

How Much Should a Person Consume?

Environmentalism in India
and the United States



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Berkeley Los Angeles London

History *sans* Chauvinism



chauvinism: exaggerated or aggressive patriotism . . . excessive or prejudiced support for one's own cause, group, or sex—*Oxford English Dictionary*

The Berkeley Nobel laureate George Akerlof once remarked of his fellow economists that if you showed them something that worked in practice they would not be satisfied unless it was also seen to work in theory. This insight explains much about the dismal science, including why, as late as 1980, the MIT economist Lester Thurow could so magisterially write: “If you look at the countries that are interested in environmentalism, or at the individuals who support environmentalism within each country, one is struck by the extent to which environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle class. *Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren't interested.*”¹

Thurow could write as he did because of the theory that environmentalism was a full-stomach phenomenon. In the West, the rise of the green movement in the 1960s was widely interpreted as a manifestation of what was called “post-materialism.” The consumer societies of the North Atlantic world, wrote the political scientist Ronald Inglehart, had collectively shifted “from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression, and the quality of life.”² A cultivated interest in the protection

¹ Lester Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society: Distribution and the Possibilities for Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), pp. 104–5, emphasis added.

² Ronald Inglehart and Jacques René-Rabier, “Political Realignment in Advanced Industrial Society: From Class-based Politics to Quality-of-Life

of nature was thought possible only when the necessities of life could be taken for granted. As for the poor, their waking hours were spent foraging for food, water, housing, energy; how could they be concerned with something as elevated as the environment?

Now, contrast Thurow's remarks with a signboard that I came across some years ago in an oak forest near the Himalayan town of Shimla. The sign, put up by the Himachal Pradesh state's Forest Department, proclaimed in Hindi:

Kehte hain Ved Puran, bina Vriksh ke nahi kalyan.

Roughly translated, this might read:

The Hindu sacred books say there's no happiness without trees.

The nine words on that signboard contain the seeds of an alternative theory of the origins of environmentalism. They suggest—contrary to what modern historians might say—that the ancient Hindus were the first environmentalists. A precocious ecological consciousness was manifest in their myths, folklore, and ritual practices, where gods played with animals, where humans attained salvation in the forest, and where lowly plant and insect species were treated with reverence. It is further argued that this feeling for nature has persisted into the present. According to this view, where the Western world has succumbed to godlessness and materialism, and deracinated Indian intellectuals have followed it down that polluted path, the environmental wisdom of the Hindus is still embedded in the living practices of peasants in the countryside.³

Thurow's claim that environmentalism is a phenomenon of the developed world alone is an expression of what I shall call *disciplinary*

Politics." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1986; cf. also Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

³ Representative statements include Banwari, *Panchavati: Indian Approach to Environment*, translated from the Hindi by Asha Vohra (Delhi: Shri Vinayaka Publications, 1992); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988). The historian Mukul Sharma, of the University of Delhi, is completing a book on the various dimensions of this "Hindu" environmentalism.

chauvinism—the belief that social and cultural changes are the simple byproduct of economic changes. Such is the theory; the practice, as it happens, is all too different. For Thurow did not look very closely around the globe. Seven years before he wrote his lines the Chipko movement had decisively shown the entry by the poor into the domain of environmentalism. Here, a group of illiterate peasants in the Himalaya threatened to hug trees in order to stop them being felled by commercial loggers. Nor was Chipko unique: the 1970s saw a slew of popular movements in defense of local rights to forest, fish, and water resources, as well as protests against large dams. These movements took place in India, Brazil, Malaysia, Ecuador, and Kenya, among peasants, pastoralists, and fisherfolk: that is, among communities even economists could identify as poor.⁴

On the other hand the slogan in the Himalayan forest was an expression of what one might call *cultural chauvinism*. This is as blinkered, and as oblivious of the diversity of human experience, as the chauvinism of the economist. No culture has a monopoly on environmental consciousness, nor on environmental depletion either. The episode of the Khandava forest in the Mahabharata—where the killing of animals and the burning of woods is celebrated in epic verse—and the clearing of the Indo-Gangetic plain in recorded times suggest that there were periods when Hindus thought the forests fit only for destruction. That Hindus are somehow natural environmentalists is also daily contradicted in contemporary India by peasants who pump pesticides into the soil.

Although the chain of influence is hard to establish, I doubt that Hindus would have begun thinking of themselves as environmentalists had it not been for an essay written as recently as 1967 by a Western scholar: I refer, of course, to Lynn White Jr.'s "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," first published in *Science* and reprinted countless times since.

As is common in such cases, more people knew White's thesis than his work. In the form in which it seeped into popular consciousness the thesis ran as follows: the Book of Genesis says that Man shall dominate

⁴ An illuminating comparative analysis of these movements is contained in J. Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Edward Elgar, 2004).

Nature; Christians have taken this to heart and been uniquely irresponsible in their use of nature and natural resources. Or, to simplify further: Christianity is principally responsible for the environmental crisis.⁵

White's essay may very well be the most influential ever written by a historian. It has spawned a massive secondary literature—thousands of books and articles written explicitly to contest, approve, or amplify his thesis. Christian theologians claim that White misrepresented their scriptures; that, in fact, the ethic of "stewardship" is as important a motif in the Bible as the idea of domination. On the other side, those with a vested interest in Eastern religions have seized with glee on White's apparent denunciation of Christianity.⁶

It took a generation for these ideas to gain common currency. But when they did, the original provocateur was wholly forgotten: the copywriter of the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department had never heard of Lynn White. Nor have the other Hindus who now claim their culture is somehow superior to all others in the matter of environmental ethics. Likewise, the Buddhist literature on the subject is a product of the past two decades. Now, we are told, the Buddha was the first environmentalist for he was born in a *sal* forest and attained enlightenment under a *figus* tree and came to preach the philosophy of ecological restraint, also known as the Middle Way. But how is it that claims such as these were never current before 1967?

I do not know how White would have reacted to this competitive chauvinism. Whose side would he be on? Perhaps it doesn't matter

⁵ See Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, March 10, 1967. Actually, White's thesis was somewhat more complex. He did not suggest that Christianity was somehow intrinsically "anti-ecological," rather, that historical conditions were making it so. In his view, as new technologies of production and communication were invented, European man began to feel more in command of his surroundings. Thus, while earlier calendars and pictures showed man in a position of subordination to nature, from the early medieval period these works tended to place man in a position of domination.

⁶ And the literature is still growing. Some years ago, the Worldwide Fund for Nature commissioned a series of popular pamphlets on the subject; *Hinduism and Ecology*, *Islam and Ecology*, etc. More recently, the Divinity School of Harvard University has organized a series of international conferences on the same lines, whose proceedings have been appearing in book form.

much, for the real roots of environmental destruction (and conservation) lie not in ancient religions but in *secular* processes of the *modern* world.

Believers and theologians will go on tracing the roots of environmental crises in human departures from scriptural mandates, and therefore identifying the prospects of environmental reform in a renewed adherence to them. For the historian, however, environmentalism is principally a product of and reaction to the Industrial Revolution. The industrialization of Europe, and later of North America, rested on the discovery of new resources—fossil fuels, pre-eminently—and on new ways of extracting, transforming, processing, and consuming them. Putting these resources to use spawned novel technologies of production, transport, communication, and storage. When colonialism followed industrialization, the scale of resource flows between and within societies hugely increased. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the invention of new technologies within, and the colonization of new lands without, together led to a massive expansion of the resource catchments owned by Europeans.

