

# FOREST NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

## (I)

### **Unravelling a Historical Misnomer: The 'Indian' Forest Service Was Never 'Imperial'** *Examining the Official Nomenclature and Legacy of India's Premier Forestry Cadre*

A misconception pervades that the "Indian Forest Service" (IFS) was once officially designated the "Imperial Forest Service." This erroneous notion, often repeated in popular discourse and even academic works, contradicts the official record. An examination of historical documents, government gazettes, and service regulations reveals that India's premier forestry cadre has been formally titled the Indian Forest Service, with the acronym "IFS" serving as its consistent identifier.

The Forest Department and the Indian Forest Service were born in British India, following the appointment of Sir Dietrich Brandis, a German botanist, as the first Inspector General of Forests in 1864. The nomenclature "Indian Forest Service", and not "Imperial Forest Service", and its use appear in the earliest documents and continue thereafter. The following documents bear this out.

First, the 17th Report of Her Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners for 1871-72 presents regulations for the selection of candidates to the "Indian Forest Service" through a competitive examination held in November 1871 in "Appendix VI - Civil Service of India: Correspondence, Examination Papers, Statistics & c." (Page 604).

Second, Indian Forester (Volume XXXI, 1905) under the section – MISCELLANEA, The Indian Forest Service in the House of Lords - refers to the call attention motion in the House of Lords on 7th March 1905 by the Earl of Lytton and quotes him, "...that in the opinion of the house, the Indian Forest Service should be opened to all the universities of the United Kingdom" (Page 351).

Third, the notification for appointment to the "Indian Forest Service", inviting applications by 1st July 1915 (Proceedings of the Government of Bengal in the Revenue Department (Forest), February 1915).

Fourth, the report of the Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for the colonies on the training of candidates and probationers for appointment as forest officers in the government service, submitted on July 1, 1931, makes explicit mention of the nomenclature "Indian Forest Service" in chapter 1 on "History of Forestry Education in Great Britain" in para 2 (Page 6).

Fifth, the Dean of Indian Forest College (IFC), Dr E. C. Mobbs, in an article in the Indian Forester (August 1939 edition, page 484), suffixes IFS to his name. He mentions the nomenclature "Indian Forest Service" several times in his article. For example, he mentions, "The suspension of recruitment to the all-India service became, therefore, a permanent cessation of recruitment. The old Indian Forest Service, by whose effort the vast forest estates of India have been demarcated..." (Page 485).

#### **Why the mix-up?**

Imperial means associated with an empire, emperor or empress, and denotes authority or majesty. In India, this term has been used to refer to anything connected to the British Raj. Even the Raj documents used it lavishly. This is demonstrated by the use of the word imperial in the following sentence: "The superior officers of several departments of the administration under Local Governments belong to Imperial services, such as the Indian Civil Service, which are under the general control of the Home Department" (emphasis supplied) (Imperial Gazetteer of India, Volume 4, The Indian Empire (Administrative); 1909; Page-23).

The history of the IFS includes a period of dissolution. The Government of India Act, 1935, listed the subject of "Forests" under the Provincial Legislative List (List II), and the All-India cadre of the Indian Forest Service was discontinued. The Government of India reconstituted the 'Indian Forest Service' as an 'All India Service' under the All India Services Act, 1951, in July 1966. The rebirth reaffirmed the all-India nature of the Indian Forest Service, now serving a sovereign India.

#### **How does unravelling help?**

The 'Indian Forest Service' of the British Raj had been a technically trained agency for the scientific management of forests. It practised scientific forest management on the principle of 'sustainable harvest', preventing overexploitation of forests. Other than during the two world wars, the harvesting of forests and the meeting of revenue targets were harmonised with the needs of scientific management. Hannam (*Environment and History*, 6 (2000): 205-28) suggests that the Indian

Forest Service was fundamentally different from other civil services of the Raj owing to its scientifically rigorous field-based training. In the era of climate change, Indian forests conserved through scientific forestry traditions and supported by government policy are vital for building resilience against its adverse impacts.

Viewing today's Indian Forest Service and State Forest Departments through the lens of a colonial legacy is adversarial and unproductive. Since 1947, despite a fourfold rise in the human population, India's forest cover and large animal populations have not only held but improved. The revival of Lion, Tiger, Barasingha, Gharial, Rhino, and Gangetic Dolphin populations from

the brink of collapse in the wild is an extraordinary achievement. The Indian Forest Service of the day is unique among the country's civil services for its scientific orientation, rugged outdoor work life, long-term planning, and its role in standing for voiceless, voteless trees and animals. Not marking them 'Imperial' is both correct and beneficial for India's aspiration to be a Viksit Bharat.

In conclusion, dispelling the 'Imperial Forest Service' myth is not an academic exercise in pedantry. It is about benefiting from factual accuracy and informed public discourse, and thereby improving the prospects for welfare governance.

**JAGMOHAN SHARMA, PhD.**  
*Indian Forest Service (Retd)*  
[jagmohan\\_gaur@yahoo.com](mailto:jagmohan_gaur@yahoo.com)

Received April, 2026  
Accepted June, 2026