

# British Forest Laws in India: Disruption of Ecological Balance, Livelihoods, Traditions and Customs

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyze the British Forest Policy in Colonial India and its impacts comprehensively. Indian States' minimal intrusion into Forests and its inhabitants was breached by the British to the utmost exploitation of Forest Resources as well as its people. The time period of the study includes 19th and 20th century colonial India with special focus on Central India. The Study Design and Methodology used includes reading and analyzing various Primary and Secondary Sources including books, research papers, seminars, National Archives Reports, GIS mapping etc. By all the analysis, one can formulate the Results as such that the British because of their own considerations like Timber procurement and increasing land revenue, started controlling forest resources by prohibiting or banning traditional forest practices by the local people like hunting, shifting cultivation or grazing of cattle by bringing out legislations like The Indian Forest Acts. All these changes led to tempering with Forests like growing Sal, Teak and Deodar instead of local trees, clearing forests for cultivation or developing hunting as a Sport added to the Environmental, Economic and Social woes for Indians although they reaped humongous benefits for the British. The locals tried to protest in various ways but they were either crushed or placated with minimal reforms and if still not succumbed then were branded as Criminal Tribes under draconian Act of Criminal Tribes Act. Thus the colonial State tried to maintain its hegemony by using all means.

*Keywords: Agrisilviculture; ecological balance; hunting-gathering; indigenous; livelihood; sandalwood; wildlife protection etc.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indian culture has always been integrally connected to the forest ecosystem as the forest going and forest dwelling culture of *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa* indicate this very clearly. So it was a home for many communities and indigenous people with community ownership as form of owning the forest resources. So the State in Ancient times tried not to exclude the people from Forest management and their livelihood. The State occasionally interfered and tried to exert monopoly over some of the resources or products like over Teak by the Mauryan State. Later after the 8th century since the invasion of Arabs, the State intrusion increased furthermore and loans were given to increase arable land by cutting down the Forests. Regional kingdoms of that period also tried to monopolize forests for

strategic, military and commercial reasons like Marathas for building of forts or monopoly of commercially rich Sandalwood forests by Tipu Sultan. But none of them did so at the expense of community rights or breaching the subsistence ethics.

With the advent of the British and their search for forest resources in order to provide timber for their ships, furniture, navy and the Railways, the Indian Forests seemed a profitable proposition to them. This led to large scale clearing of forests and pace of deforestation was directly proportional to laying of Railway lines in Southern India. Also only trees which were useful for providing good quality timber were promoted like Teak, Sal and Deodar (hardly useful for indigenous people) and others were cut down which were more useful for indigenous

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communities. However the Forest dwellers and their community rights were an obstruction in British commercial interests. So they first tried to do away with legislation by bringing out the Indian Forests Act, 1878 which classified forests into three parts out of which in Reserved and Protected Forests, the Forest dwellers rights were almost prohibited. Apart from legislation, many activities like Hunting-Gathering, Shifting Cultivation and many allied activities of settled agriculturists like grazing of animals. Were either restricted or prohibited. Ironically after banning the hunting by forest dwellers, British Officials engaged in *Shikar* themselves which led to killing of large numbers of animals especially the game species like Tigers and Elephants.

The British brought individualism instead of communal rights in Forests. After removing all these obstructions, the British forest administration saw a huge rise in the surplus from forests. Also large Forest products were imported to Britain for supporting nascent British Industry. Indian timber saved the British navy from many impending disasters like Napoleonic wars.

After filling up the British exchequer, the Forest laws had many deleterious effects upon Indians. Shifting cultivators were forced to sedentary agriculture which was met with resistance from several communities like Baigas. Succumbing to their pressure, the British in some areas left a small area for shifting cultivation like *Baiga Chak*. But ultimately these communities were moved to sedentary agriculture as it was too meager an area to sustain their large populations. With this traditional wisdom related to forests was also lost. Similarly, Hunter-Gatherers after being deprived of their livelihood turned to banditry in many regions like the *Chenchus* of Hyderabad. To deal with this the British came up with the draconian Thuggee Act and Criminal Tribes Act which demonized, exploited and dehumanized the innocent indigenous dwellers.

## 2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to depict the British Forest Policy in totality and its impacts on Indian socio-economic and Ecological Fabric. It shows how the Environmental balance was unestablished, the economical subsistence ethics were breached, many artisans' livelihood were snatched away and Social fabric of traditional forest dwellers were tempered with which led them to revolt.

### 2.1 Objectives of the Research

The following are some objectives of the study on "British Forest Laws in India: Disruption of Ecological Balance, Livelihoods, Traditions and Customs". These are-

1. To examine the historical aspects of the Forests in the Indian Subcontinent.
2. To study the Changes brought in administration of Forests during the Colonial period.
3. To observe the Economic impacts of Colonial Forest Policy on various stakeholders.
4. To assess the Environmental and Ecological dimensions of management of forests by the British.
5. To study the social changes and Indigenous People's reaction to Colonial Forest Laws.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The research is based on primary and secondary sources and pertinent data have been gathered from a variety of sources. In order to be acknowledged in related topics, the research uses this method to search through various articles, texts, booklets, handouts, seminar presentations, newspapers, national & international research articles, websites, in conducting this research, the authors adopted the doctrinal approach and as such, the research completely relied on consultations of academic materials written on the subject area. The research method used historical and analytical British forest laws in India: disruption of ecological balance, livelihoods, traditions and customs on reports and archives data. The doctrinal approach is used in conducting the research and as such, the research completely relied on consultations of academic materials written on the subject area. By doing so, the research concerned with identifying the existing gaps and ensuring the research towards filling the identified gaps.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged after elaboration and refinement of categories have been analyzed in detail below.

