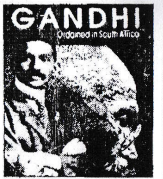


BOOKS RECEIVED



The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and States. By F. R. Allchin, with contributions from George Irwin, R. A. E. Cassin, D. K. Chakrabarti and Bridget Allchin...

This book tries "to integrate narrowly archaeological data with the wider aspects of historical, archaeological, including textual, epigraphic, numismatic and art historical, evidence."



Gandhi: Orphaned in South Africa. By J. N. Uppal (Publications Division, Rs 165)

J. N. Uppal's idea "is" exclusively portray the South Africa period on a canvas large enough to satisfy the ever so curious among the Gandhi enthusiasts, anxious to understand precisely how an obscure young Indian lawyer striving for his livelihood, after reaching South Africa, gave a completely new direction to his life...



How to Build Your Own House. Volume I - Planning, Estimating and Management. Volume II - Details of Building Construction. By S. R. Choudhuri (Nishu: Binodh Prakashan, Rs 75 and Rs 125)

"I have written this book," S. R. Choudhuri writes in his Preface, "to help a prudent, pure, non-technical man, an achieving his satisfaction of creating his house. I have tried to put the information in as much simple language as possible and in as much common man's approach as possible."



Making Movies. By Sidney Lumet (Bloomsbury, distributed by Mova, £14.99)

"A warning about," Sidney Lumet writes in his Introduction, "what you won't find in the book. There are no personal revelations other than feelings arising from the work itself - no gossip about Sean Connery or Marlon Brando."



Megatrends Asia. By John Naisbitt (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, distributed by Research Press through Rupa, £10.95)

"What is happening in Asia", John Naisbitt writes in his Introduction, "is by far the most important development in the world today. Nothing else comes close, not only for Asians but for the entire planet. The modernization of Asia will forever reshape the world as we move toward the next millennium..."

NATURE CONSERVATION HANDBOOK

By Debali Deb, Saswati Sen and Devika Kar (World Wide Fund for Nature - India, Eastern Region, Rs 100)

CONSERVATION has become a buzz-word over the past three decades. To an average representative of the Third World, it implies "a fad of the Western or Westernized rich - pampering tigers and lions at the expense of human beings". Opulent tourists, not knowing what to do with their money, flock to see wild animals while breadwinners of poor families are devoured by tigers or trampled by elephants.

But in 1989, the reader learns from Dhrubajyoti Ghosh's Preface to the World Wide Fund for Nature - India changed its priorities. Instead of preserving wildlife, "the goal was broadened to conserve Nature for sustainable living of humans."

Whether this reorientation makes the goal of WWF any more easily attainable is a tricky question. Meanwhile this handbook, which bears testimony to the serious effort of Debali Deb, Saswati Sen and Devika Kar, may well serve the needs of inquiring minds. Limited to 125 pages, it still succeeds in educating the interested reader. A handbook implies tables, figures and graphs - cold data which, though useful, are likely to make dull reading. It is therefore reassuring to find the first 40 pages or so as accessible as a popular textbook on ecology with a very modern approach, capable of being browsed through at a stretch. It has a lot to teach old-fashioned teachers as well.

The authors have taken the trouble of apprising the reader of the latest findings. For example, on the first page, while discussing biodiversity, they mention the discovery as recent as in 1992 and 1994, of two large mammals, the new wild ox and deer of Vu Quang in Vietnam. Since the discovery of the sloth in 1991 (not mentioned here) this Vu Quang ox may well have been the most significant find. The authors point out further that, in 1991, a new species of whale was discovered and they wonder whether many small organisms may remain "ever undiscovered".

They also furnish data on the biodiversity of several Asian countries and on an extinction by overkill of wapti (a deer-like animal, the bison and the almost proverbial passenger pigeon). The record of 4,000 birds in a single day of shooting arranged at Bharatpur for the then Viceroy of India is mentioned as a gruesome reminder.

Yet I cannot help wondering why such avifauna at Bharatpur were not thinned out till the near complete destruction of their habitat but the passenger pigeon died altogether. There is no reason to believe that every single passenger pigeon, even after the species had become rare, was hunted out. More probably, the Darling syndrome was very rampant in this species, that is, after falling below a critical population, the remaining birds could not come to the breeding condition.

The reader learns the very interesting lesson of co-evolution of Calceola (a tree) and the dodo in Mauritius. Since the extinction of the flightless, goose-like dodo - apparently every single one of this big bird that could not fly or escape was killed for food for man - no Calceola seed germinated in Mauritius in the last three centuries or so, and two species of bird lice have also gone extinct with the dodo. There would be few to lament the demise of the lice but Calceola is an important tree and I would have liked the authors to add two more sentences. First, Temple succeeded in germinating Calceola seeds after they passed through the alimentary canal of the turkey, the famous table bird of Christmas. Today the forest department also germinates the seeds by artificial scarification and abrasion procedures that the dodo used to employ while passing them through its gut.

Brief but informative treatment leads the reader from example to example: the shrinking habitat of the Asian lion and rhino; of the aye-aye (lemur) in Madagascar; of the sea otter in its northern region; the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect; the dwindling indigenous germ plasm of crops, once so rich in variety but now near extinct in the face of the onslaught from just a few high-yielding strains. On the last topic, over which I have been crying in the wilderness, Deb has just completed a research project, briefly mentioned towards the end of this book, which has yielded some curious information on little-known germ plasms of rice in West Bengal.



