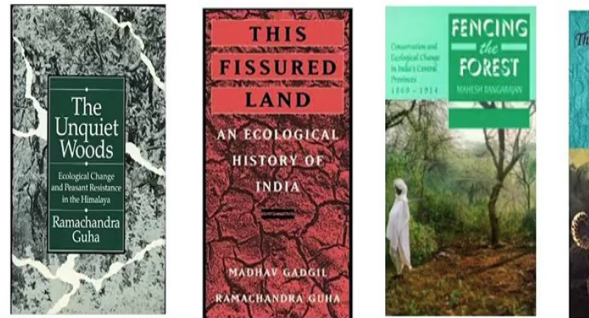
So, and the historians really plunged into this opportune moment to discuss that whether these ruthless you know state policies of the contemporary period should be contextualized or really you know should be understood as a continue a continuation or should be understood in continuity of the colonial laws and policies that kind of created metabolic rift between you know between human beings and nature.

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## The initial wave

### Forest History and Wildlife



So, the initial wave and I would like to mention four major works you know so far as this initial wave or the inception of South Asian environmental history is concerned and you need to remember that the first phase to a great extent, it cooperated with the phase of what is also known as forest history.

So, wildlife came a little later; but the first decade, you know all the works, the books that were published they mainly I mean they mainly dealt with the history of forest. So, and also, land use patterns and issues relating to access of community rights, access of forest, access of forest resources by communities etcetera.

And how you know, of course, the British Raj kind of replaced our social dynamics and community entitlements, that was there during the precolonial period. So, these three books very very significant. The first one 'The Unquiet Wood', it was published in 1989 and by Ramachandra Guha and here, Guha actually kind of fused the sociological narrative that are often there to kind of analyze the peasant struggles and also, ecologically oriented history of India.

So, sociological analysis of peasant struggles, it fused, it got fused with the ecologically oriented history of India, where you know Guha definitely took us to the Himalayan belt, where this 'chipko movement' actually took place in Garhwal here Himalayan district and he says he kind of consulted archives and he pointed out that you know how the British period actually was quite ruthless in terms of in terms of you know introducing



and implementing policies, which disrupted the ecological and social cohesion you know in this particular area.

So, he was quite influenced by the works of Karl Marx of course and also, James Scott in his analysis. So, in similar way, in another book came out in the 90s by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, 'This Fissured Land' and This Fissured Lands are also very very significant, where you know they talk about the very I mean the change in land use policies and how again, the communities were deprived from their entitlements to forest resources, most more importantly like non-timber forest produced.

And here, in this book, very interestingly, you know they talk about human prudence and they say that you know how this colonial period is watershed in terms of this dissolution or the breakdown of human prudence, when the colonizers took everything in their own hands. So, and the colonizer seemed to be the agent absolutely kind of disrupting our social ecological system.

So, and K. Sivaramakrishnan, later he when he kind of reviewed this work, he says that you know in this kind of works which came out during the initial years of South Asian environmental history, these historians or the scholars were quite I mean they had a kind of a moral imperative, where and this moral imperative played an important role to add to this story of the colonial infamy.

So, that is what he said, when he you know kind of reviewed this book. Then, there is another book by 'Fencing the Forest'. I wrote a very interesting review you know by Christopher Hill, C. Hill about this particular book by Mahesh Rangarajan and Christopher Hill says in the review that you know he says that when I first saw this book and I was about to review it, I was sure that I will be disappointed and why did he say like this?

Because he said that by then so by 1990s, there were thousands of books. So, he writes like that. So, there were so many books, numerous works were published on forest history. So, what new you know to learn from this? So, he knew that he will be disappointed. But then, he says that I was surprised you know by this new edition which is Fencing the Forest and he says why this is a new edition why this new edition is significant, what kind of fresh insights actually it could add to the forest history of South Asia?

He says that you know first of all, here, Rangarajan made a province wide analysis, province wise wide analysis and he did not kind of write the entire history of the subcontinent number 1; number 2, he also talks about the clash of culture between the colonizers and the you know the nomadic tribes or the people who were kind of associated with a Slash and Burn or Sweden cultivation.

