



The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India

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From Conflict to Collaboration

“Liberty and forest laws are incompatible,” remarked an English country vicar, speaking on behalf of villagers shut out of woodland reserved for the exclusive use of the king, in 1720.¹ The history of state forestry is indeed a history of social conflict. In monarchies and in democracies, in metropolitan Europe as well as in colonial South Asia, the state management of forests has met bitter and continuous opposition. On the one side are the professional foresters who believe that timber production can be ensured only through the exclusion of humans and their animals from wooded areas; on the other, the peasants, pastoralists, charcoal ironmakers, basketweavers, and other such groups for whom access to forests and forest resources is crucial to economic survival. Environmentalists have added to the criticisms of these latter groups, charging foresters with simplifying complex ecosystems in the direction of commercially valuable but biologically impoverished monocultures.

These contending parties have battled for more than two hundred years. In continental Europe, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were peppered with social protest movements against the state management of forests. These protests inspired, among other things, Karl Marx’s first political writings and a memorable novel by Honore de Balzac capturing peasant hostility to forest officials.² When the European model of strict state control over forests was exported to the colonies, the disaffected peasants and tribals responded with arson and violence. Movements over forest rights were a recurring phenomena in colonies ruled by the British, the Dutch, and the French. The conflicts persisted when the post-colonial governments of countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia followed the authoritarian model of forest management inherited from the colonizer.³

In recent decades, however, the global discourse on forestry has moved towards a more accommodationist perspective. Foresters and peasant protesters now seem to talk to, rather than talk past, each other. A willingness to listen to and at least partially incorporate the other point of view has replaced the rigid and uncompromising attitude of the past. Within the forestry profession itself, skeptics doubt the contemporary relevance of the custodial and policing approaches previously followed. A system of natural resource management crafted in absolutist and colonialist

times clearly needed to be seriously modified or even overthrown.⁴ Social activists and community leaders have, meanwhile, moved from demanding a total state withdrawal from forest areas to asking governments to more seriously and sympathetically consider the rights of forest-dependent communities.⁵

With this move from conflict to collaboration have come shifts in the language of forestry itself. Terms such as “scientific forestry” and “rational land management,” euphemisms for state control and commercial timber production, are being rapidly replaced by sweet-sounding phrases such as “community management,” “participatory development,” and “joint forest management.” While these terms have come into vogue in the last two decades, they have, in fact, a very long genealogy. From the beginnings of state forestry, there have been serious attempts to democratize the regimes of resource management. Both dissidents within the bureaucracy as well as intellectual activists outside it tried hard to make the state respond more sensitively to the just claims of local communities. The ongoing programs of joint forest management in India can draw legitimacy and sustenance from a struggle that is at least a century old.

The Law and the Protests

The crucial watershed in the history of Indian forestry is undoubtedly the building of the railway network. In a famous minute of 1853, the governor general of India, Lord Dalhousie, wrote of how railway construction was both the means for creating a market for British goods and the outlet for British capital seeking profitable avenues for investment. Thus between 1853 and 1910 more than eighty thousand kilometers of track were laid in the subcontinent.⁶ The early years of railway expansion witnessed a savage assault on the forests of India. Great chunks of forest were destroyed to meet the demand for railway sleepers (over a million of which were required annually). The sal forests of Garhwal and Kumaun, for example, were “felled in even to desolation.” “Thousands of trees were felled which were never removed, nor was their removal possible.”⁷

This depredation brought home most forcefully the fact that India’s forests were not inexhaustible. At this time the British were unquestionably the world leaders in deforestation, having burnt or felled hundreds of thousands of acres of woodland in Australia, southern Africa, northeastern United States, Burma, and India.⁸ Knowing little of methods of sustained-yield forestry, they called in the Germans, who did. Thus in 1864 they established the Indian Forest Department, which for the first twenty-five years of its existence was serenely guided by three German inspectors general of forest—Dietrich Brandis, Wilhelm Schlich, and Bertold von Ribbentrop.⁹

For its effective functioning, the new department required a progressive curtailment of the previously untrammelled rights of use exercised by rural communities all over South Asia. An act was hurriedly drafted to establish the claims of the state to the forestland it immediately required, subject to the provision that existing rights not be abridged. This act was “infinitely milder and less stringent than that which is in force in most European countries.”¹⁰ The search commenced for a more stringent and inclusive piece of legislation. In 1869, the Government of India circulated to the

provinces a new draft act, which sought to strengthen the state's control over forest areas through the regulation and in some cases extinction of customary rights.

The new legislation was based on the assumption that all land not actually under cultivation belonged to the state. Of course, it was not easy to wish away the access to forests exercised in centuries past by peasants and other rural groups. The colonial state, however, argued that such use, however widespread and enduring, had been exercised only at the mercy of the monarch. Unless it had been expressly recorded in writing, customary use was deemed to be a "privilege," not a "right." And since the British government was the successor to Indian rulers, the ownership of forests and waste was now vested in it. "The right of conquest is the strongest of all rights," emphatically remarked one forest official. "It is a right against which there is no appeal."¹¹

There were, however, some notable dissenting voices within the colonial government. Sent the draft forest bill by the Government of India, the Madras Government in turn invited responses from various officers. The views of Narain Row, Deputy Collector of Nellore, are representative. The proposed legislation, he said, had no historical precedent, for "there were originally no Government forests in this country. Forests have always been of natural growth here; and so they have been enjoyed by the people."¹² Another Deputy Collector, Venkatachellum Puntulu, of Bellary, argued that the burden of the new legislation would fall most heavily on the poor. While large landlords would find it relatively easy to deny the state any claim over their forest property, unlettered peasants would not be able to prove rights of ownership, even though they traditionally used forests as common property. Criticizing the detailed rules prohibiting the collection of different kinds of forest produce, Puntulu penetratingly remarked that "the provisions of this bill infringe the rights of poor people who live by daily labor (cutting wood, catching fish and eggs of birds) and whose feelings cannot be known to those whose opinions will be required on this bill and who cannot assert their claims, like [the] influential class, who can assert their claims in all ways open to them and spread agitation in the newspapers."¹³

After several such responses came in, the Madras Board of Revenue told the Government of India that the claim of the state to uncultivated forests and wastes was virtually nonexistent:

There is scarcely a forest in the whole of the Presidency of Madras which is not within the limits of some village and there is not one in which so far as the Board can ascertain, the state asserted any rights of property unless royalties in teak, sandalwood, cardamoms and the like can be considered as such, until very recently. All of them, without exception are subject to tribal or communal rights which have existed from time immemorial and which are as difficult to define as they are necessary to the rural population. . . . [In Madras] the forests are, and always have been common property, no restriction except that of taxes, like the Moturpha [tax on tools] and Pulari [grazing tax] was ever imposed on the people till the Forest Department was created, and such taxes no more indicate that the forest belongs to the state than the collection of assessment shows that the private holdings in Malabar, Canara and the Ryotwari districts belong to it.

The Madras Government advanced three basic reasons for rejecting the bill drafted by the Government of India:

First, because its principles, scope and purpose are inconsistent with the existing facts of forest property and its history.

Second, because, even if the Bill were consistent with facts, its provisions are too arbitrary, setting the laws of property at open defiance, and leaving the determination of forest rights to a Department which, in this Presidency at all events, has always shown itself eager to destroy all forest rights but those of Government.

Third, because a Forest Bill, which aims at the regulation of local usages ought to be framed, discussed and passed by the local legislature.¹⁴

The objections were disregarded, and in 1878, the new bill passed. The act divided the forests of the subcontinent into three broad classes. State or reserved forests were to be carefully chosen, in large and compact areas that could lend themselves to commercial exploitation. The constitution of these reserves was to be preceded by a legal settlement that either extinguished customary rights of user, transferred them as “privileges” to be exercised elsewhere, or, in exceptional cases, allowed their limited exercise. In the second class, of “protected” forests, rights and privileges were recorded but not settled. However, all valuable tree species were to be declared as “reserved” by the state, while the Forest Department had the power to prohibit grazing and other ostensibly damaging practices.

