



Environment & Society Portal



The White Horse Press

Full citation:

Prasad, Archana. "Military Conflict and Forests in Central Provinces, India: Gonds and the Gondwana Region in Pre-colonial History." *Environment and History* 5, no. 3 (Oct, 1999): 361–75.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/3029>.

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Military Conflict and Forests in Central Provinces, India: Gonds and the Gondwana Region in Pre-colonial History

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SUMMARY

In this article I counter the proposition that pre-colonial, caste-based, natural resource management regimes were superior, in terms of stability and coherence, to colonial regimes. By engaging with the English sources of the Gondwana region I show how the question of 'stability' ignores the unequal and oppressive character of pre-colonial societies. This is borne out by the history of the Gondwana, where the social and political marginalisation of the Gonds was a result of the changing nature of zamindari power and the creation of private property rights in early colonial India.

INTRODUCTION

Recent debates on the tribal question and in environmental history have focused on the nature of pre-colonial rule in India. Scholars engaged in such debates have argued that a reconsideration of the nature of pre-colonial society can shed fresh light on the character of the transformation of indigenous society. In the past, too, historiographical trends have attempted to trace the changes and continuities in the relationship between pre-colonial and colonial societies. Nationalist historians have argued that the advent of colonialism led to dramatic changes in the socioeconomic fabric of the traditional pre-colonial society. In contrast, historians of the Cambridge School, such as C.A. Bayly, argue that colonialism did not prove such a decisive break in history.¹

Contemporary environmental historians have revisited this debate by exploring the relationship between ecological change and colonialism. A pioneering work on the environmental history of India has argued that 'stability', cooperation and harmony characterised the pre-colonial natural resource management regimes. In *This Fissured Land* Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil contended that,

Despite the grave inequalities of caste and class, then, the pre-colonial Indian society had a considerable degree of *coherence and stability*. This permitted a rapid turnover of ruling dynasties without major upheavals at the level of the village. On the one hand, the cultural traditions of prudence ensured the long-term viability of production and of the institution of caste which was its central underpinning. On the other hand, remarkably strong communal institutions – existing at caste and supra-caste levels – oversaw the political, economic and juridical spheres of everyday existence. The agrarian system was well integrated with the highly sophisticated system of artisanal production operating for local consumption and for trade.²

The authors portrayed each village as a relatively autonomous unit which had very little to do with larger structures of the political economy, i.e. they had full control over their natural resources, subject to their payment of tributes to the rulers. But, despite the existence of specific ecological roles in the caste society, these societies were not free of conflict. Rather, their mechanisms of conflict resolution gave the society strength to endure wide-ranging changes. The whole idea that stability of the agrarian society would ensure the *coexistence* of mutually exclusive and incompatible systems was consistent with earlier socio-ecological writings that influenced this thinking.³

The position of historians like Guha underscored the oppression and inequalities of the caste society, providing, albeit unwittingly, a moral justification for the existence of a feudal social system. Guha and Gadgil also accepted uncritically the colonial ethnographers' claims that the villages of pre-colonial India were closed and self-sufficient systems.⁴ Their main difference with ethnographers such as Maine lay in the normative position that they took vis-à-vis pre-colonial societies. While colonial ethnographers claimed that these socioeconomic systems were backward in character, many activists, anthropologists and historians sought to emphasise stability and ecological viability as their main traits. In this way they privileged traditional natural resource regimes as morally and ecologically superior to modern capitalist systems of resource use and management.

While most academics and scholars agree with Guha and Gadgil in their critique of capitalist and centralised forest management systems, they disagree with their interpretation of pre-colonial history. In the early 1990s, a growing body of literature concerned with the history of ecological transformations and the political economy of marginalised groups has challenged such arguments. By showing the nature of rural instability in pre-colonial India, authors like Sumit Guha and Ajay Skaria⁵ have shown that the colonial regime did not displace stable and consolidated control by villages over their own resources. This argument is significant in two respects. In the first place, it allows a reassessment of the role of colonialism in the transformation of village natural resource management regimes. Secondly it also helps to challenge academic and political assertions that traditional systems of resource use and control were

harmonious, non-oppressive and stable in character, and therefore preferable to modern and colonial social formations.

