

CHAPTER - I

PRE-COLONIAL POLICY ON FORESTS IN INDIA

The process of reckless destruction of forests had gone on for centuries in Europe. India was not an exception. Her early history of the forests is closely bound up with the history of ancient inhabitants, as has been the case in many other parts of the world. From the time immemorial the aboriginal inhabited in India which was covered with more or less dense forests.¹ They had to depend on forests for their livelihood, specially for firewood, litter and the grazing for cattle which forests provide. Timber was necessary for houses and agricultural implements. But their population was not so much to do any harm to the vast forest areas in India. Still it is believed by some archaeologists and historians that Sind, Baluchistan and Western Rajasthan were wooded during the prime period of Harappa or Indus Valley Civilization. But when the Harappan people began to use burnt bricks the indiscriminate felling of trees started and the progressive desiccation in these areas took place.²

It would not be a gross speculation to attribute this to 700 years of Indus culture spread over half a million square mile cutting the forest cover for domestic fuel, brick kiln, pottery kiln, metal melting and probably for many other uses. Such a mammoth consumption of wood per year is not easily replaceable. In consequence flooding of the Indus and erosion of the banks became a regular feature.³ With the shift of climate the rainfall decreased from 25 inches per year to almost 10 inches per year within a span of 500 — 600 years.⁴ Such a drastic change in the annual rain caused tons and tons of silt to settle and eventually get dried and lifted into the air because of anticyclonic currents replacing the inter tropical discontinuity line. Once the air get charged with dust any precipitation becomes difficult. This finally dries the water sources rendering them salty and the subsoil water level falls down drastically. Indus or Harrappa culture, therefore, was already limping or gasping when the so-called Aryans came to these areas. Here ecology seems to, in an overall manner, be the most dominant agent in causing the collapse of the culture.⁵

This habit of destruction of forests in India continued. From the period of the immigration or emergence of the Aryans up to the advent of the English Indian forests had been more indiscriminately felled under the axe. Indian sages, on the one hand, spoke in praise of the forests, and on the other hand destroyed the forests for their cultivation and livestock. The Aryans were agricultural and pastoral people. In order to carry on their pursuits they commenced

burning and clearing away the dense forests in which they settled with a view to obtaining land for the growth of crops and on which to graze their cattle. The ancient epic, the Mahabharata tells us of the burning of Khundava forest. This forest appears to have been situated between the Ganga and Jamuna rivers, and the description forms the first semi-historical evidence of the destruction of the forests by the early settlers. When Maidanav, an aboriginal inhabitant of Khundava forest was evicted it implied total confiscation of existing use rights of the aborigines. As a result of this high-handedness of the Aryans the aborigines allied themselves for the destruction of forests. When the aborigines were evicted from usual habitat they had gone in to dense forest and mountains where by destroying forests they started shifting cultivation (Jhoom) and thereby earned their livelihood. Notwithstanding the continuity of this process even during 600 — 700 A.D. the forests were dense in the Himalayan foot-hills, particularly in present U.P., Bihar, some areas of Assam near Tripura, in the Allahabad – Rajmahal zone, Dandakaranya forest areas and also in the Deccan. The Western India from Bharoach (Broach) and northwards including Rajputana was hot and scarcity of trees was noticed by the Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang.⁶ By clearing forests agriculture flourished in the Indo-Gangetic alluvium of U.P., Bihar and Bengal. (Although there was no specific government policy on trees save and except the Mauryas in ancient India, yet in general the planting of trees either for fruit which the people yielded or for the purpose of obtaining shade was an act which was held in esteem in ancient India.) The Vedic people prayed for abundance of trees. They prayed to Agni not to destroy forests and wild animals. The system of ‘Vanaprastha’, that is, the third Asrama which was practised by the Brahmanas undoubtedly proved their love for forest-life. The scientific spirit of enquiry about the plant kingdom inspired the ancient Indians to discover that plant and trees are animate beings.⁷ In Chapter XXXV of ‘Santiparva’ of the Mahabharata atonement has been prescribed for killing animals and felling of the woods. The importance of forests was recognized during the Mauryan period. The Arthasastra mentions a Superintendent of forest produce, who also supervised the care of forests. The Arthasastra notes that the Superintendent of forest produce shall collect timber and other products of forests by employing those who guard productive forests. He shall not only start productive works in forests, but also fix adequate fines and compensation to be levied from those who cause any damage to productive forests except in calamities.⁸ The ill-effects of the random cutting down of forests must have been felt during the Mauryan period. Forests were also preserved and forest rules were framed since they were a source of revenue, which was provided by the tax on timber and on hunters who maintained a livelihood from the animals in forest.⁹ Asoka had love for trees and planted trees along the main highways. Furthermore, Asoka made repeated requests in his edicts that animals should be treated with kindness and care. The 5th Pillar Edict contains a detailed list of animals that are not to be killed under any circumstances, and a further list of animals and

