

# British Forest Policy in India: The Imperial Dilemma

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**Abstract:** *The onset of the British rule in India witnessed large scale administrative and structural changes in the governance of the colonial affairs. Colonial control led to stringent revenue collection mechanism in form of the Permanent Settlement, the Ryotwari Settlement and the Mahalwari Settlement. Similarly, new forest administration resulted in the creation of the Imperial Forest Department, Reserved and Protected Forests. The new administration also meant new property relations and the introduction of market economy hitherto unknown especially among the tribal population often leading to conflict between the native population and the British administration. With the coming of the railways and the mining industry, there was large scale destruction of forests for commercial use especially for railway sleepers, fuel as well as household construction works. The two World Wars saw severe onslaught on the Indian forests leading to large-scale destruction of timber tree as well as other forest produce. Owing to the war demands, several working plans and research projects were undertaken in order to put the forests to maximum use. The establishment of the Imperial Forest Research Institute in Dehra Doon led to judicious as well as scientific management of the forests which also facilitated researches in several silvicultural species. The new administrative structures brought in conflicts, often violent, between the native tribal population and the British administration. Some of the significant tribal movements during the colonial period included the Kol rebellion, Santhal uprising, Munda rebellion etc. These led to the passage of several forest acts, tenancy acts and other administrative acts for a better control over the tribal population. The British administration of the tribal and forest regions also resulted in the assimilation and integration of the tribal population into the mainstream economic and political activities. Some of these movements finally resulted in the creation of new states especially the Jharkhand in 2000.*

**Keywords:** Forest policy, Reserved and Protected forests, Tribal movements, Tenancy acts

## 1. British Forest Policy in India: The Imperial Dilemma

Of late there has been a growing realization about the need for a relook at various environmental issues be it policy, its implementation, various stake holders and ecology in general. This is primarily because many of the policies hitherto followed and their resultant impacts has brought in many contradictions and adverse implications. A part of this problem is because of emerging challenges in wake of newer technologies and ever-increasing requirements. In order to understand some of these challenges, a better understanding of the past programmes and policies need to be examined and ameliorative steps taken in order to strike a balance between requirements of various stake holders and ecological concerns for the posterity. This paper aims at looking into some of these issues and steps taken by the colonial administration to realize their imperial objectives.

Pre-British period in India has been characterised as “the golden age of ecological harmony despite the caste and class distinction and had a considerable coherence and stability” (Guha and Gadgil, 1997, p 113). The indigenous communities, by and large enjoyed unrestricted use of forest and wasteland in their vicinity although they were subjected to minor cesses for specific forest produces like medicinal plants etc. But, for most of the forest products used by the inhabitants either for food, fodder or daily household usage, there was no restriction, whatsoever as they depended on the forests and its vicinity for their various social and economic requirements. Their dependence was also institutionalized through a variety of cultural and religious mechanisms (Guha, 1983, p 1882) exemplified through the worship of sacred trees, sacred groves and several local customs and rituals associated with their natural surroundings also

testified by D Brandis, the first Inspector General of Forests in colonial India (Brandis, 1897, p 34). Richard Grove, however, differs from Guha and Gadgil in his analysis of the nature of earlier colonial conservancy which he says was complex and innovative (Grove, 1995). This, however, is not to undermine the ecological destruction caused to the forests due to their commercial exploitation. Mahesh Rangarajan points out that compared to the colonial period, the pre-colonial regime was much better off (Rangarajan, 1996). During the pre-colonial times, forest tracts were constantly being cleared to make way for cultivable land and often peasants were rewarded for clearing such forests. At the same time, vast tracts of forests were cleared during military campaigns which ultimately made way for cultivation of the cleared land.

Over a period of time, the forests held different meaning for different rulers and different times. For example, during immediate pre-colonial period, there was “limited but significant intrusion by the state” (Damodaran, Grove and Sangwan, 1998, p 15). Guha and Gadgil, as mentioned earlier, are of the opinion that during the pre-colonial period, the village communities held vast control over the management of forests in their vicinity and there was little interference and demand in this regard from the side of local zamindars and rajas. However, Grove points out to the fact that significant deforestation had already taken place in the pre-colonial period and the colonial regime further compounded this trend. Countering this argument, Rangarajan is of the opinion that during the colonial period, there were qualitative changes in the usage of forests. At the same time, the socio-economic dynamics of the colonial rule was driven by the trans-continental demands of its rulers. Also, the pre-colonial regime did not witness any large-scale collapse and conflict over ecological issues.

