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## THE INDIAN FORESTS - A JOURNEY FROM THE MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD TO A HIGH PRICED COMMODITY

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### ABSTRACT:

*In the writings of the environment romanticists, the presence of forest dependent communities in the forest and their forest resource use practices are viewed as the reasons for its destruction and for that matter an impediment to the present day conservation effort. In this understanding there is great danger of not finding the actual perpetrators. It rarely analyzed the forest policies of different periods and asked questions on the then list of beneficiaries. One may conclude that the forest dependent community got a gradual isolation from jungle owing to the fact that its resources became commodity. The paper is a descriptive study on the transformation of forest from the sources of livelihood for many to the high priced commodity.*

**KEY WORDS:** *community, resource, conservation, livelihood, commodity.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Forests in India, perhaps of the world were never recognized as a commodity before the industrial revolution. The hard woods of the forest were used in firming implements, shelter making etc. And the soft woods, branches, dry twigs were used as fuel for cooking. Many ecologists opined that the pre-colonial Indian society had a significant degree of coherence and stability, despite the divisions in society on the basis of class and caste. A tradition of carefulness and a strong communal institution evolved which guaranteed the long term viability of system of production. The early rulers, like the Gupta and Mughal Empire were more interested in fertile agricultural lands, populous towns, and cities. The Mughals were unable or perhaps not interested in radically altering the existing patterns of resource use. (Gadgil M. 2000; Sen A.). At the time when Europe was going through industrial revolution, India came into contact with Europe particularly Britain. The technologies of transforming resources from one form to other and transporting them to large distances enhanced the types of forest resource use in a big way. For example, wood was used as domestic fuel, construction timber and for agricultural implements in a subsistence economy. But it could now be transformed into paper, could be used in steam engines of ship and train, resulting a boundless use. The emergence of timber as an important commodity radically changed the harvesting pattern and the utilization of forests. (Debnath B. 2018)



### 2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The study tries to show that the commoditization of forest resources is the reason behind speeding organized destruction of forest. Today's forest scenario in many cases is the living relic of the past mayhem in the forests in India. The study in no way intends to oppose industrialization or for that matter technological upgradation. It simply tries to focus on the story of indiscriminate destruction of forest in order to fight the prejudice of century long believe that the dependence

of tribal on forest destroyed it. Therefore, another objective of the paper is to focus on this phenomenon and find out the historical explanation of the destruction of forest ecology and forest dependent peoples' livelihood. The study also focuses on the wildlife policy of the past in order to contemplate a probable reason for the fragile condition of wildlife in India.

### **3. METHODOLOGY:**

The paper is an offshoot of a descriptive research study on livelihood of forest communities. Primarily, it is an outcome of various scholarly books, journals, research papers & articles as well as various government documents relating to Forest Management Policies and Practices. I shall therefore, use all those resources in this paper and present my own impression and observation arising out of those studies. The paper is broadly divided into two parts: part one shows the impacts of the colonial forest policy and practices and part two takes an account of the forest policy and practices of the independent India and tries to figure out the impact on forest ecology and people's livelihood.

### **4. Colonial forest policy and practices, destruction of forest as well as people's livelihood: Destruction of forest in colonial India:**

Way back in 1874 Hugh Cleghorn, the first Inspector General of Forests in India, told that timber resources in India were declining rapidly under the pressures of the high timber demand in the British Empire and local use for railway track construction, shipbuilding etc. (Stebbing, 1922) Here British Empire means the countries other than India where the British had their colony and particularly their native country Britain. Almost entire British ship building industry was dependent on Indian and Burmese hard wood. Development of railway network in 1850s witnessed a major change in Indian forestry policies and practices. The network of tracks increased from only 56 kms (from Bombay to Thane) in 1853 to over 51,650 km in 1910. The expansion of railroads in different parts of India had a deep impact on forests in many ways: (Oosthoek, 2012). During the World War I, timber and bamboo were supplied to war zone for building bridges, piers, buildings, ships etc. From April 1917 to October 1918 over a period of little over one year 228076 tones of timber (excluding sleepers) were supplied by the specially created 'Timber Branch'. Approximately 1.7 million cubic feet timber (mostly teak) were exported annually (Gadgil M. 2000). The onslaught destroyed most of the accessible forests beyond its capacity to recuperate. These are few examples of recorded data. One can easily understand the amount of unrecorded felling, the level of exploitation of forest, especially when the efficiency of a forest officer was assessed on the basis of the amount of revenue he/she earned for the imperial government ((Rangarajan, 2012).

