International Journal of Applied Social Science **REVIEW PAPER**
(An International Double Blind Peer Reviewed / Refereed Research Journal of Social Science) ISSN : 2394-1405 (Print)
Volume 13 (9 & 10), September & October (2026) : 1100-1106 ***Website :*** www.scientificresearchjournal.com
Received : 17.08.2026; Revised : 03.09.2026; Accepted :17.09.2026 **DOI** : https://doi-ds.org/doilink/11.2026-47987177/IJASS/13.9&10/1100-1106

Foucault's Govrnmentality and Environmental History of India: A Review of Historiography

V.M. RAVI KUMAR
Professor
Department of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow (U.P.) India

ABSTRACT

The domain of environmental history contributed significantly to environmental conservation consciousness in India. Documenting extensively on the human action that destroyed the natural environment in the past, it appeals to rehabilitate and regenerate a healthy environment. This attempt, environmental historians propose, is a critical need for a harmonious relationship between human beings and the natural world. Environmental history, thus, performs intellectual and moral duties, which underscores the critical importance of safeguarding ecosystems which sustain life on our planet. In addition to this societal and ecological contribution, environmental history is credited with introducing an innovative methodological apparatus for rewriting the history of India by initiating a narrative shift in history writing. This paper proposes that environmental history in India is significantly influenced by the idea of governmentality formulated by Mitchell Foucault, a philosopher and historian, to represent the environmental history of modern India. The main thrust of this analytical and methodological framework is to construct inclusive histories of power relations between colonizers and colonized people at one level and among colonized people at another level in the domain of natural resource management policies and practices. This paper offers a brief review of environmental history studies that were written from a Foucauldian governmentality perspective.

Keywords: Foucault, Governmentality, History, Environment, Historiography

INTRODUCTION

Phenomenal expansion of environmental history in India took place in the last four decades. An ecological dimension to the history of India has been a focal analytical framework of this inquiry. Besides offering a general outline of the ecological background to Indian history, one of the fascinating aspects of modern environmental history of India is the application of the theoretical framework of governmentality, postulated by Michel Foucault. Its main objective was to capture the relations of power manifested in the arena of policies and practices of the British government. Several scholars have used this framework to capture power relations within the British planning circles at one level and native society at another level in forest, grazing and other natural zones in different parts of India. This trend, as proposed in this paper, contributed to expanding the horizon of the history of power in modern Indian history. Even though Foucault's ideas are used extensively by environmental historians, we hardly have any historiographical analysis on the way such ideas have an impact upon the history writing process. This paper, thus, essentially offers a brief review of historiography built around the notion of governmentality to capture the environmental history of modern India, with a particular reference to the forest history of colonial India.

From thematic point of view, this paper has been organized into three broad sections. The first section contextualizes the emergence of governmentality-oriented studies rooted in the Foucauldian idea of 'knowledge and power framework' Gunn (2006). The second section documents the selected studies on the environmental history of India from a governmentality perspective, and

How to cite this Article: Kumar, V.M. Ravi (2026). Foucault's Govrnmentality and Environmental History of India: A Review of Historiography. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.,* **13** (9 & 10) : 1100-1106.

the final section offers a tentative further perspective on the Foucauldian approach to environmental history.

METHODOLOGY

The source material used in this paper essentially consists of published books and papers. The relational for this selection is that this paper is a review of historiography, which means an assessment of existing studies on environmental history. So far as the method used in this paper is concerned, discourse analysis rooted in the method of archaeology of knowledge formulated by Mitchel Foucault has been used. It is useful to capture the evolutionary patterns of knowledge systems within a specific historical context. The material and method that are used in this paper have consciously been selected to present a review of historiography of environmental history with particular reference to the Foucauldian framework of governmentality.

