Cochin forests and the British techno-ecological imperialism in India

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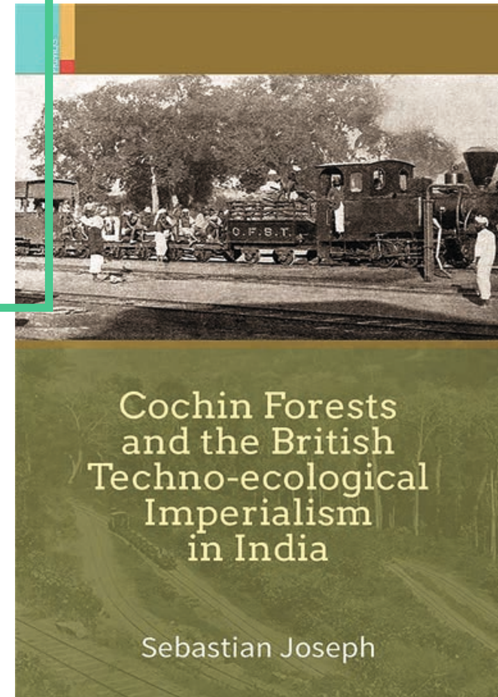

This book adds to the growing body of literature on ecological or environmental history focused on colonial forestry practice. It narrates the phases of British forest extraction in Cochin State from 1812-1963. Using rich archival material from the Cochin state, the book provides an intimate view of the processes through which the British gained control of Cochin forests, and what they did with that control. This is the main contribution of the book – excavating and presenting documents from the imperial state alongside the letters and reports from the Cochin state. The author argues that British colonialism marks an 'environmental watershed' in the Cochin region and is an example of technological imperialism. Such has already been argued and the data added from this study further validates this argument.

Why you should read this book

Sebastian Joseph offers convincing evidence to refute all claims to conservation objectives stated in the policy documents from the British. He argues that the Forestry Department created by the British in Cochin was only for the purpose of exploiting the forest, and the regional level archival material he provides reveals the 'true colonial nature of forest policies' (p. 6). British policies in Cochin state include building a tram into the deep forest to increase state revenue through forest exploitation, putting forest land in 'reserve' for the future, and extending the tram to improve security and access to markets in Cochin. The archive exposes each policy as fallacy. The tram did facilitate forest exploitation and timber exports flowed freely and profitably into Britain. The benefits were one-sided, however, and it failed to increase state revenue as the costs of upkeep and maintenance fell to the Cochin state. Similarly, the forest lands put into 'reserve' were not reserved for conservation or for future Cochin generations, rather they were reserved for other Europeans developing plantation agriculture enterprises. Finally, the expansion of the tram lines had no other effects than to increase timber extraction, with Britain as the primary beneficiary. Throughout this process, the author documents regional authorities questioning and calling for the cessation of these extractive activities. They cite multiple reasons for their displeasure, among them auditing irregularities awarding large sums to the forest department and the tramway company; theft of timber by British subjects; corrupt forest officials; and localized climate change. The words of regional authorities in Cochin are harbingers of the words of human rights and environmental activists today. Adding insult to injury – and also mimicking contemporary development initiatives – during the second world war the residents of Cochin faced rations on firewood and timber, while the British government took all the wood they needed to fuel their war efforts. The presentation of this data in parallel – with the voices of regional officials juxtaposed to the voices of the imperial state and the tram company effectively draw out the social and environmental contradictions of British forest policies in Cochin state.

Why and how the book should have done more

The main story emerges through five short chapters, the most important of which outline 1) colonial forest policies in Cochin, 2) the creation of the tram, and 3) the aggressive tactics through which the British maintained control of the area forests through 1963, despite local resistance. The data for these sections is rich and Joseph pulls on important strings that resonate through the larger story of rapacious colonial enterprises globally. Unfortunately, the nugget of data he mines regarding the Cochin tram and British practices of forest exploitation are not sufficiently connected to those larger narratives. The first two chapters, on 1) historiography and theoretical positions, and 2) colonial policy antecedents, are thin and insufficiently present the scope of scholarship on environmental history and colonial interventions in the now 'developing' world. Despite claiming to take a 'global world systems' theoretical approach (pp. 31-38), this entails little more than noting the importance of the British Empire as an 'exceptional global ecological moment in world history, and the … transformation of natural systems into legible colonial spaces' (p. 27). It is a slim volume and beyond deepening the theoretical and historical context mentioned above, the presentation would have benefited from at least two more chapters. The first would discuss the British railroad project in India, which had strong implications for the Cochin tram and also for colonial extraction projects globally. The second would deepen the discussion about British forestry in India to include a discussion of British policies in other colonial contexts and colonial forestry practices in general. These are key issues. For an experienced reader, the volume makes a useful contribution. But it does not adequately situate that contribution in the larger field of scholarship critiquing colonial extraction and gives an incomplete picture.

