Book Review

Sharma, Mukul. *Green and Saffron: The RSS, Modi, and Indian Environmental Politics*. Permanent Black and Ashoka University, 2024. ISBN 978-8178246857. xxviii + 384 pp.

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Hinduism, at its roots, can be interpreted as a religious, spiritual, and cultural practice that is strongly connected to and grounded in the environment and natural landscape of India. In his book *Green and Saffron: The RSS, Modi, and Indian Environmental Politics*, published in 2024, Mukul Sharma views this spiritual connection as the premise for giving rise to religiously grounded, domestically embedded environmental movements for the protection of land, rivers and forests in India. He explores ancient local Hindu practices in their connection to nature and finds them in some regions (for example, the Garhwal region in the Himalayas) to have strong cultural foundations. In different chapters, the author analyzes various environmental movements and shows how religious symbols are mobilized to support their activism.

One of the central messages of the book is that there have been two distinct paths exploring the convergence of Hindu spirituality and environmentalism in India to date. The first one, identified by the author as pre-2014, is associated with grassroots movements that are grounded in Hindu traditionalist approaches, viewing environmental degradation as the result of Western, foreign imposed modes of modernization and large-scale imperial development. The second path—strengthened on the national scale post-2014—Sharma labels the "Greening of Saffron," that is the intentional instrumentalization of environmental issues for Hindu nationalist politics under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

As for the first path, the author highlights that not all Indian-native environmentalism serves as a tool for Hindu nationalist proclamations. In some environmental campaigns, the confluence of nature, religion and the nation occurs unintentionally by the actors. The author explores how efforts for conserving rivers and fighting pollution and social displacement, for example in the context of anti-dam movements, often invoke religious visions and images of nationhood while striving for environmental protection. Sharma illustrates how in this process, underlying problems of undemocratic practices and social injustice get replaced by religious projections on envi-

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ronmental claims. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 demonstrate these arguments through deep dives into distinct movements, such as the Ralegan Siddhi ideal village programme, the Tehri Dam opposition movement, and the Vrindavan forest revival project.

In examining these movements, the author shows that they tend to become problematic when they intersect with practices of caste-based discrimination, economic grievances and inequalities, and, above all, Hindu nationalist mobilization grounded on Hindutva narratives and intercommunal violence.

Even though the book identifies two distinct paths of convergence between "Green" and "Saffron"—one pre- and the other post-2014—the author finds that Hindutva claims within the environmental discourse did not start with the BJP rule. Sharma's examples illustrate that, while not all environmental movements display such connections, there have been instances in which environmental activism has explicitly promoted Hindutva ideology—a process he calls the "Saffronizing of Green," in contrast to the "Greening of Saffron" under the BJP. In this context, the book argues that environmental issues in India have long become part of a Hindu nationalist reimagination as spiritual meaning and religious symbols have been appropriated for the purpose of politicizing environmental issues. A common theme of Sharma's chapters is to showcase the localized origins of Hindutva as the product of projections and counter-projections of religion, culture, tradition, and politics that aim to create rules and compliance.

Through his detailed exploration of the three different movements, the author shows how Hindu religious connectivity and imagery became strongly linked with environmental campaigns in the 1970s and -80s. During this time, religious values and Hindu territorial symbolics of localized environmentalism found strong resonance with the communal agenda of Hindu nationalist forces. Sharma identifies this period as a critical juncture for Hindutva politics to start infiltrating green movements, values and objectives for which the RSS led campaigns on a large scale. A central argument of the book is that through environmental campaigns like the anti-Tehri Dam movement, the Hindu Right gained national credibility through what the author views as spiritually and emotionally provocative imageries that were politically constructed to influence public perception and behaviour.

The book further delves into how the BJP has politically recentralized climate change narratives into beliefs and philosophies of Hindu religious practices (such as harnessing energy from the sun or cow protection) that has served as a crucial component for advancing popular support for the Hindu nationalist agenda of RSS activity and BJP Hindutva politics. Sharma situates this case of eco-nationalism in contrast to right-wing populism in Western countries which often deny environmental issues altogether. He specifically demonstrates climate change and environmental politics to be a key tool that conflates ancient cultural traditions and

wisdom with a nationalist agenda in India. A central overarching theme of Sharma's analysis is how Bharat is depicted as the Hindu Motherland—both, in politicizing debates and in grassroots activism. Its nature—animals, rivers and forests—are seen as icons of Mother India that are to be worshiped and protected from external disruption. The book demonstrates these narratives as not only symbolic but highly emotional conceptions of Hindu identity and nationality that stand at the forefront of communal hostilities and citizenship devaluation. Through this positioning, the book situates itself within the wider scholarship on Hindu nationalist politics and Hindu majoritarianism. What distinguishes this book however—and what the author contends has been neglected by other scholars—is the emphasis on the central role of climate change as a political instrument for the Hindu Right.

While Sharma finds that "Green and Saffron" have historically been linked (a finding that prompted the first edition of this book), the conception of a Hindu exclusivity on environmental issues has been strengthened with the BJP's rise to power. In this process, the book advances a central argument—environmental goals have been overshadowed by communal agendas, and environmental organizations have been transformed into localized instruments of Hindu nationalist politics.

The new edition of *Green and Saffron* by Mukul Sharma goes beyond the 2012 edition in addressing questions about the nature of the current regime's engagement in climate politics. His findings include climate change to be a strategic instrument for legitimacy and popularity domestically and for strengthening the BJP's leadership character on the global stage. The author argues that the climate change politics of the Modi government is on all levels linked to civilizational identity. In the book, Sharma identifies a core narrative underpinning the BJP's Hindu nationalist framing of climate change politics on the international level—the depiction of India as an ancient Hindu civilization that is portrayed as the authentic representor and pioneer of a climate friendly lifestyle and environmental protection. Through an analysis of grassroots environmental movements and RSS-BJP politics, the author shows, that at the national level the convergence of Hindu nationalism and environmentalism is often mobilized through common narratives of purity and opposition to external influence.

The book effectively demonstrates that the Modi government has achieved a convergence of "Green" and "Saffron" in a manner that elevates the Hindu nationalist agenda on a national level and fosters prestige for Hindu civilizational traditions on the international stage. The author, however, overlooks to examine how this confluence translates into concrete policy outcomes, or how effective the political instrumentalization of environmental themes is in delivering meaningful environmental protection—an issue that has been contested.[1] Furthermore, the author identifies a limitation for the traditional space for environmental movements

after 2014 as he sees the space to be occupied increasingly by different channels of the Sangh Parivar. However, the book fails to adequately address how the occupation of environmental issues by the Hindu Right fuels democratic backsliding in India and how the government actively represses civil society environmental activism through legislative action.[2]

To conclude, a central take-away from Sharma's book is a core argument that ties its chapters together—ecological sustainability and social justice in a society is incompatible with an exclusivist and ethnically bound approach to environmentalism. As such, the book seeks to alert secular forces to actively contest and rebalance the prevalent environmental discourse in India.

Notes

1 Ranjan (2024), for example, illustrates the gap between the government's rhetoric commitment to environmental protection and its actual domestic output which continuously prioritizes an economic developmental agenda thereby undermining implementation and compliances with environmental conservation measures.

2 See for example Mukherji (2024) and Dutta and Nielsen (2021) on the deliberate curbing of independent NGOs in India.

References

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