**Environmental Governance in Colonial India: A Historical Study of Forest Acts** **and** **Policies**

**Abstract**

This study examines the evolution and implementation of forest acts and policies during colonial rule in India, highlighting their impact on the environment, indigenous communities, and colonial resource management. The British colonial administration systematically sought to control India's vast forest resources to serve its economic and strategic interests. Central to this was the enactment of key legislations such as the Indian Forest Act of 1865, 1878, and 1927, which marked a shift from traditional community-based forest management to centralized governance. The study also sheds light on how the categorization of forests into reserved, protected, and village forests marginalized local communities, restricting their access to forest resources essential for their livelihoods. The study concludes that colonial forest policies were less about conservation and more about exploitation, setting a precedent for contemporary forest governance challenges in India. It also emphasizes the need for revisiting and addressing historical injustices while formulating policies that balance conservation with community rights. This research contributes to the broader discourse on environmental history, colonial governance, and its enduring legacies in post-colonial states. By utilizing archival records, policy documents, and historical accounts, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how colonial forest acts reshaped India’s ecological and social landscape.

**Keywords**

Environment, Forest, Management, Indigenous Communities, Rights, Forest Dwellers, Conservation.

**1.1 Introduction**

Forests in India were traditionally managed through customary rights rooted in oral traditions and beliefs, ensuring sustainable use. Even during the reign of kings and zamindars, forests integral to local communities remained free from direct control. However, colonial rule brought significant changes, including the commoditization of forest products, large-scale timber exploitation, and the imposition of market-driven policies. This marked a shift from communal stewardship to exploitative forest management practices (Anirban Roy, 2017). During the early British occupation of India, forests were largely undervalued and overlooked in policy-making. British administrators, preoccupied with consolidating their empire, failed to grasp the critical ecological and economic roles forests played in the natural and social systems. They viewed forests as obstacles to agriculture and economic development rather than essential assets. Consequently, policies prioritized converting forested areas into cultivable land, undermining the ecological balance and disregarding the long-term necessity of forest conservation. Forests were perceived as insignificant for revenue generation, as the trade in forest products and wood-based industries was still in its infancy. The government assumed that forest resources were inexhaustible and dismissed concerns about the potential depletion of forest produce. This lack of foresight led to widespread deforestation and resource mismanagement. Settlements in Bengal and Punjab epitomized this approach, with large forest tracts handed over to landholders and cultivators who neither valued nor understood their significance. These policies ignored the direct and indirect benefits of forests, including their influence on climate, water systems, and soil fertility. The administrators’ narrow focus on agricultural expansion not only disregarded the ecological importance of forests but also failed to recognize their role in supporting rural livelihoods and local economies. The early colonial approach to forest management thus reflected a short-sighted view that prioritized immediate economic gains over sustainable development and environmental stewardship, setting the stage for the environmental challenges that would emerge in later years (Ribbontrop, 1900, p.60).

**1.2 Initial Approach to Forest Governance after British Occupation**

During early British rule, policies focused on expanding agriculture, leading to widespread deforestation. Forests were rapidly depleted due to reckless exploitation for railways, construction, and cultivation. In 1796, with Mr. Machonchic of the medical services as the leading spirit, a timber syndicate was formed in Malabar, primarily to supply timber for the navy, but it eventually collapsed, highlighting unsustainable practices ( Ribbontrop, 1900, p.61,62). The defeat of Lally in 1760 ended French power in India. Tipu Sultan’s defeat in 1792 led to the cession of Malabar and Coorg to the British, who already controlled Canara. After Tipu’s death in 1799, British civil administrators focused on peaceful governance, with growing demand for teak timber receiving early attention (Stebbing, 1922).

