



## **FOREST AND THE FIRST NATION IN POST-COLONIAL INDIA**

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### **Abstracts:**

India has the second-largest tribal population after Africa. Most of them are greatly dependent on forests and their produce for their livelihood. Indian Forest Act of 1865 was the first attempt of colonial govt. to assert a monopoly right over forest resources. By the act of 1878, the customary rights of the villagers were denied. In the post-colonial period, the national forest policy of 1952 also asserted the monopoly of the state over the forest in the new brand 'national interest'. There is a sharp rise in the production of industrial and fuelwood. The blind acceptance of the colonial policy of practice of monoculture and denial of customary rights to the forest dwellers destroys the ecological balance, and make them ecological refugee. There is a shift of policy towards commercial interest and export-oriented forest management. But this strategy shift is invariably against the interest of the tribal community who inhabit forest areas. There is growing use of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) for different purposes but the profits are reaped by processing industries while collectors of MFP would get wages at subsistence level. The loss of control over resources often compels the tribe to use the forest in an unsustainable fashion leading to an alienation of man and forest. This paper spotlights how do the exogenous changes in different forested areas badly hamper allocation of food, fuel, fodder, medicine and even ritual rights of the tribal community and their relation with the forest.

**Keywords:** Tribes, Forest, Ecology and Commerce.

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## **Introduction:**

The term tribe is derived from the Latin word ‘tribus’, which means social division (*Tribe*, n.d.). In India, British colonial rulers adopted the pre-colonial Aryan theory to refer to indigenous people. Since antiquity, India has been home to a large number of indigenous people. It is home to the second-largest tribal group in the world, after Africa. Forest dwellers have been mentioned in ancient and mediaeval literature and chronicles. Culture shapes not only interpersonal relationships within communities but also the way humans interact with their environment. Ecological relationships between communities vary considerably across the globe. Because tribal people live close to nature and are reliant on it, nature has gained prominence in their daily lives, culture, religion, beliefs, customs, and norms. While the so-called developed world systematically destroys forest resources and degrades ecological balances, tribal societies continue to conserve forest and its resources in their traditional ways (Shiva, 1988). They can strike a balance between their needs and available resources, nurturing and nourishing it through their distinct culture and customs. Their constructive reliance on nature without distorting its inherent characteristics exemplifies the best form of resource management. Though the majority of tribal communities are now agriculturists, they remain heavily reliant on the forest. Though agriculturist tribal communities are accustomed to staple foods such as rice and wheat, they still consume a variety of indigenous plants, seeds, tubers, and roots in their daily diet. Furthermore, they continue to rely heavily on ethnomedicinal plants to treat a variety of diseases. Their knowledge of ethnomedicinal plants varies considerably between communities. Their religion and cultural practises also reflect a strong connection to nature. They believe in the existence of spirits in certain sacred trees and water bodies. Their festivals also relate intimately to nature and its changes. For example, the Oraons, the Mundas and the Santhals celebrate Sarhul festival during the blooming of the flower of Sal trees (Xaxa, 2008). In the last two centuries, the Indian forests are mercilessly destroyed and wild animals are killed, uprooted the tribal people in the name of developments that have made tribal people vulnerable from all aspects. It is the non-tribal people who had the responsibility to conserve the forest but they play the role of beneficiaries. The deterioration of symbiosis of tribes and nature continuum will catastrophe to the very survival of the first nation people of the country. The present paper shows how the country’s forest policy, developmental projects, urbanization and industrialization wreck havoc on the forests and made the tribal communities vulnerable to social extinction.

## **Material and Methods:**

The present study is qualitative descriptive research. Secondary data is collected from government records, reports of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, reports of the forest department, reports of Ministry of Tribal Affairs, reports of UNO, census data, relevant books, articles and newspaper reporting for collection of data.