In the light of these emerging historiographical issues, this essay challenges the notions that pre-colonial 'tribal' and village economies in Central India were isolated and sustainable systems of resource use. Using the historical example of the Gondwana, I argue that the political social and economic instability that prevailed during the Maratha period provided the Gonds with more freedom of movement than the subsequent colonial regime. The sedentarisation of forest communities like the Gonds into forest villages was thus a product of the late 18th century expansion of colonialism.

This hypothesis is confirmed in this essay. This is done through an analysis of the colonial representations of Maratha history in the Gondwana region (Northern Central Provinces). The papers of Richard Jenkins, the British Resident on the Bhonsale Marathas' territories in Nagpur State, now in the India Office Library, are one of my main sources. They are valuable in two respects. First, Jenkins records oral evidence from elderly Gond people of migrations from the highlands to the plains. Secondly, he also gives a blow-by-blow account of the complex political conflict between the British, Marathas and the Gond Chiefs. Their main limitation lies in the fact that all interpretations of the data collected by Jenkins are replete with the bias of imperialist ideology. But the discrepancy between his interpretation and the data he presents leaves sufficient scope for conjectural analysis. Hence, these papers, along with other sources of the period, give us sufficient indication of the instability of rural Gondwana.

EARLY COLONIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF PRE-COLONIAL GOND HISTORY

The early nineteenth century English records project the Gonds as habitual plunderers and looters. This image is vastly different from the mid-nineteenth century perception of the Gonds as innocent and timid people. What brought about this dramatic change in colonial thinking? The answer lies mainly in the colonial representation of pre-colonial histories and the historical circumstances that led to the British domination of the Gond Chiefs in 1819.

The Gondwana, or the homeland of the Gonds, comprised the kingdoms or chieftaincies under the principality of Garh. The chief kingdoms within Gondwana were Khatola, Magadh, Mandla, Silwani, Deogarh, Kherla and Lanji. Its main seats of power were in Chanda, Deogarh and Garh Mandla, all ruled by sovereign Gond chieftains.⁶ They existed under the political domination of the Mughal Empire before the 1730s. The nominal annual tribute which they paid to the Mughal Emperor signified their loyalty to him and gave them a sufficient autonomous control over their own territories. The nature of this control changed

significantly with the decline of the Mughal Empire and increasing Maratha depredations into Gondwana.

The Gonds started paying tribute to the Marathas when Raghojee Bhonsla became the ruler of the *suba* of Berar in 1737. The territories of Chanda and Deogarh were subject to frequent attacks by Raghojee's army.⁷ The Maratha depredations encountered ample resistance from the Gonds, the first major protest occurring in 1738-39. Richard Jenkins describes the sequence of these events in the following way,

In the year 1738-39 Raghojee Bhonsla went into the Deogarh country and took some towns: Ramtek and others. He also attacked some independent holders of places and having beaten them established his power in Deogarh. Upon this the Gond established their troops in Patan Sownjee and made headway. Having heard this Raghojee made further headway into the forest and having defeated the Gonds went back to Nagpur; but the Gonds continued to plunder Raghojees territories further up North. On the other side eight Mughal districts were being plundered by the Gowalees.⁸

This account illustrates how Raghojee's invasion and conquest of Deogarh had resulted in the organisation of the Gonds in the forests. Jenkins's papers also suggest that the movement of the Gonds was influenced by the military attacks of the early eighteenth century. Quoting an influential Gond from Sindewahi he says that,

Originally they [the Gonds] were in the country. Afterwards they went below the Ghats to Chanda ... there were considerable number of Gonds in this country but very few below the Ghats. When Raghojee Bhonsla took possession of the Gadee of Deogarh the inhabitants both from the top and below the Ghats went as far as Wurda and now very few Gonds of the Koetoor cast remain on the Ghats.⁹

Jenkins's authority speaks of two types of Gond migration: one before the Maratha occupation and the other after the conquest of Gondwana by Raghojee Bhonsle. He suggests that the economy of the Gonds was largely in flux and they were displaced to the plains from the hills and foothills. But this movement was not confined to the migration from the forests. The Gonds also migrated from the plains into the forests to escape the exploitation of their rulers.

