FOREST SOCIETY AND COLONIALISM

LIVELIHOODS, ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES

We will shift our focus to the study of livelihoods and economies. We will look at how the lives of forest dwellers, pastoralists and peasants changed in the modern world and how they played a part in shaping these changes.

The Chapter will suggest that we need to know about their lives, see how they organise their world and operate their economies. These communities are very much part of the modern world we live in today. They are not simply survivors from a bygone era.

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All the important things that we need to survive, get from forests. The paper in book you are reading, desks and tables, doors and windows, the dyes that colour your clothes, spices in your food, the cellophane wrapper of your toffee, *tendu* leaf in *bidis*, gum, honey, coffee, tea and rubber. Do not miss out the oil in chocolates, which comes from sal seeds, the tannin used to convert skins and hides into leather, or the herbs and roots used for medicinal purposes. Forests also provide bamboo, wood for fuel, grass, charcoal, packaging, fruits, flowers, animals, birds and many other things. In the Amazon forests or in the Western Ghats, it is possible to find as many as 500 different plant species in one forest patch.

But due to overuse or by the Natural or man-made factors it is disappearing. Between 1700 and 1995, the period of industrialisation, 13.9 million sq km of forest or 9.3 per cent of the world's total area was cleared for industrial uses, cultivation, pastures and fuelwood.

WHY DEFORESTATION?

The disappearance of forests is referred to as deforestation.

It is hot a recent phenomenon, it started in a century ago. We will discuss the causes of deforestation in India.

1. **Land to be Improved:** From the advent of Britishers in 1600 to the recent time population is nearly growned up to two times.

As population increased over the centuries and the demand for food went up, peasants extended the boundaries of cultivation, clearing forests and breaking new land. In the colonial period, cultivation expanded rapidly for a variety of reasons.

In the early nineteenth century, the colonial state thought that forests were unproductive. They were considered to be wilderness that had to be brought under cultivation so that the land could yield agricultural products and revenue, and enhance the income of the state. So between 1880 and 1920, cultivated area rose by 6.7 million hectares.

Need to Know?
The idea that uncultivated land had to be taken over and improved was popular with colonisers everywhere in the world. It was an argument that justified conquest. In 1896 the American writer, Richard Harding, wrote on the Honduras in Central America: 'There is no more interesting question of the present day than that of what is to be done with the world's land which is lying unimproved; whether it shall go to the great power that is willing to turn it to account, or remain with its original owner, who fails to understand its value. The Central Americans are like a gang of semi-barbarians in a beautifully furnished house, of which they can understand neither its possibilities of comfort nor its use.' Three years later the American-owned United Fruit Company was founded, and grew bananas on an industrial scale in Central America.The company acquired such power over the governments of these countries that they came to be known as Banana Republics. Quoted in David Spurr, The Rhetoric of Empire, (1993).

2. **Sleepers on the Tracks:** Due to high demand, oak forests in England were disappearing. This created a problem of timber supply for the Royal Navy which required it for building ships. To get the supply of oak for the ship industry, British started exploring Indian forests on a massive scale.

The spread of railways from the 1850s created a new demand. To run locomotives, wood was needed as fuel. As railway was expanding, the demand for fuel also became very high.

To lay railway lines sleepers were essential to hold the tracks together. Each mile of railway track required between 1760 to 2000 sleepers. To fulfill the demand of sleepers trees were felled on massive scale. Up to 1946, the length of the tracks had increased to over 765000 Km. As the railway tracks spread through India, a larger and larger numbers of trees were felled. Forests around the railway tracks started disappearing.

Converting sal logs into sleepers in the Singhbhum forests, Chhotanagpur, May 1897.

Elephants piling squares of timber at a timber yard in Rangoon

3. **Plantations:** Large areas of natural forests were also cleared to make way for tea, coffee and rubber plantations to meet Europe's growing need for these commodities. The colonial government took over the forests, and gave vast areas to European planters at cheap rates. These areas were enclosed and cleared of forests, and planted with tea or coffee.

Need to Know?
'The new line to be constructed was the Indus Valley Railway between Multan and Sukkur, a distance of nearly 300 miles. At the rate of 2000 sleepers per mile this would require 600,000 sleepers 10 feet by 10 inches by 5 inches (or 3.5 cubic feet apiece), being upwards of 2,000,000 cubic feet. The loco-motives would use wood fuel. At the rate of one train daily either way and at one maund per train-mile an annual supply of 219,000 maunds would be demanded. In addition a large supply of fuel for brick-burning would be required. The sleepers would have to come mainly from th Sind Forests. The fuel from the tamarisk and Jhand forests of Sind and the Punjab. The other new line was the Northern State Railway from Lahore to Multan. It was estimated that 2,200,000 sleepers would be required for its construction.'

