

COLONIAL FOREST ADMINISTRATION IN MADRAS

PRESIDENCY (1857-1882)-A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Before the advent of the Europeans particularly the British, there was no systematic approach towards scientific forestry/forest management. After the Industrial Revolution, there was heavy demand for the raw materials world over. When there was resource depletion for oak timbers in London, they realized the need for proper forest management. But in India the British government thought the woods that available were inexhaustible and so exploitation was continued.

After the 1857 Revolt, due to the construction of railroads and development activities the demands for these resources were high. Initially they did not realize the importance of conservation. After the huge loss of forest wealth only, they were thinking of introducing forest management and so the appointment of Dietrich Brand is, the well trained forester from Germany. Slowly they enacted forest laws not only in British occupied territories but also implemented by appointing trained foresters in Princely states also.

Initially Chief Conservators were the British; only training was given to Indians for subordinate posts. The British government also started forest rangers college to train rangers. By all their dints they classified Indian forests into three categories and permission to entry was denied in Reserved forest area even for the local chieftain. Denial of their rights led to the revolt of local people against British government. Though there was opposition the system they followed continued till India got independence. Moreover the level of exploitation was high during two world wars due to the heavy demand of wood logs for ship building and other works. After independence, Indian government realized the importance of forest resources and so policies were formulated accordingly.

KEYWORDS: Forests, Conservation, British Supremacy, Classification of Forests, Timber, Teak Plantations, The Indian Forest Act of 1865, Madras Presidency, Madras Forest Act of 1882

INTRODUCTION

Forests are a major factor of environmental conservation and control extremes of heat and cold, rendering the climate more equable. Forests have an appreciable effect on the climate. They also tend to increase the relative humidity of the air and retard evaporation. In this way forests afford protection to animals and crops against strong, cold or hot and dry winds, and rays of the sun and prevent desiccation and vegetative retrogression.

Forests tend to increase local precipitation, at least to the extent of increasing the number of rainy days. Forests enrich the soil with fallen leaves and debris and increase its depth, porosity and water storage capacity. In hilly terrains, forests regulate the water supply, feeding springs in dry weather, promoting a perennial instead of a seasonal stream flow and tending to prevent sudden and violent rises of water during rains and floods. They help to prevent soil

erosion, landslips, shifting sands and silting up and consequent overflowing of rivers, thus reducing the dangers of floods. On level ground, forests have a draining action; the clearing of forests on wet land increases its swampiness, which in arid regions it may increase the salinity of streams.¹ Forests supply timber, fuel, pulpwood and other varied products, which in turn support major industrial activity in various sectors and provide large-scale employment. Forests are the home of wildlife, and afford important aesthetic and tourist values. They have vital biological importance because of the floral and fauna associated with them.

Forests are important to our ecological, economic and social wellbeing. They provide wood and non-wood products, recreational opportunities and other non-market goods and services such as water and clean air. They also perform important environmental functions, such as protecting the health of our water catchments, and providing habitats for plant and animal species, thereby playing a vital role in the conservation of biodiversity.¹

Forests can have considerable indigenous and cultural heritage values. They are used for education, and their aesthetic values are also highly valued. The provision of clean water, conversion of carbon dioxide (atmospheric carbon) into wood (stored carbon) through the process of photosynthesis (carbon sequestration), and the maintenance of fertile soils that support healthy and productive ecosystems are critical processes performed by our forests. Forests provide many social and economic benefits to the communities that regularly interact with them, particularly regional and indigenous communities. Forests can contribute to sustainable economic growth as well as community development

The forests are one of the major forms of natural landscape and are the most important natural resources of the world."Originally over two-fifth of the land area of the earth, exclusive of polar regions or about 23 million square miles is supposed to have been covered with the primeval forests. About one third of this once forested area has been robbed by men of its natural protection cover and been turned into barren desert." ²Forests are distributed unevenly across the globe, with 17 percent in Africa, 14 percent in Asia, 27 percent in Europe, 14 percent in North & Central America, 23 percent in South America and 5 percent in Oceania. Forests once covered 50 percent of the earth's surface-today that now has dwindled to 30 percent.

Forests are the sources of every possible kind of material values, fuel, building material, industrial raw materials and many by products and also the most important factors of geographical environment exerting immense influence upon hydrological and climatic conditions, the soil forming process, the growth and yield of agricultural crops of adjoining fields, the health conditions of populated places and so forth.

The forests are not only important for their economic utility but they also influence the social and economic life of mankind, modify their views and provide new thoughts to the poets and artists.

The importance of forests which has been discussed above has a special significance for India in general where forests roughly occupy 23 percent of the total area. A considerable portion of revenue of the states comes from the forest royalty.

The present work is an attempt to study/explore the forest administration in Madras Presidency (1857-1882) under the British rule. The year 1857 in which India was brought under the direct control of British Queen and the year 1882 in which the first Madras forest act was passed. Hence attempt was made by the researcher to find out the status of Colonial forest administration from 1857 to 1882.

