Environmental Humanities and Sustainable Modernity in Asia (and Beyond)

Prasenjit Duara makes a strong case for the relevance of the humanities in understanding the human dimensions of environmental and climate change. Multiple aspects of the environmental crisis of the Anthropocene, not least questions of environmental justice in efforts to adapt to and mitigate climate change, can be engaged through humanistic inquiry. With a focus on Asia, Duara argues that questions of identity, representation, religion, ethics, knowledge systems, and more—central concerns of the humanities—are deeply embedded in imagining how to respond to present environmental challenges.

The field of environmental humanities (EH) has recently been appearing in many universities and institutions in the United States and Europe. However, it has not yet developed a foundation in Asia and other parts of the world and, beyond environmental history, remains weakly developed in Asian studies. My goal is to clarify the humanities' relationship with other areas of environmental studies, looking at issues such as the adaptation to mitigation of climate change, its differential impact on communities, the representation of nature, and religion's role in understanding the environment. By doing so, I aim to develop an agenda that EH may call its own even as it necessitates collaborating with various other areas of inquiry.1

What are the environmental humanities?

The term "environmental humanities" is unfamiliar even to most humanists and social scientists. While new and ill-defined, it is clear that the interest in the environment among humanist scholars and interpretive social scientists has emerged as a response to climate change and the environmental crisis increasingly dubbed the Anthropocene. And, whereas debates on the definition and dating of the Anthropocene continue, as well as debates among natural scientists regarding the extent to which climate change is related to the Anthropocene, the concern with the environmental crisis marks a new turn among humanists.2

Until a few decades ago, the study of nature had been separated from the study of society, and until still much more recently, in the humanities. Consequently, the latter has had little to contribute in response to the sustainability crisis facing our planet. Indeed, the naturalist ideas of early philosophers of the environment such as Arne Naess and Aldo Leopold, Rabindranath Tagore, M. K. Gandhi, or Liang Shuming and Fei Xiaotong have been rapidly overtaken technical or market-based approaches.

"Religion, culture, narrative, politics, and historical memory form the meaning-making framework through which humans act and seek to manage uncertainty and conflict."

But there is a fair consensus that environmental problems have been caused by the character of human relationships to nature and biodiversity. Moreover, while science and economics can offer technical diagnostics and formal policy solutions, increasing uncertainty and conflict in the era of rapid climate change mark the human condition. Religion, culture, narrative, politics, and

historical memory form the meaning-making framework through which humans act and seek to manage uncertainty and conflict. The ultimate delivery of technical and market solutions depends upon these conditions. The humanities and social sciences are obliged to grasp the fundamental conditions that have generated and sustained the crisis, both historically and in the present day, as well as the ways in which people can and do respond to it.

Frameworks, ethics, and values

Although the area of inquiry is impossibly vast, environmental humanities (EH) *focuses* on human-nature interactions and their implications—whether relations with particular animals, indigenous views and practices in nature, or human interaction with an ecosystem. This focus may be discipline-specific, but it is also clear that disciplinary boundaries will have to be crossed to generate useful studies. A few humanist projects undertaken in collaboration with scientists are emerging. Moreover, the projects often also cross territorial boundaries, including sovereign territories, requiring transnational modes of inquiry.

While the focus question is arguably manageable, a critical obstacle is the absence of a broad framework to study EH. Amartya Sen highlights how the absence of a framework to bring together ethics and science hinders any coherent debate and discussion on policies. Even within economics, he argues, there is no framework to assess the comparative costs of different sources of energy, particularly in terms of *externalities* (consequences lying outside market calculations—e.g., costs to the ecosystem or of air pollution).

There has probably never been a consensus in the relations between ethics and science, but in our recent past there was some coherence between models of modernization and the ethics of development. Yet the problem of a coherent framework is even more complicated today, as models of sustainable development introduce new questions, or perhaps even overturn older assumptions, about economic growth and the raising of living standards. If economic growth as we know it has led to the degradation of our natural world and the commons, then not only future generations, but billions in the present, will suffer greater deprivations. Yet how can we deny developing countries' aspirations, which are based on the idea that continued economic growth is absolutely essential to poverty alleviation. Any paradigm of sustainable development will have to engage this ethical question.

"Ultimately, we will need some kind of value change to limit the mentality favoring increasing GDP and consumption."

