History, Activism and the Environment

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Bárbara Direito* and José Miguel Ferreira**

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With an academic career spanning over two decades, most of which spent at the University of Sussex, Vinita Damodaran is a historian of modern India and a leading name in the field of Environmental History. Among her publications are *Broken Promises, Indian Nationalism and the Congress Party in Bihar* (1992), *Nature and the Orient – Essays on the Environmental History of South and South-East Asia* (1998, with Richard Grove and Satpal Sangwan), *British Empire and the Natural World: Environmental Encounters in South Asia*, (2010, with Deepak Kumar and Rohan D'Souza), *East India Company and the Natural world* (2014, with Anna Winterbottom and Alan Lester) and, more recently, *Climate Change and the Humanities* (2017, with Alex Elliott and James Cullis). Since 2003 she has been the director of the Centre for World Environmental History, at the University of Sussex, a research centre focusing on an interdisciplinary perspective on issues ranging from Historical Climatology to Sacred Landscapes. In October 2019, Damodaran was the keynote speaker at a workshop on Poverty and Hunger in Colonial Contexts, organised at the Portuguese National Library, where she delivered a lecture on "Climate signals, famine and livelihoods in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries". During

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her stay in Lisbon, Vinita Damodaran kindly and enthusiastically accepted to be interviewed for *Práticas da História*. In this interview, we discussed her career, the development of Environmental History as a discipline, the challenges it faces today and the relationship between academic work and environmental activism.

Bárbara Direito and José Miguel Ferreira (BD and JMF): *Dear Professor Vinita Damodaran, thank you so much for being with us. We would like to start this interview with a biographical question. You began your career as a researcher by working on rural unrest and on the emergence of Indian nationalism in Bihar, in eastern India. Can you give us a brief walkthrough of your path from Social History to Environmental History? How did you become interested in environmental issues? And how did your work on local communities in Bihar translate into your later work on Environmental History?*

Vinita Damodaran (VD): You are right. I was a social and political historian of Bihar, Bihar being a very large state in eastern India. I worked on issues of nationalism and independence in the state of Bihar, particularly about the rule of the Congress Party. But what I left out when I was doing that exploratory work was the Chotanagpur plateau, which at that time I felt had a very different history, trajectory, and geography because it was a highland plateau and it was populated by thirty-three different groups, known as the Munda, the Ho, the Birhor etc. They are usually portrayed as the tribes of India, although they prefer to use the word *Adivasi* instead. I thought this was a region and a project that I could not go into when I was doing my PhD. My own fieldwork was also related to the social and political history of Bihar so, when I became interested in Environmental History, I decided to locate my Environmental History research in this highland plateau of Bihar, which is the Chotanagpur plateau. And that was where my research took me. So it was an obvious new development, but also something that came out of my older work.

BD and JMF: *After you earned your PhD from Cambridge University, in 1991, you started working on Environmental History and became a lecturer at Sussex University. Nowadays there are several Environmental History courses being offered across Britain, many research centres have been running for years and the field has attracted increasing funding. But in the early 1990s this wasn't the case. What were the challenges faced by researchers pursuing topics on Environmental History at that time in the UK? And, drawing on your own experience, what difficulties were there in terms of the development of an environmental approach within history departments, in terms of the availability of sources, the understanding and usage of complex sources from the natural sciences, etc.?*

VD: When I started my pursuit of Environmental History I was influenced by Richard Grove, who I had met in Cambridge and who had, by that time, had made a name for himself as a pioneering environmental historian. In 1987, he had edited *Conservation in Africa*[1]. But he was also an historian of the British Empire[2], and, when I started my work on the Chotanagpur plateau, in India as part of my post-doctoral research, I was deeply influenced by his work and his writings. Richard, at that time, was trying to start an Environmental History centre in Cambridge. There was very little appetite for that, he was quite a young man himself and that experiment sort of floundered. At the same time, in Bristol, you had William Beinart who was a good friend of Richard's and an environmental historian in his own right. And Richard and Beinart had a lot of common feelings about how the discipline should develop. Beinart later on moved to Oxford and Richard whose networks included Oxford helped to develop the Indian school of Environmental History, along with Mahesh Rangarajan, who became an environmental historian of India specialising on wildlife, and Ravi

