



FOREST MANAGEMENT AND EVOLUTION OF THE COLONIAL FOREST POLICY IN INDIA (1860-1930)

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Abstract: *Forest is an important subject of debate in Environmental History. The evolution and execution of forest management policy inevitably involves decision making related to the use of forest resources. Major reason for focus on forest management and development of policies is due to the fact that forests are closely related with environmental conservation as they are considered as good absorber of green house gases thereby mitigating global warming, minimize erosion of top soil, prevent floods, and provide shelter and food to wildlife and tribal population. In this context study of colonial forest policies emerged as most fascinating field of enquiry in history. Forest management and policy have been a subject of considerable debate and conflict ever since the British established a Forest Department in India and enacted legislations related to forestry in the 19th century. The splendid needs dictated the British interests in the Indian forest resources, which resulted in the establishment of supremacy over forest resources. But their policies lack two crucial aspects of forest management that include the well-established traditional systems of conservation and sustainable use; and the critical ecological and social role that forests play. In present paper, an attempt has been made to review forest management and evolution of colonial forest policy in India.*

Keywords: *Forest, Management, Policy, Environmental history.*

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INTRODUCTION

India has a long history of traditional conservation and forest management practices. This fact cannot be denied that the concept of forest management is very aged in India. The term 'forest' is derived from the Latin word 'foris' this means 'out of doors' or 'on the outside of a place'. According to popular English dictionaries, 'Forest' means a large uncultivated tract of land, covered with trees and undergrowth and sometimes intermingled with pasture. The shorter Oxford dictionary, from the environmental point of view 'forest' includes flora and fauna & Tribal people living in it. From time immemorial, nature and mankind formed inseparable units of the life-supporting system. Primitive human beings were part of the forest ecosystem. Dwelling in the caves, hunting wild animals, eating wild fruits, roots and leaves, drinking water from wild streams, they lived in harmony with the surrounding habitat. But with the advent of civilization forest tracts were cleared for housing and agricultural purposes. Man's desire for more comforts urged him to 'fell trees use timber for making carts, buildings, furniture, domestic articles and agricultural implements. Population explosion and expansion of human settlements necessitated denudation of more forest for food production and housing. Roads and bridges were also constructed in forest areas, making access to forest easier and causing greater deforestation. Establishment of forest based industries, mining of minerals and lime-stones from forests and construction of hydroelectric projects led to the disappearance of large areas of forest. When the Government found forest and its produce as a valuable source of revenue; it imposed restrictions on the exploitation of forest by private persons. This in turn, increased illegal encroachments' and illegal felling of trees. It is only when man started facing ecological catastrophes like floods, landslides, droughts, desertification, climatic changes and problems of pollution that he began to realize the significant role played by forest in maintaining the quality of human environment. Tribal people living in forest depend on forest for food and shelter. They collect fruits and leaves of trees. Honey, lac and other minor forest produce for their own use and also for sale. Deforestation deprives the tribal population of their traditional culture and livelihood. Forest and its produce are valuable sources of revenue for the State. Forest supplies wood and raw materials for many industries and satisfies the fuel and fodder requirements of the rural people. No doubt, forest needs protection from the environmental and economic point of view and in the interest of tribal Community as well.



OBJECTIVE

The present paper is an effort to look in to the evolution of the colonial forest policy in India. The main motive behind selecting the time period from 1860-1930 for my study is that during this era the colonial administration introduce the concept of forest management and implemented it. The main objective of this paper attempts to construct as chronological trajectory of colonial forest policies and its execution.

METHODOLOGY

The study of the forest management and evolution of the forest policy in India: 1860-1930 (Colonial period) is based on primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources are taken from State archive, Forest Department. Books and articles are considered as the secondary sources for this article. These books and articles have provided views and fine material for completing this paper.

ANCIENT INDIA

The Vedas, Upanishads, Epics and Puranas and the spiritual literary works of great writers and poets of the recent past have all dwelt with nature in a sacred mould to ensure protection of the environment. In a Vedic culture, earth was not just geographical core but the mother who is caring, loving, sacred, nurturing, self-giving and ruling substance. In the period of epics and Puranas, trees were considered as being alive and having life, feeling, happiness and sorrows: Tress take water from the roots. If they have any infection it is cured by sprinkling of medicines. It demonstrates they have rasendriya. Trees are living things and they have life like others and hence while cutting they feel sadness. Equally, they have the feeling of happiness. After cutting, a new branch comes out. (The Mahabharatha 18.15-17). Environment was regarded as essential things in the life of human beings. The people believed that indiscriminate damage of trees and plants would result in environmental degradation in the world. Some of the trees and plants associated with gods and goddesses are as follows:



