

FORESTS AND RESISTANCE: THE IMPACT OF COLONIAL FOREST POLICIES ON THE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF UTTARAKHAND

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Abstract: This study examines the complex effects of colonial forest laws on Uttarakhand's tribal and indigenous populations. Throughout the colonial era, the Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 brought about significant changes to customary land ownership, access to subsistence resources, and cultural traditions embedded in forests. Existing social structures, economic arrangements, and cultural continuities within impacted communities were all undermined by the demarcation of reserved forests, the imposition of restrictions on grazing rights and the extraction of non-timber forest products, and the assertion of state jurisdiction over sacred groves and sites of religious significance. The book highlights organized local opposition, including the Chipko movement of the 1970s and the institutionalization of forest panchayats in the 1930s, as crucial strategies by which communities reasserted themselves, in addition to outlining these disturbances.

This essay places colonial forest governance within a longue durée historical framework, addressing its ongoing structural ramifications, using a methodology based on primary archival materials, official colonial documents, and modern historiographical studies. By doing this, the study contributes to a critical and comprehensive understanding of how Indigenous livelihoods, colonial environmental policy, and community-based resistance interact in the Himalayan region.

IndexTerms - Colonial Forest policy; Uttarakhand; Indigenous communities; environmental justice; Chipko movement

I. INTRODUCTION

A unique illustration of the effects of colonial forest management may be found in Uttarakhand, an area distinguished by Himalayan ecology, biodiversity, and cultural heterogeneity. A unique illustration of the effects of colonial forest management may be found in Uttarakhand, an area distinguished by Himalayan ecology, biodiversity, and cultural heterogeneity. The lives of its various tribal and mountain communities have long depended on forests for fodder, fuel, food, medicines, and religious purposes. During colonial rule, however, the "statization" of forests not only deprived these communities of access to resources but also affected their social and cultural structures. During the rule of the Panwar dynasty of Garhwal and the Chand rulers of Kumaon, arrangements for forest management and for the economic benefits derived from forest produce were based on customary norms, and common people were understood to possess rights over forests.

After the establishment of Gorkha rule over Kumaon in 1790 and over Garhwal in 1804, forests were exploited extensively for the construction of forts and buildings. During the Gorkha period, forest landholders in the Bhabar region were charged ghee tax and grazing tax on animals. Any person could cut trees from the forests to make beams, planks, poles, and catechu. (1) However, there was an arrangement for collecting duties at check-posts located in the lower parts of the hill regions for the export of ordinary forest products. Rural inhabitants of the hill areas were permitted to use the forest resources necessary for their daily subsistence. This suggests that before 1815 there was no systematic administrative control over forests. (2)

The incorporation of Garhwal and Kumaon into the British Empire in 1815 may be regarded as the beginning of colonial forestry in Uttarakhand. After the fall of the Gorkhas in 1815, the Kumaon and Garhwal regions of the central Himalaya came under British authority. Garhwal was divided into the Tehri State and British Garhwal. The area east of the Alaknanda River came to be known as British Garhwal and was attached to the Kumaon Division. In contrast, the area west of the Alaknanda, excluding Jaunsar, Rawain, and Dehradun, became part of the Tehri State. In 1829, the Rawain region was also added to Tehri State. (3) Dehradun was joined to Saharanpur district in 1817 under Regulation IV. After being temporarily placed under the Kumaon Division in 1825, Dehradun was established as a district on 12 May 1829 and attached to the Meerut Division. (4)

After the merger of Garhwal and Kumaon into the British Empire in 1815, deep intervention began in the traditional forest systems of Uttarakhand. With the expansion of British colonialism in India, forests became a resource for railway sleepers, construction materials, and timber for the British navy. The native tribal inhabitants, for whose woods served as the literal and symbolic foundation of social organization, ritual practice, and subsistence, were disproportionately affected by these policies, despite the fact that they were largely developed to serve colonial economic and administrative objectives. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how colonial forest policies affected Uttarakhand's Indigenous communities. It also takes into account how much these earlier rules still influence current trends in socioeconomic inequality, forest governance, and environmental vulnerability. Within this paradigm, the investigation is guided by a core question: how did colonial forest policies alter Uttarakhand's biological landscape and Indigenous communities?

