

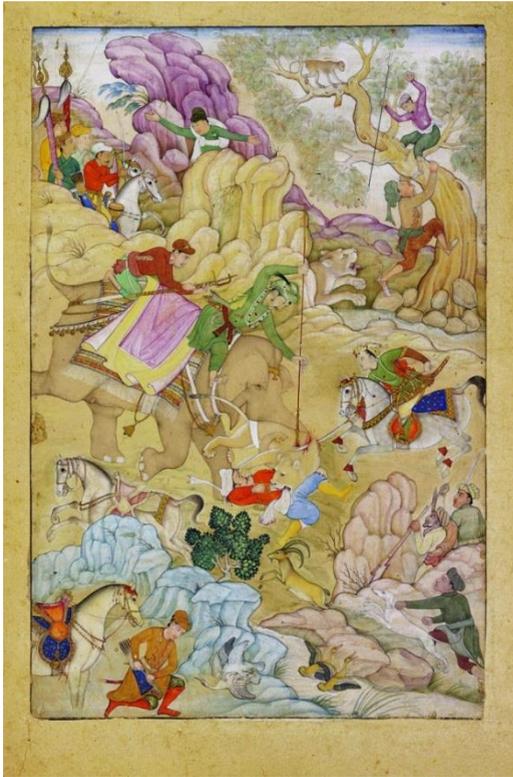
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Frontiers Of Environment: Issues In Medieval And Early Modern India

Edited by Meena Bhargava, Orient BlackSwan, Rs 850

By Uddalak Mukherjee

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FRONTIERS OF ENVIRONMENT: ISSUES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN INDIA Edited by Meena Bhargava, Orient BlackSwan, Rs 850

A continuum may be elusive to even serious works of scholarship. Meena Bhargava, the editor of this illuminating volume, argues that India's discourse on the environment reflects this lacuna. *Frontiers of Environment*, a collection of scholarly essays that counts, among others, Salim Ali, Chetan Singh and Mahesh Rangarajan as contributors, thus seeks to establish links between the modern and the medieval-early modern times in order to understand the areas of convergence and divergence within a realm that is markedly fluid. "The objective should be not merely to historicise environment," writes Bhargava in her thought-provoking Introduction, "but to also... emphasise on a wider vista, a dialogue, perhaps a synthesis..." Given that the setting is medieval India, the Mughals, expectedly, dominate the narrative.

The essays - informative and lucid - meet their intended goal. What is encouraging is that none of the contributors seeks or, in turn, provides easy answers. For instance, while detailing the grand hunts organized by the Big Six of the Mughal Empire, Ali does not forget to remind readers that there are also records of the fascination and delight with which Babur and Jahangir held the natural world. The line between the sportsman and the naturalist is blurred when it comes to the Mughals, a point that is reiterated by M.A. Alvi and A. Rahman who examine Jahangir's spirit of enquiry. Even though he was not trained as a scholar or a scientist, Jahangir's knowledge of diverse species, including the loriquet of Malaysia, the African zebra and the mottled polecat from Afghanistan, was profound.

The problematizing of issues adds to the richness of the inferences. Chetan Singh's argument is a case in point. He shows that even though the foundations of the Mughal Empire rested on a vast, but also

differentiated, agrarian economy, the border between the Empire and areas extraneous to it, an invisible line ostensibly separating the civilized from the primitive, was not without perforations. "Mughal society and polity underwent several changes. In the making of these, no small part was likely to have been played by people and areas which were neither fully within the 'system' nor typically 'Mughal'", writes Singh.

The wilderness was not merely a source of food in medieval times. Simon Digby reveals how the elephant was integral to military strategy and - this bit is quite engaging - how the *pilkhana* contributed to the Delhi Sultanate's downfall.

Bhargava refers to the politicization of the environment in modern India. The recognition of women in conservation, for example, is still some way from being accepted fully. This book is not representative either: there are only stray references of women members of the royal household during hunts. Is there then a case for delving deeper into such questions as gender and environment in medieval India?