1 David Anderson and Richard Grove, *Conservation in Africa. Peoples, Policies and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

2 Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism*: *Colonial Expansion, Tropical Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600-1860*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Rajan, who later wrote *Modernizing Nature*, a very important book on the history of the Oxford Forestry Institute.[3] A third name I wanted to mention was Richard Drayton. They formed the sort of core group of Oxford-based environmental historians working on the British Empire and on India. Richard was a sort of mentor to this younger group. In the 1990s, Richard and I proceeded to organize a series of meetings. In 1992, we organized an Environmental History meeting at the National Institute of Science, in Delhi, along with Satpal Sangwan. It was very successful and became the start of building an Indian Environmental History programme. Richard had a strong sense that Environmental History, as it was developing, had a very strong Eurocentric turn and an Anglo-American... not even Anglo, an American sort of focus to it... and that it needed a much more global, southern focus. He was trying to build momentum for an Indian Environmental History, and I became part of that movement. It was, as I said, very difficult. But it was a very important path. At the same time, Richard also started the journal *Environment and History*, with White Horse Press. This was a journal that, in some sense, he completely, conceived of, developed, imagined and created the whole editorial board. So, the journal in essence was the vision that he had about the Environmental History of the Global South. And it was a vision that was realized, because *Environment and History* went on to become quite a successful journal. If you look at the history of the journal, the first twenty issues have an editorial by Richard which gives one a sense of the history of the discipline certainly for the global south. The journal and the networks around it in these early years formed the foundation of the discipline for the global south by publishing researchers from India and Africa on topics relating to environmental history in these regions. I myself published an article in one of the early issues of the journal, "Famine in a Forest Tract", which became quite significant in terms of my own work.[4]

3 Ravi Rajan, *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Eco-Development 1800-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

4 Vinita Damodaran, "Famine in a Forest Tract. Ecological Change and the Causes of the 1897 Famine in Chotanagpur, Northern India", *Environment and History* 1, n º 2 (1995): 129-58.

BD and JMF: *That conference that you organized in Delhi, with Richard Grove and Satpal Sangwan, led to an edited volume called* Nature and the Orient. *Published in 1998, that volume is widely seen as a landmark in the Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia. Many of the authors that collaborated in it, some of whom were then at the beginning of their careers, went on to make important contributions to the field. How have you seen its development in the past three decades?*

VD: There was a realization, quite earlier on, that you could not do the Agrarian History of India without doing the Environmental History of India. So, the relation between the arable and the non-arable world was quite important, and this was a recognition that both Richard and I had. And we also began to see that India had played quite a significant role in the Global History of the Environment. And Richard Tucker and John F. Richards, who were global historians at that time, also came to a sort of similar realization about how India fitted into the Global Environmental History narrative. So, the way in which Environmental History developed in India was both regional, local, and had global ramifications. Because, as I said, you could not see South Asian Environmental History in isolation, without looking at the global aspects of commodity transfers including the timber trade of Malabar for example. So, while you had very good local and regional histories developing, we also managed to keep a global perspective in much of our work. That is why *Nature and the Orient* became a landmark text. Because not only did we map the Environmental History of South and South East Asia for the first time, it was spatially and temporarily innovative. We went back to ancient India through the work of archaeologists such as Bridget and Raymond Allchin, but we also have very detailed local studies on human-nature interactions in several different parts of South and Southeast Asia. So, it is not surprising that the book became a classic. In fact, my own article in *Environment and History* was republished in *Nature and the Orient.*

