

Tracing the Seeds of Environmental Resistance in Colonial and Post Colonial Period C. 1860s – 1970s

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Abstract: This article, has explored the relationship between forest, people and state especially with regard to Uttarakhand which faced the brunt colonial power or domination over forest resources in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The paper traces the colonial commercial forestry, scientific practices, interference with traditional customary right of local people, etc. Ramachandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil, Shekhar Pathak wrote exhaustive and interesting discourses on environmental history of Uttarakhand which has a long history of resistance against the scientific practices of Britishers. For more than a century, development has brought about major ecological transformations with change from Oak plantations to chir-pine affecting rain, soil – erosion, landslides on the environmental end. Various questions pertaining to it can be answered like the indigenous response to changing patterns of environmental control, how resistance to the colonial power took place during this period? How the forest policy and act led to the control over forests region.

This has severely impacted women in particular who faced the brunt of it and came to the forefront to continue the resistance against Britisher's dominating forest policies in the form of Chipko movement of 1970's.

Key Notes:- Commercial forestry, scientific practices, colonial domination, indigenous response.

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I. INTRODUCTION:-

^{1,2}Ramachandra Guha, and Madhav Gadgil in his *Ecology and Equity* wrote about forestry in colonial system. In 1840, the British colonial administration promulgated an ordinance called crown land (Encroachment) ordinance. This targeted forests in Britain's Asian colonies, and gave all forest, non-arable and unoccupied barren lands to the crown. The colonial forest department was established in 1864. The British monopoly over Indian Forests was for the first time introduced by the Indian Forests Act of 1865, whereby government's claims over the forests were established. Further, Forest Act of 1878, which acquired the control over all wastelands and the most significant it demarcated reserved and protected forests. In the former, all local rights were abolished while in case of the latter, some existing rights were accepted as a privilege offered by the British government to the local people. These imperial laws brought the forests under the centralized sovereignty of the state. Sir Dietrich Brandis, was the Inspector General of forests in India (1864-1883) who was responsible for the introduction of scientific forestry in India.

1. Gadgil, Madhav, *Ecology and Equity: steps towards an Economy of Permanence* (1994)
2. Guha, Ramchandra & Gadgil, Madhav *This fissured land: An Ecological History of India.*

This introduction of colonial forestry in 1864 is the watershed period in Indian history with regard to environment. An early 1983 essay by ³R. Guha established parameters of new forest history. It was this essay which laid the foundation of a 'golden age' approach to South Asian environmental history. He highlighted pre-British period as of little or no interference with the customary use of forest and its resources which further showed various forms of resistance to it in the form of Chipko movement subsequently. This environment discourse put forth by Shekhar Pathak, M. Gadgil, R. Guha was alike to South Asianist Environmental historians that included John Richards, Edward Haynes, etc.

Therefore, before the establishment of Indian Forest Department in 1864, there was little state interference in the management of forest areas which was under local communities. The takeover of large areas of forest by colonial state was a watershed period in many ways: political, as it represented an enormous expansion of the powers of the state and reduction of local interference, a social watershed by curbing local access it altered traditional patterns of resource use and an ecological watershed, as the timber became the commodity to change forest ecology as Gadgil and Guha has pointed out in their "Unquiet Woods".

Environmentalism of the East Versus West:- Ramachandra Guha in his work entitled ⁴“Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Presentation: A 3rd world critique” published in year 1986 has criticized deep ecology as put forth by Roderick Nash for wilderness preservation as it, was built upon biocentricism and misappropriation of Eastern spiritual traditions while Roderick Nash in his book ⁵“Wilderness and the American Mind” has laid emphasis on wilderness areas and its importance for the conservation of an environment.

Guha has termed it as an exclusively American concept as it was built upon affluence and post-material concerns what he and Joan Martinez-Alier later called “The environmentalism of the poor”. Nash’s study was filled by the American lead to be followed by developing countries in their national parks and wilderness preservation once they have reached a mature state alike developed countries. Nash’s book hinges upon the wilderness act of 1964, which protected a system of wilderness areas on U.S public lands.

Whereas in India the unsuccessful forest bill of 1982, which continued colonial period forest lanes i.e forest bill of 1982, which have furthered restricted peasant access to common – forest resources.

3.Guha, Ramachandra: *The unquiet woods: Ecological change and peasant resistance in the Himalayas*, OUP, New Delhi, University of California Press.

4.Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Presentation: A Third World Critique (1989): *Environmental Ethics*: 71-6

5.Nash, R.; 1982: *Wilderness & the American mind*; Yale University Press, New Haven.