The Forest Act also provided for a third class of forests—village forests. But as these lands had first to be constituted as reserved forests, the procedure aroused suspicion among the villagers, and this chapter remained a “dead letter.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, the area of forests under strict state control steadily expanded. In 1878, there were 14,000 square miles of state forest. By 1890, this had increased to 76,000 square miles, three-fourths of which were reserved forests. Ten years later, there were 81,400 square miles of reserved forests and 8,300 of protected forests. Given increasing demand for wood products, the state sought to establish firmer control over forests, both by expanding the area taken over under the Forest Act and by converting protected forests to reserved forest.

The Indian Forest Act of 1878 was a comprehensive piece of legislation that came to serve as a model for other British colonies.¹⁶ Within India, it allowed the state to expand the commercial exploitation of the forest while putting curbs on local use for subsistence. This denial of village forest rights provoked countrywide protest. The history of colonial rule is punctuated by major rebellions against colonial forestry—in Chotanagpur in 1893, in Bastar in 1910, in Gudem-Rampa in 1879–80 and again in 1922–23, in Midnapur in 1920, and in Adilabad in 1940. These rebellions sometimes extended over several hundred square miles of territory, involved thousands of villagers, and had to be put down by armed force. Even where discontent did not manifest itself in open rebellion, it was expressed through arson, non-compliance, and breaches of the forest law.

The participants in these protests were unlettered peasants and tribals, and we know far more of their deeds than their words. Nonetheless, their voices do figure here and there in the archives of the state, sometimes mediated by the language of

the officials reporting them. Thus in the 1880s, when the government of the Bombay Presidency was aggressively demarcating the rich teak forests of the Dang district, preparatory to their constitution as state reserves, a Bhil tribal chief sent in a petition stating that “we do not wish to let the Dang jungle [be] demarcated, for thereby we shall lose our rights and we and our poor rayat [cultivators] shall always be under the control of the Forest Department and the Department will always oppress us.”¹⁷ Around the same time, the colonial state was attempting to take over the *deodar* (cedar) forests of the upper Jamuna valley. These trees had suddenly become market-worthy, to service the then expanding railway network. But as a peasant bitterly observed, “the forests have belonged to us from time immemorial, our ancestors planted them and have protected them; now that they have become of value, government steps in and robs us of them.”¹⁸ Or consider, finally, these remarks of an administrator in the Bastar district of central India, on the determination of his tribal subjects to continue practicing swidden cultivation in what was now “government” forests: “On the road from Tetam to Katekalyan I found general dissatisfaction at the restriction of penda [swidden] cultivation. I was unable to convince them of its evils [*sic*]. Podiyami Bandi Peda of Tumakpal has to get his son married and for this purpose he wants to cultivate penda in the prohibited area. I told him he should not do it. He replied plainly that he would cultivate it and go to jail as he had to get his son married.”¹⁹

In 1871, the Madras Government predicted that the new act, if passed into law, would “place in antagonism to Government every class whose support is desired and essential to the object in view, from the Zamindar [landlord] to the Hill Toda or Korombar.” This was an astonishingly accurate prediction, for the Forest Department was unquestionably the most unpopular arm of the British Raj. The story of the numerous popular movements against state forestry, so long neglected by historians, is now attracting an array of chroniclers.²⁰ The critics were principally of two kinds. On the one side were scholars and politicians with a deep knowledge of rural conditions, and who sometimes formed part of popular movements themselves. Their criticisms of state forestry thus drew richly upon the feelings and grievances of the people most affected by it. On the other side were the rare (but, for that reason, significant) dissidents within the colonial bureaucracy, who opposed the centralizing thrust of government forest policy. The first set were outsiders so far as the apparatus of rule was concerned, but insiders with respect to popular opinion and popular consciousness. The second set were by virtue of race and status outsiders to Indian society, but insiders with regard to the policy of the state and the functioning of government.

Precocious Prophets

In 1878, the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha, a vastly respected nationalist organization in western India, bitterly opposed the new Forest Act. Despite its middle-class origins, the Sabha had consistently fought for the rights of the cultivator, urging that the colonial government lessen its burden of taxation on the peasantry.²¹ Now, in the

context of the Forest Act debate, it pointed out that state usurpation was grossly violative of customary rights over forests, for both “private grantees and village and tribal communities” had “cherished and maintained these rights with the same tenacity with which private property in land is maintained elsewhere.” The Sarvajanic Sabha did not, however, merely oppose the proposed Forest Act for its excessive emphasis on state control; it offered a more constructive and creative alternative. Thus the Sabha argued that

the better maintenance of forest cover could more easily be brought about by taking the Indian villager into confidence of the Indian Government. If the villagers were rewarded and commended for conserving their patches of forestlands, or for making plantations on the same, instead of ejecting them from the forestland that they possess, or in which they are interested, emulation might be evoked between neighboring villages. Thus more effective conservation and development of forests in India might be secured, and when the villagers have their own patches of forest to attend to, government forests might not be molested. Thus the interests of the villagers as well as the government can be secured without causing any unnecessary irritation in the minds of the masses of the Indian population.²²

The Sabha was advocating a far more democratic structure of forest management than that envisaged by the colonial government. Indeed, it was proposing the institution of a Vrikshamitra (Friends of the Trees) Award, one hundred and ten years before the Indian Government’s Ministry of Environment and Forests conceived and named such a scheme, for rewarding individuals and communities who had successfully protected or replenished forest areas.

Three years after the 1878 act was passed, the impact of state forestry on rural communities was foregrounded by the social reformer Jotirau Phule. Phule himself was a gardener by caste, and in general exceptionally alert to the problems of the agricultural classes.²³ The following is his description of the impact of the Forest Department on the livelihood of farmers and pastoralists in the Deccan countryside:

In the olden days small landholders who could not subsist on cultivation alone used to eat wild fruits like figs and jamun and sell the leaves and flowers of the flame of the forest and the mahua tree [both common trees of the Indian forest]. They could also depend on the village ground to maintain one or two cows and two or four goats, thereby living happily in their own ancestral villages. However, the cunning European employees of our motherly government have used their foreign brains to erect a great superstructure called the forest department. With all the hills and undulating areas as also the fallow lands and grazing grounds brought under the control of the forest department, the livestock of the poor farmers do not even have place to breathe anywhere on the surface of the earth.²⁴

These remarks drew attention to the dependence of the agriculturist on the produce of forests and other common lands. This dependence was even more acute in the tribal regions of middle India, where communities of hunter-gatherers, swidden agriculturists, and charcoal iron makers were likewise at the receiving end of the new

forest laws. These peoples found an eloquent spokesman in Verrier Elwin (1902–1964), a brilliant Oxford scholar and renegade priest who became the foremost interpreter of *adivasi* (tribal) culture in India.²⁵ Elwin was a pioneer of ecological anthropology, whose many works vividly showcased the intimate relationship between the forest world and the life of the *adivasi*. All tribals, he argued, had a deep knowledge of wild plants and animals; some could even read the great volume of Nature like an “open book.” Swidden agriculturists, for whom forest and farm shaded imperceptibly into each other, had an especial bond with the natural world. They liked to think of themselves as children of *Dharti Mata*, Mother Earth, fed and loved by her.