History as genealogies of Discourse

As succinctly put into perspective by Benedetto Croce that 'all history is contemporary history'. It has been one of the centralities of the non-objective oriented histories in which the Foucauldian model of history writing can be grouped (Joyce, 1998). It is based upon the premise that the modern state deploys sophisticated governance strategies to control the population without unleashing the agency of repressive power. The modern state's governance strategy, for Foucault, formulates and deploys multiple strategies to govern and control social complexity. For him, these strategies are not necessarily coercive, rather non-coercive measures such as surveillance (Foucault, 1995) charity institutions (Foucault, 1994) formulation of governance strategies (Foucault, 1982) and several others are deployed to control, regulate and structure the activities of people in a particular way to intended outcomes. The common thread among all these works is that manufacturing the consent of the population to achieve higher forms of control over their actions and thereby regulating policy outcomes.

The Foucauldian framework of historical analysis has been adopted by scholars of South Asia in the context of the neo-liberal economic shift in the early 1990s (Legg and Heath, 2018). This shift essentially perceives the institution of the state not as essentially a coercive power by default, but rather an agency in which diversified stakeholders assert their stakes. This process, in a way, is perceived as increasing the ability of the state to accommodate stakes of diversified sections of society, however under regulatory power. It was this perspective of conceiving the state as a plural power entity which constitutes a critical component of Foucaualdian histories in India. This perspective conceives governance process as dynamic strategy that consistently inculcates self-regulatory strategies to different stakeholders. Conceptually, environmental history emerged as a site for constructing a Foucauldian model of history which is rooted in his genealogical and archaeological analytical frameworks. The crux of this approach is that governance strategies are perceived as manifestations of multiple discourses that are articulated by different stake holders of policies. This epistemic shift in history writings manifested in the trend that several environmental historians subscribed to this approach to construct environmental histories of modern India.

A brief background of context that invoked the Foucauldian model of history is useful here. Undoubtedly, the neo-liberal economic framework integrated the Indian economy with global capitalism in an unprecedented way. The concept of commodity-based consumerism emerged as a cherished value in South Asia while the state was perceived as the facilitator of this process. In view of this, the conventional theoretical paradigm of history, mainly influenced by a nationalist Marxist approach, is perceived to be insufficient to capture the dynamic changes introduced by the colonial and postcolonial state in India (Seth, 2015). It was in this context that the Foucauldian framework of history which looks at history as a factor that exercises significant impact upon the present politics and governance gained prominence.

This paper argues that in the late 1990s, the method of Foucault was extensively invoked to capture the dynamic interaction between the state and civil society in the domain of the environment in general and forests in particular from a historical perspective. A brief review of the Foucauldian approach to environmental history has already been made by Sivaramakrishnan with a particular focus on the domain of forest history (Sivaramakrishnan, 2009). This paper attempts to extend this trajectory further with the help of the theoretical trajectory of archaeology of environmental history, which essentially means the application of the genealogical method of Foucault to explore colonial histories. Instead of perceiving facts as sacred, the framework of Foucault looks at facts and artefacts as manufactured and preserved entities by

power (Miller, 1990). In this way, this paper attempts to capture the historiographical dynamics of environmental history by confining itself to the Foucauldian variant of environmental history of modern India.

Foucault and Green Histories in India

Impactful publications on environmental history of India could be seen from the 1980s. The decade of the 1990s witnessed an exponential growth of literature on the environmental history of India (Yadav and Kumar, 2019). The pioneers of this field constructed the structure and content of their argument using the prevailing dominant approach of the 1980s, *i.e.*, the nationalist Marxist approach. It looks at the relationship between the colonizer and colonized essentially from the oppressed and oppressor framework (Gadgil and Guha, 1992). The natural resources management policies, this approach perceives strategies of oppression against the rural masses (Murali, 2023, Joshi, 1983). Exploitation –oriented natural resource management policies and resistance strategies of local communities highlighted by this approach. A mirror image of this approach put forwarded by studies that treat colonial rule as 'green imperialism' (Grove, 1995), modernising nature (Rajan, 2006) and nature's governance (Drayton, 2005). A third approach rejects the essentialist approaches to writing an environmental history of India took shape in the late 1990s with which this paper is concerned. The main purpose of this approach, as projected in this paper, is not only capturing the regional diversities of India but also diversity of colonial governance process. It, thus, reject totalising historical narratives and priorities regional level process that exhibit diversities in colonial governance process.