What we gloss as the Industrial Revolution was actually four revolutions in one: the revolution in industry (properly so called); the concomitant revolution in agriculture, which now witnessed a great augmentation in its productivity because of the new resources and technologies; the revolution in transport and communication caused by such inventions as the steam engine and the telegraph; and the demographic revolution, whereby advances in sanitation and health greatly reduced human mortality and led to a steady increase in the population of Europe. Scrupulous historians would probably add a fifth and sixth revolution to this list. Both occurred in the political realm: the fifth being the advent of democratic and socialist ideas within Europe; the sixth being Europe's political conquest of the rest of the world.

There is, then, a whole array of transformative processes lurking within the familiar if somewhat misleading term "Industrial Revolution." A one-sentence summary of these processes might read: "More people, producing more, traveling more, consuming more, and excreting more." The social changes these activities wrought have generated a huge library of scholarly works; environmental changes, which also

accelerated hugely through the devastation of forests and habitats and by the fouling of the air and waters, have not generated a scholarship nearly as voluminous.

There had certainly been human induced ecological changes in the premodern world, but they had been localized. A tribe of hunter-gatherers may have hunted a species of bird to extinction, but there were other edible species for the tribe to harvest. A community of peasants may have exhausted the fertility of their soil, but there were other soils to which the peasants could move. However, with industrialization, there was for the first time in human history a perception of a generalized—one might almost say *civilizational*—environmental crisis. The damage to nature was unprecedented in both scale and intensity. This alarmed some writers and thinkers, who began to search for ways to stem, and in time reverse, these new processes of environmental degradation. Thus was born the “environmental movement.”

There was no environmentalism before industrialization; there were only the elements of an environmental sensibility. For every tribe of hunters that pursued a species to extinction, there was a tribe that harvested its prey prudently so as not to deplete prey populations in the long run. There were peasants who used the land carelessly, and other peasants who designed sophisticated systems of water and soil management. And, as the classical literatures of West and East demonstrate, there were poets and playwrights who wrote with insight and empathy about the natural world. All this might be said to constitute the prehistory of environmentalism, though not environmentalism itself. For, neither peasant nor poet transcended their locality to offer any systemic vision of reorganizing nature. That needed the Industrial Revolution, widespread environmental degradation, and the response we term “environmentalism.”

It is that suffix “ism” which is decisive. With it, the preservation or conservation of natural resources is no longer a matter of intuitive feeling, but a wide-ranging social program.

As far as I know, the first historian to point to the organic links between industrialization and environmentalism was the Cambridge scholar G.M. Trevelyan. In a now-forgotten lecture of 1931 he observed that the “love of nature in its most natural and unadulterated form has grown *pari passu* with the Industrial Revolution. James Watt and

George Stephenson were contemporaries of Rousseau and Wordsworth, and the two movements have gone on side by side ever since, each progressing with equal rapidity.” One movement furthered the appreciation and understanding of natural beauty; the other movement intensified the rate at which nature was destroyed. As Trevelyan noted: “No doubt it is partly because the destruction is so rapid that the appreciation is so loud.”

This sense of nostalgia was made more marked by the conditions of city life—the conditions of the vast majority of English people. Their separation from the natural world, enforced by urban living, fostered the yearning to return periodically, for short spurts, to nature. “And for that reason, if for no other, the real country must be preserved in sufficient quantity to satisfy the soul’s thirst of the town dweller.”

Illustrative here was the change in the English perception of the Alps and the Scottish Highlands—once regarded as hostile, but, by the time Trevelyan wrote, as the epitome of what was wild and therefore beautiful. This change in attitude toward mountain scenery, remarks the historian, “is almost identical in time and progress with the march of the Industrial Revolution, and has, I think a certain causal connection with it.” He believed that the

modern aesthetic taste for mountain form, is connected with a moral and intellectual change, that differentiates modern civilized man from civilized man in all previous ages. I think that he now feels the desire and need for the wildness and greatness of untamed, aboriginal nature, which his predecessors did not feel. One cause of this change is the victory that civilized man has now attained over nature through science, machinery and organization, a victory so complete that he is denaturalizing the lowland landscape. He is therefore constrained to seek nature in her still unconquered citadels, the mountains.⁷

Two points are crucial here. The first is that by the end of the nineteenth century few parts of the world were unaffected by European

⁷ G.M. Trevelyan, “The Calls and Claims of Natural Beauty” (the Rickman Godlee Lecture for 1931), in *An Autobiography and Other Essays* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), pp. 92–106. A fine recent work on this subject is Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2003).

industrialization: colonialism had made sure of this. Thus, the new technologies were used, and abused, far from their original homes. The railway, for example, came to India less than two decades after its invention in Britain. By 1900 there were more than 30,000 miles of track in the Indian subcontinent, to build and maintain which thousands of square miles of forests were destroyed, and acres and acres of land mined for coal. Again, with colonialism came the modern factory system, the chemicalization of agriculture, and the growth of urban centers, all bringing in their wake myriad forms of ecological degradation. These radical transformations of the environment prompted an array of critical responses from those who sought to contain the damage or protect unspoiled areas from contamination.

Here, environmentalism can profitably be compared with three other great movements of the modern world: the *democratic* movement, which asked that ordinary, unprivileged folk also be given a political voice; the *socialist* movement, which wanted the fruits of economic growth to be distributed equitably; and the *feminist* movement, which urged that women be granted political and economic rights equal to those enjoyed by men.

Wherever there is autocracy there are dissenters asking for democratic rights. Where there is capitalism, socialists will rise to oppose it. Where there is patriarchy, there will be women who resist it. The form, shape, and intensity of these protests varies; the oppositional impulse remains constant. So, one might say, wherever there is industrialization, there is environmentalism.

The interpretation of environmentalism offered here challenges both the post-materialist hypothesis and the several versions of the Lynn White thesis. It suggests that one does not have to wait for a society to be fully industrialized for an ecological critique to manifest itself. It argues that the relationship between religion and environmentalism follows rather than precedes industrialization. Once the evidence of environmental degradation becomes widespread, writers and activists seek solace as well as solutions in practices of the past: thus the search for elements of an environmental ethic in the scriptures; thus also the rehabilitation of folk practices of conservation such as sacred groves and community irrigation systems. Over the past few

decades much energy and ink has been expended on understanding what religion and custom offer us in countering or moderating the ecological excesses of the present day. The irony is that this return to tradition is itself a product of, indeed is only made possible by, the onset of modernity.

Like the other great movements of the modern world, environmentalism is not unified or homogeneous. We speak of difference feminism and identity feminism, of agrarian socialism and Marxism; likewise, modern environmentalism comes in many shades and strands, several of which are explored in some detail in this book. At the same time, as contemporary with these other movements, environmentalism has engaged in a lively dialog with each of them. The environmental movement has been influenced by, and has in turn influenced, struggles for socialism, feminism, and democracy.

The study of environmentalism worldwide has been beset by different kinds of chauvinism. Two I have already alluded to: those caused by allegiance to a particular academic discipline and to a particular religious faith. But there are other chauvinisms that have been as damaging. These include the phenomenon of nationalism, well studied in so many contexts but not really in the context of environmentalism. There is also the chauvinism caused by partisan adherence to a particular sect or ideology within the environmental movement itself.

Within the scholarly community, the form of chauvinism most widely prevalent is the *disciplinary*: the belief that one's academic discipline provides richer or deeper insights than any other. Within the public at large, the form of chauvinism most common is the *religious*: the dogma that the faith one is born into, or which one embraces, provides a uniquely privileged vantage point into the existential dilemmas of individual human beings, and indeed of humankind.⁸ And within the environmental movement, the chauvinisms most obviously in operation are the *national* and the *ideological*, these often operating in conjunction.

⁸ I include, within this characterization, secularism and atheism, belief systems sometimes upheld with as much fanaticism and zeal as those based on religion.