BD and JMF: *From the 1990s onwards, forests have been at the forefront of many of the liveliest debates in the Environmental History of India. Recently, as you just said, there have been increasing calls to articulate debates on forest reserves and colonial forestry with perspectives on Agrarian History, to overcome colonial classifications of what is "cultivated" and "wild" land. Drawing on your own work on famine, what can you tell us about the challenges and the potential of connecting the study of different physical and human environments?*

VD: In my own work, I was very interested in looking at the used environment. How nature is not "out there", but it is a sort of lived relationship for the people of Chotanagpur. So, in some senses, I was looking at the whole history of livelihoods, nature, culture, food and famine. A cultural Environmental History, alongside with a material Environmental History. And I managed to do this very successfully for my work on eastern India. As I said that there were thirty-three different groups at that time, we are talking about 5 million people (1911 Census) who actively engaged with the landscape in a variety of ways, but who were also severely marginalized by the sort of sustained environmental attacks they faced from the colonial state, from development organizations, and so on. So, what you get over the long-twentieth century, and indeed from about 1800, and which I mapped quite carefully, is the Environmental History of Globalization. And I was able to map three stages for this region: from 1800 to about 1945; from 1945, which marks the onset of independence, in 1947, to about 1991; and from 1991, after Structural Adjustment, until now. So, these are the three phases of environmental change that I mapped onto this region. And it worked very effectively because I was able to look at long-term environmental change, responses of communities and human-nature interactions over a *longue durée*. I was very interested in the results of that research, which I went on to publish in several different articles.

BD and JMF: *You studied for your MA and MPhil at JNU [Jawaharlal Nehru University], in Delhi, and over the years you have collaborated with several Indian academic and non-academic institutions on environmental issues. What can you tell us about the relations between academic research and advocacy in a country like India, considered to be one of the most dangerous for environmental activists? And what do you think should be the role of the environmental historian in a political climate where history and the work of historians have become increasingly polarized?*

VD: Environmental History as a discipline is, as you know, very multi-disciplinary. There are whole generations of scholars from different fields: scientists, biologists, climatologists, straight-down environmental historians, historians, anthropologists. So, it's a very alive and exciting field, with lots of very creative synergies. But one group we were particularly attracted to, and they were interested in our research, is a group of activists, environmental activists, and we developed a very natural synergy with them. Richard himself, in 2006, made that shift in his own work, when he went to Kalinganagar in Odisha, which was then a site of massive tribal unrest over the usurpation of lands by Tata, where thirteen people had been killed, including a woman, Deogi Teria, who was shot at a distance of five feet. And she entered the realm of environmental martyrdom alongside Ken Saro-Wiwa and other environmental activists. So, we became very interested in that aspect of environmental politics, environmental activism, and environmental justice. Later on, after Richard's accident, I realized that environmental activism had to be an integral part of our Environmental History research. The Centre for World Environmental History, which is a centre of excellence at the University of Sussex, which I run and which Richard started in 2002, , now has a very active Environmental Activism Network. We run an "Activists and Academia Forum", which had the first meetings in the early-2010. Joan Martinez Alier, whose work on environmental justice you are probably very familiar with, was one of the keynote speakers. And he became a leading voice for

that particular network. We have had an Early Careers Network meeting as well in 2014 and since then we have had regular meetings. The core members of this network include Felix Padel, Zuky Serper and Samarendra Das. We regularly bring together environmental activists from three or four different Regions. Carlos Zorrilla and Carlos Larrea, from Ecuador, who are fighting for the cloud forest and fighting for the Yasuni people in Ecuador. We have limestone mining activists from Ghana and anti mining activists in Zambia. In India we are particularly focused around Eastern India and Saranda, along with Gladson Dungdung. We also got some very interesting focus with the work of Rohan D'Souza around water in Eastern India. So, forests, water, mining. These are the three areas that we are interested in. And the forest history, you asked me a little bit about the forest history of India. The forests are coming increasingly back into the agenda because of the recent report that we needed to plant a trillion trees in order to improve our carbon stock, which is very much in line with the old-fashioned thinking about replanting that we encountered in the context of British colonial forest policy. And we are publishing a compendium of nineteen articles with the publisher Primus on Commonwealth Forestry and Environmental History, which is a product of three different conferences we had, between 2003 and 2006, on these issues.