The late 1990s were marked by several publications on the environmental history of India, mainly carried out in universities located predominantly in North America, mostly by Indian researchers. Indecently, if not all, but most of them have subscribed to the method of discourse analysis from the conceptual framework of political ecology, implicitly or explicitly within the Foucauldian framework. This being the centrality of the border conceptual framework, divergent focal themes are being chosen by them to capture the histories of forest and forested people in different parts of India. The main objective of these studies is probably to rescue colonial state from sustained critique by liberal nationalist and left-leaning academia and civil society. It also aims at questioning the framework of colonizer and colonized which emphasized hostile relationships and confrontation between Indian society and British rule. It essentially means that the strategies of controlling people are constructed by the discourse of power in the context of colonial rule.

Incidentally, the years of 1998-99 hold a significant mark on the Foucauldian model of environmental history in India. It was in this year that the following books were published: Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories* (Skaria, 1999), Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity*, (Guha, 1999) Shivaramkrishnan, *Modern Forests* (Sirvaramrishnan, 1999) and Basant Sabrwal, *Pastoral Politics* (Sabrwal, 1999). Of course, a little later, Arul Agarwal's *Environmentality* (Agrwal, 2002) has not only furthered this approach but also placed it on a solid theoretical edifice in the domain of environmental history. Focusing on South India, Deborah Sutton's *Other Landscapes* explores and analyses the interplay of land, ecology and power in the tribal-dominated region of Neligiris in South India. All these studies attempted to offer an unprecedented linkage between historiography and political theory in the domain of environmental history. Let me deal with the critical themes of the Foucauldian method of history writing from the perspective of knowledge and power.

Both nationalist Marxist and neo-colonial approaches conceive colonial rule and native society as homogeneous and offer totalising narratives to demonstrate the clash of interests (Arnold and Guha, 1995). This reductionist and essentialist approach, definitely, is incapable of capturing Indian diversity. Regional level studies that followed this approach replicated the same coloniser vs. colonised approach. The neo-colonial approach of Richard Grove offers no respite from this reductionist standpoint (Grove, 1998). He too followed meta-history of modern India which perceives colonial rule as a homogeneous entity. Consequently, the environmental history of India became a battleground for good and bad effects of British colonial rule. It was in this context that the Foucauldian approach to history made an entry in India. The crucial methodological innovations that are offered by this approach are deploying discourse analysis and discursive approach to capture the way colonial rule and native society together grappled with the issue of resource extraction within the framework of new technological and managerial innovations for management of forest resources.

Sivaramakrishnan proposes that much of

environmental history is essentially rooted in the process of 'imagining the past with present politics' (Sivaramakrishnan, 1995). He, probably, was referring to the impact of the contemporary environmental protection movement on history of India. The ability of the past in shaping the present has been given emphasis in his analysis. As a part of this, the colonial state is perceived not as a mere repressing agency with an exclusive agenda of exploitation of the native society, rather a plural entity which contemplated multiple options for policy formulations aimed at exploitation and, at the same time, aimed at minimizing confrontation. These multiple policy options are perceived as discourse evolved around the domain of forest policies to formulate the best possible policy models with the essential objective of 'minimum confrontation with maximum gain'. Historians who subscribe to this approach have deployed the method of exploring policy narratives of colonial bureaucracy which believed to have created foundation for policy and management of forests and other natural resources. In Foucault terms, the policy narrative of the British constitutes an epistemic foundation, which gradually translated into policy formulations and practices.