Elwin’s ethnographies are peppered with references to the *adivasi*’s love for the forest.²⁶ Tragically, the forest and game laws introduced by the British had made them interlopers in their own land. He quotes a member of the tribal group Gond, whose idea of heaven was “miles and miles of forest without any forest guards.”²⁷ As the anthropologist himself wrote in 1941:

The reservation of forests was a very serious blow to the tribesman. He was forbidden to practice his traditional methods of cultivation. He was ordered to remain in one village and not to wander from place to place. When he had cattle he was kept in a state of continual anxiety for fear they should stray over the boundary and render him liable to heavy fines. If he was a Forest Villager he became liable at any moment to be called to work for the Forest Department. If he lived elsewhere he was forced to obtain a license for almost every kind of forest produce. At every turn the Forest Laws cut across his life, limiting, frustrating, destroying his self confidence. During the year 1933–4 there were 27,000 forest offences registered in the Central Provinces and Berar and probably ten times as many unwhipped of justice. It is obvious that so great a number of offences would not occur unless the forest regulations ran counter to the fundamental needs of the tribesmen. A Forest Officer once said to me: “Our laws are of such a kind that every villager breaks one forest law every day of his life.”²⁸

Elwin’s writings were addressed equally to the colonial state and to the Congress nationalists, who in the 1940s were very much a government-in-waiting. The Congress, however, had not been especially sensitive to the rights of the tribals. But as Elwin reminded them, “the aboriginals are the real *swadeshi* [indigenous] products of India, in whose presence everything is foreign. They are the ancient people with moral claims and rights thousands of years old. They were here first: they should come first in our regard.”²⁹ He was deeply distressed when a Congress report on tribals followed the British authorities in asking for a ban on shifting cultivation. Now Elwin’s work had shown that, contrary to modernist prejudice, swidden as practiced by the Baiga, the Juang, and other tribes was an ecologically viable system of cultivation. When the nationalists recommended the ban, he wrote angrily that “the forests belong to the aboriginal. I should have thought that anyone who was a Nationalist would at least advocate *swaraj* [freedom] for the aboriginal!”³⁰

The significance of the forest in tribal life is a running theme in Elwin’s work. Noting that a majority of tribal rebellions had centered around land and forests, he pleaded for the greater involvement of tribals in forest management in free India.

Even if adivasis had no longer any legal rights of ownership, they had considerable moral rights. And as tribals were as much part of the national treasure as forests themselves, there should be an amicable adjustment between forest management and tribal needs. Even where commercial forest operations became necessary, he said, these should be undertaken by tribal cooperatives and not by powerful private contractors.³¹

After independence Verrier Elwin became the first foreigner to be granted citizenship of free India. In 1954, he was appointed Adviser on Tribal Affairs to the Government of India (with special reference to the North-east Frontier Agency). He was also to serve on more than one high-level, all-India committee on tribal policy. From his first official appointment until his premature death in 1964, Elwin repeatedly urged a reconsideration of forest policy, such that it might, at last, come to more properly serve tribal needs. In this he had little success for forest management became, if anything, more commercially oriented in independent India.³² Towards the end of his life, the anthropologist wrote with some bitterness of how the victims of government policy were being unfairly blamed for the destruction of forests:

There is constant propaganda that the tribal people are destroying the forest. When this was put to some of the villagers, they countered the complaint by asking how they could destroy the forest. They owned no trucks; they hardly had even a bullock-cart; the utmost that they could carry away was a headload of produce for sale to maintain their families and that too against a license. The utmost that they wanted was wood to keep them warm in the winter months, to reconstruct or repair their huts and carry on their little cottage industries. Their fuel-needs for cooking, they said, were not much, for they had not much to cook. Having explained their own position they invariably turned to the amount of [forest] destruction that was taking place all around them. They asked how the ex-zamindars [landlords], in violation of their agreements and the forest rules and laws, devastated vast tracts of forest land right in front of officials. They also related how the contractors stray outside the contracted coupes, carry loads in trucks in excess of their authorised capacity and otherwise exploit both the forests and the tribal people.

There is a feeling among the tribals that all the arguments in favor of preservation and development of forests are intended to refuse them their demands. They argue that when it is a question of industry, township, development work or projects of rehabilitation, all these plausible arguments are forgotten and vast tracts are placed at the disposal of outsiders who mercilessly destroy the forest wealth with or without necessity.³³

From a great Englishman who devoted his life to the service of the Indian poor, we move on to a great Englishwoman who did likewise—Madeleine Slade, the daughter of an admiral who came from England to join Gandhi in his Sabarmati Ashram in 1926. Gandhi adopted her as his own daughter and gave her the name Mira Behn. She played a prominent role in the anti-colonial struggle and was jailed several times.

In 1945, Mira Behn set up a Kisan (peasant) Ashram near the holy town of Hardwar, and two years later moved up the Ganges beyond Rishikesh, where the river descends into the plains. In 1952, she shifted her base again, to the Bhilangna valley in the interior Himalaya. Here she stayed still 1959 when ill health and possibly dissatisfaction with the policies of independent India made her migrate to Austria.³⁴

The peasants of the central Himalaya are, of course, as dependent on forest produce as the tribals of the Indian heartland with whom Elwin long worked. Here, one unfortunate consequence of state forest management was the gradual replacement of *banj* oak (*quercus incana*), a tree much prized by villagers as a source of fuel, fodder, and leaf manure, by *chil* (or *chir*) pine (*pinus roxburghii*), a species more valued commercially as a source of timber and resin.³⁵ This transition had serious ecological implications, for the thick undergrowth characteristic of banj forests absorbed a high proportion of the rainwaters of the fierce Himalayan monsoon. This water then slowly percolated downhill. Below the oak forests were thus found “beautiful sweet and cool springs,” the main source of drinking water for the hill villagers. By contrast, the floor of pine forests was covered thinly by needles, and had much less absorptive capacity. In hillsides dominated by chil, the rain rushed down the slopes, carrying away soil, debris, and rock, contributing thereby to floods.

Why were the banj forests disappearing in the Himalaya? Mira Behn’s own explanation revealed a sharp awareness of the sociology of forest management in the hills. “It is not merely that the Forest Department spreads the Chil pine,” she said, “but largely because the Department does not seriously organize and control the lopping of the Banj trees for cattle fodder, and . . . is glad enough from the financial point of view to see the Banj dying out and the chil pine taking its place. When the Banj trees grow weak and scraggy from overlopping, the chil pine gets a footing in the forest, and once it grows up and starts casting its pine needles on the ground, all other trees die out.”

Mira Behn continued: “It is no good putting all the blame on the villagers. . . . The villagers themselves realize fully the immense importance of these Banj forests, without which their cattle would starve to death, the springs would dry up, and flood waters from the upper mountain slopes would devastate their precious terraced fields in the valleys. Indeed all these misfortunes are already making their appearance on a wide scale. Yet each individual villager cannot resist lopping the Banj trees in the unprotected Government forests. ‘If I do not lop the trees someone else will, so why not lop them, and lop them as much as possible before the next comer.’”

Although Mira Behn does not explicitly make the point, it seemed that this shortsighted behavior of the hill peasant was related to the loss of community control, such that individual peasants no longer had a long-term stake in the maintenance of forest cover. This was a tendency aggravated by the commercial orientation of the Forest Department. Could anything be done to restore banj to its rightful place, and thus revive Himalayan economy and ecology? Mira Behn writes:

The problem is not without solution, for if trees are lopped methodically, they can still give a large quantity of fodder, and yet not become weak and scraggy. At the same time, if the intruding Chil pines are pushed back to their correct altitude (i.e. between 3,000 and 5,000 feet), and the Banj forests are resuscitated, the burden on the present trees will, year by year, decrease, and precious fodder for the cattle will actually become more plentiful. But all this means winning the trust and co-operation of the villagers, for the Forest Department, by itself, cannot save the situation. Nor can it easily win the villagers' trust, because the relations between the Department and the peasantry are very strained, practically amounting to open warfare in Chil pine areas. Therefore, in order to awaken confidence in the people, some non-official influence is necessary.

With the aid of local constructive workers, it should become possible to organize village committees and village guards to function along with the Forest Department field staff which should be increased, and also given special training in a new outlook towards the peasantry. In this way it should be feasible to carry out a well-balanced long term project for controlled lopping and gradual return of the Banj forests to their rightful place, by systematic removal of Chil pines above 5,500 feet altitude to be followed by protection of the young Banj growth. The Banj forests are the very centres of nature's economic cycle on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. To destroy them is to cut out the heart and thus bring death to the whole structure.

Mira Behn sent reports of her findings, with photographs, to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. He passed them on to the concerned officials, but nothing seems to have come of it; it appears that the Indian Forest Department of the 1950s would not change its ways.

A Democratizing Forester

The quotes offered in the previous section are all strikingly contemporary. To those who know something of the people behind them, they are also perfectly in character. Phule, Elwin, and Mira Behn, as well as the leaders of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, had a deep knowledge of agrarian life. Alert to the inequities in access to natural resources brought about by the new laws, they would vigorously polemicize on behalf of the victims of state forest management.