This conservation or wilderness model was response to an industrial capitalism as Nash has mentioned in his “Wilderness and the American mind”. Guha has depicted that the Chipko resistance was against this colonial and port-colonial conservation model, though it served the commercial interests of Britishers. On one hand where Nash has written about nature’s needs while on the other hand Guha about conservation policy which served some group at the expense of others.

Environmentalism of the poor:- Guha and ‘Martinez-Alier says that it’s the unequal distribution of ecological goods due to economic growth.

According to them, it’s actually ordinary women and men who strive to correct the wrongs done in the form of disproportionate use of environmental resources by the rich and powerful.

The Chipko movement in the Himalayas (1970s) and Chico Mendes in Brazil’s world’s first tropical forest conservation initiative (1980s) are the two cases of environmentalism of the poor.

⁶Martinez – Alier emphasizes importance to recognize the contribution women and towards environmentalism in poor communities, particularly in rural areas. Since women devote most of their time in field collecting food, fuel and fodder while being involved in foraging activities. Women face the vagaries of nature and feel the brunt of it.

Until now, environmentalism was seen as a preserve of the rich or a northern societies while Environmentalism of the poor was often overlooked as a movement more motivated by social issues & survival of than concerned with the environment.

Environmental history:- The two approaches according to nationalist school ecological and environment ills were an outcome of exploitative colonial policies, where for Britisher’s for their benefit used forests for expansion of agricultural lands, sleepers for railways, etc. Also known as ‘cause – effect’ model analysis.

⁷Mahesh Rangarajan (1996) and R. Guha (1989) have shown that during the early phase of colonialism, the British ruthlessly cut down forest trees for roads, ship – buildings and railway sleepers which resulted in severe deforestation. The forest woods were classified into four types ‘superior, auxiliary, accessory, inferior’ based on quality.

The superior quality woods were cut down for commercial purpose by the colonial state. Rangarajan has argued that while the forest-dwellers were hunting animals for food, on the other hand Britishers conducted it as a leisure sport activity.

6.Alier, Martinez: *A study of ecological conflicts and valuation: The environmentalism of the poor*.

7.Rangarajan, Mahesh: *Forest policy in the central provinces; 1860-1914*(1992)Pp-66

Therefore, the British restricted the access of tribals & peasants to forests. In this colonial regime brought large area of forests under its control & excluded the local from them in the name of so-called 'scientific conservation'.

Which the revisionist school considers rather than colonial regime, local communities as pre – given; this school treats all these entities as evolving & heterogenous. The works of K. Sivaramkrishnan & Arun Agarwal shows the relationship between the colonial state and the environment subject as mutually changing.

The colonial forest principles evolved in the intersection between colonial administration and forest – dwellers, who showed their resistance to British interference in forests in early phase of colonialism, so there has been interaction between the two. The genesis of colonial forest policies had three sets of practices as mentioned by Srivaramkrishnan⁸:-

1. As a set of material technologies imposed on trees, grasses.
2. As a legal regime aimed at extraction of natural rents.
3. Rational knowledge became site of struggle among technocrats who compete for upper levels of bureaucracy.

These revisionist historians like K. Sivaramkrishnan and Arun Aggarwal⁹ has sidelined the cause and effect model & showcased or highlighted that nothing was pre-existing; or forest resistance being result of colonial introduction of scientific forestry. Both these actually started independently and simultaneously. The discourses on Kumaon put forth it was protest of local forest people against British interventions in forests during early phase of colonialism which led them to introduce forest laws which majorly restricted access and use of forest resources by the local population dependent on forest resources for their livelihood.

Thus, there was the formation of forest councils with the involvement in the struggle over resources.

COLONIZING THE FOREST:- ¹⁰David Arnold in his discourse named 'Disease, Resistance and India's Ecological Frontier (1770-1947)' highlights how disease i.e. malaria acted as buffer to conserve an ecological frontier for tribal population against colonial powers.

The whole colonial period from the Bengal famine of 1770s to the introduction of DDT in 1946-47 is considered for review.

As the EIC expanded its hold over the subcontinent in the late 18 and early 19 centuries, it laid a claim on a number of environmentally less accessible and politically marginal territories.

8.Sivaramkrishnan; K : Nature conservation in the new economy: People, Wildlife and the Law in India,

9.Agarwal A : Regional modernities: The cultural politics of development.

it laid a claim on a number of environmentally less accessible and politically marginal territories.