Numerous important studies have previously been conducted on this research topic. machandra Guha gives a thorough description of the social and environmental changes brought forth by British forest policies in *The Unquiet Woods*. In *This Fissured Land*, Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha contend that colonial administration eroded local community rights by treating Indian woods exclusively as economic resources. Shekhar Pathak illustrates in *The Chipko Movement: A People's History* how colonial forest policies deprived the local population of their forest rights in Uttarakhand and led to resistance, including the Chipko movement. The Van Gujjar community's ongoing quest for rights is depicted by Arundhati Roy in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 has been an important step in forest policy, although scholars such as C. R. Bijoy have highlighted shortcomings in its implementation. Although academics like C. R. Bijoy have pointed out flaws in its implementation, the Forest Rights Act of 2006 has been a significant stride in forest policy in independent India.

3. RESEARCH GAP

While colonial forest policies and their consequences at the national level have been extensively studied, their long-term effects on Uttarakhand's tribal groups have received very little attention. Most of the research has been on Punjab, Bengal, central India, or south India, however the effects of these policies were different in Uttarakhand's hilly areas. Furthermore, colonial policies undermined Indigenous groups' cultural identities in addition to causing economic exploitation; this aspect has not gotten much scholarly attention. The purpose of this work is to fill in these gaps.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary research methodology used in this study is qualitative. Historical reports from forest agencies, nineteenth-century forestry records, and archive documents are examples of primary sources. Government reports, policy documents, and research articles published in scholarly journals are examples of secondary sources. Documents from the National Archives, the Forest Research Institute Archives, and the Uttarakhand State Archives are used in the data collection process.

4.1 Historical Development of Colonial Forest Policies

4.1.1 Early Colonial Approach (1815-1855)

Intervention in Uttarakhand's traditional forest systems started in 1815 when Garhwal and Kumaon were incorporated into the British Empire. A colonial approach to forests gradually arose during this early but pivotal time in the history of colonial forest policy. Forests were initially seen by the British government as uncontrolled natural regions that could yield income rather than as an economic resource. Following 1815, Kumaon and Garhwal were designated as "non-regulated" provinces, which meant that regular British laws did not apply there and that commissioners or collectors made all administrative decisions. Although there was no formal forest management program in place under this structure, colonial perceptions of the value of forests started to shift over time. (5)

British officials initially regarded forests as obstacles to agricultural expansion and began exploiting them accordingly. In several places, large-scale tree felling was undertaken to create cultivable land, and timber began to be traded. Valuable species such as teak, deodar, and sal were cut and shipped to various parts of India for construction. From the 1820s onward, British officials increasingly described forest use by local tribal communities as "unscientific" and "wasteful" and began to regulate their activities. Later, British engineers and survey officers began assessing mountain forests. With the planning of railway expansion, the demand for timber increased, and the forests of Uttarakhand became more significant in the colonial imagination. As a result, forest areas in some parts of Garhwal and Kumaon were acquired on a large scale without the consent of local people. Although no clear forest policy had yet been formulated during this period, the traditional forest-based livelihoods and rights of local communities were gradually restricted. This approach disrupted traditional grazing routes and trade routes, damaging not only the economy but also cultural contact. (6)

4.1.2 Forest Policies and Acts

Efforts to regulate forests began in the 1850s. In 1854, McClelland, Superintendent of Forests in Burma, submitted a report to the government recommending definite restrictions on the uncontrolled exploitation of forests. Based on this report, on 3 August 1855, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India, announced forest conservation for the first time through the Memorandum of the Government of India. Stebbing later described this as the "Indian Forest Charter." The main objective of this forest charter was to ensure a cheap and stable supply of timber for the railways, to use forests commercially, and to bring forests under government control to prevent unregulated exploitation. (7)