## **Discussion and Analysis:**

### **Post-independence forest policies, politics and its impact:**

The year 1865 can be regarded as water shade in the history of utilization of forest. With the introduction of the Indian Forest Act in 1865, the conservation and commercial use of Indian forests were legitimately decided. Further, the provisions of the 1878 Act snatched the customary right of the tribes and other forest dwellers over the forests (Prasad, 1960). After independence, the national forest policy was introduced in 1952 which was a mere reiteration of the policy of 1994 and the Indian Forest Act of 1927. The policy of 1952 simply asserted monopoly rights at the expense of the forest community in the name of national interests. Moreover, the assigned objectives had no clear priority which causes the inter philosophy of utilization of forest unaltered. Post independent India witnessed a rapid growth of forest-based industries. From 1959 onwards the paradigm shifted towards large scale plantations of quick growing and high yielding tree species. The paper industries showed unprecedented growth within the first 30 years of independence. Industrial wood production has been increased by over 50% within a decade i.e. 1966 to 1977. The uneconomic conservation-oriented strategies were discarded (Guha, 2012). National Commission on Agriculture outlined the conservation strategy as production forestry for industrial wood production. As the traditional method of sustained yield is unsuitable for the growing demand of the industries so the forest authorities vastly changed the working management of the forest. Now slow growth trees are cleared and replaced by quick-growing species (National Commission on Agriculture, 1976). The question of dependency or livelihoods of the forest-dwelling tribes remains unanswered. Moreover, for getting institutional finance the Forest Development Corporation was established. Thus, the Indian forest conservation method got its firm base in the commercialization and commodification of forests.

From the sixties onward it was thought necessary to replace a substantial quantity of mixed tropical forest with the manufactured forest of desired species like eucalyptus, tropical pines and teak without contemplating its ecological effects. The US Agency for International Development encouraged the Indian government to increase commercial use of valuable trees such as Mahogany, Teak, and Rosewood, and wood craftsmen to earn foreign exchange by exporting wood logs or high-end furniture.

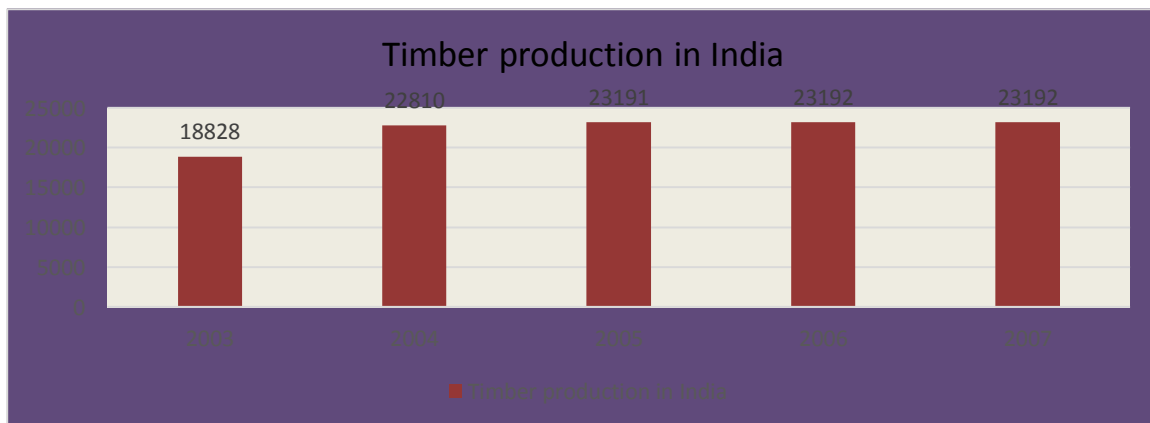


Figure 1: Timber production in India from 2003-2007

The British introduced monoculture in the name of scientific forestry (Centre for Science and Environment, 2012). Regrettably, independent India's current forest policy is also oriented in the same direction. The ecological destruction of Himalayan regions is most likely caused by the elimination of oak and other plants considered to be more ecologically resilient than pine trees. The impact both ecological and social is havoc because the forest is the source of wood, food, material for the construction of houses, fuel, fodder, medicine and cultural necessities of the tribal communities. We may know the science but they know the forests. The man-nature relationship is disrupted by exogenous changes made to cater for the need of the wealthy people by depriving the first nation.