THE RISE OF COMMERCIAL FORESTRY

Due to high demand for ships and railways, there were be high deforestation takes place. This will alarmed the Britishers. So they decided to invite a German expert, Dietrich Brandis, for advice, and made him the first Inspector General of Forests in India.

Brandis realised that a proper system had to be introduced to manage the forests and people had to be trained in the science of conservation. This system would need legal sanction. Rules about the use of forest resources had to be framed. Felling of trees and grazing had to be restricted so that forests could be preserved for timber production. Anybody who cut trees without following the system had to be punished.

A deodar plantation in Kangra, 1933.

WHAT IS SCIENTIFIC FORESTRY?

In scientific forestry, natural forests which had lots of different types of trees were cut down. In their place, one type of tree was planted in straight rows. This is called a plantation. Forest officials surveyed the forests, estimated the area under different types of trees, and made working plans for forests management. They planned how much of the plantation area to cut every year. The area cut was then to be replanted so that it was ready to be cut again in some years.

After the Forest Act was enacted in 1865, it was amended twice, once in 1878 and then in 1927. The 1878 Act divided forests into three categories: reserved, protected and village forests. The best forests were called 'reserved forests'. Villagers could not take anything from these forests, even for their own use. For house building or fuel, they could take wood from protected or village forests.

1. **How were the Lives of People Affected:** Different sections of people have different ideas for forests. Villagers wanted forests with a mixture of species to satisfy different needs - fuel, fodder, leaves. The forest department on the other hand wanted trees which were suitable for building ships or railways. They needed trees that could provide hard wood, and were tall and straight. So particular species like teak and *sal* were promoted and others were cut.

   People use forest products - roots, leaves, fruits, and tubers - for many things. Fruits and tubers are nutritious to eat, especially during the monsoons before the harvest has come in. Herbs are used for medicine, wood for agricultural implements like yokes and ploughs, bamboo makes excellent fences and is also used to make baskets and umbrellas.

   The Forest Act meant servere hardship for villagers across the country. After the Act, all their everyday practices - cutting wood for their houses, grazing their cattle, collecting fruits and roots, hunting and fishing - became illegal. People were now forced to steal wood from the forests, and if they were caught, they were at the mercy of the forest guards who would take bribes from them. Women who collected fuelwood were especially worried. It was also common for police constables and forest guards to harass people by demanding free food from them.

Collecting mahua (Madhuca indica) from the forests.

2. **How did Forest Rules Affect Cultivation?:** Traditionally people practice shifting cultivation or swidden agriculture. These can be known by local names such as *lading* in Southeast Asia, *milpha* in Central America, *chitemene* or *tavy* in Africa, and *chena* in Sri Lanka. In India, *dhya, penda, bewar, nevad, jhum, podu, khandad and kumri* are some of the local terms for swidden agriculture.

What is Shifting Cultivation?

In shifting cultivation, parts of the forest are cut and burnt in rotation. Seeds are sown in the ashes after the first monsoon rains, and the crop is harvested by October-November. Such plots are cultivated for a couple of years and then left fallow for 12 to 18 years for the forest to grow back. A mixture of crops is grown on these plots. In central India and Africa it could be millets, in Brazil manioc, and in other parts of Latin America maize and beans.

European foresters regarded this practice as harmful for the forests. They felt that land which was used for cultivation every few years could not grow trees for railway timber. When a forest was burnt, there was the added danger of the flames spreading and burning valuable timber. Shifting cultivation also made it harder for the government to calculate taxes. Therefore, the government decided to ban shifting cultivation. As a result, many communities were forcibly displaced from their homes in the forests. Some had to change occupations, while some resisted through large and small rebellions.

Burning the forest penda or podu plot

3. Who Could Hunt ?

Before the forest laws, many people who lived in or near forests had survived by hunting deer, partridges and a variety of small animals. This customary practise was prohibited by the forest laws. Those who were caught hunting were now punished for poaching.

While the forest laws deprived people of their customary rights to hunt, hunting of big game became a sport. Under colonial rule the scale of hunting increased to such an extent that various species became almost extinct. The British saw large animals as signs of a wild, primitive and savage society. They believed that by killing dangerous animals the British would civilise India. They gave rewards for killing big animals on the grounds that they pose a threat to cultivators. Initially certain areas of forests were reserved for hunting. Only much later did environmentalists and conservators begin to argue that all these species of animals needed to be protected, and not killed.

Need to Know?

Baigas were a forest community of Central India. In 1892, after their shifting cultivation was stopped, they petitioned to the government:

'We daily starve, having had no foodgrain in our possession. The only wealth we possess is our axe. We have no clothes to cover our body with, but we pass cold nights by the fireside. We are now dying for want of food. We cannot go elsewhere. What fault have we done that the government does not take care of us? Prisoners are supplied with ample food in jail. A cultivator of the grass is not deprived of his holding, but the government does not give us our right who have lived here for generations past.'