Even if the production of renewable energy can achieve the highest levels recommended for the world, it still cannot alleviate our current rate of accelerating climate change and rising ocean levels. Other problems of environmental degradation still remain. Ecological economist Tim Jackson argues that, as long as we remain on the treadmill of accelerating production, the reduction of energy inputs—and lower effective costs of energy—will simply increase the pursuit of higher production/profits and greater exploitation of other resources. He argues that resource inputs decline relatively to unit of GDP, but not absolutely. Ultimately, we will need

some kind of value change to limit the mentality favoring increasing GDP and consumption. He looks to goals of human prosperity, or flourishing, other than consumption and profits, including enhancing quality of life, recreation, arts and crafts, the simple pleasures of social life, and responsibilities to others.3

At the same time, we need to continue to address poverty. Jackson suggests the two need not be contradictory. He proposes a normative model of prosperity where incomes across the world need not exceed 15,000 dollars per capita to lead a sustainable life; this could be achieved by de-growth in the developed world and sustainable growth in the developing world. Following a version of Sen's argument, Jackson posits governments should be oriented to increase human capabilities rather than consumption. However, capabilities must be construed to enhance freedoms bounded by a world of limited natural resources.

Although it is a normative proposal for an ideal world, the possibilities of Jackson's argument deserve to be kept alive. The fields of philosophy, ethics, and the arts could certainly elaborate and develop related arguments in innovative ways to which I will return later. Just because the world has been set on the treadmill of increased production and consumption does not mean all other projects have to be put on hold until the GDP treadmill is overthrown. Problems at the intersection of climate change and poverty alleviation remain to be addressed. We may see these under the broad categories of adaptation, mitigation, impact differentiation, and resistance/protection.

Asia, climate change, and the environmental humanities

According to the United Nation's 2014 [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)](link)report, Asia, with its tropical coastal megacities and vast populations, is one of the regions most vulnerable to global warming, and with severe effects on the world. For example, the Himalayas and Himalayan plateau (circum-Himalaya) are the source of Asia's ten largest rivers, sustaining close to a billion people in over ten countries. Mammoth dam building and other diversion projects are affecting the livelihood of many species and tens of millions of people, often leading to global outmigration. A still more immediate impact of environmental and climate change in Asia affecting the world concerns the global supply-chain networks whose production and integration nodes are concentrated in Asia (though for global consumption). Major climactic events, such as the Japanese tsunami and the Thai floods of 2011, severely disrupted these flows and raised their costs and insurance rates for many in the industry.

Studies of climate change and the environment often focus on *adaptation*, which has come to include issues of human security and the forced movement of people as a result of environmental disasters. EH follows in this direction, but the time-scale of this scholarship is much longer and deeper. From a historical perspective, it is possible to differentiate systems of land, forest, and water use at different times and places that have been more sustainable than others. Regarding environmental migration, Asian histories are replete with mass movements

(and rebellions) produced by ecological and social destruction of community-based institutions that managed natural resources for generations; today *ecological migration* is both a reality in much of the world and a policy (with complex consequences) pursued, for instance, in China. At the same time, it is important to study the adaptive or coping strategies of communities and their learning experiences, particularly as new conditions or technologies affect their situations. Problems of adaptation include the analyses of the differential consequences of new markets or technical solutions among different people and places.

"What are the relations between centralized knowledge and governance systems and local ones in responding to and preparing for changed climactic conditions?"

The problem of *mitigation* involves still longer-term considerations, including the exploration of human-nature relationships in various dimensions and scales—ranging from the personal to the collective and from the local to the planetary. This would engage questions of philosophy and ethics, representation and aesthetics, the motivations and capacities of different institutions—social, religious, and political—and economic behavior under different circumstances. What, for example, are the relations between centralized knowledge and governance systems and local ones in responding to and preparing for changed climactic conditions? As Sarah Vaughn's recent "Just Environments" piece suggests, the use of local materials may or may not contribute to environmental weakness, but it is the role of engineers to test out the viability of materials in response to and consultation with local communities and civic groups.

A third area of inquiry is the *differentiation of impact*. By impact, the humanistic disciplines reference not only the direct impact of environmental disasters, but how various communities and ecologies are likely to be affected in the long term. Policy orientations tend to be disposed toward those impacted most directly by environmental disaster. Why have mitigation policies such as eliminating the use of firewood for cooking—in order to reduce carbon emissions and protect human lungs—met with forms of resistance? A project in Rajasthan, India, brought together a team of scientists and anthropologists to study why wood-burning stoves persisted despite the availability of gas stoves. The anthropologist observed that the women who gathered firewood in the morning, who described this work as a burden when asked, also enjoyed the sociality of this activity; to think of it as drudgery is not so much wrong as reductive. Engineers and policymakers in Chinese cities also found that urban waste-pickers oppose plans to mechanize waste separation, in spite of the pickers' exposure to toxins and their status as the most marginalized of migrant labor.4

Impact differentiation has been framed in environmental studies under the category of "political ecology," which refers to the examination of the politics of environmental use and management. The environmental humanities could further develop it by understanding the ways in which nature has been *represented* through multiple media. How do these mediated representations reflect differentiated power structures in the natural-social landscape? Early in 2015, Chai Jing, an established news reporter in Beijing, made a documentary called *Under the Dome* about the grave dangers of air pollution to the average Chinese citizen. Although

thoroughly equipped with statistics and expert knowledge, the power of this documentary lay in the way Chai personalized and humanized this ongoing disaster. For instance, she asked a six-year-old girl if she had ever seen a star or a white cloud in the sky, to which the girl said she had not. The documentary is said to have been viewed online by at least 300 million Chinese before it was pulled by the Chinese government. While the documentary was extremely powerful, it may have also obscured other environmental problems that did not directly impact middle-class urban residents as they did the rest of the country. The problem of visibility is central to the problem of representational forms.

