



BATTLES OVER JUNGLES: COLONIAL FORESTRY AND 1857 REVOLT IN OUDH REGION

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Abstract

The event of 1857 revolt is an important epoch in the annals of modern Indian history. The great revolt has exercised unprecedented impact upon various aspects of Indian life. This paper attempts to document the ecological dimension of 1857 revolt by focusing on Oudh region wherein the vibrant form of the revolt exists. This paper proposes that the 1857 revolt exercises significant impact upon emergence of forest policies in India in general and Oudh region in particular. In Oudh region the British could not be able to put off the revolt easily as rebels took shelter in forests and wild landscapes. After controlling the revolt, the British determined to remove the wild and forest spaces which provided shelter to rebels. This paper proposes that it was this context that forest policies of Oudh came into existence.

Key Words: forestry, revolt, Oudh, wilderness, British

INTRODUCTION

The great revolt of 1857-58 is the significant historical incident which shaped the course of modern India. Irrespective of historiographical debates, it has been widely acknowledged fact that the revolt has exercised a deep impact upon various aspects of modern India. Hitherto historians looked at the revolt from the prescriptive of India versus British. The impact of the revolt on various public policies did not receive a serious attention of historians. This paper focuses on the impact of the revolt on colonial forest policies of Oudh region. This paper proposes that the revolt in Oudh region significantly influenced the perception of colonial bureaucracy on forest policy. Colonial attitudes on wilderness and forests were shaped by the experiences learned from the revolt. This paper is therefore an attempt to explore ecological dimension to the 1858 revolt in Oudh region.

The linkages between the 1858 revolt and emergence of colonial forestry capable of bring environmental history much closer to the mainstream history of modern India. Colonial forest historians mostly focused on the material and ideological roots of colonial forestry and less attention has been devoted to the incidents that have shaped the ideas and practices of colonial bureaucracy which reflected in the policies of forest management. Consequently, the impact of the 1858 revolt on forest policies remained it not a neglected but less explored arena.

This paper attempts to document the impact of the 1858 revolt on the forest policies of Oudh region. It proposes that a strong linkage exists between the 1858 revolt and forest policies in Oudh region. The process of the revolt compelled the military, revenue and other officials of the British to encounter wild landscapes such as rivers, jungles, forests, old forts, grooves, gardens, waste wild lands and forests. The rebels participated in the revolt took shelter in forests and attacked the British troops and went back to forests. Thus, forests were used as shelter by the rebels of the revolt. It was this context that necessitated the British to evolve a systematic approach if not to conquer but to devise strategies to control forests and other wild spaces. It was this imperative coupled with resource requirements resulted in emergence of colonial forestry.



By using the correspondence and narratives of military officials published in a book by G.W Forrest, entitled *The Indian Mutiny*, this paper shows the way forests were perceived and acted upon by mainly military officials. In Oudh region the 1858 revolt was acted as a catalyst for forest management. Colonial authorities felt the need to bring the forests under a systematic management. This is because forests were perceived as space which provides shelter to the anti-state elements which are capable of de-stabilising the sustenance of the Empire. The revolt of 1858 was thus provided impetuous to policy interventions for management of forests.

Review of Literature

While the 1858 revolt treated as a great incident by both imperialist and nationalist historians and environmental historians explores the roots of colonial interventions in management of forests. These two historical processes have fascinating interlinings. These linkages can explicitly be seen in Oudh region. Historical literature on colonial forestry mostly focused on the material and ideological aspects for emergence of colonial forestry. While Indian green nationalist historians proposes that resource requirements of colonial state guided the policy interventions for management of forestsⁱ and Euro-American historians concentrated on the history of ecological ideas and perceptions that have shaped the perceptions and attitudes of colonial administrators.ⁱⁱ Several regional level studies explored the histories of colonial forestry in different parts of India.ⁱⁱⁱ These studies however did not give adequate attention to the impact of the 1858 revolt on ideas and perceptions of colonial bureaucracy on forest management. This is important as most of the rebels in central India and Oudh region wherein the magnitude of the revolt was high took shelter in forests and jungles and troubled the British army. In this context forests and rebels were treated as synonyms and need was felt either to tame or conquer them.

Impact of the 1858 revolt on forest policies was recognised by foresters^{iv} and forest historians^v. The revolt indeed initiated a shift in the nature of governance which had bearing on forest policies. Like many other aspects, forests were brought under systematic governance process. It was this attitude that has shaped the policy formulations for management of forests.

Colonial forestry in Oudh region

A separate establishment for management of forests of Oudh was created in 1861 after the revolt. The Oudh forest rules were promulgated in 1866. Accordingly 823 square miles of forests mostly situated in Baurich, Philibhit, Gorakhpur, Raibarali, Gonda and Kheri districts were brought under the control of the state as reserved forests.^{vi} Obviously the main reason for this policy intervention is to control the resources for expanding colonial economy. However, I propose that interventionist forest policy received immediate impetuous from the impact of the 1858 revolt. British army and officials for the first time seriously encountered the wild spaces such as jungles, forests, bushes, and groves. These spaces were perceived as agencies which provide shelter the rebels. Thus, the revolt left a deep impression in the minds on colonial authorities on the need to conquer and control forests and wild spaces. After the revolt India was transferred from a mercantile company to the British sovereignty. The crown rule in India derived its legitimacy by propagating the discourse of good governance and tolerance.

