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# The Many Colours of Environmentalism

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**M**ukul Sharma probably did not time it deliberately, but this book has come at an opportune moment. Anna Hazare and his group are repeatedly making headlines. Anna Hazare has for various reasons become a national icon and in showing another side to his personality and methods, Sharma does us all a service. We often tend to look at things in black and white and we miss the various shades of grey (or rather, in this case, green and saffron!) in between. And in doing this, we might unwittingly walk into traps with dangerous consequences.

In this book, Sharma has gone boldly where very few have gone before. There are, as he says, many commentaries and critiques of right-wing Hindu communalism, as also of the many kinds of environmentalism in India. But rarely have researchers or writers brought the two together, to show the increasing collaboration and synergies between them. Sharma has done this previously in articles about individual movements (e.g., Sharma 2003), but this book brings together much wider experience into an overarching analysis.

## Green-Saffron Alliance

Sharma begins with a prologue recounting his witnessing a religious fair in honour of the Kosi River at Sonmanki in Bihar. As an event in which environmental and religious aims appear to seamlessly merge, this sets the scene for the rest of the book. The first chapter introduces readers to the basic concepts used in the book, and explains its structure. The second lays out the key themes and elements of the confluence between environment and right-wing Hinduism.

Then follow three chapters with detailed case studies demonstrating this confluence: Anna Hazare's initiatives at

## BOOK REVIEW

**Green and Saffron** by Mukul Sharma (*Ranikhet: Permanent Black*, 2012; pp 263; Rs 795 (HB)).

transforming his village Ralegan Siddhi (Maharashtra), Sunderlal Bahuguna's campaign against the Tehri Dam (Uttarakhand), and the project of the World-wide Fund for Nature – India (wwf-India) to green and clean Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh). Drawing on these cases, Sharma offers a concluding analysis of the contours of the green-saffron alliance in two concluding chapters, including how this differs from other forms of environmentalism in India.

The book also contains a chapter on conservative environmentalism in Europe, to show that the trend he discusses in detail in the Indian context is not restricted to India. I should confess, however, that this is one chapter I did not manage to read, so will not comment on it here.

## Traditionalism, Communalism, Nationalism

According to Sharma, a recurring theme, in the three initiatives he describes, is the confluence of traditionalism, communalism and nationalism. Each harks back to a supposed glorious past in which people and nature lived in harmony, communities were self-sufficient and at peace with each other, men and women were in their "right" places, and so on. Each equates this past to a neat, efficiently functioning, and disciplined Hindu order; and then explicitly or implicitly equates the threats to this order as coming from "outside", from the "other"...identified as Muslim, Christian, the west, etc. And each also calls on various forms of nationalism (sometimes so extreme Sharma calls it "ultra-nationalism") to generate passion and commitment to the cause...again,

explicitly or implicitly pointing to threats from other nations. All also show a marked tendency towards forms of authoritarianism, or the use of moral or social authority as a means to meet ends.

These tendencies play out differently in each of the initiatives that Sharma mentions. In Ralegan Siddhi, even as Hazare catalyses a process of economic and social transformation that leads the village to far greater levels of prosperity than before, he does so with a mix of arguments and tactics that sometimes resemble the army (he was a jawan before coming back to his village), sometimes a hierarchical religious order. Even as he breaks tradition to eat with and visit the houses of dalits, and argue for their integration into the rest of the village society, he does so by persuading them to embrace the values of brahmins (e.g., vegetarianism). While he deals with alcoholism as a serious problem affecting village life, especially women, he does so using fear as a weapon, including public flogging of violators. Interestingly, though, the moral force he commands is so strong (and presumably, the results of the transformation so obvious), that much of the village accepts all these as necessary and justified. Sharma calls this a "hegemonic absolute". Hazare and his followers also frequently take recourse to narrow notion of nationalism, generating enthusiasm amongst the villagers by talking of the threat from Pakistan (and from forces in north-east India, Punjab and Kashmir), and the need to have a strong army to hold the nation together.

