

fully account for evolution of dark skins on the one hand and elimination of pigmentation on the other. Various other biochemical, behavioural and genetic perspectives have also been fleetingly touched, but no definite assertions are made on their validity.

In conclusion, this compilation is not only technically faultless, but also provides useful information and insight into multi-disciplinary perspectives touching upon biology, medicine, sociology and anthropology. The author must also be complimented for making the account comprehensible to laymen readers of average intelligence and education, apart from providing fascinating material for thought for the specialist experts as well. In the final analysis, the adage of shallow 'skin depth' seems to apply as much to colour as to the various prejudices associated with it. The colour of human skin is essentially due only to a cell layer or two: dispassionately considered a fit example of much ado about nothing!

R. N. SHARMA

*National Chemical Laboratory
Pune 411 008, India*

An Ecological History of India.
Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha.
Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
1992 274 pp.

In their preface to the book, Gadgil and Guha state that India's biological resources are misused and the burden of this misuse in our daily life is only

dimly perceived by the rich and the powerful. Hence their attempt to reconstruct an ecological history of India.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I deals with a generalized framework for consideration of ecological history. Through a number of examples, the authors examine the conditions under which humans exercise prudence in their use of natural resources, analyse the social conflicts that exist between and within different models of economic activity in human society, and examine the impact of changing patterns in resource use over a period of time. Whilst this section in general lends itself to easy reading, a few minor questions sometimes arise on the issue of interpretations. Thus, for example, emphasis to be laid on factors for persistence of hunter gatherer/shifting agriculture societies in India, the hilly terrains of the north-east, central and southern India, should have been analysed in some more detail. In this context, it would have clarified matters if a vast body of information available from this sub-continent, on ecological, social and economic issues on this topic had been taken into consideration by the authors.

Part II provides an account of the ecological history of pre-modern India. A few interesting points emerge: (a) that the caste system promoted narrow niches in terms of resource use and that coexistence of castes in a given area was through mutual avoidance, a point that we still see amongst the tribes of north-east India, (b) conservation practices were strongly reinforced by religious beliefs. The weakness in this section is in statements that are often not authenticated by reference to literature, thus for e.g., a reference to

the pertinent literature would have been appropriate when the authors talk about taxation policy followed by the Moghuls on page 107.

Part III deals with the impact of British colonialism and the carry-over effects of this in the post-British period in independent India. For obvious reasons, this section is better authenticated through a synthesis of a vast body of literature. However, it would have been appropriate if the authors had integrated the vast body of information recently generated on the rainforest ecosystem function from this country (cf. page 198-199). It would have also been appropriate in this section to have elaborated a little more on what we understand today as 'sustainable tropical forestry management', in order to set a positive tone to the whole discussion.

Written lucidly and easily and without jargon, the book is of value to all those who are concerned with environmental problems that beset this country with its exploding population, putting heavy pressure on rapidly declining biomass resource base. Coping with the twin problems of increasing population pressure and rapid industrialization in the context of natural resource management is a great challenge. This book helps in a better understanding of the problems that we face; the solutions are still elusive.

P. S. RAMAKRISHNAN

*School of Environmental Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi 110 067, India*