Initially, during colonial annexation, the Teak forests of Malabar were considered private property. However, it was later discovered that Tipu Sultan had treated Teak as a royal tree, a practice also followed in Cochin and Travancore. The first step in forest conservancy came with an order from the Bengal-Bombay Joint Commission to prohibit the felling of Teak trees fewer than 21 inches in girth. In 1805, the Court of Directors inquired about the possibility of a steady Teak supply from Malabar for the King’s Navy, due to a shortage of Oak in England (Ribbontrop, 1900, p.64). Starting in the late eighteenth century, market forces began to commercialize tribal-controlled forest resources for various purposes, including timber for shipping, sandalwood extraction, and supporting tea and coffee plantations. Forest resources were also used for iron-making industries and railway construction in South India. These developments led to the imposition of several restrictions on tribal communities' access to and use of forest resources (Saravanam, 2008). Efforts at forest conservation in India initially failed due to lack of political support. In 1805, the British government asked the East India Company to assess the feasibility of harvesting Malabar Teak for British shipbuilding needs during the Napoleonic Wars. The Company, a private trading entity with governmental authority in India, appointed Captain Watson as the first forest conservator in 1806. Watson’s plan involved taxing Teak to slow private harvesting, generating government revenue, and then purchasing Teak from dealers to prevent over-exploitation and ensure a steady supply (Ledzion, 1991).

After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the British Navy's demand for Teak decreased. Thomas Munro, the new governor of Madras, recognized that the timber royalty angered Indian princes, merchants, and peasants. Facing opposition to the tax on forests, Munro reversed the Teak regulations, abolished Captain Watson’s position, and allowed the free market to resume as before (Arbuthnot, 1881).

Lord Dalhousie's conservation efforts were deeply rooted in imperialist motives. Upon his arrival in Calcutta in 1848 for his inauguration, he openly declared Britain’s intent to assert direct control over Indian territories, including those under native princes. During his tenure, the British annexed eight states—Punjab, Pegu, Satara, Sambalpur, Jhansi, Nagpur, Berar, and Oudh—reducing their rulers to subordinates of the British Empire (Barton, 2000, p.561). Lord Dalhousie’s annexation of Punjab exemplified his approach to expanding British control in India. In 1849, he justified the move to a parliamentary committee by accusing the Sikh government of violating the 1846 Treaties of Lahore and Bhyrowal, defaulting on debts, and fostering hostilities against Britain. He also cited the inability of the young Sikh maharaja to maintain order. The Punjab’s rich timber resources and strategic hilly terrain had long been coveted by the British, with Lord Ellenborough previously predicting its inevitable fall under British rule. Dalhousie argued that annexing Punjab would not only finance further imperial expansion but also secure a prestigious addition to the British Crown. Consequently, the East India Company annexed the region (Baird, 1911).

Prior to the 1857 revolt, scientific forest administration was limited to the presidencies of Bombay, Madras, and Burma under the August 1855 charter, while regions like Punjab, Oudh, Bengal, and Assam had only begun forming forestry departments. The mutiny disrupted these efforts, but after its suppression, forest administration advanced under state ownership principles. Lord Canning appointed Dietrich Brandis as the first Inspector General of the Indian Forest Department (1864–1883). Forest conservators had been designated in Bombay (1847), Madras (1856), and Burma (1857), with Brandis later extending appointments to the Northwestern and Central Provinces (1860), Oudh (1861), Punjab, Coorg, and Bengal (1864), Assam (1868), and Berar (1868) (Tuscan, 1893). By 1868, the Forest Department had expanded its administration across all provinces in India. In 1871, it was integrated into the newly created Department of Revenue and Agriculture under the home department. Dietrich Brandis was succeeded by William Schlich (1883–1888), Berthold Ribbentrop (1888–1900), and E.P. Stebbing (1900–1917) as key leaders of the department (Chandra, 1991).

By 1885, the India-wide Forest Department, led by an inspector-general, included 10 conservators, 55 deputy conservators, 38 assistant conservators, and thousands of forest guards. Lacking trained officers, appointments were filled through patronage or by drawing personnel from other government branches, including British gentlemen, naturalists, and military men. In some regions, like Madras, the department expanded by absorbing agencies such as the Jungle Conservancy Department. This approach enabled growth despite limited specialized expertise (Ribbontrop, 1900, p.78-82). Recruitment for the Forest Department also relied on specialists brought in from other countries, particularly Germany, which had a strong tradition of forestry expertise. Prominent figures like Dietrich Brandis, Wilhelm Schlich, and Berthold Ribbentrop played significant roles in shaping the department's practices and policies. These individuals contributed their advanced knowledge and experience to the development of forest management in colonial India, helping to establish a foundation for scientific forestry and sustainable resource management in the region.

