

Whose Forest? Tussle Over Forest Land Between the Coloniser and The Colonised in British India



Dr. Subhasri Ghosh

Faculty

Department of History

Asutosh College

subhasri.ghosh@asutoshcollege.in

This write-up seeks to explore, from a historical perspective, various environmental movements during the colonial period, collectively identified as the 'forest movements.' While forests were the lifeline of hundreds of people, the British administration in a bid to establish its hegemony, tightened its grip over the forest areas in order to deprive and dispossess the dependent population, especially the rural communities, of their lives and livelihood. Termed as 'ecological imperialism' by Alfred Crosby, the British stranglehold resulted in conflicts and tussles between the coloniser and the colonised.

Commercialisation of agriculture, one of the key components of colonial economic policy from the second half of the nineteenth century, not only led to de-peasantisation, but spelt doom for other segments of the rural community, since market-oriented agricultural production required expansion of land under cultivation for which forests were considered as impediments. Additional pressure of increased land revenue further heightened the woes of the agricultural community as a result of which they were perpetually in search of new lands. Other factors which further led to the impounding and encroaching on forest lands by the colonial state was the demand for teak for ship-building required for the royal navy. In fact commercial logging speeded up from the late nineteenth century with the introduction of railways. European and indigenous private contractors fully utilised the

opportunity—from railway sleepers to fuel, wood remained the essential pre-requisite. Deforestation and expansion of railways became co-terminus. From a meagre 1349 Km in 1860 to a mammoth 51658 Km by 1910, as railway lines crisscrossed across the length and breadth of India, the demand for railway sleepers increased proportionately leading to a massive felling of teak, sal and deodar.

Forests thus became prized areas for the colonial state which increasingly penetrated into the forest lands, thereby unsettling the lives of the rural communities. Shifting cultivation led to widespread denudation which would eat away into the profit motives of the administration. In the given situation, 'protection' of forest land for 'protection' of their interests guided the state. The brunt of it was faced by the forest-dependent indigenous communities. The Imperial Forest Department was set up in 1864 with the German forest officer Dietrich Brandis helming it. A special executive post of forest officer was created and government's control over larger tracts of woodlands was established. This paved the way for the exclusion of rural forest-users and shifting-cultivators from the forests. The crystallisation of the government's control over forest lands was reflected in a series of Forest Acts, the first of which was passed in 1865—signalling the state's monopoly over forest lands. The Act of 1865, empowered several state governments to declare certain areas as 'state forests.'

The chosen areas were those which were primarily required for railway supplies. Though the Act did not directly abolish the customary rights of the indigenous communities, that the state had ulterior motives became clear when in March 1868, sal, teak were declared protected species in the Central Provinces. The passing of the Indian Forest Act in 1878, sealed the state's unassailable rights over forest lands in complete disregard of the customary rights of use by the rural communities. By this Act, the forests were categorised into three—reserve forests, protected forests and village forests. In the first instance, the state had monopoly rights over forest lands, whereas in the second instance, though the rights of other users were formally recognised, state's control was strictly maintained by outlining detailed provisions for the reservation of particular tree species as and when they became commercially valuable, and for closing the forest whenever required to grazing and fuel-wood collection.

The Acts, thus, ruined the pastoral and nomadic communities, as well as hunter-gatherers and those dependent on shifting cultivation. In fact, the colonial administration subsequently tried to alter the very life-pattern of the indigenous people by forcing them to take up sedentary agriculture in a bid to wean them away from shifting cultivation. Colonial state's redefinition of property rights brought large tracts of cultivable waste under the control of Forest Department and became a key factor in the colonization of the land. The control and power of colonial bureaucracy also strengthened agrestic serfdom and practice of begar (unpaid free labour) in many areas inhabited by tribal communities. Associated with increasing penetration of market forces was intrusion of indigenous capital (merchant-cum-usurer) into forest areas. The settlers from plains entered areas inhabited by tribal groups secured by proprietary rights and forms of debt-recovery alien to such indigenous communities. As a result of all these social and economic changes, conflicts and confrontations over forest and

pasture lands, over the exercise of customary rights by local social groups became frequent.

Birsa Munda's Ulgulan, through which he sought to establish the rights of the indigenous people over the resources being snatched away from them, is a well-catalogued event. Less known are the revolts of the Naikda forest tribe in Gujarat, which attacked police stations in 1868 in a bid to restore their privileges or the Kacha Nagas of Cachar in 1882. The hills of the Godaveri river area were rocked by the Rampa rebellion in 1879 which at its height affected nearly 5000 square miles. As we move into the twentieth century, tribal rebellions fighting for their customary rights spread to distant lands like that of Assam. The revolt of Songram Sangma in 1906 is another little known and less-researched event in the annals of anti-colonial resistance movements. In the Jagdalpur region, the uprising of 1910 against the banning of shifting cultivations, led to widespread unrest where the rebels disrupted communications and set afire police stations and forest outposts—symbols of colonial hegemony. The Bhil community of Rajasthan in 1913 tried to wrest their rights of shifting cultivation by trying to establish a Bhil raj as opposed to the British Raj, and could only be dispersed after several rounds of firing.

From the 1920s, the forest movements came to be deeply inspired by the Gandhian ideal of satyagraha. Although operating outside the Gandhian fold and having a character of its own, these movements, drew heavily from the Gandhian philosophy. Case in point forest satyagraha of Rayachoti taluka of Cuddapah and Palnad taluka of Guntur in modern-day Andhra Pradesh during the Non-Cooperation movement (1920-22). The tribals resumed their age-old practice of sending cattle to the forests without paying grazing fees, some of the forest villages in Palnad proclaimed Swaraj and attacked police stations. In August 1922, the Santhals of the Mayurbhanj area of Orissa, started asserting their traditional rights to use the forest land and to

fish in the ponds. Similar trends were witnessed during the Civil Disobedience movement (1930-31). In Maharashtra, Central Provinces and Karnatak, forest satyagrahas became the most dominant form of civil disobedience. Violations of forest laws were reported from Sangamner in Ahmednagar, Bagalan in Nasik and several places in Satara district. However, what deeply impacted the psyche of the locals was the revolt of Ganjan Korku in Madhya Pradesh. A group of Gond and Korku tribals started a procession under the leadership of Seth Deepchand on 1 August 1930 in Chikhlar Reserve Forest. With the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of the tribals, the onus of hoisting the banner of revolt fell on Ganjan Korku. The police faced stiff opposition and had to resort to lathi-charge and firing. Not to bow down before the brutality, the tribals under Korku, stepped up their agitation so much so that the local officials had to requisition assistance from

the neighbouring police stations to suppress the indomitable spirit of the rebels.

Thus the British attempt to upset the traditional mores of the tribal society by framing policies to serve their own interests did not go unchallenged. Although these rebellions were confined to specific regions and suffered from certain weaknesses, namely in terms of building up an effective leadership barring a few individuals, the very fact that these communities took on the colonial machinery head-on with limited resources like bows and arrows, speak volumes of their grit and valour. Mainstream historiography is somewhat reticent about these movements which had an independent character of their own. However, whatever little information have filtered in from the official documents, prove that even on a limited scale these movements did strike fear in the hearts of the local officials. Therein lay their contributions in the wider anti-colonial struggle.