creatures which are declared inviolable on certain days. The king concludes the list by stating that all quadrupeds which are neither useful nor edible should not be killed. This is a justifiable on unnecessary killing of animals.¹⁰

Thus it seems that when the Brahmins, Jains and Buddhists controlled the society forest still existed over a considerable part of India. This was, however, not the case when the foreigners at a later time invaded India. The great reduction in the forest areas in the country was slowly brought about by the constant invasions of the Central Asian peoples who brought their flocks with them; and as both people and flocks increased in numbers, wider and wider areas of forest were burnt and destroyed to obtain pastures for them. This period may be said to have culminated with the Mohammedan conquest of large portion of India. The Mohammedans had no regard for the forests, nor any religious scruples about destroying them.¹¹ The Mohammedans thought that the forest was a free gift of nature, and belonged to anyone, just as water did. The destruction, therefore, proceeded apace. Scholars think that India suffered from Mohammedan incursions just as Persia, Asia Minor, Spain and other countries on the Mediterranean suffered.¹² During this period the original agricultural population was further driven back into the forests, hills and mountains where they took the method of shifting cultivation which meant destruction of forests further.

In this way, man has proved himself surprisingly illiterate in reading the lessons of history. Perhaps this is because, blinded by the glare of immediate profits, he sees the pages of the past as blank. Whatever the cause, the results are discouraging repetition of mistakes. This has been true particularly with man's treatment of the forests. Properly managed, forests can enrich human life in a variety of ways which are both material and psychological. Poorly managed, they can be source for the disruption of the environment of an entire region. However, through the centuries we have seen a pattern repeated. The misuse of axe or saw, of fire or grazing, causes forest destruction. This leads to disruption of watersheds, to the erosion or loss of fertility of soils, to siltation and flooding in stream valleys, and loss of the continued productivity of the land on which man must depend. The process, yet goes on. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America the tropical forests disappear at a rate approaching the catastrophic.¹³ Even in countries where forestry is an old and well-established profession the pressure toward single purpose management of the land and dams after dams threaten the existence of the life-enriching diversity which has characterized forest lands in the past. In general, forests remain in those areas least suited to other uses.¹⁴

To take the case of India, in Sultanate period there was no policy for the preservation of forests. Contrary to it Balban took such steps which helped to destroy forests around Delhi.

Barani informs us that during the period of early Mamluk Sultans of Delhi, there were dense forests around Delhi, and the Mewati robbers took shelter in those forests. Balban in order to check the predatory raids of these robbers within a year cleared forests round the capital and the robbers hunted out. And forests were further destroyed when he built forts on the four corners of Delhi. He further cleared the forests of Awadh and Doab to suppress the peasants' revolt. To suppress the rebels of Katehar (Rohilkhand) he again cleared forests of the locality and a network of roads was constructed to facilitate administrative control. Muhammad Bin Tughluq (1325-51) tried to encourage agrarian extension by remitting revenues and providing credit to those peasants who cleared fresh land for agriculture. Later on, Firoj Tughluq constructed five canals to provide irrigation facilities to the peasants which cost large areas of forests in Northern India. He also constructed a good number of towns which needed destruction of forests in Northern India. Ferishta among others credits him with construction of numerous gardens but nothing is known about his attitude towards the preservation of natural forests. There was an official in sultanate period named Amir-i-Shikar who was in charge of the hunting establishment of the king and others but there was no department or minister in charge of forests.