MAN AND NATURE

By RATAN LAL BRAHMACHARY

RICE is a fascinating discovery of non-Aryan genius - a great unknown scientist scattered all over the vast land mass extending from China to west India, who bred this unique cereal out of wild grasses several thousand years ago. Known as *Brihi* in Atharva Veda but not at all mentioned in the earlier Rig Veda, over the centuries this wonder crop was engineered by nameless herds of practical scientists, many of them illiterate peasants. Shahjahan pronounced it the most valuable commodity under the sun. He was probably thinking of basmati rice. Five thousand varieties of rice from Assam alone were in safe-keeping with the International Rice Research Institute and have now been brought back to India, as I learn from a recent issue of Nature. This handbook estimates the number of rice varieties in India at 40,000. It could be considerably more. I have seen even a "guesstimate" of 100,000. The vast array of germ plasms exhibiting such a wide spectrum - rice with heavenly fragrance (not to be found in any other crop); big, coarse rice for heavy meal; rice for lactating mothers; salt-resistant rice; instant rice (that need not be boiled); and special rice for preparing fast food like *Chira*, *Muri*, and *Khai* would leave a genetic engineer green with envy.



The authors then touch on the population problem. They take the view that exploitation by the First World and the (non-western) poverty of the Third is the real crime, not the overpopulation of the east. But, in spite of the graph showing the inverse relationship

self is anybody's guess. Only recently the fragrance of jasmine has been proved to be part of the arsenal for fighting invasive bacteria. One of Deb's findings suggests such a property in an aromatic rice. Inevitably, the authors tread on sensitive and controversial ground. The west (or the north) prospers at the expense of the east (or the south) just as at the national level, cities prosper at the cost of villages. Hence the unstated conclusion: some brand of socialism is necessary to introduce a system based on equitable and sustainable living. This is gunpowder for a political ideologue!

That women of the Third World have an important role to play in the grassroots level is not to be questioned, but the authors argue that men are inherently destructive and that the world would be more equitable and just if the control of all social production be handed over to women. In many primitive forms of civilization, such as the 10,000-year-old lifestyle of the Bushmen in southern Africa, both men and women pursued a modest sustainable way of life. The men do not overkill or destroy Nature. I marvelled at their traps for capturing porcupines and big birds like bustards, so carefully designed that unseated errantes could be set at liberty if enough game had already been collected. Likewise, Vander Post, the empathic (and emphatic) mouthpiece of the Bushmen, describes the respect paid by the hunters even to their quarry.

From about the middle part onwards this book offers mostly statistics. It lists the major forest types, the wetlands named in the Ramsar Convention, hapless reserves, sanctuaries and national parks in India up to 1993. Though very impressive on paper, they cover less than five per cent of the land area, and I have learnt the hard way to take such data with a pinch of salt. All the same the authorities seem to be earnest.

There is useful information on the population of tigers, rhinos and elephants. The last chapter reveals what WWF has done in the eastern zone to protect the environment. The first is the representation for the Dalma Hill sanctuary. In 1973, as a result of this WWF move, Tisco agreed to stop using water needed for wild elephants. Nevertheless, after two decades, the situation does not seem to have improved much. It is claimed that WWF succeeded in persuading the Talas to restrict the height of a hotel near the Alipore zoo to three storeys so that migratory water fowl are not impeded in their flight. Like some other non-Government organizations, WWF fought for the Narendrapur bird sanctuary. In spite of concerted efforts, the environmentalists failed. The first success in breeding the white-winged wood duck has been noted, but what happened after 1985?

The joint venture of the Zoological Survey of India and WWF in 1993 located 13 breeding dens of the Indian wolf in a sanctuary in Bihar. The project on indigenous rice varieties in West Bengal has been an unqualified success because the work sits clear of the bureaucracy and there is no question of staking out territories for beasts or birds by edging out human beings.

between quality of life and birth rate, and the discovery that a mere 20 per cent of the world population, the rich First World, enjoys 80 per cent of the earth's resources. I must say that overpopulation is a serious problem. If, by waving a magic wand, we could at this instant abolish the inequities (and inequities), India would still be in a quandary. In order to conserve 1,000 tigers, we need 3,000 square miles of nearly uninterrupted prime forest, more so for elephants. There should be numerous pockets to preserve all the endangered flora and fauna, not to mention thousands of square miles for trekking, eco-touring, mountaineering, desert camping for hundreds of thousands of young men and women. These are aspects which never engage the attention of our political leaders, most of whom cannot even think along these lines.

An unrealistic hope is that the teeming millions will be housed in high-rise buildings and that a small land area under cultivation, managed scientifically, will produce enough food for the nation. Even if it were feasible, people should not be cooped up in concrete jungles. Every family needs at least two gardens (flower garden and kitchen garden). Every child should grow up observing seeds germinating into plants, flowering or fruiting, thus learning how to nurse patiently to cherish something that repeats the unending cycle of Nature. The child should romp merrily with dogs and cats, and watch birds, butterflies, fox, jackal and porcupine, if not tiger or lion. We need space, lots of it, for things other than gaining food land for that as well, and so population has to be checked in the Third World together with measures to foster the First World to adopt a less wasteful way of life.

THIS handbook contains information on 29 commandments of a religion based largely on ecology and sustainable living; the Chipko and Appiko movements, and Narmada Bachao Andolan. These spiritual concepts are largely ignored or countered by our politicians. I have seen very few, reserved academics totally ignorant of such happenings. It is necessary to evoke an awareness of all this in

young minds and the authors do a good job of it. Also remarkable is their coverage of the recycling of waste and the use of sewage in East Calcutta wetlands. Ghosh studied this aspect intensively over years. Sustained production of crops and vegetables and a fishery based on this time-honoured practice aroused admiration at the Ramsar conference.

The next part of the book is devoted to methods of training schools and clubs to communicate effectively, through greater emphasis on environment in official curriculum, slides, videos and film shows. Such programmes are difficult to arrange in rural areas, though the young even in villages are today conditioned by video-parlours catering to the baser instincts.

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