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During the colonial period, imperial considerations were central to the management of forests and there was little concern for ecological conservation of flora and fauna. Requirements of the railways as well as ship building activities in particular, shaped the policies and activities of the forest department and the British. In words of Guha and Gadgil, "by 1860, the British had emerged as world leader in deforestation destroying not only the forests in India but also in Ireland, South Africa and parts of north-eastern United States in order to provide timber for ship building, iron smelting and farming" (Guha and Gadgil, p.119). This was primarily because the oak forests of Britain had shrunk and Napoleonic wars and subsequent maritime expansion led to heavy exploitation of the teak forests of India. Control over the forests in India by the colonial power through creation of various instruments like the Imperial Forest Department, Forest Acts, Reserved and Protected forests, working plans etc. led to conflicts not only with the local communities but also within the colonial regime where ambiguities in state conservation could be noticed.

The early days of British rule was characterized by a total indifference to the needs of forest conservancy. Indeed, up to the mid-nineteenth century, the Raj saw a 'fierce onslaught on India's forests' (Smythies, p.11). Till the establishment of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864, the forests of India were virtually left in the hands of private men and timber merchants. Apart from demands from the railways and ship building industry, timber was in great demand for use in Public Works Department for buildings, bridges and several other domestic requirements. In the absence of any efficient means for conservancy and scientific management, forest activities were unrestricted and unplanned felling of trees and various other forest produce went unabated. Establishment of the railway network, however, marked the crucial watershed in the history of Indian forestry (Guha, 1983, pp. 1882-96). The Revolt of 1857, expansion of trading activities, export of commodities, colonial trade at large, further led to the penetration of railway network into remote corners and in the countryside. These considerations led to better management of the forests. There was also a growing realization that the forest resources were not inexhaustible and further controls were required and law mechanisms put in place in order to utilize the forest wealth. This led to demarcation of forests as 'reserved' and 'protected' thereby limiting their use by the local inhabitants unless specifically permitted. Thus, as railway expansion continued unabated and methods by which private enterprises were working the forests, forced the state to safeguard "their long-term imperial interests" (Sagrey, 1979, p.79).

Driven by the idea of better utilization of forests for various requirements of the colonial regime, Imperial Forest Department was established in 1864 with D Brandis, a German forester as the first Inspector General. It was followed by the Government Forest Act of 1865 which gave the British all necessary legislative power and authority to declare any forest area as government property. The Forest Act of 1865 was meant to establish state monopoly and acquisition especially in those areas which were suitable for the extraction of timber for the railways (Vandana Swamy,

2003, p.120) The state ownership of forests was already there but this Act formalised this fact (Nadkarni, 1989, p.124). However, traditional rights and privileges enjoyed by the community were protected. Nevertheless, the government went ahead with surveys and settlements, demarcating areas and trees for the exclusive use of the government which led to the creation of two categories of forests viz. the 'reserved' and 'protected' forests. It led to the repeal of the earlier Forest Act of 1865 and a new Indian Forest Act of 1875 came into force. The Act emphasised on the scientific management of the forests, improved the system of transportation and penetrated deep inside the rural areas and integrated these with the commercial network. This Act not only formalised the creation of Reserved and Protected forests, it also formally recognized 'village forests'. The new Act was more stringent and comprehensive and restricted the use of forests more than ever before by way of establishing absolute right of ownership in the 'reserved' forests. Local inhabitants were not allowed to exploit these forests for their local needs unless specifically permitted. These forests were traditionally used for the various needs of the local inhabitants but now this right ceased to exist.

'Reserved' forests were now to be used only as thoroughfare in permitted routes as well as certain specific usage as permitted by the Forest Department. By doing this, the government was trying to curtail the movement as well as usage of forests in terms of uncontrolled grazing and cultivation. 'Protected forests', on the other hand, were those forests which had not yet been surveyed and settled and the government permitted its access and usage to the local inhabitants for the time being unless specifically prohibited. Under the category of 'village forests', the Forest department recognized the rights of the local inhabitants for its usage for grazing, fuel and fodder, use of timber for making implements, household construction etc. But its commercial use was forbidden. Even for extending the cultivable area, permission had to sought from government authorities but in no case, it was allowed in case of 'reserved' forests. By doing this the government practically reserved rich forests for its own use leaving relatively less productive areas for local use (Nadkarni, 1989, p.89). After the demarcation of forests under reserved and protected categories, there was significant expansion in forest related activities. Working plans were drawn to manage the forests in scientific way. This was also necessitated by the fact that there was significant pressure on the forest department for increase in revenues. Thus, as a result of the settlement works of the forest department, the area under 'reserved' category was almost 69%; it was as high as 89% for Bombay Presidency (Stebbing, E P, p.61). The Voelcker Report of 1891 also emphasised on the role of agriculture and need of the forests to meet the requirements of agriculture on a priority basis (Voelcker, 1893, p 31).

