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## REINVENTING MODERN DAY IMPERIALISM: ENVIRONMENTAL COLONIALISM

*Afnan Towheed*

With nearly 80 years since India claimed its Independence from British Colonial rule, it would not be safe to say that India has completely rid itself of colonialism. A mature, yet overlooked, form still exists in the theme of environmental colonialism.

In general terms, it is the “control by one power over a dependent area or people”<sup>1</sup>. This practice dates back to the empires of Ancient Greece, Rome and Phoenicia. This has allowed two main streams of colonialism to emerge; firstly, the 15<sup>th</sup> century European race for colonising lands across North and South Americas, and secondly, more popularly known as the ‘Scramble for Africa’ beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>2</sup>. This historic practice is responsible for centuries of unfortunate and lucrative practices across the regions of the Global South, such as Asia, Africa and Latin America, that have driven wealth towards the Global North and left behind poverty in the Global South.

### ***WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL COLONIALISM AND ITS COLONIAL ROOTS?***

The Sustainability Directory has expanded its definition to extend beyond the initial meaning of resource acquisition<sup>3</sup>. It signifies a continuation of colonial power dynamics into the environmental sphere. The intention behind these actions is often the economic gain for powerful actors in line with negligence for the environmental and social well-being of the marginalised.

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<sup>1</sup> Arivu, *Disturbing Native Ecology: British Exploitation*, MIDS WORKING PAPER NO. 203 (Oct. 8, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Colonialism in Economics, Climate Sustainability

Directory, <https://climate.sustainability-directory.com/term/colonialism-in-economics/>.

The deep-rooted connection between India's colonial past and present-day environmental colonialism is evident in the persistence of extractive policies, centralized resource control, and the marginalization of local communities. During British rule, forest policies were crafted to maximize imperial profit, leading to widespread deforestation, the introduction of monoculture plantations, and the displacement of indigenous populations. The Indian Forest Act of 1878<sup>4</sup>, for instance, transformed customary community rights into state-controlled privileges, stripping forest dwellers of their traditional access and branding many as "criminal tribes" when they resisted these changes. The introduction of invasive species like eucalyptus, prioritised for colonial needs, further disrupted local ecosystems and water cycles - impacts that still linger today.

These colonial policies established a precedent for viewing nature as a resource to be managed and exploited for economic gain, often sidelining the ecological wisdom and sustainable practices of local communities. The centralised and exclusionary approach to environmental governance, rooted in colonial administration, continues to shape India's forest and land management today. Even after independence, the legacy of state monopoly over forests persists, with modern policies frequently echoing the same top-down logic that prioritizes commercial interests over local welfare and ecological balance

### **MODERN EXAMPLES:**

In the present era, environmental colonialism has taken on new forms, most notably through carbon markets and offset projects. Taking the example of carbon offset projects, these take place through afforestation or reforestation initiatives by which organisations replant areas that were previously subject to deforestation in a bid to decrease the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. A recent example of this was Google's purchase of 100,000T of offsets from Indian Farms<sup>5</sup>. However, it is likely that carbon offsets are sometimes purchased to claim a smaller carbon footprint without truly fulfilling the reduction of GHG emissions, as promised. A majority of these projects are typically done in India within the context of the Global South. Unfortunately, the result of these projects has been shown to involve land grabs from local citizens, who are then evicted from their homelands. Consequences have also been shown through unjust payment of farmers who allow space for the fulfilment of the carbon offset projects as well as offering of agricultural credits at a very low price to companies, results in middlemen taking a big cut. Allowing companies to buy credits to fulfil carbon offset projects is seen by many environmental experts as an important way to help developing countries and custodians of the land to project the environment. Yet the method of implementation is questionable; hence the significance of understanding environmental colonialism lies in recognizing these power imbalances and working towards more just and equitable environmental solutions globally.

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<sup>4</sup> The Indian Forest Act, 1878, No. 7, Acts of Parliament, 1878 (India)

<sup>5</sup> Reuters, *Google Signs Deal to Buy Carbon Removal Credits from Indian Farms*, REUTERS (Jan. 16, 2025).

Lately, trade in credits generated from projects including renewables, forestry and agriculture reached about 2B USD in 2021, it shrank significantly to 732M USD in 2023 after reports were found that a majority of the credits issued by regulated certification organisations were likely to be ‘phantom credits’ that did not represent genuine carbon reductions<sup>6</sup>. This would mean that certifying organisations have to implement higher scrutiny which would cause delays in approval of offset figures, ultimately affecting local farmers.

### **THE STEP TOWARDS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE:**

These modern practices are not isolated incidents but are deeply connected to the legacies of colonial resource management that continue to shape India’s environmental policies. The same extractive logic that drove colonial exploitation now underpins many post-independence development projects, often justified in the name of progress or sustainability. This dynamic is reinforced by global economic structures that allow wealthier nations to outsource their environmental burdens to countries like India, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and inequity. At the same time, resistance to environmental colonialism has a long and vibrant history in India. From the Chipko movement in the Himalayas to contemporary protests against land acquisition for industrial projects, local communities have repeatedly mobilized to defend their rights and protect their environments<sup>7</sup>. These movements are grounded in traditional ecological knowledge and a deep understanding of local ecosystems—wisdom that is too often ignored or marginalised in top-down development schemes.

Recognizing these historical continuities is crucial for understanding the roots of environmental injustice and for crafting policies that genuinely empower local communities, respect traditional knowledge, and promote ecological sustainability. Only by addressing the enduring structures of environmental colonialism can India move toward a more equitable and resilient future.

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<sup>6</sup> Bhasker Tripathi, *India Struggles to Get Cash to Farmers Producing Carbon Credits*, CONTEXT BY THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION (Jan. 30, 2025),

<sup>7</sup> Government of India, *Disturbing Native Ecology: British Exploitation*, DIGITAL DISTRICT REPOSITORY, <https://indianculture.gov.in/digital-district-repository/district-repository/disturbing-native-ecology-british-exploitation>.