TIMES evoke

OF CABBAGES — AND KINGS

This day in our Times marks the coronation of the United Kingdom's King Charles III. He represents a regal order which both embodied and expanded British imperialism worldwide. Beginning in America in the 16th century, by 1901, the British Empire, headed by its monarch, had spread over Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Central and South America, covering a quarter of Earth's surface.

Empire, accompanied by twin pageantry and brutality, had an economic mission — Britain sought sugar, spices, metals, crops, fabrics and tea from 'colonies'. Its desires meant a relentless extraction of natural resources from these rich landscapes alongside huge changes forced in existing agricultural patterns and ecologies. The cultivation of new commodities, from cabbages to corn, meant clearing forests, deforestation becoming synonymous with empire — pursuing rubber, British colonialists cleared Malay rainforests and hunted down tigers. With plantations, mines and commercial farms, soil strength and water levels dipped while the vulnerability of colonised communities to crop failures, droughts and floods rose. So did pollution — colonial mining in Africa dirtied air and water for decades, lending a bitter twist to the saying 'diamonds are forever'. It is no surprise that scientists researching today's climate crisis find its roots in the imperial colossus, which only grew as colonisation funded Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Empire changed the world's nature. Many precolonial societies had developed equanimity with the environment, some constructing wondrous cosmologies where humans, animals, trees, air, water and soil were part of a tapestry of life. British imperialism smashed this, treating ecology as an ATM to enrich an elite — that view lingers in many postcolonial societies. It is no small irony then that Britain's King Charles is an environmentalist who might indeed find the head that wears such a crown heavy. However, the new King could make a meaningful contribution too. Empire wrecked ecologies but its explorations bolstered a scientific temperament. Charles III can encourage such an outlook in finding innovative solutions for the climate crisis. And as Times Evoke's global experts emphasise, his — and your — awareness of environmental history and climate justice is key. Join Times Evoke in journeying through a regal past, which heralded today's Anthropocene.

'Today's climate crisis is rooted in British imperial rule — this impacted India's nature'

Mahesh Rangarajan *is professor of history and environmental studies at Ashoka University. Speaking to* ***Srijana Mitra Das*** *at* ***Times Evoke****, he discusses how imperial Britain shaped the world's environment:*

Colonialism in India was mostly defined by the crown — how did this encounter with royalty change our view of nature?

■ There were two major points of departure. First, from about 1760 to 1940, India became part of a transcontinental political formation, initially with the East India Company, then with the crown. India played a critical role in the protection of British power worldwide — the forces recruited from here came from the agrarian hinterland. By 1800, there were around 2,00,000 such troops. By WWII, there were two million. Creating this military manpower impacted India's culture, society — and agro-economy. Consider a linked strategic intervention with large ecological consequences — this was the making of the Canal Colonies in Punjab. In the late 19th century, the Raj began the largest irrigation project in the world, with Punjab being watered via the Indus River. This replaced the existing agro-pastoral landscape, dry-

SEEDS OF TIME: Imperialism forced the toil of peasants in India to fund British

land agriculture and animal raising with sedentary farming. This is the terrain from where the crown could draw its peasant soldier. Neeladri Bhattacharya has written of the great agrarian conquest — this was a fundamental ecological remaking of Punjab.

There were other huge schisms — in the late 19th century, the reservations of the forests, after the 1878 Act particularly, meant a takeover of almost 6,00,000 square kilometres of land. By the early 20th century, the world's largest forest enterprise was in British India, creating the base for supplying railway timber. It meant an intense extraction of resources and the exclusion of local communities. There was also a marked change in agroecology, with animals like wolves and tigers eliminated on a much wider scale, many species also killed as bounty. As society changed from having many nomadic communities with flocks — Banjaras with bullocks, Gaddis with sheep, Raikas with camels, etc. — to a sedentary state, the continuum of Indian ecological life was broken.

