

Sugata Ray

Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550–1850

(Global South Asia Series, ed. Padma Kaimal, K. Sivaramakrishnan and Anand A. Yang)

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019

ISBN: 9780295745374 (HB) \$75.00. 264pp.

The history of South Asia is intertwined with colonial politics, natural calamities and ritual respect, breeding indigenous art. To learn about all of these, the geoaesthetic frame, which sees environmental art as a ‘form of thinking that works between the territory and the earth by opening up zones of indeterminacy’ (p. 21), would be a good choice. In *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion*, Sugata Ray examines architecture, paintings, photography and prints created in Braj, Uttar Pradesh, from the fifteenth century to the twentieth century, bringing unique aesthetic experiences into humanistic studies. By reflecting on South Asian ideology and admiration of nature, we may cultivate new angles on today’s environmental development. This book, based on the author’s comprehensive investigations, offers abundant critical knowledge of the area.

The book is structured around four elements central to Braj’s spiritual traditions: ‘water’, ‘land’, ‘forest’, and ‘ether’. The four main chapters explore the cultural elements behind artistic expressions of natural topography in Braj. Following the sequence of the four essential elements, each section is constituted by case studies that dig into artistic, ritual and historical facts. The book uses its geoaesthetic perspective to illuminate South Asia’s colonial history and reveal how extraneous and environmental factors affect a country’s cultural development.

During 1550–1850, the period on which the book focuses, the area was continuously threatened by droughts, prompting emperors to alter their governance policies in the light of environmental disasters. This illustrates an early socio-economic impact due to environmental changes. Such histories are recorded and depicted in books like *Half a Tale* (Ardhakathānaka; 1641) and *History of Akbar* (Akbarnāma). From an artistic history perspective, such changes are also a crucial momentum for aesthetic creation. Take water paintings as an example: droughts underscore the importance of water, attracting people’s attention to water’s fluidity and other characteristics, and thus innovating new techniques to portray these features. Meanwhile, some theories also appear regarding natives’ respect for natural components (p. 26). These early expressions of aesthetic experience from the natural environment demonstrate the environment’s impact on humanity.

However, such narratives concerning climate and art history have been suppressed by Western-centred historical writings. According to this book,

it was not until the 2000s that the contrapuntal pressure of postcolonial eco-philosophy and vital materialism profoundly transformed the disciplinary horizons of art history (p. 17), a movement led by the Moravian-Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch (p. 35). Colonial governments prohibited natives from building temples for the gods of nature to allow the expansion of colonial plantations. On the bright side, luckily, the South Asian emperors learned to grow useful plants and herbs, which slightly enriched the local crop structure in the eighteenth century (p. 101), thus connecting indigenous botany to modern science and trade.

Though Braj has gone through so many climatic and colonial influences, the indigenous art style still distinguishes itself from the Western colonial picturesque. The artists in Braj refuse to depict the environment with the objectification of nature through institutionalised scientificism. Instead, they see it as an inclusive habitus of inventive play where sentient plants and humans can share a contingent correlation of equivalence (p. 129). The eco-art relationship is crucial for understanding native views on nature and aesthetics, and it has timeless value. As the river Yamuna, an important resource for local art, was polluted, contemporary artist Sheba Chhachhi 's 2008 installation *The Water Diviner* describes the industrial threat to ecology, which 'bears the potential to both rethink politics and politicize art's relation to ecology', in the words of the art historian T.J. Demos (p. 185).

Braj's ideology also adapts well to post-colonial culture. The design of its modern cities is rather an embodiment of local space cognition, as well as reflections on ecohumanity. The geoaesthetics materialised by South Asians is a destruction of the colonial frame that once saddled the district politically and culturally. Today, such an addition to multivalent narratives of geoaesthetics may also set an example for the rest of the world about ecology and art's significance in shaping and portraying history. As Ray concludes, 'planetary geoaesthetics spills into our embattled present as trace, memory, and refraction' (p. 186).

Sugata Ray 's *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion* offers a compelling exploration of the deep interconnections between art, environmental change and colonial history in Braj. By examining the region's distinctive aesthetic responses to the shifting natural landscape, Ray sheds light on how indigenous art not only reflects but also shapes the local understanding of nature. Through the four elements – water, land, forest and ether – Ray demonstrates the profound impact of environmental factors, such as droughts, on artistic practices and cultural shifts. This book also highlights the tension between colonial oppression and indigenous resilience, showing how South Asian artists maintained a unique relationship with the environment, one that resisted the objectification of nature common in Western traditions. Furthermore, Ray's integration of postcolonial theory with environmental aesthetics enriches our understanding of how art can serve as a vehicle for socio-political commentary,

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as exemplified by contemporary works like *The Water Diviner*. Ray's work is not only a contribution to the study of South Asian art and culture but also a timely reminder of the ongoing relevance of ecological and cultural narratives in today's globalised world (Hahn and Vermeylen 2023). The book thus opens up important conversations on the power of art in confronting contemporary environmental crises and reimagining our relationship with the natural world.

YI SHAN AND BIYU WU

*College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai of Science and
Technology, Shanghai, China*

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First Author:

Yi Shan

syi078615@gmail.com

Corresponding Author:

Biyu Wu

*College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai of Science and
Technology, Shanghai, China*

2741153668@qq.com