The American writer Jonathan Franzen has recently remarked of his country's environmental movement that it is "a constituency loudly proud of its refusal to compromise with others."⁹ This characterization alas, is true not merely of American environmentalism as a whole but also of the different sects within it. Deep ecologists will not compromise with bioregionalists, who themselves fight with the votaries of eco-efficiency, while none of the above will talk to gung-ho modernizers or religious zealots. Nor is the American experience unique in this regard. Environmentalists in other lands are likewise implacably hostile to modernizers and developers, and likewise deeply divided among themselves.

This book can be read as a historical analysis of these various forms of chauvinism, but also as a personal attempt to escape and transcend them. For the most part, its later chapters suppress my own voice in favor of the voices of those I write about.¹⁰ The remainder of the present chapter, however, is cast in an autobiographical vein. My intention is not to draw attention to myself but to try and sense, through my own intellectual evolution, some of the wider currents of politics and scholarship as these relate to the history of environmentalism.

II

In 1980, the year Lester Thurow so comprehensively rejected the idea of an environmentalism of the poor, I began a PhD in sociology at Calcutta. I was surrounded by Marxists, for the state of West Bengal and its capital, Calcutta, had lately under come under the rule of a coalition of Communist parties. The finest intellectuals belonged either to this "Left Front" or were further to the left of it. There were, as I recall, no credible liberals around, and naturally no conservatives were visible at all.

To a young middle-class Indian, Marxism had great intellectual and emotional appeal. This is a philosophy that flourishes in conditions of scarcity and inequality; recall that the European and American

⁹ Jonathan Franzen, "Reflections: My Bird Problem," *The New Yorker*, August 8 and 15, 2005.

¹⁰ Partial exceptions to this are Chapters Seven and Eight herein, where my assessments of the work of Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Madhav Gadgil combine historical analysis with personal recollection.

intelligentsia turned sharply leftward after the Great Depression, when poverty was pervasive, capitalism seemed in the grip of a general crisis, and revolution seemed round the corner. Likewise, in the India of the 1980s only Marxism, it seemed, could provide a convincing analysis of why some Indians were rich and so many so poor.

There was also a psychological reason for the attractions of Marxism: it allowed everyone to participate in the conviction that they were ultimately going to be part of the winning side. In 1980 History had not Ended; the Soviet superpower was alive, while—at any rate in ex-colonial countries like India—the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions had not lost their romantic sheen. In Calcutta, Marxism's appeal was enhanced by the fact that there was no single party line. Within and outside the ruling coalition there were in fact many varieties of Marxism, each drawing inspiration in varying degrees from the several founders of the faith. All admired Marx and all worshipped Lenin; but some venerated Trotsky while others detested him. A figure of great interest, as well as controversy, was Mao Zedong, the lately deceased leader of the socialist revolution in India's great civilizational neighbor, China.¹¹

As we saw, for the economist environmentalism was a post-materialist phenomenon restricted to affluent sections of the developed world. For the Marxist, on the other hand, environmentalism was a bourgeois deviation from the class struggle. Classical Marxists believed that the destruction of capitalism and its supersession by socialism would create a resource-abundant utopia in which "Man, the Sovereign of Nature" (as Marx characterized our species) would bend the natural world wholly to his will.¹² Shortly after the victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia, Trotsky argued that "the proper goal of communism is the domination of nature by technology, and the domination of technology by planning, so that the raw materials of nature will yield up to mankind all that it needs and more besides." In Trotsky's characteristically arrogant view:

¹¹ For a personal, anecdotal account of Calcutta Marxism in the 1980s, see the title essay of my book *An Anthropologist Among the Marxists and Other Essays* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001).

¹² Marx used the phrase in one of his essays on India, contrasting what man was and should be with regard to nature with the (in his view, contemptible) worship of monkey gods and cows by Hindus.

The present distribution of mountains and rivers, of fields, of meadows, of steppes, of forests and seashores, cannot be considered final. Man has already made changes in the map of nature that are not few nor insignificant. But they are merely pupil's practice in comparison with what is coming. Faith merely promises to move mountains; but technology, which takes nothing "on faith," is actually able to cut down mountains and move them . . . Through the machine, man in socialist society will command nature in its entirety . . . He will point out places for mountains and passes. He will change the course of the rivers, and he will lay down rules for the oceans. The idealist simpletons may say that this will be a bore, but that is why they are simpletons . . .¹³

In a theoretical sense, Indian Marxism has always been imitative. And on this subject, as on so many others, the views of the classical Marxists were energetically reproduced by their comrades in the subcontinent. Thus, Indian environmentalists were suspect in the Left for asking critical questions of modern science and technology, and for suggesting that modern industrialization might face ecological limits. Greens who opposed large dams and nuclear power plants were dismissed as a bunch of reactionary Luddites; it was also suggested that they were not merely foolish but dangerous for they played into the hands of the American imperialists, who did not wish to see India emerge as a strong and self-reliant power.¹⁴

At any rate, environmentalism was not a subject that figured in my curriculum at Calcutta, or in the seminars I attended, or in the coffee house conversations in which I participated. Listening to these an aspiring sociologist would have concluded that there were really only two proper subjects of scholarly enquiry: class conflict in the countryside between landlord and laborer; and class conflict in the cities between capitalist and worker.

Some months after I had begun my PhD I attended a lecture by a visiting scholar, Jayanta Bandyopadhyaya, then of the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, who spoke about the relevance of

¹³ Leon Trotsky, quoted in C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 278–9.

¹⁴ Cf. Biplab Dasgupta, "The Environment Debate: Issues and Trends," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, 1978; Subrata Mirra, "Ecology as Science and Science Fiction," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 30, 1982.

Schumacherian notions of "appropriate technology." At a reception afterwards I got talking to the visitor. Professor Bandyopadhyaya asked me where I was from (the sub-Himalayan town of Dehradun was the answer), and then asked what topic I intended to pursue for my dissertation. I said I was torn between studying steel workers in Jamshedpur and peasants in Bihar. "If you're from Dehradun," said the professor, "why don't you work on the sociology of the Chipko movement?"

At the time, Chipko was relatively obscure—far from being the global symbol of popular environmentalism it has since become. Now there are tree huggers in California, but back then this protest movement in the Garhwal Himalaya was not very well known even in India. However, the past winter Professor Bandyopadhyaya had met the Chipko leader Sunderlal Bahuguna and been deeply impressed. He had visited Bahuguna's ashram and traveled around some Garhwal villages with him.

For Professor Bandyopadhyaya these encounters with Chipko had confirmed and consolidated his own move away from the Marxist path. Brought up in Calcutta, he had imbibed its socialist air, but his later travels around India and his own studies of the degrading effects of much that passed for modern technology had led him to the Gandhians and their search for more humane and eco-friendly technologies. These were based on a critical appreciation of indigenous peasant and artisanal practices rather than a wholesale rejection of them. His trips around Garhwal with Bahuguna had been, for him, the final nail in the Marxist coffin.

When Bandyopadhyaya suggested I work on Chipko he did so with the invigorating zeal of the convert-turned-missionary. Here was an active, alive, social movement still in the process of being made. But there hadn't been any scholarly studies of it. My home town was at the edge of Chipko country, and I spoke Hindi, a language most Garhwalis understood. And I was a sociologist who had to write a dissertation on an original and unresearched subject. Why look further?

After my first year of course work, I returned to Dehradun for the summer. To explore the Chipko idea I wrote to the two leaders whose names I knew, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt. I got no answer from Bahuguna but Bhatt wrote back inviting me to his home town, Gopeshwar. (That visit is described in some detail in Chapter Seven of this book.) I was charmed by his presence and moved by his

work. Two days with him convinced me that I must indeed follow Bandyopadhyaya's advice and write a dissertation on Chipko.