Forests in India through the Ages

In the Indian subcontinent the term 'forest' does not merely mean an area covered with trees but it carries the impression of an entity that is a sum total of ecological, edaphic and biological parameters. According to the cultural traits of the country, forests hold a very important place in the life and philosophy of the people apart from the material gains that it brings about continuously ever since the birth of civilization³.

Very little is known of the features of forest administration in the country prior to the initiation of regular forest operations by the British on their attainment of the supremacy of India.⁴

In the pre-British periods, the successive wars of invasion and immigration into India inevitably had their effect on the forests. The early Aryans were a pastoral people interested in the pursuit of agriculture, cleared forests only in the areas in which they actually settled down and maintained all their big institutions in the Sylvan surroundings of the forests. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana give attractive descriptions of forest like Dandakaranya, Nandavan etc. The ancient culture of Hindus had its origin in the Aranyas and Ashrams. There was great reverence for vans/forests and groves near temples.

In the days of Chandra Gupta Maurya, there was a superintendent of Forests who was assisted by some staff. The protection of wild life in the forest areas was part of their duty. There were punishments for forest offences. The punishments for unauthorized killing of elephants was death.

The forests of those days under Hindu rulers, were classified as

- Those set apart for the study of religion
- Reserved forests for the supply of forest produce
- Forests set apart for the grazing of the royal elephants
- Hunting ground of the Royalty
- Hunting ground for the public

During the days of Ashoka, much importance was laid to the planting of trees along the roads and on camping sites. Growing of medicinal plants was also encouraged.⁵ In the Artha Shastra legal classification of forests has been given and three main classes of forests have been named as i)reserved forests ii)forests donated to Brahmins iii)forests for public use⁶.

During the Gupta period forests were one of the main sources of revenue. A new class of forest officers called Gaulmikas for the collection of revenue were appointed. Plantation of forest trees was carried out in villages. From the works of the Chinese traveler, Huien Tsang, it is in the 7th Century C.E, there were dense forests in the foothills of the Himalayas. Thereafter upto about the 14th century there was a trend of disintegration and India was divided into numerous states which were struggling amongst themselves for supremacy and besides this there were foreign invasions and no effort towards forest protection seems to have been made. Influential people used to organize Shikar (hunting) and large scale fellings for the purpose of defence and other purposes were done.⁷

During the Mughal period in the 16th &17th Century CE, although there was some unification and integration of states, no attention to the preservation of forests seems to have been paid. Emphasis was on agriculture and forests areas

were cleared for this purpose. Mughals used forests as game reserves for the purpose of sport and they laid more stress on gardening.

Forests in Early British Period

In the early years of their rule, the British also made large indents on the timber wealth of the country. The newly established British administration in India was not alive to the need for careful husbanding of forest resources and was even under the impression that the forest wealth of India was inexhaustible. Agriculture and urbanization expanded at the cost of massive forest depletion from the late eighteenth century onward. In each region the British quickly constructed military cantonments, civilian settlements and new transport facilities all providing commercial markets for timber.⁸ Large scale felling of forests were carried out mainly for ship building and railway sleepers without any efforts for forest preservation and development. As supplies of first class Oak timber became short in England, large quantities of teak from India were used for the British admiralty's fleet.

In many localities forests were considered as obstruction for further development of agriculture. Hence no serious attempt was made to prevent destruction of forests. The general policy was to expand agriculture and to obtain teak and other timber for the navy and for constructional purposes.⁹

Steps Taken towards Forest Conservancy

The first step in Indian forestry began in the South. In the year 1800, a commission was appointed to enquire into the availability of teak in the Malabar forests. In 1805, a forest committee was constituted to enquire into the capacity of forests and the status of proprietary rights in them. In the year 1806, the Government of Madras appointed Captain Watson as Conservator of forests. His methods gave rise to discontent and in 1823, the post of Conservator was abolished. In 1842, Conolly, Collector of Malabar laid the foundation of the world famous teak plantations of Nilambur in Kerala.¹⁰

In 1855 Lord Dalhousie, then Governor General promulgated for the first time an outline for forest conservancy by the issue of a memorandum of the Government of India dated 3rd August 1855 which was called by Stebbing as "Charter of the Indian Forests"¹¹

In 1858 Cleghorn was appointed as the first regular Conservator of Forests of Madras Presidency and it was he who published his book on 'Forests & Gardens of South India' and laid the foundation for an effective system of Forest Conservancy in Madras. In 1856, Dietrich Brandis was appointed Superintendent of Forests in Pegu who was the first professionally qualified German Forester later came to serve in India. Till about the middle of the nineteenth century, the attitude of the British administrators, with some notable exceptions was:

- To obtain and export large quantities of Indian timber for use by the British Navy
- To obtain timber for local constructions
- To fell and export the scented sandalwood to various European countries
- To allow free development of agriculture by clearing forests¹²

After the 1857 Revolt, India was directly brought under the control of the British Queen Victoria. After the Revolt, the tremendous impetus given to railway construction caused heavy demands on forests.

