CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Of late, there has been growing realization about the need for an alternative model of development, which is capable of carrying forward the civilization without disturbing the congenial relation between man and nature, and man vis-à-vis society has emerged all over the globe. This need is a product of the stark reality of global ecological doom that stares the civilization in the face. It is generally argued that such a situation arose out of the existing dominant model of development. The paradigm of modernization as forwarded by laissez faire and laissez passé, along with the Industrial Revolution, thought that development would be unilinear and unlimited i.e., prosperity for all forever. However, certain developments took place contrary to what was envisaged. The
result was an acute disparity among living beings. Due to uneven
distribution of power and wealth, dominant social groups and
nations grabbed the resources available for their own greed that
ultimately led to competitive exploitation and thus it became an
integral part of the developmental model itself. This has resulted,
on the one hand, into growing fears of domination and
subordination-politically and economically, and on the other, into a
realization of the fact of resource depletion at a faster rate. The
problem is further compounded by the process of diverse regions,
cultures and eco-systems becoming parts of a competitive
enterprise giving rise to new conflicts.

As a result of the dominant developmental model, there have been
large-scale ecological imbalances of dooming proportions the world
over. In the past few decades this has become more glaring than
ever before. Depleting ozone layer, massive landslides, shifting
course of rivers, deteriorating green cover, increasing salinity,
delayed and erratic monsoon and other climatic changes etc., are
just a few examples. It is in this context that environment has
assumed importance and people from all walks of life are voicing concern for the preservation of the natural order. In the Indian scenario, apart from other forms of historical writings, environmental history has also assumed greater importance and invited more attention, thus bringing together scholars in diverse traditions who share a common anxiety and urgent concern for the degradation of forests, lands, water, wildlife habitats, air quality etc. They also share a common mode of enquiry - environmental history - as they approach the study of contemporary environmental problems.

In light of these concerns, Stephen Dovers has forcefully argued that environmental history must take as its central concern culpability and relevance and urgent policy issues. He says, "crucially relevance to ... sustainability demands a form of environmental history that goes well beyond tracing the history of traditional environmental protection and amenity concerns of pollution and nature conservation... environmental history needs to have explanatory power regarding the roots of and reasons for such
things as institutions, consumption patterns, economic activities, settlement arrangements and scientific approaches relevant to particular environmental phenomena”. ¹ The expansive vision of environmental history has, thus, prompted Indian scholarship to undertake studies such as river basins to tank irrigation, vast biosphere reserves to community based forest management, poisoned wells to the pollution of major rivers and coastal fisheries. However, like other histories written after the end of the colonial rule, environmental history has also been gripped by certain preoccupations.

Certain problems that have surfaced in the post-colonial era include dilemma between continuity and change, lived hibridity and the quest for authenticity. Disciplinary divides have separated these inquiries into questions concerning institutions (including state

Colonial hibridity has emanated from the assumption that colonial subjects could be taught to mimic and imitate the authentic colonizer. It was also presumed that there would be no danger of perfect assimilation because of ineradicable differences of race and evolution. But hibridity was also a tool used by the colonized elite in their pursuit of freedom struggle and decolonization.

These processes have deeply affected the writing of history and have been aptly analyzed in the Subaltern Studies. Arguing on the issue, Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, "colonial historians presented the

British rule as an opportunity to introduce civilization. Rule of law, private enterprise and secular education were to create a modern economy, urban profession and civic consciousness. Several generations of Indian nationalists, well into the 20th century, participated in constructing the transition narrative where India needed to overcome immense barriers to enable movement from feudal to capitalist economies, and tradition to modern amenities. Thus, most modern third-world histories are written within problematic posed by this transition narrative, of which the overriding (if implicit) themes are those of development, modernization and capitalism. Environmental histories emerged within the

confines of these dominant perspectives. Both in its imitations principally as a ‘subtle undercurrent in agrarian history’, and in later ‘self-confident overt forms in forest and social movement history’. Indian scholarship in the environment was caught up in the critique of colonialism, nation-state development and the transitions to capitalism that engrossed a wider nationalist and post-colonial historiography.


Although Indian environmental history has been a witness and a participant to the above-mentioned debate, it has also occasionally led the way in various parts of the country. Some of these works show how the control of land, water, forests and wildlife varied across regions and did not follow a clear developmental trajectory. At the same time, struggles over natural resources reflected the opportunities and limitations created by socio-economic change.