**1.3 The Forest Act of 1865**

The Imperial Forest Department, formed in 1864 with German expertise, aimed to curb deforestation and establish state control over forests. Led by Dietrich Brandis, a botanist from Bonn, it developed legal mechanisms to manage forests, restricting rural communities' access. Railways prompted the department's creation, requiring legislation to reclaim state rights previously granted to peasants and tribes (Brandis, 1897). Before the colonial state acknowledged the strategic value of forests, its policy was to treat forests and wastelands as belonging to the village communities in whose territory they were located (Stebbing, 1923). The Indian Forest Act VII of 1865, authored by Hugh Cleghorn and Dietrich Brandis, centralized forest administration at the national level. It was India’s first comprehensive forest legislation and environmental law, covering annexed lands declared government property. The act regulated forests, soil, water quality, and pollution, shaping the management of natural resources. Cleghorn’s earlier conservancy models in Mysore and Madras influenced this landmark legislation, redefining environmental governance in 19th-century India (Barton, 2000, p.250). The 1865 Act allowed for only limited state control and intervention. It was quickly drafted and enacted to assert the state's claim over forests needed for railway supplies, while ensuring that existing rights were not infringed upon. However, it soon became clear that a more comprehensive and stricter law was necessary. There was debate among officials regarding the level of state control to be implemented. Baden Powell advocated for extensive government control, while Thomas Munro was a strong proponent of minimal state interference. Other officials, including Dietrich Brandis, the Inspector General of Forests, supported a more balanced approach, preferring limited state involvement over either full state monopoly or an entirely unregulated market (Barnagar Colllege File, 2025).

**1.4 The Forest Act of 1878**

The Indian Forest Act of 1878 was enacted in 1878, applying to most provinces of British India, excluding Madras, Burma, the Hazara district in Punjab, Ajmer, Coorg, Berar, and Baluchistan. The Act introduced three categories of forests: ‘Reserved Forests’, ‘Protected Forests’, and ‘Village Forests’. Chapter 2 of the Act addresses reserved forests, Chapter 3 outlines the creation of village forests, and Chapter 4 focuses on protected forests. Initially, the Act was designed to establish a single class of demarcated state forests, offering limited protection to other government-owned forest lands until decisions could be made regarding their permanent classification. The final law maintained this approach, not requiring specific demarcation of forest areas before declaring them as protected forests (Indian Forest Act, 1878). Ribbontrop states, ‘that the primary difference lies in the requirement to investigate and document the rights of both the government and private individuals before declaring an area as a reserved forest. This process ensures that private rights are protected, and a permanent settlement is established. In contrast, the second category of demarcated state forests, known as 'Protected Forests', provides only limited security for their preservation. While existing rights in these forests are recorded, they are not definitively settled, allowing for the potential growth of new rights, which could ultimately lead to the loss of the property. This issue has been recognized by various local governments in practice (Ribbontrop, 1900, pp.109-111). Due to rising commercial demands and the relatively vulnerable position of protected areas from the government's perspective, these areas were increasingly converted into reserved forests, granting the state greater control. As a result, the 14,000 square miles of state forests in 1878 expanded to 56,000 square miles of reserved forests and 20,000 square miles of protected forests by 1890. By the following decade, these figures had risen to 81,400 and 3,300 square miles, respectively. Chapter III of the Act also introduced a third category—village forests—though this option was largely unused by the government across most of India. Additionally, the new legislation significantly expanded the punitive measures available to forest authorities, imposing strict regulations on the extraction and movement of forest products and outlining severe penalties for violations of the Act (Stebbing, 1922, p.468).