I returned to Calcutta after the vacation and ran the subject past my teachers. Kamini Adhikari, my dissertation supervisor, was a widely traveled woman of cultivated interests. Her main concern was that I should find a meaningful way of relating my theme to debates in sociology. She had studied in Holland, lived in France, and knew Alain Touraine, the French sociologist of social movements. Chipko, she suggested, could be seen as an Indian variant of a "new" social movement—to be distinguished from the "classical" social movements of workers and peasants.

Dr Adhikari was of a different generation, some three decades older than myself. Closer in age and temperament was Anjan Ghosh, a sociologist trained at that redoubt of intellectual Marxism, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. But unlike the typical JNU product, Anjan recognized that there were other social theorists as great as Marx. In the classroom he introduced me to Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, while outside it he introduced me to the circle of anarcho-Marxists who hung around Samar Sen, the legendary editor of a radical weekly, *Frontier*.

Anjan Ghosh was, for all practical purposes, my guru. Under his close and almost daily guidance I worked my way through the classics of Western social theory and Indian anthropology. His intellectual generosity was remarkable: when I told him I wanted to work on Chipko, he put me on to Shiv Visvanathan, who, he said, knew more about such things than he did.

Visvanathan is a sociologist of science who was then teaching at the Delhi School of Economics. I already knew him; in fact, when I wanted to change fields and cities after my master's degree in economics Visvanathan had advised me to study with Ghosh in Calcutta. Now I had been sent back to him, to be guided through the canonical works of the modern environmental debate. Visvanathan made me read Lynn White on religion and environmental ethics, Garrett Hardin on the tragedy of the commons, and Barry Commoner on the links between modern technology and environmental degradation.¹⁵ Visvanathan

¹⁵ The White and Hardin essays I first read in R. Clatke, ed., *Notes for the Future* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), while the work by Commoner that most impressed me was *The Closing Circle* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1971).

may have been the only Indian who had read these writers; through him I became perhaps the second. He also introduced me to pioneering environmental thinkers likewise unread by other Indians: for example, Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford, both of whom feature later in this book.¹⁶

Looking back, these disciplinary transgressions must have been encouraged by the fact that, within India, the discipline of sociology had been far more accommodative of other disciplinary traditions than was the case in Europe and, particularly, the United States. In his withering attack on American sociology C. Wright Mills had written of how it alternated between two poles: "Grand Theory," the formal elaboration of concepts without regard to how people actually lived; and "Abstracted Empiricism," the mere accumulation of statistics and numbers with little regard to their social and historical context.¹⁷ The leading Indian sociologists, in contrast, were engaged in a lively dialog with history and anthropology. They were also keenly immersed in public affairs, in the painful yet deeply interesting transformation of their hierarchical, caste-and-kin bound society into a modern, secular, democratic nation-state. And unlike their American counterparts they did not believe that sociology and elegant prose were necessarily at odds.¹⁸

III

By the beginning of 1982 my dissertation was taking shape. It was to be an ethnographic study of Chipko. My field material related to the sociology of social movements and the environment-development

¹⁶ Shiv Visvanathan's published work includes *Organizing for Science: The Making of an Industrial Research Laboratory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), and *A Carnival for Science* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

¹⁸ The two Indian sociologists I read with most interest and profit in those years were M.N. Srinivas and André Béteille. To be fair, there were also some American sociologists who engaged with history and wrote elegant English. The two I learnt from were Wright Mills and—to invoke a name from the other side of the political spectrum—Robert Nisbet.

debate. To that end I planned a preliminary trip to Mandal, the village in the upper Alakananda valley where the first Chipko protests had taken place in March–April 1973.

At the time I was living in Dehradun's Forest Research Institute (FRI), where my father worked. He was a paper technologist who ran a laboratory which tested the suitability of various woods for pulping. He had never been near a forest himself. But the FRI was India's flagship institute of forestry education and research. Its history went back to 1906; the collection in its library went back further still.

The FRI library was housed in a gloomy white building located a hundred yards from my house. I spent the weeks before I went to Garhwal in its cavernous corners, reading documents untouched for a hundred years: forest working plans, reports of forest conferences, runs of authoritative journals such as *Indian Forester*. These were the foundational texts of forestry in the subcontinent. They told the story of how and why the Forest Department had come to be India's biggest landlord, with more than a fifth of the country's land in its possession. Through the texts I scoured one could exhume the logic—economic as well as political—of state intervention, and of the scientific (or, as I was to argue, pseudo-scientific) basis of forest management. These narratives, sometimes somber and at other times heroic, all originated with high officials of the British Raj, but within their interstices one could read signs of subaltern resistance.

I finally left Dehradun to go to the home of Chipko. Here, one of the first people I met was Alam Singh Rawar. He had been headman of Mandal village in 1973, when the Chipko movement was born there. Naturally, he had vivid memories of protests against the Forest Department. The early writings on Chipko tended to interpret the movement as a response to tropical deforestation and the global environmental crisis. To my surprise, Alam Singh saw the struggle, rather, in the context of the very local and specific history of the Garhwal Himalaya. Chipko, he told me, was not the first time the peasants of the region had asserted their forest rights. Decades earlier, when India was still a colony, a British Conservator of Forests had come to Mandal village to convert its woodland into state property. The villagers surrounded him, blackened his face with a cattle iron, and ran him out of the district.

After some weeks of trying, I found a file in the National Archives at Delhi which confirmed the tale, in essence if not fine detail. An *Indian* conservator had indeed been attacked, not in British Garhwal but in the princely state of Tehri Garhwal which lay to the west. However, the sentiments were exactly those expressed by Alam Singh. As the secret report on the disturbance put it, the villagers "had taken exception to the reservation of these forests;" indeed, they "objected to any state interference with forests over which they claimed *full and exclusive* rights."¹⁹

By now I had acquired a real taste for the archives. Those weeks in the FRI library and that thrilling printed confirmation of Alam Singh's oral history were the beginnings of what was to become a lifelong addiction. Much of my work was done in the National Archives and the Uttar Pradesh State Archives in Lucknow. Here lay the rich records of the Forest Department. These were records that provided a privileged window into India's rural social history, conveying the relations between a ubiquitous arm of the state and millions of peasants, tribals, pastoralists, and artisans. These were records that had not previously been seen by scholars—a lacuna that delighted me no end. For what can please a historian more than finding documents that no other historian is aware of?

My first exposure to serious research had been deeply satisfying. And there was more to come. On my way back to my institute in Calcutta, I stopped for some days in Delhi. As it happened my visit coincided with a conference on a new forest act being proposed by the Government of India. A draft of the act had been leaked and come to the notice of social activists. To their dismay the new legislation would further strengthen the hands of the state and lead to a further diminution of the rights of peasants and tribals.

In the modern history of India there have been two landmark forest conferences. The first was held in 1875 in the imperial summer capital, Simla (now spelt Shimla). Those attending the conference were senior colonial officials. Their brief was to put in place a legislative apparatus for the state to effectively administer forests. Its most tangible outcome

¹⁹ Cf. Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 71–2.

was the Indian Forest Act of 1878, a far-reaching and hugely influential piece of legislation whose impact was felt well beyond India.²⁰

Over the summer in Dehradun I had found and studied the proceedings of that Simla conference. Now, more than a century later, I was able to attend a rather different kind of forest conference. It was held at the Indian Social Institute, a place run by Jesuits but hospitable to dissenters of all kinds. For this occasion the dissenters turned out in strength, many coming from parts of India where forests still remained. Here were Gandhian reformists from Garhwal, Maoist revolutionaries from Chandrapur in Maharashtra, Jesuits and lapsed Jesuits from Dhule near Bombay and from Chaibasa in Jharkhand—all people who, unlike me, had “declassified” themselves. But there were also some real subalterns, activists from an *adivasi* or tribal background. Also in attendance were some sensitive members of the intellectual elite such as the newspaper editor B.G. Verghese.

