
Forestry and Colonial Rule in India

by

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In the Raja's reign we are all dying of hunger
He robs us of our axes, he robs us of our jungles
From village to village go the Raja's men
They make roads, but not for us
The roads are for the Raja's men
He steals the Bangs's Bewar
We are all dying of hunger during the Raja's reign
He robs us of our axes, he robs of our jungle
He beats the Gond
He drives the Banga and the Baigni from the jungle.¹

INTRODUCTION

Land is one of the essential non-renewable resources of mankind. In agrarian society, land is one of the constructive elements of political and economic strengths. It seems that the relationship between man and land, the pattern of land holding and land use are shaped by the interaction of a complex set of elements, which are climatic, economic, cultural and political. Generally, land can be divide to certain type such as agricultural, forest etc.

The aim of this essay is to examine the changes of land use, particularly the land forest in India. This study will began with the use and the pattern of forest land during the pre-colonial period. Then, it will examine the use of land

forest during the colonial rule. In addition, this essay will also try to construct and expand the idea that the Colonial rule i. e the British, not only change the natural course of land forests, but also introduced new subjects which had a close-relationship with land forest.

Land forest provided a firm base for the economy, directly with the forest products and indirectly with forest resources. Forest also directly affected the climate and soil conditions, agriculture and the balance of environment. Generally, the forest resources have a several functions. The first is to protect the fragile eco-system from the undesirable consequences at the slightest disturbances due to geological, hydrological, soil erosion and slope condition. The second, to produce raw materials for production purposes. Forest production includes the supply of timber and bamboo for railway sleepers, building constructions, ship building and initially also fuel for burning.²

It was no doubt that the Indian land forest played a vital role in Indian society particularly to the village people and hillmen. The study of Indian land forest seemed to have been started by colonial officer during the colonial period. B. Ribbentrop in *Forestry in British India*, produced some enlightening work on this subject. He argued that scientific forestry under the British rule marked the end of a 'war on the forest'.³ This idea was shared by E. P. Stebbing in *The Forestry of India* in two volume. Like some other imperial forester historians, Stebbing saw that the colonial rule marked a watershed in Indian land forest and forest history in India. He also argued that the colonial rule had saved the forest from certain destruction by indigenous forest users.⁴

Since then, the study about Indian forest moved towards a new phase when the Indian scholars made an interpretation about the subject, For example, Ramachandra Guha challenges the view of the imperial historians. He argued that the practices of colonial forestry were largely on the outgrowth of the economic and strategic needs of British empire. He continued that the colonial period is seen as an ecological watershed because it disrupted the relationship of the forest based communities with the land.⁵ Mahesh Rangarajan also shared this idea. He was convinced that the colonial policy concerning the forest not only changed the original custom of people but also disturbed the overall equilibrium between people and nature. As Mahesh Rangarajan put in his book, "The colonial period saw major changes in the structure of the polity and in the nature of property relations".⁶ Anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin also gave a very important contribution about the matter especially the relationship be-

tween forest and tribal communities such as Baiga and Gond.⁷ Elwin argues that the cultural practices of tribal communities closely corresponded with specific ecological roles. The colonial policy such as forest classification and forest reservation brought great effects to these people's lives. These policy seems taking away 'their forest' and 'their only property' and made their life more difficult and demanding. Ramachandra Guha in the introduction of *'Leaves From the Jungles'* states that, "Although the forest was central to the economy and culture of tribal communities, the relationship of these communities to nature was gravely threatened by colonial forest laws".⁸

THE LAND FOREST DURING PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

In order to understand British attitudes over the land forest, it is worth while examining how pre-colonial regimes viewed the related subject. Generally, it has been said that the land forest and Indian society cannot be separated. Since the ancient epic Mahabrata tells the burning of the great Khundawa forest, situated between the Ganges and Jumna Rivers. Under the Mughal rule, all lands including the land forest belonged to the emperor. However, the peasants could convert forested land into arable, under certain regulation such as paying land tax. Mansabdar employed their own staff to collect the land tax behalf of the ruler.⁹ The land forest also had a close relationship with the village people and hillmens society. To them, forest is their life.

