South India Journal of Social Sciences, September'24, Vol. 22 - No. 3
ISSN : 0972-8945 (Print) | 3048-6165 (Online)

COLONIAL EXPLOITATION AND BEYOND: REVISITING INDIAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

Environmental history as a field of historical research originated in the United States in the early 1970s. It was the outcome of a series of environmental movements. Environmental historians played an important role in these protests. Around the world, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed powerful grassroots-level environmental movements. They demanded that the government to preserve biodiversity. In India, the late twentieth century saw a series of environmental movements and protests.Environmental movements were aimed at the protection of forests and other natural resources. These protests were against the country's forest policies. The post-colonial period witnessed certain restrictions on indigenous tribal and peasant communities in terms of accessing forest resources. This period also witnessed movements against the government's construction of hydroelectric projects. This scenario provided an opportunity to explore India's environmental history. Till then, environmental history formed part of agrarian history. This new genre mostly dealt with themes like colonial forest policy, ecological problems, and pre-colonial property rights. Environmental historiography in the initial phase mostly dealt with colonialism and its impact on the ecology of India. Colonialism left a profound imprint on India's environment, ranging from deforestation and resource extraction to the introduction of new agricultural practices. MichaelMann extensively studied the ecological changes in Ganga- Yamuna doab during the 19th century. M.S.S.Pandian studied the transformation of the agrarian sector in southern Travancore in the later part of the nineteenth century. These studies focused on the negative impact of colonial rule in India. The themes of forest policy, deforestation, and ecological destruction formed the basis of studies in environmental history.The history of ecological changes brought about by colonial powers is no longer sufficient for the historiography of Indian ecological history; it has progressed beyond. It now incorporates analysing the socio-political changes, power structures, and indigenous responses. The thrust areas of interest now include material, cultural, intellectual, and policy-related environmental histories.

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COLONIAL DISCOURSE ON INDIAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY:

Imperial historians had tried to portray the British era as one which ended uncontrolled deforestation in India[1]. Dietrich Brand is, the first Inspector General who served in the British Indian forest department between 1864 and 1883, wrote 'Indian Forestry[2]. His career in India marked the publishing of many forest reports and papers. He helped to establish the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun[3]. His years in India marked the beginning of state forestry. Ramchandra Guha opines that when compared to other foresters in British India, Brand is differed in his opinion about forest management[4]. The general view among British Foresters was that scientific management of forests was effective, and the traditional use by the village communities in India was considered wasteful, short-sighted and not systematic. Brand is was also a keen supporter of scientific forestry. However, he appreciated conservation practices, particularly the preservation of flora and fauna in the sacred groves across India. He says that in many areas, woodlands were carefully protected. Brand is also praised Indian princes for protecting forest reserves, particularly the Rajput kings of Rajasthan, for preserving hunting grounds, which ensured hunting and a limited timber supply and fodder[5].

Wilhelm Schlich followed Brandis as the Inspector General of Forests. He worked initially as a forest conservator in the Punjab province. He played an important role in introducing working plans for systematic forest management[6]. Schlich's 'A Manual of Forestry' provides information about the colonial forestry community in India. It was also an important guidebook for many aspiring forest service officers. Schlich also taught many students forest service exams in India. The publication of Schlich's work marked the mechanisation of activities of the forest department in British India. Schlich says that forests are important for the production of timber and other minor forest products; at the same time, they also play an important role in regulating the climate. Schlich was a German forester. Like other German foresters of his time, he was influenced by George Perkin Marsh's ideas. Marsh was an important environmentalist of the 19th century. Marsh's work Man and Nature exposed the dangers of deforestation and climate change to the world. Marsh advocated human control and custody of the environment. This human custodianship of nature formed the basis of environmental ideas in colonial India.

Berthold Ribbentrop served as the Inspector General of Forests in India for fifteen years. He published his work Forestry in British India'in 1900.Ribbentrop followed views similar to those of his predecessors, such as Brandis and Schlich. He argued that introducing scientific forestry marked an end to the destruction of Indian forests[7]. He writes that the destruction of forests in the earlier period had a deteriorating effect on the climate of India,

which can be inferred from the existence of several deserted Indian villages that were once heavily populated.

E.P.Stebbing,who succeeded Ribbentrop as Inspector General of Forests, wrote a voluminous work titled 'The Forests of India'. The work provides a broad framework of colonial forest policy. Stebbing opines that introducing forest policy was an important achievement of the colonial government. The first volume of his work deals with a general sketch of the geography of the country and its early history. He traces the forest history of the country,the pre-colonial regimes and their policies, which he says destroyed natural resources.

Furthermore, he criticises Indian rulers who destroyed timber resources for trade purposes. He believes India's forests were barely a fraction of what they used to be when the British took over the country. In their works, Stebbing and Ribbentrop use the phrase "wholescale destruction of forests" to argue that how pre-colonial states treated forests led to environmental damage and destruction. Guha and Gadgil refuted these claims by pointing out that the destruction of forests in pre-colonial India was quite restricted. In contrast, the devastation of forests peaked during colonial rule. They contended that colonialism was the catalyst for a turning point in the ecological history of India.

