

Deforestation, Forest Management and Protest in Mountain Regions of Uttarakhand Himalayas during Colonial Regime

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Abstract

This paper discusses a historical context of colonial influence on the forests of Uttarakhand Himalayas. In his paper, the conflict of interest between local population, the government and the commercial forces over a period of more than 120 years of colonial regime are considered. Impact of the conflict on the forest and forest based rural economy of local folk is an important aspect of the study. It also shows that how in the name of scientific forest management, bulk of local population was alienated from the traditional forest rights, use and management of forests and how most of the benefits of forest accrued to the government and richest classes of society. A major aspect of the study is how and in what stages a forest region was opened out and exploited for the larger colonial economic interests, what effects it had on Uttarakhand Himalayas region itself and its agriculture in the colonial period.

Keywords: Deforestation, Himalayan society, Forest policy, Kumaon, Garhwal, Uttarakhand, Colonial regime

Introduction

Deforestation of the Uttarakhand hills is not a new phenomenon but has a long history, being well established by the late nineteenth century. Forests have played a significant role in the development of civilization on this earth. Not only they provide means of sustenance, food, fuel, fodder and raw material for human use, but also help in maintaining a balance in our natural environment and more specifically help in maintaining soil health and productivity of natural watersheds. They support many known and unknown organisms and wildlife. Forest support local agriculture by providing green manure and fodder, preventing soil erosion and maintaining ground-water recharge. Above situation is truer in the case of Himalayan society whose economic and social structure is constructed around the primary relationship with their natural resources.

I have undertaken this study to determine causes and aspects of deforestation, destruction, impact on local folk and their way of protest against draconian colonial forest management structure, policies, rules and regulations. I have also made endeavor to review the history of forests and their use for past 120 years or so in the Uttarakhand Himalayas. Because of paucity of reliable written primary sources and data, it is difficult to trace past history of forest use. The main available sources of information for this article are secondary, from which relevant information and data has been extracted and reviewed in the context of forestry and its use.

Aim of the Study

To determine causes and aspects of deforestation, destruction of forests during colonial regime, its impact on local folk of Uttarakhand Himalayas and their way of protest against draconian colonial forest policies. To review the history of forest and their use over the past 120 years in Uttarakhand Himalayas.

General History

Uttarakhand was carved out of the state of Uttar Pradesh on 09 November 2000. As per the Census 2011 total population of the state was 10.11 million (Census 2011). The state is divided into 13 districts. Ninety per cent of the geographical area of state is made up of low hills, high mountains and deep valleys. The state is also divided into four climatic zones: the tropical zone up to an altitude of 1000 m, sub-tropical zones

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range from 1000 to 1500 m, the cool temperate zone ranges from 1500 to 2400 m, and the sub-alpine and alpine zones begin at 2500 m (NABARD 2010). Forest cover of the state is close to two-third of total area and 14 per cent land is used for agriculture.

As far as known history of Uttarakhand is concerned, at one time it was ruled by one dynasty, the Katyuris. The Katyuris ruled for several centuries initially from Brahampur which is identified as modern day Joshimath town in the Alaknanda valley in Chamoli district and later from Baijnath in the Katyur valley in Almora district (Joshi 28-9). After the decline of Katyuris this region was divided into many small principalities. In 14th century Ajaypal Panwar brought all the independent chiefdoms of Garhwal region under his rule, and founded the Garhwal kingdom. Unification of Kumaon took place under Som Chand in 10th century (Atkinson). Panwars and Chandas soon consolidated their rule. Because of isolated nature of their territories, which were bounded on north by the higher Himalayas and separated from Indo-Gangetic plain in the south by the Siwalik ranges. Hence neither came under the sway of Mughals nor were invaded from the north. After the unification of Nepal under the Gorkha chief Prithwinarayan Shah, Gorkhas conquered Kumaon in 1790 and Garhwal in 1804. Their rule was short-lived and after Anglo-Gorkha war in 1815, the East India Company conquered Kumaon and Garhwal both. After the end of rule of Gorkhas, Garhwal was divided by the Britishers into two parts- The eastern part called British Garhwal and western part renamed as princely state Tehri Garhwal, restored to the son of last king of Garhwal Kingdom. British Garhwal became a separate district with the Kumaon Commissionaire governed by British Empire (Sankrityayan 1953).

Society and Economy

The social structures of Kumaon and Garhwal is almost similar and here hill society exhibits an absence of sharp class divisions with the presence of strong communal traditions, this makes Uttarakhand a fascinating exception which one is unable to fit into existing conceptualizations of social hierarchy in India (Guha R.C. 14). This unique agrarian class structure is relevant to the various kinds of movements of protest that is the subject of this study.