Every aspect of their life stayed around the forest. This agreement of the village and hill peasants on forest resources was institutionalized through a variety of social and cultural mechanism. Ramachandra Guha said that through religion, folklore and tradition, the village and hill communities had drawn a protective ring around the forest.¹⁰

During the pre-colonial period, while the rulers came and went, India's peasants managed their own lands and forest. The pre-colonial community management system had their elements of equitable sharing decision making on the whole functioning and working effectively. This communal society system believed on the communal belonging. They shared their land and shared their forest. They do what they liked in the forest under the communal line. It was different in later period when land became a commodity, when the sense of individual property emerged, the forest did not belong to communal society anymore. Therefore, during the period, hunter-gatherers, shifting cultivators,

peasants and pastoral nomads felt free access to land forest, without any restriction. In such forest areas, forest had a tremendous influence in moulding religious and spiritual life. It is often that the hilltops were dedicated to local deities and the trees around the spot were regarded with great respect. As S. M. Edward put it, "In such sacred groves, the traditional form of forest preservation and one found all over India, no villager would injure the vegetation in any way. In fact, the planting of a grove was regarded as a work of great religious merit".¹¹

Therefore, at every moment in Indian history had its own 'forest interest'. States and kingdom such as the Delhi Sultanate encouraged the peasants and agrarian intention by remitting revenues and providing credits to those who cleared fresh land forest for agriculture.¹² Forest also became a target in long-term measures for the extension of agriculture or to extend the military and political powers of conquerors and landed elements. Woodcutters and ploughmen accompanied the Mughal army from the time of Shah Jahan and there was a general order whosoever cleared the forest and brought land under cultivation would become a zamindar.¹³

Above all, it seems that since the pre-colonial period the land forest will always standing as a valuable resources to the rulers. In Mughal times, when the ship-building increasing in demand, emperor Aurangzeb issued a farman or imperial order allowing a contractors to felling the sal timber from the Punjab hill free of charge and to refund him any due which had been levied.¹⁴ Land forest also became the personal property to the ruler and was called 'royal forest' which timber cutting restriction, creation of hunting reserves and grazing regulation by regional chief were occasional exceptions. These restrictions found in certain parts of eighteenth-century India applied to cutting certain species of trees by calling them royal trees were used by India's rulers justify a monopoly on exploiting teak, tectona grandis and sandal.¹⁵ At certain aspect the idea of 'royal forest' continued during the colonial period when the British introduced the forest laws. The different might can be seen only on the degree of the practice. Whereas the 'royal forest' limited only to certain areas the forest laws, which had, been introduced later by the British cover almost the whole India. However, the pre-colonial perceptions about land forest radically changes with the coming of the British. European colonialism in India entailed a rapid and significant modification of the forest and natural environment. The European regimes were well situated to manipulate a seemingly unfavorable environment to their own advantage and profit.¹⁶

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The British expansion in the Indian sub-continent brought a new pressure to land forest. The British not only brought the new approach of trade different from pre-colonial condition. The British brought 'modernization', new way of communication and transportation, and commercial industrial economy system which among others are related to forest resources. During the pre-colonial period, land was standing as communal property and did not obtain 'economic value' such as colonial rule. The colonial rule changes the perception of 'non-valuable' forest to 'valuable' and made it a very important economic entity. From the forest resources, the British could expand their industrial sectors especially shipbuilding, railways line, housing, development of urban area etc. Looking at this idea, scholar such as R. H. Grove said that, colonial expansion not only brought a new system to the colony but also protected the rapid diffusion of new scientific ideas between colonies.¹⁷

Therefore, the study of colonial discourse is important, especially the contradictory nature of colonial intervention and the institutional bases of colonial impact. Since the early 18th century, the British remained as 'simple traders' in India, which they remained anxious only to the safety of their trade and business.¹⁸ The early days of the Indian occupation owing the varied demands on the forest resources made by naval and trade purposes. Since the British forestry were almost ceases to commercial enterprises in Great Britain, the Indian teak was needed for use in the ship construction. The demand for the Royal Navy by 1760 had resulted in a scarcity of oak forest along the Wales coastline and in parts of England. This development seems to be the first step towards more comprehensive powers control over the forest. The demands for naval and military fleet made the Indian timber represented the main significant and demand factor in British policy over the forest in India. The British aware that the Indian teak were the type of timber which suitable replacing the oak. Mahesh Rangarajan in commenting this subject stated that, "the record of ship-building by Indian and European rivals of the East Indian Company are cause for hope that Indian teak would supply wood for British shipping".¹⁹