One of the important claims of Foucauldian historians of environmental history is that the categories of environmental governance in general and forests in particular evolved through colonial officials' narratives put forwarded in various forms of correspondence took place among them. This discourse was perceived as a reflective matrix on the possibilities and prospects of natural resource management for the betterment of the British as well as Indian society. This discourse was analysed by using the Foucauldian framework of 'knowledge and power', which essentially denotes the truth construction process. In other words, colonial discourse emerged as a privileged standpoint that should be incorporated into the policy framework of natural resource management. The core argument of this approach is that the colonial state was not a unified overarching powerful agency that decided the pattern of governance. Rather, colonial rule is a product of the 'micro physics of power' that emanates from diversified layers of colonial bureaucracy and technocrats involved in the governance process.

The connection between power and knowledge and its reflection in the domain of forest governance of colonial India has been tested by environmental historians in different regions and situations of India. To start with, Sivaramakrishnan explores the history of colonial forestry in the South Bengal region. He applies the Foucauldian framework to capture the forest policy formation process in Bengal. His study concentrates upon the way colonial bureaucracy rigorously engaged in the creation of categories, strategies and measures to govern the forests and forested people of Bengal. He argues that a well-articulated discourse on forest management couched with the discourse of development and progress of native society with application of modern science was used as pretext for interventionist policies. It was this process, for Sivaramakrishnan, constructed forestry as a science as a privileged epistemic component to be used for the progress of natives and their forests.

Sumit Guha analyses the method of discourse analysis to narrate the emergence of ethnicity as a discursive category to control, use and manage tribal and ethnic communities' lives in the forest zone of central India. He argues that the projection of ethnic communities as environmentally detrimental has successfully been achieved by administrators. This alarmist narratives prepared a strong groundwork for policy intervention for taping vast forest resources of central India by driving forest-dependent communities away from forests. It shows the complexity and contradiction of colonial discourse. At one level, it claims to represent the needs of native society in a positive manner at another level, it portrayed forest-dependent communities as exploiters with irrational intent to destroy forests. Guha, thus, locates the Foucauldian notion of epistemic structure as a foundational and justifiable factor for colonial intervention in the management of forest resources of Central India (Guha, 1999).

The political ecology of discourse analysis method has been adopted by Vasant Saberwal to explore the policy politics of the Himachal region. He demonstrates how the discourse of ecological degradation was invoked by forest officials to discourage sheep grazing on mountain sloops. At the same time, Saberwal attempted to demonstrate the way pastoral communities tried to move to higher altitudes to access grazing and escape from restrictions imposed by forest policies. The idea of pastoral politics, essentially for Saberwal, means the ability of the native population to cope with the policy formulations of the British (Saberwal, 1999). This situation often forced the British either to alter or modify policy frameworks. It is this policy flux that the Foucauldian model of history attempts to capture and present.

In an interesting study, Arun Agrwal locates the Foucauldian notion of govrnmentality to explore local forest management in the Himalayan region. He developed a concept of environmentality analogous to governmentality, which essentially means inculcating local communities to manage forests for their needs, known as van panchyats and forcing them to adhere to the rules of the forest department. These institutions are managed by local communities, but under the guidance of the forest department. In a way, this policy shift of the British shows the concept of panopticon, which was developed by Foucault to highlight how the state constantly monitors citizens to discipline and control them by allowing a certain degree of freedom (Foucault, 1977) . Arun Agrwal argues that this method was adapted by the British to exercise indirect control over local communities and achieved obedience without repression (Agrwal, 2002). It is this method, undoubtedly incorporated into joint forest and community forest management policies in the post-colonial period.