4.1.3 The Indian Forest Act, 1865

With the establishment of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864, the process of centralizing forest administration also began. (8) In the following year, the Government of British India passed the Indian Forest Act of 1865 for the conservation and management of forests. It was approved by the Governor-General of India on 24 February 1865 and was deemed to have come into force from 1 May 1865. The Act was applied across all provinces of British India. By order of the Conservator of Forests, forest boundaries were defined, and the setting of fires as well as the falling of trees in forests was prohibited. Based on the provisions of this Act, the demarcation of forest areas and the formulation of rules were later undertaken for the British Kumaon Division and the Tehri State. (9)

4.1.4 The Forest Policy of 1894

In 1893, Dr. Voelcker, in his report "Improvement of Indian Agriculture," discussed the need for agricultural improvement. A year later, based on Voelcker's report, the Government of India formulated its first forest policy on 19 October 1894 through Resolution No. 22-F. Through the forest policy resolution, all forest property was treated as falling under the authority of the state government. The policy referred to forest management, the promotion of people's interests, and the public benefit from forest control. It laid down the following conditions for bringing forest areas under agricultural use:

1. Permanent agriculture should be given priority over forestry.
2. While keeping in view the revenue obtained from forests, the needs of local inhabitants should be met at the lowest possible cost.
3. After the fulfillment of the above conditions, the recovery of maximum revenue should become an important factor.

Indian forests were divided into the following four categories based on their primary functions:

1. Forests whose preservation was necessary on climatic or physical grounds.
2. Forests that were useful for obtaining commercial profit.
3. Minor forests consisting of low-quality timber and meeting local needs such as grazing, fodder, and the supply of wood.
4. Pasture lands. (11)

Thereafter, under Notification No. 262-14-264B of 5 April 1903, a new set of working instructions was issued for the sanctioned rules governing the protected hill forests of Kumaon district. In effect, it was proposed to divide these forests into two categories: closed civil forests and open civil forests. The Deputy Commissioner managed closed civil forests, while Patwaris managed open civil forests. Local villagers could exercise forest-related rights such as cutting down trees, grazing animals, bringing bamboo, and cutting grass in open civil forests without restrictions. In closed civil forests, however, any such activity was prohibited without the order of the Deputy Commissioner. These forest policies sparked widespread resistance across the region because they encroached on rural people's forest rights. (12)

Through surveys conducted between 1911 and 1916 and the declaration of "New Reserves" in 1916, many forest areas of Kumaon were declared reserved areas. This naturally intensified the hostility between the government and the villagers. Rural inhabitants of the mountain regions regarded this as a violation of their rights and began setting forest fires to defend their land. Serious consequences emerged later, when in 1921 a large part of Kumaon's forest area burned in devastating fires. The forest department and local leaders expressed concern over the event. The forest department regarded this forest-fire tragedy as an organized effort by the Kumaoni people and as a step that would damage their own future. Under pressure from the growing hostility between local villagers and forest officials, the government decided to constitute a Forest Grievances Commission. In its survey, the Commission found that the main issue among local people was the demarcated grazing land. (13) Through the efforts of Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant, a report on forest rights and essential demands in the Garhwal and Kumaon region was prepared. Based on this report, the British government constituted the Forest Grievances Committee in 1921.

Thereafter, the Indian Forest Act of 1927 was passed. The 1927 Act was largely a recasting of the 1878 law. Based on this forest legislation, the forest-related rights and powers of forest officials were expanded. In addition, the state monopoly over the exploitation and sale of forests was further strengthened. In Uttarakhand, this Act became a cause of local protests, as villagers were prevented from using their traditional grass, fodder, fuel, and medicinal plants. (14)

5. Impact of Colonial Forest Policies and Acts on Tribal Groups

Under British colonial rule in India, the primary objective of forest policy was to collect revenue, fulfil the economic requirements of the empire, especially timber for railways, construction, and military use, and establish complete state control over forest resources.

