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Soul searching time for green journalism

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Book - *The Green Pen: Environmental Journalism in India and South Asia*; Editors: Keya Acharya and Frederick Noronha; **Publisher:** Sage; **Price:** Rs.395 Do journalists writing about the environment have special problems? Do they have special opportunities? Should they see themselves as a tribe apart? Where should they draw the line between journalism and activism?

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More than three decades after the Indian media started paying special attention to environmental issues, it was perhaps time for some soul searching in this genre of journalism - a need that this collection of essays fulfils to a large extent.

The essays in *The Green Pen* have been written by journalists - which is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because the journalists have been able to express their day-to-day as well as long-term problems and prospects. It is a weakness because there is

no outsider doing an objective analysis of this genre as it has been exercised over the last three decades and more.

The book is valuable for those studying the history of environmental journalism in India. Right from the foreword by Darryl D'Monte, it traces the growth of this genre from the days of protest over possible destruction of Kerala's Silent Valley rainforest.

Other journalists who have been at it for decades trace the periodic shifts in the popularity of environment as a topic in the media. Richard Mahapatra and S. Gopikrishna Warriar talk about how this has been affected by India's economic liberalisation. Keya Acharya shows how this genre is more than writing about the birds and the bees, a point stressed through the reprint of three pieces by Anil Agarwal, a pioneer in the field.

One of the best essays in the book is by Kunda Dixit, owner-editor of a number of publications and radio stations in Nepal, who explains exactly why environmental journalists should not see themselves as a separate category but should react to news developments in a professional manner.

The editors have done well to go beyond India and include essays on the state of journalism in the Maldives and Pakistan.

They have also done well by devoting a section to the interface between science, health and environment in the media - something not done often. Pallava Bagla has written on the barriers to good science journalism and Patralekha Chatterjee on how the media handles emerging issues like the interaction between the environment and health, especially exotic diseases.

With water sharing being one of the thorniest issues in South Asia, perhaps the section on this should have been fleshed out more, though Shree Padre has written about how water journalism warrants better attention.

Whether it is long-term effects of droughts and floods or about new farming practices forced by changes in the environment, many of the authors, especially Sunita Narain, have pointed out how the media has become very good at reporting and analysing sudden crises but largely fails to take notice of the unfolding of slow disasters.

It is a warning that both the media and the planners ignore at their own peril.

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Alack, bareheaded!

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