Despite all the pandemonium in the forest, a strict regulation on the traditional use of the forest resources was thought to be a necessary condition for commercial timber production. The erstwhile right holders were given a certain quantity of timber and fuel, while the sale or barter of the same was banned in 1878's forest Act. State monopoly over forest produce underlined the forest policy statement of 1894 (Gadgil M. 2000). Several aboriginal communities of the country fought against the British against the annexation of their resource base (forest) on which their livelihood depended. Hundred of such movements are not recorded or find scant references in scholarly books. However, the mainstream history writers could not ignore the movements spearheaded by many leaders like Birsa Munda, Tilka Majhi. In some cases the British Empire had to buckle down to these movements and had to pen down accords which gave concessions to the communities to continue with their livelihood (NFFPFW, 2001; Narayan K. 2012).

### **PLANTATION OF TEA, COFFEE ETC. AND FOREST ECOLOGY:**

Plantation of tea, coffee and rubber brought a major transformation in forest ecology. Much of the forest land was converted into these plantations before 1864 i.e. before the formation of forest department. However, the demand for more forest land for new estates continued to grow even after 1864. The trend continued till independence. The desire to convert forestland for commercial use like establishing plantation business found a ready partner in growing planters group; and forest department transferred vast areas of

forest tracts to them. Moreover, development of road and railway connectivity to facilitate export of tea, coffee and rubber further increased the speed of forest felling. Plantation economy itself requires a high level of wood for fuel and packaging. Thus expansion of plantation induced shrinking in forest areas by multiple ways (Gadgil M. 2000). This new economy, in most of the cases engaged the erstwhile forest people as captive labor. New phenomenon of mass migration from forest areas is witnessed. Some forest economies which faced challenges after the annexation of forest into state's hand forced their inhabitants to migrate. The phenomenon is witnessed in the forced migration of people from Chotanagpur (today's Jharkhand) to the tea belts of Assam and North Bengal (NFFPFW, 2001).

### CREATION OF RESERVES:

There is a common sense that reserves are created to save the forest and its habitants i.e. wild lives. However, eminent ecologists suggested that the purpose of creating reserves hovered around two points: i. to facilitate hurdle free collection of timber and ii. to provide ample scope for games to the top end officials of the British government. Though, sometimes the concern for ecology figured in the scheme of things (Gadgil M. 2000). The 1878 forest act provided an brilliant cushion for creating reserves. The reserves were dedicated to producing timber, where contractors were allowed to fell trees at through away prices; as a result the forests became open-access lands that underwent the torment of overuse and degradation. The reserved forest lands, taken over by the state *merely amounted to confiscation, not conservation*. The forest department (FD) viewed the needs of the 'ecosystem people' as burden, as 'biotic pressure'. In fact several working plan of the FD termed these people as the 'enemies' of the forest (Guha R. 2000). The advent of the reserves destroyed the traditional conservation models of the forest communities in most of the forests. In place of this a commercial forestry in the name of scientific forestry slowly stepped in. Scientific forestry essentially means the maximum production of commercially valuable timbers replacing the indigenous species; surely the science of felling the natural forests and planting commercially valuable trees was followed. A productive forestry based on the ethos of business got going in British colonial era and continued for several decades, even after the independence.

By the turn of twentieth century some NTFP (non timber forest produce) figured in the list of revenue earning forest products. A Timber Directorate was created in Delhi in early 1940s to smoothen the supply of forest products during World War II. Indian forest department became the one and only supplier of timber to Middle East and to the allied forces in Iraq and Persian Gulf. War need exposed the remotest forests of the Himalaya and Western Ghats. The most accessible forests of Bombay region got felled to meet the demand of the war, margin of profit there in some cases rose to as high as 400% (Gadgil M. 2000).

### INTRODUCTION OF COMMERCIAL PLANTS:

Priority of the forest department in the colonial era was essentially commercial in nature. Different government committees asked for more and more revenue from forest. Handsome returns mostly come from hard wood forest, as a result, the forest department was forced to neglect shrubs and pasture lands. Ironically these two types of land provides varieties of livelihoods to the local communities. The species promoted by the colonial ruler such as teak, pine and deodar in different ecological zones were of a very little use to rural population, whereas the species they replaced like oak, terminalia etc. were extensively used by the locals for fuel, fodder, leaf manure and small timber (Gadgil M. 2000; Nandi M. 2002 ). Forest people's livelihood options hovered around these forest resources.