The word most used in their discussions was “draconian,” which the new legislation undoubtedly was. Speaker after speaker condemned its provisions for facilitating not forest conservation but the oppression of the forest dweller. For forests were crucial to the sustenance of the rural economy: as the source of wood for agricultural implements, pasture for goats and cattle, rope and bamboo for artisans, herbs for local healers, not to speak of a hundred other users and uses. Under the new laws the collection of many kinds of forest produce was deemed a crime. On the enforcement side, forest officers were given the right to arrest without a warrant.²¹

As subsequent research showed, the bill was not only draconian, it was also colonial. It had taken over, wholesale, 81 of the 84 sections of the 1878 Forest Act which rested on a more or less strict notion of state ownership. One would have expected that Indian independence would have led to a new forest act, more sensitive to local needs and

²⁰ Cf. D. Brandis and A. Smythies, eds, *Report of the Proceedings of the Forest Conference held at Simla, October 1875* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1876); R.S. Troup, *Colonial Forest Administration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

²¹ The proceedings of the Delhi meeting were published as Walter Fernandes and Sharad Kulkarni, eds, *Towards a New Forest Policy* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1983).

more conducive to democratic participation. To the contrary, a colonial act of 1878 continued to guide forest policy more than three decades after independence. And now the attempt finally being made to change it was in the direction of greater state control rather than less.

In the forefront of the opposition to the draft act was the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR). This was (and remains) a remarkable institution run by volunteers—many of them students and teachers from the University of Delhi—working on a less-than-shoe-string budget. The PUDR had just published a forceful critique of the act and was beginning to work on other aspects of natural resource management as well.²² Its members met every Saturday in a room of Triveni Kala Sangam, an artists’ enclave in central Delhi. As a researcher in the field of forest policy I was encouraged to attend, and there I gained a great deal from the experiences of PUDR members.

At about this time I also made my acquaintance with two other groups of great energy and promise. One was the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a brainchild of the engineer turned campaigning journalist Anil Agarwal. The other was Kalpavriksh, a group of school and college kids deeply committed to a sustainable future. Both groups were also involved in the campaign against the new forest act.²³

A future historian of Indian environmentalism will have to write at some length on the contributions of the PUDR, the CSE, and Kalpavriksh. India’s debt to these groups is enormous; so too is mine. Conversations with their members helped me sharpen my understanding of the environment debate, thus to more effectively link past with present, academic research with public policy.

IV

Looking back it appears that my academic career was determined by a series of lucky accidents. Had I not met Jayanta Bandyopadhyaya I would never have thought of working on Chipko. Had I not lived in

²² Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, *Undeclared Civil War* (New Delhi: PUDR, 1982).

²³ This draft act was dropped, then reintroduced in even more stringent form in 1994, sparking another pan-Indian debate which was, once more, successful in getting the legislation shelved.

the FRI I would never have seen those forgotten documents on the history of forestry. Had I not seen them, or had I not been in Delhi in April 1982, I would not have attended that famous meeting against the new forest bill.

The first of these accidents introduced me to the environment debate; the second and third, seen in conjunction, helped me overcome the barriers between history and sociology. In India these barriers were formidable. Historians did archival research and worked on the period before 1947, the year of Indian independence; sociologists did fieldwork and studied the ethnographic present. But, as I was finding out, both forest policy and peasant discontent were oblivious of these divides. To properly understand Chipko one needed to study its pre-history; and this meant going back to the colonial past and digging in the archives.

I found it easy to become methodologically promiscuous, for my teachers were encouraging, and I saw that I much preferred archival research to fieldwork in any case. Disciplinary boundaries I could comfortably breach. Somewhat harder to transgress were the boundaries of ideology. From the time I went to Calcutta I had been calling myself a Marxist: a non-party Marxist, perhaps, but still a Marxist. Given that ecology was regarded by all varieties of Indian Marxists as a bourgeois fad, how could I reconcile my faith with my chosen topic of research?

I tried hard, and was not entirely unsuccessful. I noted that one of Marx's first published articles was on the theft of wood; although one could never be sure—I was reading him in an English translation done in Russia from a German original which was convoluted enough in the first place—he seemed to be saying that Rhineland peasants in the nineteenth century had a prior right to forests later claimed by the state, just as had their Garhwal counterparts a hundred years later. The first deprivation was a consequence of capitalism; the second of capitalism and colonialism. Those two “c” words provided the analytic grid of my first published essay, which examined the continuities in Indian forest policy through an unmistakably (and, in retrospect, crudely) Marxist lens.²⁴

²⁴ See Ramachandra Guha, “Forestry in British and Post-British India: A Historical Analysis,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2 parts, October 29 and November 5–12, 1983.

I moved away from Marxism as a consequence of two conversations I had in Delhi, circa 1983–4. The first was with a friend who had been an undergraduate with me in Delhi. He had since joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which was then, as it is now, the Big Brother among Left parties in India. When I explained to this friend what I was working on, he said that, if it opposed the felling of forests, the Chipko movement was on the side of reaction. For forest felling fueled the paper industry, wherein labored the advance guard of the working class who would lead the proletarian revolution of the future. From the point of view of Marxist catechism his logic was irrefutable. But it left me uncomfortable. How could a man of such manifest sincerity and social commitment as Chandi Prasad Bhatt be, even “objectively speaking,” a reactionary?

The other conversation was with the historian Basudev “Robi” Chatterji, then just back with a PhD from Cambridge. Chatterji was to Indian history what Shiv Visvanathan was to Indian sociology—without question the best-read scholar of his generation.²⁵ At the time, I was enchanted by the school of British Marxist historians whose leading members included Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson. Chatterji advised me to read the French as well. The British historians, he said, were insensitive to geography, whereas in the *Annales* school geography was integral to history. At his suggestion I read the classic works of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, scholars who were “environmental historians” before the existence of environmental history.²⁶

Chatterji also persuaded me of the necessary distinction between political faith and scholarly practice. It was all right to be a Marxist in

²⁵ Basudev Chatterji is the author of *Trade, Tariffs and Empire* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), and editor of the three-volume anthology *Towards Freedom: Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1938* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁶ See, especially, Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History*, English translation (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950); Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on its Essential Characteristics*, English translation (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). Both books were originally published before the Second World War. After the War, the works of the second-generation *Annales* historians—Fernand Braudel, Georges Duby, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and others—also emphasized the impress of the natural environment on human life. For an overview, see Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School, 1929–89* (Oxford: Polity, 1990).

one's personal life, he said, to march in demonstrations and even behead a landlord if one thought this would aid the revolution. But when it came to historical research it was not wise to declare oneself a Marxist in advance. For the archives told their own various, complex, contradictory stories which did not always fit into a neat theory.

I was won over by Charterji's argument. I was still a Marxist (though that too was to change), but no longer a Marxist *historian*. I am grateful for my early exposure to Marx, who taught me that inequality was not natural but rooted in institutions created by men. Marxist historians, especially E.P. Thompson, also made me look out for resistance to authority by those at the bottom of the heap. But I am glad I stopped calling myself a Marxist for it allowed me to learn from alternative traditions of historiography and listen to the archives before asking questions of them.

