

## **Transkription des Interviews mit Pallavi Das: “Ecological legacy of colonialism and expansion of the railway in India”. (gekürzt und geglättet)**

Dr. Pallavi Das ist außerordentliche Professorin im Fachbereich Geschichte der Lakehead University in Ontario, Kanada, mit Forschungsschwerpunkt auf Umweltgeschichte und der neuzeitlichen Geschichte Südasiens. In ihrer Publikation *Colonialism, Development, and the Environment: Railways and Deforestation in British India* (2015) untersucht sie die kolonialen Begegnungen zwischen Großbritannien und Indien im Hinblick auf die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung, einschließlich wissenschaftlicher und technologischer Veränderungen, und die Auswirkungen dieser Begegnungen auf die Umwelt Indiens. Derzeit arbeitet Dr. Das an ihrem neuen Buch mit dem Titel *Environment, Society and Science in India: Colonial and Contemporary Perspectives*, in dem sie die wissenschaftlichen und nicht-wissenschaftlichen Reaktionen auf Umweltprobleme im kolonialen und zeitgenössischen Indien beleuchtet.

### **TMW: How did the expansion of colonial infrastructures like the railway impact the environment in India?**

#### **Pallavi Das:**

The most direct impact of the expansion of railways was on the forests in India. The wood was used from the timber of the trees in the forest to create or to make what are known as sleepers. The second direct impact on the forest was for the fuel that was used on the railways. Instead of coal, wood was preferred because it was cheaper than coal and it was readily available. Also, the railway lines were laid on raised beds, which often interfered with the local drainage. And it created unwanted, you know, water logging and ponds that became breeding grounds for the malaria vectors, which were carried by the mosquitoes. In fact, one of the British medical agents who was in India during that time, came to the conclusion, that the railways were one of the major causes of malaria in India. Highly mobile nature of construction work, you find, a lot of diseases were brought by the workers from distant parts. And the laborers often shuttled between colonial plantations, railway networks, you know where the railway work sites were there, they were travelling there by trains. And these migrant laborers often went to work for months and years to these and they would carry the diseases with them.

**TMW: What was the impact of railway construction specifically in the Northwest of colonial India in the region?**

**Pallavi Das:**

Specifically in the case of Northwestern Provinces, the harvesting of trees was done from the Himalayas because there were no local trees that would qualify for the sleepers, given that it's an arid region. For the firewood, they would obtain the wood from the plains – the forests located in the plains - where you had different species, such as, I can give you the botanical names: *Prosopis spicigera* is one species, there is *Acacia modesta*. It was calculated that because of the railway expansion that was going on in that time, especially in the 1860s, it was calculated there were only three years supply of fuel wood left in the Punjab. You know, the colonial records indicate that.

**TMW: What are the sustained effects of the railway expansion that are tangible in India today?**

**Pallavi Das:**

Well, the forests are still scarred from the deforestation. When I visited some of those areas more recently or in the last few years, many of the forests had not grown back – you know - these are forests that take a long period of time to regenerate. These are all old-growth forests. And what the current government has done is they have engaged in what is known as social forestry, where they plant these quick growing species, which may not really support the biodiversity. So again, you have monocultures in the form of eucalyptus trees and other trees.

**TMW: Can the approach of a “decolonial ecology” be applied the context of India – if so, how? Or: why not?**

**Pallavi Das:**

This decolonial framework assumes that prior to colonial rule, the human-nature-relationship was an equilibrium, and that indigenous people never suffered from, were not subject to any kind of power relations – which is not true. Because before the colonial state, there were other states, right? There was always this power relation between the subaltern people and the dominant groups. It shifts the blame to colonialism, slash, western ideas, western knowledge about nature – and does not actually critique the economic process, the actual economic process, of capitalism that led to environmental degradation.

If capitalism continues in the way it is, being rapacious on the environment and degrading the environment, then we can only come up with what are known as a spatial fix or technological fixes. Either you use technology to deal with an issue, or, if there's environmental degradation in one place, you move to another place – that's a spatial fix.

**TMW: How does the awareness of the colonial legacy regarding the environment/ these historical implications shape environmental policies and activism in India today?**

**Pallavi Das:**

We were talking about the Himalayas, the landslides, the erosion, etc. – which can be traced back to the colonial, you know, extraction of timber from the region. And this led to various what you could call unrest from the local people or resistance by the local people in the Himalayan region known as, the particular region is I think now in one of the provinces known as Uttarakhand<sup>1</sup> in northwestern India. And there were forest movements led by peasants during the colonial times protesting against the Forest Department, denying people access to the forest resources, which were basically common property resources or CPR. The same kind, inspired by those movements, you find in the 1970s there was the Chipko movement, you must have heard about it, where women, local women from the neighboring villages, basically were inspired by these movements in the past in the local area where people had protested against the colonial governments taking over of the forest and denying them access similarly in the 1970s these women began to hug the trees when the commercial logging company came to cut the trees. These kinds of protests continued to happen and they were effective in showing the state, the post-colonial state, that you have to take care about the livelihood of the people who were dependent on the forest and natural resources for their survival. It was not a question of luxury like you see in the Global North. Many of these movements have led to a new forest policy being enacted - I think in 2006 they enacted the Forestry Act<sup>2</sup>, because previous to that, they were just following the colonial policies. But given these movements, there has been a recognition that the local people's rights must be respected, and they are the ones who have the knowledge of the local ecosystems and that needs to be respected and taken into account for managing the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> The region's official name was changed to Uttarakhand in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, also known as the Forest Rights Act.