The forest played an active role in the contest between the Gonds and Marathas. The vanquished ran away to the forest to escape coercion and humiliation of defeat. The victorious, on the other hand, often destroyed the forests and plundered the wealth of the defeated to assert their power. The forest was thus an arena for political contest as well as the object of destruction during military conquests.¹⁰ In the process, some communities lost their basis of survival. For example, Raghojee's action in Gondwana pushed the Gonds and Gowlees from the plains into the forest. 'More industrious inhabitants' replaced them. The permanent settlement of non-Gond peoples suggests that the Maratha

action may have led to the social and political marginalisation of the Gonds.¹¹ As one Gond elder said,

In this country almost everyone used to bring up cows and buffaloes in their houses and the inhabitants were possessed of great wealth - korkee, kodo and mandya (local cereal crops) – were in abundance in the country and none of them were without gold and silver ... in this state the country continued until the reign of Bukht Bulund, never did the Gonds employ themselves in robbing on the highway ... our country was taken away from that time and the zamindars employed themselves in the service of another.¹²

Jenkins records that this marginalisation reflected the changes in survival practices. Quoting another Gond he states,

Formerly they [the Gonds] had nothing to eat and after which the Parsee Pen provided for them fruits of the jungle and beasts which they ordered to kill and eat. He also ordered them to remain in the jungle and there was no sin to killing and eating.¹³

The statements of the Gonds, as recorded by and represented in Jenkins's text, suggest that their land and forest use practices had changed with Maratha depredations into the Gondwana. With the increasing settlement of zamindaris in forested areas, the forest became a major site of the contest between the Marathas and the Gonds.

Examples from other areas illustrate a similar role of forests in regional political conflicts. For example, while describing the Battle of Deogarh in the sixteenth century, Pogson shows how the Bahadur Khan, the Raja of Deogarh, fled to the forest. His account of Raja Chumput's devastation of the Chambal areas suggests the possible linkages between deforestation and military action. In another instance, Muzaffar Alam relates how the Sikhs were forced to take shelter in the Lakhi Jungles. They then plundered large number of villages, stopped traffic and extracted large tributes from zamindars.¹⁴ The Gond case is different from these episodes because there is little indication of any direct correlation between deforestation and military action.

However, some sources do point towards the changing nature of land use in the region. The settlement of 'advanced cultivators' (presumably caste Hindus) and the displacement of the Gonds and Gowalees was significant from this point of view. It also reflected the increasing territorial control of Raghojee over the Gondwana region.

Colonial records are quite ambivalent in the way they see Raghojee's rule. In keeping with standard colonial ideology, they were eager to project Raghojee as a 'bad ruler' in order to justify their benevolent existence. They often speak of the way in which the Maratha ruler mismanaged his territories. The attempts by Gond zamindars and population to protest any domination by the Marathas are described as evidence of 'chaos' in the Maratha regimes. At the same time

increased centralised control over forest and agricultural land by Raghojee reflected the emergence of a new power structure. This was amply evident from the events of the mid-eighteenth century.

Raghojee reached a territorial agreement with the rulers of Chanda and Deogarh after winning the battle of 1749. But the Gonds did not take defeat passively, and revolted against Raghojee in Chandarpur, the capital of Chanda. In a battle that ensued for four months the Gonds were defeated, putting Chanda under the direct control of Raghojee.¹⁵ The process of settlement of new claims for Gond zamindaris resulted in the partition of territory. Thirteen *parganahs* (revenue circles) in Deogarh and a quarter of Chanda were divided between the Raj-Gond Raja, Neelkanth Shah, and Raghojee.¹⁶ As a result of his defeat, Neelkanth Shah and other Gond rulers lost their political power and status in the wider power structure. In the Mughal period, they had the status of semi-independent rulers with autonomous control over their territories. This position changed under Raghojee's domination (from about 1740 onwards), where the Gond chiefs were granted the rank of ordinary zamindars. These land-grants were made to families who had proved their fidelity to the Nagpur Raja and had served him for many generations. For example, Raghojee granted Hunye, the largest Jagir of Deogarh, to a long time loyalist, Fateh Shah. Seeing the estate in excellent condition, the new landlord decided to add to his riches by terrorising other Gond zamindars. He contributed a large measure of these riches to the Raja's treasury and was therefore granted a free hand in the Gondwana. Fateh Shah dominated the central districts of the area, annexed them and established the rule of his relatives. In return he was able to extract payment for the Nagpur Raja's troops. By the time the British started interfering in Gondwana affairs Fateh Shah's cousin, Chyne Shah, was established as the most powerful ruler in Gondwana.¹⁷