V

In August 1985 my wife went to Yale University to study graphic design; in January 1986 I joined her because of accident no. 4 in my life. At the American consulate in Calcutta I had found a Yale catalog which listed departments and professors. I recognized two names: James C. Scott, whose work on peasant protest I had read; and W.R. Burch, Jr. whose work on environmental sociology I had heard of. I wrote to both.

Scott answered that to his regret Yale had no program in South Asian studies. Burch, on the other hand, had just been made Director of the Tropical Resources Institute (TRI) at the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. The Mellon Foundation had awarded the TRI a grant to develop courses in tropical ecology. Yale had no one to teach them. It was at this point that I happened to present myself: a sociologist with environmental interests from the tropics asking to be able to join his wife in a faraway land.

Had Yale's TRI been headed by a soil scientist or silviculturist they would have called in one of their kind. I was fortunate that the TRI Director was a sociologist, and that he had once been to India. Back in 1969 Bill Burch had visited the Gir forest and noticed the simmering conflict between pastoralists and the Asiatic lion. After Gir he stopped in the town of Surat where he met an eminent Indian sociologist who

was, as it happened, a Marxist. When Burch suggested that the conflict in the Gir merited closer study he was told ecology was a Western fad. Almost two decades later, the Director of the TRI welcomed my letter as evidence of a belated awakening within the sociological profession in India.

I was to spend eighteen months in Yale, teaching, talking, traveling. My students were outstandingly good. The Forestry School there had the reputation of being the most international place in New Haven (it was; and apparently it still is). Many of its students were former Peace Corps Volunteers with experience in Asia and Africa. There were a handful of Asian and African students as well. And they were *all* just a few years younger than me—a couple, in fact, were older. *Several are my friends still.*²⁷

On the faculty I was to forge close friendships with Bill Burch and Jim Scott. Burch was that American exception—a sociologist who wrote uncommonly well. He had written a marvelous book on environmental attitudes in America, but was now more interested in policy questions, the restoration of urban environments, and community forestry in the tropics.²⁸ Scott was also in his own way an exception, an American political scientist who had never crunched a number and whose real interests were history and anthropology. When we met he had just published what I regard as the best of his many books, this one based on eighteen months' fieldwork in a Malay village.²⁹ Scott and Burch were both catholic in their interests and genuinely internationalist in their outlook. And both were left wing without being of any particular sect or party.³⁰

²⁷ Among them, Michael Meyerfeld Bell, now Professor of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, whose works include *Chilnderley: Nature and Morality in an Country Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology* (Santa Barbara, California: Pine Forge Press, 2000).

²⁸ William R. Burch, Jr., *Daydreams and Nightmares: A Sociological Essay on the American Environment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

²⁹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

³⁰ Among the younger faculty at Yale there was Timothy Weiskel, an anthropologist trained in Oxford and France whose work was on the ecological history of West Africa. He published some fine essays but was perhaps at his best in the classroom. Among the students he inspired was William Cronon, whose book

Through Yale I was introduced to the field of American environmental history, which in the mid-1980s was truly coming into its own. Trading on my novelty—there were then not too many Indians doing history in America, and none at all doing environmental history—I wrote to the stars and got back encouraging letters. I went several times to see Donald Worster, then at Brandeis. At a meeting of the American Society of Environmental History held at Duke University I met the ecofeminist scholar Carolyn Merchant and the “materialist” historian Samuel Hays who, like all the others, were unfailingly generous with their time.³¹

I was impressed by the vigor of American environmental history (some 170 scholars attended the Duke meeting), by the quality of the scholarship—in particular its engagement with the natural sciences—and by the intensity of its debates. Here, as in India, scholarship was not always to be distinguished from partisanship. Historians were taking sides: for native Americans against colonists, for conservationists against capitalists, for nature against humans.

Emblematic were the works of that evocative writer Donald Worster. Behind his first book, published in 1977, lay a much older debate between the utilitarian forester Gifford Pinchot and the preservation-oriented naturalist John Muir. Thus, Worster’s history of ecology was based on the opposition between “Arcadian” scientists, who, like Muir, thought that nature had an intrinsic value apart from human needs—and “Imperial” scientists, who, like Pinchot, wanted only to put natural resources more efficiently to human use. Worster’s later works moved from intellectual to social history while retaining their

Changes in the Land bears the impress of Weiskel’s teaching. See William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983). Cronon too was at Yale, and also became a friend. Weiskel now runs a widely acclaimed program in environmental ethics at the Harvard Divinity School.

³¹ While I am in the business of paying my dues to American scholarship, I must also mention the Rutgers historian Michael Adas (author of *Machines as the Measure of Men* and other works) and the Berkeley sociologist Louise Fortmann (a pioneer of agroforestry studies), both of whom I got to know in my time at Yale, and whose intellectual example and personal friendship have nourished me since.

moral passion. On the one side there was the exquisite natural beauty of Old America, on the other the destruction unleashed by capitalist agriculture.³²

The best environmental historians, I found, were moralists too, unambiguously identifying good and evil among individuals and ways of life.³³ The political context is also relevant here. The environmental struggles of the 1960s had led to a series of positive reforms: the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, the passing of the Endangered Species Act, new legislation to control air and water pollution. But now, in the 1980s, a counter-revolution was taking shape. The American President, Ronald Reagan, was not particularly sympathetic to environmental concerns, while his Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, was positively hostile. The climate was inhospitable to environmental reform and, on that account, most congenial to radical environmental history.

And to radical environmentalism as well. In 1985, just before I reached America, Bill Devall and George Sessions published their book *Deep Ecology*. Before and after the book there was published a series of essays extolling a new environmental philosophy of this name. These essays argued that the philosophy that prevailed in the environmental movement was “shallow ecology,” which was to be distinguished from a truer “deep ecology.” While the former tinkered ineffectually with the status quo, the latter aimed at nothing less than a cultural and philosophical revolution. Shallow ecology was narrowly “anthropocentric” and thought nature existed only to serve man; deep

³² Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: The Roots of Ecology* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977); idem, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); idem, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

³³ They still are moralists, and they still very easily oppose good to evil, sometimes in the same life. Consider Donald Worster’s recent essay, “John Muir and the Modern Passion for Nature,” *Environmental History*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2005. This combines a presentist reading of John Muir as a proto-feminist and precocious multiculturalist with the (betrayed lover’s?) complaint that, in his maturity, Muir abandoned the simple life for the company of capitalists: “Muir no longer made twenty-mile walks with a bag of tea and a loaf of bread tied to his belt; instead, he rode in the substantial comfort of Pullman cars and steamships.”

ecology was "biocentric" and had the interests of nature itself at heart. Whereas shallow ecology placed uncritical faith in technocratic solutions, deep ecology believed in spiritual solutions based on a creative reworking of ancient ecological wisdom. Above all, while "reformist" shallow ecologists worked within the scientific and institutional structures of corporations and the state, "revolutionary" deep ecologists were uncompromisingly opposed to the System and all its workings.³⁴

The ideas of deep ecology were being carried forward by groups such as Earth First!, militant defenders of the Western wilderness. They came to prominence just as I reached Yale and several of my students were among their sympathizers. Talking to them and reading the literature they passed on to me, I was powerfully reminded of debates among the leftists I had left behind in Calcutta. There were striking similarities in the rhetoric used by radical ecologists and radical socialists. In each case the sharpest attacks were reserved for those closest to you in the political spectrum. ("Shallow ecology" was the severest opprobrium, analogous to the term "social democratic" in classical Marxist parlance.) As much attention was paid to the source of one's ideas as to their content and meaning. The Marxist would damn you as unscientific or idealist, the deep ecologist would dismiss you as Newtonian or anthropocentric. Like the Marxists, deep ecologists were always looking out for guilt by association; the polemics were ferociously personal.