Studies from South India also use the analytical framework of governmentality to capture the interplay of the power relationship between the state, forests and local communities. My study deals with the peasant society and their claims over forest and grazing sources in the Andhra region demonstrates an operational mechanism of power in vertical and horizontal axis. Forest policies in the Andhra region of South India were consistently contested by peasants. In fact, they lobbied for favourable policies. This lobbying manifested in the form of the creation of forest panchayats in which certain rights of peasants for grazing and forest produce were recognized. These concessions, however, were strictly supervised by the forest department. This policy formulation shows how the British adopted strategic shifts in the policy in which the demands of natives are incorporated and regulatory powers of the colonial state were retained (Kumar, 2012). Kavita Phillip offers a macro level trend pertains to natural resource management policies and their impact upon tribal and other forest dependent communities (Phillip, 2003)

The aforementioned studies broadly share certain common points in terms of conceptual and methodological aspects rooted in the Foucauldian notion of governmentality. Firstly, the perception of environmental policies of the British was a product of a discourse articulated by colonial bureaucracy consisting of different layers of bureaucracy exists in all studies. The colonial bureaucracy has been viewed as a representative agency of colonial epistemology which eventually created a foundation for a policy framework. Refuting the framework of Guha and other left-leaning historians, Shivaramakrishnian proposes that the state-making process undertaken by the colonial bureaucracy by the way of articulating their conceptualisation of the complex nature of Indian society, of course, in the domain of forests. For Sumit Guha, this constructed Indian reality represented by colonial bureaucracy is mainly determined by the European epistemological background which played a vital role in shaping the colonial perception of local conditions. It has been argued that India's natural resource management policies and objectification of ethnic communities are significantly determined by emerging modern knowledge in Europe. At the same time, this objectification process was influenced by the superiority complex of the ruler over the ruled.

Vasant Sabrwal offers an interesting twist to the Foucauldian notion of governmentality in an Indian context. He argues that the discourse and practice of colonial forest policies are a combination of a power nexus between the Indian elite and the British interests, as in fact proposed by historian David Ludden's famous concept of the Anglo-Indian Empire (Ludden, 0000). This approach proposes that the powerful community were able to safeguard their interests in spite of normative policy frameworks devised and executed by the British on account of their access to British power circle and ability to represent their interests in the policy process (Sabrwal, 1999).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Future of governmentality and enviroinmentality

Undoubtedly, the Foucauldian framework for historical writings had unleashed certain profound conceptual and methodological innovations. Under this influence, history ceases to be a stable narrative to capture human experience in the past, rather, treated as a process driven by multiple power struggles which defy the conventional Marxist schema of class struggle. It prefers a multiplicity of narrative history driven by the quest of the stakeholders to maximize their stakes at one level and the attempt of the modern state to deploy relentless strategies to govern them with minimum dissent at another level. The Foucauldian governmentality studies could profitably address the following aspects in the future:

- To extend the Foucauldian framework to natural resource management policies such as water management, mining resource management, mountain management, agricultural policies etc to capture the wider picture of Indian history from the perspective of governmentality.
- One of the apparent limitations of India's environmental history, till today, is the non-gender dimension. While women are important stakeholders of natural resources, their view and visions were almost excluded from the Foucauldian analysis of the environmental history of India. Gendering environmental history from the perspective of the Foucauldian framework would enrich both environmental and gender history.
- Most studies from the Foucauldian perspective did not give importance to caste-based exclusion in peasant societies and its impact on policy and practices of natural resource management. It would be exciting to see how Indian environmental history navigates with the idea of caste-based exclusion of vast sections of agrarian society.

Needless to point out that each conceptual approach offers a new perspective and at the same time, embedded limitations to capture human reality. The Foucauldian method is not an exception to this general proposition. It introduces dense and thick language-centric analysis which commands formidable language skills. On account of this, the Foucauldian approach emerged as an elitist approach which means complexity of language enables few privileged sections to participate in the epistemic formulation. In a way, the Foucauldian method appears as the Global North passing the monopoly to theorize the Global South to Indian elite sections. Another important limitation is that the Foucauldian history remains a descriptive account without an apparent prescriptive intent and thereby lacks any ability to advance a transformative vision for social change.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the Foucauldian perspective of environmental history has emerged as an important approach in the field of environmental history of modern India. It has indeed brought about different ways of looking at colonial natural resource management policies in more creative ways of locating the participation of colonized and colonizers into the policymaking process. It has not only enhanced the complexity of colonial policy history, but also introduced a fresh method of looking at archival sources not merely as objective facts but as narratives which play an important role in shaping policy processes in colonial and post-colonial India. The Foucauldian method also introduced the method of placing multiple actors into the process of making governance strategies. This approach enables us to track the interplay of power and policy formulations in a much better way. The Foucauldian method of writing history certainly may go beyond environmental history and is capable of enriching several other fields of history in the future.