By the early nineteenth century, the Gondwana had emerged from being a cluster of independent chieftaincies under the Mughals to relatively autonomous zamindaris. Deogarh and Chanda were both considered a part of the *khalsa* area, i.e. areas under direct Crown rule, with some zamindaris on the fringes of the central Gondwana estates. The estates of the Raja were managed by agents like Chyne Shah and his predecessor Fateh Shah, who were given a free hand in the kingdom as long as they maintained their loyalty to the Nagpur state. Zamindars attempted to encourage commerce and sedentary cultivation in order to turn them into profitable estates. The Settlement Officer for the Gonds, Captain Montgomery, noted that many fertile tracts of the area had been deserted by the Gonds and needed to be repopulated.¹⁸ Colonel Van Agnew, the officer at Chattisgarh, made a similar observation when he wrote that,

The central parts of Chattisgarh which were open and free from the hills and jungles, having been gradually conquered from the Goonds by the Marathas have been directly subjugated and the direct authority of the latter is introduced in them.... In the

mountainous and wooded tracts which encompass the assumption has been less decided. The original zamindars retain them and their land and exercise authority with a certain degree of independence within their limits, although they are a tributary of the Maratha government and are forced to acknowledge supremacy.¹⁹

Though the Gonds retained their zamindaris in the hilly and inaccessible tracts, they were dispossessed of the plains by the Maratha conquest. In this sense the forests provided the zamindars and their subjects a source of refuge from increasing territorial control by the Maratha regime. The prevalence of thick forests facilitated the zamindars' control over their own estates as long as they professed loyalty to the Nagpur Raja. The Gondwana zamindars were transformed from independent sovereign subject state under the Mughals to mere agents of the government under the Marathas. In the process, their mobility was curtailed and they could not escape from the plains into forests to escape the oppression of military conflict. The systematic plunder of Gond villages by the Maratha armies of Raghojee Bhonsle ensured this. The changes in the nature of chieftaincies had a direct bearing on the relationships between the Gond zamindars and their subjects. Acts of plunder and extortion of peasants by the armies of the zamindars seemed to increase with the frequency of military contests by the Marathas and the British.²⁰ Therefore the possibility that the zamindari plunder of plebeian wealth and property was linked to tributes paid by the zamindars to the Maratha treasury cannot be ignored. Simultaneously, the instability resulting from the contests between the zamindars, British and Marathas was reflected in the frequent rout of peasant societies by the zamindars. This created a conflict between the peasants and the zamindars. However, as we shall see in the next section, this conflict was scarcely reflected in the conflict between the zamindars, Marathas and the British.

GONDWANA AND GONDS IN EARLY COLONIAL HISTORY

The colonial image of Raj-Gond zamindars and their people as habitual plunderers was based on the belief that this conduct was borne out the feeling of insecurity. This anxiety was instilled in the community by the mismanagement and military actions of the Marathas. In this context the early nineteenth century British officers saw themselves as benefactors of the Gonds in two ways. They wanted to cure the Gonds of their habitual depredations. The British also perceived themselves as the saviours of the Gonds from an exploitative Maratha rule. They felt that direct intervention was essential to achieve these aims, and this is amply reflected in Jenkins's papers of that time.

The first direct British intervention in Nagpur affairs can be dated to 1803. The treaty of Deogaon helped to destroy the Bhonsle-Scindia alliance against the British. It also led to the assertion of British supremacy in Maratha territories.

The British domination of Nagpur was total by 1816, when their hold over administration increased. Appa Sahib, the ruler of Nagpur, became a symbolic head and the Resident started managing all the affairs of the Nagpur state.²¹ But even though the British managed the routine affairs of the state, their total control over Maratha territories was hampered by frequent Pindari attacks. The intensity of the Pindari threatened the stability of British control and provoked Lord Moira to propose the formation of a British-Maratha alliance for defeating the Pindaris. He believed that the Bhonsles, Scindias and the Gond chiefs could co-operate with one another to form a federation for achieving this objective. The proposal assumed that all Maratha states could coexist peacefully and partake in such a military effort. Richard Jenkins disagreed with this view and held that co-operation between Maratha States was impossible in the absence of British mediation. He argued that the British would not be able to control the Indian heartland without the direct control of most of the Maratha States.²² The domination of Nagpur was an intrinsic part of the larger colonial strategy of the British domination over the Deccan. The geographical importance of Nagpur arose from its position as a gateway into the Deccan plateau from North India.

