

# OneWorld South Asia

"The environmental impacts of conflicts have been overlooked"



*Poorva Sagar, OneWorld South Asia*

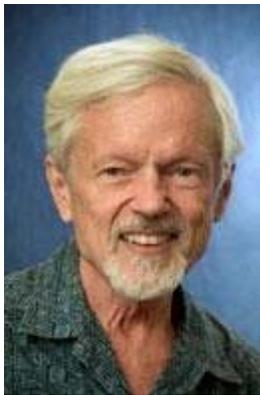
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**Insurgencies and ethnic conflicts have left massive footprints on regional ecosystems, thereby disturbing indigenous lives and livelihoods. Talking to OneWorld about his latest book, Prof Richard P Tucker of the University of Michigan, USA, establishes the close relationship of forestry with existing social structures.**

Richard Tucker's latest book *A Forest History of India* has been published by [Sage Publications](#) in October 2011.

**OneWorld:** *Your recent book A Forest History of India on colonial India's forest history is just out. How do you see this environmental history contributing to an understanding of India's current socio-economic development?*

**Richard Tucker:** In a way I have been talking about this first question already because all of my work as a historian is designed to give us perspective on today's dilemma on how the political controversies have developed. So, let me go beyond the forest work. In 1985, one of the environmental research institute in Washington asked me if I would write a book on historical background of American environmental operations around the world, especially the tropical regions.



So, what was the role of a historian in all of this and why do we worry about what happened in 19th century or early 20th century. My response to that

came to be and I hope this is catching your eye; it came to be a response to researchers looking at contemporary policy issues which whatever research institute was designed to do. So, they had research policies on tropical forests, for example and intensive studies, globally tropical forests, global water resources, population issues and each of their researches was finding that they were looking at international problems that are developed in a particular way which they could not trace.

The tropical forests Amazonia or in South-East Asia, in Malaysia and Indonesia have a long history of colonial background in the 1980s in south-east Asia. They needed to know more about that historical background and that's why they invited me to do a book on American operations internationally. This was a new kind of work.

Environmental historians in 60s, 70s and 80s, when it was a new field, almost all of them from North America or Western Europe were looking at the history in the north-west of the world. They were just beginning to do that work and so obviously there were discussions on policy issues. And I talked to couple of the key people in brand new environment ministry in 80s who were involved in these controversies over what are people's rights vs state's forest department interests. And they were saying to me, please write quickly and publish soon about the colonial period because we then can debate with our opposition and it may help us to resolve the dilemmas of today. A historical research will be very helpful to the contemporary discussion.

I think this is particularly true for NGOs, research centres and journalists. That early environmental journalists' era of 80s is hugely important and enriching for public discussions of those issues.

**OW:** *Your book covers a wide range - from the northern Kumaon mountains to Himachal to the Assam and Kerala plantations. How have the contextual environmental stresses shaped India's access to forest resources?*

**RT:** One of the great differences that occurs to me immediately is, some of the areas, Madhya Pradesh, for example, or down the Western Ghats, which are tribal areas are in stark contrast to western Himalayas, say Kumaon, Garhwal, Himachal - where sometimes we don't find the word tribal and its clearly wrong in terms of the social structure of the region.

If we come to the north-east, some of the areas in Assam are distinctly tribal minorities and the gap between tribal traditions and their uses of the forests is different from the mainstream use. The sort of project I did – the comparison between Assam and Kerala – that brought tribal issues in way.

But in Assam, I was looking at the history of tea plantations of the tribals there. It was an import of tribal labour from Bihar into the tea plantations precisely because the outsiders don't have social networks in the area around the tea plantation and because as outsiders they are easier to manage.

The timber contractors – most of them are not hill people themselves. The contractors were from the cities of what later became Haryana. The labour force for timber cutting was identified from particular '*jaatis*' (caste) of those areas, other cases they brought outsiders because they could manage them better.

So the question of labour force for resource is a very significant one and varies from one region to another. It will be worthwhile for people to do more research in that area – the relationship between imported labour and the local population.

I can give you an example from one of my unpublished research which I was doing in the 1990s with the National Parks. If we go to Sariska or any of the tiger reserves and the desperate pressures of the tiger population in these reserves- the question is who are these people who are trapping the tigers and poisoning them and exploiting the tigers and exporting tiger products into the international markets particularly China and through Nepal.

Here local population can both be the victims and exploiters. For that, the social patterns, are very important to understand.

Another dimension of forests and forests products is medicinal herbs. I have one essay on this book on minor forest products which now, in international terminology, we know as non-timber forest products. The Great Himalayan National Park is one of the wonderful national treasures of India. Through the World Bank funding, there was a major research for flora and fauna and medicinal herbs in the region.

We have a baseline for field studies and historical background for some of these national parks and national treasures. A number of upcoming researchers are conducting their research in the trade of medicinal herbs which is increasingly scarce and endangered species of herbs and plants species.