Dietrich Brandis was a prophet of community forestry who came from the unlikeliest of backgrounds. He was a forest officer; in fact, no less than the first inspector general of forests (IGF) in India. In nineteen years as IGF (1864–1883), he laid the foundations of state forestry in India. A man of great energy, he toured widely in the subcontinent, writing authoritative reports on the direction forest management should take in the different provinces of British India.³⁶ In the realm of silviculture, he formulated the systems of valuation and forest working still widely in use. As a former university don himself (he came to the service of the Raj from the University

of Bonn), Brandis started a college for training subordinate staff, arranged for higher officials to be trained on the continent, and helped set up the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun.

The scientific and administrative aspects of Brandis's legacy are not our focus here, but rather his *sociology* of forest management, his understanding of the social and political contexts within which state forestry had to operate in India.³⁷ Here Brandis's views must be immediately distinguished from almost all other forest officials, Indian or European, before or since. These officials counterpose "scientific" forestry under state auspices to the customary use of forests by rural communities, which they have always held to be erratic, unsystematic, wasteful, and shortsighted. It is thus that the forest officials justify their territorial control of over one-fifth of India's land mass, claiming that they alone possess the technical skills and administrative competence to manage woodland.

To be sure, Dietrich Brandis shared this creedal faith in the scientific status of sustained-yield forestry. He also believed that the state had a central role to play in forest management. But what he certainly did not share was his colleagues' skepticism of the knowledge base of rural communities. For example, Brandis wrote appreciatively of the widespread network of sacred groves in the subcontinent. These he termed, on different occasions, the "traditional system of forest preservation" and examples of "indigenous Indian forestry." In his tours he found sacred woodlands "most carefully protected" in many districts—from the *Devara Kadus* of Coorg in the south to the *deodar* temple groves in the Himalaya. At the other end of the social spectrum, Brandis also wrote appreciatively of forest reserves managed by Indian chiefs. He was particularly impressed by the Rajput princes of Rajasthan, whose hunting preserves provided game for the nobility as well as a permanent supply of fodder and small timber for the peasantry. The British stereotype of the Indian Maharaja was of a feckless and dissolute ruler, but as Brandis pointed out, in strenuously preserving brushwood in an arid climate the Rajputs had "set a good example, which the forest officers of the British government would do well to emulate."³⁸

In Brandis's larger vision for Indian forestry, a network of state reserves would run parallel to a network of village forests. The Forest Department would take over commercially valuable and strategically important forests, while simultaneously encouraging peasants to collectively manage areas left out of these reserves. Through a series of reports and memoranda written over a decade, the ICF tried to persuade the colonial government that a strong system of village forests was vital to the long-term success of state forestry itself.

The first such report was written in 1868, and pertained to the southern province of Mysore. This was a closely argued document suggesting the creation of village forests throughout Mysore, managed on a rotational cropping system, with freshly cut areas closed to fire and grazing. Ideally, each hamlet would have its own forest, but in many cases it might become necessary to constitute a block to be used by a group of villages. Such forests would provide the following items *free of cost*—firewood for home consumption and for sale by "poor people with headloads"; wood for agricultural implements and the making and repairing of carts; wood,

bamboo, and grass for thatching, flooring, and fencing; leaves and branches for manure; and grazing except in areas closed for reproduction. On the payment of a small fee, wood would be made available for houses and for use by artisans.

In Brandis's scheme, these forests would be put under a parallel administrative system, with a village forester for each unit, a forest ranger for all the village forests in each *taluk* (county), and a head forest ranger for the district as a whole, this man reporting to an assistant conservator of forests. He anticipated that the system would be self-supporting, with any surplus used for local improvements. In this manner, peasants would come to feel an interest "in the maintenance and improvement of their forests." Brandis also hoped that Forest Department control over village forests would give way in due course, with the "leading men" of each village assuming responsibility for management.³⁹

Forwarding his report to the Government of India, Brandis noted significantly that it was "the first of a series of measures" which he proposed "to suggest in various Provinces for the better utilization and for the improvement of the extensive wastelands which will not be included in the State Forests": that is, as a prelude to recommending a countrywide system of community forests.⁴⁰ Unhappily, the British officials of the Raj lacked Brandis's understanding of the biomass economy of rural India, the vital dependence of agrarian life on the produce of the forests. They also lacked his faith in local knowledge and local initiative. The opposition to Brandis claimed that his scheme would lead to a loss of state revenues while undermining the powers of district officials. Also invoked was an early version of the "Tragedy of the Commons" argument. For one official, "the village communities of Mysore, without cohesion and often split up into factions by caste, could not be entrusted with the powers, or competent to perform the functions assigned to them in [Dr Brandis's] scheme." Another commented that the scheme would fail "as each man, when the least removed from supervision, would cut whatever he might require for himself without any regard to the interests of his neighbours."⁴¹ The Government of India's final, negative verdict rested on a classic piece of colonial stereotyping. "The prejudices and rivalries of Natives," it said, "might be excited if men of different classes and castes shared in the same forests."⁴²

Brandis did not lightly accept this judgment. In a defiant note, he reviewed the case afresh, and made another forceful plea in favor of village forests. He drew pointed attention to the flourishing system of community forests on the continent, where scientific foresters exercised technical supervision over woodland managed for the exclusive benefit of villages and small towns. In Europe, wrote Brandis, "Such Communal Forests are a source of wealth to many towns and villages in Italy, France and Germany; property of this nature maintains a healthy spirit of independence among agricultural communities; it enables them to build roads, churches, school-houses, and to do much for promoting the welfare of the inhabitants; the advantages of encouraging the growth, and insisting on the good management of landed communal property, are manifold, and would be found as important in many parts of India as they have been found in Europe."⁴³

Following his failure in Mysore, Brandis resurrected his proposals in the debate leading up to the 1878 Forest Act. Here he urged the administration "to demarcate

as state forests as large and compact areas of valuable forests as can be obtained free of forest rights of persons,” while leaving the residual area, smaller in extent but more conveniently located for their supply, under the control of village communities. He hoped ultimately for the creation of three great classes of forest property, based on the European experience: state forests, forests of villages and other communities, and private forests. State ownership had to be restricted, argued Brandis, on account of the “small number of experienced and really useful officers” in the colonial forestry service and out of deference to the wishes of the local population. For “the trouble of effecting the forest rights and privileges on limited well-defined areas is temporary and will soon pass away, whereas the annoyance to the inhabitants by the maintenance of restrictions over the whole area of large forest tracts will be permanent, and will increase with the growth of population.”⁴⁴

Here was an uncanny anticipation of the widespread popular opposition that has been such a marked feature of the subsequent history of Indian forestry. But Brandis was overruled by more powerful civil servants within the colonial bureaucracy, and the 1878 Forest Act was based firmly on the principle of state monopoly.⁴⁵ But the German forester was a remarkably persistent man. As he remarked shortly after relinquishing the post of inspector general, systematic forestry in India “was like a plant of foreign origin, and the aim must be to naturalize it.” On the social side, this process of indigenization could be accomplished by encouraging native chiefs, large proprietors, and especially village communities to develop and protect forests for their own use. In the last instance the initiative lay with the government, which, insisted Brandis, stood to gain enormously from a successful system of communal forests. “Not only will these forests yield a permanent supply of wood and fodder to the people without any material expense to the State,” he wrote, “but if well managed, they will contribute much towards the healthy development of municipal institutions and of local self-government.”⁴⁶

In 1897, well into his retirement in Germany, Brandis returned to the subject of community forests. Long after he had severed all formal contacts with British India, Brandis continued to be deeply concerned that Indian forestry should cease to have “the character of an exotic plant, or a foreign artificially fostered institution.” This concern was consistent with his larger democratic vision for forestry in the subcontinent. Thus he suggested that “native” forest officers, as they distinguished themselves, be sent to study the forestry system operating in Germany. Notably, Brandis had in mind their social as well as silvicultural education. As he concluded his essay, Indian foresters, if sent to Germany, “will find that the villages, which own well-managed communal forests, are prosperous, although now and then they complain of the restrictions that a good system of management unavoidably imposes. What Indian forest officers will learn in this respect in Germany will be really useful to them in India.”⁴⁷

Perhaps by now Brandis despaired of British officials in India taking seriously his proposals for the constitution of village forests. Hence this indirect approach, wherein Indian forest officers trained on the continent might be able to better see the benefits of community forests. In the event, Indian officials (whether trained in Germany or not) have been, for the most part, hostile to any suggestion that local communities could be encouraged to manage forest areas for their own use. It is,

indeed, this territorial monopoly and indifference to the demands of rural communities that have made the Forest Department the object of such relentless criticism in recent years.