Pushing his argument further, Jenkins contended that it was natural for the British to take over the governance of these states. The Maratha states would benefit immensely from this action because the British had a superior system of government. Describing the nature of Maratha rule he said that,

They (the native states) have presented us with a spectacle of daily increasing decay, that has long seemed to threaten their dissolution as political bodies. Two of them, Scindia and Holkar, scarcely retain a feature of regular government, and if the Raja of Nagpur has hitherto supported this character, it is because we have prevented his dominions from becoming, altogether, a prey of Mere Khan and Tel Pindari, which required actual military power to resist them.²³

Jenkins viewed ascendancy as the only way to control Appa Sahib. The Nagpur ruler had been communicating with the Peshwa in an offensive against the British. In 1817-18 the British mounted a massive attack on the Pindaris. In a simultaneous move, the forces of the Peshwa and Appa Sahib attacked the British Subsidiary Regiment. The British defeated the Maratha army in the War of 1818 and Appa Sahib escaped into the thickly forested tracts of the Vindhya and the Satpura plateau.²⁴

The forests played an important part in influencing the political history of the region after the Maratha War of 1818. The British officers claimed that Gond leaders like Chyne Khan had assisted in the escape of Appa Sahib. They invaded the territories of the Gond zamindars to punish them for demonstrating their loyalty to the Maratha leader. The nature of the contest between the British and the Gonds was profoundly influenced by the topography of the Gondwana region. The commanding officer of the forces against the Gonds, Colonel. J.M. Adams, wrote that,

The difficulties experienced even in the place of preventing the escape of a few individuals were very great and they can not but be greatly increased in the hilly tract of a considerable extent covered by thick jungles and numerous paths completely known only to the enemy.²⁵

Colonel Adams admitted that the presence of thick forests had put the British at a disadvantage in their expedition against the Gonds. The composition of the Gondwana forests was mainly of sal (*Shorea robusta*) and bamboo, with other thick undergrowth. This helped the Gonds to flee from the oppression of the British army on the plains and helped them to reassemble their forces. In this context, the Gonds responded to the British suppression of 1819 by assembling a force at Motee Boree, the place where Appa Sahib had escaped. Major Nation, the officer stationed at Motee Boree, described the Gond Chief Gubla's force and the British strategy of dealing with the Gonds in the following way,

The force of the enemy consisted of about 600 men, most of whom on alarm being given fled to the hills, and were seen no more; and after collecting a few head of cattle and their articles of plunder, destroying their grain and burning the villages, I set out to return to our camp.²⁶

The British tactics aimed to prevent the Gonds from coming back to the plains. The destruction of their property was important to ensure this. The British wanted to occupy the Gond territories because of their enormous potential for profitable use. They could only do this by defeating the Gond zamindars through effective military action. As the officer in charge of Gond settlements said,

I beg to offer you my warmest congratulations, on our having obtained possession, at so early a period of our campaign of this scrounge of his fellow creatures, whose atrocities have depopulated so great a portion of the once fertile province, and seems to have left no means untried, during the last eight months, which might expedite the ruin and desolation of the districts belonging to the Nagpur State and those ceded to the British government in the vicinity of his native hills.²⁷

This British perception of the Gond rulers as habitual plunderers remained intact till the suppression and settlement of the Gond zamindars in 1819-20. First, there was the destruction of the Gond villages by the Maratha armies. Second, there was the oppression of the ordinary Gond peasants from the ravages of the Gond zamindars. Colonial records maintain that the Gond zamindars exploited their subjects and destroyed their villages in order to escape the enemy.²⁸