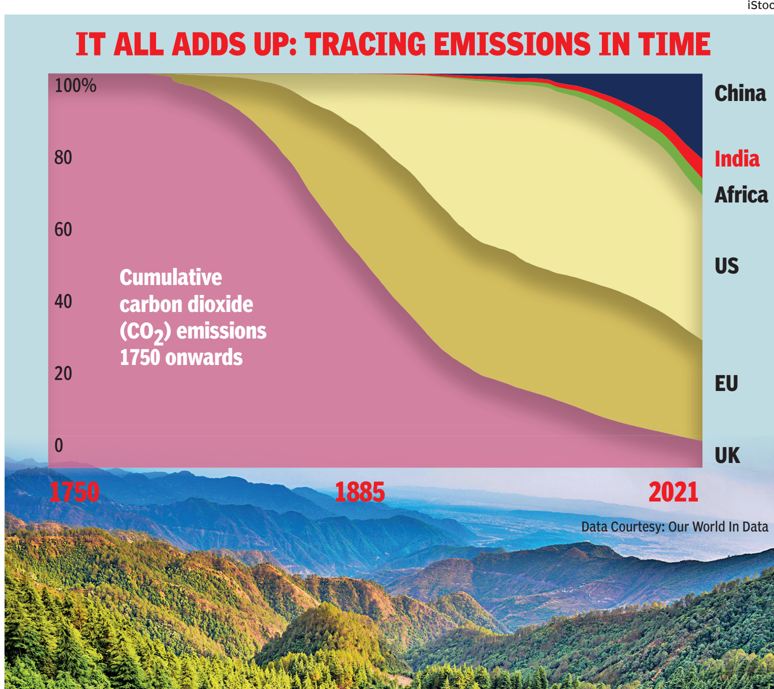
But this was not done along a very sharp line. Much of the bounty killing of lions, tigers, leopards and wolves, for instance, was done by Indians themselves. As they changed our ecological landscape, the British brought many Indians on board as subsidiaries in this system — the landed gentry were directly linked to them but there were others too. The strategy of non-cooperation aimed to break this chain, by disobeying, for instance, the forest laws. This was extremely important in British India which didn't use a white settler model displacing the local population, as in South Africa or Australia.

TIMES & CLIMES

Are there echoes of this imperial approach to nature in postcolonial nations?

■ Around WWII, the idea that development meant the conquest of nature took a concrete shape. The two great powers emerging after the War, the US and USSR, had similar visions of progress, based on steel, energy, large dams and fertiliser factories. Newly independent nations seeking economic autonomy also adopted these artefacts.

India was among these but it didn't undergo what occurred in China under Mao — we retained attempts to balance our use of resources. The Gandhian ethos about nature and the reconciliation of all life explains the enduring diversity of forms of production and ways of relating to land, water, air, flora and fauna continuing in India. In contrast, China's vision of nature was of breaking and completely remaking it.



Do the origins of the current climate crisis lie within such imperialism?

■ From 1780 to 1850, Britain emerged as the supreme world power. Importantly, this was also the period of coal and steam power and the Industrial Revolution. The transformation of production in Britain was matched by the capture of a very important piece of land in India in 1765 — Bengal. The British draw vast land revenues from here and broke up textiles and local enterprises to develop their own industries. The sharp divide between what is now called the 'developed' and 'developing' world lies in the long colonial period, from the late 18th to the mid-20th century. About 15% of the population in this industrialised world — comprising Western Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand and later Japan — accounts historically for the bulk of fossil fuel emissions, starting around the 1800s.

Therefore, climate justice today must deal with the legacy of that imperial past. The notion of global warming impacting a deeply unequal world was articulated 30 years ago by

A BRIDGE TO MODERNITY: Empire boosted British infrastructure and industry

Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain. It remains valid and there must be redressal for developing countries.

Is there a special significance in King Charles III being an environmental votary and biodiversity protector?