Common name	Scientific name	God/ Goddess
Vata/banyan/peral	Ficus bengalensis	Brahma, Vishnu
Papal/sacred fig/arayal	Ficus religiosa	Vishnu, Krishna, Buddha
Ashoka	Saraca asoca	Indra, Buddha
Palasa/flame of the forest	Butea monosperma	Brahma, Ganapathi
Mango	Mangifera Indica	Lakshmi
Neem	Azadirachta indica	Manasa
Bael	Aegle marmelos	Shiva
Sandal	Santalum album	All gods
lotus	Nelumbium speciosum	Vishnu, Lakshmi
Tulsi /sacred basil	Ocimum sanctum	Almost all gods

The holy quran is wrote with a good tree-illusion, allah sets onward the case of a good word which is like a good tree whose roots is rigid and whose branches reaches into heaven. In Islamic literature, the Quran says that man is born with nature made by allah and "he who nourishes it, will definitely be successful and we, who confines it, will surely come to grief" (91:9-10). In spirit of islam A. Hussain says: All being is equipped for life within its nature and similarly every nature is so ordered that its products and effects are according to set laws, so that there is constant adjustment between the nature and the beings who exist in it and life will not be endangered (p.25). The Upanishads are "secret or esoteric" set of guidelines. The Upanishads are either imbedded in the Aranyakas or from their enhancement. Aranyaka is supposed, because it is meant to be studied in the jungle. The aranyakas as well as older Upanishads belong to the various vedic schools and some of the important aranyakas are-a) The aitareyac Aranyaka, b) The kausitaki Aranyaka, c) The Taittiriya Aranyaka, d) Brhad Aranyaka. In Taittiriya Aranyaka describes the climatic conditions and says that 'with abundance of rain, there is lot of vegetational growth.' Section 12 and 13 contain versus in praise of indra for abundant rain and significant growth of life-sustaining vegetation. Flora in Srutasutras, the Srutasutras along Grhyasutras and dharmasutras form an important link between the vedic literature and the classical literature. The Srutasutras talk about a large number of trees species, plants, grains, and grass in connection with the performance of the sacrifices. Ficus benghalensis, ficus infectoria, acacia catechu, butea monosperma, ficus religiosa etc. several varieties of grasses and creepers are also mentioned. In Buddhism, Sal(shorea robusta), bodhi tree(ficus religiosa) have very important place. Ayurveda, the Indian system of medicine, mainly depends on plant parts. The 'Materia Medica' was very extensive. Over 760 plants are described by susruta. All parts of the plants such as roots,



bark, juice, resin, fruit, flower, leaves, etc are used. Cinnamon, pepper, cardamom, ginger, garlic, etc are domestic remedies even today. Historical annals provide an account of forestry from the time of Chandra gupta maurya. Reliable historical documents are accounts of the Greek ambassador megasthenes(321-247 B.C.) and the famous arthashastra of kautilya which vividly depicts various aspects of forest and wild life management. At that time there was a separate department of forest products headed by “kupyadhyaksha”. “kupyadhyaksha is an officer who manages valuable timber like sandal wood, bamboo and other forest products. He is also responsible for collection of good quality timber, including timber harvesting, disbursement of salary and wages to staff employed in forestry operations as also penalize persons who unlawfully felling trees. He should, however not prosecute persons cutting timber for their bonafide agricultural implements”. Kautilya’s arthashastra deals in detail with the classification of forests and duties of forest officers, various rules regulations regarding preservation and exploitation of forest, hunting and game laws, penal provisions for breach of forest law etc. It thus provided the foundation stone on various facets of forest management. After the reign of Chandragupta maurya, emperor ashoka adopted and improved these practices. Plantation of fruit-bearing and shade-giving trees for the benefit of travelers and common people was started in earnest. Ashoka was a follower of the creed of non-violence and he was the founder creator of ‘Abhayaranya’ which are presently termed as National parks and Sanctuaries.

The Gupta period (200- 600 AD) witnessed a distribution of forests similar to that of the Mauryan period, despite the two periods being separated by centuries. During Gupta period (320-800 A.D.) forest management practices improved and flourished. A well-known work of that time ‘shukraniti’ throws light on these improvements. Notable among which were making of forests roads plantation of fruit bearing trees and medicinal plants in the villages, appointment of ‘Gaulmikas’ for collection of forest revenue. Various other literary works including ‘Neetisara’ of Kamandaka’ indicate that forests were in abundance and contained multiplicity of fauna as well as flora.