Elwin (1939), cited in Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India.

REBELLION IN THE FOREST

In many parts of India, and across the world, forest communities rebelled against the changes that were being imposed on them. The leaders of these movements against the British like Siddhu and Kanu in the Santhal Parganas, Birsa Munda of Chhotanagpur or Alluri Sitarama Raju of Andhra Pradesh are still remembered today in songs and stories. We will now discuss in detail one such rebellion which took place in the kingdom of Bastar in 1910.

1. The People of Bastar: Bastar is located in the southernmost part of Chhattisgarh and borders Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Maharashtra. The central part of Bastar is on a plateau. To the north of this plateau is the Chhattisgarh plain and to its south is the Godavari plain. The river Indrawati winds across Bastar east to west. A number of different communities live in Bastar such as Maria and Muria Gonds, Dhurwas, Bhatras and Halbas. The people of Bastar believe that each village was given its land by the Earth, and in return, they look after the earth by making some offerings at each agricultural festival. In addition to the Earth, they show respect to the spirits of the river, the forest and the mountain. Since each village knows where its boundaries lie, the local people look after all the natural resources within that boundary. If people from a village want to take some wood from the forests of another village, they pay a small fee called devsari, dand or man in exchange. Some villages also protect their forests by engaging watchmen and each household contributes some grain to pay them. Every year there is one big hunt where the headmen of villages in a pargana (cluster of villages) meet and discuss issues of concern, including forests.

2. The Fears of the People:

In 1905, the British Government proposed to reserve two-thirds of the forests, to stop shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of forest produce, the people of Bastar were very worried. For long, villagers had been suffering from increased land rents and frequent demands for free labour and goods by colonial officials. Then came the terrible famines, in 1899-1900 and again in 1907-1908. Reservations proved to be the last straw.

The initiative was taken by the Dhurwas of the Kanger forest, where reservation first took place. Although there was no single leader, many people speak of Gunda Dhur, from village Nethanar, as an important figure in the movement. In 1910, mango boughs, a lump of earth, chillies and arrows, began circulating between villages. These were actually messages inviting villagers to rebel against the British. Every village contributed something to the rebellion expenses. Bazaars were looted, the houses of officials and traders, schools and police stations were burnt and robbed, and grain redistributed. Most of those who were attacked were in some way associated with the colonial state and its oppressive laws.

The British sent troops to suppress the rebellion. The adivasi leaders tried to negotiate, but the British surrounded their camps and fired upon them. After that they marched through the villages flogging and punishing those who had taken part in the rebellion. Most villages were deserted as people fled into the jungles. It took three months for the British to regain control. However, they never managed to capture Gunda Dhur.

Need to Know?

In 1947 Bastar kingdom was merged with Kanker kingdom and become Bastar district in Madhya Pradesh. In 1998 it was divided again into three districts, Kanker, Bastar and Dantewada. In 2001, these became part of Chhattisgarh. The 1910 rebellion first started in the Kanger forest area (encircled) and soon spread to other parts of the state.

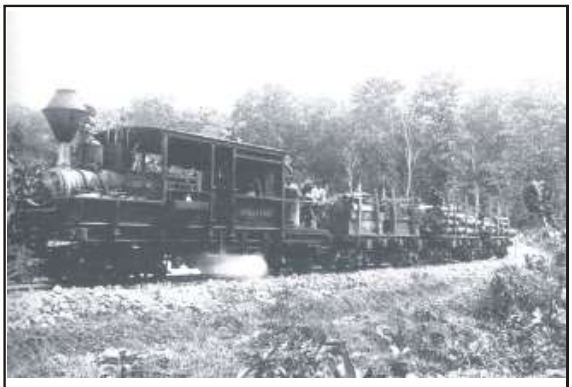
In an major victory for the rebels, work on reservation was temporarily suspended, and the area to be reserved was reduced to roughly half of that planned before 1910. The revolt also inspired the other tribal people to rebel against the unjust policies of the British Government.

FOREST TRANSFORMATIONS IN JAVA

Java is now famous as a rice-producing island in Indonesia. But once upon a time it was covered mostly with forests. The colonial power in Indonesia were the Dutch, and as we will see, there were many similarities in the laws for forest control in Indonesia and India. Java in Indonesia is where the Dutch started forest management. Like the British, they wanted timber from Java to build ships. In 1600, the population of Java was an estimated 3.4 million. There were many villages in the fertile plains, but there were also many communities living in the mountains and practising shifting cultivation.