Nevertheless, the Indian teak would supply wood for the British shipping industries. The problem of obtaining adequate timber for ships building led to the introduction of forest regulations. There are two branches of work which had to be provided, first, to protect the forests by prohibiting destructive prac-

tices, and second, to regulate the timber export and protect timber in transit. In 1865, the Indian Forest Act No. VII was passed by the British government and followed by the Forest Act of 1878. The Indian Forest Act of 1865 was the first action towards a rule of property for the forests of British India and the Forest Act of 1878 provided more extensive powers to the British officials. Under the condition that the government needed timber for shipbuilding and land for cultivation, initial steps were taken towards the introduction of the forest conservancy. The forest conservation was more than a justification for the strategic and commercial interests of the empire in obtaining timber and it seen as being against the Indian users. However, even before 1865, under the Bengal-Bombay joint commission appointed about 1800, the felling of threes below 21 inches in growth was prohibited.²⁰

One of the important issues emerges since the early years of British rule in India was deforestation. During the military campaign in 1800 against the Pycche Raja, one of the local ruler, Arthur Wellesley given an order to cleared the forests at Malabar, to deny them as a hiding places and this policy was first step towards deforestation by the British rule in India.²¹ After the seizure of Malabar, the British held the policy to increase and expand the agriculture and timber export. But, the British faced some difficulties in controlling the land forest which belonged to private property i.e the local rulers. In August 1800, the East India Company (EIC) promised will not infringed the private forest property at Malabar. Then, to follow this action, appears two different views taken by the government officials. First, those who saw the control of the timber trade as the first step towards more comprehensive powers to control private forests. These officials claim that they had a land monopoly including the private land in Malabar.²² Secondly, those who preferred a limited 'state intervention' to monopoly forest control. But, the private forest owners such as the Raja of Nilambar in Malabar believed that the government regulation was essential to prevent total destruction of all valuable trees.

The conservation practise became a major theme during the early 19th century India. The debate on conservation was given a fresh impetus by the group of surgeons in the service of the East India Company. The surgeons especially Alexander Gibbon and Hugh Cleghorn widened the issue beyond protection of timber. From 1837 onwards, they pointed to the connection between deforestation and drought protection of forest was essential for maintaining water supplies and safeguarding agricultural prosperity.²³ The surgeons claimed

that the deforestation of forest in the catchment areas was leading to siltation of rivers especially in Malabar coast.

Its interesting to note that the deforestation agreement always been referred to the cultivation activity by hill and tribal peasant. The kumri or shifting cultivation was blame for deforestation. However, the argument which says that sifting cultivation was the chief destruction to the forest are unreliable especially from the eyes of some historians. It did not support by any such data which showed clearly that this argument was right. The British government only assumed without any evidence and it seems difficult to accepted. C.A. Bayly in his book, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* give a different opinion said that, "due to rise in demand for timber, commercial logging increased even in areas that were not under British rule . . . {and} the wake of British territorial expansion led the increased deforestation".²⁴ Ramachandra Guha also shared this view and give the idea that the adaptation of farming techniques to cope with the rapid change in the economic demand was further hampered by the deforestation caused by the use of wood-fuel by railway companies.²⁵

A combination of revenue needs, expansion of commercial crops and the development of railway lines gives a powerful impact to the Indian forestry. After 1853, the great land forests were destroyed to meet the demands for railway sleepers. The situation became worse when no supervision was exercised over the felling operations. A large number of trees were felled and lay rotting on the ground.²⁶ The development of railway lines brought the major impetus to the forest history in India.