#### Commonly Reserved Species

(Compiled from the notifications reproduced in Brandis, 1875)

Common Name	Botanical Name	Region
Sal	<i>Shorea robusta</i>	Oudh
Sissoo	<i>Dalbergia sissoo</i>	Oudh
Ebony	<i>Diospyros melanoxylon</i>	Oudh

Khair	<i>Acacia catechu</i>	Oudh
Teak	<i>Tectona grandis</i>	Central Province
Saj	<i>Terminalia glabra</i>	Central Province
Seeshum	<i>Dalbergia Latifolia</i>	Central Province
Beejasal	<i>Pterocarpus marsupium</i>	Central Province
Thitkado	<i>Cedrela toona</i>	Burma
Kokoh	<i>Albizia lebeck</i>	Burma
Pingado	<i>Xylia dolabriformis</i>	Burma
Yemmany	<i>Gmelina arborea</i>	Burma
Unjun	<i>Hardwickia binate</i>	Ajmer
Babul	<i>Acacia arabica</i>	Ajmer
Sandalwood	<i>Santalum album</i>	Mysore
Lac	<i>Vatica califera</i>	Mysore
Poon	<i>Callophylum elatum</i>	Mysore

The above list, although not exhaustive, demonstrates pattern of species of timber kept under protected category in different regions of India.

The new set of rules and regulations and consequent ownership and usage of the forests, thus led to new areas of conflicts between the local communities and the colonial administration. This was primarily because of the alternative notion of property rights and obligations which was not very well established during the pre-colonial times and depended mainly on traditionally held rights and mutual obligations. The colonial rule which was based on the notion of private property, dealt with the natives individually and brought them under direct subjugation without the involvement of community on most occasions which had acted as cushion in times of adverse situations and crises. The tribal population was also subjected to the vagaries of the new market economy, to which it was exposed leading to the emergence of new lifestyle and dependence on the market rather than reliance on traditional systems of community-based forestry and rights. The prevailing situation thus, has been summed up by Voelcker, an expert on agriculture in the following statement, "The tendency of our system of government has, to a considerable extent, been to break up village communities, and now for the most part they are heterogenous bodies rather than communities" (Voelcker, 1893, p.16).

As for the governance of the area under Forest Department, there were conflicting interests involved between revenue and law and order administration on the one and the forest department officials on the other. Whereas the civil administration, often the revenue personnel were mainly concerned with the increase in revenue by bringing more area under cultivation by clearing forests and thus leading to conflicts between the government and the native population, the Forest Department was opposed to purely commercial treatment meted to the forests by the revenue and administrative officials. The revenue officials were also often reluctant to transfer administrative rights of even those forest areas and wasteland which now came under the working of the Forest Act. The Forest Policy Statement of 1894, now categorised the forests as under taking into account long-term imperial interests as well as the requirements of agriculture:

- Forests, (essential for climatic or physical reasons)
- Forests, which afford a supply of valuable timber for commercial purposes
- Minor forests and

- Pasture lands.

There was, however, little regard for forest conservation except for the use of certain varieties of trees for future use.

Thus, the Forest Policy Statement of 1894, guided the working of the Forest Department and the government for a long time emphasizing the fact that imperial interests superseded the interests of the public when it came into conflict with the latter. This Policy provided the framework for the working of the Forest Department and many of its guidelines continued to be followed even after Independence. During the entire colonial period, the promulgation of the forest acts and policy guidelines often led to sharp conflict with the forest communities as their traditional rights over control of forests were being constantly eroded. Commercial use of forests and the political subjugation of the local population sharpened this conflict further affecting traditional rights of the usage of forests for routine requirements like fuel, fodder, other household requirements like wood being used for agricultural implements, house construction etc. With more and more areas being brought under the fold of British administration and the commercial use of forests for larger economic activities – ship building, railways, army and war related use etc.-political subjugation of the forest areas was manifested more stringently and it adversely affected the role of forest communities in managing local resources. "The history of commercialization of forests is, thus, also a history of conflicts between local and outside interests and the alienation of local inhabitants from management of local resources (Nadkarni, 1989, p.132).

