

Urban History of Atmospheric Modernity in Colonial India

Dust and Smoke: Air Pollution and Colonial Urbanism, India, c1860–c1940

by Awadhendra

Sharan, *Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2020; pp xxiv + 319, `895.*

In this era of intellectual laziness and haste, as well as snobbish temptation with jargonised, least comprehensible prose, laden with over-theorisation, and omitting story from history, it is indeed a great delight to read a book, which derives immensely from wide-ranging variety of primary, archival evidence. The book under review is one such work, wherein the author Awadhendra Sharan has not only delved deep into a wide range of primary evidence, but has also made sharp analysis of those evidence. His clarity about the merits and limitations of the evidence used is immense. This is amply reflected in the clarity, lucidity and coherence of his prose. This is a book straddling simultaneously into many themes of history and social sciences, namely, environmental history, urban history, legal-judicial history, racism, colonial power-play, labour history, gender studies, urban poor, health and sanitation, and many more emerging themes. In the last few decades, each one of these frontiers of studies has drawn specific attention and for each one of these many dedicated journals are brought out.

Earlier, people of the third world or ex-colonies were supposed to be “too poor to be green.” Roughly from the 1980s, the environmental history of South Asia began to get serious academic attention. Yet, most of the pre-existing studies on environmental history concerned itself more with environmentalism (people’s movements) such as Ramachandra Guha’s (1989) *Unquiet Woods* is on the Chipko movement, and an anthology, *Varieties of Environmentalism* edited by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez Alier (1997). More recently, Vinita Damo-

damaran, Anna Winterbottom and Alan Lester brought out an anthology (2015), *The East India Company and the Natural World*. The essays of this volume focus on environmental ravages unleashed against the colonies by the imperial powers, and thereby providing us with a more nuanced view of the empire and imperial histories. Soon after the publication of her work on the political history of the late colonial Bihar, *Broken Promises* (1992), Damodaran shifted to and dedicated herself to environmental history. This specific theme of environmental history has by now become so popular that Michael H Fischer has come out with a textbook (2018), *An Environmental History of India: From Earliest Times to Twenty-first Century*.