Establishment of Forest Department under Government of India

The Governor General in his letter dated 1st November 1864 to the Secretary of State for India pointed out that the idea of allowing proprietary rights in forests to individuals must be abolished, as such rights might lead to the destruction of forests. Exchange of correspondence between the Governor-General and the Secretary of State resulted in the birth of a separate forest department under the Government of India and Brandis became the head of this department (Inspector General of forest). Under his guidance, the forest service proceeded to transform the working of India's forests—from the initial practice of exploiting them merely for obtaining supplies of timber, to one of treating them as a biological growing entity of much value, and handling them in accordance with the principles of scientific forestry.¹³ Dr. Cleghorn was appointed to assist Sir Brandis.

The Indian Forest Act of 1865 came into being as the first attempt at forest legislation by the British in India. Under this Act, the local Governments were empowered to draft local rules for enforcement in their respective regions. Steps were taken to prevent acts which caused injury or destruction to the forests. This act was not adopted by the Madras Presidency; it enacted a separate Madras Act 17 years later in 1882.

In 1869, the forest department was reorganized and forest officers were classified into Conservators, Deputy Conservators, Assistant Conservators except in Madras and Bombay Presidency where Conservators had been appointed earlier.

In 1878 Indian Forest act was revised and a Forest Rangers Training School was inaugurated at Dehra Dun. This revised Act was extended to all provinces of British India with the exception of Madras, Assam, Coorg, Burma, Bihar, Hissar District of the Punjab, Ajmer and Baluchistan which aimed at improving the inadequacies of the Indian Forest Act of 1865.¹⁴ This Act enabled the Forest department to bring the forests under proper management and protection also empowered government to declare certain areas to be 'state forests' but without interfering with the rights and privileges of the people. The claims of the latter were on such an excessive scale that real forest conservancy became practically impossible..The result was that a new Forest Act was passed in 1878.¹⁵

After a visit to Madras by Brandis who spent merely a year in making a report on the condition of its forests, the Madras Government appreciated the need to have a forest act for the scientific and effective managements of forests and passed its own Forest Act of 1882.

Initially the forest bill was introduced into the legislative council on 29th June and after having been altered in several essential points was passed on 26th August and received the assent of the Governor and General in October.

This act makes a distinction between two classes of cases. In the case of claims of rights of occupancy and ownership the appeal from the orders of the forest settlement officer lies to the district court while in the case of claims of rights of way, water-course, pasture and so forest produce the appeal lies to a forest court or where no such court has been constituted to an officer of the revenue department appointed by the government. Chapter VI prescribes the constitution and functions of the forest court. The court will ordinarily consist of the district judge, the collector and a person not in the service of government.

In regard to land at the disposal of government not included within reserved forests the madras act follows the lines of the Burma act and does not attempt to constitute a separate class of forests as is done by the Indian act.¹⁶

The Madras Act is framed on the same general lines as the Indian and Burma Acts, but is improved in several points. The chapter on the constitution of Reserve is more logically arranged and the procedure is somewhat simplified. The chapter on the protection of land at the disposal of government not included in reserved forests, which again has the same object in view as the chapter on protected forests in the Indian Act, shows a great improvement, even on the provisions of the Burma Act. There is no reason why with certain alterations, the Madras Act should not be made applicable to the whole of India. But the Madras Act has no great defect, in as far as it admits of an appeal or suit beyond the District Forest Court.

In general, all these acts passed by the British provided for the control over forests and lands not belonging to the State, if such control appears necessary for the public weal or if the treatment such forests have received from their owners injuriously affects the public welfare or safety; but the provision that the owner of the land can require the Government to acquire the land in question under the land Acquisition Act has rendered special legislation necessary when such interference was deemed necessary. When the Madras Act of 1882 was passed, 130 square miles in the Southern Circle were constituted reserve under Section 25 of this Act¹⁷

CONCLUSIONS

Before the advent of the Europeans particularly the British, there was no systematic approach towards scientific forestry/forest management. After the Industrial Revolution, there was heavy demand for the raw materials world over. When there was resource depletion for oak timbers in London, they realized the need for proper forest management. But in India the British government thought the woods that available were inexhaustible and so exploitation was continued.

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Forests are living, they are renewable, and provide a wide range of benefits to all who interact with them. A tree can be harvested and a new tree grown in its place in the space of a single human lifetime. The sustainable management of our forests is aimed at ensuring there are enough resources for our generation, while laying the foundations for future generations India has lost 367 square kilometers of forest cover in the past two years. According to the India State of Forest Report, 2011, released by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) on February 7, the total forest cover in the country is now at 6,92,027 sq km. This accounts for 21.05 per cent of the total geographical area of India.¹⁸To conclude let us all aim at all our development activities without the degradation of environment.

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