MEDIEVAL PERIOD

In the Medieval period, Environment conservation didn’t achieve much attention. The main reason of this ignorance was political instability. During the Mughal period large portion of forests was cleared because forests provided shelter to dacoits, anti-social elements and



insurgents. Frequent change of political bodies coupled with the pressure of burgeoning population and livestock, clearance for agriculture led to large scale destruction. The only abiding feature was that some forests were reserved for game- hunting, gardens and recreation. Canal bank plantations were also started in some regions. The Mughal Period (1526-1700) was characterized by continuous destruction of forests for timber and clearance for cultivation. Mughal means forest meant no more than wooded lands where they could hunt & properties which yielded some revenue. There was no restriction on cutting of trees except 'Royal trees' which enjoyed patronage from being cut except upon a fee. Besides that Mughal emperors contributed in forest conservation by establishment of gardens, green parks, Central & provincial headquarters, Public places. Additionally, the religious policy of Akbar based on principle of complete tolerance also reflects concern for protection for birds & beasts in so much so as endeavors were taken during his reign to stop their unnecessary killing. In the sunned of emperor akbar it is directed "that on both sides of the canal down of hissar, trees of every description, both for shade and blossom be planted so as to make it like the canal under the tree in paradise and that the sweet flavor of the rare fruits may reach the mouth of every one, and that from those luxuries a voice may go forth to travelers calling them to rest in the cities where their every want will be supplied". Subsequently, however, destruction and mismanagement of forests started with the invasion of India by foreign powers. The tempo of deforestation and wanton destruction which increased during the mughal period reached its peak during the British regime.

MODERN PERIOD

Early British period, the forests deteriorated considerably with the advent of the British who were not familiar with systematic forestry. They considered forest wealth of India as an inexhaustible resource. Forestry was confined to only exploitation without any regard for replanting. Large quantities of teak and other valuable timber were cut down from areas easily approachable for the use of British admiralty's fleet. During the British period, forests were rapidly razed as revenue-eared from the timber supplies and for maximizing land revenue by putting the cleared tracts into cultivation. The growing ship building industries in England in the 18s and the expansion of the railway network in India further spurred the demand for timber, leading to rapid deforestation.



The Forest Policy in 1865:- the first step of asserting the State monopoly right over the forests. This facilitates the acquisition of forests by State. The Act empowered the State to declare any land covered with trees or brush-wood as state forest and to make rules regarding the management of the same by notification, provided that such notification should not abridge or affect any existing rights of individuals or communities. The government was empowered to prescribe punishments for the breach of provisions or for infringing rules and for the arrest of offenders. For the first time, an attempt was made to regulate the collection of forest produce by the forest dwellers. Thus, socially regulated practices of the forest people were to be restrained by law. The Act was applicable only to forests under the control of the Government and no provisions were made to cover private forests.

This policy revised in 1878- This Act was more comprehensive than earlier one and divided forests into reserved forests, protected forests and village forests. Persons were to be notified to record their claims over land and forest produce in the proposed reserved and protected forest. Certain activities like trespassing or pasturing of cattle were prohibited. A provision was made to impose a duty on timber. Some provisions were also made for private forests. And certain activities were declared as forest offences and imprisonment and fines were also prescribed. Thus, the 1878 Act continued and extended the Government policy of establishing control over forests which ensured that the State could demarcate tracts of forests, needed especially for railway purposes & retain enough flexibility over the remaining extent of forest land to revise its policy from time to time.

The Forest Policy 1894:- the policy had the following objectives:

- Promoting the general well-being of the people in the country;
- Preserving climatic & physical conditions in the country;
- Fulfilling the needs of the people
- Classification of forest as forest for climate, forest for commercial purpose, minor forests, forest for pasture.

Deficiencies in 1894 policy: Policy favored regulation of the rights & privileges of people in & around forest & denied the recognition to legitimacy of conventional conservation practices. It allowed unchecked diversion of forest land to agriculture & other uses. To provide teeth to the provision of the forest policy 1894, the forest Act 1927 was enacted.



The forest Act 1927 denied the right over the forest produce, embodied land use policy whereby the British could acquire all forest land, village forest & other common property resources through simple notification.

- Consolidated the law relating to forests, the transit of forest produce and duty leviable on timber and other products. And also given emphasis on the revenue yielding aspects of forests.
- Forests were classified as reserved, protected and village forests.
- Certain special provisions were made about the shifting cultivation. The Forest Settlement Officer was supposed to record the claims relating to the practice of shifting cultivation and to inform the state government together with his opinion as to the permissibility or otherwise of the practice. The state government was finally to decide on the issue of permission or prohibition.
- The practice of shifting cultivation was in all cases deemed to be a privilege subject to control, restriction and abolition by the state government.

CONCLUSION

In India, British Forest Policies were structured to provide to the colonial agenda of extracting the maximum income from its colonies. Primarily there was a vital drive to clear forests for agriculture because agriculture consistently yielded the most revenue and it was much easier to administer than forests. Afterward, when it became obvious that the demand for timber was growing exponentially and the scale of deforestation might lead to an acute shortage of timber the practice of scientific conservation and management of forests was introduced to facilitate the sustained availability of wood. One important feature of the British policy in India is that when colonial rulers occupied the plains and main lands of the county, they formulated policies first to grab the revenues and resources and later designed the administrative apparatus to execute the policies. It is the policy driven administration that the British adopted in the plains and the main land's contrary to this in the forest regions and hilly terrains the system of British governance was to formulate administrative apparatus first and later to support it by forest policy.



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