Conflict of interest declaration

This is to inform that there exist no conflict of interests with any institution, individual and product to the best of my knowledge.

Declaration of funding

This is to inform that no funding has been received for this research.

REFERENCES

Agrawal, A, (2002). "State Formation in Community Space: Decentralization of Control over Forests in the Kumaon, *Journal of Asian Studies,* **60** (1) : 9-40.

Arnold, D. and Guha, R. (1995). *Nature Culture Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995.

Drayton, R. (2005). *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the Improvement of the World* , Orient Longman, New Delhi

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison,* Vintage, London.

Foucault, M. (1994). *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, RHUS. Paris.

Foucault, M. (1982). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Vintage, London.

Gadgil, M and Guha, R. (1992). *This Fissure land: an Ecological History of India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Grove, R.H. (1995). *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860,* Cambridge University Press.

Grove, R.H. (1998). *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Indian Legacy in Global Environmental History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998.

Guha, S. (1999). *Ecology and Ethnicity in India, c.1200-1991*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, Indian Prints.

Gunn, S. (2006). 'From Hegemony to Govermentality: Changing Conceptions of Power in Social History'. *Journal of Social History,* **39** (3) : 705-720.

Joshi, G. (1983). Forest and Forest policy in India, *Social Scientist*, **11** (1) : 43-52.

Joyce, P. (1998). 'The Return of History: Postmodernism and Politics of Academic History in Britain', *Past and Present, No.* 158, 1998, pp. 207-235.

Phillip, K. (2003). *Civilising Natures, Race, Resources and Modernity in Colonial South India,* Orient Longman, New Delhi.

Kumar, V.M.R. (2012). 'State, Forests and Communities: History of Community Forest Management in Colonial South India (Andhra) 1800-1947' *Economic & Political Weekly*, December, 11-8, Vo. **Xlvii**, pp, 53-60

Legg, S and Heath, D, (2018). *South Asian Governmentalities: Michel Foucault and the Question of Postcolonial Orderings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Ludden, D. (2005). *Early Capitalism and Local History in south India,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Miller, S. (1990). 'Foucault on Discourse and Power', *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory,* No. 76, pp. 115-125.

Murali, A, (2023). *Alluri Sitaramaraju*, Nava Telengana, Hyderabad.

Rajan, S. R. (2006). *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Eco-Development 1800-1950*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Sabarwal, V. (1999). *Pastoral Politics Shepherds Bureaucrats and Conservation in the Western Himalaya,* Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Seth, S. (2015). Foucault in India. In: Fuggle, S., Lanci, Y., Tazzioli, M. (eds) Foucault and the History of Our Present. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 43-57.

Shivaramakrisnhan, K. (1999). *Modern Forests: State Making Environmental Change in South West Bengal,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Shivaramakrishinan, K. (2009). Forests and the Environmental History of Modern India, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, **36** (2) : 299-324.

Shivaramakrishnan,K. (1995). 'Colonialism and Forestry in India: Imagining the Past in the Present Politics', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* **37** (1) : 3.40

Skaria, A. (1998). *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wilderness in Western India,* Oxford University Press.

Sutton, D. (2009). *Other Landscapes: Colonialism and Predicament of Authority in 19th Century South India,* Orient Blackswan.

Yadav, S and Kumar, V.M. R. (2019). 'Ecology and Nationalism in India: A Study on Indian Environmental History', *The Research Journal of Social Sciences,* **10** (4) : 372-378.

****