

Book review

The Green Pen

Edited by Keya Acharya and Frederick Noronha (eds) (2010). New Delhi: SAGE Publications

Reviewed by Ramesh Menon

There are not too many books on environmental journalism in India. This increases the significance of *The Green Pen*, edited by Keya Acharya and Frederick Noronha from Sage. It has a wide array of interesting essays penned by active environmental journalists from India and South Asia, which gives a broad and deep perspective into the different burning issues plaguing the region.

It also gives us an understanding of the varied kinds of difficulties and ironies that environmental journalists face on a daily basis. Reputed journalist and former editor Darryl D'Monte, in his foreword, talks of how things were in the seventies and eighties, and how things have changed.

Though India has surmounted numerous environmental problems, media has still got to give it the importance it deserves. The environmental beat is not seen as glamorous and most newspapers and magazines do not have a single specialist journalist in this area. The end result is half-baked, poor, and sketchy reporting on environmental issues that has little or no research worth the name, while analysis and interpretation is a far cry. Ultimately, most of the time, environmental journalism ends up with statements of some activists, and quotes from the powers that be refuting the charges.

Journalists Keya Acharya and Frederick Noronha have managed to get a battery of reputed writers like Pallava Bagla, Kunda Dixit, Richard Mahapatra, Max Martin, Meena Menon, Sunita Narain, Nandan Saxena, Devinder Sharma, and Kalpana Sharma to write on crucial issues that force us to think.

For example, Devinder Sharma argues how the media is no more the fourth estate. He talks of the inequalities that no more outrage the elite, such as how a bunch of rich and bold people defaulted on paying

back Rs 160,000 crore to the nationalized banks and got away. On other hand, a mentally deranged beggar was arrested and jailed in Delhi as he picked up a bottle of toned milk and did not pay for it. He died a week later in jail. India's hungry and malnourished population count would be more than the combined population of the European Union.

Shree Padre, an activist, farmer and journalist rolled into one, who prides in calling himself a 'water journalist', details the water crisis and what could be done to mitigate it. He underlines how water activism is a must for all of us as none of us would be able to survive without it.

Padre details interesting media campaigns in Karnataka, Kerala, and Rajasthan where the public was made aware of water issues with a series of positive stories. It caught the imagination of the readers who moved into water conservation soon after.

Sunita Narain talks of how floods happen and how we can manage them. She calls today's floods a double tragedy of mismanagement of land and water combined with science and data mismanagement, and how this mismanagement is criminal.

Keya Acharya talks about how little the gatekeepers in media houses know about environmental issues and how he had to fight his way through to make them understand the seriousness of the issue and get published. Sadly, it is not very different even now. It makes news if it is controversial and what TV channels would want is a fight and the argument that the issue would raise.

I remember how a 'Headlines Today' producer once called me asking how to ensure a fiery debate over climate change. He also wanted names of people who differed in their views and hated each other so that they would 'fight'.

Late Anil Aggarwal talks about how the media plays games. Independent and informed public opinion can never be formed on contentious environmental issues as media reporting on it is unbelievably biased and distorted. This is a case not only with India; it is the same with the global press. It is a scenario where there is little hope at the moment. Vested interests can paint a nation a villain or a Robin Hood without any evidence. This can swing public opinion as the public do not have the facts or the analysis to interpret and come to a considered view.

Talking about photojournalism, Max Martin feels photojournalists now need to think and move beyond political borders. 'In the age of internet revolution and

instant transmission of images, there is a good case for photographers, especially those covering disasters and other emergencies to work and learn beyond borders and pool their work,' he says.

For those involved in any form of development journalism, *The Green Pen* is a good read as it gives a wide view about varied subjects. The chapters are short and can be easily read even by busy writers and journalists.

The book is not just for journalists as the essays would interest anyone who is worried about the way our world is evolving and the dangers that we are going to see in the future. If we do not see it, be sure our children will see it.