From the reign of Babar till the era of East India Company, precious little is found about the detailed description of forest area and its distribution all over the country. From some sources, yet an estimate may be made of the distribution of forests in Mughal India. In his Autobiography the Emperor Babar "mentions that the pergunnas (subdivision of a district) were surrounded by jungles, and that the people of the pergunnas often fled to these jungles to avoid paying their revenues".¹⁵ It is further known that in the days of the Emperor Babar the rhinoceros abounded in the country adjacent to Ghogra, and wild elephants, first met with in numbers at Karrah, near Allahabad. On this and with other circumstantial evidences Sleeman concludes, "the Ghazeepur District, which is situated on the Ghogra, and far east of Karrah, must have been in a great degree of a forest swarming with herds of elephants and rhinoceros three or four hundred years ago".¹⁶ Babar even hunted rhinoceros in the neighbourhood of Peshwar. Babar says in his journal "... in the course my expeditions I frequently killed rhinoceros in the jungle of Peshwar and Hasnagar." Akbar shot tigers near Mathura. In 1615 Rev. Edward Terry was troubled by lions when he encamped at Mandu in Central India. He notes, "In those vast and extended woods there are lions, tigers and other beasts of prey and many wild elephants."¹⁷ He further referred that Jahangir and his courtiers used to ride down lions and kill them 'with their bows and carbines and launces'.¹⁸

Even at this background an accurate quantitative statement of forests or agricultural area of Akbar's period, let alone Mughal period, is out of question. But it is important to indicate that

during Akbar's period there was a lot of incentive for increasing the area of agriculture, and that obviously by reclamation of forest areas or by cultivating the fallow land. A project was taken up for land reclamation within five years, when the full revenue demand would be paid on completion by the peasant (1/3rd share), only 1/26th of which is payable in the first year. This financial incentive boosted up the reclamation work, but reclamation was not so much as to deforest the sub-continent.¹⁹ From Abu'l Fazl and other sources of the Mughal period it is assumed that in spite of the reclamation of land for agriculture many parts of India, particularly Eastern India were still heavily forested and contained wild animals.

It ought to be remembered that direct statements can often be supplemented by inferential evidence derived from information such as on locations of hunting grounds or haunts of wild animals. These incidental details tell us much about the extent of forest and even of forest types. For example, wild elephants obviously indicate the proximity of a dense forest while wild cheetahs imply the presence of grass lands and scrub.²⁰ Since five thousand elephants were kept in Emperor Akbar's establishment alone,²¹ and his nobles were ordered to maintain another 7,709 elephants under the conditions of the personal or *Zat* ranks,²² it is obvious that there were dense forests in India in Mughal period. This is again proved by the fact that the ruler of Assam alone possessed 1000 elephants, while 500 to 600 elephants were yearly caught in Assam. To add to it, the zamindars all over India in Mughal period maintained elephants. Besides, lions, tigers, rhinoceros and other beasts of prey were killed by the Mughal Emperors which indicate the presence of dense and vast forests all over India. Moreover, Abu'l Fazl mentioned the quantity of fire-wood consumed in the imperial kitchen, namely 1,500,00 mans (37,63,890 kilograms) a year. These information indicate that there were vast forest areas in Mughal India //

Another way to gauge the extent of nature's domain within the Mughal Empire, is by examining the statistics of area under cultivation for the different regions. This method has been taken by Shireen Moosvi and she writes, "These statistics are available to us in some profusion from the late 16th and the 17th centuries, and give us much help in delineating the boundaries between forest and waste, on the one side, and cultivation, on the other."²³ With such evidence at hand, an effort was taken by Irfan Habib in his '*Atlas of the Mughal Empire*.' It was modified and supplemented by Shireen Moosvi who showed (1) the extent of forest, scrub and desert in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, (2) the major forest products and notable representatives of wild life in the same period. But Moosvi's effort suffers from limitation since she was unable to show many details of the agricultural, forest, scrubby and desert zones. She took the authoritative map of Vegetation Features in the *Imperial Gazetteer Atlas*, valid for 1909 as the basis of her mapping, from which she reproduced the areas of forest, scrub and desert in Mughal