The problem of establishing political control and effective systems of revenue extraction in such areas completed tribals not to submit to company rule. Despite of environmental and administrative problems; company interfered either to tax forestland produce or periodic raiding battle and grain as a less of revenue in the plains.

It was after the Bengal famine in 1770s, in Kandesh from 1819 and from 1820s and 1830s in Madras, the British had launched punishment raids against hill and jungle, tribes, executing hill raja. But colonizers faced the problem of disease in this tribal area when they launched an expedition against these tribal population.

As Richard Grove has remarked; 'Control of forests became similar with the political control of dissent'.

India's tribals represented primitiveness or uncivilized population vis – a – vis 'civilized' citizens of the plains. There appears to be a cultural difference and tribals/hilly/forest people made to be subordinated, or succumb to the dictates of 'scientific forestry', which breached or violated the ecological frontier, forests were felled and further encroachment continued. As roads, railways and markets connected them to the outside realm and the efforts to eradicate malaria and policy of developing 'backward' regions, led Britishers to interfere with forest resources and local populations customary practices.

¹¹Oliver springate & Piere Blaikie in their works entitled, "Forests, People and Power" highlights that in pre-colonial feudal periods, forests, pastures and grazing lands were under common use and management, subjected to a variety of customary regulatory practices. It has then local rulers set aside specific areas for hunting purpose and applied different levels of controls and taxes on the use of forest resources.

¹²Baden Powell said, “There never was a timer when the Govt. could not issue an edict reserving certain valuable trees, such as teak, sandal, black wood & other valuable trees, as royal trees, nor any time when the chieftain of the province would have hesitated to enclose a large area of the wasteland as a hunting preserve”. As the commercial interests of colonizers arosed for railway sleepers, fuel for stream engines, etc. followed by the passage of stringent acts or laws like Forest Act of 1865, revised Forest Act to increase state’s control over forests and finally the legal & administrative structure of the forest bureaucracy.

As voices of concern were evident “The provisions of this bill infringe the rights of poor people who live by daily labour whose feeling can be known to those whose opinions will be required on this bill who cannot assert their claims, the influential class who can

10. Arnold, D: Disease, Resistance and India’s Ecological frontier (1770 - 1947). In India’s Environmental History (2012) Pp – 143-159

11. Springate, O and Blaike Piers: Forests, people and power; The political ecology of reform in South Asia Pp – 27-40.

assert their claims in all ways open to them & spread agitation in the newspapers (Guha 2001). When the resistance started with the interference with customary rights of local people leading to the loss of livelihood. The colonial state argued that forest use is not local’s rights but a privilege given by raja.

Despite this; Indian Forests Act of 1878 led to expansion of commercial exploitation of forest and an unavoidable removal of livelihood and state’s reservation of ‘valuable’ forest tracts. Further the 1927 Forest Act, concerning the formation of boundaries, trespass and cutting & control of movement of forest product.

In 1970, the National Commission on Agriculture (NCA) was appointed to look into the issues related to forests. The report highlighted that forests occupied 23% India’s landmass, while contribution to CNP was less than 1% and mixed vegetation to be replaced by commercially valuable plantation crops, rendering to violation of local communities’ needs.

II. STICK AND STONE AS A MEANS OF REBELLION

The change or transition began with the rise of Chipko movement in Northern India as mentioned by ¹³Richard Grove in “Nature and the Orient”. The debate arose whether Chipko was Gandhian and non-violent, or represented revival of old traditions of protest and forest satyagraha, which were by no way non – violent. Anil Agarwal, Vandana Shiva, Jayanti Bandopadhyay located Chipko and its activists in alliance with Gandhian principle.

The spark in the protest was finally given in 1980 over government proposals for a new Indian Forest Act which was largely based on earlier colonial precedents. Shekhar Pathak, M. Gadgil and R. Guha of India while John Richards, E. Haynes, E. Flint of USA environmental historians, called as the ‘Golden Ageist – Subalternist’ and the ‘Statistical – Empiricist’ traditions has contributed significantly in environmental history.

¹⁴Guha asserted for example that in the pre-British period, these was hardly any interference with the customary use of forest and it’s resources. Later, on; Shekhar Pathak focused on the malicious burning of property and other kinds of resistance to the local forest department, evident with the onset of Chipko movement and interpretation of scientific forestry after 1864.

¹⁵N.C. Saxena has pointed out of late about the history of colonial forestry in India as it was not only of resistance, but of a collaboration. Further David Baker has established connections between forest satyagrahas and freedom struggle in 1930.

