Protecting Nature and Serving Empire: The Tale of Forestry in British India

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Forests have captured the human imagination for centuries, from folk tales and mythology to horror literature in modernity. The importance of forests was in no way diminished by the 19th century. In some ways, they had only become more important. Over the course of the 19th century, India would become the British Empire's primary source of timber. Even its threatening navy, for example, was dependent on the forests of India. It inspired the implementation and organization of forestry around the anglophone world. The development of conservation and forestry in India can be seen as an origin story for modern environmentalism and serves as a livewire for discussing the tensions and dynamics at the core of environmentalism and colonialism today. By looking at the development of forestry in British India over the course of the 19th century, it can be understood how the British Empire's approach to forestry in India changed over time and the ways it intersected with environmentalism and imperialism. It will be shown that the process of change and development in Indian forestry followed a trajectory of increasingly absolute state control, continually fraught with tensions with *laissez-faire* ideals, and its role both as an origin story for modern environmentalism, and as a tool of imperialism and colonialism.

Before discussing the development of 19th century forestry, it would be helpful to outline the pre-British forest policy, as well as how the British perceived their predecessors. The British were convinced that by the time they arrived, the forests had already been reduced to a point of damaging the climate.[1] Muslims were pointed to as an example of this, seeing Islamic regions

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[1] Greg Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 40.

within India as being stripped by shifting cultivation and grazing.[2] The main piece of evidence they used for this was the descriptions of the region by an ancient Chinese explorer, Fa Hien.[3] This perception of the local Indian population as being wasteful or destructive of the forests would contribute to later British colonial policy.

The pre-European relationship between people and the forests was not as destructive as the British purported, but it was not perfect harmony either. India was home to an extensive wilderness until the 19th century in spite of the dense populations it held prior to the arrival of Europeans.[4] That being said, states have intervened in forests of India for a very long time, going back to ancient times,[5] and there is little evidence of a pre-colonial equilibrium between people and nature.[6] Muslims under the Mughal Empire appear to have cleared the most forest land prior to the British,[7] but were far from the only people to do so. There was no practice of conservation, but there were customary restraints on the use of trees. An example of this would be the sacred groves protected by villagers, many of which survived well into the 19th century.[8] The border between cultivated land and wild forest was in a state of continual change. Peasants made workable fields from what used to be forest land, and the forests, in turn, retreated and

[2] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 40.
[3] Barton, 43.
[4] Richard P. Tucker, "The Depletion of India's Forests under British Imperialism: Planters, Foresters, and Peasants in Assam and Kerala," in *The Ends of the Earth, Ed. Donald Worster* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 118.
[5] Sangwan, Satpal, "Making of a Popular Debate: The Indian Forester and the Emerging Agenda of State Forestry in India, 1875-1904," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 36, no. 2 (June 1999): 200, https://doi-org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/10.1177/001946469903600203.
[6] Sivaramakrishnan K., "Forests and the Environmental History of Modern India," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 303, https://doi-org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/10.1177/001946469403100202.
[7] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 44.
[8] Rangarajan, Mahesh, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 31, no. 2 (June 1994): 149, https://doi-org.proxy.hil.unb.ca/10.1177/001946469403100202.

recovered in response to human practices.[9] The forests changed with each passing season, and the borders of the forests changed with each era in Indian history.[10]

The early phase of Indian forestry's development can be seen as the first half of the 19th century before the official establishment of forestry as an institution. This era was characterized by small-scale regional efforts at conservation, and a back and forth between state control and advocates of the free market. The proper place to begin our discussion is with the causes for the British Empire's interest in and dependence on Indian timber. First, the loss of the American colonies dealt a serious blow to the timber supply chain of the British.[11] Then, in 1805, the Napoleonic wars would further aggravate the problem and ignite an even greater appetite for timber.[12] Furthermore, by this time, the British Isles had already been stripped of much of their forests, as well as being absent of oak plantations.[13] The decline of oak in England is important for understanding the British view of nature itself in this time, as the decline of oak trees was seen as a sign of national improvement, and for many, wilderness was seen as evil and malevolent.[14]

The first decade of the 19th century was witness to a rise in the use of Indian wood for ship construction, which placed additional pressure upon the Indian landscape to provide timber, and eventually cried for greater state control.[15] The Royal Navy knew that Arabs had imported teak from Bombay for their own fleet, and thus, the directors of the British East India Company

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[9] Rangarajan, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," 149.
[10] Rangarajan, 149.
[11] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 44.
[12] Barton, 45.
[13] Barton, 45.
[14] Sangwan, "Making of a Popular Debate: The Indian Forester and the Emerging Agenda of State Forestry in India, 1875-1904," 189.
[15] Rangarajan, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," 155.

