

Editorial:

Re-imagining Human-Nature Relationship in North Bengal

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Ever since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) brought the environmental issues to the popular consciousness, slowly but steadily, the scientific, academic and the political community has been engaged in rethinking, many a times collectively addressing, the issues of social/human relations with nature. Henceforth, climate change, global warming, rising food prices, energy security, waste management, ozone depletion, loss of biodiversity, extinction of species, deforestation, loss of people's livelihood, depletion of finite natural resources, land degradation, pollution of all kinds, access to clean water, lack of sanitary facilities etc are all part of many global as well national and local debates and discussions. Alongside, theoretical perspectives like neo-Marxism and Feminism have begun to explore the change in the meanings of 'nature' in different discourses and representational practices, in trying to understand the social construction of nature. Unfortunately, most of the discussions veer around the assumption that the earth's environment is a subset of the human activity, and that earth belongs to humans. Whereas, in reality, human culture and its economy are a subset of the earth's environment and resources, and humanity is only one of millions of species that depend on them.

The concept of development, though at times can be equated to human advancement and sustainable efforts at improving human conditions, it has become more or less a one-dimensional concept directly linked to GDP and economic growth. Even though sustainable development, defined in the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report of 1987, titled *Our Common Future*, as "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," was a silver lining, we are rapaciously exploiting the finite natural resources. It is a fact that the modern industrial activity has embraced a pathological gigantism, through increased corporate consolidation, at the expense of everything else. The signs are now well known: climate change, mounting waste, loss of topsoil and fresh water, increasing rates of species extinction, deforestation, increasing human-animal conflict, endangered coral reefs, toxic chemicals that will remain for eons in the environment, persistent human poverty and hunger, and an increasingly inflated, unstable world economy.

To make matters worse, beginning with the last quarter of the last century, neo-liberalism has put forth the ideology that human wellbeing can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedom within an institutional framework characterised by private property rights, individual liberty, unfettered market, and free trade. Further, under the neoliberal agenda, the developmental state has been more or less abandoned, resulting in a high degree of marginalisation of various disadvantaged sections of the society. A large majority of those marginalised population depends on their immediate environment for their survival. And for them, the neoliberal ideology which poses tremendous challenge to the local and global

environment is even more detrimental.

Of late, some of the key concerns that humanity grapples with are the (re)distribution of resources, the sustainability of the dominant development paradigm and the environmental/ecological degradation associated with the said model. There is a broad understanding that the current high consumption based, market driven development cannot sustain for long because of the knowledge, among other, that we have finite resources, and second, any development activity is adding to the carbon footprint, taking a toll on the environment/ecology. However, we cannot deny the fact that a large majority of Asia and Africa are deprived of their basic amenities and living conditions, which needs to be fulfilled. So the question is how do we find a reasonable balance between the high consumption of the North and the basic needs of the South?

Across the political spectrum there exists a consensus that environmental concerns are here to stay and that something needs to be done. The awareness is so much that environment, alongside globalisation, became the centre stage of international relations agenda. The policymakers gradually understand the fundamental linkage between the human society and the physical environment. However, there are challenges manifold:

Firstly, most nations of the world are facing grave economic crisis and they are trying to find solutions within the conventional economic wisdom, in which environment has the least priority. Their immediate concern is to come out of the economic recession and not environmental concerns.

Secondly, the consensus that everybody needs to do something about the environment should not lead to a situation of unrestricted flow of private capital into the sector. They should not be allowed to create a bubble (this time a 'green bubble') out of this crisis. Instead there should be governance mechanism that should precede the market entry.

Finally, and most importantly, is the question of how the political class and the policy makers frame the environmental problems. For example, if we are to posit the problem of environmental degradation as a security issue, then there is the danger that the Realists in the military will be entrusted for a policy solution. It is certainly true that some environmental issues give rise to security threats, but it is a completely different story to say that all environmental threat is a problem of national security.

The massive floods that affected Kerala in 2018, the 2014 disaster in Uttarakhand, the cyclone Phailin which devastated Orissa, the flood situation in many states, and not to forget the tsunami are all indicators of our vulnerability vis-à-vis nature. What is more alarming is the increasing intensity, frequency, scale, and impact of these disasters. Equally a matter of concern is the challenge of rehabilitation of the affected communities and the rejuvenation of ecosystems. It is true that floods, droughts and cyclones are natural disasters. But we need to examine our role in exacerbating the situation, through climate change, thereby they become human made. We also need to re-examine our assumption of nature as inanimate and independent from humans and the attitude of conquest and control of nature. The need of the hour is to re-imagine the relationship between human and nature to understand the real

causes of deepening vulnerability to disasters, sustainable and just patterns for post disaster rehabilitation and rejuvenation, and most of all, to ensure our own existence on planet earth.

North Bengal, a region which falls on the fault lines of many of the concerns narrated above, is a fit case of examining and re-imagining human-nature relationship. A region close to the Himalayan range; ecologically fragile; rich in biodiversity; where a large number of tribes resides; questions of their livelihood; where increasing human-animal conflict is happening; where large scale development activity is envisaged demands careful attention—both in theory and practice. The national seminar of which the papers are presented in this volume was a modest attempt towards this goal.