The building of the first railway line from Bombay to Thane in 1853, and the subsequent expansion of the railways generated a high level of demand for wood. A mile of broad-gauge rail track required about 1800 to 2000 sleepers. By 1878, over two millions sleepers had been used for the construction of railway lines. . . In addition to timber, railways generated a demand for fuel especially in areas like the Punjab where there was no coal.²⁷

By 1921, the Indian railways became the greatest in any colonial country, covered over 37,0000 miles across the country. The railway lines linked parts the agricultural hinterlands and urban centers to support the expands of primary

goods and import of finished products. Woods from the forest, in the form of sleepers for railways lines and fuel for steam engines provided vital inputs to this development. Forest were integrated into the market and commercial economy by forest administration initially demarcating areas with promulgated regulations for their management and directives to generate budget surpluses in forest operation. The appointment of D. Brandis as the first Inspector General of Forest Department gave the central government an agency for formal intervention in provincial forest management.²⁸

The introduction of the administrative body to control the land forest and the passed the forest law made the life of Indian inhabitants especially the forest users more difficult. The forest now became government property and was protected by law. Unlike previous rulers which cut down trees for strategic reasons and with the limited numbers, the British rule began to systematically protect the forests to secure the timber and forest resources. they also tried to regulate the users of forests by groups on the fringes of the settled arable.²⁹

The life of the forest people became more desperate with the passed of the forest act. The Forest Act of 1865 banned the felling of any timber trees without any permission from forest officers. The forest classification made the situation worst when the forest which had a good timber trees were classified as A class and under government control. Lands that were marginal values for forestry became reserve class. This type were considered suitable for agrarian extension and for the supply of forest produce to cultivators.³⁰ However, under the demand for sleepers and charcoal led to increase felling the forest reserves.³¹ The passed of the forest act brought a new conflict between the government and the forest users. The best case shows at Jamsar Bawar of Dehra Dun District. The villagers don't have free access to the forest like previous days because of the act. Then, the villagers also suspicious that the classification system made by the government would slowly take over all the land under the commercial management and government control.³²

Besides the shifting cultivation, the British rule also believed that the grazing and looping of the livestock are enemies of the forest. Since the centuries, the cattle and sheep being a major elements of India's rural economy. Grazing on the stubble and forests surrounding the villages, were a very significant source of nutrients to replaced the poor soils that support much of Indian agriculture. The farmers grazed their animals on village common lands subjects, including the land forest. By December 1874, some 150,000 sheep or

half of those in Punjab grazed in the forest reserves. Before the forest act, the villagers were accustomed to a relatively uninhabited movement in their search for pasture and unrestricted rights of grazing in grassland and forest land.³³ But, to the British, grazing lands were considerably wastelands and preferably to brought under cultivation or converted into reserves forests. In the Punjab, irrigation was used to brought a large tracts of grazing lands under the plough. In Western Himalaya, grazing cattle in the land forest was prohibited.³⁴ Although the government had a strong feeling against cattle and grazing process, it seemed not a practical ways to totally ban this activities. Under the regulation, cattle were not allowed to enter the reserve forests that were larger than five acres and only allowed to use forest lands under supervision and control by forest officers. Nevertheless, the grazing process was not same again because the grazing right now under the 'government protection.'

Colonial views on wildlife and nature were at first all concerned with hunting. The hunting activities was one of the first ways in which settlers and 'adventurers' paid their way. Land forests became the hunting grounds for white hunters in search for trophies and skins. The hunting traditions of the princely rulers had much more common with those of the British. But, the regulation of hunting had a minimal impact on the large landowners who continued to hunt in their private forest. The villagers who had much more ambivalent relationship with fauna, which has to be analyzed partly in terms of religious customs and taboos against killing certain species. Even hunting was important for Indian rulers, the scale of intervention in regulating access to the jungle was limited.³⁵ However, during the colonial rule, hunting became one of the popular sports among the government officials. "*Hunting for sport was not only a form of amusement for the British, but also affirmed their status as a racially distinct and close-knit elite*".³⁶ Hunting also part of a militarized lifestyle. The act of hunting i.e. to hunt and to killed was a similar to warfare and needed not only physical fitness but also the qualities of leadership.