In the case of the campaign against the Tehri Dam, Sharma notes the gradual transformation of a movement that began with the very real and justified concerns regarding the social and environmental impacts of the project, into one that conflated Hindutva political agendas with environmental ones. Sunderlal Bahuguna, for long an iconic figure amongst India's environmentalists and Gandhians for his leadership of part of the Chipko movement, took up the struggle against the dam in the 1970s. A substantial part of the movement against the dam was in language similar to other

anti-dam movements in the country, some prior to Tehri, some parallel to it. However, there were also elements of the religious nature of the Ganga and its tributaries, and it is these that became the focus of Hindutva groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Finally, Bahuguna joined hands with these organisations by appearing on the same forums together and making joint appeals. Sophisticated, nuanced arguments on environmental, socio-economic, political, and cultural fronts were displaced in much of the subsequent public discourse by a narrow agenda of religious nationalism, so much so that even anti-Muslim stereotypes crept into the arguments against the dam. As in the case of Ralegan, here too nationalism was invoked, this time playing the image of China as a major threat, or of the dam being a communist plot by Russia, or even a sinister move by Inter-Service Intelligence of Pakistan. As Sharma says, “green politics was effectively made saffron”.

A similar confluence is seen in the attempt by WWF to bring environmental sustainability to Vrindavan. This town, along with its surrounds, including Mathura, is one of Hindutva’s hotspots. WWF actually made a conscious attempt to link religion and environment. While their intentions may have been genuine and perhaps even naively innocent, they played right into the hands of forces that would like us to believe that India’s past (when Hinduism predominated) was one of harmony and peace, that Braj Bhoomi (imagined as a vast landscape centring around Mathura) was an environmental utopia with Krishna as its chief architect, and that it was forces from outside (read: Muslim and Christian) that have brought strife and conflict and environmental degradation. It is not clear if WWF explicitly denounced its collaborators who were prone to labelling Muslims as “polluting”, or even justifying untouchability. In any case it did not challenge the dominant social system, and wittingly or otherwise, dalits and Muslims were left out of the project or at best used as *sewaks*.

Some Hindu groups draw explicit parallels between natural processes and

what is happening in society: the dangers of introducing “exotics” and “aliens” into an ecosystem are the same as those of allowing “foreigners” to come into “Bharat”; pollution of the physical environment is akin to that of the social and cultural order by non-believers (or believers of faiths other than Hinduism); the caste system is as natural as the division of ecological niches between different animals. Caste as a legitimate social order, in fact, comes up often in their arguments and beliefs, and has wittingly or unwittingly even been reinforced by some ecologists. The situation of dalits at the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy gets legitimised in various ways; even when environmental or social leaders like Hazare make explicit attempts at integrating them and providing them some respect, this is done through getting them to adopt brahminical practices and beliefs.

Sharma is not afraid of naming some of the biggest names in India’s environmental movement, as having willingly or unwittingly lent their weight to the above tendencies. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha’s ecological legitimacy for the caste system (though if I remember correctly they disavow its exploitative tendencies), Vandana Shiva’s Indian tradition vs modernity arguments, Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain’s romanticisation of the Indian village – these and others get associated. Gandhi’s writings about the Indian village, and ancient vis-à-vis modern civilisation, also get mentioned, though Sharma refrains from linking them to the green-saffron alliance.

I must confess to my own personal (and initially naïve) involvement in this, having been part of India’s environmental struggles for over three decades. Our earliest lessons on environment were from people like Sunderlal Bahuguna (amongst many others), and Ralegan Siddhi has been a “model” of how a village can become self-reliant and prosperous by judicious use of its natural resources that we have cited in many places. Many of us joined the anti-Tehri Dam movement long distance or with more direct support. I remember myself joining in demonstrations, and visiting Sunderlal Bahuguna when he undertook

a historic 50-day fast to stop the dam construction. But we were also deeply concerned when the VHP decided to take up the issue, and shocked when Sunderlal Bahuguna openly welcomed its entry and collaborated with it on a number of platforms. It was perhaps an act of desperation since the struggle was not achieving its aim, but it was, for us, a betrayal by a Gandhian of one of Gandhi’s basic principles, that of the means being as important as the ends.

### A Model of Research and Humanism

Sharma’s analysis of the three case studies is incisive and novel not only because of the insights he brings into the green-saffron connection, but also because he puts these initiatives into their historical, sociocultural, economic and political contexts. He also combines such transdisciplinary research and analysis with a deep sense of humanism, a genuine concern for the exploited and down-trodden sections of society. It is this which makes him expose the ugly side of what have otherwise been considered by most people to be radical social and environmental movements.

