Creating ‘manageable’ forests: Plantations and Plantation Workers in India

When the British invaded India 250 years ago, they found the sub-continent covered with a mosaic of vegetation they did not comprehend. Tall dark trees, gnarled and knotted creepers, wild grasslands…the sheer tropical abundance of India’s forests shocked, overwhelmed them. Ultimately, forests came to signify a number of simpler issues (or things): snakes, tigers, barbarians/rebels, pests, and adventure. British colonizers/traders never neglected the mundane and practical, though, which lay beyond this ‘exotic’ and ‘orient’. The East India Company went on ‘empirebuilding’ and the first 100 years of British rule witnessed a colossal plunder of half of India’s forest vegetation. Resultant timbers went to feed the railways and the new and old shipyards in both India and England. The ‘cleared’ land were settled to white planters (tea, coffee, indigo and sugarcane), and the native ‘zamindars’, the new class of feudal lords that the British created.

The carnage would not stop before 1860, when a century of empire-building and associated political stresses and compulsions would make the rulers wiser, and in many areas —for instance, areas under administrative control of ‘native’ Kings and Nawabs— forests would be let alone. A different fate awaited forests within the empire. In 1864, the first forest administration for the British Empire (Imperial Forest Service) was created. In 1868 and 1878, India was ‘endowed’ with its first forest policy and forest act, which, prescribed, among other things, banishing indigenous communities from the forest and restricting forest usage by them. In the interests of the queen and empire, the British proclaimed all ‘unsettled’ and ‘ownerless’ common property resources like pastures and forests ‘eminent domain’, which meant that the colonial state would ‘manage’ the forests as it saw fit. ‘Management’ of resources (the British called it scientific forest management) was the key, which, the Indian forest policy claimed would make forests more homogenous and productive.

‘Homogenisation’ was the magic word with which every working plan of India’s forests started (till as late as 1988!). Perhaps the real urgency lay in the colonial mindset of domestication or ‘wilderness taming’ —to make something civilized out of a pagan landscape. Accordingly, in between 1864 and 1947 (when the British left India), Indian forests were taught ‘order’, with neat rows of tall and elegant pines filling up the hillsides, and sal (Shorea robusta) and teak (Tectona grandis) monocultures replacing the riffraff (in vernacular hindi ‘jhar’). In fact, forests were increasingly being managed as estates and forest villages (new colonies of plantation workers) were being set up inside forests. Later, when Dietrich Brandis, the ‘father of Indian forestry’, developed the ‘taungya’ system of plantation, many of these villages came to be known as ‘taungyas’. Taungya became the premiere plantation method not only in India, but also several Asian and African countries.

Ecologically, taungya brought the much-needed fire component back both to tropical and temperate forest systems. Socio-politically, it offered a temporary solution to the problem of increasing tribal unrest in forest areas of British India. Taungya villages had some sort of 'rehabilitation' space for displaced ‘jhumiyas’ (shifting cultivators), where they could clearfell forests and burn the area to raise food-crops. The cultivators then had to raise plantations in that land. During initial years of taungya, this labour was mandatory ‘beggar’ —the cultivators received no wages. Despite this, taungyas showed some improvements on pre-taungya forest villages. In Bengal for instance,

'permanent' forest villages started to come up from 1910 onwards, where settlers signed agreement papers or bonds with the Department. These agreements spelt out some privileges for forest villagers, like free timber and other implements for building quarters, firewood and fodder —in addition to cultivable land.

In independent India, the forest department continued with the task of homogenizing forests, and the 1952 forest policy legitimized this by saying that forests would be managed to meet the ‘paramount needs’ of the nation. These needs translated into aggressive commercial forestry, and, according to Planning Commission of India and Forest Survey of India estimates, more than 17 million hectares of plantations came up in next 38 years, till the new Forest Policy of 1988 prescribed a moratorium on clearing natural forests. Plantations continued in the post-1988 period, however, and in the 8th and 9th 5-year plan periods, about 16 million (!) hectares of new plantations were created. Though the 1988 policy talked about integrating livelihood and biomass needs of forest communities in future forest management strategies and plans, plantations programmes in India continue to be governed by industrial and urban consumers’ needs. This becomes clear from the choice of species. According to a 1999 Forest Survey of India estimate the forest department has created 15 million hectares of plantations till 1997, which include large blocks of pulp and timber plantations (Eucalyptus and Teak account for about 16 % of total area). About 20 million hectares of plantations came up in agricultural land under firm or social forestry programmes.

According to the FAO’s Forest Resources Assessment (2000), India has 34 million hectares of plantations, and going by plan targets, another 30 million are on the cards. This makes, by 2020, a whooping 65-70 (add 4+ millions between 2000 and 2005) million hectares of plantations, about 36 % of the world total! Expectedly, the Indian Government advocates the World Bank PPP (public-private partnership) formula to meet costs, which means that the State would enter into contracts with corporates (or International Financial Institutions or whatever) on behalf of user communities mobilized through the Joint Forest Management Programme. Such experiments have already been practiced in the state of Andhra Pradesh, where entire communities were driven out of their lands (officially, ‘encroached’). The strong paper/pulp lobby in India demands that ‘degraded’ forest lands be leased out to companies to raise ‘protected’ plantations, and for the time being they are demanding a ‘tiny wee’ amount of 1.6 million hectares! This is happening despite several recommendations and reports by government agencies that such moves can impact forest communities adversely.

While plantations grow and cover the country, original plantation workers of India, the forest villagers, continue to languish in their ghettos, deprived of all privileges, and bereft of all rights. Because forestry now is a thoroughly mechanized and capital-intensive industry, and forest management practices in the country show a much-vaunted paradigm shift in favour of 'biodiversity conservation', importance of forest labour has decreased. For forest villagers, this translates into perpetual unemployment, untold economic hardships and misery. The villagers have no access to various development schemes or bank loans and any ownership rights over their agricultural landholdings or homesteads. In many areas, the Forest Department threatens them with eviction. There can hardly be better instances of a sovereign state declaring a whole body of its citizens persona non grata, and waging a war against them.

The stage set for a full-scale market invasion in terms of carbon trade and ecosystem services trading, Indian forests, and forest communities struggle against the twin menace of production and protection forestry.

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