The class conflict between the Gond rulers and peasants was revealed in this exploitative nature of the zamindaris. Yet the lower class tribute-paying Gonds supported the zamindars in the wider political conflict for control over their land and forest resources. As we have seen, this conflict acquired intense momentum after the 1740s, when Raghojee started annexing the territories of the Gond zamindars. At this point the peasants of these zamindaris faced a choice between

two oppressors: Marathas and Gond zamindars. The Maratha regime was threatening to curtail the zamindars' control over their forest and agricultural land. This affected the movement of Gond villagers between the hilly and plain tracts. On the other hand, the administration of the zamindars usually gave the villagers some control over their own resources. They did not impose any restrictions over access to forest produce and allowed free movement inside the forest as long as the villagers paid certain dues to them. The villagers' obligation was met by giving the ruler a certain portion of the produce, or by working on his field for specified number of hours. Thus the main distinguishing factor between the Marathas and the Raj Gonds lay in the intensity of restrictions on movement within the forest. In this context, the Gond subjects allied with their rulers because their mobility was protected under a relatively autonomous zamindari. Ironically, the Gond peasants were forced to support those who regularly razed their villages to the ground.

But the plunder and devastation of the Gond peasants was carried out not only by the zamindars, but also by the armies of the British and the Marathas. Historical records show that the British army plundered Gond territories and looted their wealth in order to destroy the very foundation of zamindari resistance. For example, Montgomery recorded the British army had successfully plundered Chyne Shah's tents, cattle and baggage. But this act of plundering was described as a triumph of civilised society.²⁹ Jenkins described the main objective of these expeditions in the following way: '[The British wanted to] deprive Appa Sahib of all future chance of obtaining refuge with the Gonds by showing people the irresistible power that they had provoked'.³⁰ The British hoped that their action would frighten and subjugate the Gonds, so that they would not defy colonial authority in the future. In this sense engagement between the Gonds and the British in 1819 signified the complete suppression of Gond independence, and their final marginalisation from the fertile tracts to the thickly forested tracts of the Satpura and Vindhyan hills.

The use of coercion had the desired effect on the Gonds, most of whom felt unsafe in even the most 'inaccessible of retreats'.³¹ By September 1819 almost all the Gond chiefs had surrendered to the British army. A few defiant Gond zamindars had migrated further into the hills, carrying on their free-booting on the western side of the Narmada. The British government began determining the conditions of surrender by the end of 1819. The settlement was to operate on two principles: first, that the Gonds should make promises of fidelity to both the British Empire and the Nagpur State which was now a British Residency; and secondly, that if promises of loyalty were made they would be allowed to retain zamindari rights over their lands, on the condition that they repopulated fertile tracts.

Most Gond chiefs were obliged to serve the Nagpur Raja under the conditions of settlement in the pre-1819 period. But in the British perception, they were

hardly treated as 'human creatures' by the Maratha government. Unlike the Marathas, the British claimed that they did not want either to humiliate or to ill-treat the Raj-Gond chiefs. Their objective was to civilise the Gonds and to accustom them to 'regard the government with confidence and respect'.³² Jenkins hoped that this would teach the Gonds to obey the orders of the government and not to loot or plunder British territories.³³ This was the basic idea underlying the British concepts of 'loyalty' and 'fidelity', and was to form an important basis of the grant or maintenance of zamindari rights once the Central Provinces were constituted in 1861. These rights had consisted of the right to control land and resources with out interference as long as they paid tribute to, and maintained their political alliance with, the dominant power.

The second condition was that the British wanted all fertile tracts, places of pilgrimage and trading routes under their control. Zamindaris like Hurrye, had very fertile *haveli* tracts and trade routes that connected the eastern with the western part of Narmada. They also considered annexing Sonapur and Pratabgarh, to facilitate direct commerce between Nagpur and Berar. The zamindari of Pachmarhi continued to be with the zamindar, Mohan Singh, on the condition that he let the British collect the Pilgrim Tax from devotees going to the famous Mahadeo temple. Formerly, Pilgrim Tax had been collected by Mohan Singh and distributed amongst different Gond chiefs, giving rise to conflict. The British thought that the assumption of Pilgrim Tax would allow them to maintain tranquillity in the area as well as to control a route of pilgrimage that was frequently used by traders.³⁴