### 4.1 Historical Background of Forests in India

The country which has an age-old tradition of *Vanprastha* (going to forests) and *Sanyasa* (asceticism) where after doing their household duties male householders retired to the forest, shows how intimately its culture was intertwined and knitted with forests. Even the epics like

Ramayana and Mahabharata with the chapters like *Vanavasa* of Lord Rama and Pandavas shows the indispensability of forests for common as well as royal people and an alternate but parallel abode for many people. It was aboriginal people's home as well as a source of livelihood which was based on hunting and gathering. Palaeobotanical Evidences suggest that India had very dense forests since the Paleolithic Era. Paleolithic and Mesolithic man lived in forests only but he did not cut the trees. However Neolithic man started felling the trees for constructing houses and other purposes like food, fodder, fuel-wood and even cosmetics. But they had hardly any adverse effect on Forest Wealth. Later when civilizations built, the wholesomeness and interdependency with forests was never broken.

According to Kulkarni [1] people of those days had a good knowledge about forests and uses of forest products. They were especially concerned about the protection and conservation of natural resources. This knowledge developed year after year through their practical experiences. During the empire building phases like Mauryas (321-184BC) and Guptas (280-550A.D.) although state tried to control and monopolize some resources of the forests like teak by emperor Ashoka but State did not do so at the exclusion of indigenous forest dwellers. Commercial and strategic value of forests was realized without tempering with existing structure. From Arthashastra and Megasthenes Indica, it is found out that the emperors Maurya and Gupta used to collect revenue from timber and non-timber forest products. They even had a well organized Forest Department for management of forest and forest products [2].

In Arthashastra, legal classification of Forests has been given and three main classes of forests which have been named as:

1. Reserved Forests
2. Forests donated to eminent Brahmins
3. Forests for public use.

During the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal period many changes were introduced regarding the relationship between the State and the forests. Land was cleared for extending cultivation. Muhammad Bin Tughlaq gave taccavi loans to farmers for this purpose and incentives in taxation were also given. Also during warfare jungles were cut to get to hidden armies and rebels. But one thing was clear that even during the Sultanate and Mughal periods, subsistence ethics was never breached. Forest dwellers and

Forests were little harmed e. g. Babur in Tuzuk-i-Baburi mentions very dense forests in Ganga-Yamuna Doab in which the rebel soldiers hid. But after Colonial rule there were no forests in that region.

Guha and Gadgi [3] have called the pre-colonial forest age in India as the Golden Age for ecology in the Indian Subcontinent. But Grove [4] criticized this pre-colonial golden age theory. He cites various instances of ecological disharmony and deforestation carried out by the State itself. He illustrated after 800 A.D. Onwards, control of the State was increasing over forests and forest resources which peaked in Mughal period and the successor states e.g. Maratha in order to increase revenue, build navy and forts deforested the forests of Western Ghats and introduced plantations. Similar steps were taken by Cochin and Travancore states. However amongst these disrupting activities some ecological harmony inducing activities were also seen like the Amirs of Sind started a forestation drive albeit to develop Shikargah (hunting reserves).

Mahesh Rangarajan [5] also opines in this pre-colonial ecological harmony debate and designates this period as one of "limited but significant state intrusion" because State control in pre-colonial era was limited to certain floral and faunal species or certain products and not the entire forests and their resources e.g. Tipu Sultan asserted his rights over Sandalwood trees which were commercially important. Or control was seen as necessary for strategic security like building and maintenance of forts or maintaining military might. Revenue considerations also sometimes led to extension of cultivation to forests but not in the jurisdiction of forest dwellers.

## 4.2 Changes in Colonial Period

Guha and Gadgil [3] have marked the colonial period as an ecological watershed. The British intervened with indigenous food systems and radically altered them. The basic changes introduced by British are:

1. Moving away from subsistence centric livelihood sustenance to commercial production.
2. Disruption of cohesion amongst Indigenous Communities and their Institutions and substituting it with Individualism.
3. Breaking down the system of limits on traditional use of resources because of the

development of markets as hubs for accessing the resources.

These Changes had deleterious impacts on Ecological Harmony of the subcontinent, Livelihood patterns of Traditional Forest Dwellers, Their Social Structure and overall subservience to the colonial administration and their caste counterparts. But what were the reasons for these changes by the colonial administration? In the 19th century large scale commercial lumbering was started in order to get timber for various needs like Navy, fuel in various sectors and later Railways for fulfilling domestic needs as well as to sustain the Mighty Colonial Empire. Gadgil and Guha (1992) have stated that by 1860 Britain had emerged as the "world leader" in deforestation destroying the forests of Ireland, S. Africa and some parts of the USA to provide for Farming, Shipbuilding and Iron Smelting. Since Britain had depleted its own oak reserves, it was in search of a permanent supply of timber for the Royal Navy.

India's huge wealth of forests provided this opportunity and Indian Timber almost saved England by providing worth 4,937,000 tonnes of wood per annum during Napoleonic invasion and later helping in the expansion of its maritime boundaries [6]. The above lines are corroborated by the fact that many teak forests in the period 1800-1830 were axed for the use in Bombay Marine in the Western Ghats. The introduction of plantations of Coffee in Southern India in the early 19th century and the plantations of tea in Bengal and Assam Hills further accelerated the deforestation.

