ISSN No: 3048-5851 (Online)
Vol.3, Issue No1, June 2026:153-157

https://doi.org/10.21276/smprt.202512.22.a11

Book Review

***Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism* by Ramachandra Guha. Edition 2024, Gurugram: Fourth Estate (an imprint of HarperCollins), Pages: 407+xxxi, ISBN: 9789362134905. Price 799, Cover Design: Mugdha Sadhwani**

Reviewer: *Ruchi Shree*[1]

Received: 16-09-2025 *Accepted: 12-05-2026*

How to cite this review article?
Shree Ruchi 2026. 'Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism'. ***Sampratyaya,* 3(1):** 153-157. *https://doi.org/10.21276/smprt.202512.22.a11*

11.0 Introduction

Ramchandra Guha's recent book *Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism* (2024) is an account of ten early thinker-practitioners. Guha argues that although these people contributed enormously to environmental consciousness in India but their contribution has not been adequately acknowledged. Those ten pioneering thinkers are Rabindranath Tagore, Radhakamal Mukerjee, J.C. Kumarappa, Patrick Geddes, Albert and Gabrielle Howard, Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn), Verrier Elwin, K.M. Munshi, and M. Krishnan. Guha writes that these are the people who shaped India's relationship with nature well before the rise of modern global environmentalism. He mentions early in the book that his goal is 'to provide contemporary Indian environmentalism with a credible intellectual genealogy' (Guha 2014: xxii). This text challenges the prevalent assumption that environmentalism follows a singular trajectory set by the west, and then adopted by the rest of the world, including the Global South.

11.1 Debating Environmentalism

Guha argues that the dominant narratives tend to situate Western conservationism at the core of environmental thought. He writes that India's ecological traditions are historically profound as well as politically significant. His work offers a necessary corrective to the prevalent Eurocentric framing of environmental history. This book convincingly illustrates that Indian

[1] Assistant Professor, University Department of Political Science, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University, Bhagalpur – 812007 (Bihar), https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9843-4698, Email: jnuruchi@gmail.com

environmentalism is not a recent adoption but rather a deeply rooted, context-specific ideology that long predates the west's ecological awakening.

11.1.1 Roots of Indian Environmentalism

While western environmentalism which focuses on the preservation of pristine landscapes, as seen in the works of John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and Rachel Carson, Indian environmentalism is deeply intertwined with the lived experiences. In India, environmental thought is closely tied with the lived experiences of the marginalised communities such as the tribal groups, subsistence farmers, boatmen, and fisherfolk communities, to name a few. These communities depend on natural ecosystems ranging from ponds, lakes and rivers to mountains and forests for their survival. Guha opines that Indian environmental thought offers valuable insights that can enrich transnational debates in three substantial ways: First, it shifts the focus toward sustainable lifestyles that tends to balance ecological responsibility with everyday survival. Second, it highlights the vital link between democracy and environmental sustainability in India which emphasises on the need for stronger community control over natural resources. Third, it places environmentalism as inseparable from social justice at different levels – whether it is within nations, between nations, or across generations.

Guha examines J.C. Kumarappa who was a Gandhian economist and linked ecological sustainability with rural self-sufficiency. Kumarappa argued that the true measure of economic progress was not gross domestic product (GDP), but the harmony between human communities and their environment. Tagore's educational philosophy makes a compelling appearance in this book. Tagore's first educational maxim asserted that 'the child should be brought up in such environments as would provide him with opportunities of direct and close contact with Nature' (Guha 2024: 16). That notion is so important and equally relevant even today. To illustrate the same, Guha mentions about Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood's essay (published in 2017) in the epilogue section of this book. He argues that Atwood's advocacy for outdoor classrooms in Canada proves the relevance of Tagore's ideas even after almost a century. Tagore opined that the learning will be better when the children are surrounded by trees, flowers, butterflies and birds (Guha 2024: 321).

11.1.2 Shades of Environmentalism

Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism depicts numerous shades of Indian environmentalism. As a reader, I sensed three prominent shades namely Ecological, Gandhian, and Hindutva. Ecological shade is represented by Tagore, R.K. Mukerjee, and M. Krishnan. To Tagore, modern cities were parasitic on the natural resources of the countryside but he was not unduly romantic about the village life (Guha 2024: 21). Tagore grew up in the city but he gradually got disenchanted with urban lifestyles. In his worldview, human beings and nature are inseparable and his writings, be it novels, poems or plays deeply reflect that. R.K. Mukerjee was an economist as well as a sociologist. He was deeply influenced by Tagore and Patrick Geddes. Mukerjee argued that indigenous systems of common property resources (CPRs) had been grievously undermined by colonial rule in India (Guha 2004: 45). M. Krishnan, a journalist by profession was committed to the cause of wildlife. Guha underlines that when one thinks of

'nature' or of 'wildlife' in the Indian context, two names that come to mind are Jim Corbett and Salim Ali and the contribution of M. Krishnan does not get its due acknowledgement.

The most dominant theme of this book seems to be Gandhian environmentalism with J.C. Kumarappa, Madeliene known as Mira Behn, and Verrier Elwin as its proponents. This school of thought advocates decentralisation, proximity with nature and a self-disciplined way of life. Kumarappa, an economist by training but later undertook the task of building an ecological programme on Gandhian lines. The agenda of rural construction was undertaken through focus on soil maintenance, water conservation, village forest rights, and protection of the artisans (Guha 2024: 109). Mira Behn advocated more decentralized forms of production, habitation and governance. She argued that 'we must fundamentally change our outlook and way of life. We must simplify if we are to survive' (Guha 2024: 205). Influenced by Gandhi, Verrier Elwin devoted his life to study the tribal culture as an anthropologist. K.M. Munshi is the only Hindutva environmentalist mentioned in this book. Guha writes that Munshi was the first thinker to bring an explicitly religious dimension to the conservation and protection of nature (Guha 2024: 278).

11.1.3 Festivals around Indigenous Traditions of Nature Conservation

Tagore's affection for nature led him to celebrate nature through festivals. The tree planting ceremony or *Briksharopan* was one of the several festivals held at Shantiniketan (West Bengal). The idea behind this festival was to nurture among students an affectionate and caring relationship with nature. Tagore believed in harmonising the human lives with rhythm and variations of nature. He introduced five more such festivals named *Vasant Utsav* (Spring Festival), *Varsha Mangal* (Welcoming the Monsoon), *Sharad Utsav* (Autumn Festival), Ploughing Ceremony (*Halakarshana*) and *Nabanna Utsav* (Harvest Festival) (Guha 2024:19). Some of these festivals are celebrated even today in Shantiniketan.

K.M. Munshi, the first food and agriculture minister of India initiated a week-long ceremony to celebrate trees, to be called *Vana Mahotsava* (literally, the Grand festival of the Forest) in 1950. In Munshi's words, "during this week, women and children should plant trees, water them, repair to the forest and gardens… honour and study and worship the trees. Let those who like it revive the echoes of Vrindavan with flute and *mridanga*" (cited in Guha 2024:247). The author doubts that Munshi was aware of Tagore's similar initiative taken much before him. He argues that Tagore's religious heterodoxy must have prevented Munshi who was more interested in invoking the Hindu tradition and even calls him the first Hindutva environmentalist. Two different variants of tree-plantation festivals are prevalent in India i.e. Tagore's socio-cultural interpretation of nature and the significance of trees and Munshi's state sponsored week-long project work.

M. Krishnan liked to contrast between two different indigenous traditions of nature conservation, namely Vedanthangal and of Ashoka (Guha 2024:296). He wrote that "the first referred to a village which was fifty-five miles from Madras, where custom and religious traditions had saved for generations, breeding birds from the hunter's arrow and shikari's shotgun; the latter to the Mauryan emperor whose edicts commanded his people to protect rare animals and plants" (cited in Guha 2024:296). Krishnan writes in a pamphlet on Vedantnagal that in the Sangam literature of the 2nd century AD, there are vivid descriptions of the birds. So, from ancient times

the colonies of water birds were protected in the villages in South India. This rich cultural indigenous tradition guided the humanity to protect the nature, to live in perfect harmony – be it birds or forests.

Guha's book, which is reviewed here, claims that Krishnan had a cultural partiality for the literature of his native Tamil Nadu (Guha:2024: 304). Krishnan admired the Tamilian poetic ecology in the Sangam period (c. sixth century BCE to third century CE) which divided the land into five categories – *Marutam* (agricultural tracts and human settlement), *Mullai* (plain forests and woodlands), *Kurinji* (hill forests and montane tracts), *Neital* (the sea and littoral areas) and *Paalai* (scrub and waste lands) (Guha2024: 305). For each category of landscape, the poets had described its fauna and flora in remarkable factual detail. Krishnan believed that human beings were the principal enemy of wildlife conservation. He had absolutely no trust in Indian bureaucrats (Guha 2024: 310). As a result, he felt bitter and frustrated about the prospects for wildlife conservation in Indian context.