Environmental historians have been instrumental in focusing secular-metropolitan nationalism and its ecologically disastrous manifestations in large dams, forest policy, industrial pollution and nuclear proliferation. They have also been catalysts in propagating a strategically essentialist, celebratory indigenism (inspired equally by Gandhian ideas and Romantic Positivism). This perspective has, on occasion, stimulated ethno-nationalism, regionalism and forms of religious nationalism drawing upon the romanticized pre-colonial/pre-modern subject and society that they evoke in their
Over a period of time, environmental history has become more inter-disciplinary in nature. Historians have now gradually moved into streams of atmospheric sciences, information technology, international law, comparative religion, trans-national cultural studies etc. These are complemented by physical sciences, linguistics and medicines. These, in turn, have led to the discovery of new archival sources. Even otherwise, well-used sources have yielded new insights. Thus well-used Settlement Reports, Census documents, Forest Working Plans etc. have yielded valuable insights as demonstrated by a series of Indian environmental histories produced in 1990s. Judicial records, obscure sporting and hunting serials, scientific and technical reports and private papers of individuals which were, till now, of no consequence to other

kinds of history emerged as useful sources.  

At the same time, tools and methodologies adopted by anthropologists, ecologists, geographers etc. have entered environmental history. Now, the study of environmental history is characterized by field study and archival sources. Social histories in forms of oral histories, ethnographic data and folklore also play a complementary role. The history of science and technology has also contributed greatly to the evolution of environmental history.

One of the most important gains of environmental history has

been its rather bold delivery into long duration studies. Environmental historians have also worked out new and meaningful periodizations breaking away from the stereotypes. Thus, the 1870s and 1880s are now recognized as key decades when the legal and administrative apparatus for land, forest management and medicalization of human body to cure and prevent tropical diseases began to take shape.


Early History of Forest Management

New pressures on various areas and walks of life marked British rule in India. As far as forestry is concerned, British expansion brought new pressures on woodland. It also led to new concerns about timber shortage due to excessive use, and later to fears of a general decline in forest cover. Colonial rule did not always mean a complete departure from the past, but it often led to new economic pressures. Also, the British rule meant control of land, trade and the like which far transgressed previous rules. The subcontinent was being drawn into a trans-continental empire, and the new rules brought with them a particular legacy in terms of how they viewed forests.  

demographic distribution, pressure on land was not so much so as to disturb the ecological balance despite the fact that regular reclamation of land were carried out. There were indeed some customary restraints on the use of certain trees like the ‘sacred grooves’, which were protected by the villagers. But, the border between forest and cultivation was very thin. Every period in Indian history had its own forest ‘line’ besides its political and military boundaries.\textsuperscript{12} States such as the Delhi Sultnate under Muhammad Bin Tughlaq (1325-51) tried to encourage agrarian extension by remitting revenues and providing credit to those peasants who cleared fresh land for agriculture. Conversely, exclusive taxation could contribute to the contraction of cultivation. This was especially so in medieval India where

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labour was a scarce resource and peasants could simply move away rather than pay high taxes.\textsuperscript{13} Clearance of forests for cultivation brought more revenue for the state and also enabled increased political control by the regime. Low population density in many parts of Mughal Empire meant that peasants could still convert forested land into arable land.\textsuperscript{14} At the same time, there was a close connection between deforestation and military campaigns. In addition to long-term measures for the extension of agriculture, forests became a target of attack in order to extend the military and political power of conquerors and of landed elements. However, this did not mean that the relationship between state and

\textbf{13.} Habib, Irfan and Raychaudhari, T.: op. cit., p. 46.

forests was that of exploitation. Emperors generously used forests for the game and their rights preceded that of the subjects. Often, the local inhabitants were only allowed to net quail, hares and rabbits and no one was allowed to disturb the game. There was, thus, a hierarchy of user rights rather than an absolute notion of property. Moreland found 'no hint' of Mughal efforts to conserve or exploit forests on a systematic basis. He argued that restrictions were largely limited to the exaction of the dues by local or imperial authorities.\textsuperscript{15} Certain forest products were important for trade and rulers tried to stake a claim to the wealth by asserting their rights.

In the pre-British period, there were many ways by which the policies of states led to changes in forested tracts. Previous regimes had often encouraged the clearance of woodlands as compared

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to successor regimes after the fragmentation of the Mughal empire, but, only to augment revenues and secure military control. In general, the states asserted their prior rights to certain commercially viable products. There were some significant initiatives in general. They were more concerned with pushing back the jungle and less with controlling access of extraction of forest produce. It is against this background of limited but significant state intrusion that the British entered the picture.16

On the question of differentiation between the pre-colonial and colonial forest policies and its usage, Guha and Gadgil are of the opinion that “in the earlier situation, village communities had control over the management and disposal of forests and uncultivated lands. Demands by dominant landscape were noticeable that were a consequence of commercial and strategic