The forest policies implemented by British colonial rule deeply affected the Indigenous and mountain economy of Uttarakhand. After 1815, when Kumaon and Garhwal were incorporated into British India, most rural communities depended on a mixed forest-based economy. This economy was not limited to the supply of material resources; it also encompassed the social and cultural structure, seasonal migration, animal husbandry, the collection of forest produce, and religious life. British policy disrupted this complex and balanced system.

With the establishment of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864, the British government began declaring forests to be state property. Thereafter, under the Indian Forest Act of 1878, forests were divided into three categories. In reserved forests, entry, fodder cutting, wood collection, and animal husbandry were completely prohibited, while these activities were also restricted in protected forests. In mountainous regions such as Uttarakhand, most forest areas were declared "reserved" because abundant high-value timber was available there. As a result, rural communities were deprived of resources used for their everyday needs, such as fuel, fodder, small timber, medicinal plants, and forest produce, including kafal, buransh, and other minor forest products. (15)

When legal restrictions were placed on basic resources such as fodder and fuel, villagers were forced into two alternatives: either use these resources illegally, in which case they were declared "forest offenders," or seek alternative labor, such as daily-wage work, military service, or migration to towns. This not only disrupted their traditional livelihood system but also destabilized the social structure. Shekhar Pathak writes that British rule attempted to bind the traditional system of mountain life in Uttarakhand within a legal framework without understanding it, a process that ultimately contributed to the destruction of local knowledge and the local economy. (15)

The most significant social impact was that communal rights over traditional resources, which had previously been based on moral and customary recognition, were now seen as little more than permissions or concessions from the government. This increased administrative distance and diminished the idea of "our forest" among the locals. The change from "right" to "permission" was a colonial show of force meant to intimidate the people. According to Nandini Sundar, this situation is known as the "criminalization of customary use," when customs are made illegal.

Because of the bureaucratic structure of the forest department, which only permitted a few senior officials to make decisions, local communities were excluded from decision-making processes. In regions like Uttarakhand where panchayat-garh, and forest panchayat traditions were common, administrative centralization weakened local people's capacity to make decisions. This

circumstance encouraged a culture of distrust toward the government and continuous confrontation, as demonstrated by movements from the 1930s to the Chipko movement. This situation encouraged a culture of distrust toward the government and continuous confrontation, as demonstrated by movements from the 1930s to the Chipko movement.

5.1 Impact on Traditional Nomadic Practices

A fundamental component of Uttarakhand's past mountain economy, seasonal migration served as both an economic necessity and a deeply ingrained social identity formation and ecological adaption strategy. However, colonial forest policy aimed to overthrow this structure by portraying it as illegitimate, unwanted, and a cause of administrative chaos.

In addition to engaging in trans-border trade with Tibet, the Johari, Shauka, and Tolchha people in the area followed a biannual pattern of movement, moving from lower valleys in the winter to higher Himalayan pastures in the summer. Gathering herbs, trading woolen products, raising cattle, and making crafts were all part of this seasonal cycle.

Through a number of legal initiatives, most notably the Indian Forest Act of 1878 and the grazing limitation orders of 1906, British colonial authorities gradually restricted, monitored, and controlled these tribes' mobility. A 1921 municipal order in the Pithoragarh district provides a concrete example of this dynamic: it forbade herders from entering designated restricted forests without express government authorization, upsetting the Bhotia community's established trade routes and customary grazing practices. These communities' long-practiced seasonal migration was reinterpreted as "anarchic" behavior under colonial classification and made a "forest offense," primarily because summer grazing in the high mountains harmed forest tracts. As a result, the new legal system made practices that had long supported the community's natural relationship with the terrain and its means of subsistence illegal, creating a situation that was deeply paradoxical.

