

# Modernity and its Discontents: Studying Environmental History of Colonial and Postcolonial Bangladesh

*Iftakhar Iqbal*  
University of Dhaka

## Abstract

In the context of rapid environmental changes in modern Bengal and Bangladesh, this paper suggests that the problem of well-being—eg. availability of and entitlement to food, nutrition and social and economic stability—in the region has been intimately related to declining ecological conditions. The paper then offers a critique of an all-pervasive modern knowledge and modernization process that contributed towards this ecological decline. Referring to the fact that the ontological connotation of modernity excluded environmental considerations, this paper argues that contemporary environmental crisis can be effectively dealt with by an holistic approach through fostering 'ontological unity' which refers to a state of internally coherent relation between various branches of knowledge.

O Moonsheegunge, thou spot beloved  
Of paddy-bird and duck;  
Where all the land is water,  
And all the water's muck;

Where never, by remotest chance,  
A Sahib shows his nose;  
And where there's no society  
But that of Ram Nath Bose!

What have I done, relentless Fate,  
That thou shouldst stick me here,  
Remote from horses, dogs, and men,

From all I hold so dear?

As I sit in the verandah  
 A-smoking my cheroot,  
 I come to the conclusion  
 I'm a miserable brute.

There's Jones has gone to Shikarpore,  
 There's Smith at Spinst'rabad,  
 While I am left to linger here  
 And probably go mad.

To post a European here  
 Is cruelty refined;—  
 'Tis rigorous imprisonment  
 with solitude combined.

O may some future ruler  
 In charity expunge  
 Thy name from each gazettee and map,  
 "O slimmy Moonsheegunge!" (CS., 1896, 65)

The above poem was written by an English officer of the Indian Civil Service in the 1860s while he was posted in Munshiganj, a small town near Dhaka. That this poet-cum-civil servant really thought he was going insane became clear from an incident that took place about the same time he wrote the poem. One day he went hunting in a nearby district where there was plenty of deer in the forests. As the evening was setting in, he was only able to wound a swamp deer by gunshot. Since the deer managed to flee into the jungle, he began to search for it next morning by setting the entire jungle on fire. He described the event in the following manner:

As expected the jungle was not everywhere dry enough, but when the fire did get a good hold it was a sight to watch, now burning low in the short grass, then suddenly catching some high bush and leaping up, sputtering triumphantly as if in delight at finding something worth burning, and gradually advancing till a clear space was left...' (CS, 1896, 65)

Because of the 'Prairie fire', however, the deer disappeared. And so ended the story, but it remains as an interesting example of the different ways in which the ecological system of nineteenth-century Bengal was damaged. This particular instance of course typified the way in which the modern man's alienation,

emotional upsurge or possibly psychic malfunctioning manifested itself at its worst. But this was one of instances of its kind; by the late nineteenth century the impact of the forces of modernity on the environment was remarkably felt everywhere in what is now Bangladesh. The deltaic ecological system, particularly the water regime, deteriorated to a great extent by the late-nineteenth century. This was largely caused by extensive railway and protective embankments which crisscrossed the country leading to water logging, unpredictable flooding due to the bursting of embankments, absence of overflow irrigation, declining rate of spatial spread of silt and the raising of river-beds. The problems caused by embankments were complicated by the spread of water hyacinth, which choked all types of water bodies affecting water transport and agricultural fields from the first decade of the century. The combined effect of the presence of the embankments and the water hyacinth was reflected in lower agricultural output, abandonment or non-utilization of land leading to the growth of cultivable waste, and the spread of a number of fatal water-borne diseases. (For a detailed study of the state of the water system and the havoc caused by embankments and water hyacinth in early twentieth century Bengal, see Bentley, 1925; Iqbal, 2005; also Iqbal, 2006)

Keeping in mind such environmental changes during the colonial period, this paper proceeds on the assumption that the problems of well-being, eg. availability of and entitlement to food, nutrition and social and economic stability in the region was intimately related to deteriorating ecological conditions. The paper also offers a critique of the all-pervasive modernization process that contributed towards such ecological decline.

It is a well-known fact that the modernization process that was initiated during the colonial period was perpetuated by the western-educated Bengali middle class. In nineteenth-century Bengal, the foremost problem of the middle class seemed to have been its failure to develop a critique of the emerging modernity. The uncritical adulation of Western scientific progress by nineteenth-century Bengali *bhadralok* was transformed into a critique of the same only in the early twentieth century. The critique, however, did not reject or question the essential features of Western science and technology. Instead, it assumed that modern science was no monopoly of the West and could be directed towards 'deriving a programme commensurate with the aspirations of the Indian people'. Along with attempting to 'neutralize the cultural import of the term "modern science"', this program represented science as 'morally worthwhile and politically emancipatory' (Raina, D. & Habib, S. I. (1996, 31). In this sense, Western science itself was above any doubt; the causes of the failure of social and economic

transformation in South Asia should, therefore, be sought not in the introduction of Western/modern science itself, but in the colonial conditions which left the project of modernity 'incomplete'. Interpreted in another way, it can be seen that such acceptance of the Western modernization process has largely been informed by the classical Marxist approach which eagerly welcomed British rule in India as a prelude to a proletarian revolution. As Marx remarked, 'England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia'. (For a critique of the Marxist approach, see Chakrabarty, 2002, 21-29)

