

**Ranjan Chakrabarti**

***Climate Calamity and the Wild – An Environmental History of the Bengal Delta, c. 1737–1947***

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Previously Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University, West Bengal, Ranjan Chakrabarti is Professor of History at Jadavpur University. A former Fulbright Visiting Professor at Brown University, he was a recipient of the Charles Wallace Fellowship, the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, of the Alexander O. Viotor Memorial Fellowship, Brown University USA, and the Alfred Bell Memorial Fellowship, Forest History Society, Duke University, USA. Chakrabarti's recent publications have included *Order and Disorder in Early Colonial Bengal, 1800–1860*, *A History of the Modern World: An Outline*, *Critical Themes in Environmental History of India*, along with a co-edited volume titled, *Natural Resources, Sustainability and Humanity*.

*Climate, Calamity and the Wild: An Environmental History of the Bengal Delta, c.1737–1947* presents an environmental history of the deltaic plains of Bengal with a climate-related viewpoint and context. As an ecologist and environmental historian, I warm to the approach which considers the historical issues from perspectives embracing ecological, biological and cultural terms. He turns his writing away from more conventional ideological and political modes of historical texts. In doing this, he examines issues through the lens of political economy, production, crop patterns and the like. This examination embraces demographic patterns, culture and economy, and the development of inland and overseas trade transformed by shifts in climate, forests, river systems and hydrology. Of course, water is at the core of this remarkable and extensive landscape; somewhere we have all heard of, though sadly few of us have witnessed first-hand. Today, water remains as the pulsating heart of the region as a source of fertility and productivity, of potential disaster, and ultimately, of political contestation. Furthermore, the book is to be read in a wider context of global environmental change and the twin spectres of both flood and drought, and the growing threats which both these scenarios bring. Chakrabarti draws comparison with the environmental histories and fates of other major river and deltaic systems. There are also strong echoes here of the insights and approaches developed by, say, Crosby (1972, 1986), and this enhances the style and breadth of the volume. Along with the bigger stories there are enticing insights into the life and times of the period of subjugation of the region by Western imperialism, with accounts of great feasts, of animal hunts, of music, and of hospitality. The accounts of the organisation and results of imperial hunts in colonial India include the slaughter of thirty-one bears as described in the 'Kasimr Diary' of Lady Minto (unpublished). There is much more, and these observations provide useful insights into the region, its peoples, and its

environmental history. The intricate complexities of the internal relationships between internal castes, tribes, and people, and then the dynamics of East and West, are in part shaped by this big landscape and then increasingly affected by the same. Chakrabarti explains the colonial obsession with law and order to the extent that entire communities might be labelled by the authorities as 'dangerous' under the Criminal Tribes Act of the later 1800s. Whole groups could be branded as 'criminal' if they somehow failed to comply with colonial expectations. In fairness, however, some of the populations and individuals of the Bengal region in the 1800s were indeed a wild and lawless bunch, and many combined a mix of pastoralism with violent raiding of their neighbours. Both colonial administrations and the wider society feared the disruption of itinerant, roaming tribes, and they endeavoured to control and to settle them whenever possible.

Chapter 3 is particularly interesting in terms of climate and extreme weather impacts. This describes the history and effects of cyclones along the Bengal Coast, and presents a detailed account of the cyclone of 1737. This horrific event resulted in around 300,000 deaths, and it is argued, may have been the first documented tsunami to hit this region. It was estimated that 20,000 boats of all sizes were destroyed.

Overall, with an easy, readable style, the book explores the complex dynamics of human social interactions and their relationships with the history of the region's natural disasters such as super cyclones, severe thunderstorms and floods. This sometimes brutal environment caused loss of life, damage, and destruction of property, of livestock, and of human settlements. It shifted and shaped wildlife of the area and shaped much of the history of colonial Bengal. For those of us unfamiliar with Bengal this is a fascinating introduction and journey.

I recommend this as a read for all those interested in the eco-cultural landscape and in human-nature interactions in environmental histories. However, I feel the price is far too high and will restrict readership and impact, which is a shame. Furthermore, given the high price the quality of the production and reproduction leaves much to be desired.

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### *References*

- Crosby, A. 1972. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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