

3. AN HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RESERVE FORESTS IN INDIA

3.1 Forestry Policy up to 1977

As early as 4000BC Ashrams or Sylvan asylums were abodes of thinkers, philosophers, poets and writers who preached human social values and veneration of forests and their inhabitants. Hieun Tsang (600 BC) had recorded that the Indo-Gangetic belt was thickly wooded. The population of India which was around 150 million at the time of Chandragupta Maurya (320 BC) had not risen significantly by time of Akbar (1550 AD). During the periods of foreign invasions and internal wars shifting cultivation was a common practice. As recorded by Buchanan (1867) it was neither considered as illegal nor improper. It was then sustainable, due to a small population and long cycles. By 1805 the population had risen to 200 million and the pressures had begun to be felt. The British continued the earlier practice of declaring certain tree species as belonging to the Government and collected royalty, leaving the rest free for use or felling. In 1848, the Collector of Kanara District, that extended from Goa to Malabar, had described the forests on the slopes of the Western Ghats as badly denuded making many of the rivers, within living memory, unnavigable. Stebbing (1921) has reported that "long before our arrival, the Indian ryot had begun in many parts, to realise that water was diminishing, that streams and springs were drying up".

Dr Hugh Cleghorn, Assistant Superintendent of Hospitals at Shimoga, in 1849, reported that during the summer months, the sun could not be seen due to the burning of the forests. Cleghorn's report evoked the interest of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at its meeting in Edinburgh, in 1850, to set up a Committee to study the effects of forest destruction in the tropics. The resulting report provided the stimulus for the organisation of forest conservancy in India (Shyam Sunder 1992).

Some of the major general conclusions of the committee are noted below.

Over large portions of the Indian Empire, there is, at present, an almost uncontrolled destruction of the forests.

Wherever supervision has been exercised, considerable improvement has taken place.

That special attention should be given to the preservation and maintenance of the forests occupying tracts unsuited for culture, whether by reason of altitude or peculiarities of physical structure.

That in a country to which the maintenance of its water supplies is of such extreme importance, the indiscriminate clearance of forests around the localities whence those supplies are derived is greatly to be deprecated (Report of the Committee 1851).

The first step in forestry in India was however taken earlier, but with a commercial motive. In 1800 the East India company had appointed a Commission to enquire into the availability of teak in the Malabar forests (Kerala), and regulations in felling were introduced.

In 1855 Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General introduced the "Charter of the Indian Forests outlining forest conservancy for the whole of India". The Government Forest Act of 1865 was the first attempt at forest legislation "for the better management and preservation of forests wherein the rights are vested in Her Majesty and provided that such notification shall not abridge or affect any existing rights of individuals or communities". The 1865 Act provided for the formulation of rules regarding the preservation of the tree growth and prohibiting fires, removal of forest produce, cultivation and grazing of cattle.

In 1894 a Government Resolution of Forest Policy was published. It spelled out that the sole object of administration of the State Forests was public benefit. The resolution broadly categorized the forests as:

- a) forest, the preservation of which is essential on climatic or physical grounds, that fulfil the larger good of the community, to preserve which the individual interests should not come in the way;
- b) economically important forests capable of producing large sized timber;
- c) minor forest and
- d) pasture land.

The policy denoted that: "claims of cultivation are stronger than the claims of forest preservation. The pressure of the population upon the soil is one of greatest difficulties that India has to face and that application of the soil must be preferred which will support the largest numbers in proportion to the area" (Government of India 1894). It hence recommended that whenever an effective demand for cultivable land exists and can only be supplied from forest area, the land should ordinarily be relinquished without hesitation. The resolution further stressed that if this applies to economically important forests, it applies a fortiori to minor forests and pastures" (Shyam Sunder 1992).

As a result of this policy decision, considerable areas of forest lands were released and thrown open for cultivation. The Royal Commission on Agriculture in India (1928), mentions that in the Central Provinces since 1906, 2500 square miles of forests were released and in Punjab over 3000 square miles. On a proposal to further release another 1,000 square miles of forests in Punjab, the Commission suggested that the matter might be reviewed in the context of the fire-wood requirements of the people. At this stage, the extent of "culturable waste" and "land not available for cultivation" (and which constituted areas outside reserve forests for meeting the rural needs of forest produce) was about 45% of the total surface of British India. (Royal Commission on Agriculture 1928).