Post 1850s this timber was being shifted to the ever expanding Railways, so use in Railway Sleepers and as fuel also before opening up of Raniganj Mines became the main cause of commercial logging especially in Southern India [7] has described the impact of Railways on South Indian forests especially in Melghat and Northern Arcot Hills. The speed of deforestation was directly proportional to the Railways expansion. But why were adverse impacts on South Indian Forests felt? Only three Indian timbers-Teak, Sal and Deodar were considered good sleepers of Railways. Since Sal and Teak forests were available near Railway lines in peninsular India, they were rapidly axed down. Subsequently Deodar Forests of Garhwal and Kumaon were also utilized.

Not only Timber was the main extraction from Forests, but Revenue orientation of Colonial Policy saw forests as hindrance in the expansion of settled agriculture. So, clearing up the forests

and starting fresh cultivation could remove this hindrance to some extent. Here the British drew upon their experience of clearing forest land for agriculture in Ireland and Scotland and took ecological warfare at the next level. After 1860, large scale expansion of cultivable land started in North India by clearing the forests. Beside, creating ecological disequilibrium, this disrupted the routine life of pastoral and nomadic communities and flipped their economic fortunes.

Thus for these reasons the British administration saw the forests as profitable enterprises and legislative measures are the best policy to exploit and annex as they make the black deeds look like white. In pursuance of this ideology, the British set up the Forest Department. Guha and Gadgil [3] see this as a qualitative shift in colonial perception of the strategic value of forests: commercial compulsion to safeguard forests needed legal mechanisms to enforce rules and claim monopoly on lands that were, for the most part, communally owned prior to the setting up of these rules.

While making rules for Forest regulation, how much control should be exerted was a matter of debate. So, three strands emerged among the bureaucrats of the British colonial empire regarding the questions of traditional property rights. These three strands were:

- A. **Annexationist:** (called by Gadgil and Guha) believed in the ideology that the State was the owner of all uncultivated land.
- B. **No State Intervention:** This strand favored the existing tradition of customary rights of use which were at that time exercised by rural communities. This ideology was held by the Forest Officials of Madras Government.
- C. **Intermediate Position:** It included the middle path of some control by the State and some by the communities themselves. This position was taken by Dietrich Brandis who was the Inspector-General of the forests and some other Officers.

With the passing of Indian Forest Act (1878), the question was clearly in the favor of the 'annexationists'. It divided Forests into three categories:

- A. **Reserved Forests:** designated for compact and valuable areas. A complete state control extinguished private rights.
- B. **Protected Forests:** These forests are also under the State control but the State's and other user's rights were written. However,

in these forests also, control of the colonial State was maintained strictly as there was a provision for the reservation of some specific species of trees whenever they became valuable commercially. When the commercial demand grew, many protected forests were converted into reserved forests.

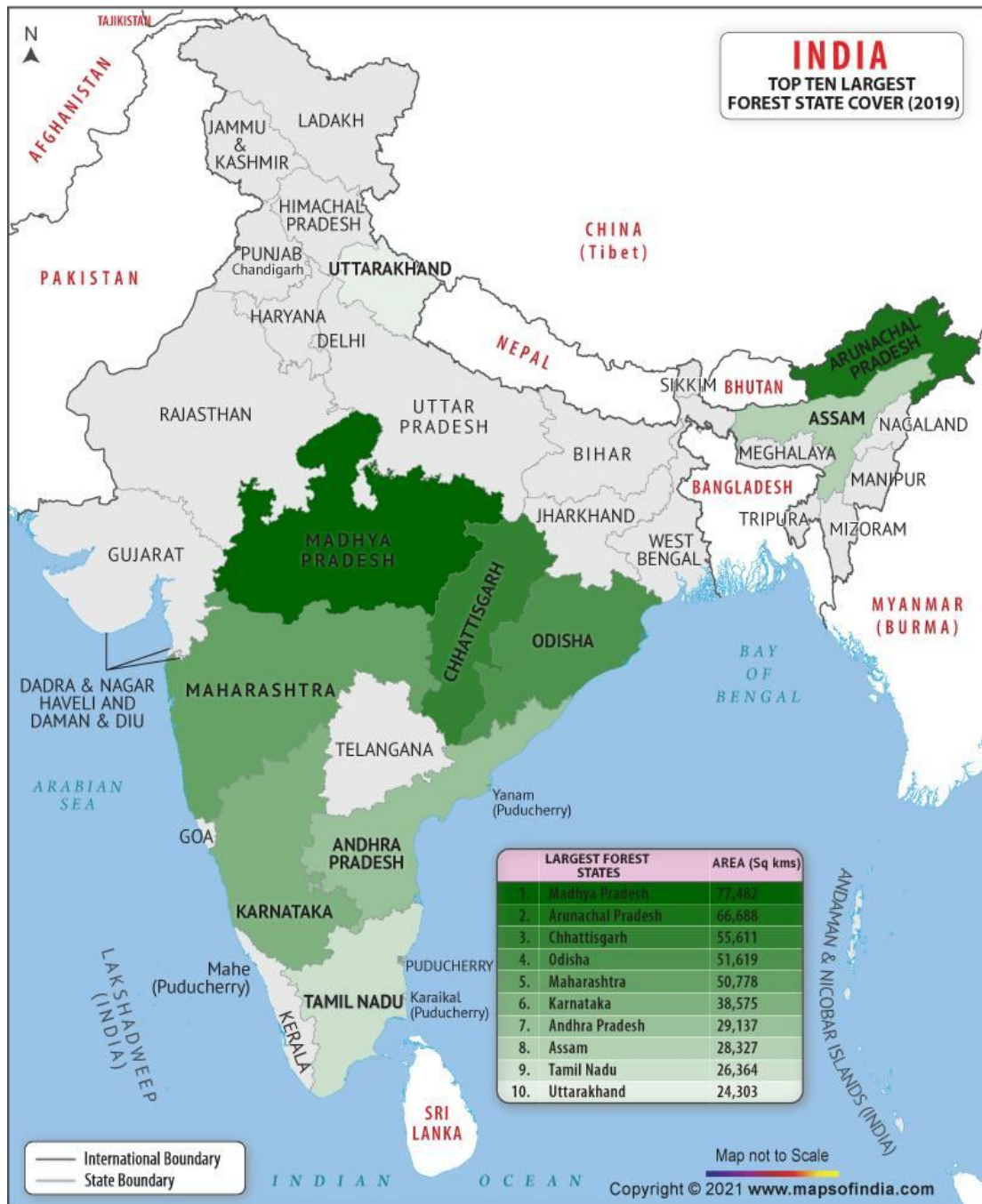
- C. **Village Forests:** These were the community owned forests. But this choice was scarcely exercised.

