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Review of *A Forest History of India* by Richard P. Tucker

Swati Chawla

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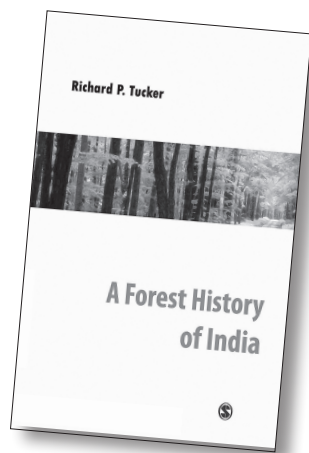


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Reviews



A Forest History of India.

Richard P. Tucker. Delhi: Sage, 2012. 267 pages. ISBN 9788132106937.

Reviewed by Swati Chawla

Richard P. Tucker's *A Forest History of India* is a collection of ten essays on the history of forest management in the Himalayas under British imperialism. Most essays first appeared in journals and edited volumes, and are compiled here to ease access for "researchers, students, and resource managers who work on the history of forest use in India" (p. ix). It is the appeal to this last constituency that makes both the subject and the author singular, for Tucker is not just an historian who studies imperialism and nationalist struggles through the history of environmental movements. He is more widely concerned with the roots of contemporary conflicts in the struggle over natural resources; for example, he co-edited a volume on the environmental impacts of mass violence (Richard P. Tucker

and Edmund Russell, eds. 2004. *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of War*. Corvallis: Oregon University Press). Along with Ramachandra Guha and Mahesh Rangarajan, Tucker is an important scholar in the relatively new field of forest history in India. The short introduction itself is a valuable primer for the uninitiated: he lays out the genesis of the discipline in Europe and North America, followed by its application in the former colonies of Europe (the Western Himalayas for most essays in the collection), and finally its entanglement with nationalist and postcolonial developmental politics, while also pointing to important secondary scholarship on the subject (pp. xi–xviii).

The book contributes to three distinct historiographies: environmental history, the history of British imperialism and nationalist struggles in the colonies, and postcolonial developmental history; for the latter two, the book uses the regional example of the Western Himalayas to make wider connections with national(ist) history. First, the introduction points out that the emergence of the field of forest history in early 19th century Europe was closely tied to the actual management of government forests. While the discipline attracted a diverse range of specialists from the timber industry and the wildlife conservation movement in addition to traditional historians, there was little "attention to the exploitation and management of the colonial and tropical possessions of the

West" up until the last few decades of the 20th century (p. xi)—a gap addressed by the present collection. Second, by drawing attention to "the environmental underpinnings of confrontations between British officials and Indian nationalists," the essays show that the administration of revenue was intricately tied to the history of forest management and exploitation in India, and forest management in itself was a major element of changing land use and social conflict (p. xii, 40). As Tucker points out, "colonial forest management was born in British India and was transferred from there to other parts of the British Empire" (p. 35). Third, he also underscores the timeliness (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) of the academic project of excavating the colonial roots of environmental histories of the Himalayas, since it was coterminous with the emergence of India as a "leader in the global movement of citizens' environmental activism," with the Chipko movement and other NGO and activist initiatives across India (p. xiii).

The Himalayas are an appropriate choice for this study because "nowhere were the problems of forest management in India more intricate or the ecological stakes higher than in the vast forests of the Himalayas" in northwestern India (p. 35), which came under direct or indirect British control between 1815 and 1849. The first British administrators settled in the Kumaon hills in 1815 under Commissioner G.W. Traill, whose surveys of the land

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Swati Chawla on *A Forest History of India*

and revenue management laid the foundations for the dominant place of the Revenue Department in the colonial administration (p. 40). The collection provides a detailed history of the struggle between administrative authorities and the peoples dependent on forest resources that dates back to colonial legislative interventions, such as the Forest Law of 1878, which first placed systematic restrictions on traditional uses of forests, thereby inaugurating a conflict over customary versus legal rights that has had a long afterlife in postcolonial India. However, the essays are largely focused on the colonial period, and make only a few cautious connections to social movements and legal debates in independent India. Six of the ten essays are about the legacy of colonial forest management in the Kumaon and Western Himalayas; one about the evolution of transhumant grazing in the Punjab Himalaya; three about the extraction, appropriation, and depletion of forest resources (both timber and non-timber products) under British imperialism; one about wildlife reserves; and most allude to the tension between resident peoples and the colonial (and later postcolonial) administrative machinery. Tucker also offers two comparative perspectives on the Western Himalayas and Kumaon: from the commercial timber economy in colonial Philippines and from Assam and Kerala where plantation agriculture for export (in particular, tea and coffee) replaced natural forests to a greater extent. The present collection, like the field

of environmental history itself, is enriched by insights from social history, land- and water-use history, and local history, and in particular the analytical tools of subaltern studies (p. xii, xiv).

Tucker has done valuable archival spadework with the colonial forestry archives in London and Oxford, the National Archives of India in New Delhi, and the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun, which houses colonial forest records of Kumaon, Garhwal, and the then Punjab Hill States (roughly, today's Himachal Pradesh), as well as the forest department offices of various districts. While the essays were written at a time when the field was relatively underdeveloped, Tucker has painstakingly mined existing secondary scholarship and grey literature on the subject, and made useful connections with work coming out of European and North American contexts. Tucker rightly points out that "numerous local examples from a broad range of colonial settings must be explored before historians can generalize with any confidence about the patterns of resource use in the non-Western world" (p. 35). Therefore, since each of the essays is a narrative-based account of a particular period and region under British administration, the collection as a whole is under-theorized, and offers few generalizable conclusions for other historical contexts, except underscoring the nexus between the administration of forest resources and imperial/nationalist/develop-

mental politics. As he points out in the introduction, "most of us who call ourselves environmental historians in our professional lives are also active environmentalists as public citizens" (p. xii). The value of an enterprise such as this one lies precisely at this intersection of the academic and the civilian, the historian and the activist.

Swati Chawla is a PhD candidate in South Asian History at the University of Virginia. Her research is focused on migration across the Himalayas in the twentieth century, and she is broadly interested in issues of statelessness, exile, and citizenship in postcolonial South Asia.