### WILDLIFE IN BRITISH ERA:

The common believe regarding the extinction of several species from the forests of India, held responsible the practice of traditional hunting of aboriginal people. Today's conservation discourse is heavily biased to this understanding. In many occasions the naturalists and the forest department's documents blame the aboriginal people for the present sorry state of affairs in the number of the wildlife. The community is blamed in two fronts: 1. they kill the animals for tradition (religious practices like mass hunting

etc.) 2. they destroy the habitat of the wildlife as a result wildlife get gradual extinction. In this (myopic) vision, often we miss to find out the truth behind this annihilation of wild lives. The present paper tries to find out the history of the destruction of forest ecology and forest people's livelihood. In this journey if we don't venture into the wildlife policies of the past then we might do an injustice to the whole process, as today's conservation regime is based on the belief that the livelihood of forest people is detrimental to the existence of the wild lives. Nearly 550 wildlife forests i.e. national parks, wild life sanctuaries, tiger reserves etc. are honestly trying to evict the traditional people (forest villagers) from the forest in the pretext that their presence in the forest is detrimental to wild lives ([www.projecttiger.nic.in](http://www.projecttiger.nic.in), 2015)

Since today's conservation policy is heavily dependent on the concept of the 'pristine' forest where no anthropogenic interferences are permitted; hence human presence is thought to be detrimental to wildlife. This understanding is based on the presupposition that the forest dwellers are the reason for wildlife's extinction. In this context it becomes a responsibility to look for the probable causes of extinctions of different species from forest.

In early days of British rule the government's income mainly came from agriculture, as a result, an utmost importance was given to acquiring more and more agricultural land and disturbance free production of agricultural products. As most of the agricultural lands were in close proximity to forests, crops were subject to free raids by the herbivores from the forest. With the herbivores, there came the carnivores, making the whole situation a battlefield in the forest fringe areas. The British acted to be the savior of the poor farmers, from this menace; by enacting policies and sometimes by simply acting as a hunter with modern ammunition. British declared bounties for killing wild lives mainly carnivores, the purpose is to save the peasants and national exchequer. Over 20000 animals were killed annually for bounties in British India. In 50 years, from 1875 to 1925 over 80,000 tigers, more than 150,000 leopards and 2,00,000 wolves were killed. The event of extra reward for killing females and cubs might have brought the catastrophic consequences in the dwindling number of wild lives. The native kings spent their time and energy against the wild lives as they were forced to stay away from war. Often princely states invited the high officials of the British *Raj* for sports. The hunting was a prestigious sport to the kings. It can be comprehended from the fact that the native rulers regarded the hunting as a religious ceremony to reach into adulthood, particularly manhood (Rangarajan M. 2012). This mayhem in the far flung areas of the country continued for a century.

It's not that the villages were not subject to wildlife attack before the advent of the British, but there was a delicate yet dependable coexistence between the peasants and the wild lives. The quest for more revenue from the farming sector destroyed that ecological balance. The community institution that once existed to prudently use and conserve the forest vanished gradually. Even the practice of restrictions on traditional hunting in certain seasons (normally breeding season) and over-use of forests were not encouraged as the forest were annexed by the state (Kothari A. 1996; Guha R. 2000). The over dependence on bounty killings thrust many species on the verge of extinction. Many species vanished from some areas for example water buffalo from the forests of North Bengal, wolf from South Indian forests and the cheetah altogether from the forests of the country (Rangarajan M. 2012).

## 5. COMMODITIZATION OF FOREST IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

### Craze for industrialization:

The first forest policy of the independent India (1952) clearly mentioned the reasons of poor forest condition in the country. The policy of 1952 identified that i. rapid expansion of plantation industry ii. the expansion of railways iii. supply of timber to the two world wars iv. supply to industry as cheap raw material etc. are the main reasons of the devastation in the forests (<http://forest.ap.nic.in>, 2012) However, the policy did not prescribe to undo the reasons of the forest destruction in India. Instead, the 1952 National Forest Policy recommended to tighten the privileges and concessions that the forest depended people were getting from the forest during the British era (Poffenberger et al.1996). The concept of a restructuring forest to maximize marketable gain in the colonial era got stronger after the independence. The concept of monoculture stepped in, commercially important trees were planted uprooting the natural plants. The