**1.5 National Forest Policy, 1894**

The Forest Policy of 1894, India's first formal forest policy, prioritized the commercial exploitation of forest products, state control over forests, and the promotion of permanent cultivation. It was primarily shaped by the recommendations of Dr. Voelcker in his 1893 report on the "Improvement of Indian Agriculture." Voelcker highlighted that the forest policies enacted under the Indian Forest Act of 1878 were negatively impacting agricultural productivity and rural social structures. He observed that the colonial governance system had fragmented traditional village communities, turning them into heterogeneous groups rather than cohesive social units. Voelcker advocated for modifying forest policies to better support agricultural needs and production. In response, the British administration introduced the Forest Policy of 1894, designed to balance forestry and agriculture. The policy encouraged zamindars to convert open forests into agricultural land to increase state revenue. The Government of India issued Circular 22-F in 1894, which became the guiding framework for forest management throughout the remainder of the colonial era. A key feature of the new policy was its increased focus on the interdependence of forestry and agriculture. It particularly addressed the restrictive nature of earlier regulations, easing restrictions on forest access and use to accommodate the needs of agricultural communities. Under this policy, forests were classified into four categories based on their primary function and value. The first category included forests located on hill slopes, which were vital for preventing soil erosion and protecting cultivated plains from landslides. These forests played a crucial conservation role and ensured consistent revenue for the state. The second category comprised forests with valuable timber species, such as devadharu (Cedrus deodara), sal (Shorea robusta), and teak (Tectona grandis). These forests were managed to promote the natural regeneration of devadharu and sal and the artificial regeneration of teak to meet commercial demands. The third category encompassed minor forests, which provided low-quality timber, fuelwood, and fodder to meet the subsistence needs of local communities. While less valuable from a commercial perspective, these forests served an important role in supporting rural populations. The fourth category consisted of pastures and grazing lands, which were made available for local use under specific restrictions to prevent overuse and ensure sustainability. The policy marked a significant shift in forest management by acknowledging the critical role forests played in supporting agriculture and rural livelihoods. By relaxing earlier restrictions, it attempted to address the needs of agricultural communities, particularly their dependence on surrounding forests for resources. However, it also maintained the colonial administration's focus on generating revenue and meeting commercial interests. The classification system allowed for a more structured approach to forest management, balancing conservation, commercial exploitation, and the needs of rural populations (Jissa, 2020).

**1.6 The Forest Act of 1927**

This Act had a negative impact on forest-dependent communities. Its penalties and regulations were designed to strengthen the state's control over forests while reducing the rights of local people. As a result, village communities were disconnected from their longstanding, mutually beneficial relationship with the forests. Subsequent amendments further restricted local access to forest resources, especially for those reliant on them. Simultaneously, there was a significant rise in the revenue generated from the forests (Jissa, 2020). The objective of the Indian Forest Act of 1927 was to consolidate and revise the laws governing forests in India, marking the first step toward codifying the various practices of forest officials. The Act aimed to regulate the rights of different groups over forest lands and resources. It introduced classifications for forests and expanded the scope of provisions to extend state control over them. Unlike the 1878 Act, this legislation did not acknowledge the community's rights over forests, instead requiring individuals or communities to claim their rights over specific forest lands before the Forest Settlement Officer. The officer would investigate these claims. The Act also addressed the regulation of forest produce transit and levied duties on forest products, emphasizing the revenue-generating role of forests for the colonial state. The Act, consisting of 86 sections, categorized forests into four types: Reserve Forests, Village Forests, Protected Forests, and Non-government Forests. It imposed regulations to control activities like stone quarrying, charcoal burning, and the removal of forest products, and prohibited land clearing for cultivation, building, or grazing. Inspectors were granted powers to arrest without a warrant for violations of the Act. Special provisions were included to regulate shifting cultivation, with the Forest Settlement Officer overseeing claims and reporting to the state government on their legitimacy. Section 10 explicitly stated that shifting cultivation was a privilege subject to the state’s control, restrictions, and potential abolition (Indian Forest Act, 1927, Pathshala, MHRD).

**Conclusion**

The British forest laws, policies, and management strategies introduced in colonial India were largely motivated by utilitarian principles, prioritizing the colonial administration's interests over the well-being of the local communities and the environment's protection. These policies were grounded in the systematic exploitation of forest resources, aiming to enhance economic gains for the British Empire. The approach to forest management during British rule was tailored to meet the empire’s commercial demands, especially for timber, fuel, and various forest products critical for infrastructure, shipbuilding, and military needs. This utilitarian perspective resulted in significant negative impacts on India's forests, as it favored resource extraction at the expense of sustainability.

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