The Indian Forest Department has been the subject of sharp attack for its authoritarian style of functioning; and yet, in an interesting paradox, the founder of the department had himself anticipated that a narrow reliance on state control and punitive methods of management would lead to popular disaffection. While terms such as “social forestry,” “community forestry,” and “joint forest management” have only now come into currency, the principles they embody would have been readily recognized, and indeed warmly commended, by the first head of the Forest Department in India.

The Himalayan Case

For all their insight, knowledge, and passion, these precocious advocates of community forestry did not have much impact on state policy. Control and commercialization remained the dominant motifs of state forest policy. The chapter on village forests in the 1878 act remained a dead letter. Government forest policy, in the colonial as well as postcolonial periods, continued to seriously ignore village needs, demands, and interests. The principle of state monopoly has remained paramount, with one very partial exception.

The Kumaun and Garhwal hills of present-day Uttar Pradesh contain the best stands of softwood in the subcontinent. These coniferous species have been highly prized since the early days of colonial forest management. Between 1869 and 1885, for example, some 6.5 million railway sleepers made from *deodar* (*cedrus deodarus*, the Indian cedar) were exported from the valley of the Yamuna, in the princely state of Tehri Garhwal.⁴⁸ Adjoining Tehri Garhwal to the east was the British-administered Kumaun division, with its rich stands of chir pine. Here forestry operations concentrated simultaneously on expanding the area under chir (at the expense of oak) and exploiting the tree both for timber and for resin. Between 1910 and 1920, for example, the number of trees tapped for resin increased from 260,000 to 2,135,000.⁴⁹ The pine trees of the Central Himalaya were the only source, within the British Empire, of oleo-resin, an extract with a wide range of commercial and industrial applications. Likewise, the timber of deodar and chir, as well as fir and spruce, constituted a strategically valuable resource for the colonial state, exploited with profit to service the military campaigns of the two world wars.

In the Himalaya, as elsewhere, commercial forestry under state auspices was made possible only through a denial of customary rights of ownership and use. In these hills, forests and grassland were a crucial resource for the agro-pastoral production system. In fact, the fragmentary evidence available to historians does suggest the existence of a fairly widespread system of common property resource management— with grass reserves walled in and well looked after, oak forests managed by the village community, and sacred groves lovingly protected. Not surprisingly, the government’s attempts to seize vast areas under local control and reconstitute them as “reserved forests” evoked opposition. In the early years of state management, a

petition from a discontented hillman evocatively recalled a golden age when the villagers had full control over their forest habitat:

In days gone by every necessities of life were in abundance to villagers than to others [and] there were no such government laws and regulations prohibiting the free use of unsurveyed land and forest by them as they have now. The time itself has now become very hard and it has been made still harder by the imposition of different laws, regulations, and taxes on them and by increasing the land revenue. Now the village life has been shadowed by all the miseries and inconveniences of the present day laws and regulations. They are not allowed to fell down a tree to get fuels from it for their daily use and they cannot cut leaves of trees beyond certain portion of them for fodder to their animals. But the touring officials still view the present situation with an eye of the past and press them to supply good grass for themselves and their [retinue] without thinking of making any payment for these things to them who after spending their time, money and labour, can hardly procure them for their own use. In short all the privileges of village life, as they were twenty years ago, are nowhere to be found now, still the officials hanker after the system of yore when there were everything in abundance and within the reach of villagers.⁵⁰

When such protests went unheeded, the sentiments underlying them were to manifest themselves in sustained and organized resistance on the part of the Himalayan peasantry. In fact, this region probably witnessed more and more serious social conflict than any other forest region of India. There were major peasant movements against state forest policies in 1904, 1906, 1916, 1921, 1930, and 1942.⁵¹ These recurrent conflicts, remarked one sensitive official, were a consequence of “the struggle for existence between the villagers and the Forest Department; the former to live, the latter to show a surplus and what the department looks on as efficient forest management.”⁵²

The most significant forest movement in Kumaun and Garhwal took place in 1921. This took the shape of labor strikes, which crippled the administration, and the widespread burning of pine forests. A total of 395 recorded fires burnt an estimated 246,000 acres of forest. Hundreds of thousands of resin channels were destroyed. Constituting a direct challenge to the state to relax its control over forest areas, these protests enjoyed enormous popular support, which made it virtually impossible for the administration to detect the people responsible for the fires. The fires were generally directed at areas where the state was at its most vulnerable, for example, compact blocks of chir forest worked for timber and/or resin. Significantly, there is no evidence that the large areas of broad-leaved forest, also controlled by the state, were at all affected. Thus arson was not random but carefully discriminating—it spared those species more useful to the village economy.⁵³

In the vanguard of the 1921 movement were soldiers who had fought for the British in the First World War. Kumaun and Garhwal had long supplied hardy and exceptionally brave soldiers for the British Army—indeed, three of the five Victoria Crosses awarded to Indians between 1914 and 1918 went to this region. These former men in uniform saw the forest regulations as a bitter betrayal of their interests by the white overlord for whom they had so recently risked their lives. Their protests

alarmed the colonial state, for apart from being a reservoir of able-bodied men whom it hoped to continue to recruit for the wars it had to fight, the Kumaun hills bordered both Nepal and Tibet—regions not under direct British suzerainty but in which it had strong trading and political interests.

In the wake of the popular protests, a magisterial critique of government forest policy was published by Govind Ballabh Pant. Pant was a rising lawyer from a peasant household in Almora who went on to become one of the foremost of Indian nationalists, after independence taking office successively as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and home minister of the Government of India. His 1922 booklet *The Forest Problem in Kumaun* described the “burial of the immemorial and indefeasible rights of the people of Kumaun,” buried, that is, “between the property-grabbing zeal of the revenue officers and the exhortations of experts of the forest department.” As he put it, with legal precision, “the policy of the Forest Department can be summed up in two words, namely, encroachment and exploitation.” Several decades of a single-minded commercial forestry had led to a manifest deterioration of the agrarian economy: “Symptoms of decay are unmistakably visible in many a village: buildings are tottering, houses are deserted, population has dwindled and assessed land has gone out of cultivation since the policy of [forest] reservation was initiated. . . . Cattle have become weakened and emaciated and dairy produce is growing scarce every day: while in former times one could get any amount of milk and other varieties for the mere asking, now occasions are not rare when one cannot obtain it in the villages, for any price for the simple reason that it is not produced there at all.”⁵⁴

Pant’s analysis was rooted in a deep knowledge of the local context. He took it upon himself to combat the charge, commonly levied against the hill peasant, “of reckless devastation,” a charge “sedulously propagated by prejudiced or ignorant persons.” As he wrote,

The spacious wooded areas extending over the mountain ranges and hill sides bear testimony to the care bestowed by the successive generations of the Kumaonies. All of them are not of spontaneous growth and specially the finer varieties bespeak his labour and instinct for the plantation and preservation of the forest. A natural system of conservancy was in vogue, almost every hill top is dedicated to some local deity and the trees on or about the spot are regarded with great respect so that nobody dare touch them. There is also a general impression among the people that everyone cutting a tree should plant another in its place. . . . Grass and fodder reserves are maintained, and even *nap* [cultivable] lands are covered with trees, wherever, though in few cases, such land could be spared from the paramount demand of cultivation. Special care is also taken by the villagers to plant and preserve trees on the edges of their fields.⁵⁵