Before leaving New Haven in the fall of 1987 I had written a critique of deep ecology. This was published, two years later, in *Environmental Ethics* under the title "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique." It generated a furious controversy whose ripples can still be heard.³⁵ The essay has been widely admired and just as widely condemned. It has been reprinted in at least thirty anthologies as the (usually lone) voice of opposition to the reigning orthodoxies of American environmentalism.

My essay offered four main arguments: that the anthropocentric/biocentric distinction, so beloved of environmental philosophers and

³⁴ Warwick Fox, "Deep Ecology," *The Ecologist*, vol. 14, nos 5 and 6, 1984; Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Books, 1985).

³⁵ I still get mail from readers who have chanced upon the essay, accusing me of being anti-ecological as well as anti-American.

environmental activists, was of little help in understanding the dynamics of ecological degradation; that the most serious environmental problems worldwide were over-consumption and militarism, both of which deep ecology ignored; that deep ecology was in essence an elaboration of the American wilderness movement; and that in other cultures "radical" environmentalism expressed itself very differently. The last two charges gave most offence, for they challenged the claim of deep ecology to be a philosophy and program of truly universal significance.³⁶

In retrospect I recognize that behind my attack on deep ecology lay a chauvinism of my own. In their celebration of American wilderness deep ecologists were echoing the wider climate of nationalism in the environmental movement. A particular influence on their work was Roderick Nash, a historian of the America First! tendency who saw the national park system as his country's great contribution to the culture of the world. His book *Wilderness and the American Mind* rested on superb historical scholarship somewhat distorted by triumphal nationalism. Nash wanted the "American invention of national parks" to be exported worldwide; he worried whether other countries were mature enough to receive them. But he did hope that "the less developed nations may eventually evolve economically and intellectually to the point where nature preservation is more than a business."³⁷

This angered and irritated me, for I had spent five years studying what I thought to be rather evolved environmentalism in India. Where American environmentalists were hypocritical, driving thousands of miles in a polluting automobile to enjoy "unspoiled wilderness," men like Chandi Prasad Bhatt integrated their lives with their work. Deep ecology tended to ignore inequalities within human society, while the Gandhian Greens I knew worked among and for the poor.

³⁶ For a sampling of the debate, and of the different perspectives within it, see J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds, *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998).

³⁷ See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); and idem, "The American Invention of National Parks," *American Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 3, Fall 1970. In the best traditions of American scholarship and American democracy, the finest critique of "wilderness nationalism" was penned by one of Nash's students: see Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 2nd edn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

My essay was frankly polemical, seeking to critique American environmentalism from a Third World perspective. But, as I came to see later, it was inflected by a chauvinism as real as that of Nash. I was arguing, in effect, that Indian environmentalism, *my* environmentalism, was superior to its American counterpart, more attentive to social inequality and more conscious of the long term. I even borrowed the rhetorical devices of my adversaries, offering a conspiracy theory of coincidence which went as follows: "Paradoxical as it may seem, it is no accident that Star Wars technology and deep ecology both find their fullest expression in that leading sector of Western civilization, California."³⁸

VI

On my return to India in 1987 I joined the Centre for Ecological Sciences (CES) of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. I was the only social scientist among the institute's nearly 400 faculty if one excluded the Chair of the CES, Madhav Gadgil, an ecologist by training but an anthropologist by temperament. (Later in this book I shall say more about Gadgil.) I was fortunate in being thrown so close to him on my return from America; for Gadgil knew that country and its environmental movement rather well. He listened to and read my critique of the deep ecologists and gently pointed out that they and I had polarized a very complex matter. They upheld a philosophy of Nature First!, to which I had counterposed my own slogan, People First! He rejected both positions, seeking in his own work to harmonize the interests of people and nature.

Gadgil tempered my chauvinism; so, in somewhat different ways, did the Spanish economist Juan Martinez-Alier. When I met Martinez-Alier he had just published *Ecological Economics*, a brilliant history of ideas showcasing scholars who analyzed the economy in terms of energy and material flows rather than money and prices.³⁹ I had not read

³⁸ Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1989, p. 79.

³⁹ J. Martinez-Alier, *Ecological Economics. Energy, Environment, Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

the book, but my friend Paul Kurian had. Kurian had been a contemporary of my teacher Anjan Ghosh at JNU. In appearance he was everybody's idea of a JNU radical: a thin, intense man with a slight stoop, a shock of hair and a beard urgently in need of running repairs. He had an acute intelligence and a formidable knowledge of the Marxist scriptures. After taking a master's in economics at JNU he went off to work with the Solidarity movement in Poland and, later, with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Somewhere on his travels he had picked up a copy of *Ecological Economics*. The book so impressed him that he abandoned his Marxism and resolved to introduce its themes to the community of Indian economists, then largely ignorant of or dismissive about ecological issues. Kurian therefore prevailed upon his brother—who ran a NGO in Bangalore—to invite Martinez-Alier to India.

In August 1988 Kurian organized a conference in Bangalore around the themes of Martinez-Alier's book—namely, the links between energy, the environment, and society. I helped him put the meeting together and met its chief inspirer the day he landed in our town. Then I took Martinez-Alier on a day-long excursion to the great Hoysala temples of Halebid and Belur. Along the way he let it drop that he was, as he put it, a "lapsed Marxist." Well, so was I, and so of course was Kurian.⁴⁰

With Martinez-Alier I was to forge a close and continuing collaboration. When I first met him, seventeen years ago, he still carried traces of his Marxist past. He was forced by Franco to study outside Spain and publish his first books in emigré editions in Paris. But over the years he changed his nationality—from Spanish to Catalan—and his name too.⁴¹

Martinez-Alier was my first introduction to the world of the European intellectual. If he is at all typical, then Americans, and Indians too,

⁴⁰ I write this with some feeling, for, by the time Martinez-Alier arrived in India, Paul Kurian had already come down with the depression that was to claim his life.

⁴¹ He now spells his name "Joan," to the exasperation of bibliographers, and to the confusion of graduate students, who doubtless think that the author of *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (his latest book) is the wife or sister of the author of *Ecological Economics*. (Perhaps some of them even think that, like another celebrated economist—Dcidre, once Donald, McCloskey—Juan has had a sex change.)

should feel decidedly inferior. For one thing, he speaks eight languages, and he can make jokes in at least six of them. He is a global citizen who has spent years in Latin America, living for extended periods of time in Cuba and Peru (he wrote a book comparing agriculture in the two countries), in Brazil, and most recently in Ecuador. By now he has made half-a-dozen trips to India, in the course of which he has visited parts of my country I scarcely knew of and certainly will never get to.⁴² In disciplinary terms, too, Martinez-Alier is unclassifiable. His formal appointment is in a department of economics and economic history. But many know him principally as an anthropologist on account of his first book, a classic ethnographic study of the *hacienda* system.

That book features strongly in my favorite Martinez-Alier story. One day, I was walking with him toward his old college, St Antony's in Oxford. On the road we bumped into Jairus Banaji, a polymath Trotskyist who had come to Oxford after two decades of trade-union work in Mumbai to do a thesis on the olive oil economy of ancient Greece. When I introduced the two, Banaji more or less prostrated himself. "The author of *Landlords and Laborers in Southern Spain*," he exclaimed: "That's the finest modern treatment of the dialectic between the formal and the real subsumption of labor. On my shelf, your book lies between [Marx's] *Capital* and [Lenin's] *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*."