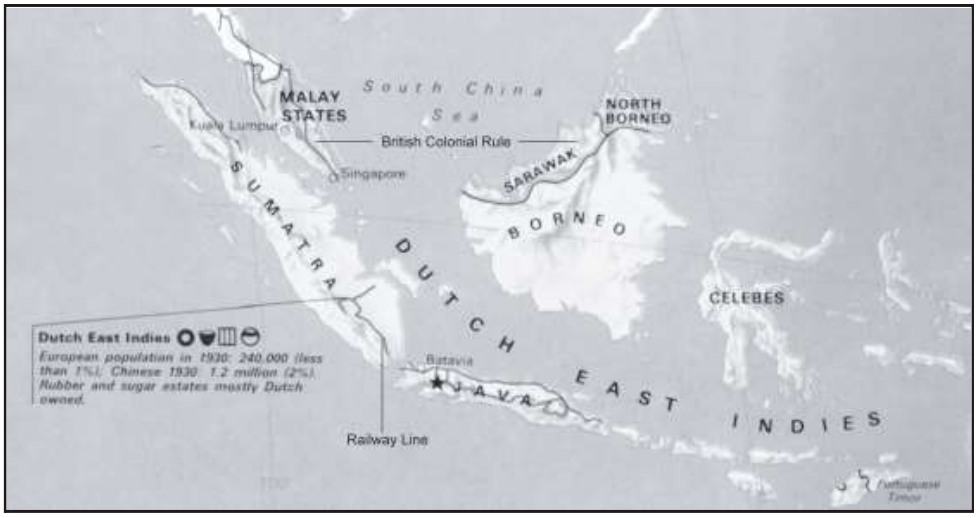
1. **The Woodcutters of Java:** The Kalangs of Java were a community of skilled forest cutters and shifting cultivators. They were so valuable that in 1755 when the Mataram kingdom of Java split, the 6,000 Kalang families were equally divided between the two kingdoms. Without their expertise, it would have been difficult to harvest teak and for the kings to build their palaces. When the Dutch began to gain control over the forests in the eighteenth century, they tried to make the Kalangs work under them. In 1770, the Kalangs resisted by attacking a Dutch fort at Joana, but the uprising was suppressed.

2. **Dutch Scientific Forestry:** The Dutch enacted forest laws in Java, restricting villagers access to forests. Now wood could only be cut for specified purposes only from specific forests under close supervision. Villagers were punished for grazing cattle in young stands, transporting wood without a permit, or travelling on forest roads with horse carts or cattle. The Dutch first imposed rents on land being cultivated in the forest and then exempted some villages from the rent on land if they worked collectively to provide free labour and buffaloes for cutting and transporting timber. This was known as the ***Blandongdiensten***. Later, instead of rent exemption, forest villagers were given small wages, but their right to cultivate forest land was restricted.



Train transporting teak out of the forest - colonial period

3. Samin's Challenge: Around 1890, Surontiko Samin of Randublatung village, a teak forest village, began questioning state ownership of the forest. He argued that the state had not created the wind, water, earth and wood, so it could not own it. Soon a widespread movement developed. Amongst those who helped organise it were Samin's sons-in-law. By 1907, 3,000 families were following his ideas. Some of the Saminists protested by lying down on their land when the Dutch came to survey it, while others refused to pay taxes or fines or perform labour.



4. War and Deforestation:

The First World War and the Second World War had a major impact on forests. In India, working plans were abandoned at this time, and the forest department cut trees freely to meet British war needs.

In Java, the Dutch destroyed sawmills and burnt piles of giant teak logs so that they would not fall into Japanese hands. The Japanese then exploited the forests recklessly for their own war industries, forcing forest villagers to cut down forests.

Many villagers used this opportunity to expand cultivation in the forest. After the war, it was difficult for the Indonesian Forest Service to get this land back.

5. New Developments in Forestry: Since the 1980s, governments across Asia and Africa have begun to see that scientific forestry and the policy of keeping forest communities away from forests has resulted in many conflicts. Conservation of forests rather than collecting timber has become a more important goal. The government has recognised that in order to meet this goal, the people who live near the forests must be involved. In many cases, across India, from Mizoram to Kerala, dense forests have survived only because villages protected them in sacred groves known as sarnas, *devarakudu, kan, rai*, etc. Some villages have been patrolling their own forests, with each household taking it in turns, instead of leaving it to the forest guards. Local forest communities and environmentalists today are thinking of different forms of forest management.

Need to Know?
The Allies would not have been as successful in the First World War and the Second World War if they had not been able to exploit the resources and people of their colonies. Both the world wars had a devastating effect on the forests of India, Indonesia and elsewhere. Working plans were abandoned, and the forest department cut freely to satisfy war needs.