From this analysis, the solution logically offered was to give back to the peasants the woodland that they traditionally regarded as being within their village boundaries. “If the village areas are restored to the villagers, the causes of conflict and antagonism between the forest policy and the villagers will disappear, and a harmony and identity of interests will take the place of the distrust, and the villager will begin to protect the forests even if such protection involves some sacrifice or

physical discomfort.” Pant envisaged that these areas would be under the control of the village panchayats, or councils, under whose direction the “natural system of conservancy” would once again come to the fore. As he shrewdly observed, “some restrictions will be there, *but these will proceed from within, and will not be imposed from without.*”⁵⁶

Clearly, Pant drew upon and systematized the knowledge, perceptions, and analysis of the peasant folk of the Kumaun Himalaya. Thus, after the popular protests in 1921, the Government of the United Provinces set up a Kumaun Forest Grievances Committee. This committee toured the hills, examining some five thousand witnesses in all. Peasant activists submitted dozens of petitions to the committee, on behalf of individual villages. These identified blocks of forest near every village, where peasants would have *exclusive* rights of fuel and fodder collection, timber for building, wood for ploughs, bamboos for basket making, etc. It was being proposed that villagers should have full rights over these forests, which they would manage through their own panchayat.⁵⁷

Based on the evidence it collected, the committee finally concluded that “any attempt to strictly enforce these [forest] rules would lead to riots and bloodshed.” It thus divided the existing reserved forests into two categories—Class I, which were to be managed not by the forest officials but by the civil administration (in theory more sympathetic to rural needs), and Class II, constituting the commercially valuable wooded areas, which were to remain with the Forest Department. It also recommended that the government consider the constitution of village forests as per the demands of the people of Garhwal and Kumaun.⁵⁸

Bureaucracies move at their own pace, and only in 1930 the rules were passed allowing for the formation of van panchayats, or village forests, in the hill districts of the United Provinces. These allowed for a forest patch to be handed over to a village if it lay within its settlement boundaries, and if more than one-third of its residents had applied for permission to the deputy commissioner (DC). Once the DC gave the go-ahead, then the villagers elected, by voice vote, a council (*panch*) of five to nine members. This council in turn elected a head (*sarpanch*) among themselves. The van panchayat was empowered to close the forest for grazing, regulate cutting of branches and collection of fuel, and organize the distribution of forest produce. It could appoint a watchman, whose salary would be paid by villagers’ contributions to the panchayat. The panchayat could levy fines, although if the offender did not pay it had then to go to the civil courts for redressal. The felling of trees, however, required the permission of the Forest Department. The department also claimed 40 percent of the revenue from any commercial exploitation. Of the rest, 20 percent would go to the *zilla parishad* (district council), with the balance 40 percent kept with the DC on behalf of the van panchayat, which with that official’s written consent could use the funds for roads, schools, and other local improvements.

There are now in excess of 4,000 van panchayats in Kumaun and Garhwal, covering an area of just less than half a million hectares. An official report of 1960 remarked that many of these village forest councils had done “exemplary work in connection with forest protection and development.”⁵⁹ A more recent survey has concluded that the panchayat forests are often in a better condition than the reserved forests. Of twenty-one panchayats surveyed in three districts, the forest stock

in thirteen of these were in good condition, in four in medium condition, in three in poor condition. The researcher concluded that van panchayats have, by and large, maintained oak forests very well, especially in contrast to the dismal condition of the reserves (except for those reserves distant from habitations). The position in respect of chir forests is not so clear, but these seem to have done about as badly under van panchayat control as in the reserves. Various studies suggest that, overall, panchayat forests seem to be in as good or better condition than the reserves.⁶⁰

The van panchayat system constitutes the only network of village forests mandated by law in all of India.⁶¹ The concession was made by a colonial state worried of losing control in a sensitive and strategically important border region, and it was not to be replicated elsewhere. After independence, the van panchayat regime was not extended to the adjoining region of Tehri Garhwal, where Mira Behn worked in the 1950s, and where it might have very well contributed to preserving and enhancing the oak forests. Within Kumaun, too, there is considerable resentment over the curbs placed on the autonomous functioning of van panchayats.⁶² Though technically under the control of the villagers, the Forest Department can veto schemes for improvement, while of the revenue generated, 40 percent is swallowed by the state exchequer. Forty percent of the rest is by law granted to the village, but this money too first finds its way into a “consolidated fund” controlled by the DC, to which individual panchayats have then to apply. There are signs of an emerging movement to do away with these constricting rules, to make the management of the panchayats come fully under the control of the villagers. A chronicler of this discontent, himself quite aware of the long history of forest-related protests in Kumaun and Garhwal, writes that “those who know the history of forest struggles say that . . . the van panchayat movement will be the biggest such movement in the hills.”⁶³

Two Cheers for Joint Forest Management

From the inception of state forestry in India, perceptive critics have argued for a democratization of resource control, for a correction of the commercial bias promoted by successive governments, and for a proper participation in management and decision making by local user groups. Arguments first offered in the 1870s, and reiterated in subsequent decades, were revived, or reinvented, in the 1970s by the now-famous Chipko movement. It is no accident that Chipko originated in Garhwal and Kumaun, the part of India that has seen some of the most intensive conflicts between the state and the peasantry over forest resources.

The 1970s were marked by a series of forest movements in different parts of India. These took place in the Himalaya, in the Western Ghats, and, above all, in the vast tribal belt extending across the heart of peninsular India. In the Chotanagpur plateau, forest protests formed an integral part of the larger movement for a separate tribal homeland of Jharkhand, carved out from the huge, unwieldy, and predominantly non-tribal state of Bihar. In one much celebrated case, tribals demolished a plantation of teak, a highly prized furniture wood, that was coming up on land previously under the *sal* tree (*Shorea robusta*), a species of far greater benefit to the

local economy. Their slogan, “Sal means Jharkhand, sagwan (teak) means Bihar” was a one-sentence critique of the narrow commercial ends of state forestry.⁶⁴

Since the 1970s, there has been an ongoing, nationwide debate on forest policy in India, a debate fuelled by the continuing social tension in forest areas and the evidence of massive deforestation provided by satellite imagery. This debate has passed through three distinct if chronologically overlapping phases. The first phase might be designated the “politics of blame.” The activists speaking on behalf of disadvantaged groups have held the forest officials responsible for environmental degradation and popular discontent. The officials, in turn, have insisted that growing human and cattle populations are the prime reason why fully half of the 23 percent of India legally designated as “forest” was without tree cover.

The forestry debate of the 1970s and the 1980s drew, at times, on the heritage of earlier movements and critiques. The peasants of Garhwal and Kumaun, as this writer found out while doing field work there in 1982–83, were acutely conscious of how Chipko itself drew on a long and honorable history of peasant resistance to state forestry. Tribal activists in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, meanwhile, were not unfamiliar with the work and message of Verrier Elwin. And in the villages of the Deccan, social workers liked to offer the same quote of Jotirau Phule’s reproduced earlier in the paper, as proof that in the agro-pastoral system of that region, proper access to forests and pasture was vital to survival, and that it was the “great superstructure” of the Forest Department that continued to deny herders and farmers this access.⁶⁵ However, perhaps the most direct connection between the past and the present of forest management was effected in the summer of 1982, when the Government of India circulated a new draft forest act. Activists and academics joined hands to demonstrate how the proposed legislation was solidly based upon and, indeed, took further forward the centralizing thrust and punitive orientation of the notorious Indian Forest Act of 1878. After a countrywide campaign, the draft bill was finally dropped by the state.⁶⁶

As tempers cooled and polemic exhausted itself, a second phase, the “politics of negotiation,” originated. In villages and state capitals, forest officers and their critics found themselves at the same table, talking and beginning to appreciate, if not fully understand, the other’s point of view. Concessions were made by each side, protests suspended by one, and leases of forest produce to industry cancelled by the other. One product of the growing dialogue between activists and bureaucrats was the approval, by the Indian Parliament in 1988, of a new National Forest Policy. Where the ruling Forest Policy of 1952 had stressed state control and industrial exploitation, the new document instead emphasized the imperatives of ecological stability and peoples’ needs.

