
UNIT 19 ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA

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19.0 INTRODUCTION

The environmental agenda of the colonial and the post-colonial period in India show a striking continuity in their working doctrine. This continuity is also reflected in the underlying principles of related policies. The early attention of the English colonisers was almost exclusively focused on timber among all the natural resources of India. The environmental agenda was therefore set by the English keeping in mind the forest and its products. The objective was abundantly clear- conversion and utilisation of forest timber as a commodity geared for the market. Interestingly, the forest policy pursued by independent India too was guided by a similar if not identical agenda. There is, however, a divergence of views on specific items of the forest policy of the English colonial powers in India as also the policy pursued by independent India. Since forest resources were invariably located at the centre of colonial interest zone, a discussion of the forest policy will help us understand the characteristics colonial environmental agenda. Similarly for the post-colonial period, the policy discussion mainly focuses on forests that help us portray the objectives of the policy.

19.1 COLONIAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA

Reviewing the book *Nature and the Orient* in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (issue dated July 3-9,1999) David Hardiman had written that the forest agenda of the British colonial powers was subjected to a critical enquiry in the book by protagonists arguing for and against the forest policy adopted by the British. The arguments centered round the current crisis of massive deforestation and while the forest policy of the British colonial period was held responsible for originating the current crisis, it was also contended that the same policy continued to be implemented almost seamlessly in the post-colonial period. This actually was an extension of the position taken by Ramchandra Guha in his writings dating from early eighties (1973 and after). Guha's position was that "the British had established an autocratic forest department which sought to exploit timber for imperial needs by enclosing the forests and

excluding the peasantry from using them as a resource-base. This gave rise to disparate protests in the late 19th century and later nationalist-led forest protests of the Gandhian period. With no substantial changes after independence in 1947, the protests continued, giving rise in time to the Chipko movement. Guha was highly critical of the British, who in his account were blamed for both snatching the forests from the people and for providing the institutional base for their commercial exploitation” (Hardiman). This position was contested “by the British scholar Richard Grove, who sought to show that the original ‘greens’ in India were in fact colonial officials. Colonial forest policy was, in his view, rooted in an enlightened understanding of environmental issues developed in particular by a group of remarkable Scottish medicos serving in the colonies, who sought initially to understand the connection between climate and health, but very quickly became experts in botany and ecology. They argued that there was a close connection between deforestation and environmental desiccation, and pressed strongly for state-led conservation of forests. Through their pressure, the earlier laissez-faire attitude towards forests was replaced from the mid-19th century onwards by active management and control” (Hardiman).

It is evident from the positions taken by both the protagonists as well as the opponents that the colonial environmental agenda as reflected in the British forest policy in India was based on the premise that forest resources were valuable natural assets on which the state possessed absolute proprietary rights. The logical extension of this premise was that the communities exercising traditional rights over forests were not justified in their claims and should be de-legitimized from such claims in order to protect the forest. The details of the forest policy would make this point clear.

The process of extensive use of wood as a forest product had begun in England earlier than Industrial Revolution. But this process was hastened around mid-eighteenth century when use of charcoal was practiced on an extensive scale as fuel to run blast furnaces. By the third quarter of eighteenth century the forest situation was beginning to look grim as vast areas were denuded of all forest cover. Since the famous oak forests of England had been exploited to the extent that even their traces had begun to vanish, quality timber was an urgent requirement. The maritime expansion and wars among colonial powers for grabbing as large a slice in global wealth as one could manage had maintained a constant pressure on ship building industry. India as a colony was therefore a most opportune possession for England. One major pressure on English colonisers was for procuring timber for ship building. In this situation Indian teak was discovered as a product of quality and durability. The worth of Indian timber may be had from the general perception that England was saved in war with Napoleon due to a regular supply of teak timber from India. As stated by Gadgil and Guha, “in the early nineteenth century, and following its defeat of the Marathas, the East India Company razed to the ground teak plantations in Ratnagiri nurtured and grown by the legendary Maratha admiral Kanhoji Angre” (p. 118; cited from *Bombay Gazetteer*).

Another factor responsible for the exploitation of forest was the expansion of railways in India. A phase of laying railway lines all across India that began in the second half of nineteenth century needed a very large number of sleepers for providing the foundational base for placing the railway tracks on it. The sub-Himalayan forests of Garhwal and Kumaon were completely denuded. The destruction was also the consequence of a policy of felling trees without accurately estimating the requirement of sleepers. Large number of felled trees in fact rotted at the felling site itself. The volume of this destruction can be roughly gauged from the figure of 35000 trees needed annually to meet the Madras Presidency requirement of nearly 250000 sleepers. “The crisis had assumed major proportions” write Gadgil and Guha, “as only three Indian timbers –teak, sal, and deodar –were strong enough in their natural state to be utilised as railway sleepers. Sal and teak, being available near railway lines in peninsular India, were very heavily worked in the early years, necessitating expeditions to the north-western Himalaya in search of deodar forests. The deodar of the Sutlej and Yamuna valleys was rapidly exhausted in the years following the inception of the forest department – over 6,500,000 deodar sleepers were supplied from the Yamuna forests alone between 1869 and 1885” (p.122; citing G.P. Paul, *Felling Timber in the Himalaya*, Lahore, 1871 and N. Hearle, *Working Plan of the Tehri /Garhwal Leased Forests, Jaunsar Forest Division, Allahabad*, 1888).

Further, the orientation of the revenue policy of English colonial power also resulted in the destruction of forests. The objective was to increase cultivation and thus enhance the revenue collection of the State. Forests were then treated as unnecessary obstacles in the way of agricultural expansion.