India.²⁴ If forest (including waste land), scrub and desert are subtracted from the maps, then only the agricultural land remains. Thus, “even a cursory glance at the maps showing the natural vegetation features of the 16th — 17th centuries brings out the large size of forested area and waste set against the much more restricted area of the agricultural zone at the time.”²⁵

(Shireen Moosvi compared her maps with the vegetation map of 1909 and found a considerable reduction of forests everywhere in India. According to her in three centuries since 1601 India saw near doubling of cultivated area which obviously implied considerable gain of the arable against forest and waste land. She showed that during the Mughal period major part of the sub-continent was thickly forested. (According to her, except for a narrow stretch of cultivation on both sides of the Brahmaputra and a small cultivated region between the Brahmaputra and Dihing rivers most of Assam and the other north-eastern parts of India were densely forested. (In Bengal the existence of thick forests was shown in 1781 in Rennell’s celebrated *Bengal Atlas*. In the north the submontane or Terai forests broadened into a large block covering much of Cooch Behar, and the *Sarkar* of Ghoraghat. It, then, with some breaks, extended to Sylhet, and linked up with the Arakan Forests.) In the Delta, the Sundarbans formed an isolated but large forest zone. A part of the great Central Indian Forest Orissa was covered with forests and some areas were rich with thick and impenetrable woods. Mughal India also saw thick and uninterrupted forest continuing from Himalayan foot hills along the India – Nepal border that formed a broad band of forest right from Purnea in Bihar to Bahraich in Awadh, forming the central part of the famous Terai Forest.) (Abu’l Fazl also reported of the dense forest in *Sarkar* Champaran. (The Terai forest in the Mughal era covered most of the region of eastern U.P. Tavernier in the middle of the 17th century reported that this region was “full of forest”; this forest line continued up to Rohilkhand.) Another part of the Central Indian Forest was the dense forest of Jharkhand in the south of the Mughal *suba* of Bihar. The most extensive unbroken forest within India in Mughal times was indeed in Central India. This forest is designated by Irfan Habib as the ‘Great Central Indian Forest’. This forest zone was stretching from Bastar (between Mahanadi and the Godavari), Jharkhand (between the Son and the Mahanadi) in the east to the borders of Gujrat (Dohad and Rajpipla). This region was full of dense forest since Lahori reported it as habitat of elephants.²⁶ There were jungle cover on both sides of the Narmada where Jahangir caught elephants in 1618,²⁷ and the Lakhi jungles on the banks of the river Sutlej which were so thick that it was difficult even for a man on foot to get easy passage.²⁸

In peninsular India, the forest cover down the Western Ghats and parts of the Deccan plateau was extensive since in the 17th century elephants and teak as well as other timbers had been available there. On the Deccan plateau particularly, there was a large block of forest

extending from Krishna-Tungabhadra confluence almost to the delta, south of the Krishna River. Tavernier found wild elephants being caught just north of Tirupati.²⁹

// (Besides, from the evidences of Abu'l Fazl, Sujan Rai, English factors, Bernier, Ralph Fitch, Manuchi, Thevenot and Portuguese records it is proved that private trade in Mughal India was carried on Fire-wood, Timber, Bamboo and cane, gum-lac, Beeswax, wild silks, Bezoar (particular type of goats who secreted bezoar stones in their stomachs which were taken by the Portuguese to Achin), Elephants et al. What is not proved is that the Mughal government had any interest in forest preservation, preservation of wild animals and trade of forest produce in state level/Forest did not retreat and much clearing had not occurred in Mughal era because there was no need of the extension of agriculture since there had been no need of further production in society/and the Mughals from the period of Aurangzeb were not interested in export trade as proved by the decline of Surat. But there is no document to prove that timber was in the list of Mughal export trade in the 17th century which 'was the golden period of Indian maritime trade'.³⁰ However, timber was used in domestic purposes for building houses, ships and country boats. Obviously, 'boatmen and carpenters drive a thriving trade'.³¹