Alongside policy framework for better control and management of forests and the structures put in place to realize its objectives, systematic researches began to be conducted for better productivity and scientific management of forests. One of the initial steps taken in this direction was the establishment of Imperial Forest Research Institute in Dehradun in 1906. Its main branches of study included studies in silviculture, botany, zoology, chemistry and economics and researches were mainly conducted in wood technology, timber testing and seasoning. Thus, two-pronged strategy was adopted by the colonial administration for the management of forests – 'limiting the physical access to the forests and the use value of forests for subsistence was minimized by altering species composition and reducing biological diversity' (Shivaramakrishnan, K, Jan.1995, p.19).

Indian forests were ruthlessly exploited during the World Wars when war demands rose sharply for timber for various war related usage. In fact, it was only during the 'Great Wars' that the enormous potential of the forests was realized (Stebbing, 1927, p.46). Cessation of imports of timber due to war meant that every possible use was made to substitute indigenous timber for imported ones. Timber and other forest produce was largely used for the construction of bridges, buildings, huts and shipping requirements. The demand for timber significantly increased during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War as it came much closer to India as well as its magnitude was much more than the 1<sup>st</sup> World War.

### The World Wars

The importance of forests significantly increased during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and it received wide publicity and attention than ever before (Smythies, 1925, p.19). Several publications of books and pamphlets as well as special public lectures with lantern slides on various forest subjects were undertaken fostering scientific utilization of forests and awareness about the importance of forests. A Timber Branch of the Munitions Board was created in order to facilitate the supply of timber as well as fodder grass to help military operations in Egypt and Iraq between 1914 – 1919. Many young officers of the Forest Department were called in to serve various military related requirements during the war years as there was enormous demand for timber and other forest produce from the military authorities (*Hundred Years of Indian Forestry*, Official, 1961). Important investigations in developing silvicultural species were undertaken by the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun in order to augment war demands and possibilities of utilizing many wood and other forest produce as substitutes. After the end of the War, wide ranging studies for the regeneration of forests and forest produce was undertaken to replenish the damages caused during the war years. A study of the statistical accounts shows that the regular high forest areas with scientific management increased from under one percent in 1919 to 13 percent in 1924 for Bihar and Orissa (*Official Return of Statistics Relating to Forest Administration in British India for the Year 1923-24*, Govt. of India, 1926). Similar works were undertaken for the United Provinces, Burma, Central Provinces, Madras etc. so that scientific regeneration of various species of trees could be undertaken.

### Revenue and Surplus of Forest Department 1869 – 1925 (Stebbing III, 1922-27, p.620)

Yearly Average for the Period (1)	Revenue (Rs. Millions) (2)	Surplus (Rs. Millions) (3)	Percentage of Column 3 to Column 2 (4)
1869-70 to 1873-74	5.6	1.7	30
1874-75 to 1878-79	6.7	2.1	31
1879-80 to 1883-84	8.8	3.2	36
1884-85 to 1888-89	11.7	4.2	36
1889-90 to 1893-94	15.9	7.3	46
1894-95 to 1898-99	17.7	7.9	45
1899-1900 to 1903-04	19.7	8.4	43
1904-05 to 1908-09	25.7	11.6	45
1909-10 to 1913-14	29.6	13.2	45
1914-15 to 1918-19	37.1	16.0	43
1919-20 to 1923-24	55.2	18.5	34
1924 to 1925	56.7	21.3	38

The above table clearly shows significant surplus of revenues over the years. This was primarily due to the requirements of urban centres for fuel wood, furniture and building materials. Its supply was facilitated and augmented by a smooth network of railways which had reached far and wide in the Empire.

Before the Second World War, the forest policy in India was not progressive mainly due to two reasons-stagnation of industrial development and tight financial policies (*India's Forests and the War*, 1948, p.12). The 2<sup>nd</sup> World war was of far greater magnitude than the first one and it came much

closer to India. It led to growing demand for timber causing excessive felling of tree of almost all species and the impact of war on the forests therefore, was more severe. The cessation of imports of timber from Europe, USA and Canada due the war led to exploitation of India's forests more ruthlessly than ever before. 'By the beginning of 1941, the forest department was asked to meet the entire timber requirement of the Middle East forces and later on of the Allied Forces in Iraq and Persian Gulf' (*India's Forests and the War*, 1948, p.16). Large scale regeneration of forests was undertaken after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. The forests of India had played a valuable role in serving war related requirements. Therefore, more areas under reserved category were brought in Assam, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, U P, Madras, Central Provinces, Sind and Bombay and revised working plans were drawn up for better management of forest areas. Post-war years were marked by drawing up a forest policy to rehabilitate the overexploited forests. At the same time, developmental plans like plantation activities as well as strengthening of communication networks were also taken up. New forest divisions were created for Bihar, Bengal, Central Provinces, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa etc. in order to facilitate better management of forests. Research in silviculture, especially those timber types which had served as substitute for steel, were also undertaken at the Forest Research Institute, Dehra Doon.