The 1878 Act increased the scope of sanctions available to the forest administration to control the transition and extraction of forest produce and to prescribe a detailed list of punishments for trespassing the Act. Protection of the forests was meant to increase timber productivity which could be achieved only by removing commercially non important trees and species. The Department of Forest differentiated between 'superior' and 'inferior' species for this purpose. To effectively maintain such 'multi-species' forests, axing the 'inferior' varieties and cultivating 'superior' varieties in the 'blanks' to increase the proportion of 'superior' species. The species which were

promoted by colonial administration-Pine, Cedar and Teak were of very little use to rural populations, while the species they replaced (like Oak) were used for fuel, fodder and small timber. With legislative control and changes, many restrictions were imposed upon the traditional forest dwellers and their activities as given below:

#### **A. Hunter-Gatherers**

They declined to extinction. The reservation of forests by the state adversely impacted the subsistence oriented activities of many hunting-gathering communities who had populations in just hundreds and calculation of their densities was in square miles per person instead of persons per square mile. Although it is very ironic that on one side hunter gatherers were restricted and prohibited, Hunting as a Sport (Shikaar) among British Officials saw a huge rise. An organized hunt was witnessed in which the white hunters or the Shikaris at all levels, starting from the Viceroys to the lower ranks of the British Indian Army, took part.



**Map 1. Current forest cover of India state wise per Sq KM**

*Data Source: Government Forest Reports, 2019, Maps of India*

**B. Restricting Shifting Cultivation**

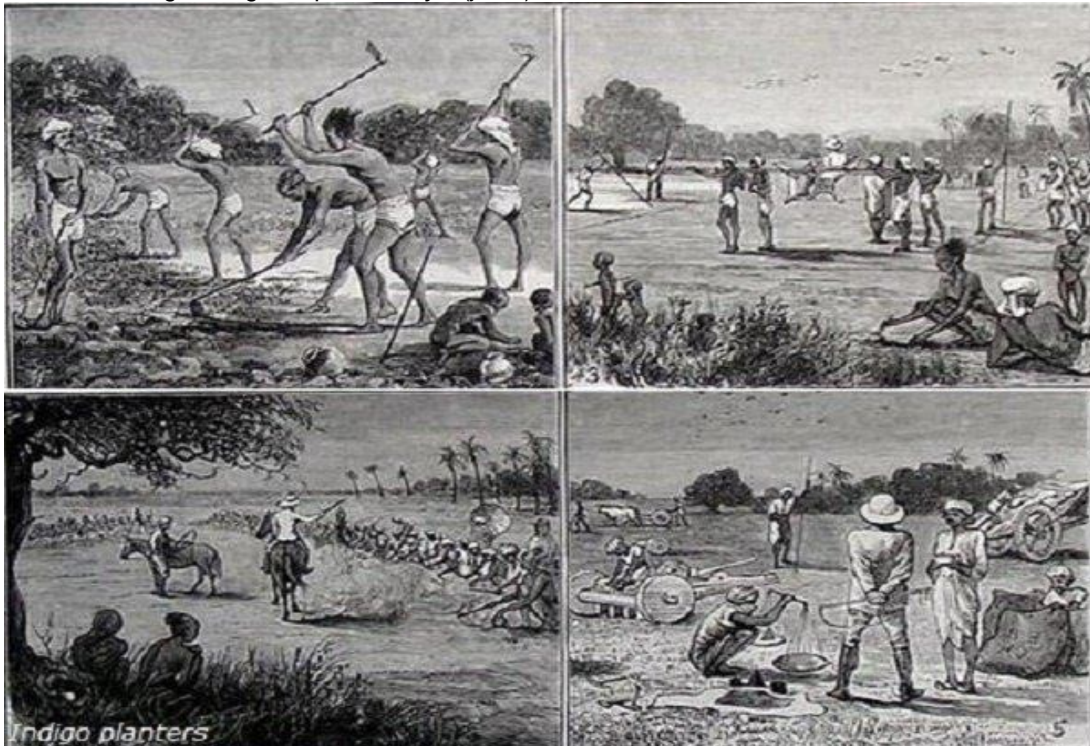
Known as ‘Jhum’ which was practiced in North-East India, Hilly and Forested Tracts and in the areas where plowing or settled cultivation was not always viable. Shifting Cultivation meant clearing the patches of forest lands and cultivating it by rotation. The plots are first burned and then cultivated for a few years and then they