BD and JMF: *The field of Environmental History has welcomed a great deal of cross-fertilization and interdisciplinarity. Particularly in the case of South Asia, the link between Environmental History and Imperial History has been at the centre stage of a great deal of historical research, including your own work and that of many of your close associates. In your opinion, what can Environmental History bring to the understanding of colonialism and vice-versa? And what are the main tensions and lacunae within this sub-field?*

VD: It is again a very interesting question. When we were taught Imperial History, what was very obvious to us, or became obvious to us, was

the absence of nature or the "unnatural" history of empire in a lot of the work that we did. So, the intention was to bring nature back in and to understand that resource use was critical to imperial history. That it was all about resources. That link between resource extraction and capitalism was brought on brilliantly by Donald Worster, who talked about capitalism being the single most important intervention which transforms the World in terms of a single integrated economy, culture and society. So, while one might talk about different variations in different regions, I think that that insight is very important. But Worster also talked about the ecological history of culture being as important as the cultural history of ecology. So, to understand the relationship between ecology and culture becomes quite important to him. In many ways what I have sought to do is, as I have said, to understand this resource extraction by colonizing empires. John F. Richards has a book, titled *The Unending Frontier*, which I think is very interesting and important in this context. To look for frontiers in our research was important, and Eastern India became for me a sort of frontier in terms of colonial extraction. The impact of that work resulted in new work on the Environmental History of Globalization, which is closely linked to colonialism in the Eastern Indian context. This sort of research feeds into current Anthropocene thinking which is again about the *longue durée* and which again maps into these different phases in terms of the various datings of the Anthropocene as around 1610, which is true if you look at the Amazon, and the global cooling as a result of the Amazon returning to forest due to the dying out of native Americans. There is a new article in *Nature* about it, about the returning of the Amazon to forest causing a new phase of anthropogenic change. For India you could again argue that post-1500 was a period of quite dramatic change in terms of environmental resources and the use of these resources a turning point in the environmental history of India. And then, if you again, as I said, if you map the environmental history of globalization you get the "Great Acceleration" after 1945, with fossil fuel use and the push of the development state in India, and then more recently post 1991. So, I think the Environmental History of Globalization that has been mapped, maps closely the history of the Anthropocene.

And for me it is not surprising that Environmental History feeds into the reasons for why historians are important to understand climate change and debates on the Anthropocene. The areas of lacunae for South Asian environmental history that still remain include, climate history, urban environmental history and the history of the seas, the Arabian sea in particular, comparative regional environmental histories of South Asia and the history of extractive industries.

BD and JMF: *You have favoured more material and political perspectives over cultural ones in your own work. How do you feel those broad perspectives have been evolving and competing between each other in the historiography in the past few years?*

VD: I think I mentioned ecological history of culture being as important as the cultural history of ecology. And I have tried to do both. So, I do look at the material changes in the land and in the environment. Environmental changes in Eastern India, for example, over the *longue durée*. But I also try to look at the prism of how local people have interacted with the environment. Both as a human species and in interspecies relationships. The cultural valuing of the environment in terms of cosmology, in terms of local communities and their poetry, and the ideas and rituals of the sacred groves is also important. So, the cultural history of ecology is also quite important to my work. The way in which the field has evolved, I think now there is a greater interest in the material Environmental History. That is coming back, and I think that the interdisciplinarity that we have talked about is part of the tradition of environmental history. For example, we should be careful not to let the scientists take over the field of climate and environmental change studies. As historians we need to keep a perspective on nature and culture, and their co-production, in mind when discussing human nature interactions over time. And theorize a little more about it. The argument is that Environmental History is a bit weak on theory, but I don't think that is really the case. I think if you look at the ways in which the practice of