And the British trained or you know brought up or rather conditioned by the by their private property tradition, they could not actually fathom you know this kind of slash and burn agriculture or this kind of practices by the nomadic tribes and they want to do as a control on them, they wanted to kind of I mean force them find them and force them towards a settled peasant forms of livelihood settled agriculture.

But then, Rangarajan shows that how these people also protested against the colonizers in subtle ways and subtle forms because these were the same people, who were they were the same people, who were used by the colonizers to clear forests, to cut forests, clear forests. So, the their labour was actually quite important to the colonizers and they were conscious about this and so, sometimes they migrated and sometimes you know they just protested that they will not work.

And that kind of you know posed these were impediments this protest and this migration were kind of impediments to the rule to the statecraft and, but finally, of course, they had to relinquish their control on their traditional livelihoods or mode of practices. But you know, but at least you know they felt empowered by a kind of you know putting pressure little bit of pressure at least on the colonizers.

Finally, you know this book is also significant because it also talks about 'Shikar', hunting Indian wildlife and also, talks about the clash of culture between the poachers the native indigenous hunters, who actually kind of hunted for to ensure their own livelihoods. In that way, it was legitimate and on the other hand, I mean the Britishers, who were like who were maniac almost to kind of collect their trophies and I mean hunting was a sport.

But unfortunately, hunting as a sport; how hunting as a sport was nurtured and kind of encouraged. But at the cost of you know the restrictions of rights on the so called quote unquote poachers. Yeah. So, another final book you know 'The State of Empire' by John Mackenzie also I think is quite important because the it adds further insights you know to

Mahesh Rangarajan's argument so far as hunting or shikar is concerned. Because Mackenzie shows and Mackenzie's is not limited to India, but you know the he also discusses Africa.

So, Mackenzie shows that how hunting became a code of mans conduct and a component of imperial culture. So, and he shows that how you know the golden days of bloody sport, meat diet and this mania to collect trophies as part of this ethnic curious also corroborates to the heydays of imperialism and how you know this kind of attitude, this control over the wild animals, it also become a kind of a powerful metaphor to display dominance over nature and the native.

So, hunting became a ritualized activity in that sense. So, finally, you know so far as all these works are concerned during the initial period of South Asian urban environmental, South Asian environmental history, these are mainly you know they are mainly narratives they are saga, the tales of woe which focus on instances of environmental degradation, neglect and vandalism.

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## Irrigation



**AQUARIAN CONDITIONS  
IN NORTHERN INDIA**  
Volume I: The United Provinces  
Under British Rule 1850-1900  
Elizabeth Whitcombe

**Ecology, land use and colonisation: The canal colonies of Punjab**

*Indu Agnihotri\**

The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 33, 1 (1996)

**Canal ir colonial Godava**

*G.N. Rao*

The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 33, 1 (1996)

Travails of an Irrigation Canal Company in South India, 1857-1882

M. Atehi Reddy

Colonialism, Capital Nature: Debating Origins of Mahan Hydraulic Crisis (

Coming to the water sector, there are works on irrigation and the first work came out long back actually in the 1970s. Again, a seminal volume by Elizabeth Whitcombe and where, she consulted archival documents like anything like whole lot of documents, proceedings, reports, gazetteers on finance, railways, trade, see consulting land even

documents etcetera for each of the 40 districts you know of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, which is present Uttar Pradesh.

And she discusses how the indigenous you know well irrigation system was replaced by perennial irrigation system comprising extensive and elaborate distribution channels and how it altered the entire hydrological regime of the study area. And she also talks about the social transformation of changes which were brought about by this you know by this perennial irrigation system.

So, how the new class of land lords or I mean new mediators, they also started they started controlling you know the design or the layout of the distribution channels, I mean kind of dictating who will be having access to this irrigation water and who will not and also, like there are stringent mechanisms to collect water tax.