Martinez-Alier was not entirely displeased by the company his book was keeping. One of the heroes of *Ecological Economics* is the Ukrainian thinker Podolinsky, who wrote to Marx about his idea that energy lay at the basis of economic activity—only to be dismissed with contempt by the prophet. Living in Europe Martinez-Alier found (as I had in India) that orthodox Marxism and Marxists were deeply hostile to ecological concerns, though there were other traditions of left-wing thought that were less insensitive. One of the little noticed tragedies of the Bolshevik revolution was that the victory of Marxism had consigned these other socialist traditions to oblivion. Now that the Berlin Wall had fallen, it was time to resurrect them.

Between 1990 and 1993 Martinez-Alier and I hosted a Social Science Research Council Working Group on the "environmentalism

⁴² For the record, he has also been a Visiting Fellow at Stanford and Yale.

of the poor." Our members came from half a dozen countries and we held meetings in four of them. Independently, I was deepening my acquaintance with intellectual traditions other than those I grew up with. As it happened, on most of my trips outside India Martinez-Alier contrived to spend some time in the cities where I was. We met in Berlin and Berkeley, at Oxford and New York, and quite often in his native Barcelona.

My conversations with Martinez-Alier have been of fundamental importance to my work. I have found in him a congenial spirit who, like me, but more effortlessly, transgresses boundaries, both disciplinary and national. I found also a fellow radical disenchanted with the faith which, for most of the twentieth century, had professed to contain within itself all that was progressive and humane in modern social thought.

In 1988 I moved to a job in Delhi. Six years later I moved back to Bangalore, which has been my base ever since. In this time I have spent an average of two to three months a year abroad. I taught the odd term in American universities and was a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. The academic market being what it is, it is far easier for an Indian to travel to the West than to visit, for professional reasons, other countries of the South. Still, I have made three short trips to Africa, one to Latin America, and two apiece to Pakistan and Nepal. All through I have listened to and learnt from, and occasionally argued with, environmental scholars from cultures and traditions different from my own. These travels have enormously enriched my intellectual life and shaped, in imperceptible ways, the ideas in this book.

VII

The substantive chapters of *How Much Should a Person Consume?* move outward from the Indian experience to consider environmental ideas, institutions, trends, and thinkers in other parts of the world. Some chapters are largely or wholly focused on India and Indians: these would probably have been written differently had I never lived in Europe and the United States. By the same token, the chapter on Lewis Mumford would certainly have been written very differently by an American, if it had been written at all. Other chapters are consciously

comparative: they seek directly rather than implicitly to engage different environmental traditions in conversation and sometimes in contention.

This book is, I hope, catholic not merely in its geographical reach but also in its intellectual influences and range of subjects. It is most fundamentally the product of one historian's attempt to think through the *environment*—to relate changes in social and economic life, political institutions, popular mentalities, and scientific research to the natural world in which humans are embedded. At a second level it is also one man's attempt to think *through* the environment—to assess without prejudice or sectarianism the many and differently oriented efforts toward forging a more peaceable and sustainable relationship between humans and the other species with which we must share this earth.

The ecumenism of this book is reflected in the range of themes it addresses. It seeks to understand how people think, what makes them act in groups and sects, what means they use to act and think as they do. As a work of social history it engages with ideas and interests as well as institutions. As an analysis of a popular social movement it engages with environmental philosophies and practices as well as policies.

That said, two caveats are in order. The first is that, as a work written by a single hand, it is necessarily selective. This is not a comprehensive comparative history of environmentalism, it is only one scholar's sense of some of the important trends and debates within that very large history. Second, the older I get the more I am attracted to a methodological credo which—with apologies to the last of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach"—I want to state as follows: *Environmentalists may wish to change the world, but environmental historians should seek merely to understand and interpret it.*

When I first started out in the field I was perhaps more keen to put my own research directly in the service of social and environmental change. Since this book draws upon some twenty-five years of research and reflection, there is probably a tension running right through it between the more detached perspective of the scholar and the more engaged one of the citizen. In any case, my disavowal of an activist role for the historian does not mean I subscribe to Rankean positivism, to the notion that the historian's job is "merely to tell how it really was."

For Ranke the "strict presentation of the facts" was the "supreme law" of history. But the fact is that "facts" are open to multiple interpretation. The historian must be attentive to this polyvalence and must also be prepared to express his own choices and preferences. He is required both to tell a new story and tell it well. The first requirement rests on the uncovering of sources previously unseen or unused; the second on the capacity for evaluative judgment. The historian must be able to say that he finds one individual more attractive than another, or a particular event more significant than another.⁴³

George Orwell once remarked that "a writer can never be a *loyal* member of a political party." Or of a social movement either. Or, indeed, of a particular faction within a social movement. This last is the seduction most prevalent in the field of environmental studies: very few scholars have not succumbed to it. Generations of American environmental historians have taken sides in the Muir-Pinchot debate. Writings on the Chipko movement have tended to see one wing as more real or more ecological than the other.

My view is that for a writer or scholar to take strongly partisan stances in an ideological debate of the past, or in favor of a popular movement in the present, is simply *unsustainable*. This is where Robi Chatterji's wise distinction comes to mind. If one is acting as an activist, it is perfectly fine to submerge one's self as well as one's critical

⁴³ I depart here from those (post-modernist and/or post-structuralist) scholars whose disenchantment with the possibility of an "objective" history has led them to abandon empirical research altogether. All sources are tainted, they say, and all writers ideological. True; but does that then mean that the task of the historian is only to point out how texts are contaminated? From Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre onward, if not earlier, sensitive historians have learnt to look for (and accommodate) biases in writers and documents—biases with regard to provenance, context, ideology, and biography. Having done that, they go on with the business of digging deep and, having finished digging, construct a plausible narrative, understanding full well that this narrative might be overturned by subsequent research.

Doubts about "history" (in scare quotes, always), I also think, tend to be expressed by scholars in middle age, just as they are beginning to find original research somewhat laborious. How much easier it is to philosophize about "the Eurocentricism of history writing" and the "imperialism of the narrative mode," than to read barely legible manuscripts in dingy archives!

faculties in the Cause. But to do so in print and under one's individual signature is, for a writer or scholar, to put one's independence and integrity on the line.

That said, to be non-sectarian is by no means the same as to be non-political. Orwell also wrote that all he had ever written was in defence of "democratic socialism, as I understand it." But he never allowed himself to be captive to a party of the left, unlike so many travelers of his time who were happy to tailor their writings to the needs of the Communist Party of Great Britain or the British Labour Party. By the same token, most—perhaps all—environmental historians wish to see a world in which humans relate harmoniously with one another and with nature. They might be sympathetic to the broad goals of the environmental movement, but, I believe and argue in this book, they must never take sides on behalf of any particular sect, faction, group, or ideology within it.

CHAPTER 2

The Indian Road to Sustainability



The British environmental movement has been described as "monumentally ahistorical," an indictment that applies with equal force to its Indian counterpart.¹ Thus, in an essay written to mark the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence from British rule, Anil Agarwal claimed that "when India began its planned development, *nobody* had heard of the word 'environment.' And the technologies adopted were intrinsically aggressive."²

The conventional wisdom holds that the Indian environmental movement began with the Chipko *andolan* (movement) in 1973. That wisdom was upheld by Agarwal, as also by numerous lesser environmentalists. As a social *mouvement*, Chipko was without precedent. But behind and before it lies the unacknowledged prehistory of environmental ideas.

This chapter distinguishes between two waves of Indian environmentalism: an early period of pioneering and prophecy, and a more recent phase when intellectual reflection has been allied to a popular social movement. The first wave of Indian environmentalism ran from the early twentieth century to the outbreak of the Second World War.

¹ Cf. Michael Rand Hoare, "When the Earth Moved," *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, February 1, 1991.

² Anil Agarwal, "Old Mindsets in a Changing Environment," *The Times of India*, August 19, 1997, emphasis added.