

Book review

A forest history of India

Richard P Tucker, 2011, Sage Publications

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Richard P Tucker's *A Forest History of India* is a collection of articles written mostly in the 1980s and 1990s, and is among the first environmental history studies in India. As an ecologist, I cannot comment on the contribution of this corpus to the discipline of environmental history, but will attempt to highlight its usefulness for ecology.

The book is a compilation of pre-published material; divided in ten chapters that cover forestry in India from the time when records were systematically established by the British administration, till the 1990s. The geographical areas covered are principally the Himalayas and the Western Ghats, the two most forested areas of India during this period.

Three factors had tremendous importance in the alteration and management of the forest cover: the farmers, the timber contractors, and the Forest Department. They schematically represent respectively; the subsistence requirements of rural populations, market forces, and the imperative of a long-term management. Other actors such as herders, the Revenue Department, and slash-and-burn practitioners are also a part of this epic story of India's deforestation, but basically fit into this triangular model of forces acting on the forest cover.

This simple model however becomes enormously complex when ethnicity, politics, economy, ecology, geopolitics, etc. come into play in the multifaceted country that India was during British rule, and still remains after Independence.

The merit of the author is to depict a meaningful picture to the readers that helps them understand the forces at work in a given region and socio-political context. This is done with clarity, and with no overarching ideological framework that sometimes diminishes the objectivity of sociological analysis.

From the book, we get the sense that before European colonization, Indian forests in the Himalayas and the Western Ghats were still relatively untouched (at least those away from the cities), due to low population densities in both these regions. Multiple agreements between villagers, lords, and kings helped share the abundant timber and non-timber forest products. The farms depended on abundant forest resources surrounding the villages. The modern concept of private property was not operational and a system of "protections" encompassed all properties. The villages had no strict limits and boundaries ended-up somewhere in the forest.

Colonization changed this traditional set-up, and Tucker clearly affirms that, "in each region of India the first era of massive deforestation occurred shortly after it was absorbed into the British Empire". Rules were changed that drove ecological destruction till the present time.

The first wave of deforestation occurred to suit the needs of the Empire, and at different times was due to the requirements of the Royal Navy, the railways, the war efforts of the Twentieth Century, and development, all represented

“unquestionable” reasons why the forests had to be destroyed. Immediately after the axe, the plough of the farmer transformed forest land into fields. Tucker recalls, with plenty of such examples, that the copper and iron mines of Kumaon started to decline by the 1860s, only thirty years after initial interest had been expressed by the British over this industry. Enthusiastic, progressive administrators had declared the resources inexhaustible. The forest cover and industry’s source of energy were gone in one generation. Some however, like the famous German forester Dietrich Brandis, understood that forests would not provide sustainable yields the way they were “managed”. This precipitated the creation of the Indian Forest Department, in 1865. Due to the scarcity of ecological data at the time, and also because it was the “poor parent” of the Revenue Department, the Forest Department mostly exercised a regulatory role only after initial and irreparable damages were committed.

With an increasing population, easier access to forests, the opening of India to international markets, and a struggle towards independence, the Forest Department had to face severe constraints – sometimes with considerable success (the first restoration of Sal forests) – in order to produce timber in a sustainable manner. But in general, the downward spiral of the native Indian forests had been initiated with associated risks to water security and soil erosion, not to mention the loss in biological diversity.

Tucker’s contribution is important to present day environmentalists because it illustrates the recurrent mistakes committed along the years by the various players. And unless we meditate over the past, we are not likely to make considerable progress in the future as far as the forest cover is concerned.

In several instances Tucker insists upon the fact that the Forest Department had no inclination to understand the exploitation strategies of farmers or tribal people. As the Forest Department attempted to protect resources according to a “logical” management plan that in general did not make sense to locals, coping tricks, like illegal felling, corruption, etc.,

were concocted in order to escape restrictions. The first lesson for modern-days ecologists and foresters is to comprehend the local dynamics well before imposing a management plan that would run against the subsistence needs. No management plan can run properly without the basic respect of attempting to understand the other players better.

Recurring throughout the book, are mentioned the failed efforts to document ecosystems and species before they were destroyed. Botanists of the Forest Department at the Forest Research Institute (FRI) struggled to describe the species with immediate economic importance, but other species could not be studied either because of the lack of resources or the lack of interest. Consequently, we don’t know how many species of plants (and animals) and how many ecosystems have disappeared. We can’t even measure the damage committed to remaining ecosystems. All we know is that early discoverers marvelled at the forests and the size of the trees. A sense we can’t share any more. The debate over the need to document is still alive today. There is a consensus among some political and industrial elite that environmentalists prevent development. Remaining forests are still the target of projects “critical for the development of the nation”, and as such, no proper evaluation is deemed necessary before forests are submerged or cut to the ground: why bother when a project is an absolute priority? This approach is extremely damaging, as show the historical records. The chance of finding appropriate solutions (ecosystem restoration, translocation of species, displacement of ecosystems, etc.) is abandoned at the onset of such projects. The main difference with earlier managers is that they barely knew what they were doing, whereas now we know. Knowledge is the power to correct some negative effects. And when knowledge is disallowed, corrective actions become near impossible.

This book is a valuable collection of writing. But it is as user friendly as the Publisher want it to be, with the warning that the “material has been presented in its original form”. This is a bit unfortunate. The physical units change

from chapter to chapter, the notes are at the end of a chapter or at the bottom of the page in another one, and there is no entry for the Forest Department in the Index.

In spite of these mishaps, the clarity of the texts, the wealth of sources analysed and the

variety of the topics addressed, make it a very valuable document for students of forestry and ecology. It should also be a source of inspiration to present-day managers who are concerned with sustainable management of natural resources in India.