So, water tax was also imposed on people. So, what happened is that you know she says that the ecological implications were disastrous. So, it led to I mean desertification so, the outcomes were saline deserts, water log swarms and decreased soil fertility and over and above, there were there was a social operation. So, what happened is that the depressed; so, I am quoting Whitcombe here that she writes that the depressed peasantry labored in a distorted environment.

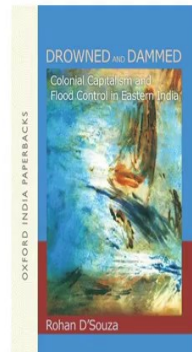
Similarly, yes. So, similarly another work by this is an article published in the IESHR Indian Economic Social History Review in 1996 by Indu Agnihotri. Agnihotri also talks about the like how the canals, the colonial canals in Punjab you know it kind of overran the inundation water system and how you know that was extremely deleterious for the pastoral communities and pastoral livelihood in the region.

There are several other works on this on same on similar lines that discusses you know the capitalist commodification of nature and its impact on the South Indian river deltas like Kaveri, Godavari etcetera. So, works by Reddy and Rao on similar vein. Yes, and Mahanadi is, so this also like work by of course, Rohan D'souza, who also talks about the vicissitudes of this perennial canal system on our ecology and society at large.

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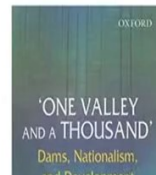
## Embankments



**The colonial state, zamindars  
and the politics of flood control  
in north Bihar (1850–1945)\***

**Praveen Singh**

*The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 45, 2 (2008): 239–59



The R  
Flood  
Syste  
1840s

Author: Wei  
Source: En  
Publisher: W  
DOI: [https://](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022268908000000)

Scientific Empire :  
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Then, important you know works on the construction of embankments on Indian like on floodplains of on Indian floodplains and on river deltas and so, what kind of implications this era of embankment crafted on the Indian socio-environmental scene. So, an Eastern India and again, the work by Rohan Dsouza is very significant in this context so the this book 'Drowned and Dammed' is a major, it is I mean it is a very very significant book on water history of South Asia.

And so, Rohan Dsouza showed that how you know like with a colonial period, there was an entire transition of the Mahanadi, delta of the Mahanadi floodplain from. So, previously, how the people are dependent on floods because they could actually distinguish between good floods and bad floods and they perceive floods as a blessing because when flood waters receded, then the soil was left with a very fertile you know I mean with fertile alluvium with silt.

But unfortunately, he discusses with the colonial period, how there was a transformation from this flood dependent gradient regime the in the Mahanadi delta to a flood vulnerable landscape. So, Praveen Singh, again impact of embankments, so both private embankments and public embankments; so, how zamindars also started crafting a regime of private embankments and its implications for society and environment in North Bihar.

And then, Daniel Klingensmith, she he actually talks about the debates in the bureaucratic circle, which also involve politicians and academia about the about modern,

I mean series of modern hydraulic interventions replacing overflow irrigation in Bengal. One very significant work actually works by Benjamin Weil and also, David Hardiman on North India and this particular work by Benjamin Weil, it is on the Indus Basin.

And basically, it is on the Dera Ghazi town and the fate of the Dera Ghazi town, how the entire town actually had to be relocated when this traditional warning system and traditional water practices were actually replaced by colonial hydraulic interventions. And Weil, that he says that you know I mean the British could have been could have actually first relocated the town and then, deployed the interventionist, then like kind of implemented, could have implemented the interventionist regime.

But this was not the case and the suffering for the inhabitants and also, you know for the entire town was quite huge, quite severe. So, and I think both like David Hardiman and Weil also talks about techno-chauvinism that how the British, they were very chauvinist in promoting their technologies.

Because they were believers in the dictum of big science and big technological innovation and they thought that you know I mean their design their engineers and the centralized control, the era of centralized control and the irrigation department was I mean a kind of an emblem of modernity. So, yes, the element of techno-chauvinism was also very much imbued with colonial hydrology.

