
Forests of India: A Review of its Colonial Ordeal

Sarup Sinha

*Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati
February, 2016*

ABSTRACT

India, a land of vast glory, beginning with one of the oldest civilizations since primordial times is endowed with natural magnanimity, embracing its cultural diversity and rich traditional history. But amid all those grandiose, lies a very key component of India, its natural biodiversity, specifically the forest which is central to its composition. The forests have been an integral part of India in innumerable ways, starting with mystical stories, traditions and rituals to a source of livelihood. Hence, investigating the journey of forests becomes an utmost priority to amplify our understanding of forest.

Keywords: Indian Forest, social impact of forest, forest evolution, colonial forestry

In India, forests or “*jungle*” are not merely regarded as an element of nature, it is also associated with lives of many in countless ways, especially those who are dependent on it, who consider their mere existence is possible because of forests. While enquiring modern Indian forests, India’s colonial past becomes the starting point of debates and the large scale impact it generated on the nature, people and ecological history. It is widely believed that British intervention in forest policies of India had a negative impact not only on the natural diversity but also the social structure of India and the primary agenda of British were to further their commercialization and revenue generation by virtue of their forest policies and in the process neglected the ecological state of Indian forest. Along with it, came various methods and technological processes capable of extracting resources unseen and unknown before in India.

COLONIAL PERIOD AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Starting with the nineteenth century, attention towards the Indian forests and its conservancy began to be contemplated by the Colonial State. Indian teaks were in great demand especially after the depletion of teak forest elsewhere in Europe and played an important role in the maritime expansion during Anglo-French Wars. Afterwards, The Railways were introduced in 1853, and that led to the immense exploitation of Indian forests and resources. It was realised that Indian forests could deplete exhaustively which meant British could suffer long term losses in revenue and resources, hence, a Forest Department was sought to be established. Finally, Forest Department was started with the help of German Foresters in the year 1864. Following this was the exertion of regulations by the colonial state with the Forest Act of 1965 laying down many rules and jurisdiction for forest land but this lasted for merely 13 years as an even more rigorous and strict act was initiated by the Colonial State known as Indian Forest Act 1878, it safeguarded their colonial interest and expansion and snatched the rights away from rural communities and prohibitions were implemented in sale and use of forest resources and they were allowed a limited use as laid down by the State, forests were now under the control of British and the forest land was reserved and managed by the Colonial State.

Resource exploitation in such a large scale hampered the cultivation, agriculture and hunter gatherer activities. Before timber production was promoted, the existing commercialisation were related to ivory, cardamom and pepper which did not impact much on their forest use and forest ecology but the increase in timber commercialisation led to drastic consequences on agriculture patterns. Colonial forestry sought to bring a conversion in the existing forest to the forest which will be profitable and garner great market value for them. They gave utmost priority to forest produce such as timber, teak,

**Address for correspondence:*

sarup.sinha@iitg.ernet.in

cedar etc and were not hesitant to tamper with ecological state of forest to meet their revenue oriented objectives. As indicated, negative economic, social and ecological effects on Indian forest were marked during the colonial rule.

A major chunk of Indian population- from the northern region of Kumaon to the Southern region of Cochin was heavily reliant on the forest for subsistence living by hunting and gathering. Naturally, reservations and forest rules made matters worse for them and they began to resort to other desperate measures for their living. Another two-faced aspect of colonial forestry was hunting - which was although illegal for tribal and hunting communities but was very much prevalent among all British officials from the top to the bottom, large scale ‘*shikar*’ of elephants, tigers, birds among other animals were astonishingly high in numbers ranging from hundreds to thousands. These numbers are upsetting and had a devastating result as observed by the declining number of animal species on the verge of extinction. Additionally, the rules in place did not stop the tribes and communities like the Baigas of Central India and Hill Reddis of Hyderabad to bring a permanent end to their hunting practices.