During the end of the 19th century, the jungles of the Central provinces were under increased pressured from the European hunters. Hunting in India was often cheaper than in other parts of the British empire. Licenses for hunting in India cost less than those in parts of Britain. In many ways, the hunting activities during the colonial period totally different in pattern and purpose from the previous days. To the mass cultivators, hunting activity were more than to killed animal. Certain animals and birds were killed because of cultural and

ritual significance. Meantime, hunting to the British was some kinds of sport and pleasure rather than personal gain or profit. It was the trophy rather than the price of the skins that made the hunting meaningful.³⁷

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it seems that the British rule in India radically change the land use system especially in this study, the land forest. The British rule marked 'a new phase' of forest exploitation. In the sense to maximize the revenue from the forest resources and to feed the British economy, the colonial land forest policy was introduce and neglected the traditions and way of life the Indian inhabitants. At this circumstances, the colonial rule used all of the government body such as the Forest Department with aim to control the forest resources. For instance, traditionally, livestock were maintained by majority of farmers as part of mixed agriculture. The forest around the villages were used as grazing grounds, but, under the British rule, grazing lands, were considered a wasteland and the grazing at forest at certain places were prohibited. Under the colonial rule, the concept of land use and land owner change differently, including the land forests. Bernard S. Cohn in "*The Initial British Impact on India : A Case Study of Benares Region*" said that, under the local system, land has been the basis of power, with land, one could provide for followers. Once land became a commodity, power came to be based on economic considerations. Followers were not as important as income for the basis of social status. To Indian users, the land forest status as their life ground were change.

NOTES

1. Baiga song, recorded by Verreir Elwin in 1930's, quoted from Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1996, p. 95.
2. See K. C. Purohit, "State of Forest in Chamoli District (U.P. Himlayas)", in J. L. Raina (ed.), *Himalayan Environment, Man and the Economic Activities*, Part 1 Pointer Publisher, Delhi 1992, p. 251.
3. B. Ribbentrop, *Forestry in British India*, pp. 37-61, quoted from Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 5.
4. E. P. Stebbing, *The Forest of India*, John Lane the Bodley Head Ltd., London 1921, p. 78.
5. Among the work by Ramachandra Guha is *The Unquiet Woods*, Oxford University Press, London first published in 1989, Ramachandra Guha and Mahdavi Gadgil, *Ecology and Equity*, published by Routledge in 1995 and Ramachandra Guha (ed.), *Social Ecology*, published by Oxford University Press in 1994.
6. Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 200.
7. Verrier Elwin, *Leaves From the Jungles*, Oxford University Press, London 1958 which give a good document about the Gond people in the Maikal village. It can be used by historians as a first hand account concerning the Gond and their life including their relationship with the forest.
8. *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.
9. John E. Richard, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 60
10. Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods*, p. 29.
11. S. M. Edwardes, "Tree Worship in India", *Empire Forestry*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1922, pp. 78-80, quoted in Ramachandra Guha in *The Unquiet Woods*, p. 30.
12. Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 11.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
15. K. Sivaramakrishnan, "Colonialism and Forestry in India : Imaging the Past in Present Politics", in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 37, No. 1, January 1995, p. 13.
16. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, "Introduction : Themes and Issues in Environment History of South Asia", in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (ed.), *Nature, Culture and Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, London, 1998 pp. 14-15.
17. Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 1. Colonial response over the ecological change in India before 1857 followed the pattern which had developed on Mauritius, St. Helene and St. Vincent.
18. However, this policy change drastically in the 2nd phase of 18th century especially because of their confrontation with the France.
19. Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 20. See also R. H. Grove, *Green Imperialism*, pp. 390-391.
20. E. P. Stebbing, *The Forest of India*, Vol. 1, p. 63. Captain Watson was appointed the first conservator of forest in India in 10th November 1806.

21. C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 139.
22. Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 21.
23. R. H. Grove, *Green Imperialism*, pp. 399-427.
24. C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, pp. 24-25.
25. Ramachandra Guha, "Colonialism and Conflict in the Himalayan Forest", in Ramachandra Guha (ed.), *Social Ecology*, p. 276.
26. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *The Fissured Land*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, p. 120.
27. Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 29.
28. K. Sivaramakrishnan, "Colonial and Forestry in India : Imaging the Past and Present Politics", p. 9.
29. Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 33.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
31. Ramachandra Guha, "Colonialism and Conflict in the Himalayan Forest", p. 284.
32. To see Conflict at Jamsar Bawar of Dehra Dun District, See Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, "State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India", in *Past and Present*, No 123, May 1989, p. 164.
33. Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Colonial State and Agrarian Society", in Burton Stein (ed.), *The Making of Agrarian Policy in British India 1700-1900*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992, p. 126.
34. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Ecology and Equity*, p. 24.
35. Mahes Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, pp. 138-144.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 158.