Religion, the sacrality of nature, and environmental activism

"Among the most marginal communities devastated by environmental degradation are forest communities in Asia."

Adaptation, mitigation, representation, and resistance are not necessarily disconnected themes. For instance, among the most marginal communities devastated by environmental degradation are forest communities in Asia. The forest communities of Prey Lang, Areng, Cardamom in Cambodia, joined by activist Buddhist monks and NGOs at various scales, have led a remarkable resistance movement against massive deforestation, hydropower clearance, and displacement by the building of mammoth dams. Between 2000 and 2013, 14.4 percent of Cambodia's rainforests disappeared as a result of government land concessions to logging companies. These Cambodian and neighboring forests are the largest carbon sinks in mainland Southeast Asia, and the alliance of communities, religious actors, and civil society activists is committed to protecting and saving the forests.

These communities, who call themselves Cambodia's "Avatars," organized regular mass demonstrations in Phnom Penh's main square in 2011 by engaging in traditional forms of ritual theatre combined with scenes from the Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar*. They drew the support of many civil society groups and university students, spawning new organizations, which joined their protest and protection efforts in various capacities and at local, national, and international scales.5

These activities reveal new types and scales of alliances as well as emergent values and paradigms that have come from the countercultural penumbra they occupied in the last century. On the one hand, these include American spiritual movements that embraced a holistic view of nature—from Henry D. Thoreau to deep ecology—and grassroots and community movements in Asia fostered by rural reconstructionists, Gandhians, Buddhist forest monks, Daoist temples, and others. Often, scientists, educators, and public interest litigation (PIL) activists are also involved in these engagements; and we have seen how some historical religions are remaking themselves into saviors of the environment. We may be able to see some glimmers of value change in a convergence of historical trends—of marginal, local communities in Asia and elsewhere in the developing world seeking to conserve their livelihood resources alongside modern groups committed to environmental protection. This convergence

is an emergent, if still weak, historical force poised on something globally significant: it reflects a philosophical attitude toward the possibilities of a sustainable life in opposition to the neoliberal capitalist or even more basic national-modernization cosmology focused on the conquest of nature to feed unending wealth.

To be sure, there are manifold contradictions within this oppositional mosaic of visions and interests—hence its weakness—but I would hazard that a new concept of the sacrality of nature with social, discursive, and legal underpinnings is emerging from this mélange. In many parts of the world, marginal and threatened communities are resisting efforts to exploit or industrialize their natural resources by appealing to the sacrality of these commons. In Asia, elements from Daoism, animism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and other faiths are mobilized to protect community resources by using the terminology of sacred homeland, community forests, and holy waters. On the other hand, civic groups concerned with the environment are developing a modern form of sacrality expressed in the inviolability of protected areas as "common heritage of humankind."6 On several occasions, these expressions have begun to converge. One example is the Eastern Himalayas protected zone in Yunnan, which is the home of many minority groups as well as the cradle of NGO activism in China.

The humanistic disciplines have historically contributed to, as well as explored and debated, modes of subject formation, whether individual or collective. They have, as we know from the rapid spread of modernization theory in the last century, contributed to the creation of new types of identities suited to the "modern" age. They also have the potential to create subjectivities that incorporate natural and planetary consciousness, identity, will, and leadership for a sustainable modernity.

Banner photo credit: USAID Cambodia/Michael Gebremedhin/Flickr

TAGGED IN

activismclimate and environmental changeLand rightspollutionsocial movements

Prasenjit Duara

Prasenjit Duara is the Oscar Tang Chair of East Asian Studies at Duke University. He was born and educated in India, and received his PhD in Chinese history from Harvard University. He was previously professor and chair of the Department of History and chair of the Committee on Chinese Studies at the University of Chicago (1991-2008). Subsequently, he became Raffles Professor of Humanities and the director of the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore (2008-2015).

In 1988, he published *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China, 1900-1942* (Stanford University Press), which won the Fairbank Prize of the AHA and the Levenson Prize of the AAS. Among his other books are *Rescuing History from the Nation* (The University of Chicago Press,

1995), *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), and most recently, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). He has presented about 150 keynote and distinguished lectures globally since 1996, and his work has been widely translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and the European languages. He was awarded the *doctor philosophiae honoris causa* from the University of Oslo in 2017.