POST-COLONIAL DISCOURSE ON INDIAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY :

In Green Imperialism, Richard Grove discusses the development of environmental concerns among East India Company officials from the 15thcentury to the 19th century. Grove specifically studied British colonial possessions in the Eastern Caribbean, South Atlantic and India[8]. Grove says that the development of environmental consciousness and conservation practices started in British India due to the efforts of East India Company officials. From the late 18th century, Scottish-trained surgeons began to realise the consequences of resource exploitation in colonies for short-term imperial goals. Grove argues that these EIC surgeons helped critically analyse the process of ecological change in colonies and pressurised the government to introduce conservation programs. For example, William Roxburgh, an EIC surgeon, played a vital role in forming a Botanical garden in the Madras presidency. The influence of European scientific ideas was visible. Many provinces and princely states started scientific experiments by establishing botanical gardens. According to Grove, this earlier colonial conservancy was very complex yet innovative[9]. Grove considered the commitment of these EIC officials significant.He also opines that state control of forests existed in pre-colonial times specifically for safeguarding timber for shipbuilding. The misuse of timber resources and difficulty obtaining timber during the Anglo-French wars led to British interference in Indian forests. Grove says that though the British state and traders benefited from the timber trade, concerns about the exhaustion

of forests and the need for their preservation arose among EIC officials.

In their work 'This fissured land: An Ecological History of India', Guha and Gadgil argued that 'despite the grave caste and class inequalities, pre-colonial Indian society had considerable coherence and stability[10]. Grove rejected this concept of ecological harmony in pre-colonial India.He says significant forest destruction had already happened in the pre-colonial period, and the colonial period followed this trend. Mahesh Rangarajan rejects Grove's argument in his works. He says that the various economic demands of the British Empire determined forest policies in colonial India. He also says there was no large-scale ecological collapse or conflict over environmental issues in the pre-colonial period.

Guha also argues about indigenous communities in pre-colonial India, who enjoyed unrestricted use of forest and forest resources. The indigenous communities had access to forest products except for some medicinal plants. Their dependence on forests also reflected specific cultural and religious mechanisms. The worship of sacred trees like pipal, preservation of sacred groves and other customs and rituals of people were intertwined with nature. In Garhwal, before British rule, the wastelands did not attract attention from the rulers. The indigenous rulers imposed a nominal tax on forest products, including medicinal plants, when they were exported. However, the forest resources utilised by the local population were not considered for taxation.

Similarly, in Madras, traditional communities possessed all forests within their boundaries. Therefore, the intrusion of the colonial government disrupted the activities of tribal and peasant communities[11]. Guha agrees with Rangarajan that colonial forest policies resulted from the British Empire's needs. The effective legislation of colonial policies required the implementation of laws which would curb the previously unrestricted access that the rural population had enjoyed. The Indian Forest Act 1865 was the first to establish a state monopoly. This was hastily drafted. The objective was to assert the state's ownership of the forest areas, which must be done promptly. This action also caused dissatisfaction among some members of the Indian ranks. Consequently, this led to an extensive discussion that ultimately resulted in the creation of the 1878 Act. The legislation established three separate categories of forests: (i) 'Reserved forests' including valuable forest tracts,(ii) 'Protected forests' areas that are under the authority of the state, and (iii) 'Village forests' for the use of the population. Ultimately, the new legislation expanded the punitive penalties under the jurisdiction of the forest administration.

Britain had faced immense deforestation by the 19th century. Bythe 1860s, Britain has emerged as a world leader in deforestation. Forests in India, Ireland, and South Africa were destroyed for timber. The shortage of wood for shipbuilding caused severe problems

in Britain[12]. Britain, therefore, turned its attention toward its colonies in the East for good quality wood. By the second half of the 19th century, the railway network's expansion hastened the forest destruction process. British officials' writings mentioned the urgent timber requirement for railway sleepers. Lord Dalhousie formed the forest department to satisfy the enormous demand for wood[13]. Guha opines that the British government created the Forest Department to control forest felling because the expansion of railways in the initial stage led to the clearing of accessible forests in many parts of the country[14]. Colonial forest management was to expand political hegemony as these policies helped the British acquire control over Indian forest resources and wildlife[15].

Mahesh Rangarajan also questions Guha and Gadgil's argument on ecological equilibrium in pre-colonial India. He says that though certain customary practices existed in pre-colonial India, such as preserving sacred groves and worshipping sacred trees, there is significant evidence of forest clearance in the pre-colonial period. The regime of the Delhi Sultans witnessed massive clearing of forests. During Muhammed Bin Tughlaq's reign, peasants were rewarded for clearing forest cover for agriculture. Forest clearance also brought revenue to rulers as rebels, robbers, and peasants who fled without paying taxes sought refuge in the forest. For instance, Jahangir, the Mughal Emperor, knew villagers near Agra evaded taxes by staying in dense woods near the Yamuna River. Forests became an essential target to expand political and military power. Wood-cutters accompanied the Mughal army to clear lands which were given to zamindars. Thus, there was a close connection between deforestation and army expansion.

The relationship between Indian states and forests was not hostile during the pre-colonial period. State control of forests was limited to the monopoly on specific flora and fauna. Rangarajan says the immediate pre-British period intrusion into forest resources was limited but significant. However, the pre-colonial period was better compared to the colonial period. Because during colonial times, substantial changes occurred in the use of forest and forest resources.

CONCLUSION:

Guha says the writing of environmental history is in its infancy in India, but the studies that have appeared so far are interesting[16]. The environmental movements of the 1970s influenced historical enquiry into the colonial attitude towards the Indian environment. Historians began to analyse colonial policies and restrictions on the local rights of communities. These led to new possibilities for the field of environmental history. Yet the study of India's environmental history remains a subject of continuous debates and varied perspectives, characterised by its contentious and dynamic nature. As researchers explore

the intricacies of the subject, they uncover new viewpoints and events that influence how we think of India's ecological past and what it means for the future. This ongoing discussion encourages additional investigation and reflection, ensuring that the debate on India's environmental past stays dynamic and pertinent in tackling current ecological concerns.

Endnotes

Abbreviations and Acronyms

East India Company (EIC)

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