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BOOK REVIEW

An Environmental Basis for Comparing different Histories and Experiences

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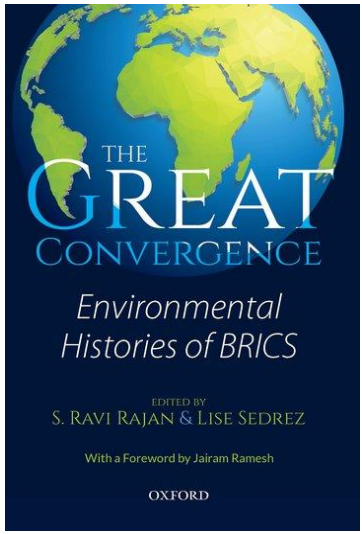
S. Ravi Rajan and Lise Sedrez (eds.). 2018. *The Great Convergence: Environmental Histories of BRICS,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, ISBN: 9780199479375; pp. 462, INR 1195



The edited volume under review is an interesting and unique academic exercise. The Great Convergence follows from the efforts of 16 historians and social scientists in writing a meaningful environmental history of BRICS. The acronym refers to five major emerging economies – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa that together comprise a geo-political association. The term BRICS was first coined in 2001 by Jim O'Neil, the then chairman of Goldman Sachs; arguably one of the most powerful multinational investment banks in the world today. The idea for the BRICS took off after 2009 ─ given the obvious strategic allure for uniting economies that have 41% of the world population and make-up 32% of the

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World's Gross Domestic Product in 2015. But forging and sustaining unity among these nations is no easy challenge given that they are not only diverse culturally, environmentally and politically, but are also geographically far parts of different continents. Or as plainly remarked in the introduction by the editors S. Ravi Rajan and Lise Sedrez, 'countries with very little in common as far as history goes' (p.xv).

Admirably enough, the 16 essays that comprise the volume do manage to make a compelling and sometimes even convincing case for how the environment can become the ground for establishing a conceptual linkage for comparison across different histories and experiences. The book is divided into three broad themes: the state; the role of civil society; and, environmental histories. The first part explores how the respective states and their governments have dealt with the notion of nature and engaged with ideas of environmental conservations or preservation. The authors – Regina Horta Duarte (Brazil), Paul Josephson (Russia), S. Ravi Rajan (India), Xueqin Mei (China), and William Beinart (South Africa) give a fairly detailed account of how environment policies were steadily formulated as part of state strategies to either exploit or conserve natural resources. The essays by Josephson and Mei are particularly instructive with regard to how communist governments thought about the natural world despite Marxist ideological blinkers and the urgency for development. The authors in this section do also attempt to engage with each other's essays and one also notes how the respective governments draw upon international contexts such as the Stockholm Conference of 1972 and the Rio Conference of 1992 to elaborate state-level responses to the problems of environmental degradation and alarm.

On the second theme, dealing with civil society organizations (CSOs), the contributions by José Augusto Padua (Brazil), Nicolai Dronin (Russia), Radhika Krishnan (India), Fei Sheng (China), and Farieda Khan (South Africa) helpfully map the distinct social contexts for environmental action. Khan's excellent discussion tells us how CSOs in South Africa in the apartheid era (1948-94) pursued wildlife protection as an element of racial segregation. While some of the CSOs did challenge the racial divide, it was only in the post-apartheid period that a more 'people-centric' notion of conservation was developed. Krishnan's essay draws upon a vast canvas of how Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), popular resistance, academicians and popular science initiatives combined to create a vibrant and forceful mood for environmental protection in India during the 1970s through to 2000. At heart, she informs us, these 'multiple voices' underlined the need to meaningfully define notions about 'progress' and 'development'. Sheng's discussion on the role of Environmental NGOs (ENGOs) and

Government NGOs (GONGOs) in China reveals how complicated and yet hopeful the problems of achieving conservation outcomes can be under a communist government.

In the third theme, Lise Sedrez and Eunice Nodari (Brazil), Julia Lajus (Russia), S. Ravi Rajan and Rohan D'Souza (India), Shen Hou (China) and Sandra Swart (South Africa) provide a broad survey approach to outline the state of environmental history as an academic field in their respective countries. Here, I would commend the essay of Shen Hou for both her literary style and thoughtful discussion. We learn how environmental history writing in China was substantially driven and inspired by the works of environmental historians in the United States. Notably, the seminal efforts of Donald Worster. Interestingly, once the environmental history takes off in China at the turn of the 21st century, Hou informs us that several Chinese scholars begin to reverse the academic gaze by researching and publishing on the environmental histories of the United States, Europe and even the Pacific regions of Australia and New Zealand. As a historian located in Nagaland, such a perspectival shift by Chinese scholars is particularly telling as the environmental history of the Northeast region of India, with the exception of Assam, continues to remain meagre.

Sadly, the limitations of space prevent us from providing a more detailed discussion of the many insights, perspectives and concepts that these essays throw up, and therefore in this very brief review one can only conclude by restating that such a collection deserves a larger engagement and that it will make for excellent teaching material for college and university students. As almost all the authors maintain, the future of the environmental history writing has many good reasons to go beyond the limitations of national histories.