Colonial forestry also viewed some cultivation practices with disapproval, *jhum cultivation* was one of that, and this form of agriculture was a predominant practice in the northeastern part of India as well as by other tribes elsewhere in India like the Baigas. Here, the plot of land in the forest area is burned and cleared for cultivation and then abandoned after shifting to the next plot of land so that the land regenerates its fertility. The reason for concerns of British against Shifting cultivation had less to do with the negative effects of this practice on forest ecology and more to do with their conflict of interest. Areas under shifting cultivation consisted of timber trees in large numbers which as already mentioned above was a valuable commodity for the British. Strict measures were implemented by the British against *jhum* cultivation and though a total ban was not imposed, a reserve area or ‘*chak*’ was established where all the *jhum* cultivators were allowed to practice their agriculture. However, those outside the reserve faced serious odds and many resorted to plough cultivation while the *jhum* cultivators population kept reducing. People protested and raised their voices against the injustice carried out against them and depriving them of their rights which has been a part of their life for generations but all these concerns were bluntly ignored by the colonial authority. The Rampa Rebellion of 1879-80 was a good example of revolt by the tribal people fighting for their rights and independence in governing their way of life and nature.

Plough agriculturalists in other parts of India were not in a desired state of condition as well, they too were dependent on forest for fuel, leaves, timber, and fodder among many resources. Unlike earlier, where they had unlimited access to resources, now with the forest acts, restrictions were imposed on them as well and their uses of forest resources were confined. An interesting case would be that of Jaunsar Bawar, where theft of timber floated down the Yamuna River for timber merchants kept increasing despite the strict measures and warning given repeatedly by the British imposing punishments such as rigorous imprisonment and huge amount of fine.

Cultivation and agricultural classes were not the only affected class, colonial management of forest led to the decline of Indian Artisan Industry as well by the imposition of restriction on the usage and access of raw materials necessary for them. For instance, Bamboo was seen as a useless plant and demanded its replacement with timber production by the colonial state while totally dismissing the importance of bamboo for the artisan who use it for various purpose such as furniture, weaving, musical instrument, and construction. Similarly, the colonial state led to an end to the charcoal based iron manufacture due to high taxes and insufficient supply of charcoal, followed by the import of British metal which made its purpose pale in comparison. Other artisan industry such as tassar silk industry began to decline as a result of stringent forest laws and duties levied on them in order to collect *cocoons* form the forest which is absolutely mandatory for the survival of silk industry.

POST COLONIAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Moving to the post colonial period implicates a link between forest policies of colonial period and post colonial policies, upon observation it becomes apparent that The National Forest Policy of 1952 exhibits a lot of similarity with the forest policy of 1894, just reframed and toned down to suit the larger masses. To clarify, the State still had the monopoly over forest and exercise power in the name of national interest and the forest or village communities as apparent were not given any major rights as envisioned in an independent state. One vital difference was the growth of forest based industries like the Paper Industry which showed a dramatic resurgence and rise in production post 1947. The

National Commission of Agriculture laid down certain strategies to tackle the low productivity of forests by focusing attention on large scale plantation of high yielding and economically attractive tree species. ‘Production forestry’ gained an impetus after 1960s and replantation of commercially viable tree species in lieu of traditional harvesting was initiated with proper flow of finance via establishment of 16 Forest Development Corporations in different Indian States. Building of Roads and other communication networks into previously inaccessible forest areas and places were constructed and a contractor was put in charge for transportation of product to large scale industries but this did not reciprocate into development of hill people and their economy, instead, led to the ecological degradation due to the improper planning and construction combined with deforestation.

MFP emerged as a high foreign exchange earner and became a product of great value for the economy. Majority of the MFP came from the tribal areas, and the forest dwellers who worked as labour and put their hard work sold their products to the traders at a meager scanty price who in turn sell the same product after finish in an exponentially higher price. Chief among them were: chirang seeds, sal seeds, bidi leaves etc. hence, the traders, contractors and the industries were the actual beneficiaries. Private Contractors were profit oriented and exploited the labours. Five Year Plans by the Government had even addressed this issue in 1952 to look into tribal grievances and problems. However, forest operations show a disjoint with government policies and on numerous occasions these forest contractors were able to politically influence the State. Forest exploitation and Deprivation of Rights have led to various uprisings and protests. Large plots of forest land have been felled for various agricultural or infrastructural purposes. Indian forests were being harmed by the commercial interest and profit maximising policies.