16. Rangrajan, Mahesh,: op. cit., p. 78.
pressures and never approached the scale they did in the subsequent period of colonial rule. Nevertheless, considerable changes were beginning to take place just before the dawn of the British era. According to Grove, “deforestation had assumed significant proportions before the advent of colonialism. Changes in the colonial era were thus accumulation of trends that had their roots in pre-colonial society. But, there was a qualitative break in policies and scale of involvement with


the forests. Also, there were very significant social and political changes. On the whole, Indian rulers and landholders were content to take a share of the surplus. At the same time, notion of property was fluid enough to accommodate various interests and policies. On the contrary, the British had a very different concept of political power and the notion of private property. The fluidity of the old regimes allowed for an extensive variety of systems of land use to survive and flourish. Under the British, things were bound to change and the pressure was increasingly felt leading to more of transformation than transition.

During the earlier part of their regime, the British began to consolidate their control over cultivation. They imbibed certain Indian ideas about the inherent conflict between farm and forests and they gave it a new significance. Zimmerman has shown that the British believed jungles to be lands that had lapsed into a state of nature because of inadequate care by man. The jungle was, thus,
seen as the result of the abandonment of cultivation and was a place of wild, rank vegetation.19

With the passage of time, however, the new pressures of the empire like strategic and commercial imperatives began to be felt. South Asia acquired fresh significance in the context of Anglo-French rivalry and the need to tap new sources of wood for shipping was felt. The record of shipbuilding by Indian and European rivals of the East India Company created the hope that Indian teak would supply wood for British shipping. The problem of obtaining adequate timber for ships led to the first steps for the control of forests. Ship had been built in the dockyards such as the

one at Calcutta from 1786 onwards, and teak was a commodity for export. By the turn of the 19th century, shipbuilding had become a regular activity in Bombay.

Large-scale use of Indian timber for ship building activity demonstrated the importance of Indian forests and some local officials felt that the control of trade in timber was the first step towards more comprehensive powers to control private use of forests. Such positions were articulated in the case of Malabar, which had been conquered in 1792, and Tenasserim, annexed in 1826 after the First Anglo-Burmese War. But, there were certain British officials who opposed the very idea of the annexationists. Thomas Munro who was of the opinion that a free market in wood was all that was required to help preserve and replenish tree cover in this regard took lead. Munro favoured a minimal role for the government and had deep faith in the ability of

peasants and other landowners to act in their own long-term interests. 21 Munro believed that the whole country was 'hostile' to a system of control in which people had no stakes or gains. He even compared the proposed regulations to the inequities of the Norman forest laws in the English history. 22 Other officials preferred limited state intervention to monopoly control or a free market.

The debate on conservation was given fresh impetus by the surgeons in the service of the East India Company. Surgeons like


Alexander Gibson and Hugh Cleghorn widened the issue beyond the protection of timber. From 1837, they pointed to a connection between deforestation and drought. Protection of forests was now seen as essential for maintaining water supplies and safeguarding agricultural prosperity.\textsuperscript{23} The surgeons claimed that the destruction of forests in the catchment areas was leading to the siltation of rivers and of southern ports.\textsuperscript{24}

But, the group of conservationists, led by scientists and surgeons and few British officials, formed only a small section of the colonial elite. In course of colonial expansion in south Asia, large tracts were opened to commercial expansion or were being brought under British rule. Due to rise in demand for timber,

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  \item \textbf{23.} Grove, Richard,: Green Imperialism, pp. 399-427.
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commercial logging increased even in areas that were not under British rule. Elsewhere, economic changes in the wake of British expansion led to increased deforestation. This was, especially the case in the North West Provinces and the plains of Punjab, where the need for fuel and timber in British cantonments led to a reduction of tree cover. Previous rulers had felled trees as well, but now the woodlands were especially vulnerable to new pressures for fodder and fuel, as the British armies had felled trees for similar use.  

British policy for the renewal and regeneration of tree species also underwent a change due to many reasons. Management plans for shikargahs drawn up by the British officials reflected this sentiment. New sources of demand included fuel for steamers.

Tanneries required the bark of acacia or Babul trees. With increasing demand, reserves were not to be maintained wood was mainly used for public works, and matured trees were speedily felled. Wide-ranging changes were taking place in the Madras and Awadh. The acquisition of lands on lease was followed by curbs on the use of forests with a view to promoting the growth of timber. This raw material, in turn, was reserved for state use, especially for construction and military purposes. The Madras Government acquired the Annamalai forests in 1847, and sought to protect teak from fires. In Awadh, there were reports of acute scarcity of matured sal trees and after 1857, sal and sissoo plantations were reserved for the exclusive use of the government, and the felling of immature trees was banned. The objective was to

facilitate the circulation of wood in the most economical manner possible. As timber became a valued resource, officials in various provinces began to regulate the access to forests. Though such measures were largely in response to local circumstances, they did mark fresh attempts to resolve the problems of supply through the protection of forests.