(BEIC) set up a forest committee to investigate the collection of mature teak trees.[16] The results of this committee's inquiry were dire and shattered any preconception of a near limitless supply teak; accessible forests had been stripped of teak, and costly infrastructure would be needed to reach new areas that were often unmapped.[17] This committee would also recommend the implementation of a European style of forestry.[18]

With the navy's need to secure timber at the time and for the long term, the first conservator of forests in India, Captain Watson, was appointed by the BEIC directors in 1807.[19] Early advocates of greater state control over forests viewed it as necessary due to concerns that the private sector would make any attempt to acquire timber for public works useless and destroy an important revenue source.[20] Malabar Teak and other hardwoods had fallen under the imperial gaze, leading to a survey in 1810 and a subsequent report in 1811 by Captain Morier Williams.[21] Further reports followed, signifying a growing interest in India's potential as a supplier of vital timber for the empire, especially in regard to the defence of said empire. Imperial forestry had begun to emerge, if only in concept.[22] Notably, forestry and conservation was emerging directly out of a desire to strengthen the empire in terms of strategy and economy.

India's first conservator of forests had been appointed, but the path to the establishment of the Indian Forestry Department was far from a straight line. By 1815, Sir Thomas Munro (governor of Madras in the southeast) had sought to eliminate environmental regulations in the

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[16] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 45.

[17] Barton, 46.

[18] Barton, 46.

[19] Barton, 46; Rangarajan, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," 155.

[20] Rangarajan, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," 156.

[21] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 45.

[22] Barton, 5.

name of laissez-faire principles.[23] Advocates of the free market argued, in standard fashion, that

a free market in timber would be sufficient for preservation.[24] When the British first developed

an interest in the forests, they devised a strategy to restrict private rights with little to no attention

paid to the actual regeneration of the forests. The fragility of their policy would soon become

apparent.[25] In 1823, the conservatorship of the forest in Malabar was abolished, once again

giving private interests free reign in the forests.[26] This situation created a new tension between

the interests of the navy and that of a laissez-faire colonial government.[27] The navy board

recommended that the conservatorship be brought back in 1831, but in 1842, the BEIC decided

not to reimplement a conservancy, and instead create new teak plantations.[28]

The extraction of timber by private interests was far from the only contributing factor to

deforestation in this period. For example, on the southwestern coast of India, much of the forest

was depleted in response to European commodity markets and economic expansion.[29] Coffee

planters discovered that the climate of Wynaad was a good fit. By 1866, more than 200 different

coffee plantations had been established on nearly 15,000 acres.[30] Later, tea would become the

crop of choice further south.[31] Planters, such as those in Wynaad were a strong lobbying force

on the government, often forming associations for greater leverage.[32]

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[23] Barton, 46.

[24] Rangarajan, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," 156.

[25] Sangwan, "Making of a Popular Debate: The Indian Forester and the Emerging Agenda of State Forestry in India, 1875-1904," 200.

[26] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 46; Rangarajan, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," 156.

[27] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 47.

[28] Barton, 47.

[29] Tucker, "The Depletion of India's Forests under British Imperialism: Planters, Foresters, and Peasants in Assam and Kerala," 128.

[30] Tucker, 133.

[31] Tucker, 135.

[32] Tucker, 136.

In the second half of the 19th century, forestry would become an official institution across all of British India, which was notably now ruled directly by the crown instead of the BEIC. However, there are many continuities between the early phase of Indian forestry just discussed and the later phase. The state sought to create a distinction between the rights and claims of an individual or private interest.[33] To begin this process, the first Indian Forest Act was passed in 1865[34] in spite of opposition from other colonial administrators.[35] However, multiple additional rules would be necessary to truly cleave a distinction between the rights of individuals and the state.[36] Within a few years foresters complained it did not give them enough control.[37] The 1875 Hazara rules followed the act of 1865 and codified the forest department practice into law.[38] After this, a new act was passed in 1878 that extended the range to include nearly all provinces, and those provinces left out would be inspired to pass their own acts based on the other legislation by 1890.[39]

One of the key elements that made the later foresters different was their embracing of the continental tradition of forestry, which had its roots in Prussian, German, and French forestry practices.[40] This was largely due to the key players in Indian Forestry. Dietrich Brandis for example, was a major advocate for training Indian foresters in Europe,[41] and this practice was

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[33] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 59.

