



A Forest History of India. Richard P. Tucker. SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, B1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area, Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044, India. 2012. xviii + 249 pp. Price: Rs 750.

As a scholar of environmental history, Richard Tucker has authored valuable and insightful publications, including on historical aspects of forestry in India. The present book is a collection reprinting ten essays and papers by the author that had appeared in various journals and edited volumes between 1979 and 1997. These papers form the ten chapters of the book, preceded by a brief 'Introduction' by the author outlining the social and ecological dimensions and perspectives of the work. The 'Introduction' also refers the reader to some important recent literature (up to 2011) that extends and deepens our understanding of India's environmental history within the broader analytical and global context.

A premise of research in ecological history, even if not always overtly stated, is that understanding history of forest use or contests over natural resources is useful not only as a means to document evolving policies and practices, but as providing insight into the nature and management of conflicts over natural resources, which are relevant even from a contemporary perspective. This is clear even from the first chapter of the present book, where Tucker develops on his early historical research in Maharashtra to examine forest management in relation to the politics of imperialism in Thana District between 1823 and 1887. Tucker's account of the tensions over forests and timber rights, and the work of the Bom-

bay Forest Inquiry Commission of 1885, although embedded within Maharashtrian politics and British imperial interests of the period, illustrates well the problems that can emerge when colonial-style administration tries to curtail local access and use of natural resources.

The following three chapters are devoted to forestry in the Western Himalaya, spanning mainly the period from the early 19th century to the first couple of decades after India's independence in 1947. Although this is a region from where other detailed studies of social resistance and environmental change have since emerged, Tucker's publications perceptively record major trends in timber exploitation and the genesis of conflicts, especially over access to forests, the sociology of forest depletion, and the emergence of social forestry onto the stage. The author describes the main forest types and timber trees from the Siwalik foothills to the higher mountains. He traces the pattern of early exploitation of sal and pine in the lower reaches to increased later extraction of oak, deodar and high-elevation conifers as the years progressed, and roads and markets penetrated further into the mountains. Besides brief accounts of resin-tapping and mining industries, the chapters provide a useful overview of the impacts on forests created by the demand for railway sleepers (crossties) during the railway-building era of the latter half of the 19th century, the effects of the two World Wars, the formation of forest panchayats, and the pressures and trends after independence. These papers are complemented by the analysis of pastoralism in the Punjab Himalaya (chapter 5) and the social and ecological aspects of grazing of livestock (principally sheep and goats) by resident peoples and the migratory Gaddis.

Tracing forest history in any region needs sensitive attention both to local ecosystems and species as well as local human communities, and social dynamics of use. In examining the impact that colonial regimes have had on forests and local communities, one can find similarities and differences by comparing different regions or regimes. Focusing on the first half of the 20th century, the author takes this approach to compare and contrast history of forestry involving colonial regimes in Assam and Kumaon (chapter 6), involving planters, foresters and peasants in Assam and Kerala (chapter 7), and under the different colonial

regimes in India (Western Himalaya under British rule) and the Philippines (under American rule). These areas are today recognized as global hotspots of biological diversity, and the historical context of forest loss and exploitation is particularly relevant, especially because of many environmental and social issues related to foresters, tea, rubber and coffee planters, and workers, persist into the present day. As these are reprinted papers, many recent studies, both sociological and ecological, are naturally not referred, including work on the ecological history of Assam and social conflicts in that region, deforestation and land-use change in the Philippines, and research in the Himalaya on grazing, shifting cultivation and forestry. Today, a reader must place these chapters in the wider context of other work to avoid having an incomplete picture.

The final two chapters deal with the issues of resident peoples and wildlife reserves in India, and the non-timber forest products (or minor forest products) policy in the Western Himalaya under British rule. These chapters lack the depth of the earlier chapters and are also overshadowed by more recent work, especially on the wildlife history in India. It is unfair to criticize this publication, intended to be a compendium of earlier work, for neglecting to ignore aspects that have emerged from more detailed work in recent times. The only slightly annoying character of the book is that much information is repeated in the different chapters (e.g. chapters 2 and 3), with almost verbatim repeat of some passages (e.g. chapters 6 and 7). There are a few typos, an inaccurate reference to the earlier publication in which chapter 1 appeared (vol. 16, not vol. 39), and some missing references. Still, the book is a useful reference for scholars of environmental history in India as a compilation of a set of the author's main publications from the region.

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