A fundamentally different critique of modernity was offered by a group of radical intellectuals who questioned the claim of objectivity and universality of the European Enlightenment and the modernity that resulted from following such a path. It is argued that the Enlightenment was a Eurocentric historical experience and the relevance of modernity in the non-Western world became dubious precisely because it was essentially embedded in a sense of superiority of the colonizers who found modernization the means of dominating the colonies as well as sustaining a self-satisfying 'civilizing mission' (Said, 1978). Such a critique of the Enlightenment is mostly offered by subaltern and post-modern historians who question the validity of the grand narratives of modernity or nationalism. An extension of such an assertion is the attempt to drive the discourse of the Enlightenment and modernity out of the erstwhile colonial world to its place of origin, that is to say, 'provincializing Europe'. (Chakrabarty, 2000)

Some scholars have sought a middle ground between such diametrically opposite representations of the modern and the traditional. For instance, Ashis Nandy (Nandy, 1988) argues that since India was exposed to Western knowledge for about six hundred years it had developed the capacity to appropriate Western knowledge within its own traditions of knowledge. He, therefore, suggests that India did not have to necessarily reject modern science completely and fall back upon the purity of its traditional systems of knowledge. Instead, it was able to 'choose the option of creatively assessing the modern system of knowledge, and then integrating important segments of it within the frame of its traditional visions of knowledge.' Nandy further suggests that 'the Indic civilization today, because it straddles two cultures, has the capacity to reverse the usual one-way procedure of enriching modern science by integrating within it significant elements from all other sciences - premodern, non-modern and postmodern - as a further proof of the universality and syncretism of modern science.' (Nandy, 1988). Thus, a creative engagement between the tradition and the modern is

emphasized, signifying that different systems of knowledge are not mutually antagonistic. But the problem with this discourse of bridging modernity and tradition seems to be that its efficacy in addressing the most pressing issues of human well-beings, particularly the relationship between man and nature, can not be verified precisely because, in the wake of the monolithic process of modernization, this synthetic approach has not been put into practice either in the colonial period or in the five decades of the postcolonial period. If it has taken us several decades to formulate a substantial critique of modernization, then it will take a similarly long time to for us to identify the merits and demerits of the proposed synthesis between modernization and tradition.

In the meantime, from our reading of historical developments in colonial Bengal, it may be argued that irrespective of the total acceptance or denial of either modernity or tradition, or of the proposed synthesis of the two, the problem of human well-being will remain unresolved until the problem of the *unity of knowledge* itself is restored, be the knowledge modern or traditional. By *unity of knowledge* we refer to a state of internally coherent relation between various branches of knowledge, in the absence of which disciplines either become mutually exclusive or tend to dominate each other, resulting in an interdisciplinary fissure in the practical world. The consequence of this disunity has a direct bearing on man's relations with nature and hence his well-being. For example, in a deltaic landscape such as Bengal, the free flow of water bodies and proper drainage may be considered simultaneously important for cropping patterns, food productivity and human health. If the idea of the *unity of knowledge* however, were properly appreciated, a medical doctor would focus on the free flow of water as well as his professional remedies. Similarly, an engineer who was trained in building railways or highways would take every precaution to allow as much freedom for water as possible. In this sense, both the doctor and the engineer, who have different professional expertise, could meet on a common ground. But if they fail to appreciate the relationship between disease, crop production and the free flow of water, both nature as well as its endowment could be affected.

In other words, traditional South Asian society, like all other traditional societies, does not seem to have struck a perfect harmony among different branches of knowledge. But it seems plausible that in the pre-industrial world and in a world where fragmentation of knowledge into innumerable sub-branches occurred, the human and the natural world had more mutual proximity and did not have to suffer the consequence of conflicting relationship among mutually exclusive disciplines. With the arrival of modernity, with all its disciplinary

specializations, the inherited knowledge about man-nature relationship faded. Occasional attempts to restore such a balance have failed painfully in the face of either the apparently lucrative ready-made solutions offered by modernization or by ghastly historical counter-developments. For instance, in 1846, a committee, appointed to examine the problem of embankments of the rivers of Bengal, made some recommendations which presented a remarkable conceptual challenge to the emerging drive toward modernization. After pointing to the manifold demerits of embankments for the water system of the Delta, the Committee, comprising of two engineers and a botanist, proposed a 'return to that state of nature, which, in their opinion, ought never have been departed from.' To achieve this goal, the Committee recommended the total removal of all existing embankments to allow the free flow of water. The proposed system, to be built in consonance with 'local experience', amounted to reversing the existing system of embankment by substituting them with drainage. (Government of Bengal, 1846). But the possibility that arose out of the recommendations was soon overshadowed by the emergence of the railways which, with certain aspects of scientific wonder and a powerful capitalist lobby attached to it, had to be built on high embankments. 'Tradition' was easily replaced by a 'science of steam engine'.