Biju Mathew, the organizing secretary, introduced the discussions drawing attention to the hazards of the dominant development paradigm, and stressed the need to search for a viable alternative in order to keep the earth habitable. Prof. Somnath Ghosh, Vice Chancellor, North Bengal University, gave the inaugural address expounding on the threats and implications of such a possibility tracing the scientific history of the change nature had undergone since the beginning of the world. For him, the ‘mother nature’ is ‘silent’ and dynamic; it is the human intervention that vitiates this relationship. In his keynote address, Prof. Virginius Xaxa, Deputy Director, TISS, Guwahati, talked about the pre-colonial organic human-nature interaction based on survival, and the colonial, economically exploitative encounter between the two in North Bengal. In tracing the historical development of the human-nature relationship he highlighted North Bengal, wherein the pre-colonial organic human-nature interaction was based on survival; whereas the colonial encounter was economically exploitative. Prof. T.B. Subba, Vice Chancellor, Central University of Sikkim, in his presidential address questioned the very subsuming category called ‘human’ and critically analyzed how the question of human-nature relationship was in essence a man-nature debate. While bringing in an element of spiritual connotation, even as emphasising on the literal and political interpretations, he argued for primeval notions of animism as a response to organized form of religion(s) and rapid strides in the field of science and technology. He further suggested the inclusion of environmental education as mandatory; inventing the techniques to acquire alternative sources of food and energy; and, implementing the ways to control the population, for restoring a healthy man-nature relationship.

The academic sessions focused variously on the spiritual outlook towards nature, of the politically manipulated and economically structured divisions implied in the relationship, and the eco-feminist and eco-imperialist approach to the entire problem. The concluding plenary session of the day by Prof. A. K. Ramakrishnan, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, talked about the dialectical relationship between human and nature correlating politics and ecology, bringing in economic considerations like the market forces and political structures like the state, studying them in the light of the social demands for conservation. He further argued that the crisis of environment is in fact the crisis of humanity itself. He urged that the political institution of the state must play a pro-active role in protecting the environment vis-à-vis the onslaught of the global capitalism. The seminar, on the first day, thus entered into those critical interstices of nature which understands nature not only as ‘natural’ but also as a component of the social, economic and political lives of the people.

The second day of the seminar began with the plenary session by Prof. Milindo Chakraborty, Sharada University, Delhi NCR bringing in discussion on the antithetical role of forests as an asset and as a liability. The various direct use values, indirect use values and non-use values of forests were talked about, revealing that our perception of nature is fragmented and hence we receive only a partial view of the human-nature nexus when we look at it through different lenses of interest. Solutions to socio-environmental deadlocks between conservation and development can therefore be achieved through compensation grants for those areas which nurture an extensive forest cover. The first session engaged in thoughts of the conflict that underlies, governs and inflects any interaction between human and wildlife, of the problem of encroachment, of the intervening external presence that both the human and animal society feel threatened with. It also dealt with the identity crisis suffered at a regional and cultural level due to large scale in-migration favoured by pull factors and the change in intra-cultural community relationship that arises from difficulties in locating one's cultural genealogy in the social map.

The second session was aligned to an industry-based approach to the problem, using industry, especially small scale industry, not as a metaphor of opposition to nature but as a concrete metonymy of the abstract notion of sustainable development, as a mediator between the need for progress and of conservation, and as a medium for women employment. The third session focused on issues of migration and settlement, including economic and demographic considerations. In the evening plenary session, Prof. Samir Kumar Das talked about the disappearance from public records of people displaced from their homes due to natural calamities. The strange irony of the situation is that in spite of them being formerly in a Foucauldian 'panopticon,' continuously watched over, they are compulsorily excluded even from the state gaze once their geographical locatedness is disturbed.

The seminar dealt with the following broad themes in the six academic sessions: Engaging the Nature: Theory and Practice; Strategic Significance of the Region in India's Security Paradigm; Need for a viable Disaster Management Policy for the Region; Communities and Demographics of North Bengal; Environmental Sustainability: Case Studies; and People, Migration and Urbanisation. It concluded with the valedictory address wherein Fr. (Prof) George Thadathil, the Principal of the college, talked about the lack of recognition of local cultures and the need for 'discovering' them. On a philosophical note it calls for a re-appropriation of the realisation that cosmos, the human and the divine co-inhere and are the three dimensions that constitute the only reality. The re-imagining, as the seminar showed, is not only a rethinking but a remembering of a forgotten reality. This requires a suspending of our consciousness only to redirect it to the primal realization of being in our most simplistic identity just a life-form where hierarchy fails to operate except as an effect of survival and not as its cause. Even as it was a grim reminder of the crisis of the humanity, the seminar also restated the human potential to transform the world in a better way. It goes without saying that such a re-imagination ought to be political in its true sense as the present issue of the Journal brings home through the politics of ecology.