Another matter of concern is Minor Forest Products (MFP). According to the forest rights act, 2006, all non-timber items like bamboo, brush wood, stumps, cane, tussar, cocoons, honey, wax, lac, tendu or kendu leaves, medicinal plants and herbs, roots, tubers, etc are considered as Minor Forest Products. During the time of independence revenue earned from MFP was 30.3 million and it reached up to 1299 million in 1976-77 (National Commission on Agriculture, 1976). It is now a multibillion business for multinational corporations. The major MFP come from central India which constitute 65% of the total tribal population. Over 67% of forest export is from MFP and its amount is increasing day by day. MFP is the important source of income for tribals and other forest dwellers but the profit is reaped by the companies and middlemen. The MFP collectors only get subsistence wages whereas the real value of the products maybe 100 times more than the selling prices. In fact the exploitation of tribal is most pronounced in MFP oriented commerce. Government policy is inadequate to give them protection. Under severe criticism, the government of India enacted the Forest Rights Act, 2006 which empower the tribal and other forest dwellers to have full right over-collection and sell of MFP. Added to this the government of India also declared MSP (minimum support price) to MFP. More and more items are included in the list. But the picture is gloomy due to the reluctant attitude of state administration as well as forest officials. Here is one example of success: Two tribal clans in the Mendha Lekha and Marda villages of the Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra. They were granted collective rights to their forest resources. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 establishes a legal framework for the collection and sale of minor forest produces (MFP). These include tendu leaves, which are utilised in bidi industries, and bamboo with a high commercial value that was formerly under the forest department's supervision. Taking ownership of these resources entailed economic independence for the ethnic inhabitants of these villages. However, the image does not lead to oxidative stress. According to a 2010 news release from the ministry of tribal affairs, just 1.6 per cent (46,156) of the 2.9 million cases concluded under the FRA included community rights, and the majority of these did not involve entitlement over MFP. The majority of other titles were for agricultural or forestland dwellings. Individual pattas (for agricultural land and residences) have been prioritised above MFP claims. In Chhattisgarh, the bare fact appears to be identical. Only 250 of the 214,918 claims processed by the state involve community rights, and none include MFP rights (CSE, 2018).

In India, about 100 million people are living within or outside of the forest. This population has a multi-facet symbiotic relation with forests. The forest plays a crucial role in meeting the wide

dimensional demands of the people. Though the national forest policy tried to justify the causes of the tribes but its recommendations were grossly ignored (Manoharan, 2011). But ruthless destruction of forest cause not only change in social structure but also change in occupational structure. The Birhor is a tribe that was hunters and gatherers but ultimately settled with rope making and allied occupation. The rope was made from creepers available in the adjoining forested areas. The degradation and destruction of forest cover not only forced them to change their occupation but also cause a change in their population distribution. Moreover decrease in forest cover increase pressure on the forest for food, fuel and fodder. This additional pressure further escalates the degradation of forests. It compels the Bihors to change their traditional occupations and also causes widespread spatiotemporal migration among them. The maximum of them was reduced to agricultural labourers (Firdous, 2012).

The case of Andaman and Nicobar is more pathetic. Within 35 years of independence, 30 per cent land of Little Andaman was encroached on by outsiders. Though the Onges, original inhabitants on the island, have been provided adequate legal protection their livelihood is at stake due to illegal poaching and encroachment by outsiders due to the ineffectiveness of law. Moreover, the introduction of alcohol made the Onges more susceptible to exploitation. But the Onges have good knowledge of local food plants and medicinal plants which can be a boon for their economic developments (Sekhsaria, 2012). But the very minimum ethnobotanical survey has been done in this regard. There is a great fear if the cultural assault could not be stopped then this little tribal community will no longer survive.

The tribal economy which largely encompasses collection and gathering activities obvious gives women the most prime and prominent position. A study conducted in Ganjam in Orissa revealed that 60 per cent of workforces for gathering and collection work consist of women and 70 per cent among them are engaged in the collection of fuelwood (DN, 2012). But in a tribal community, the division of labour is not sharp as in an agrarian community. Earlier the tribal women enjoy more economic freedom as they not only collect but also market the products. But with the advent of new communication systems like bicycles tilt the balance towards male dominion. Now in many areas, the role of women confines to only collection of forest produce and marketing is done by male counterparts resulting in their disempowerment of them. The displacement from the forest causes changes in control over the family, resource management and a decline in the empowerment of tribal women. The decline in empowerment is directly related to the Shift from forest to land and further intensifies patriarchal caste influence. The rights of the tribal women now become residual and patriarchy is deep-rooted specially among agriculturist tribes (Harsh,1992). Vandana Shiba argued that all cultures and religions of South Asia are evolved with deep ecological thought. The practice of maintaining sacred forests and sacred groves is nothing but a cultural response to ecological conservation (Shiva, 1988). With the economic marginalization and upper-caste dominance, the tribal women are further oppressed.