are left fallow for a long period (almost twelve years or more) which allows soil to recover its lost nutrients and recoup from it. Colonial administrators viewed jhum as a very primitive and uneconomical form of agriculture if compared to the plough cultivation. Colonial administrators had influences of the European agrarian revolutions and the larger revenue generating propensities of intensive form of

cultivation as compared to extensive cultivation. So with this the Officials became more hostile to jhum when the commercialization of the forests became the order of the day. They held jhum as one of the most destructive of all practices for the forest and finding the reasons for this animosity was simple: Timber operations of the British competed with jhum for territorial control of forest.

Also jhum cultivated areas often contained the most valued timber species. So with all the reasons British tried to ban the Shifting cultivation but these attempts were met with tough resistance from the communities e.g. Baigas of Central Provinces when resisted-a British official commented that "it has been found quite impracticable, as well as hard and impolitic, to force the Baigas to give up their *dhya* (jhum)

cultivation and take to the plough". The British banned shifting *cultivation for two reasons*: They wanted to utilize the timber from the forests, and the shifting cultivation would have destroyed the timber. Secondly, shifting cultivation made it hard for the British to collect taxes and track tax collection from jhum cultivators because they settled in more than one place. Consequently, the government established Baiga Chak (reserve) in 1890 covering 23,920 Acres of forest, where it planned to confine all jhum cultivation. At last, the State found a novel way of pursuing commercial forestry without further alienating tribal cultivators by using the 'Taungya' method of agrisilviculture which was developed in Myanmar in the 19th century. Hum cultivators were allowed to grow food crops in the forest provided they grew timber trees alongside.



**Image 1. The British Policies with regard to Indian Agriculture**

*Sources: National Archives and Google images*

**C. Settled Cultivators and the State**

They were as much affected by forest regulations as jhum cultivators. They were also dependent on their natural habitats i.e. forests in various ways. An adequate forest cover was ecologically necessary to sustain cultivation, especially in mountainous tracts because terrace farming predominated there. Also Animal Husbandry was an important appendage to cultivation; the forest was a prime source of fodder in the form of grass and leaves. The forests also provided such

necessities as fuel, leaf manure and timber for construction and agricultural implements. Now with new 'legal' arrangements, the previously unlimited use rights were severely circumscribed.

**4.3 Economic Impacts of British Forest Laws**

The economic impacts of the forest laws are twofold: On one side it incurred huge profits to the British at the expense of indigenous

communities, some of which even had to do away with their source of livelihood.

**Benefits to British:** According to Ghoshal [8] in the Bengal Presidency alone, the surplus revenue from forests went up from about 2000-3000 Pound sterling in 1868 to more than 60,000 Pound sterling in 1939-1940. Throughout the country too, Forest administration generated surplus revenue consistently in the period from 1870 to 1925. So the administrative machinery was more than self-financed. This was made possible by raising the demands of the Urban Centres for fuel-wood, furniture and building timber materials. On the top of it, their unimpeded supply was ensured by improved transportation [6].

Also Forests were large import hubs to United Kingdom for majority of raw materials which gave boost to British industries like Caoutchouc, Gutta-percha, Resins, Oil of Turpentine, Pitch, Galls, Dye-Stuffs, Dye-Wood, Myrobalans etc. These imports were worth more than 11 million Pound sterling. Other than this, import of timber was a boon for the English navy and ship-building which saved it from many dangers including the Napoleonic Wars.

#### **4.4 Economic Catastrophe on Indian Communities**

##### **A. Shifting Cultivators and Hunter Gatherers**

They lost their subsistence means due to the limits imposed by the Forest Laws. It is not that they were opulent but they earned a decent livelihood which was foregone now pushing them into the cycles of poverty.

##### **B. Artisans:**

Forest control by the colonial led to the destruction of various indigenous Artisanal forms by curtailing the access to traditional raw materials sources e.g. Bamboo. The Bamboo was necessary for many activities like Construction of House, Furniture manufacturing, Weaving of Baskets, and making Musical Instruments and for providing Food and Fodder. Since the British discovered its use in paper making, villagers were denied its use and were exploited commercially. One of the affected communities was Baigas who supplemented their slash and burn agriculture with Bamboo weaving.

Another industry which got adversely affected by the Forest Laws was iron smelting by the tribe of Agarias of Central India. It was shown in Verrier Elwin's Study of Agariatribes. He showed that

there was a sharp fall in the number of operating furnaces due to high rates of taxation on furnaces and reduced charcoal supply. e.g. they declined in the duration 1909-1938 to 136 from 510. Although the peasants also preferred the ores of the Agaria Tribes which was soft and malleable but the changed conditions forced the Agariatribes out of this business virtually mainly because the improved communication made the traditionally smelted Iron uncompetitive to that of the imported British Iron.

The Tussar-Silk industry was also another negatively affected artisanal craft which depended upon gathering the wild cocoons from the forests. It witnessed almost steady decline throughout the large parts of the country in the late 19th century. A parallel case like this concerned about the decline in the local tanners and dyers in the villages who were also denied access to the important raw materials found in the forests.