5.2 Impact on Women's Lives

In Uttarakhand, rural and Indigenous women have long had a close association with forest ecosystems, serving as major gatherers, caretakers, and unofficial managers of these areas in addition to being consumers of forest resources. However, colonial forest policy had a profound impact on many aspects of women's lives, including their means of subsistence, work habits, social status, and ability to support themselves. Due to the disruption of long-standing daily routines caused by the legal limits on forest access, women were further marginalized within the larger colonial order and were more economically and socially dependent. The Indian Forest Act of 1878 and local rules of 1911 made these activities dependent on "permission." As a result, women were compelled to obtain fodder and fuelwood from alternative, more distant, and less secure locations.

In addition, declaring traditional work illegal led to the erosion of women's traditional knowledge. Women possessed knowledge of medicinal plants, seed preservation, biodiversity, and season-based agriculture, all of which were connected to forests. For example, women of the Rawain region of Uttarkashi collected medicinal plants such as gucchi, kutki, and atis. After 1920, commercial monopoly and government control were imposed over these resources, restricting domestic use and the transmission of knowledge. While colonial policies affected women, women also developed their own traditions of resistance. In the forest satyagrahas of 1921, women participated actively in the Almora and Nainital regions.

5.3 Disruption of Cultural and Religious Structures

In Uttarakhand's rural communities, forests were seen as living cultural entities rather than just resources. Village forests were said to be home to local deities. Water springs and trees like peepal, banj, and deodar were revered as sacred locations. The majority of forests were designated as reserved forests by the British government's Indian Forest Acts of 1878 and 1927. This limited access to places of worship. Several houses of worship were deemed to be "illegal encroachments."

In Green and Saffron, Mukul Sharma makes the case that environmental justice is connected to cultural rights and traditional practices in addition to forests and forestry resources. He goes on to say that it is cultural colonialism when the government restricts a community's places of worship, customs, or religion.

6. Conclusion:

Therefore, rather than acknowledging the cultural, religious, and livelihood-based linkages that local communities had with forests, the main goal of forest policy in colonial India was to arrange forests as commercial resources. The effects of these measures were especially significant and pervasive in a Himalayan region like Uttarakhand, where traditional forest-life culture remained rich and lively. In addition to undermining local livelihoods, the unilateral statization of woods also threatened cultural and religious identity. Large forest tracts were officially classified as reserved areas under British control by the Indian Forest Acts of 1878 and 1927, which also limited local community involvement in their maintenance. By effectively turning forests into state-owned property, this legal approach gradually undermined long-standing autonomous organizations like village forest councils, holy groves, and neighborhood-based conservation initiatives. Local communities were essentially shut out of the advantages that came from their own ancestral lands because of the formal state administration system that followed, which directed the economic exploitation of these resources toward colonial objectives.

Affected populations experienced extensive social instability, cultural change, and livelihood insecurity as a result of these initiatives. Communities responded by organizing through both institutional and grassroots means, as demonstrated by the establishment of forest panchayats and, later, social organizations like Chipko. These initiatives presented a different model for community-based forest management, going beyond just challenging the systems of resource control. As a case study in the larger cultural indifference typical of colonial governance, Uttarakhand's historical trajectory thus demonstrates how colonial forest policy asymmetrically molded the interaction between forest ecosystems and society.

Given these long-lasting historical legacies, modern forest management strategies in areas like Uttarakhand must take sociocultural rights and Indigenous knowledge systems into account in addition to environmental and economic factors. Therefore, in order to properly understand how discriminatory state actions harmed local populations' livelihoods, cultural integrity, and dignity, a critical

reevaluation of the history of forest policy is necessary. In turn, this kind of reevaluation provides a basis for building a future that is more equal and inclusive.

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