

## Fluvial Histories

Vipul Singh, *Speaking Rivers: Environmental History of a Mid-Ganga Flood Country (1540-1885)*, Primus Books, Delhi, pp xi + 245, Price/-, Rs. 1195, ISBN: 978-9386552822 (hardcover)

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*Speaking Rivers* is a welcome addition to environmental history on South Asia and confirms the view that our scholars are engaging with fluvial landscapes and riverine communities in earnest. Narrating an anecdote on how young researchers defending their research proposals two decades back used to be advised that their proposals would get more justice if one researched it from a disciplinary lens such as Geography, Vipul Singh tells his audience that environmental history has come a long way in South Asia. While there is no dearth of literary writings on the rivers of India, it is only recently that the scholarship has moved to explore how fluvial landscapes have been integral amongst environmental aspects, which have shaped cultural identity and regions.

Singh urges us, drawing on Mark Cioc's words written in the context of the Rhine, that "if we try to understand the transformation of Ganga, 'from a free flowing to a harnessed river' over a long period of time, we may get a fresh light on the river system perspective" (p. 11). In the current context, where two seers – Swami Nigamanand and Swami Sanand – have died during their protest in trying to get the Government's attention to "*aviral and nirmal Ganga*" (ensuring Ganga's free flowing and unpolluted status), Singh's book urges us to understand "what rivers have allowed people to do' in the *long duree*. The region Singh refers as 'Mid-Ganga Flood Country' has been studied earlier by scholars whose writing focused on what embankments did to the people of Purnea district from the late eighteenth to twentieth centuries (See, Christopher Hill's 1997 book, *River of Sorrow*). However, Singh's book doesn't discuss writings from Indian scholars who have challenged Hill's thesis of depicting Kosi as 'River of Sorrow'. While it is true, speaking in a strictly historical sense of periodization, that Vipul Singh has selected 1540-1885 as period of

study, it is curious that throughout the book there are no references to how communities organised themselves in North Bihar to seek literally and figuratively 'liberation from floods' (people's movement had chosen the name '*Barh Mukti Abhiyan*' then).

In the last two decades the narrative of historicizing our rivers and listening to them 'speak' have seen writings coming not only from Christopher Hill, Praveen Singh and Rohan D'Souza, but a range of other scholars, some of whom have moved from their academic training in civil engineering and their professional lives as 'community mobiliser' to undertake narrating history in a serious sense of academic scholarship.

This book persuasively urges us to go beyond 'shorter spells of colonial transition' and commit ourselves to the task of bringing together insights from agrarian and environmental histories of a region and traces how the 'Early Modern Bihar's evolving as a region was to a large extent influenced by the ecology of Ganga' (p. 188). Chapter two and three talk about the fertile floodplains of Mid-Ganga and shows how these regions of confluence of many rivers joining Ganga from the north and the south made the fluvial landscape as ideal settlement site. These chapters also bring earlier historical scholarship that looked at the land revenue changes and warfare between different rulers trying to extend their control on the floodplains talk to environmental historian's concerns where he tries to glean an understanding of these changes by paying close attention to river morphology, fluidity of the landscape and legal changes. Singh also brings in a refreshing perspective by devoting many pages to trace how 'the riverine character of the mid-Ganga plain, where many rivers met, went on to create its own cultural homogeneity' despite being populated by three speech communities. Singh goes beyond the predictable

material that historians weave their narratives with and bring folklore, literary writings and art.

Chapter four then moves to engage with economic history of 'how the region became linked with the maritime economy and trade'. While discussing 'the process of change from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century', it argues how 'the centre of commercial activities shifted from the Ganga-Yamuna Doab to the middle Ganga plain'. Moving to the changes that took place during the colonial period, Singh talks about how Patna was important for the East India Company and how 'beginning with the eighteenth century, the centre of economic and political activity shifted to the east, toward the Patna-Calcutta axis from the Agra-Delhi one.

Chapter five engages with the famines that occurred in 1770 and 1873-'74, by questioning 'Graham Chapman's contention that the British administrators' flood control schemes were based on 'rationalism and modernity'. Singh contends whether these famines were 'in any way linked to the concept of revenue maximisation'? Singh argues that "rather than the colonial administration's endeavor to pursue 'rational knowledge', it was their objective of maximization of revenue which led them to understand the river basin ecology of Ganga differently to early modern regimes" (p. 189).

Chapter six explains how after the year 1765, when the British East India Company obtained land revenue rights, several changes took place that ultimately led to the region being reconfigured in terms of economic interest rather than keeping it aligned to the complex natural of fluvial processes. Colonial administration actively "encouraged construction of embankments, canals and communication networks, especially railways that ran parallel to the river", leading to what Singh, borrowing from Nayak and Berkes (2011: 132-45) concept applied in the context of Chilika lagoon, calls 'the gradual decommonization of the river'.

Chapter seven follows the recent historical scholarship that has studied property rights in fluvial landscape such as *Char* in Bangladesh and Assam (See, Iftekhar Iqbal's *The Bengal Delta*, Kuntala Lahiri Dutt and Gopa Samanta's *Dancing with the Rivers: People and the Life on Chars of South Asia*). It discusses the life of people *diara* and how the colonial state tried to bring them under the administrative logic of legibility and control and how despite these efforts *diara* commons have remained a centre of conflict and dispute. This book will inspire young scholars to undertake more work on the fluvial landscapes and on the task of exploring conversations between agrarian and environmental history.