### **Increasing Intervention Of Private Traders and Effects On Tribes:**

Forest are the birthplace of bio-diversity, producer of nutrients, a harbinger of rain and preserver of C cycle which generate the tribe who lived their life on the 'common property resources. At first, they used the forest and land for pasturing, hunting, cultivation along harvesting. They not only used the forest to survive but also regenerated it and protected it for the future. With the stepping in the age of the industrial revolution, the notion of 'common property resources' have begun to change its periphery. With the increased rate of industrialization, privation is also increased to provide continuous fuel to continue the wheel of industry. The coinage becomes a powerful one in notion to protect forest: 'protect nature'. Suddenly, forests are turned into wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves and national parks uprooting its habitats that are a tribe. Tribes endured a lot because 'common property resource' which was resource ground for their living hood was snatched away leaving no other alternatives for them. To conserve the forest, private sector interventions were started as a measure to secure biodiversity. But invasions of species and plants and disturbing the forest ecology are two common phenomenons that occurred at the hands of private traders as they know and preserve the forest as a commodity. For example, N S Lodha enumerated that 'common property resource' has been downgraded and the ratio of production is much decreased today than previous. The campaign to save forests and biodiversity is started to satisfy the needs of the industry. Again, private traders use the forest as per needs and necessity and hike in price in global markets. Private ownership stimulates the process of deforestation and degradation in quality. Just a million years ago, there were 44% of land covered under forest but with the rate of hungriness of the Industrial era, it is now limited to 23% only (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). In this devastating scenario, Nepal and Vietnam show us that when communities are given the responsibility of forest, forest conditions are improved and gradually slows down the process of degradation.

Again, tribal people have resided as a community closely attached to nature depending on 'common natural resources to satisfy their needs and necessities. Shifting cultivation is one of their existential criteria which not only secures their food basket but also acts as a reservoir of agrobiodiversity. With the name of development, again and again, Government uses the trap of mainstream development rejecting and neglecting their age-old practices and leaving them as prey and vulnerable in the hand of society. The Government of Chhattisgarh takes up a bamboo cultivation project to increase the state revenues under the National Bamboo Mission neglecting tribal rights and culture of shifting cultivation (*CSR in Bamboo Can Drive Sustainable Livelihoods and Socio-Economic Development at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, n.d.). As a result of this decision, the natural ecosystem of the forest also is destroyed, many natural ecological habitats are lost along with those helpless tribes. With the increase of forest bureaucracy, there is a tendency to use the forest for commercial purposes. In Madhya Pradesh, there was a tendency visualized in 1975 with the support of the World Bank to replace 20,000ha of Sal (*Shorea Robusta*) into the tropical pine forest, in Bihar a large hector of Sal forest is tried to transfer Teak forest to promote the Paper Industry changing its natural ecology. Natural forests grow up in the soil as the quality, types and nutrients in the soil. When private invaders try to change the natural plantation of the area, it badly



affects the biodiversity and brings a curse in its habitats destroying natural flora and fauna of this area.

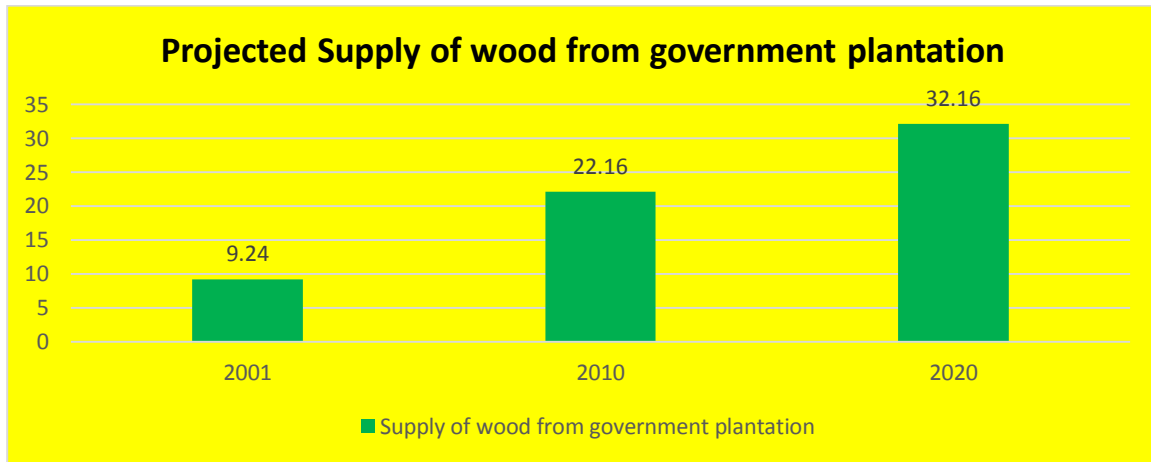


Figure 2: Projected Supply of wood in million cu.m.(approx.)

Source: (Khanduri & Mondal, 2005)

The propulsion of market-based tree plantation and forest conservation programmes constantly pushed the tribe in the path of oblivion. There is a constant threat knocking their life through the intervention of private sectors in the forest.