#### **4.5 Environmental Impacts of British Forest Laws**

Environmental impacts of the forest laws were deleterious and multifold which included:

##### **A. Deforestation**

The most visible and sudden negative change perceived was the reckless cutting of forests which depleted the forests resources of the country on a large scale which changed to less than 30% of land area from more than 50% of the total land area of the country when the British came to India.

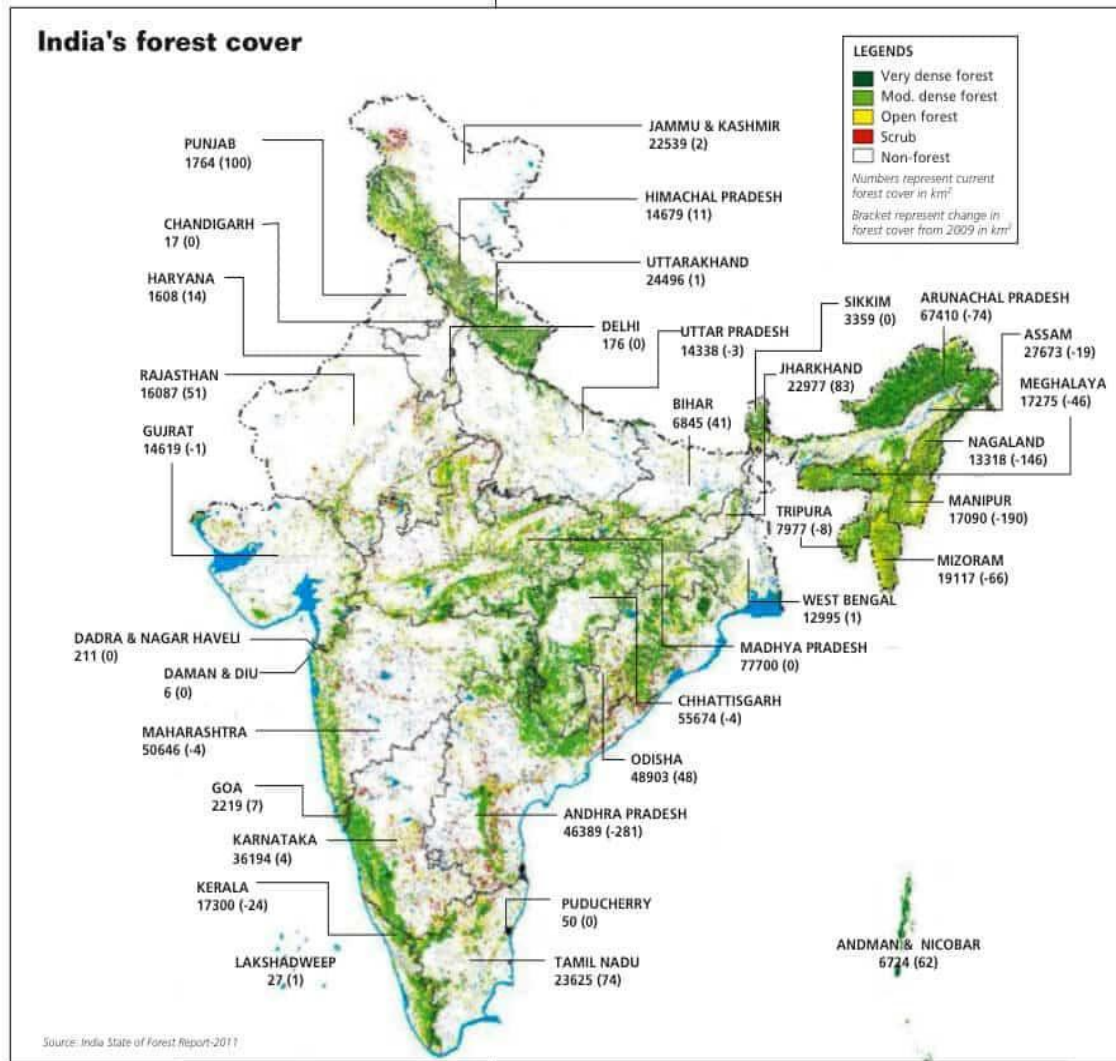
##### **B. Impact of Flora and fauna**

Since British banned hunter-gatherers but in place of them, they started organized Hunting i.e. *Shikaar* as a sport where mass killing of birds and animals was carried out led to their rapidly dwindling populations e.g. World records of killing several thousands of birds and animals were set by calling successive Viceroys, in the decade of late 19th century almost 400 Elephants were killed by a British planter in the Nilgiri Area [9]. Many Indian Kings tried to imitate the British e.g. 107 tigers were shot by the Maharaja of Gwalior in the early years of 20th century.

However, it is difficult to fathom the impact of such reckless hunting on faunal diversity of the country but its results were visible by the time India gained Independence which was reflected in continuously dwindling populations of genes

and species like the Elephant and the Tiger. That's why after Independence the Government had to bring many legislations to protect wildlife

like The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and Project Tiger, 1973 etc.



**Map 2. India's State Forest Density Covers in 2011 Report**

Data Source: Indian State Forest Report-2011, Government of India

**C. Other Connected Impacts**

Alarming large scales of deforestation led to frequent and sudden episodes of floods and droughts resulting in disturbances in the irrigation and food production systems which increased the fear of social upheavals and rebellions more and put the stability of the colonial rule in peril [10,11].