The author’s views are also not simplistic; he brings out the nuances of the situations. He gives details of the positive spin-offs of these movements; particularly, for instance, the remarkable economic transformation wrought by Hazare in Ralegan Siddhi. He notes that some of what has happened, e.g., in Tehri, may have been an off-shoot of the environment being sidelined from the mainstream discourse and decision-making, leading environmentalists to desperate “pragmatic political paths”. He also explicitly states that environmentalism in India is diverse, with many strands being explicitly and genuinely anti-communal, oriented towards both environmental

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sustainability and social justice; and he notes that not all Hindutva groups use environmentalism.

Notwithstanding these complexities, Sharma notes five crucial points of convergence between “green” and “saffron” in the three cases he examines, as also in some other instances: the use of ultra-nationalism to whip up supporters, the admiration of or encouragement to a brahminical Hindu order, the recourse to authority and discipline, the hostility to “others” (sometimes explicitly named, such as Muslims, Christians, dalits), and the use of pragmatic politics based on communalism.

In all, Sharma succeeds admirably in achieving his primary motive for writing the book: to record and alert against the coming together of green and saffron.

### Unexplored Terrain

While completely convinced of his overall argument, I would like to raise some issues that I think need further exploration. If there is one weakness in the book, it is that Sharma does not clearly raise these issues himself, not necessarily to deal with them in the same book (no single work can encompass the universe of issues on such a complex subject), but to state that these need to be tackled. And my apologies to the author in case in my reading of the book, I missed seeing that these were indeed present.

First, it seems to me that the distinction between religion and spirituality needs further work in assessing the green-saffron confluence. In critiquing the various uses of tradition, rituals, and beliefs by Hazare, Bahuguna, WWF, and the Hindutva forces aligned with them, Sharma cites examples like the sacredness of nature (forests, rivers, mountains, etc), the view of earth as “Mother”, and the belief that humans are a part of nature. It is important, however, to realise that such beliefs (and practices associated with them) are found in many (perhaps most) indigenous or adivasi peoples. Distinguishing between such cultural/spiritual links of nature and humans that are part of thousands of years of people’s existence on earth and the use of these for communal or ultra-nationalist agendas is crucial. In other words, is all

cultural and spiritual connection between us and the earth we live in, to be suspected? Is the argument given by the Dongria Kondh adivasis of Odisha, that the proposed mining by Vedanta corporation was unacceptable because it was on their sacred hill, invalid or unacceptable? Are the motivations behind the lakhs of ecosystems and landscape conserved around the world because they are considered sacred (see for instance, Mallarach 2008), necessarily problematic? I doubt Sharma would think so, but then it would have been useful for him to say something on this in the book.

Second, presumably the problem is not only about the confluence of Hindutva and environmentalism, but also about the links between any extreme or communal religious movement and the environmental movement (indeed Sharma points to this in the chapter on Europe, though perhaps he could have more explicitly stated this so as not to be faced with charges that he is essentially anti-Hindu). But this raises a question linked to the first one above. Is it *necessarily* problematic when any religious body gets into environmental activism, or any environmentalist invokes religion? For instance, Buddhist monks in parts of north-east India have taken to the streets or gone on fasts against proposed or ongoing construction of hydroelectricity projects that, according to them, will cause ecological and cultural damage. In the 1990s, a proposed dam in the Rathong Chu region of Sikkim was stopped by monks and local groups, with one main argument being that the entire valley was sacred for Buddhists (Ramakrishnan 2008). In all these cases environmentalists too have joined in. This has strong resemblance to the Tehri example Sharma gives. But there *may* be a difference, in that the religious leaders involved are not (as far as I know) *communal* in their practices and beliefs.

If this is the case, or if there are other such instances where this is the case, is the religion-environment collaboration acceptable? Is it ok, for example, to take the Dalai Lama’s help in appealing to Buddhists in India, Nepal and China not to hunt threatened animals like the tiger and the snow leopard? Or progressive

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Christian leaders in Nagaland to appeal to the Naga people (predominantly Christian) not to indulge in indiscriminate hunting?

I am myself not sure of the answer, as I have problems with religion per se as an organised undemocratic force. But I wonder what Sharma would say.

Perhaps we can look forward to a sequel from Sharma, to go even further into a domain where other analysts and observers of environmentalism in India have hardly ventured.

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