■ Well, for many years, he apparently went fox hunting himself. This practice was described by the writer Oscar Wilde as 'the unspeakable in search of the inedible'. The history of Britain's landed aristocracy included the domination of large parts of the countryside for elite purposes. Balmoral Castle in Scotland is located amidst a backdrop of uprooting crofting communities, grabbing commons and dispossessing very poor people to create deer hunting grounds. Alongside contemporary global environmental facts, Britain's King Charles could also consider this past.

STORM IN A TEA CUP

● **'There's nothing more English than a cup of tea'.** Actually, no — a tea cup holds world history. As British imperialism expanded, so did its taste for tea. **Initially grown largely in China,** after 1840, the British quest — per capita annual tea consumption rose from 1.1 pounds in 1820 to 5.9 pounds by 1900 — led to **plantations in India and Sri Lanka,** a famed royal warrant awarded to a London store specialising in imported teas

● Hot tea loves **sugar** — in the 15th century, European colonisers spread sugar **plantations throughout the Caribbean and South America.** By 1750, **British plantations produced most of the world's sugar and molasses.** But all was not sweet — colonialism was based on **slave labour,** cruelly transported across the Atlantic

● Only a spoon was needed to stir things up — imperial adventurers established **silver mining in South America and Mexico** in the 1540s. In the 19th century, **more deposits were discovered in Peru, spurring the regal quest for domination.** Experts estimate annual silver production was 2,000,000 kgs in 1872, touching 5,000,000 kgs by 1900, benefitting some **'born with a silver spoon'**

Research: Encyclopaedia Britannica, BBC, Smithsonian Magazine

Photos: iStock

NATURALLY REGAL

● The tawny **lion of India and Africa** is called the **'king of the jungle'** — which makes sense, given that a lion grows to 200 kgs, delivers a paw swipe of 400 pounds and can lift 1,000 kgs of prey. Lions hunt in prides, lionesses leading while lions take a backseat, guarding territory. But this is no chilled-out cat — a lion's **unique larynx** ensures its **114-decibel-loud roar is heard 8 kms away**

● **Killer whales** are titled **'monarch of the seas'** — found from the **Arctic to Antarctic,** the 50-toothed **orca** grows **over 30 feet and weighs 4,500 kgs.** Dashingly black and white in colouring, it lives in pods of about 50 which communicate intensely and hunt together. Interestingly, despite their fearsome reputation, killer whales usually feed on fish and seals — **they aren't known to attack human beings**

● The bald eagle is often hailed as **'king of the skies'** — but it's bested by the **small eastern kingbird.** Sized about 20 cms on average, this muted-looking **American bird has a red crown hidden on its head** — this blazes forth when an intruder enters its area, the songbird flying up to peck even at eagles and hawks. In a democratic world, this little bird shows us that **neither birth, nor girth matter — guts can win you glory**

Research: National Geographic, Smithsonian Magazine, WWF, Encyclopaedia Britannica

'Naturalist studies grew as an imperial by-product'

Harriet Ritvo *is professor emeritus of history at MIT. Speaking to* ***Times Evoke****, she discusses how empire changed perceptions — and pathogens:*

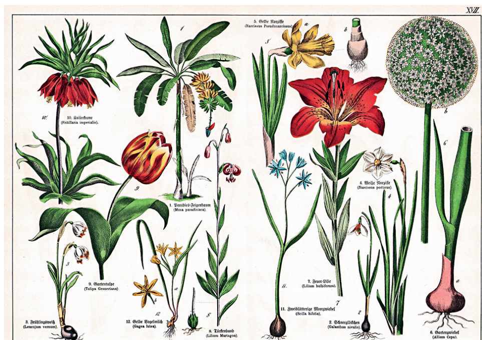
The expansion of imperialism in the 17th century involved military and administrative movements worldwide. Alongside, this huge push exposed Europeans to a range of places they were unfamiliar with. Eurasia and Africa had been in contact with Europe but the Americas, Australia and New Zealand were new. Those places were populated by people Europeans had never met as well as animals and plants which were unknown to them. These discoveries even posed a challenge to scriptural accounts of creation because when colonialists found animals like the opossum, a marsupial in the Americas and Australia, they noted this wasn't mentioned in the Garden of Eden. This sense of discovery and interest in a world they were interacting with for the first time expanded naturalist study. This wasn't an intention of the British empire but it was a constant by-product.