The problem of *disunity of knowledge*, largely informed and nourished by a deformed modernization process, remains unresolved in South Asia, as do the problems associated with it. To be specific, in Bangladesh, high-embankment railways and motorways continue to encroach into the landscape and in the popular mind-set. At the same time, because of the success of plant genetics in coming up with hybrid rice, for instance, the focus on sustainable ecological conditions for rice production has been replaced by attention to the emancipatory power of genetic science which can in some way compensate for the loss of rice due to ecological deterioration. However, in a practical sense, human well-being is not entirely dependent on a high level of food production or resultant consumption, but also on health, for example. Since *knowledge* remains disaggregated at its roots, an overwhelming faith in modern medicine or the linear sophistication of the methods of treatment are sustained without any appreciation of the ecological sources of diseases. In the same vein, recurring devastating floods and water-loggings are dealt with not by removing the obstacles to the free-flow of the water bodies of the Delta, but by technology-intensive and hugely expensive river training and embanking plans. Thus, in a cyclical order, one adverse impact of modernization is dealt with by another modern remedy, leaving a gap in between. In other words, in the absence of a holistic approach, the more society and the landscape became modernized, the

more the idea of ontological unity weakens.

Such perceptual anarchy has, however, provoked debates about reviving the possibility of the *unity of knowledge*. Part of the debate draws inspiration from metaphysics. It is argued that metaphysics is capable of bringing unity in knowledge since it 'stands as a universal science which provides the general background for each science and which brings to light the universal and symbolic significance of the discoveries of each science, a process which the sciences cannot carry out themselves by virtue of the self-imposed restriction of dealing with facts and generalizations or mental constructions based upon them'. (Nasr, 1968, 129). Nasr places God at the centre of this 'universal science of metaphysics'. He points out that whether one pollutes water resources in a single bombing or does so over a twenty-year period, the result is essentially the same: man is waging war against nature. In the two cases, the net result is same for in both instances 'man is waging war against nature'. Nasr then argues that 'there is no peace among men unless there is peace and harmony with nature. And in order to have peace and harmony with nature one must be in harmony and equilibrium with Heaven, and ultimately with the Sources and Origin of all things.' (1968, 135)

Another perspective on the possibility of the restoration of *unity of knowledge* is rather earthly. It finds metaphysics as merely a factor in, rather than something capable of presiding over, the process of *unification*. Edward Wilson thus declares that 'science offers the boldest metaphysics of the age'. If for Nasr, it is *Sapientia* or the Universal Wisdom which is capable of restoring the *unity of knowledge*, for Wilson the key to *unification* is *Consilience* or the scientific method of the inter-linking of disciplines. Wilson argues that most of the pressing issues, including environmental problems and endemic poverty, that torment humanity daily, cannot be solved without integrating knowledge from the natural sciences with that of the social sciences and humanities. He remarks that 'only fluency across the boundaries will provide a clear view of the world as it really is, not as seen through the lens of ideologies and religious dogmas or commanded by myopic response to immediate need'. (Wilson, 1998, 11-12)

From our reconstruction of the specific history of the 'modern' Bengal Delta, it becomes clear that pressing social and economic problems such as poverty and disease mainly originated in the deteriorating ecological conditions of the region. Nationalist agitators had a romantic as well as rational vision of a postcolonial world which would be free from poverty, hunger and disease. In the last fifty or thirty-five years of independence this dream has not yet been significantly realized. After decades of indulgence in political, social and cultural

discourses, it is now time that we also appreciate that most of the problems affecting human well-being have had their origin in the displacements of existing ecological regimes by a process of modernization which has been informed by neither *Sapientia* nor *Consilience*. It seems only reasonable that if we are to learn at all from history, it is not merely from historical change itself, but from the epistemological forces that have influenced this change.

## References

- Bentley, C. A. (1925). *Malaria and Agriculture in Bengal. How to Reduce Malaria in Bengal by Irrigation*. Calcutta: Bengal Seretariat Book Depot, 1925.
- CS, (1896). *Leaves from a Diary in Lower Bengal*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1896.
- Raina, D. & Habib, S. I. (1996). The Moral Legitimation of Modern Science: Bhadrilok reflections on the theories of evolution. *Social Studies of Science*, 26 (1).
- Chakrabarty, D. (2000). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2002) *Habitations of Modernity. Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Iqbal, Iftekhhar (2005) *Ecology, Economy and Society in the Eastern Bengal Delta c.1840-1943*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.
- Iqbal, Iftekhhar (2006) *The Railway in Colonial India: Between Ideas and Impacts*. In R. Srinivasan et (Eds.), *Our Indian Railway. Themes in India's Railway History*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2006.
- Said, Edward, (1978), *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Nandy, A. (1988). 'Introduction' to *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity* (A. Nandi, Ed.). Tokyo: United Nations University.
- Government of Bengal (1846). *Report on the Embankments of the Rivers of Bengal*. Calcutta: W. Ridsdale.
- Nasr, S.H. (1968). *The Encounter of Man and Nature*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Wilson, E.W. (1998). *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. London: Little, Brown.