At independence, in 1947, the population of India was 300 million. Until then release of reserve forest for cultivation was of a small order compared to extension of cultivation in the community privilege areas. This was in itself a wrong policy because the community areas set aside at the time of reservation (about double the extent reserved) was determined with reference to the rural requirements of firewood, small timber, fodder and mulch. However, as these needs were growing with increase in population, the area for meeting these needs was rapidly dwindling.

Forests, both reserved and unreserved, in the better rainfall belt of the Western Ghats remained unaffected by the growing population because of the high incidence of malaria.

With independence, the main policy thrust of the Government was on increasing food production; production of energy for industrialization; and the conquest of diseases. All these three policy elements had serious repercussions on forests. In the initial years and until the late 1960's, increased food production was by extension of agriculture into forest lands. Between 1951 and 1976, 43 million hectares of tree clad areas were cleared for agriculture in India. Irrigation and hydel projects entailed clearance of good forests in valleys. Conquest of malaria permitted settlements everywhere. Reserve forests were released freely when revenue lands were not available for the purpose (Shyam Sunder 1992).

In 1952, the second National Forest Policy was proclaimed. This policy was ahead of its time. It was conceptually brilliant but was undermined and sabotaged by other sectors. It spelled out that the nation as a whole has a vast stake in the conservation of forests and commented on the deprivations caused by indiscriminate extension of agriculture. It stressed the intrinsic right of forests to fulfil both protective and productive functions. None of this was heeded.

While each year's land use statistics proclaimed that the forest area of the country was 23% (the records continuing to show even reservoirs as forest, since they had not been denotified legally), and there was a surfeit of forest produce obtained from wholesale clearance of forest areas for extension of agriculture and in river valley submersion areas it was presumed that forests were an inexhaustible resource.

3.2 Reserve Forest Conservation Efforts in Recent Times

By the early 1970's the effects of ecological degradation had begun to be felt. Droughts and floods were increasing. In 1977, the Government of India amended the Constitution to bring forest from the State Sector to the concurrent list. Many States enacted Tree Preservation Acts to regulate tree felling in private lands. In 1980 the Forest Conservation Act was promulgated, requiring the approval of the Government of India before any reserve forest could be released or put into non-forestry use by the State. The measure reduced the release of forest from an average of 154,571 ha per year between 1952 and 1980 to 14,351 ha since then (Government of India, 1989). The Government brought tree planting into the list of major developmental programmes reviewed by the Government each month. Social forestry programmes were encouraged due to the realisation that natural forest can be saved only by developing the required resources elsewhere to meet the needs of the people. A separate Ministry of Environment and Forests, was created whereas previously, "Forest" was a minor component of the Ministry of Agriculture. Rigorous guidelines were issued under the umbrella of the Forest Conservation Act, on environmental evaluation of the projects involving the loss of forests. The National Wasteland Development Board was constituted to deal with the subject of tree planting and reclamation of wasteland.

The National Land Use and Wasteland Development Council, was constituted in 1986 with the Prime Minister as Chairman to take policy decisions on integrated land use, environmental protection, forest conservation, and wasteland afforestation, etc. The Environmental Protection Act and Rules of 1986 which provide for protecting and improving the quality of the environment and preventing, controlling and abating environmental pollution, specifically refer to areas with biological diversity, proximity to Sanctuaries and National Parks and environmentally compatible land use.

In this context, the National Forestry Policy of 1988 was announced. In 1952, when the cost benefit ratio of a river valley project was computed, the basis was nil value to the forest land to be cleared in the submersion area and for rehabilitation of evacuees. In 1988, an

environmental value of Rs12.67 million (to accrue over 50 years) was accorded to one hectare of closed forest. With the introduction of high monetary value to forests very few projects involving release of forest could pass the test of an adequate internal rate of return. The ecological history of the country, has thus resulted now in a policy biased in favour of ecology, and conservation of forests.



B.1 and B.2

Settlements on
the edge of
reserve forest.

Alternative
supplies of
fodder and
fuel need to be
provided to
relieve the
pressure on
natural
vegetation.