Interestingly, the formative naturalist Charles Darwin's own work was expanding as the British empire did. The link between Darwin's experience of the world and the crown's widening reach was extremely strong — the HMS Beagle on which he sailed to South America was a military voyage attached to Britain's Hydrographic Office. Its purpose was to survey the coast of South America. Most of the continent had recently become independent of the Spanish empire — all this while, the Spanish had tightly controlled information about the region's coasts. So, the British seized the earliest opportunity they got to access these new places.

Darwin went along not as an official member of the ship's staff but a personal companion to its captain Robert FitzRoy. The young naturalist got this opportunity because of his privileged position in British society, with one of his professors at Cambridge recommending him. Darwin thus got the rare chance to see this new world.

People often think of Darwin's discoveries in the Galapagos as a Eureka moment for him but in fact, the insights about speciation and natural selection came later, when he was back in Britain and discussing the distribution of different forms among the Galapagos islands with other naturalists. He hadn't perceived the importance of variation from island to island — he thought of the Galapagos islands as one place but he realised the significance of the different isles having diverse evolutionary histories when he was back in Britain.

Photos: iStock



KNOWLEDGE AS POWER: Colonialism was driven by geographical and botanical discoveries across Earth

EVOLUTION

Groundbreaking though this was, Darwin's theory of natural selection, which became publicly known by the late 1850s, had no particular impact on ongoing colonial policy. But the term 'social Darwinism' eventually emerged — this reflected how the theory of evolution by natural selection was easily assimilated to ideas about human types. Darwin actually doesn't deserve this label to be put on him.

Even as imperialism changed imperialists, it also reshaped colonised places. The organic products which came to Europe were mostly due to the transplantation of domesticated plants and animals in agriculture — these were as much part of invasive species as indeed were colonial humans. The more similar colonised places were to Britain, the more effective the transfer of organisms in both directions was likely to be. This was more notable in temperate environments than tropical and semi-tropical ones. It also meant an onrush of diseases both ways. Imperial movement and the increasingly effective transport networks of the 19th century meant the transfer of disease organisms like cholera which came to Europe, a world outbreak of plague and European rinderpest reaching cattle in Africa by the end of the century. This wasn't intentional but it was driven by the large movement of people worldwide, changing nature, habitats — and ideas — across Earth.

HELLO! The opossum was a wondrous discovery

'Imperialism enabled the fossil fuel transformation of the world'

William Beinart *is professor emeritus at the African Studies Centre and St Antony's College at Oxford University. He tells* ***Times Evoke*** *about how imperialism changed economies — and ecologies:*

Empire meant the transformation of the environment in imperial or colonised areas — the processes that underpinned far-flung European maritime empires over the last 500 years were primarily economic. European countries sought raw materials and commodities of all kinds, from sugar to furs, cotton, wool, rubber, gold and oil. The pursuit of each had varying environmental impacts. Sugar plantations based on slave labour transformed the colonised islands of the Caribbean like Barbados. Very little of the indigenous ecology remained. Similarly, beaver furs were in great demand for coats and hats in the West — for three centuries, fur traders pushing into Canada established commercial hunting among First Nations indigenous peoples. This devastated the beaver population — alongside, bison and buffaloes were also hunted to provide provisions along the trade routes. In Africa, elephants were relentlessly killed for ivory while whaling damaged marine populations. Wildlife was the primary sufferer of imperialism's environmental impacts.