The political and territorial power of the Gonds was severely diminished by the second decade of the nineteenth century. This process, however, was not unique to the British era. It had begun in the late eighteenth century with the Maratha invasions into the Gond area. The marginalisation of the Gonds into the forested tracts was evident in the whole of the Gondwana region. But perhaps there is reason to think that this process was not entirely of a long term or permanent nature. Once people like Chyne Shah were granted administrative rights over large tracts of land, many Gonds moved back to the fertile tracts until they were raided again either by Maratha armies or by a different zamindar.³⁵ Raiding the territories of a Raja was often a means of protest against his oppression or conquests. As Captain Van Agnew explained, the zamindar of Sonakar often raided *khalsa* territories in order to protest against the Raja's supremacy. The members of the raiding party were mostly Gonds and numbered about seven hundred. They raised insurrections on fertile land and then retreated to the hills.³⁶

The Marathas lacked centralised control over the administration of zamindari estates till the mid-eighteenth century. The zamindars of the Gondwana obtained freedom of administration through the regular payment of tribute. But even this payment of tribute and the regularisation of revenue administration were only

mid-eighteenth century phenomena.³⁷ Before that, the Maratha had an organised system of raiding where the Maratha troops plundered areas and subjugated local chiefs who paid them annual tribute. Due to the emphasis on loyalty and the lack of any centripetal forces, the Gond chiefs were able to emerge as strong regional powers who commanded great influence and had attained the status of *de facto* rulers. But their relationship to the Maratha ruler was never in doubt. In theory, they were his political subordinates and were bound by his dictates. The Maratha will to achieve centralised control was incompatible with the existence of zamindaris as centres of regional powers. This was the main contradiction inherent in the very nature of Maratha rule.

Under these circumstances the villages were able to maintain considerable control over their own natural resources. Most villages were assessed jointly and the *patel* (village headman) made a joint agreement with the *malmutdar*, the state-appointed revenue collector. Forests and pasture lands were assigned to each village for use without cost. Villagers had to pay an additional fee for collecting wood from the government forests. This pattern prevailed in most Maratha areas.³⁸ In estates controlled by the Raja of Berar, the land revenue of villages was assessed directly. In Betul, the *patel* collected revenue after he had prepared a *lagan*, the most important document concerning the settlements. The preparation of a *lagan* was described in this way:

The *patel* assembles all the people of his village and the engagements entered into for each field together with cultivators, stock, the quality of soil, rates of land rent, quality of seed sown, are recorded by the *pandiya* in what is called the *lagan*, the patriarchal contract being sealed by the distribution of *pan* to each individual. During the next three or four months changes must necessarily take place, cattle die, lands fall out of cultivation for want of means and ruined *assamis* abscond. The *lagans* are consequently revised till November ... A very accurate knowledge of the state of things is thus obtained and the nature of the *lagan* is so well defined and so easily comprehensible by the cultivators so as to render fraudulent insertion liable to speedy deduction.³⁹

The relationship of the *patel* to the rest of the village was paternalistic. The same was the case with the linkages between the *patel* and the zamindar. But the villagers' control over their own natural resources was limited by broader political events and social circumstances encountered by them. Though they exercised the freedom of movement in forests, their lives were not free of conflict. Stewart Gordon has shown how eighteenth century villages co-operated with each other in adverse conditions.⁴⁰ The early English records of the 1800-1819 period suggest that the relationship between the Gond zamindar and his subjects was not always a harmonious one.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that the pre-colonial period in the Central Provinces was marked by a certain kind of political instability that facilitated the mobility of the Gonds. There is little evidence to suggest any definite patterns of Gond movement in the English records; but there is sufficient documentation to indicate that a substantial number of Gonds did not live in the forests permanently. The movement between the forests and the plains allowed the Gonds to escape the oppression and the plunder of their oppressors – the Maratha army and the zamindars. The Gonds and other pastoral communities like the Korkus were often faced with a threat of losing their livelihood. This was reflected in the periodic desertion and repopulation of lands by peasant and Gond communities. Conflicting relations and frequent movements from the plains to the hills signified both the freedom of movement and the social and political instability of the late pre-colonial era. In this sense the instability of the pre-colonial times was not necessarily incompatible with the forest communities' control over their own land or resources.