**4.6 Social Impact of Colonial Forest Laws and People's Reaction**

The British Forest Acts drew an artificial separation between agriculture and the forests.

The traditional rights of the aboriginal people were curtailed and the commercial property parameters of Europe were used to ascertain the usage of the Forests. Following this, Hunting-Gathering, Shifting Cultivation and Grazing were banned. Such changes in the use of forests had many adverse impacts on the lives of the villagers. Changes in many facets of their lives were brought which flipped their familiar world e.g. The reservation of forests by the State grew new species or only 'useful' species of the trees like pine, teak etc. in place of older species like oak, Terminalia etc. This change adversely affected the

ecological balance of people and snatched away from people their useful tree species as newer ones were of little use for them [12].

Many passionate efforts were made in the 1860s to take away the Baigas many areas of the Central Provinces from the Shifting cultivation. The demeaning of traditional methods of livelihood of indigenous forest people also meant discrediting the traditional knowledge system, indigenous wisdom and conservation methods about their environment e.g. The Forest Act of 1878 excluded a range of indigenous hunters especially the underprivileged groups belonging to low caste and tribal communities. In lack of many avenues for livelihood many groups turned

to banditry like the Chenchus of Kurnool did by frequently holding up pilgrims to the major Hindu temples of Srisaillam [13].

Although Chenchus had their way, other hunter gatherer communities were not so populous to resist the socio-economic changes ensuing the State Forest Control. Forceful Sedentarisation and loss of their homeland exposed their helplessness as outsiders made greater incursions into their unchallenged domain. Similarly, the Baigas of Central India were very famous for their hunting skills so much so that even the early British *Shikaari* depended on their knowledge and dexterity to hone their skills. But ultimately they succumbed to the stricter Forest laws and saw dramatic decline.



**Image 2. Impact on Wildlife of Colonial Forest Law in India**

*Data Sources: Field Survey during Research work in different Wildlife Reserves*

Social impacts of banning 'jhum' cultivation were no less dramatic. The serious trials to stop *jhum* began in the decade of 1860 in the Central Indian Provinces. In order to induce *Baigast* to the plough cultivation, their standing *jhum* crops were destroyed by an overtly passionate British administration. However Baigas did not give up the practice and instead ran away to the Princely States in the neighborhood. Sensing the rebellion, the government advised a policy of slowly moving away from ax cultivation as use of force on Baigas was both impracticable and difficult. So the government set up a Baiga Chak (reserve) to confine the *jhum* cultivators in the Chak itself. Although this policy was not quite successful as the Baigas continued their migration in the neighboring Princely States.

Baigas resisted in many ways like continuing *jhum* in the prohibited areas and not paying the taxes. They also tried to use the legal route by sending the petition to the British Government.

Although Baigas' resistance was nonviolent, in some areas the tribal resistance even took the form of violence and confrontation. This was particularly true for those areas where the commercialization of forest was accompanied by the penetration of non-tribal landlords and moneylenders i.e. the outside elements. The one example of this was resistance by the Saoratribesmen who were exploited both by the outsiders who penetrated in their area and the British. They revolted by entering into the State Reserved forests and clearing the land for

cultivation. In return for this, they were prepared for any punishment and when the male members were arrested, the women continued the cultivation. However, even the repeated arrests failed to stop Saoras from trying to establish their right.

A similar kind of effort was made by the tribes of Konda Dora and Koya in Rampa and Gudum Hills of present day Andhra Pradesh in the form of small rebellions called *fituris*. These repeated protests to continue practicing jhum had a significant impact on the government policy. So the State found the 'Taungya' method discussed above in the article as a viable option. However, ultimately the tribes were forced to settle to plough cultivation against the vagaries of the market forces and the state intervention. Wherever the tribes however tried to practice jhum within the *Chaks*, the disruption of ecological balance and the increase in their population led to a decline in the cycle of shifting cultivation.

Despite all the efforts some tribes never gave up to the State exploitation and continued their struggle in whatever way possible. In order to deal with such tribes, the British State came up with the draconian Criminal Tribes Act, 1871. Under this Act, British declared some tribal groups as Criminal by nature who could not be mended. Their Human Rights, Forest Rights and Customs were severely curtailed and they were forced to do Begar or forced labor in Forest Areas which used to be their land.

#### **4.7 Impacts of British Forest Policy**

The effects of colonial forestry are extensive. It had a largely negative effect, save from benefiting the British and their allies. It destroyed the ecosystem irreversibly, endangered the way of life for people who relied on forests for their subsistence, and established the standard for post-independence forest management in India, ensuring its sneaky continuation.

The Forest Department earned Rs. 5.67 million in the two years between 1924 and 1925 (about Rs. 28.35 million annually) compared to Rs. 5.6 million in the five years between 1869 and 1874 (or Rs. 1.12 million annually). The excess or profit increased from Rs. 1.7 million in the five years between 1869 and 1874 (about Rs. 0.34 million annually) to Rs. 21.3 million in the two years between 1924 and 1925 (almost Rs. 10.65 million annually). Annual revenues increased between 1869 and 1925.