### **Loss of Rights and Loss Of Bio-Diversity:**

With the advent of Industrialization, the forest began to use as a commodity and one of the resources of industrial development by the British as well as the Indian Government in the post-independence period. To use abusively and economically, they need to uproot the tribes whose lives are surrounded by the plants. India should feel proud of itself for being the abode of 45,000 species of plant including 15000 flowering species and 91000 faunal species which have crowned India as one of the mega biodiverse countries (IUCN, n.d.). Tribes use trees not for only economic purposes but also for cultural purposes which help to portray their social lives and their belongings. The indigenous knowledge is a part of their survival, a component of their origin and culture that naturally needs an environment to thrive and pass through generation after generation in a more fruitful way has begun to lose its ground. But if we pull up them, uproot them from their origin, how can the tribe be able to continue their culture. A tress does not grow up in the air, it needs all the components to bring up. Biodiversity is a periphery of the human-environment interface. It is a culture that flourishes for the interaction between tribes and forest, any outsider has no notion about that and when the outsider has written the fate of forest and its habitats with his economic motivation; all is going to a mess. All tribal traditions, customs, creeds and behavioural aspects have grown up in the notion to save the environment. Ministry of Environment and Forests of GOI has pointed out that approximately 7500 types of plants are used by 4,635 tribes that not only indulge in good health but also preserve and maintain the environment (Ministry of Environment, 2021). There is a constructive mutual dependence between plants and tribes which takes its resource

from the forest. The conflict of interest between tribe and government plays a destructive role which shut down the process of cultural reproduction of knowledge as well as bio-diversity of nature. To survive the bio diversity it is the hour needs to revive the rights of tribal to live in forest and the protection of forest should go in the hand of the community to flourish it again.

**Forest Right Act 2006, the silver lining of hope:**

The Forest Right Act 2006 [25] is a reckoning bell of justice for those unprivileged people whose natural habitats were snatched away from them within a blink of an eye. It is flagged off the glory of justice and cut off the wings of the kite which proclaimed the real habitats of those scheduled tribes as ‘ reserved forest’ and cut the thread of mutual relationship which has its root since the beginning of civilization without a second thought. It again reestablishes the close knot connection between tribal and forest. It accepts the rights of the tribe and those forest dwellers whose survival are completely dependent on the forest and in return, they protect the forest as their mother. The hidden treasure behind this mutual relationship is the birth of an indigenous culture of tribes which again gets its nutrients by passing this law. It rebuilds the right of the tribe by returning them to access to the environment accorded with the right to live life and livelihood as per their need keeping intact its natural habitats and biodiversity as per their hidden commitment to mother nature. Even after implementing Forest Rights Act 2006, many states show their inclination to implant and promote it properly as it helps to increase the revenues. The heartless motive of the Government digs the pit holes for those tribes. A genuine effort has been to show on the part of the Government end and keep an eye till the implementation of any act wholly. Otherwise, the positive essence of real development cannot be executed at any cost. Forest departments have to alter their perceptions and attitudes towards the tribe. The monopoly of forest departments should be changed and a mutual partnership should be fostered to celebrate and use indigenous knowledge of tribes.

**Conclusion:**

The tribe and the forest are synonymous in the sense of survival and share equal responsibility to protect each other. They share a ‘symbiotic relation’. Upon forest, they not only depend for their economic survival necessities but also their religious-magical beliefs. They worship various flora-fauna as their god and deity which are known as Totems. Always priority should be given for whom the blue plan of development is designed but this tone of voice was unheard in the case of tribes. The progress of India should have to be designed on behalf of its people as they are the sole bearer of the wheel of progress in the country. It is a prime necessity to design the plan of progress keeping those indigenous people in their real abode. As we can’t say that animals at zoos enjoy the golden phase of their life so the case is also with the tribes. They share a close knot with the forest which is the basic necessity for their existence. In the name of ‘forest conservation,’ the vested interest of the officers have deprived the forest scenario along with its diversities and existences. A humble intention to preserve bio-diversity, indigenous knowledge of tribes should be calculated as a guiding principle for making and implementing a Government policy that can play a pivotal role in preserving resources that can sustain life in the amalgamated interest of humans and nature. Again it is also kept in mind that no biopiracy can take its place. Therefore systematically



and scientifically the indigenous knowledge should be preserved to keep protecting biodiversity and tribal's rights. When a country protects its people's rights, the boundary and progress of the country are protected by those people.

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