[34] Barton, 59; Ravi S. Rajan, *Modernizing Nature: Forestry and Imperial Eco-Development 1800-1950*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford University Press, 2006), 93.

[35] Sangwan, "Making of a Popular Debate: The Indian Forester and the Emerging Agenda of State Forestry in India, 1875-1904," 206.

[36] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 59.

[37] Rajan, *Modernizing Nature*, 93.

[38] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 59.

[39] Rajan, *Modernizing Nature*, 93.

[40] Rajan, 93.

[41] Rajan, 81.

supported by others in government.[42] Dietrich Brandis was the first Inspector General of

Forests.[43] In his years in charge of Indian forests, Brandis systematically set about applying the

principles of forestry developed within the continental tradition to the tropical forests of the

Indian subcontinent. Embedded within this method, was the fundamental principle of German

forestry, which was sustainable production and harvesting mainly for the needs of the economy

in the long term.[44] Wilhelm Schlich succeeded Brandis as inspector-general of forests in 1881.[45]

Additionally, he wrote the first three volumes of the *Manual of Forestry* between 1889 and 1895,

which would serve as the holy text of forestry throughout the empire, and even the English-

speaking world at large.[46]

The multitude of acts regarding forestry passed in the second half of the 19th century

institutionalized forestry as an important apparatus for the colonial government. Like their

predecessors in Germany and France, the Indian foresters had come to develop a strong

commitment towards strong, autocratic control over the forests and related enterprises.[47] In his

Manual of Forestry, Schlich argued that this was due to the state being the only party with the

capability to think long term and give heed to the long-term benefits of the forests.[48] There were

two main reasons for this belief. The first reason was the private sector's impact on the

environment and forests, especially in the first half of the 19th century. Brandis himself often

came to blows with timber merchants in his earlier time spent in Pegu and other areas of

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[42] United Kingdom, House of Commons. *East India (Forest Conservancy): Despatches on Forest Conservancy in India.* 17 August 1871, 231.

[43] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 39.

[44] Rajan, *Modernizing Nature*, 84.

[45] Rajan, 87.

[46] Rajan, 87.

[47] Rajan, 92.

[48] Rajan, 92.

Burma.[49] Second, was the influence of European tradition. Debate over the proposed forest bill

of 1875 borrowed from the well of European history and the implicit importance of state control

within the continental tradition.[50]

The foresters of the second half of the 19th century sought to optimize the extraction and

exploitation of the forest's riches, much like their predecessors in the first half.[51] Forests were a

branch of public revenue, where conservation was important for guaranteeing an increase in

value to the greatest possible extent.[52] However, arguments were made in the House of

Commons that there was more to it than profit, and that it could demand being an expense in

some cases.[53] Eventually environmentalists more sympathetic to the plight of the forests would

intervene and disrupt this profit seeking fixation.[54] People's increasing familiarity with the

devastating changes as a result of deforestation brought about a new eco-consciousness and

awareness of the interconnected whole of nature.[55] Foresters would often push for the

"reserved" status over the "protected" status, as they better preserved the "whole economy of

nature."[56] This concept is sometimes called the "house of nature" (commonly found in the

Indian Forester magazine), in which concerns ranged from soil and air quality, to birds, game

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[49] Rajan, 92.

[50] Rajan, 92–93.

[51] Rajan, 93.

[52] United Kingdom, House of Commons. *East India (Forest Conservancy): Despatches on Forest Conservancy in India,* 16.

[53] United Kingdom, House of Commons. *East India (Forest Conservancy): Despatches on Forest Conservancy in India,* 13.

[54] Sangwan, "Making of a Popular Debate: The Indian Forester and the Emerging Agenda of State Forestry in India, 1875-1904," 195.

[55] Sangwan, 197.