Railway development decimated the teak and sal woods of the Indian peninsula to the point where it became necessary to tap the deodar forests of northern India. "The Forests and Gardens of South India" by Cleghorn described the formerly timber-crowned Melghat and North Arcot Hills as nearly bare. After 1864, the deodar forests of the Sutlej river quickly disappeared, leaving the Jumna valley with only a little remnant of these woodlands. The best deodar was located in the northwestern Himalayas in the Tehri Garhwal forest. The colonial state's spies quickly took advantage of this, as did the raja himself in subsequent years. This brought about a shift in the nature of the connections between the monarch and the subjects. Because of this, Tehri Garhwal has experienced irregular "dhandaks," or forest movements, since the early nineteenth century. Even Verrier Elwin has discussed the depressing impact that the Central Indian tribal population suffered from forest reserves. For these people, nothing increased their animosity against the government more than having their forests taken away, which they considered to be their own.

Different ideas about property rights and obligations might be understood as the fundamental source of conflict and struggle throughout the history of forests. In the tribal and peasant societies of India, where the connection to the overlord was defined in terms of mutual duties that had to be met, there was no developed concept of private property. In contrast to these people's experiences, colonial rule was founded on a concept of private property. The indigenous people experienced constant degradation of their way of life due to the unpredictable nature of the colonial market economy. Moreover, they lost a significant source of livelihood due to the state's claim of priority over natural resources.

Environmental movements emerged during the colonial era in response to British policies that: (i) increased state control over forest areas; (ii) outlawed or restricted shifting cultivation; (iii) limited the use of timber, hunting, and grazing; and (iv) encouraged a migration of outsiders from the plains, including contractors, moneylenders, traders, and land grabbers, into the forests.

Tribal movements persisted as an endemic phenomenon in many regions of India during the nineteenth century. Tribal people lived at the bottom of the peasantry as shift workers, agricultural laborers, and coolies in plantations, mines, and factories. The colonial state tightened

control over forest zones for revenue and banned shifting cultivation in the reserved forests.

Regarding impacts of forest policy in post-independence India, the classification of Forests still continues according to the Indian Forest Act, 1927 which is not only outdated but also against the traditional practices of indigenous Forest dwellers. Also, The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 was replaced by Habitual Offenders Act in 1949 in which although these Tribes are called by lesser demeaning words, the essence of the law is more or less the same. Similarly, deforestation and destruction of Wildlife became so widespread that the Independent Indian Government had to bring many legislations like Wildlife Protection Act, 1972; Forest Conservation Act, 1980; Project Tiger, 1973 etc.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Indian culture since times immemorial has been deeply integrated with nature and ecology of which Forests are an important part as can be fathomed from the fact that out of four stages or *ashrams* of a man's life, two are to be dwelled in forests i.e. *Vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*. The State intrusion in forest areas was very limited so that it did not tamper with the forest dwellers' right. Also the State did not control all the commodities of forests; it was limited to some commodities like timber in Mauryan times. After 800 A.D., the State control rose more in forest areas to expand area under cultivation, strategic control like building of forts (Marathas) and commercial interests like Sandalwood Trees of Mysore. According to Mahesh Rangarajan, "State control was limited but significant". It hardly breached the subsistence ethics of forest dwellers.

Colonial period changed it and they displaced the forest communities, snatched away their lands as well as rights. They did so because the British needed forest resources for timber which could be used for Shipbuilding and Railways and to expand cultivation by clearing forests in order to increase revenue. They did this to partial or complete exclusion of forest dwellers which caused social and economic stir in their lives. For unimpeded use of Forest Resources without drawing the ire of forest dwellers, the British tried to legalize this exploitation by bringing the forest laws which categorized the forests into Reserved, Protected and Village forests with the first one exclusively controlled by the State.

With the control the British tried to ban Hunting, Shifting Cultivation and tried to curtail rights of

settled agriculturists. The British started growing timber which was good for their commercial propositions and three Indian varieties suited the role: Teak, Sal and Deodar. These varieties were hardly of any use to local people as compared to the varieties they replaced like Oak. The control over forests gave unprecedented economic and strategic benefits to the British like the Indian timber was used in ship building which saved the British Empire from Napoleonic invasions. Also the revenue from forests increased.

But the economic fortunes of the Indian Communities were reversed from the forests. They lost their subsistence be it Hunters or Shifting cultivators. Some artisans like the ironSmith tribe of Agaria which depended on charcoal from forests and tussar silk artisans suffered badly. Their social structure was also changed, impacting their customs and traditions. Many hunters took to banditry like Chenchus of Hyderabad. Many Shifting cultivators protested like Baigas of Central India. As a consolation prize from the government they got Baiga Chak reserved for them for practicing Shifting cultivation. The protest by forest dwellers were either crushed or were appeased by giving small consolation prizes. The tribes which did not succumb to the British exploitation were labeled as Criminal Tribes under Criminal Tribes Act, 1878.

The Environmental impacts were no less dramatic. Rapidly declining forests caused decline in Flora and Fauna. Ironically hunting of local communities was banned but Hunting as a Sport was taken up by the British and shikargah were built to which Viceroy, officers and Army Men were usual visitors. Resultantly, game species like Tigers and Elephants declined dramatically. The Forest Policy of the British created harmful Social, Political, Economic and Environmental impacts for the Indians but the gains for the British were very strategic and economical.

However if the Government wants and has iron-will then it can rectify the historical wrongs by focusing on Environment Friendly Development, repealing the Habitual Offenders Act, promoting [traditional conservation practices of indigenous people, replacing The Indian Forests Act, 1927 with another legislation suitable with traditional heritage of India which ensures the participation of forest people in the process of development.](#)

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### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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