demand of the paper and pulp industries was such that even many wild life areas i.e. sanctuaries and national parks were subject to commercial plantation. A widespread commercial forestry operation continued until 1980 with little importance on regeneration. This, according to many destroyed the forest, its ecology and the forest dependent people's livelihood. (Poffenberger et. el. 1996, NFFPFW 2001) According to available estimates the country had a tree cover of nearly 40% of its land mass in 1894; by 1952 it declined to nearly 22%. Thus, showing an annual net deforestation of 0.18%, however, by 1980 country's forest cover went further down to 10%, measuring an annual deforestation of 0.4% which is much higher than in the colonial India (Fernandes W. 1996). After the independence the forests of India served as a cheap source of raw materials. The zeal for the industrialization was so high that forest raw materials were supplied to factories at heavily subsidized rate. Historian, (also ecologist) Ramchandra Guha showed that during 1960s bamboos were supplied to industry at Rs.1.50/tonne, when the prevailing market price was Rs.3000/tonne (Guha R. 2000). The example is not sufficient to understand the level of indulgence given to the industry by the then governments. But, it surely gives us a clue to understand the zeal for the industrialization. In every sector, be it mining or construction probably this was the trend. One may be curious enough to peep into the history of capital accumulation in the hands of few that we witness today in India.

### **The National Forest Policy 1988 - a paradigm shift:**

The policy makers realized the importance of the local communities in regenerating the forest of the country. The National Forest Policy, 1988 acknowledged the necessity of involving forest communities in the organization of forest; it also confessed that the traditional people have their dependence on forest and it should be protected. During this period the policy makers were bit bewildered, they tried every tricks of the book to keep a favorable balance with the uses and regeneration of forest. According to many, the mismatch between demand and supply of timber opened an opportunity for a new breed of timber mafia which had crafted a chaos in the forest. The deadly combination of timber mafia, corrupt forest officials and dishonest political leaders were able to create an irrecoverable devastation in the forest. The forest fringe villages of the country felt the pinch of this destruction first in the form of water crisis, ecological disasters, crop damage by wild lives, lack of fuel and fodder etc. In different villages people started to form forest protection committees in collaboration with forest department. In the state of West Bengal (South Western Bengal) it took a shape of a movement and people started to form their own organizations. This initiation, latter came to be known as joint forest management or JFM. The National Forest Policy 1988 gave the concept a formal nomenclature as 'Participatory management' or 'joint forest management' (JFM) (Saxena 2003). According to some the changes in the thinking of foresters and the opportunity to build grassroots level organization gave the local communities a test of real democracy. However, the changes in the policy matter were cosmetic in nature. The foresters were forced to share the power with the community because they have tried everything in order to regenerate forests but failed. The reply has been, '*all else having failed, JFM.*' (Khatre A. 1996)

### **WILD LIVES IN INDEPENDENT INDIA:**

Development in the communication system and establishment of big river valley projects brought the remotest forests of the country accessible to the modern hunters who by the time started using jeep and developed arms. After the great summit of IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) in 1969 in New Delhi the country realized to frame stringent laws to save the wild lives of the country. Wild Life Protection Act, 1972 was enacted and the concept of protected area i.e. creation of National Parks and Sanctuaries put forward its firm step in Indian forests. However, protected area network could not stop the denudation process as the overall ethos of the forest policies stayed commercial in nature. In the early seventies the government of India (Gol) welcomed the foreign hunters in the Indian forests. The country was projected as a haven for those with gun and fishing rod. (Rangarajan M. 2012)



Another weakness of the Act – it disregarded the local community, did not make them partner in conservation. The philosophical backbone of this act was the concept of pristine forest. The assumption of pristine forest suggests that the human presence in the forest is detrimental for the ecosystem. The act is heavily dependent on the writings of the romanticists who propagated the assumption that once there existed pristine forest devoid of human presence. However, the ecologists claim that disturbances both climatic and anthropogenic are the cause of diversified ecologies of the world (Seberwal et al. 2000).

## 6. CONCLUSION:

We may conclude that the forest dependent community got a gradual alienation from jungle owing to the fact that its resources became commodity. The high priced commodity i.e. timber, sometimes evicted the communities from forest and sometimes made them captive labor under the forest department. During the process of annexation in British period and again during the process of creating protected areas (after independence) the local communities got a raw deal. Their rights, mostly customary in nature were not recorded. This fact has been acknowledged as “*historical injustice*” in the newly enacted Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA, 2006: Ministry of Law and Justice, 2007.p-1). It is clear from the above discussion that a forest which once regarded as a resource base for countless livelihoods of forest dependent communities, gradually turned into a priceless commodity. This transformation attracted various vested interest groups in forest. The forest dependent communities also realized the value of this commodity. As the very nature of commodity is to reach to the consumer and satisfy his or her need, the forests of India are exactly following this rite. The only difference lies in the legality of the extraction. When the forest department cut down the trees (commercial monoculture) it is assumed to be legal felling and when the timber mafia or the community fell them it is treated as illegal. Commoditization of the forest resources had been completed during the last two centuries. The standing trees of most of the forests are high priced commodity, waiting to reach to its destined customer.

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