It is interesting to see the nature of encounter that took place between the British army and wild nature. It is well known fact that in Oudh region, the revolt was extremely intense between the rebels and the British army. Particularly in the countryside British had great difficulty in handling the rebels. This was mainly due the topographical advantage that the rebels able to master. They took under the shelter of dense jungles, bushes, shrubs, old forts, river catchments, gardens, topes, and groves. They used to attack the British troops and



disappear into dense jungles. Thus, the British had uncomfortable encounter with wild places during the revolt. Besides this, for strategic defence and attack purpose, large number of forests was cleared. By all means the revolt necessitated the British to not only to wage against the rebels but also against wild nature. It was this process that has shaped the attitude the British towards forest management.

To substantiate my claim, I use the narratives of official's correspondence on jungles, groves, gardens and forests took place among various officials. Controlling rebels gradually emerged as a difficult task especially in Oudh region owing to two reasons: firstly, its social base which prevented the British to acquire realisable information on the movements of rebels and secondly, the superior knowledge of the rebels over topographical condition of Oudh region. Particularly, rebels used wild places such as jungles, gardens, groves, rivers, dense vegetation, dilapidated forts, etc to hide and attack the British troops. The rebels could offer a prolonged and stiff resistance to the British on account their mastery over the wild places which protected them from the attacks of the British army. It was this process that created two enemies to the British: rebels and wild places which offer shelter to the rebels. This trend can be captured from the narratives and reflections of military officials.

During the 1858 revolt, three perceptions on forests emerged: military officials perceived jungles and wilderness as a hostile space which provides shelter to rebels: jungles were perceived as impediment for progress of British army to crush rebels and hence their clearance was recommended and forests and jungles were also treated as spaces to be tamed for the advantage of the state. Colonial thought process thus engaged with jungles and forests of Oudh region in the context of the great Indian revolt. The point to be noted here is that the revolt as an incident indeed exercised significant impact on the perceptions and practices of the colonial bureaucracy and these processes reflected in the policy formulations for management of forests. While the popular social support that enjoyed by the revolt in Oudh region has already been explored by some studies, but its impact upon the forest policies remained totally unexplored.^{vii}

The imagination of colonial officials on jungles and forests was guided by anxiety and frustration upon the inability to conquer the enemy. It was being viewed that forests and jungles were main obstacles for crushing rebel forces. In the official correspondence several references were made on the two aspects: firstly, jungles were perceived as spaces wherein rebels took shelter and able to execute their sudden attacks and escape. Jungles were thus treated as troublesome areas for the stability of the Empire and hence either to be eliminated or to be regulated. It was this thought process that is responsible policy intervention for management of wood lands of India.

The hostility towards forests and jungles could be seen in the narratives of military officials. Writings to the Chief of the Staff Head Quarters, Lieutenant-Colonel R.D. Kelly of 34th regiment mentioned that he was compelled to focus on 'clearing the gardens and ruined house in their front of the enemy's picquets'.^{viii} Expressing similar views can be captured from Captain G. Allgood who preserved the details of Sir Conin Campbell's campaigns in Oudh region mentions that, 'The entrenchment at Cawnpore has been recently much strengthened by new outworks and by the demolition and clearance of houses and trees within 800 yards of the works'. Similar work was done in another incident which as follows: The rifle Brigade at the same time cleared the gardens on the right of the Fyzabad road; cavalry and horse artillery covered our right flank. The rebels were pressed with spirit through the gardens and suburbs'.^{ix}

While commenting upon the movements of rebel's it was mentioned that: "No reliable information of the movements of the enemy could be obtained, but it was afterwards ascertained that a considerable portion of them had retired towards Pilibhit".^x Thus, one would see that forests and jungles were treated as strategic spaces to be controlled in order to crush the rebellion.

On the other hand, rebels mainly supported by Taluqdars of Oudh region perceived the wild spaces as safe haven for not only for shelter but also spaces to hide weapons and devising strategies. Rudanshu Mukharaji lists out the dilapidated forts that were used by rebels to attack the British army. In the Oudh region nearly 303 old forts are used by rebels. Most of them were located in dense jungles. From these forts rebels carried out campaign against the British army. In these jungle forts number of rebels stayed is estimated to be 78,211, with 303 guns and other weapons.^{xi}

The notion of forest control by the state acquired prominence in the context of the revolt. It means forests not only seen as resources but also a space to be controlled to tame wild people and anti-state elements. In Oudh region, military officers ordered for clearance of trees located besides the roads, clearance of bush growth, dense tree growth, jungles as a means to dismantle the sources of shelter to rebels. In several instances army was engaged in clearance of vast tracts of jungles and forests as a means to control the rebels

Conclusion

Environmental history needs to be located and contextualised in the various incidents that had shaped the history of modern India. Linkages between the 1857-58 revolt and colonial forestry shows the fact that the revolt has significantly shaped the ideas and practices on forest management practices in India. By examining Oudh region this paper shows that one of the main reasons for emergence of strong centralised forest policy in India is the impact of 1857-58 revolt for it has shaped the perception of colonial bureaucracy on forests. The revolt compelled the colonial state to bring the forests of India under control which is perceived as a precondition for stability of the Empire.

Notes and References

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^{ix} Ibid Append, p. xx,

^x Ibid, Appendix, p. xxix.

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