(But Indian forests were mainly saved for social customs and religious traditions of the Indians. These guided the relationship between the majority of the Indian people including the aborigines and the forests. The perception was that forests, like other natural resources, are blessings from God. It was accepted that forests existed for the people and that the people had customary rights over forests, but at the same time, it was understood that forests must be respected and worshipped. As the population grew, various customs emerged irrespective of caste and creed that were aimed at protecting the forests and wild animals. Some social customs prohibited Hindus from cutting certain trees, such as peepul and banyan, shady trees which benefit the people. With the passage of time, the ideas of Vanadevi, Vanabibi, Dakshinaroy developed. All are connected with forests. In fact, several superstitions are still associated with the cutting of certain trees) In Hindu customs the cutting of fruit-bearing trees has been prohibited. Forests were regarded as Devaranya (God's grove) and therefore were sacred. A number of social customs, which were accepted by all religious sects, also emerged, as in Aravalli Hills, where it was understood that use of axe would bring killing storms in the region. This custom prevented the people from cutting big trees; however, at the same time it allowed them to take forest products that fall from the trees. Similarly, the Bishnai community in Rajasthan placed the restriction that only whatever can be broken by hands could be taken away from the forests. In addition, in the villages of Central India, drought and ghosts are associated with assault on forests.(In Bengal certain shady and big fruit trees are associated with ghosts, namely, Sheora, Gab, Hijal, Bel. Even to day, it is believed in India that forests are guarded by

Vanadevi (the Goddess of Forests) and their destruction will bring a curse from her. It seems that these social and religious taboos were invented in India only to protect forests from indiscriminate felling. Religion in this way helped to preserve forests. Absence of government policy towards forests in pre-colonial period was thus made up for social and religious taboo which proved that society was more conscious than government itself about the necessity of forests.)

(India took a complex attitude to the forests. They destroyed forests but not unnecessarily. But beyond this necessity they respected forests. At the same time they were the first in India, not the British to make incursions on its timber wealth. For a long time before the arrival of the British timber had been exported in large amounts to Arabia and Persia. For a considerable period the Arabs had possessed a powerful fleet in the construction of which teak was used; Persia purchased valuable wood from India for furniture and decorating palace and houses; and the valuable sandal wood of South India had for many centuries found its way by the sea and land routes to the western markets. Indian satin-wood, ebony and black-wood also were exported to European markets. There are sufficient proofs that even during the pre-capitalist stage commercial exploitation of forest produce was not totally absent. Sandal-wood and ivory were under state ownership and control during Hyder Ali and Tipu's periods. Teak also gained in prominence during Hyder Ali's regime. He had set up a dock for building ships at the coastal town of Hanover in Uttara Kannada, for which teak was needed. Francis Buchanan has recorded that the ships were meant for war; possibly they were for trade as well. Though teak was, to some extent, allowed for local consumption, the state enjoyed a monopoly in teak, the tree being constituted a 'royal' tree, the felling and sale of which the ruler kept in his own hand. In Burma the Alompra dynasty had taken the same action. In a similar manner the Sandal-wood of Mysore was constituted a monopoly of the ruler. It is admitted in all hands that the Indian rulers of ancient and medieval India could not evolve the policy of forest conservancy or any methods to that extent but by initiating the commercial importance of wood, state ownership of forestry, extending partial rights to the forest-dwellers and monopoly on valuable wood, the Indian rulers of pre-capitalist India paved the way for the forest management of the British. The British lacks evidence that they were expert in forest management in their country, if so, Oak forests of England would not have been destroyed. In fact, Indian rulers and the German foresters influenced and taught the British to take commercial attitude to the forests in India when they felt the need of teak owing to the unavailability of Oak for the British Royal Navy.

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