By 1857, the common elements of British forestry in India were clearly evident in several provinces. The local inhabitants were either totally excluded or else incorporated into a regime of control. Either way the wider British interests in timber and revenue were paramount. Broadly speaking, the British felt that groups on the fringes of arable society were responsible for deforestation in addition to being lawless and unproductive. At the same time officials in many provinces were concerned with the supply of timber for strategic and commercial use. However, the absence of a department at the All-India level meant that conservation per-se was not the focus of activity of the British authorities.
THE FOREST ACT OF 1878

In the early stages of the colonial rule, attempts were made towards working in the forests for timber and allied activities as well as regeneration work. But these were, by and large, localized activities and were often in response to exigencies and without any methodic or systemic policy. In most cases, officials took initiative for conservation only when supply of timber for public works was inadequate. In November 1862, the Government of India admitted to the Secretary of State that 'until the last few years, no forest administration has in truth existed'.

The advent of railways marked the watershed in the history of Indian forestry, which was

27. Parliamentary Papers 1871, lii.i (77), p. 6, Governor General of India-in-Council to Secretary of State for India, 1 November 1862.
marked by comprehensive measures. 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 1800-2000 sleepers. Other than deodar trees from the Himalayas, *sal* and teak were the main sources of wood. In addition to timber, railways generated a demand for fuel, especially in the areas like Punjab where there was no coal. Long-term interests in building an effective rail system led to a new regime of forest control that sought to restrain private extraction of raw materials for the railways. Officials were anxious to prevent the indiscriminate


The forest resources of the country and more importantly towards a rule of property for the forests of British India. However, there were fears among British officials about the nature of involvement or alienation of the local inhabitants and whether or not they were to be affected adversely by law. The Act, therefore, provided for only a limited degree of state intrusion and control. While the Act did not provide for the total curtailment of user rights, the authorities were faced with several problems and several positions emerged from within the officials ranging from total control of forests by the government to self-regulation by village communities. B. H. Baden-Powell sought to extend state control over all uncultivated lands. He argued that conservation

was only possible if the government had absolute property rights over forested land.

The reckless cutting of trees by the people was 'an evil that must be suppressed' and was akin to sati or small pox. He believed that it was impossible to conserve a forest, 'unless you have an absolute or more or less limited proprietary right in it'. There was a section of people who criticized the very idea of state control. They were especially opposed to one of the major aims of the Bill, which was to 'extinguish all customary forest rights'. D. Brandis, the first Inspector General of Forests favoured a policy of selective annexation of those areas, which were vital for commercial, strategic or climatic reasons. He steered a middle course between Baden-

Powell and those who supported the rights of village communities. 32
Despite significant differences, there was a broad unity among officials on the need for new legislation.

At the same time, effective conservation required that the government determine which privileges were to be retained. This was seen as essential for the benefit of the 'whole community'. 33 There was a significant shift from the 'rights' of communities to

33. National Archives of India, Delhi, Legislative Department, March 1878, A, no. 137, p. 7, T C Hope, Extract from the Proceedings of Legislative Council of the Governor General, March 1878.
their 'privileges'. The ideological premises and material interests of the Raj were closely interwoven in the Forest Act of 1878 though, opinions were bound to differ on specific issues. 34 Nevertheless, the Act of 1878 worked only as a broad guideline and in practice, varied from region to region. After all, all government forests were not alike and varied on account of category of forest in a given area, the applicability of the Act to a particular province and the local system of land revenue. At the same time, the amount of land owned by the government and the kinds of user rights could vary from province to province. In 'reserved forests', all rights were recorded and settled, but in 'protected forests', things were different. User rights were not always set-aside in the latter areas. Further, the division of waste

34. Rangrajan, Mahesh: Fencing the Forests op. cit. p. 31.
depended on the nature of the land revenue system prevalent in an area.

In the permanently settled areas of Bengal and Benaras, the Zamindar owned the waste. In Ryotwari areas, such as most of Madras Presidency, all wastelands other than the village grazing grounds were owned by the government. The impact of the new legislation was far from uniform given the diversity in systems of land tenure in the various provinces. Also, the way in which the laws were applied to particular areas could also differ from one province to another. Now forests were taken over by the officials with potentiality of more than being arable land only. The British began to protect forests systematically to secure timber unlike the previous rulers who used these for strategic contexts

that the Imperial forest policy needs to be examined at provincial level to arrive at micro-level assessment of the pros and cons of various legislations from time to time.