Then, slowly and hesitatingly, commenced the third phase, “the politics of collaboration.” In the state of West Bengal, for example, the Forest Department initiated remedial action on its own, abandoning its traditional custodial approach by inviting peasants to cooperate with it. Thousands of village forest protection committees were constituted, each of which pledged to protect nearby forests in collaboration with the state. Thus previously authoritarian government officials joined with previously suspicious villagers to successfully regenerate the degraded *sal* forests of southwestern Bengal.

The success of “Joint Forest Management” or JFM in West Bengal has encouraged scholars, activists, and sympathetic civil servants to demand its replication in other parts of India. Outside its original home, however, the progress of JFM has been slow. Administrative styles and cultures of governance vary widely among the states and regions of India. So do individual orientations, with some forest officials still loathe to relinquish control, while others have been inspired to start village protection committees on their own.

A mapping of the forestry debate in contemporary India would therefore show significant regional variations. Some states are still stuck in the “politics of blame”; others have moved tentatively to the “politics of negotiation.” West Bengal and parts of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Himachal Pradesh have instituted the “politics of collaboration” through the creation of JFM regimes. In this last scenario there is abundant scope for improvement. As analysts have shown, the JFM model now promoted by the Government of India reflects and sometimes reinforces inequities within rural society. Gender and caste are two axes of discrimination, with women and low-caste members of the village community not having adequate representation or voice in the decision-making process (this is also true, to a great extent, of the van panchayats in Kumaun.) Likewise, pastoral groups and artisans, who have legitimate claims on forest resources, are sometimes given short shrift. Moreover, the forest officials still claim a monopoly of “scientific expertise,” refusing to entertain villagers’ own ideas on species choice, spacing, or harvesting techniques.⁶⁷

One serious problem with the JFM model, as currently promoted by the state and donor agencies, is that it allows the constitution of village forest committees only on forestland with less than 40 percent crown cover. This is a deeply constricting rule, which reserves to the state, and the state alone, exclusive rights over the best-clothed lands of India. Thus forests situated close to hamlets cannot come under JFM regimes if they have more than 40 percent tree cover. Again, the regulations, strictly interpreted, would mean that if local communities were to effectively protect and replenish degraded lands, such that the crown cover was to come to exceed that magic figure of 40 percent, the state could step in and remove the area from JFM—which would be a bizarre outcome indeed. Nor have changes in policy and orientation been accompanied by concomitant changes in legislation. Thus, the present regime is not flexible enough to allow for spontaneous community-initiated forest regimes to exist along with more orthodox JFM regimes. In some parts of India, the Forest Department is casting a covetous eye on areas well protected by village communities. Thus in the Uttar Pradesh hills, the old established panchayat forests, managed by villagers, are sought to be brought under the JFM system only so that bureaucrats would have a greater say in their management. A new, carefully thought out Indian Forest Act is called for, which allows both for areas to be managed under state-village partnerships as well as by self-generated, autonomous community regimes.

One can thus envision a fourth (and possibly final) phase for the Indian forestry debate, the “politics of *partnership*.” For collaboration, even where it does exist, takes place on terms set down by the state, through the officials of the Forest Department.

We need to move on to a more inclusively democratic structure, where the state listens to and learns from the community, and where the community itself recognizes and deals fairly with the inequities within its own ranks.

The evidence suggests that contemporary advocates of decentralized forestry have had far greater success than their precursors. One reason for this is the altered political context: Brandis, Pant, and company worked under a colonial, authoritarian regime; the partisans of Chipko and similar movements in a democratic system. The revival of forest protest in the 1970s also coincided with the international environmental debate, which foregrounded the use and abuse of forests worldwide. The work of Indian scholars had, meanwhile, demonstrated with authority that the century-old history of state forestry in India must be reckoned a failure, in both an ecological and social sense. Finally, the problems with government-directed development programs in much of the Third World had led to an increasing interest in nongovernmental forms of management and control.

These calls for forest reform from the outside were complemented by pressures from change from within. Starting with West Bengal, the governors themselves, namely the forest officials in charge of their vast landed estate, realized that old methods of control and exclusion were merely fuelling social conflict. An overworked and underfunded bureaucracy then started, slowly, to involve communities in forest working. What started as a strategic imperative became, at least for some forest officers, a sincere change of heart. Once the critics from without were being echoed by the dissidents from within, the process of reform accelerated. This is indeed the signal lesson of Indian forest history—that meaningful policy change comes about only when the sustained pressure by social movements and their intellectual sympathizers resonates with the feelings of powerful officials within the state bureaucracy. One or the other, by itself, will not do. When Brandis was active, he was handicapped both by his lone dissident voice within the Forest Department, and by the fact that there had not yet emerged an effective critique from outside. When Elwin, Mira Behn, and others propagated the feelings and aspirations of the peasants and tribals they worked with, the forest bureaucracy was, collectively and to the last man, deaf to their arguments and entreaties. Forest policy remained unbending and unchanging, with the exception only of the Kumaun hills. There, as we have seen, the popular protests and outside critics were partially successful not because of a honest rethinking by the state but by its concern that this sensitive border region must not be tempted into outright rebellion. Elsewhere, where this political imperative did not come into play, the colonial regime refused to heed the widespread criticisms of its system of forest exploitation.

In more recent times, however, the radical critics have been aided by the auto-critique of influential sections of the forest establishment. This confluence of external pressure and internal rethinking explains why, and how, the contemporary proponents of community forestry have, unlike their predecessors, been able to see their ideas and polemic become translated into official policy and (though less assuredly) into official practice. Nonetheless, there are indeed striking parallels between the ideas underlying the application of joint forest management today and the ideas of the early, prescient, and brave but for the most part unheard critics

of state forestry discussed in this essay. With respect to the role of forest dependent communities, for example, there is a shared faith in indigenous knowledge, in the management capacity and robustness of local institutions, and above all, a sharp focus on local access to the usufruct of the forests. Again, with respect to the role of the state, there is a common recognition of the essentially advisory role of the forest department, of its need to collaborate with rather than strictly regulate customary use, and of the justice of sharing revenues from forest working with the villagers. Then, and now, critics have called strongly for an attitudinal change among state officials, a retraining and retooling in keeping with the democratic spirit of the age. Finally, both past and present proponents of decentralization seem to converge in their larger vision for forest policy in India, a vision which in my understanding consists of three central principles: (1) that benefit sharing (between state and community) and local control are to be the key incentives to ensure sustainable management and minimize conflict; (2) that community-controlled forests would work as a complement to a network of more strictly protected areas, further from habitations, that continue under more direct state control; (3) and finally, that the restricting of state control to these latter areas is vital on grounds of equity (i.e., the respect for local rights and demands), efficiency (i.e., as the most feasible course, with the state not biting off more than it can chew), and stability (i.e., as the most likely way to lessen conflict).

There is little question that the ongoing attempts at reversing or mitigating state monopoly over forest ownership and management do constitute a significant departure from past trends. In a deeper sense, however, contemporary attempts at fostering participatory systems of forest management hark back to a much older tradition. In the late twentieth century, as in the late nineteenth century, there has arisen a movement for the democratization of forest management, for a system founded not on mutual antagonism but on genuine partnership between state and citizen. The first inspector general's vision for Indian forestry was abruptly cast aside in the 1860s and 1870s, but it may yet come to prevail. That would be a vindication of the life and work of Dietrich Brandis, but also of Jotirau Phule, Verrier Elwin, Mira Behn, Govind Ballabh Pant, and the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha.

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Notes

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16. R. S. Troup, *Colonial Forest Administration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).
17. Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 216.
18. See File No. 2, Department I, Pre-Mutiny Records, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Dehradun.
19. Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 154.

