

Need to Understanding of Nature

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Introduction:

The environment, from an academic point of view, has for centuries been understood from the lens of science. Scholars and experts have explored issues related to ecology and the environment through a utilitarian understanding of nature. While studies around the relationship between humans and nature have been more forthcoming in the last few decades, the field of environmental humanities is relatively recent.

Bias against 'soft sciences':

- Positioning themselves as scholars working on environmental humanities in a science and technology institute where the discipline of humanities and social sciences is part of their coursework.
- The authors explain how the mere introduction of humanities as a chapter would not help remove the dichotomy between the sciences and the bias against the "soft sciences".
- The authors explain that instead of looking at science as the only solace to providing solutions to environmental issues, disciplines of humanities and social sciences must also be taken seriously to understand indigenous epistemologies that broaden our understanding of nature.
- The nationalist project such as the Indian Knowledge Systems is dangerous as it is a mere replacement for the Western understanding of nature.
- It lacks the multitude of narratives and perspectives from various social and marginalised groups that discuss the entanglement of human beings with the environment.

The nation and nature:

- In India, nature has been considered intrinsically connected to society and culture.
- The nation is seen through the lens of nature, ecology or as a sense of place.
- There are two dominant understandings of a nation. The first one considers the nation as one place where nature is universal to its citizens as an ecological reality.
- Ecological nationalism is used to justify the utilisation or restriction of nature.
- The second understanding goes beyond the unitary sense of nation or nationalism and finds multiple perspectives that define the nation in connection to nature —

as the affiliation to a piece of land and to its people who have various cultural identities. It is a sense of belonging, despite diverse notions about the ecology and environment.

- In looking at the environment as a physical entity meant to be exploited according to man's wishes, neo-liberal establishments have separated people's indigenous experiences and narratives from our understanding of nature.
- The dominant understanding of the environment while using gender, caste and tribal experiences as case studies, still largely remains androcentric and Brahminical, according to the authors.

Indigenous narratives on nature:

- The relationship that Dalits or tribal communities have with the environment is complex and much deeper than dominant narratives.
- While they have been given limited access to space, land and water due to the exclusionary practices that persist, owing to the caste system, they have a stronger connection with nature as they consider the environment to have agency and influence.
- Such narratives reject the reductionist attitude towards ecology/ environment that exists among mainstream understandings of the concept.
- Therefore, it is essential to incorporate the perspectives of different marginalised communities, such as those based on gender, caste, and tribal identities, into discussions within academic and policymaking circles to challenge the monopolistic understanding of the environment.

Way forward:

- Environmental humanities is an open-ended discipline that constantly evolves and continually redefines the perception of the environment.
- In incorporating narratives about the interplay between nature and diverse communities through stories of rivers, landscapes, plants, animals, and the communities' perspectives and ecological wisdom, the discipline enriches our understanding of the environment and helps us re-evaluate conventional notions of nature.