### 2. Conflicts

The onset of the colonial regime was marked by change in the proprietary relationship vis-à-vis native population. New set of rules and ownership rights meant that traditional rights hitherto enjoyed by the native population was significantly eroded and new categories of demarcation of forest areas like the 'reserved' and 'protected' forests came into existence. It altered the traditional and long-standing privileges enjoyed by the native population and imposed several restrictions in its usage. This brought them into direct and often violent conflict with the colonial administration and their associated machinery who were considered outsiders – money lenders, contractors, shopkeepers etc. The problem was further compounded by the introduction of legal notion of absolute ownership of property which eroded the notions of community ownership of land forests, a right held by them from time immemorial. The colonial system thus dealt a heavy blow to the isolation of tribal society and put an end to the political dominance of the tribes in their own habitat. Introduction of market forces and a new system of production relations brought in new system of market economy which was symptomatic of industrial society. These systems created conditions for the successive weakening of the traditional systems of the tribal society.

Throughout the colonial rule, there were widespread tribal uprisings in which a large number of non-tribal population also participated. New colonial administrative structures like the new legal system, property relations, revenue administration, evangelization, intrusion of new instruments of power and administration etc. acted as catalysts for conflicts. These movements were often led by traditional chiefs or their subordinates many of whom had been displaced by the new colonial system. Large masses of

population protested against the oppressive structures built by a rising new class of officials and assisted by the contractors and moneylenders. The Kol uprising of 1832, the Santhal rebellion of 1855 and the Munda rebellion of 1899 in Chotanagpur were massive in nature and challenged the colonial administration in a big way. There were several other movements and uprisings spread across the length and breadth of the empire, tribal as well as peasant, which shook the colonial administration. Although these movements and uprisings were crushed ruthlessly, they demonstrated the contradictory nature of the colonial administration and the nature of conflicts.

Influx of the non-tribal population into the tribal areas often in form of officials, money lenders, contractors and several other elements of the new market economy coupled with conflicting notions of traditional rights of the inhabitants led to altered demographic profile in these areas often leading to conflicts on issues of traditional rights and the new market economy. Over a period of time, the tribal population became minority in their own area and the numerical dominance of the non-tribal population was reinforced by advanced agricultural technology, new system of economy, education and healthcare, missionary activities and effective influence in the administration. The penetration of new elements and systems of British administration coupled with conflicting claims and counter-claims is thus, the story of conflicts with the tribal population throughout the colonial period.

### 3. Conclusion

Colonial forest policy, thus, had three distinct stages. The importance of Indian forests and its wealth was realized by the colonial administration right in the beginning leading to the establishment of Imperial Forest Department in 1864. Subsequently, demarcated forest categories like the 'reserved' and 'protected' forests were created which restricted the traditional rights of the native population which was mainly tribal. This often led to conflict between the tribal population and the government authorities and it became a recurrent feature through the entire colonial rule. Secondly, several Forest Acts were promulgated from time to time in order to manage the forests and its rich resources, which the colonial administration realized were inexhaustible. The expansion of the railways and communication networks which drove the colonial administrators deep into the countryside and forest areas, led to ruthless plunder of forests for railway sleepers and construction of railway tracks, railway stations and quarters for railway employees, loco sheds, fuel etc. construction of bridges and residential and official quarters. Thirdly, it was during the Great Wars that the true potential of forests was realized. War requirements led to ruthless plunder of forest resources which was squeezed to the maximum especially during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War which came much closer to India than the 1<sup>st</sup> World War. Years succeeding the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War also saw large scale regeneration works in order to replenish the damages done due to large scale felling as well as concern for soil erosion and maintenance of ecological balance. The idea, however, was to ensure optimum utilization of forest resources in event of future eventuality. It is not to forget that the Indian forests had rendered

invaluable services owing to war requirements and efforts were made to ensure its proper management in times to come. However, the traditional fabric of the tribal life, customs and rituals were significantly eroded often leading to conflicts of varying magnitude and violent nature of death and destruction. In the long run, the indigeneity of the tribal culture was significantly altered and the demographic profile severely compromised.

### 4. Declaration

I declare that the manuscript has not been published in any journal/book or proceedings or in any other publication, or offered for publication elsewhere in substantially the same or abbreviated form, either in print or electronically.

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