

## Book Review

### **Speaking Rivers: Environmental History of a Mid-Ganga Flood Country, 1540-1885, Vipul Singh, Primus Books, Delhi, 2018**

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The book under review as a result when the question of the water-human relationship has become a crucial public concern of the 21st century. In India, Environmental History is a new field of discipline of History developed by Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil, K. Shivaramkrishnan, Richard Grove, Mahesh Rangarajan, and other historians. Their studies primarily looking at Colonial intervention and post-colonial approaches but to a large extent pre-colonial South Asian Environmental history remained unexplored.

In *Speaking Rivers*, Author Vipul Singh covers the history of the Mid-Gang flood country where many rivers meet, from mid sixteen century to the later decades of the nineteenth century. Culturally, this delta carried distinctive features and traditions. In the sixteenth century, for the first time, with a deep knowledge of the nature of the river systems, the Afghan ruler Sher-Shah united the region and gave its proper identity. In the sixteenth century, this area was attached to the Mughal Empire, but it still retained its regional identity. The nature of the region, particularly the livelihood of the people, their traditional knowledge, and ecological differences had remained unchanged because landscapes at the grassroots level remained integrity in a broader political and socio-economic context. The British East India Company occupied this region in 1765, by Diwani rights. The prime motive of the British was to maximize exploitation through the collection of revenue. Without any knowledge of the rivers of this region, British engineers were trying to control the river and its flood country, which had a long-term adverse impact on the river ecology. Even though massive changes were taking place, a subtle and unique regional identity continuously flowed.

In ancient India, political upheaval and cultural prosperity began mainly with the leadership of Pataliputra. In the medieval period, the central identity of the region had shifted to further north Delhi and Agra in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab region by the Sultanate and Mughal rulers and it remains as a productive agricultural zone. Patna took the leading role in international trade which continued for the next hundred years. From the late eighteen century when the manufacturing industry began to decline their main emphasis was on revenue collection. The writer draws how the British policy disturbed the whole ecological balance of this region and turned it into famine-prone areas. In the pre-modern period, the need for drinking water, and the agricultural purpose to some extent utilized by controlling the several rivers. But it was the British period when a large number of embankments, canals, and railways were built to fulfill their colonial exploitation that's led to a massive change in the riverine ecology. The traditional sustainable knowledge of the inhabitant of the region became lost.

Speaking river is a masterpiece for being the first study on the livelihood of Diara land. The fluvial character of these highly productive char land has a different socio-economic system. By implementing various acts and regulations, the British Government kept the region under extensive

cultivation and leased them to Zamindar. As an effect of this system, the agricultural people were deprived of their traditional land and right. The fishermen lost their customary habitation which caused labor migration from this 'prosperous' region.

Here, the writer concentrated mainly on the four centuries from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, but the analysis of the last centuries is the strongest of the three. In this sense, it will certainly help to fill the gap of Pre-Modern South Asian Environmental history kinds of literature. The key significance of this book is the extensive use of traditional sources, these are myth, folklore, and regional songs, etc. Various local languages got important for used as source materials to construct the history which gave regional taste. There is no way to not appreciate the amazing skills of the writer for analyzing the facts. I think a book should become more acceptable to the reader if a difficult concept is easily understood by the use of easy language and description. No doubt this demand has been largely fulfilled. Not only for the researcher or history lover or any reader, but this book will also affectionate those who love rivers or nature. Hopefully, this book will open up new directions in future research on Environmental History.

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