[56] Barton, *Empire Forestry and the Origins of Environmentalism*, 59.

and fungi, bugs and animals.[57] The new practical demands of forest management called upon

ecologists and foresters who were well aware of the complexity of nature.[58]

Forestry did not just provide the colonial apparatus with a way to better control the value

of forests, but also a way to control and exert influence over the people. In its attempt to realize

goals of progress, the state would seek to strengthen its hold over natural resources, and in the

process, would impose its own legal structure onto the forest's traditional users.[59] It is clear that

the British either did not see Indians as capable of managing forests as effectively as themselves,

or that they did not want to give up any control over the forests, or both. Almost every European

observer from 1806 to the 1860s noted the "wastefulness" of the traditional users of the forest.[60]

In their view, giving Indian communities management of forests was compared to giving a child

an entire cake.[61] The colonial hierarchy was further replicated within the Forestry Department of

India, wherein the state desired to place Indians in subordinate positions of forestry.[62]

The increasingly absolute control over forests by the state often functioned as an

instrument of colonial rule, forcing those who had long depended on the forests for their lifeways

to instead depend on the colonial apparatus and market economy. Foresters often came to be the

face of an alien power.[63] While colonized peoples saw the forests as their own, the British

administration aimed to close them off for their own ends, creating a conflict between the

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[57] Barton, 39.

[58] Sangwan, "Making of a Popular Debate: The Indian Forester and the Emerging Agenda of State Forestry in India, 1875-1904," 197.

[59] Sangwan, 201.

[60] Sangwan, 201.

[61] Sangwan, 201.

[62] Sangwan, 208.

[63] Rangarajan, "Imperial Agendas and India's Forests: The Early History of Indian Forestry, 1800-1878," 147.

traditional users of the forests and the exploiters of the forests.[64] In the second half of the 19th century, the needs of the national economy were legitimized, while local agrarian populations were discounted.[65] The dismissal of local folk was more distinguished amongst the French and German trained foresters than the prior generation, like Brandis.[66] The change in attitudes towards local peoples came, in part, from technocratic sentiments and the foresters' increasing self-perception as experts.[67]

This scientific conservation denied the needs of local communities in two main ways. First, it denied tribal groups their traditional subsistence lifeways by banning shifting cultivation and the collection of minor produce from the forest.[68] Secondly, peasants were denied access to lands they had historically used for grazing; their customary rights to the collection of firewood, manure leaves, and wood for tools were also denied.[69] Even with a permit system in place to allow peasants access to common land, the application process could result in a peasant being forced to wait months to get the wood needed for a new plough.[70] This became a primary driving force for frictions between the peasantry and the government, and would actually go on to contribute to anti-imperialist consciousness in the early 20th century.[71] Other Indigenous

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[64] Atluri Murali, "Whose Trees? Forest Practices and Local Communities in Andhra, 1600-1922," in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia,* Eds. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 111.

[65] Rajan, *Modernizing Nature*, 99.

[66] Rajan, 99.

[67] Rajan, 99.

[68] Murali, "Nature, Culture, Imperialism," 101.

[69] Murali, 101.

[70] Murali, 104.

[71] Murali, 102.

practices, such as Kumri (also called Shifting Cultivation) were subject to explicit, official restriction beginning in 1849.[72]

Over the course of the 19th century, British conservation efforts in India evolved into the practice of forestry, being increasingly characterized by absolute state control. This can also be seen as a sort of birthplace for environmentalism as it is understood today, while at the same time having a legacy of disenfranchising the people of India. The 19th century as a whole was a time in which many elements of the modern world were cemented. In this sense, to understand many of the contentious issues of modernity, one must look to the past. Especially in an era of ecological crisis, looking at the development of modern environmentalism and conservationism in the context of industrialization and resource extraction can be immensely revealing. The core contradictions of the environmentalism of British India have not evaporated into the winds of history. We are still attempting to balance conservation and consumption to this day. The conflict between state control and private exploitation is ongoing, yet they are still unified in seeking profit. It is imperative to look at the history of modern environmentalism critically and consider what ghosts of the past still haunt the present.

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[72] Jacques Pouchepadass, "British Attitudes Towards Shifting Cultivation in Colonial South India: A Case Study of South Canara District 1800-1920," in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia,* Eds. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 141.

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