The origins of the Indian environmental movement and the discussion of modern Indian forest would be incomplete without the mention of Chipko Movement. In April 1973, peasants of an interior village in Garhwal Himalaya successfully interrupted the commercial felling of trees by threatening to ‘hug the trees’. It was the result of their dissatisfaction and frustration towards state forest policies supporting Commercialisation and neglecting the needs and dependency of forest communities on the forest they live by. This was followed by a series of similar protest in the region; it was a powerful movement and gathered huge attention and fame along with bringing environmental issues, violation of rights by the government and the forest policies which were doing more harm than good into the limelight. Along with the reason mentioned above, these protests were the manifestation of immense dissatisfaction of forest policies which conflicted their livelihood interests and traditional rights and practices they were involved since generations and it also showcases their resistance towards the tampering of their way of life as they were reliant on forests for many resources such as fruit, fodder, meat, timber, wood, herbs etc. this infringement was the primary reason for rebellions and protests as a way of showing disapproval of negligence by government.

FOREST RIGHTS ACT 2006

The issues surrounding forest dwellers and communities, who are totally dependent on forest lands but have no legal rights on their home or forest land and resources were addressed through an act passed which recognized the rights of forest dwellers and making the conservation more liable. On Dec 15, 2006 ‘The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006’ was passed in Lok Sabha and subsequently in Rajya Sabha. This act also gave the rights to people and other communities to voice their opinions regarding forest and wildlife conservation.

Forest dwellers got the following three rights under the act:

Land Rights – those practising cultivation prior to December 2005 were entitled to their land although the land could not be sold or transferred but can be inherited.

Use Rights – traditionally collected MFPs, grazing grounds and water bodies, along with pastoralist community areas were granted to be used.

Right to Protect and Conserve – this gave them the right to protect and manage the forests and wildlife against any threat.

CONCLUSION

The history of Indian Forest is intertwined with stories of splendor, myths and exploitation; it has gone through a series of highs and lows. India is endowed with natural generosity and astonishing beauty with lush green cover of forest but this beauty underlies immense troubles it had to go through.

Sarup Sinha “Forests of India: A Review of its Colonial Ordeal”

While colonial forestry did everything in its power to extract almost every quantum of resource, extending their imperial ambitions of expansion through railways, world war, maritime trade among others. This had a far reaching devastating effect on the ecology and wildlife of India. It not only led to the degradation of the forests but also had negative effects on the communities dependent on it by stripping them of their rights and depriving of the forest resources they rightly deserve and live on. While one would have expected the situations to improve after independence and promotion of healthy environmental relations with cooperation of forest communities to occur, this was far from reality, as forest dwellers and village communities were not provided with the desired rights and contrary to what had expected a focus towards commercialisation began to be exercised instead of taking steps addressing the redressal to the people who were wronged during colonial rule and had to face tremendous difficulties.

Of course, there was arousal of numerous protests and rebellions by different tribes and communities demanding their rights and constantly struggling for their rights by battling strong odds. Mostly forest policies were less in favour of social benefits and more towards industrial interests but with the Forest Act of 2006, issues regarding forestry and ecology along with the rights of forest dwellers, tribes and communities have been addressed which is a step in the right direction. Forests are an indispensable element and valuable resource not only to humans but also for other living organisms on this planet. Hence, maintaining a right ecological balance is imperative for the sustainability and long term health of our ecosystem so that the coming generations are able to experience a beautiful resourceful world and the legacy of forest lives on.

REFERENCES

- Gadgil, M., & Guha, R. (1994). Ecological Conflicts and the Environmental Movement in India. *Development and Change*, 25(1), 101-136
- Gopalakrishnan, S. (2015). What is the Forest Rights Act about?. *Forestrightsact.com*. Retrieved 19 November 2015, from <http://www.forestrightsact.com>
- Guha, R., & Gadgil, M. (1989). STATE FORESTRY AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN BRITISH INDIA. *Past and Present*, 123(1), 141-177
- Guha, R. (1983). Forestry in British and Post-British India-A Historical Analysis. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18(44). Retrieved from <http://www.epw.in/special-articles/forestry-british-and-post-british-india-historical-analysis.html>

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Sarup Sinha, Masters in Development Studies, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati.