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Environmental history: Natural and human influences

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of natural phenomena and governmental actions within the realm of environmental history, with a particular focus on the Anthropocene and the concept of the Capitalocene. The study explores the theme of violence exerted by both natural events and human policies through two primary case studies: the 1877-78 famines in India, China, and Brazil, driven by the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon. Drawing from Brian Fagan's analysis, the paper delves into the devastating impact of ENSO-induced droughts and the varying governmental responses that exacerbated the crises. Fagan emphasizes the role of colonial policies, such as Lord Lytton's laissez-faire approach in India, which neglected price controls and subsidies, further aggravating the famine's toll. In contrast, Mike Davis presents a critical examination of the same famines within the context of the global economic depression of 1873, highlighting the interplay between ecological events, the global capitalist economy, and colonial exploitation. Davis argues that famines functioned as instruments of historical change, underscoring the stark disparities between the global north and the 'third world.' This paper traces the dual impact of natural and human-induced violence, demonstrating how environmental factors and colonial policies collectively precipitated and intensified the suffering of millions.

Keywords: Environmental history, natural, human influences

Introduction

The relationship between natural and human influences has been a crucial facet of environmental history since the 1970s. An interesting point of focus has been the duality of the Anthropocene and the role of not just humans, but governments, in impacting nature. This critical threshold has been theorised in several forms, through ideas of 'Capitalocene', but what remains common is the idea of violence¹. This paper therefore, will attempt to trace the violence of governments and the dual impact of this, through case studies of famines on the one hand, and more discursive and subtle forms of violence on the other.

Famines serve as the most powerful examples of violence partly due to the sheer scale of devastation involved and the overt relationship with nature, through drought. Fagan cites how the 1877 famine killed more than a million in Madras, with similar numbers in China and Brazil². Importantly, however, Fagan draws upon an ecological phenomenon, the El Niño phenomenon, as the reason for drought across the world, resulting in massive devastation. Using the case study of the 1877-78 phenomenon, Fagan traces the ecological history of ENSO's at a global level, while exploring questions of state prevention through famine relief and economic policies. Drawing upon comparisons between India and China in particular, Fagan highlights the difference between attitudes towards famine relief, with Laissez-faire and Malthusian influences reflected in Lytton's refusal to impose price controls and other subsidies³. Fagan therefore draws the important link between the effects of the El Niño as a natural phenomena and the state policies which led to 'the great famine'. However, what remains implicit in the argument is the causality of environmental factors and subsequently human action which leads to further deterioration. The El-Niño and the subsequent drought was used by to exploit subsistence farmers and plantation workers within the ambit of debt and the Colonial, global economy⁴.

In contrast to this is Mike Davis' work where he argues a fundamental and equal connection between the ecology of the El Niño, the Late Victorian Global economy and the policy of Colonial states of not providing relief, especially in India at an equal level. The 1876 El Niño

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1 James Moore

2 Brian Fagan. *Floods, Famines and Emperors: El Niño and the Fate of Civilizations*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, 226.

3 Fagan, *Floods, Famines and Emperors*, 229. 4 Fagan, *Floods, Famines and Emperors*, 243.

and famines in India, China and Brazil were related to the economic depression of 1873 where cultivators were already impoverished⁴. The ecological effects of ENSOS is compounded with rejection of the naturalization of the commodification of agriculture and price speculations⁵. Through a historicization of Capital Accumulation, Davis's work explores the violence of colonialism through the dual process of studies of famines in India, China and Brazil, and 'famine' policies rooted in *Laizzez-faire* ideals along with the interactions with the global economy. Crucially however, Davis also locates famines as engines of historical change, using them to highlight the divergence between the global north and the 'third world'⁶.

While examining the occurrence of famines, a crucial description which highlights the violence of states is explored in Vipul Singh's work. Using the case study of the mid-ganga basin, Singh argues that drought, devastation and death was a frequent part of India's history. Asserting that famines were present even before Colonial rule, Singh draws an important link between drought, famine and policy, specifically revenue policy⁷. Using a complex argument, Singh's duality is that pre-colonial rulers had high taxation, but with increased flexibility. This can be especially seen during cases of drought and even famines, wherein Sultanate rulers Alauddin Khilji and Mohammad Bin Tughlaq provided relief, employment and reduced taxation⁸. The administration of the East India Company in the 18th Century was a fundamental break however, since the sole focus was on revenue extraction. This was reflected in varying forms, such as further attempts to transform and even control rivers, refusal to provide relief during crop failure¹⁰. The fundamental transformation therefore, between drought and famines is the actions and policies of governments.

While famines are the overt examples of violence and the manifestation of human actions which transform nature, more discrete forms of violence are asserted by states. Jeremy Schmidt highlights one example of this with the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), America's post-colonial development and the transformation of policies on water post 1945. Schmidt highlights how the model of the TVA's naturalization of water through dual assertion of abundance and scarcity, manifested in policies of large dams, was used to further regional development and American interests, manifested in dam projects in Chile (1948), Mexico (1949) and the Indus Basin (1960)⁹. The dual thrust of the argument is in tracing the origin of the TVA project and highlighting how its liberal promise of abundance was rooted in the exclusion of alternative ideas of 'water' and replicated the violence of America's Settler Colonialism.¹⁰ While simultaneously arguing how the TVA was used as a policy tool for America's territorial and security interests, and through this reproducing forms of violence through economic dependence.

A combination of subtle, discursive forms of state violence and overt ones used to transform nature can be reflected in Satadru Sen's examination of *Savagery and Colonialism* in the Indian Ocean. Sen argues that discovery of diseases in the Andamese tribes in the 1870s was used as an entry point by British Colonialism to transform and control their bodies and their environment. Tracing material and discursive transformations in the Islands from the 1860s to the 1890s, Sen argues that questions of medicine and extinction were tools used by the Colonial state for Colonial expansion on the one hand, and control over the Andamanese on the other¹¹. The importance of this transformation was its peculiarity wherein the Andamanese were located liminally between nature and humans, with Colonial intervention as a mediating factor, in the 1880s through medicine. This discourse allowed the Colonial State an opportunity for expansion into the forests, as well as important ideological assertions of the Andamanese as 'victims of nature and history'¹².

While exploring the relationship between humans and the environment in history, the idea of the Anthropocene is important. This allows a fundamental entry point wherein the duality between human actions and their impact on nature and vice versa are reflected. However, the idea of the Anthropocene must be explored specifically, and the anthropogenic violence of the state is a crucial factor, not only in transforming nature but in understanding history. Through the case studies mentioned above, this paper attempts an analysis which links the question of violence and transformation in the actions of the State, represented as 'capitilocene' as distinct from merely ordinary human impact on nature.

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5 Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 12.

6 Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 17.

7 Vipul Singh, *Speaking Rivers: Environmental History of a Mid-Ganga Flood Country, 1540-1885*, Delhi: Primus, 2018, 119.

8 Singh, *Speaking Rivers*, 116. 10 Singh, *Speaking Rivers*, 117.

9 Jeremy J. Schmidt, *Water: Abundance, Scarcity and Security in the Age of Humanity*, Delhi: Sage, 2018, 110.

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12 Sen, *Savagery and Colonialism*, 156.