The agenda of the English colonial power was clear as its main objective was to produce large commercial timber. The forests were ruthlessly subjected to this commercial aim. The other objective was to increase the volume of revenue collection. Forests were again treated with disdain as the act of agricultural expansion cleared large areas of all obstructionist wooded growth. In this scheme forest dwellers were to become great sufferers. A note reproduced from the *Bombay Gazette* by Satpal Sangwan describes this aspect vividly: “Here was one Bhugut at his literary best. He recaptured the emotions of the ‘Sons of the forests’ separated from their mother.

*By one direful stroke of pen the poor tribal finds himself at once a proscribed outcaste in his own wilds. His hills and jungles fastnesses are suddenly proclaimed to be state forests. Every vegetable and mineral substance therein is declared to be ‘forest produce’. All forest produce is declared to belong to the Crown. And no one is allowed to move any forest produce whatever without the formal permission of the ‘Jungle-walla sahib’, the new forest king. Does a wretched Varli scratch clean half an acre of slope and cover it with a layer of bushes and scrub, all ready to burn, down comes the forest guard and arrests him for committing waste! Does he lop a **kheir** or an **ain** tree, or any of the hundred and one kinds specially reserved, he is taken away to*

the magistrate for injuring Crown property. Does he cut a few reeds for his hut, or bamboos for his cattle shed, he is a thief for he has stolen public property. Does he collect a little store of mowha flowers, or korinda berries, or nuts or edible roots, or what not, –poor fool, he little knows that he is committing a crime, that mowha flowers and all other forest produce are no longer his, and that all property in them is transferred to the neighbouring Parsee or Hindu contractor! Of course he is fully informed –that all is done for his own good, that the mowha belongs to the Queen, that illicit distillation must be stopped, that intoxication is a great sin, which cannot be allowed under a moral British raj, etc.” (‘Making of a popular debate: The *Indian Forester* and the emerging agenda of state forestry in India, 1875-1904’ in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 36, 2, 1999, p. 203).

19.2 POST-COLONIAL SITUATION

Analysing the colonial environmental policy, Gadgil and Guha made a pithy remark: “If in the neo-Europes, ecological imperialism paved the way for political consolidation, in India the causation ran the other way, their political victory equipping the British for an unprecedented intervention in the ecological and social fabric of Indian society. Moreover, by exposing their subjects to the seductions of the industrial economy and consumer society, the British ensured that the process of ecological change they initiated would continue, and indeed intensify, after they left India’s shores” (p.118).

In line with this remark the forest policy of independent India has truly continued the basic working concepts of its predecessor, the English colonial power. There are four operative areas where this feature is clearly manifest. A remarkable element of post-colonial forest policy has been its intimate links with wood-based industries and processed wood products. Perhaps for this purpose there has not taken place any change in the ownership of forests. The monopoly set up by the English over Indian forests and the usurpation of the sole right over its resources has continued unabated with only a change in the ownership from a colonial state to the post-colonial state.

The National Forest Policy, 1952 reiterates this monopolistic control by legitimising national priorities as of precedence over local priorities. The settlements on the fringes of forest lines are depossessed of claims over the neighbouring forest resources. The forests are declared a ‘national asset’ and state control declared as in the interest of the entire country. “The rationale for government ownership is the belief that private individuals and groups will not invest in tree crops whose gestation period often exceeds a lifetime” of the individual (*This Fissured Land*, p.194).

A second feature relates to the continuity of control over forests by technically trained managers. This immediately denies any role in the forest upkeep or management to the traditional local knowledge and practices. The pitfall is that resource use and resource management are segregated as mutually insular categories. Further the commercial

exploitation of forest continues even in independent India. The colonial orientation of forest as a revenue generating possession continues in the same manner in the post-colonial state. There is thus a tendency to over exploit the forest. As suggested by Gadgil and Guha, “A narrow commercial orientation is also reflected in research produced individual bibliographies for commercially valuable species such as teak, sal and chir pine, whereas the many varieties of oak, so crucial for sustaining Himalayan agriculture, only merited a single bibliography” (p.195).

Finally, the social groups which are intimately connected with forest do not seem to possess any long-term interest in the upkeep of forest resources. The situation is appalling in view of the fact that the forest management does not leave any scope for such social groups to benefit in any way from the forest resources. The “bureaucratic apparatus, with its diffusion of responsibility and lack of any accountability, provides no motivation to a good officer for the proper management of resources under his charge, or disincentives for those who mismanage” (*This Fissured Land*, p. 196).

19.3 SUMMARY

The colonial environmental agenda is most aptly reflected in the management policy of the English for forest resources. The denudation of forests in England forced them to reorient forest resource-use in India. Foremost change inflicted was in making forest resources a commodity for the market. This necessitated that various traditional claims on the forest were necessarily pushed aside. The communities sustaining on such resources were completely forbidden from exercising any user right or control over the forest. The demands of the maritime expansion and of navy were fulfilled by recklessly felling trees. Pitiably there was not much change in this situation in the post-colonial period. Commercial use of forest was at the top of the agenda and community exclusion was a logical corollary. The principles of management did not change and forest remained under the control of the state.

19.4 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the agenda of the English colonial power with regard to the forest resources of India.
- 2) The post-colonial forest policy was a blemish-free continuation of the colonial policy. Comment.

19.5 SUGGESTED READING

Madhav Gadgil & Ramchandra Guha, *This Fissured Land, An Ecological History of India*, Delhi, 1992.

Richard Grove, Vinita Damodaran, Satpal Sangwan eds., *Nature and the Orient, The Environmental History of South and South East Asia*, Delhi, 1998.