20. See, among other works, Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, "State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India," *Past and Present* no. 123 (May 1989); David Baker, "A 'Serious Time': Forest Satyagraha in the Central Provinces," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 21, no. 1 (1984); Atluri Murali, "Whose Trees? Forest Practices and Local Communities in Andhra, 1600–1922," in *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, ed. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*, op. cit.
21. Unfortunately, no proper history of this pioneering organization exists. The activities of the Sabha do, however, figure in the standard biography of its founder, Gopalkrishna Gokhale. See B. R. Nanda, *Gokhale: The Indian Moderates and the British Raj* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).
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24. Jotirau Phule, "Shetkaryacha Asud" (The Whipcord of the Cultivator), first published in 1881, reprinted in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Phule*, ed. Dhananjay Keer and S. G. Malshe (Pune: Maharashtra Sahitya and Sanskriti Mandal, 1969). Quote translated from the Marathi by Madhav Gadgil.
25. Elwin's life and work are the subject of my book, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
26. See especially, Verrier Elwin, *The Baiga* (London: John Murray, 1939); *The Agaria* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1942).
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28. Verrier Elwin, *Loss of Nerve: A Comparative Study of the Contact of Peoples in the Aboriginal Areas of Bastar State and the Central Provinces of India* (Bombay: Wagle Press, 1941), 12.
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30. Verrier Elwin to A. V. Thakkar, 7 July 1941, in P. Kodanda Rao Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
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32. The marked continuities between colonial and postcolonial forest policy in India are analyzed in Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
33. Verrier Elwin, ed., *A New Deal for Tribal India* (New Delhi: Ministry for Home Affairs, 1963), 54–55.
34. No biography of Mira Behn exists. Her own memoirs are entitled *A Spirit's Pilgrimage* (London: Longmans, 1960).
35. The following discussion, as well as all the quotes therein, is drawn from Mira Behn, "Something Wrong in the Himalayas," essay of 1952 reproduced in *Khadi Gramudyog* 39, no. 2 (1992).
36. A fascinating fictional portrait of Brandis is contained in Rudyard Kipling's short story, "In the Rukh," in his *Many Inventions* (London: Macmillan, 1905).

37. See, in that connection, Herbert Hessmer, *Leben und Werk von Dietrich Brandis (1824–1907)* (Dusseldorf: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1975).
38. D. Brandis, *Indian Forestry* (Working: Oriental Institute, 1897), 12–14; D. Brandis, *The Distribution of Forests in India* (Edinburgh: Macfarlane and Erskine, 1873), 24–25.
39. D. Brandis, “On the Formation of Village Forests in Mysore,” report dated May 1868 in Forest Proceedings No. 63–66, June 1870, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
40. Brandis to Secretary, P. W. D., 9 January 1869, in *Ibid.*
41. L. Ricketts, Officiating Deputy Superintendent, Mysore, to Officiating Superintendent, Ashtagram Division, 15 February 1869; I. G. Cumming, Deputy Superintendent, Shimoga to Superintendent, Nagar Division, 22 February 1869, both in *Ibid.*
42. Chief Commissioner of Mysore to Secretary, Public Works Department, Government of India, 6 May 1869; Resolution No. 172 in the Foreign Department, 24 June 1870; *Ibid.*
43. Note on “Village Forests, Mysore,” by D. Brandis, 28 May 1870; *Ibid.*
44. See especially, D. Brandis, “Explanatory Memorandum on the Draft Forest Bill,” 3 August 1869 in Forests, B Proceedings No. 37–47, December 1875, National Archives of India, New Delhi; D. Brandis, *Memorandum on the Forest Legislation Proposed for British India (Other than the Presidencies of Madras and Bombay)* (Simla : Government Press, 1875).
45. As described in my essay “An Early Environmental Debate: The Making of the 1878 Forest Act,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27, no. 1 (1990).
46. D. Brandis, “The Progress of Forestry in India,” *Indian Forester* 10, no. 11 (November 1884): 508–10.
47. D. Brandis, “Indian Forestry: The Extended Employment of Natives,” *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review* (April 1897): 255–56.
48. See N. Hearle, *Working Plan for the Tehri Garhwal Leased Forest* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1888).
49. Stebbing, *Forests of India*, vol. 3, 660.
50. Petition to Sir James Meston, Lieutenant-Governor, United Provinces, from Pandit Madan Narayan Bist (village Ulaingad, Almora district), 17 May 1913, in File 398 of 1913, General Administration Department, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow.
51. These protests are narrated in Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000 [1990]).
52. Percy Wyndham, Commissioner, Kumaun Division, to H. S. Crosthwaite, Secretary to Government, United Provinces, dated 21 February 1921, in Forest Department File 109 of 1921, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow.
53. For details, consult Guha, *The Unquiet Woods*, Chapter 5.
54. G. B. Pant, *The Forest Problem in Kumaun* (Allahabad: Kumaun Parishad, 1922; reprint Naini Tal: Gyanodaya Prakashan, 1983), 39, 84, 70–71, 72.
55. *Ibid.*, 75–76.
56. *Ibid.*, 87–88; emphasis added.
57. “Garhwal Janta ki Janglaat Sambandi Maang” (“The Forest-Related Demands of the People of Garhwal”), *Garhwali* (weekly published from Dehradun), 18 June 1921.
58. Report of the Kumaun Forest Grievances Committee, in A Proceedings No. 19–24, June 1922, in File 522 of 1922, Department of Revenue and Agriculture (Forests), National Archives of India, New Delhi.
59. *Report of the Kumaun Forests Fact Finding Committee* (Lucknow: Government of Uttar Pradesh, 1960), 37.

60. E. Somanathan, "Deforestation, Incentives and Property Rights in Central Himalaya," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 January 1991. These conclusions are reinforced by my own field visits to Kumaun and Garhwal in 1981, 1983, and 1990.
61. This statement needs to be slightly qualified. Madhu Sarin (personal communication) informs me that in 1985 the Government of Orissa enacted rules allowing for the constitution of village forests. However, the extent of these forests and their status is unclear. Again, immediately after the First World War, panchayat forests were initiated in the Madras Presidency—these functioned desultorily for several decades, and were finally wound up. See Franklin Pressler, "Panchayat Forests in Madras, 1913–52," paper presented to the Second Conference of the American Society of Environmental History, May 1987.
62. S. L. Shah, *Functioning of Van Panchayats in Eight Hill Districts of Uttar Pradesh: An Analysis of Present Malaise and Lessons for Future in the Context of the Proposed Van Panchayat Niyamwali* (mimeo from the author, 1989); Vishwa Ballabh and Katar Singh, *Van Panchayats in Uttar Pradesh Hills: A Critical Analysis* (mimeo: Anand: Institute of Rural Management, 1988).
63. Jai Prakash Pawar, "Chipko ki Parampara mein ab Van Panchayatain Janta ko Andolit kar Rahi Hain" ("The Tradition of Chipko is Making the People Prepare for an Upsurge on the Question of Van Panchayats"), *Naini Tal Samachar*, 1 September 1994 (my translation).
64. Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, *Undeclared Civil War: A Critique of the Forest Policy* (New Delhi: PUDR, 1982).
65. Anonymous, *Whither Common Lands?* (Dharwad: Samaj Parivartan Samudaya, 1988).
66. See Ramachandra Guha, "Forestry in British and Post British India: A Historical Analysis," in two parts, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29th October and 5th–12th November 1983; Walter Fernandes and Sharad Kulkarni, eds., *Towards a New Forest Policy* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1983).
67. There is a growing literature on these issues. I have benefited from the following essays and articles: Madhu Sarin et al., *Who is Gaining? Who is Losing? Gender and Equity Concerns in Joint Forest Management* (New Delhi: Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development, 1998); S. Palit, "Structural Changes in Forest Departments," paper presented at workshop organized by WWF-India, Hyderabad, 14–15 March 1997; Bhaskar Vira, *Institutional Changes in India's Forest Sector, 1976–1994—Reflections on Policy*, Research Paper Number 5, Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics and Society, November 1995; Sushil Saigal, *Beyond Experimentation: Emerging Issues in the Institutionalization of Joint Forest Management in India* (New Delhi: Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development, 1997); K. Sivaramakrishnan, "Comanaged Forests in West Bengal: Historical Perspectives on Community and Control," *Journal of Sustainable Forestry* 7, no. 3 and 4 (1998); Nandini Sundar, "Unpacking the 'Joint' in Joint Forest Management," forthcoming in *Development and Change*. The last two scholars, both anthropologists with a strong interest in historical research, are each preparing a monograph on JFM.