So, those who were concerned about bio-diversity and maintaining them is very difficult because it's not just snow leopards in the Himalayan regions which are endangered but also plant species which are equally endangered. Trade in medicinal herbs was becoming a serious problem in the 1980s and

the 1990s. Who were the buyers of these products became a question. Were those international pharmaceutical companies buying up these special herbs, very valuable in the international markets?

It became quite clear that the major buyers were for the Ayurvedic medicines for the internal market within India and most of these done very quietly. Lots of it was marginally illegal in your forest. So that is another issue which knowing historical background can help us to know how recent the problem is. So there is another little way in which historical background is useful to know .

**OW:** *You have also written extensively on the subject of warfare and its environmental impacts. How do you see environmental transformations as critical in such conflicts?*

**RT:** Most of I work has been an area of research that is very new anywhere in the world and very little has been done in that framework.

Recently there has been a lot of work on environmental causes of major conflicts. I and some of my friends are working on environmental consequences, the environmental damage caused by conflicts.

In Nepal for example, if you are an insurgent fighting against the government, you are likely to have your base in some environmentally sensitive area - hill regions, forest regions or tropical forests marshland regions. All of these are very delicate ecosystems and the damage done to these systems tends to be long term damage. But the whole question of environmental impact from that kind of conflict is one that I argue. It is largely overlooked.

So, what we are trying to do is to develop a research network that can help us understand better what environmental costs have been. Some of the best work in these areas is done by UN groups and UN's Environmental Programme (UNEP) which was developed since 90s, has been a very valuable programme in these conflict areas. Their post conflict environment assessment teams, for instance, had gone to Iraq after the end of the American occupation. Also, there some very valuable courageous work from some journalists but it all needs to be put together and constantly updated. Iraq and Afghanistan are good examples. There is always a rebuilding process.

If we look at the Vietnam, there was a huge damage done by chemical warfare. Even if we look at Vietnam, huge damage was done by chemical warfare before 1975. So, we are not still clear about the consequences of

these wars and that requires continuing monitoring on the ground and a focus on short and long term environmental damage and deterioration. In the last analysis, these contribute, in one way or another, in global climate change.

We now have to look at the damage to atmospheric health. By now there is a sense of real urgency, so that people from different disciplines, social science, the natural sciences and atmospheric physics have the capacity to monitor and be aware of the rapidly increasing human and environmental impacts. We have seriously neglected this aspect but I think now is gaining momentum. I am encouraged.

**OW:** *What is your view on the role of private sector in natural forest management?*

**RT:** I was watching in Himanchal particularly, when they set up the forest development corporation and separated that from traditional work of forest departments. I think that was the second directorate of Himanchal's forest development corporation, he was the one who understood all the aspects of long term forest management and challenge to provide for timber products for its market at the same time maintain the long term quality of the forests. But if you see someone whose responsibility is to meet the market demands then all the professional pressures on you are to maximize timber production and that's unbalanced.

So, it's a very complex issue. it has counterparts in many other countries to maintain a healthy forest and also meet market demands and of course one of the angle of that is the revenue that comes to government agency which pays for their operations and without that their operations will seriously curtailed. Now if they are really doing damaging work then may be the policies will shrink. That's very controversial. If we go back to the 70s in the beginning of the Chipko Movement, the women of North Garhwal were the champions who were saying "forests are ours. Where we live, the life systems are ours and the people in Lucknow or beyond do not have the right to take our forests away". That's very understandable position but the question is to whether people living in cities of India or any country also have a moral right? I am not talking about legal right.

I think the women of North Garhwal were talking about moral right. But do we, as urban people also have some kind of right to our forest products. Morally, may be the response needs to be that locals whether they are tribals or non-tribals, should have their needs met first and their forests not damaged. And any extraction of forest products whether its medicine or whether its timber or whether it's wildlife, should only be when it doesn't

damage the needs and the interests of the local people because they have much greater stake in maintaining all the diversity and broad health of the forest.

That's not the power complex that determines the whole situation these days. So, that needs to be looked at year by year as we go on with much clarity and completeness as we can.

There is an interesting comparison between the forest services and aesthetics in the United States. The government forest service at the state and national level has often been criticised for putting timber production as the overriding priority and this very notion of sustainable forestry is meant, sustainable timber production. So, over the last 30 years, people have been saying sustainable bio-diversity of the flora and fauna which is much broader and so we have a similar situation of close co-operation between public forests and private timber corporations.

But, there, much of the timberland is privately owned which is a major difference from here. And in the long run, I say, preserve bio-diversity for the sake of global health of the natural world in the bio-sphere. But that doesn't put me in the position to say that we should close down timber operations. We should create a balance between all these priorities about maintaining ecological survival of the natural systems. However, that has not been adequately prioritised.

Richard P Tucker is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Michigan, School of Natural Resources and Environment and an author of myriad books on environmental issues.