The specificity of colonialism and the impact of the pre-colonial state on the livelihood of the forest communities have to be seen in this context. Colonialism has often been seen as an environmental watershed, a dramatic period in the history of the marginalisation of the forest communities which enjoyed unrestricted rights in forests. A significant portion of the previous historiography has argued that these rights resulted from the specific ecological niches that these communities occupied in a stable pre-colonial society. In contrast, this essay has argued that such a generalisation can not be applied in the case of the Gondwana region. The intra-community and military conflicts of the pre-colonial period signified the beginning of the restriction of the Gonds' rights in both land and forests. Between 1740 and 1818 the Marathas tightened their control over plain and highland territories. But the restriction over the mobility of the Gonds was neither permanent in nature nor severe in character. It is only after the establishment of the British Residency in Nagpur that we find any evidence of permanent and oppressive territorial control which resulted in the restrictions over the movements and sedenterisation of these communities in the forests. In this sense the term 'forest communities' can only be applied to people who lived in the forests from the early nineteenth century onwards.

In sum, this essay has shown that an analysis of forestry in the pre-colonial period is incomplete without an inquiry into their links with the military conquests of the period. This perspective offers a richer account of the historical reality of the period: an analysis differs significantly from the story of caste-based equilibrium.

NOTES

¹ C.A. Bayly, *India and the Making of the British Empire*.

² Gadgil and Guha 1992: 114.

³ Mukherjee 1926 and Karve 1961.

⁴ Maine 1876. This position has been illustrated in Archana Prasad, 'Forests and Subsistence Economies in Colonial India, A Case Study of the Central Provinces, 1830-1945', (Ph.D. thesis, JNU, 1994).

⁵ For this point see Sumit Guha 199 and Ajay Skaria 1998.

⁶ Habib 1992: 34-35. See also sheet 9A.

⁷ Mss. Euro. E.1 12. India Office Library, London, p.7. Henceforth all Mss. Euro files are mentioned without the place citation.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁹ Mss. Euro. F.34, p.320.

¹⁰ See Bayly 1988 and Rangamjan 1994 for this point.

¹¹ Mss. Euro. I.12, p.25.

¹² Mss. Euro. F.34, pp.328-329.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.330-331.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Muzaffar Alam for the observation relating the process of deforestation to military invasions in the pre-colonial period. For these instances see Pogson 1880. For the example of the Sikhs see Alam 1986: 178.

¹⁵ Mss. Euro. E.112, p.27.

¹⁶ Mss. Euro. F.34, pp.86-87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.188-189.

¹⁸ Boards Collections. India Office Library, London. F/4/755/20542, p.21. Henceforth all Boards Collections are mentioned without the citations of the place.

¹⁹ Boards Collections, F/4/731/19783, pp.37-38.

²⁰ These instances are amply evident in Sardesai, *Selection from Maratha Records*, and other records of the Poona Daftar.

²¹ Vaish 1972: 395-96.

²² IOR.Pos.4226. India Office Library, London, pp.400-587. For the discussion of Moira's proposals, see p.460.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.408.

²⁴ For the details of the suppression of the Pindaris by the British, see Burton 1834.

²⁵ Boards Collections, F/4/755/20541, p.62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.122.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.136.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.121.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.138.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.142.

³² *Ibid.*, p.150.

³³ By the early 19th century, plundering of British territories had also become a way of protest against military incursions and annexation. An example of this is the plundering of British territories by some Orissa zamindars on the border of the Nagpur State. For this see Sardesai, *Selection from Maratha Records*.

³⁴ Boards Collections, F/4/755/20541, pp. 158-160.

- ³⁵ Satish Chandra has pointed out how there was a great mobility between settled cultivators and the landed gentry. This logic can be extended to the Gonds as well. We can argue that there was an equal amount of mobility between the shifting and settled cultivators. See Chandra 1982: 25.
- ³² Boards Collections F/4/731/19783, pp.79-80.
- ³³ Gordon 1994. See essay entitled, 'The Slow Conquest: Administrative integration of the Malwa into the Maratha Empire'. Gordon shows how the Maratha system was an organised military system before this rather than a revenue and administrative system.
- ³⁴ Elphinstone 1821: 40. Also see Jenkins 1827.
- ³⁵ Sadr Board of Revenue, North Western Provinces. Uttar Pradesh Archives, Lucknow. Prog. No. 78 of 23 October 1832.
- ³⁶ Gordon 1994. See essay entitled 'Recovery and adversity in eighteenth century India'.

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