12. Powell, B: The land systems of British India: Being a manual of the Land-Tenures and of the systems of land – revenue administration prevalent in the several provinces.

13. Grove, R: Nature and the orient (1998) – Oxford University Press Pp – 1 to 17

14. Guha, R and Gadgil, M: This fissured land : An ecological history of India (Oxford India Paperbacks) Pp : 160 – 180

15. Saxena, N.C : Forests, people and profit : New equations in sustainability Natraj Publishers (1995)

According to ¹⁶Oliver Springate; these policies of forest reservation led to the several protests. Both widespread resistance (eg. breaches & arson) and outright rebellion across the country. In Chhotanagpur in 1893, Gudem Rampa in 1879-1880, Bastar in 1910; Midnapur in 1920, Uttarakhand in 1915 – 1920 & Adilabad in 1940. Eventually by 1920s & 1930s, protests against forest settlements and behaviour of forest personnel became intense, that it converged with the independent movement. Thus, leading to the establishment of Madras Forest Grievance Committee & forest panchayats & the van panchayats in Kumaon & British. Garhwal on the

suggestion of the Kumaon forest grievance committee making large part of forest reserve & restoration of people's rights and actions to reduce political agitation.

¹⁷Ranjit Guha in "Dominance without hegemony : History and power in colonial India" showcased how colonialism is endowed with power or hegemony on one hand and uses the same to make resistance disappear from the political history of India under British rule on the other hand.

The indigo rebellion and the Deccan Riots were dismissed by him as peasant uprising of the traditional types which was alike using "Sticks and stones" to protest against the problem and "Scufflings produced by religious and agrarian agitations" which do not qualify as political either because it arose in simple societies with an inborn capacity to revolt or because they were based on local grievances and aspirations and dependent on local leadership which can be traced back to an archaic period.

'Uttarakhand' means 'a piece of the north'. The region to the northern most part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. This is a part of central Himalayan mountain system.

Uttarakhand ranges between 28^o 44' and 31^o 28' and 77^o 35' 81^o 5' east. In the north it shares it's boundary with Tibetan China along with the Himalayas, in the east river Kali Ganga as a boundary between Uttarakhand and Nepal. While in the west with state of Himachal Pradesh and in south plains of Uttar Pradesh. It's further divided into two sub-regions : Garhwal & Kumaon,

The current ecological problems in this region has a long history. For many centuries development, has brought ecological changes in this region, which has led to various forms of protest like Chipko, etc.

British region in this area, the self – sufficiency was destroyed to a considerable extent and it disturbed the ancient form of livelihood when Britishers gained an opportunity to exploit. This exploitation was in the name of development. The British found trees of these mountain slopes, the deodar appropriate for railway sleepers and timber wood but were slow growing & difficult to propagate, oak also had economical & ecological significance. Various qualities of oak led to severe tensions with commercial exploiters who used oak timber for building material and it's usage in furniture business. Gradually; for commercial purpose there was a change from oak to chir pine cultivation. Every year the flood and other ecological problems were aggravating.

These precedents led to the consequence in the form of Chipko movement in 1974. In 1977 all Chipko activist and intellectuals like D.D. Pant appealed, "The swan song of chir pine trees" since they demanded rest to the pines due to deep cuts for resin tapping. But government did not pay heed to these ecological problems except the illiterate local women of Tehri Garhwal, who first bandaged the wounded pines and later on pulled iron to extract the resin. Women spearheaded the movement against these colonizers. Women opposed felling of trees auctioned to the contractors. Women thus tied sacred thread around the trees marked for felling & pledged to save them:-

Thus, scientific forestry was introduced and people were taught about this so the harmful impact of deforestation in the form of soil erosion was evident. The forest officer remarked, what does the forest bear? Resin, timber and forest exchange. But village women shows their involvement with nature and ecological awareness. As they answered soil, water and pure air are the things which forest bear and are basis of our life.

III. CONCLUSION:

In this article, I explored the following questions (a) how the forest policy and acts led to the control over forest region. (b) how resistance to the colonial power took place during period under consideration. The first section dealt with the introduction of Forest act of 1865 by the Britishers which divided the forests into reserved, protected and community forests. With this alienation of rights of the local people and augmentation of control over forests in the form of commercial or scientific forestry which led to ecological problems. The second section showcased the method of protest or rebellion used against colonial powers. The comparison is drawn between archaic method of stone and stick while modern form of rebellion on the other side. Uttarakhand region also witnessed the same in response to colonial forest policies.

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