Environmental History has occurred over the years, it is very insightful. And if you look at the scholars that work in the field, John McNeill, Richard Grove, Donald Worster, of course Alfred Crosby, all the greats, there is a sense in which there is a global vision that is articulated, but also what John McNeill calls as "ground truthing", the locality comes into perspective. So, this global vision should not foreclose the locality. And I think that we must keep both those in mind. There is also the question of interdisciplinarity, as in the case of the *Integrated History of People and Future on Earth* project that started in 2006, the book edited by Will Steffen, Robert Constanzas and Lisa Graumlich, recognised and incorporated the work of environmental historians such as Richard Grove as part of an understanding of Earth and its processes. *The Integrated History of People on Earth* (IHOPE) became quite an important project for bringing an interdisciplinary group to work for both the past and the future of our species and planet Earth.

BD and JMF: *One of your most recent projects is trying to map the colonial botanical collections that exist in British institutions, such as Kew Gardens, to further the understanding of the environmental and climate history of the Indian Ocean. Can you tell us a bit about that project? And how does this work with colonial collections relate to current debates about the decolonization of knowledge and the repatriation of objects and specimens?*

VD: This project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England, and it started because the University of Sussex had an MoU [Memorandum of Understanding] with Kew Gardens. It was mainly a science MoU, between the scientists and the botanists at the University of Sussex and Kew. And there was a realization that we actually needed to bring the Arts and the Humanities into this MoU. And a realization, once again, that Richard and I both had at that time was that the papers of Indian botanists and naturalists of the British Empire, which were held in Kew collections, could be digitized as a very important source for the environmental history of India. And one of the people we

identified then was Joseph Hooker, who was one of the directors of Kew in the nineteenth century. He travelled in India in the 1840s, brought back the rhododendron and drew the first sketch of Mount Everest. His plant collecting and his travels of India, in the 1840s and 1850s, are a very rich resource for the flora of India. In 1872, he also produced the first volumes on the flora of British India. There has been no new flora of India since. Which is what propelled me to take this project forward, through a large collaborating network we set-up on the botanical and meteorological history of India. This has involved several Indian and British scientific institutions, archives and holding institutions. They included the Botanical Survey of India, Kolkata, the National Museum of Natural History and the National Archives in India, Delhi, and regional museums of natural history in Mysore. At the British end, we had Kew Gardens, the Natural History Museum, Edinburgh Botanic Garden, and the British Library. And we also had academic institutions, for example the University of Calcutta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jadvapur University, and the French Institute in Pondicherry. So, this became quite a network, with about ninety-three members. And we had quite a number of significant meetings, particularly one in 2012 minutes of which are found in the centre's website, in which we talked about endangered archives, hidden archival collections on natural history, in different empires. We did not focus just on the British Empire. We also brought in Portuguese academics, we brought in French and Dutch academics, and they talked about French archives, Portuguese archives, Dutch archives, and British archives. It was a very interesting and important meeting. A group from Frieburg also talked about Arab sources to understand Botany and Meteorology. Since then, it is an ongoing project, where we are trying to recover, digitize, and integrate collections, with a view to understanding global environmental history, especially in the Global South. This is a project that now has had two or three different offshoots. One, of course, is the digitization project. We have successfully digitized about 300,000 specimens from the Natural History Museum for the Botanical Survey of India. We also have an offshoot, which is an environmental education project, where, for India at least, Indian scientists who hitherto have kept their collections

for themselves are opening them up to schoolchildren and to interested researchers. Kew Gardens or the Natural History Museum of Britain have a strong sense of public engagement of their collections to create a sense of environmental heritage. And I think we have been quite successful in pushing this idea in Kolkata, in the Botanical Survey of India with the Botanical Survey of India scientists. And the third thing we are trying to do is to restore William Roxburgh's house and herbarium, which had fallen into disrepair, in the Kolkata Botanical Garden. We now have a project with the Asia Scotland Trust to restore that building and to create a centre for climate change in Kolkata.