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## colonial period – watershed m

- “scientific forestry”
- “colonial hydrology”
- declensionist teleologies
- the omnipotent state; state-society divide

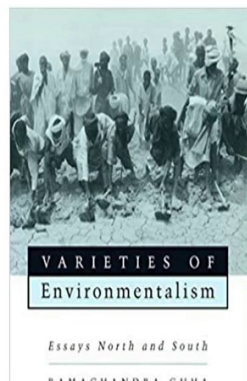
So, finally, like I think the initial wave or the initial scholarship so far as South Asian environmental history is concerned, they these works consider the colonial period as a watershed moment, all these works. So, and for example, scientific forestry as watershed policy or watershed shed you know kind of a strategy so far as forestry is concerned.

Then, colonial hydrology a conceptual analytical traction used by Rohan Dsouza to show that how the South Asian experience of water I mean is altogether different, it became altogether different during the colonial period. And so, I mean there these are teleologic, these are declensionist teleologies or declensionist narratives which also show that how the state actually you know the state was the ruthless exploiter, exploiter of I mean so far as both nature and native was concerned.

So, these are works that also kind of you know discusses how the poor were actually beaten against the rich and the state at the society was beaten against the state and how the omnipotent state kept you know kind of exploiting our natural resource and the native.

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## The subaltern ideological paradigm



So, yes finally, like you know there is also as I mentioned earlier that South Asian environmental history definitely it was influenced by U.S history; but from the very beginning, you know the scholars pointed out that you know while the U.S or the Western environmental history was green in its agenda, South Asian environmental history is actually brown in its agenda.

So, there is a strong like political content and social commitment in you know South Asian environmental history and this it is a favorite example. So and so, I take this example always from this particular book, 'Varieties of Environmentalism by Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, where you know. So, this is Medha Patkar, who was protesting against the construction of the Narmada dam on the Narmada River.

And she was protesting against the Sardar implementation of the Sardar Sarovar project and on the other hand, you know Stan; Mark Dubois, she he was protesting against the intervention on the Stanislaus River in California. So, they were protesting more or less during the same period of time and they were interviewed extensively by you know media journalists.

So, in the interview that was the that was published, I mean where Mark Dubois was asked number of questions. So, when Mark Dubois was asked that why did he took did he take such a radical step you know of chaining himself to a boulder in order to protest against this intervention on the Stanislaus river.

He said that you know this was the last patch of virginity so far as the U.S so far as the history of California is actually concerned, so far as the history of ecological resource or history of rivers in California, is concern was concerned and so he was he wanted to restore you know the river, he did not want the river to get intervened with technological infrastructures.


But when Medha Patkar was actually asked the same question that why was she you know he she was involved I mean she was also protesting against the project, against the Narmada dam in such a radical way through Ansan and Dharna. So, she said that you know not even a single time in her entire interview, she actually talked about the river.

So, she was only talking about the villagers and the villages which will which was I mean which were to face the brunt of the burden during the pre-implementation, implementation and post-implementation phases of this Sardar Sarovar project. So, for her, the concern she was worried about; so far her the concern was the people; she was worried about the people, the marginalized villages, who would lose home, who would lose land you know due to the project.



So, and with this example, with these two case studies, with these two example, Guha, Alier, then I mean it they could explicitly explicate you know the different agendas and the different kind of commitments and political content of environmental activism and hence, environmental scholarship that was forged from this kind of separate saga and separate pathways of environmental activism.


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So, yes some of the references.

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## CONCLUSION: Key highlights

- the context behind the emergence of SAEH
- Historiographical analysis of the initial scholarship
- colonial period – watershed – India's environmental trajectory

And I would like to conclude by saying that in this particular lecture, we discussed the context behind the emergence of South Asian Environmental History and I did a historiographical analysis of the initial phase of South Asian environmental history scholarship and where, you know colonial period is actually projected as the watershed period in India's environmental trajectory.

And the historians had definitely a political commitment and a moral imperative to kind of to churn out you know this colonial period as a distinctive period or distinctive phase altogether different experience so far as South Asian nature and hence, South Asian native were concerned.

Thank you.