Critique, theoretical and intellectual shortcomings

The only glaring concern with the overall treatment is the author's insistence that the pre-colonial states had a 'spiritualistic outlook' that evolved in an 'eco-sense', through which the 'administration of the forest wealth did not collide with the interests of the people' (p. 50). This is unfortunate. There is scant evidence provided for his conclusion that the pre-colonial state did not 'collide with the interests of the people'. It is in fact unlikely that all people benefited equally from the pre-colonial state. The evidence provided in this volume shows quite clearly (although not explicitly noted by the author) that colonial policies mirror contemporary ones in which reforms, reserves, and conservation areas are more important as archival material than actual practice. The contemporary archive of United Nations and World Bank documents reveal similar policies for conservation and caretaking in so-called developing states whose debts increase while the benefits of development accrue outside the state apparatus. In this context, it seems naïve to suggest that previous states were any less or more rapacious than current ones – although suggesting as much is a common legitimizing trope. Joseph brings this out in colonial histories that vilify the pre-colonial state to justify their interventions into forest policy. While it is possible that early kings were actually afraid of the unknowable power of 'nature' – certainly palpable as the planet reasserts control over the interestingly dubbed Anthropocene – but, there is no evidence to suggest that pre-colonial records claiming conservation and caretaking of the population are any more true than the colonial documents claiming the same cited in this text. It is more likely that pre-colonial states took as much as they could, and left much behind. Despite the author's romanticism for the pre-colonial Indic states, this is a useful addition to our growing arsenal of data against colonial abuses and the environmental destruction caused by state formations, present and past.

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is heightened by the centrality of motherhood for Thai women's femininity. This is paired with fears of desertion by their husbands who might abandon them for a younger, more fertile woman. Men, however, are not immune to the issue as fertility is equated with potency and virility. Thus, parenthood is important to couples to feel complete as well as to fulfill their respective gender roles. Adoption is not seen as a viable solution due to the lack of a biological connection to the child. Further, the existence of birth parents is seen as highly problematic. For these reasons, couples who can afford the treatment opt for assisted reproduction.

On the quest for parenthood, couples engage with a 'sacred geography of fertility' (chapter 3) as well as with modern biomedicine (chapter 4). To increase their chances of getting pregnant couples visit religious sites and make offerings to spirits and deities asking for babies. The offerings given which are often for sale at the temples may appear as commercialization but are understood by Thai people as part of an exchange of gifts that allows them to negotiate with the god. The sites visited spread over a wide religious spectrum, including Buddhist temples, Chinese or Brahmin deities as well as animist spirits. This praxis of appealing to religious forces for help is not in opposition to medical treatment or a final resort after all other measures have failed. It is, rather, a form of care that 'complement[s] and enhance[s] other forms of intervention' (p. 73). The medical treatment itself also has its own kind of enchantment. To achieve their goal of having a baby, couples undergo a number of medical procedures and protocols within the liminal space of the clinic. It is the clinic that helps to transform couples into families but also offers a space where unsuccessful couples can come to terms with their losses. The clinic is also a liminal space because despite all the medical intervention successful treatment remains a mystery.

The mystery of assisted reproduction is in no small part in the hands of doctors and other professionals. This 'clinical ensemble' (chapter 5) is seen as benevolent and in a very literal way the givers of life. This fits well into the highly prestigious status that doctors have in Thai society that goes well beyond the realm of medicine. However, assisted reproduction has a very low chance for success leading to almost inevitable disappointment. Such failure to reproduce is placed on the couples (mainly the women) but also lead to disillusionment with the doctor. '[T]he image of the doctor as that of a healer with special moral status and expertise may transform into an image of a doctor as a businessman engaged in profit-making activities' (p. 153). This doctor–patient relationship and commercialization of medicine that Whittaker points out here open up more opportunities for future research, also beyond reproduction.

The women and men that are seeking to have children through assisted reproduction both have their own agency that functions within their relationship, the wider kinship group and society at large. While some women willingly undergo infertility treatment out of a desire for a baby, this is not the case with every woman. Some have no desire to have children or they are fertile while their husbands are not. The decision of these women to undergo treatment is part of a 'patriarchal bargain' (chapter 7) in which women give up some of their agency or are subjugated to male control in form of their husband or doctors in exchange for a secure relationship, fulfillment of their gendered roles in society or obligation to the kinship group. These bargains are made under constraints specific to Thai society, such as the status of women in society and relationships, high moral emphasis on motherhood, male sexual privilege and related concepts of fidelity, the continuity of bloodlines and the perception that children make the couple complete as a relationship and as individuals. While these concerns are overwhelmingly more relevant to women, it should not be overlooked that men, too, are under pressure to father children. Male fertility has been culturally linked to strength and power. Further, men are pressured to produce an heir and to continue the bloodline as well as help their wives achieve motherhood. Assisted reproduction and other related technologies 'give [infertile] men hope' (chapter 8). However, they remain marginalized in the fertility clinics and academic studies of assisted reproduction. Here Whittaker has made some inroads into the role of men in infertility treatment and their feelings about it.

With *Thai In Vitro* Andrea Whittaker, has continued her work on reproduction in Thailand and created what could be called a trilogy. In her first monograph she focused on reproduction and giving birth, while in the second, she explored the issue of abortion. That her third monograph is about assisted reproduction creates a logical continuation of her inquiry. The book is of the same highly detailed ethnographical spirit but also offers insightful theoretical analysis. I would highly recommend reading this book to anyone who is seeking to understand the inner workings of Thai society. Its implications go well beyond its subject matter.

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