BD and JMF: *What about the repatriation of objects?*

VD: The repatriation is mainly of the herbarium specimens. So, as I said, 300,000 herbarium specimens have been digitally repatriated. There are millions of Indian specimens, and this is an ongoing project which requires more money. We have found some bits of money and this is an ongoing, continuous project. But this is quite an arduous task. In fact, I have written a recent paper on it, on decolonizing the Natural History collections of India. One thing we also did was to have a natural history exhibition, in Kolkata, which has moved around India to Delhi and Mysore, on the environmental history heritage of India. The exhibition, for example, involves not just western botanists, from Roxburgh to Hooker and various other British naturalists, but also Indian scientists. One of the women I discovered in my research is E. K. Janaki Ammal, who was a very eminent Indian woman botanist, from a lower caste, who came to England in 1938. She was one of the first women Botany PhDs in the World, she did a PhD in Michigan, and she came and worked with C. D. Darlington. She became a brilliant cytologist and an early plant geneticist. She wrote the *Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants* (1945) and she went on to direct the Botanical Survey of India. She was the first female employee of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), in England, and she is a completely neglected scientist, both in

the West and in India. The Smithsonian magazine has just published an article about her.[5] So, we have recognised her neglected contribution in the history of science and have placed her at the start of this exhibition, where visitors move from her feminist decolonising nionalthe imperial naturalist to the exhbition of diawork to that of the imperial naturalist Joseph Hooker. This exhibition has had an enormous public engagement impact in terms of understanding the role of women in science, the neglected histories of women in science, and, for me, it was also important because Ammal was also destabilizing the Kew paradigm. She was very much trying to look for local plants and she was against the lumping of plants that you get in the plant classifications that Kew was pushing for. So, there was an element of decolonizing the Kew paradigm within her own work that I tried to bring that out as well.

BD and JMF: *You have been the director of the Centre for World Environmental History (CWEH), at the University of Sussex, since 2003. The university has a firm tradition of research and teaching in the areas of development, sustainability, and natural sciences, but also in the social sciences and humanities. What is the current environment for researchers with an interest in developing interdisciplinary approaches? We are particularly interested in the dialogues between the natural sciences and history, and more broadly, the humanities, about which you have recently published an edited volume along with Alexander Elliott and James Cullis.*[6]

VD: The interdisciplinary aspects of Environmental History are very interesting to me. And while I myself am primarily an historian, increasingly I have felt very comfortable working with biologists, climatologists and paleoecologists. And they, I find, are very respectful of history as

5 https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/pioneering-female-botanist-who-sweetened-nation-and-saved-valley-180972765/. Based on Vinita Damodaran, *Gender, Race and Science in Twentieth-Century India: E. K. Janaki Ammal and the History of Science*, *History of Science* 51, nº 3 (2013): 283–307. https://doi.org/10.1177/0073275313051003O2

6 Vinita Damodaran, Alexander Elliott, and James Cullis eds., *Climate change and the humanities* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

well, and of the historical insights that we bring. So, while I might have been concerned at the beginning about how our collaborative networks would work, I find that interdisciplinarity has been extremely creative and refreshing for my own work. I have also collaborated very successfully across the humanities and social science with philosophers, art historians and anthropologists. Recently, in the publications that I have written with Rob Allan, a Met Office meteorologist[7], and in the project that we have collaborated with the University of McGill on *Human environment interactions in the Indian Ocean World*, we tried to bring in climate data and climate information to feed into our own historical research and into how we can see the links between famine, disease, climate and environmental issues over the *longue durée*. So, that work has been particularly fruitful, and we have ongoing projects trying to improve the climate data for the pre-instrumental period. As I said, we are working quite closely with the Met Office to identify qualitative sources and, if possible, quantitative daily and sub-daily temperature and other sort data, from ship's logs and so on, for the ACRE project, which is an atmospheric reconciliation analysis run by Rob Allan. With biologists, people like Mika Peck who is working in Ecuador at the moment, we have this project on sustainable development goals (SDGs) in terms of SDGs in Latin America and India. So, we are of course talking about the Indian environment, about how you have to set off one SDG against the other. Preserving the forest is, in some ways, going against the livelihoods of local communities. As such, the project is very much organized on conservation and its contradictions in India and Latin America. That is a successful ongoing project along with biologists. In this case, Mick Peck is very involved in saving the spider monkey in Ecuador and our own research is about elephants in Saranda. So, you can see how those synergies develop, and we can speak to conservationists and biologists, bringing also history and anthropology into the perspective about the ways in which human nature interaction develops over time. Elephants