11.2 Shortcomings of the Text

Speaking with Nature: The Origins of Indian Environmentalism is quite rich in analytical details; it also has some shortcomings. The author himself accepts two such things – first, the inclusion of biographies of non-Indians and second, the gender imbalance. I would like to mention that the gender imbalance in the book is particularly striking given the rich legacy of women in India's environmental movements. The inclusion of figures such as Savitribai Phule and Pandita Ramabai, or even Sarojini Naidu would have provided a more inclusive picture of Indian environmental thought. While Savitri Bai and Ramabai's pioneering work in education emphasised a connection between literacy and sustainable rural practices, Sarojini Naidu frequently spoke of nature's role in shaping national identity. Along with these three women thinkers, even the contributions of Janaki Ammal (who was a pioneering botanist and challenged the colonial forestry policies) is missing. Though the book highlights Mira Behn (Madeleine Slade) as a devoted Gandhian and advocate for sustainable agriculture but her presence in the book feels somewhat secluded. The only other woman discussed in the book is Gabrielle Howard, who appears primarily in relation to her husband, Albert Howard. Such omissions are quite striking and tend to disappoint the readers.

This book's argument that "environmentalism" is only 200-250 years old is contested by Ashish Kothari, a leading voice of environmentalism in India. He writes that Guha adopts John McNeill's definition of environmentalism "as the view that humankind ought to seek peaceful co-existence with, rather than mastery over, nature" is debatable (Kothari 2025). Kothari insists that such a view has been held by myriad Adivasi peoples and other "ecosystem people" (a term that is used by Madhav Gadgil and Guha in their two-volume ecological history of India) for time immemorial. In fact, the practices such as conscious restraint on hunting and fishing during breeding seasons, or norms regarding the felling of trees including in the Bishnoi community and many others are also based on worldviews that respect nature. It would be clearly in the domain of environmentalism as defined by McNeill.

Though environmentalism as an academic concept is new but as a practice it is much older. This book of more than 400 pages includes merely ten chapters and most of the chapters are quite

lengthy. Inclusion of a few more personalities would have brought diversity to the content of the book and even the chapters could be shorter. Due to each chapter being quite lengthy, the details seem overstretched. Similarly, the positions taken by the author to compare two personalities or influences appear biased and at times unnecessary. For example, the author writes about sibling rivalry between Lewis Mumford and R.K. Mukerjee as both of them were influenced by Patrick Geddes. There are several other comparisons in the book. In fact, even the portrayal of K.M. Munshi as Hindutva environmentalist could be little perplexing for the secular readers.

11.3 Style and Scholarly Significance

This book is divided into nine distinct yet interlinked chapters excluding an Introduction and an Epilogue. While Introduction contextualises the relevance of the text, the epilogue narrates the environmental issues and the need to learn lessons from these thinkers. Each chapter explores a different facet of India's environmental history through a diverse range of intellectuals, writers, activists, economists, and policymakers. Guha's approach is a blend of historical and biographical. In his previous books *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2000) and *How much should a person consume?: Thinking Through Environment* (2007) also, he has written about different aspects of environment. In this book, he offers an intellectual history of Indian environmental thought. To do so, he situates each thinker within their specific socio-historical contexts by illustrating how their personal experiences, ideological shifts, and interactions with contemporary events shaped their ecological views. His sources of scholarship are remarkably diverse as he draws a varied range of essays, published science writing, memoirs, polemics, travel literature, manifestos, investigative journalism, letters, plans, educational treatises and plays, poetry, and novels. The book is quite rich in terms of scholarly efforts taken in compiling the facts.

11.4 Conclusion

To sum up, this book does not confine itself to merely tracing the genealogies of environmental thought in India. While the introduction sets the context of writing this book, the Epilogue underlines the contemporary ecological crises. The text closely situates Indian environmentalism within the broader economic structures. It also clearly reveals that ecological struggles are not relics of the past but ongoing battles shaped by contemporary power dynamics. This book is a landmark contribution to environmental history and ecological thought. One of the many insights a reader will pick up in the book is the intersectionality of the environment with social and cultural aspects of life in India. Most of the thinkers featured in the book have engaged with environment through different aspects of society, economy and politics. The interdisciplinary orientation of the book makes it relevant for the readers of various disciplines. Overall, the book is a significant contribution to ever increasing literature on environmental studies.

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