

Background on State of Nature in India by Ravi Agarwal

In recent times, India's rich biodiversity and diverse ecological landscapes have been under tremendous pressure from its accelerated economic growth. The issues and conflicts which surround this change may not be unlike those elsewhere, but possibly of a much greater intensity.

The pressures on ecological landscapes are evident. The forest cover has been vastly reduced, wildlife and rich ecosystems, like those in the Himalayas and the Western Ghats, are under threat, rivers are polluted with urban sewage, pesticides and industrial toxics, food is contaminated through polluted irrigation water and air pollution, and Indian cities are choking on waste and dirty air as automobiles multiply. Even as macroeconomic indicators grow, the quality of life of many simultaneously shrinks, especially those who cannot join the new economy, like forest dwellers, fishermen, farmers, artisans, or agricultural workers who migrate to join the labour force as waste-pickers, construction workers etc. The growing urban middle classes seem to care less about the ecological footprints of their prosperity. Historically India's current ecological crisis can also be traced back to the colony, which imposed exploitative systems and institutions, as well as the exploited natural resource for imperial purposes. However today, as a newly emerging economy and a democratic nation-state, the country cannot escape the responsibility for addressing its growing internal inequities and habitat destruction. Hence the crisis is part of both an imposed idea of nature, but also its current developmental aspirations.

Simultaneously, India has had a long history of peoples' struggles, especially those directly affected, and whose lives have been intertwined in centuries-old cultural and economic relationships with the natural world. The *Chipko Movement* (1970s, women saving forests from tree logging), the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (1980s' to now, against big dams and displacement), the Bhopal tragedy struggle (since 1984, for environmental justice from large multinationals), or the Nyamgiri movement (2000s' - saving a sacred hill from being mined for bauxite) are but a few that demonstrate how the ideas that people have of their futures, could be different from those driving modern development processes, which do not factor in complex relationships with nature.

The scientific approach to 'nature' is not new, but has had a long, post enlightenment trajectory. Nature itself, was posited as separate from man, and in the 'service of mankind.' This binary man-nature idea, led to centralized approaches, such as the top down conservation of forests and wildlife, and control of rivers and water (replacing community-based management), or the mapping of land and biodiversity to mobilize them for commerce and/or Nation-State building. This replaced local and diverse understandings based in complex, cultural and lived relationship of men and women with nature. This position of nature in the service of man helped facilitate its merciless exploitation. This was further aided by technology and capital, leading to massive global flows of labour and materials to fuel an increasingly seamless and exploitative global economic system.

Along with global capital becoming increasingly free-floating, high technology has infused all aspects of human life and become almost undistinguishable from the human. One response to the crisis has been to reduce nature to abstracted monetary values, which are subsequently traded on 'big data' based computerized monetary markets, and where, for example, carbon is currency. Other proposals are for massive geo-engineering of planetary weather systems or water systems at a scale and expense hitherto unknown. These almost fantastical attempts which take the centralizing approach to a new level, and yet have not even begun to bend the trajectory of the ecological crisis. It is a signal that more diverse approaches are called for.

This new age of power over nature is being called “the Anthropocene¹,” or “Age of the Human.” This idea has been some time in the making. Our understandings of the impacts of human “progress” have grown over the past few decades, with markers of the damaging consequences noted in concepts such as Limits to Growth, the Sixth Extinction and Climate Change. Images of polar ice caps melting confirm that the planet as we know it is changing rapidly. Alongside fresh ecological readings of histories suggest new linkages between nature and Nation-making.

The idea of the Anthropocene as a new place holder for rethinking the state of planet, contains more complexities than are immediately apparent. The art historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos writes that (though) “the term (captures) the geological impact of human activities, ... (and) unites climate science and environmental studies with the environmental arts and humanities—the crisis ... (points) to complex socio-economic, political and material operations, involving classes and commodities, imperialism and empire, biotechnology and militarism, that distributes causality for environmental change beyond the problematic generalization of human species-being.²” Dipesh Chakrabarty, the historian and post-colonial scholar, asks, “Why should one include the poor of the world—whose carbon footprint is small anyway—by use of such all-inclusive terms as *species* or *mankind* when the blame for the current crisis should be squarely laid at the door of the rich nations in the first place and of the richer classes in the poorer ones?³”

The term Anthropocene has also been contested by terms such as Capitalocene (Moore⁴), Plantationocene, Chthulucene (Haraway)⁵ etc. However, all of them in varying ways, pinpoint the idea of ‘nature’ as central to our current crisis, and point towards that idea being lodged in social structures, gender politics, and income inequities. The eco-philosopher Timothy Morton goes a step further, to question ‘nature’ itself as a category and proposes the idea of an ‘ecology without nature.’⁶

The ecological crisis today is foundational and multi-dimensional, and addressing it requires cutting across traditional disciplinary categories of knowledge. It necessitates a sharing of perspectives and recovering multiple ways of knowing and relating to nature. Moreover, solving the crisis demands that our gaze to be turned inwards to an examination of our notions of power and ethics. Planetary futures are at stake.

¹ According to the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), the professional organization in charge of defining Earth’s time scale, we are officially in the Holocene epoch, which began 11,700 years ago after the last major ice age. The ‘Anthropocene’ is a term coined by atmospheric scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the present time interval, in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities.

² Demos T.J. in *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Gynocene: The Many Names of Resistance* at <https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/27015-anthropocene-capitalocene-gynocene-the-many-names-of-resistance> (accessed December 20, 2017)

³ Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2009) *The Climate of History: Four Theses* Critical Inquiry, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 197-222, The University of Chicago Press

⁴ Jason W. Moore (2017) The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44:3, 594-630

⁵ Haraway, Donna. (2015). *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin*. *Environmental Humanities*. 6. 159-165. 10.1215/22011919-3615934.

⁶Morton, Timothy. (2007). *Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

