

9th – Forest Society and Colonialism II



The People of Bastar: Bastar is located in the Southernmost part of Chhattisgarh and borders of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Maharashtra. The central part of Bastar is on a plateau. To its North is the Chattisgarh plain and to its South is Godavari plain. The river Indrawati flows across Bastar East to West. A number of different communities like Maria and Muria Gonds, Dhurwas, Bhatras and Halbas, live in Bastar. The people of Bastar speak different languages, but share common customs and beliefs. The people believe that each village is given its land by Earth and they look after the natural resources of their village. Further they show respect to the spirits of river, forest and mountain. The local people look after all the natural resources within their boundary. If people from a particular village want to take some wood from another village they pay a small fee called devsari, dand or man in exchange. By appointing watchmen, villagers protect their forests also. Every year the headmen of villages in a pargana (cluster of villages) meet and discuss important issues.

The Fears of the People: When the Colonial Government proposed to reserve two thirds of the forest in 1905 and stop shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of forest produce, the people of Bastar were very worried. Some villages were allowed to stay in the reserved forests. But there was a condition that their people will work free for the Forest Department in cutting and transporting trees and protecting the forest from fires. Subsequently, these came to be known as Forest Villages. As a result, people of other villages were displaced without any notice or compensation. For long time villagers had been suffering from increased land rents and frequent demands for free labour and goods by colonial officials. Then came two terrible famines. One in 1899-1900 and another in 1907-1908 thus the forest products became the last choice for the people. People began to gather and discuss their issues. The initiative was taken by the Dhurwas of the Kanger forest, where reservation of forest first took place. Although, there was no single leader, but Gunda Dhur, from village Nethanar, became an important figure in the movement. In 1910 messages like mango boughs, 'a lump of Earth', 'chillies and arrows' began circulating between villages as the messages to invite villagers to rebel against the British.

The Rise of Revolt: - The people of Bastar organised themselves and revolted against the British. Bazaars were looted; the houses of officials and traders, schools and police stations were burnt and robbed. The grain was redistributed. They attacked the ones who were in some way associated with the colonial state and its oppressive laws, William Ward, a missionary who observed the events, wrote "From all directions came streaming into Jagdalpur, police, merchants, forest peons, school masters and immigrants". The British sent troops to suppress the rebellion and it took three months for the British to regain control. They were never able to capture Gunda Dhur. After the revolt, work on reservation was temporarily suspended and the area to be reserved was reduced to roughly half of that planned before 1910. After independence, the same practice of keeping people out of the forests and reserving them for industrial use continued. In the 1970s, the World Bank proposed that 4600 hectares of natural sal forest should be replaced by tropical pine to provide pulp for the paper industry. But after the protests by local environmentalists the project was stopped.

Forest Transformations in Java: - Java is a famous rice producing island of Indonesia. In past years, it was mostly covered with forests. The colonial powers in Indonesia were the Dutch and they wanted timber from Java to build ships. There were many similarities in the laws for forest control in Indonesia and India. In Java, there were many villages in the fertile plains but many communities living in the mountains used to practice shifting cultivation.

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The Woodcutters of Java: - The Kalangs of Java were a community of skilled forest cutters and shifting cultivators. 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 18th 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.

Dutch Scientific Forestry: - In the 19th century, the Dutch enacted forest laws in Java, restricting villagers' access to forests. This law imposed that wood could be cut for specified purposes like making river boats or constructing houses. But this was done only from specific forests and under close supervision. Villagers were punished for grazing cattle, transporting wood without a permit or travelling on forest roads with horse carts or cattle. This was similar as in India, the need to manage forests 'for shipbuilding and railways led to the introduction of a forest service. In 1882, 280,000 sleepers were exported from Java alone. However, all this required labour to cut the trees, transport the logs and prepare the sleepers. The Dutch first imposed rents on land being cultivated in the forest. It then exempted some villages from these rents if the villagers worked collectively to provide free labour and buffaloes for cutting and transporting timber. This was known as the **Blandongdiensten System**. Later, instead of rent exemption, forest villagers were given small wages, but their right to cultivate forest land was restricted.

Note Most of Indonesia's forests are located in islands like Sumatra, Kalimantan and West Irian. However, Java is where the Dutch began their scientific forestry.

Sarnin's Challenge: Around 1890, Surontiko Samin of Randublatung village (a teak forest village) started a movement against the state ownership of the forest. He argued that state could not own forest as it had not created the wind, water, earth and wood.

By 1907, 3000 families were following his ideas. Some of the Saminists protested by lying down on their land when the Dutch came to survey it i.e. While others refused to pay taxes, fines or perform labour.

War and Deforestation: The Allied power exploited the resources (mainly forests) and people of their colonies and won both the First and Second World War. Both these wars had a devastating effect on the forests of India and other colonies. In India, at this time and the Forest Department was cutting trees freely to meet British war needs,

In Java, the Dutch followed a **Scorched Earth Policy**, just before the Japanese dominance. By following this policy, Dutch destroyed sawmills and burned huge piles of giant teak logs, so that they would not fall into Japanese hands. The Japanese then exploited the forests recklessly for their own interests.

This opportunity was used by many villagers to expand cultivation in the forest. After the war, it became difficult for the Indonesian forest service to get this land back. 'This situation was same as that of India where people and forest department conflicted with desire to control forest area.

New Developments in Forestry: Since the 1980s, governments across Asia and Africa found that scientific forestry and the policy of keeping forest communities away from forests has resulted in many conflicts. Now, conservation of forests was more important than collecting timber.

The government recognised that to conserve forest, the people who live near the forests must be involved. In many cases across India, forests have survived only because villagers protected them in sacred grove known as Sarnas, devarakudu, kan, rai etc.

Some villagers have been patrolling their own forests, instead of depending to the forest guards. Local forest communities and environmentalists now are thinking of different forms of forest management.