Relationships between people and nature also changed, albeit differently in diverse places. The fur trade initially depended on indigenous skills for trapping, hunting, canoe-building and survival in that terrain. Imperialism caused both demographic devastation — and a change in attitude. First Nations societies gradually responded to opportunities from the fur trade and began hunting more systematically. In the last 50 years, there's been an assertion of the idea of the relationship between preindustrial indigenous people and nature being far more benign and respectful than the imperial or industrial gaze.

Interestingly, amidst frenzied exploitation, colonial forces often also tried to establish the conservation of nature, seeking to regulate the use of the environment. There were different strands to this concern. Overexploitation threatened resources which were often the backbone of colonial revenues. The reservation of forests in 19th century India to safeguard timber was a move to conserve a critical resource for Britain's growing railways. Huge areas, eventually around 20% of British South Asia, were reserved — this also meant that indigenous access was curtailed to some degree. So, interventions by colonial states to save natural resources often brought severe exclusion as well, as outlined by scholars like Richard Grove and Mahesh Rangarajan.

There were also colonial attempts to protect wildlife by keeping people out of what later became national parks and reserves. That didn't have such clear economic motivations.

JUST HANGING ON: The colonial frenzy over fur nearly made beavers extinct

Photos: iStock

TEARING INTO NATURE: The conquest of the Malay Peninsula saw rainforests chopped for rubber plantations, decimating species

Scientists were involved and there was a growing aesthetic element to valuing wildlife, reflected in groups like the Penitent Butchers turning from slaughter to protection in the early 20th century. Today, as ecotourism and natural history filmmaking grow, so does a more aesthetic appreciation of wildlife — and this also has imperial roots.

REVOLUTION

Alongside, the roots of today's climate crisis lie in imperialism too. Its systems of extraction and intensification of agriculture in colonised areas caused massive deforestation, degradation and diminishing biodiversity. As I've written in the book 'Environment and Empire', the astonishingly rapid growth of colonial cities, especially ports, was important too. Many have become the biggest cities in the world. These imprints contribute to the biodiversity crisis.

Back in time though, these processes fuelled great change. Motor vehicles emerged in the early 20th century with the British empire extracting rubber from Malaysia and oil from the Middle East. This intensified the use of fossil fuels, literally driven by commodities taken from colonised territories. Today's climate crisis is thus embedded in the imperial nexus.

There is some significance now to Britain's King Charles III being a votary of the environment. Royals have a certain influence on public opinion in the UK and particularly among conservative groups who may not be influenced by other arguments about a climate crisis. However, it's important that royal support for environmental protection ensures the gains from conservation are equitably shared with impacted communities. Environmental justice is a crucial part of conserving biodiversity — it is to be hoped that royal awareness will strengthen this after a very long history of the opposite.

READERS WRITE

Dear Times Evoke,

The article about how extreme heat increases child malnutrition (April 29th) is a very serious fact. Ariel Ortiz-Bobea rightly says this damages humans and the economy, hence it is of national importance that we act now.

— Dr D. Lakshmanan, Chennai

Ariel Ortiz-Bobea explaining climate impacts on child malnutrition was very valuable. Climate change is affecting construction, tea estate and farm workers, including their children caught outdoors. We must work on environmental protection which will save humanity.

— Vipan Kumar Gupta, Delhi

The very well-presented interview with Ariel Ortiz-Bobea highlighted the links between climatic change and child malnutrition, with heat exposure even affecting the brain. Thanks for featuring this important research, TE.

— N. Anthri Vedi, Hyderabad

The knowledge imparted through TE is incomparable. Ariel Ortiz-Bobea's study of climate impacts on child nutrition brought home climate change's human dimensions very lucidly. I feel with TE, TOI has compelled young readers to pick up the print media at a time of digital news. Keep it up, TE!

— Rashi Beriwal, Delhi

Whenever I read Times Evoke, I recall earlier days when I had multiple National Geographic magazines, each featuring excellent articles, photos and graphics with detailed descriptions. I always recall these when reading our TE now. It thoroughly refreshes my mind as a senior citizen. Thank you, TE, and keep Evoking!

— Prakash R. Kelkar, Pune

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