7 Rob Allan, Georgina Endfield, Vinita Damodaran, et al., "Toward integrated historical climate research: the example of Atmospheric Circulation Reconstructions over the Earth", *Wires Climate change* 7, n º 4 (March-April 2016): 164-173 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/wcc.379

are not ambushing peasants in Eastern India because they are bored, but because the elephant corridors have been messed about with due to railways and mining in forests. So, what we really need to do is to bring some semblance of the elephant corridors back, which requires us lobbying the Indian government. The really important question now for wildlife preservation in India is how the core area for preservation has been whittled down from 5% to 3%. Along with other wildlife experts, such as Mahesh Rangarajan, there is a very strong lobby, which is pushing for the return of these habitats to some form where these elephants, for example, can have access and can regain their terrain. The biggest threat to elephants in Eastern India today is mining. And those are issues that are, again, at the forefront of our work. The activists Samarendra Das, along with Felix Padel and Gladson Dungdung are very actively putting together a dossier for what is happening in India right now in the context of mining. And this group is also very active in Zambia, against Bauxite mining by one particular company called Vedanta.

BD and JMF: *We have one final question. A big part of your work, as we have just talked about, deals with sustainable development. As a result, you have engaged with several policy debates. One of the networks at the CWEH, as you said, deals precisely with these kinds of connections between academia and activism. At a time when the climate emergency is mobilizing thousands of people around the World, do you believe this may attract more attention to Environmental History?*

VD: You know, as I said, this is a moment when we cannot be sitting on the fence. Our research has to translate into something very practical on the ground. I see myself as very strongly feeding into environmental activism, being an activist myself, if I can, standing at the barricades, protesting, if possible, along with my activist friends. So, the issue is that we cannot put activists in silos and academics in silos. There is a co-production going on here, where academics are feeding into activism through knowledge networks and activists are telling us about strategies for action and pathways

to protest. The first question that Samarendra Das asked me was: Zambia has had so many important anthropologists who documented the mining industry, how is that nobody has actually taken up the cudgels to protest against this particularly polluting company, Vedanta, whose history of human rights violations is horrific? This is an Indian company, registered in the London Stock Exchange and the activist group, called Foil Vedanta, have single-handedly managed to file a legal suit for compensation, in London, for Zambian peasants whose lands have been polluted by Vedanta which has got assent from the courts. This action has been enormously instructive for me, as an academic, to see how my research into mining or elephant damage in Eastern India can feed into real activist networks and can result in change on the ground. This is a synergy, I think, which we need to develop much more if we want a future for our disappearing World. I see Environmental History as becoming ever more important to understand our relationship with nature over this *longue durée*. I think anyone innocent of History, of Environmental History, or continuing to preach the "unnatural history" of History, is in danger of ignoring the elephant in the room. Which is climate change, right? So, we really need to embrace Environmental History as part of our curriculum, to teach an Environmental History that is revelatory to school children, to engage with Environmental History in all its interdisciplinary ramifications including its activism, so that we can be citizens of a World which is much more attuned to biodiversity, to inter-species coexistence, to recognizing that humans and nature need to coexist, not within a capitalist framework alone, but to understand that there are multiple ways of living and being on this planet.

BD and JMF: *Thank you very much for your time, Professor Vinita Damodaran.*

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