In the hilly region most of the cultivation was carried out along the river valleys. Two or sometimes three crops were possible throughout the last century. Arable land and methods of crop rotation was as per the hill folk's natural environment. Usually there was a surplus production of grain, that was exported to Tibet and southwards to the plains. Having six months of grain in hand and with their diet supplement by fish, fruit vegetable, and animal flesh the hill cultivators were described by Henry Ramsey, commissioner from 1856 to 1884, as 'probably better off than any peasantry in India (Walton 57-9, Pant S.D. 137).

Origin of Forestry as A State Subject In India

The origin of forestry as a state dominated subject is believed to have been started with the rise of imperialism in north India. In about 543 B.C during the rule of King Bimbisara of Magadha¹. During this period forest of India for the first time were divided on

the basis of geographical location and physical characteristics.

The next phase of chronicled history of forest and forestry in India could only be traced after about 900 years. In the memoir of Hiuen-Tsang who visited India during 629 A.D to 645 A.D. His memoir indicated the progress of desiccation and deforestation in north western region of Kashmir and Punjab, which was once densely forested. The eastern region according to Hiuen-Tsang was densely forested while in southern region, forest areas were intervened by small number of habitations²

It was surprising that Great Mughal did not think about conservation of forest. But "Ain-i-Akbari" of Abul Fazal indicated the awareness of commercial value of 72 different types of timber on the basis of weight of wood/ unit area. Edward Terry in the court of Mughals wrote about vastness of Indian forests. According to him the whole kingdom looked like a forest.

Aims and Objectives of Colonial Forest Policy

The British East India Company had a purely mercantile activities in India. In the beginning of their rule, they also made large indents on the timber wealth of the country. The newly established British administration in India was not alive about the careful husbanding of forest resources. They were under the false impression that the forest wealth of India was inexhaustible. The British themselves were new to ideas of systematic forestry. As they had not developed forest organization in Britain³.

At the close of the 18th century, the position regarding forests in India was no better than before the advent of the British. Only certain species which were acceptable for export purposes were exported and that also in an unregulated manner. Apart from timber the sandal wood of South India was exploited for its highly scented wood and it found its way to different European market⁴. In fact all the requirement needed for governmental activities were easily met from the forests.

The people also obtained all their necessary requirement without difficulty. Naturally the state of affairs could hardly be conducive to forest conservancy. On the other hand, in many localities forests were considered as conservancy for further development of agriculture. Hence no serious attempt was made to prevent destruction of forests. Rather it was encouraged for the extension of agriculture which provided land revenue.

The increasing intensity of exploitation of natural resources fostered by colonialism were also accompanied by equally dramatic changes in the forms of management and control. The most significant of these changes was the takeover of wood land by the state. While state management was not unknown in pre-colonial forest history of India, it was usually restricted in its applicability and was oriented towards highly specific end- e.g. the reservation of elephant forests in the Mauryan period or later edicts affirming a state monopoly over commercial species such as teak and sandal wood⁵.

Later on, state control notably over forests had extended over large tract and throughout the

subcontinent. State had formal rights of ownership over various natural resources. The colonial government brought to bear on their management a highly developed legal and administrative infrastructure⁶.

It was well recognized that colonial policies were purely commercial forest policy was also part of it. Their operations were dictated more by commercial and strategic utility of different species than the broader social and environmental consideration⁷. The institutional framework that governed the working of state forestry in British India was one of the main characteristic of colonial policies.

As we know that in the early decades of colonial rule, the state was markedly indifferent to forest conservancy. Until well into the nineteenth century forest were viewed by administrators as an impediment to the expansion of cultivation. With the state committed to agricultural expansion as its major source of revenue, the early decades of colonial rule witness a fierce onslaught on India's forests⁸. In the beginning, colonial interest in forestry was limited to reservation of teak forests of the western Ghats for use in marine ship building⁹. Indian teak had the most durable qualities for shipbuilding timbers. It was used extensively by the Royal Navy in the Anglo-French wars of the nineteenth century and by the merchant ships during later period of maritime expansion¹⁰. After the advent of East India company forest become increasingly a resource base for colonial power. The landmark in the history of Indian forestry was undoubtedly the building of the railway network. The primary impact of the Railways on the Himalayan forest in 19th century resulted from timer felling for production of sleepers and railway fuel. Some teak wood were still available from the Malabar coast for railway construction in the western region. By the mid of 19th century the great teak forest of upper Burma began to be harvested for export to India and elsewhere¹². The railway sleepers had caused a heavy toll on forest timber trade and opening of communication system. It provided a very essential lever which was must for exploitation of major and minor product with assured transportation to far and wide areas. The first step for conservation of forests in 1855, a memorandum was issued by the Government for restricting the free movement of forest dwellers¹³. In 1860 Ramsay who was the commissioner of Kumaun and Garhwal also took energetic step to prevent devastation of forests in the hill districts¹⁴. A large scale destruction of accessible forests in the early years of railway expansion led to the hasty creation of a forest department, set up with the help of German experts in 1864¹⁵. The control on tracts become tighter with the passing of first Forest Act of 1865 which empowered the colonial rulers, to declare any forest of tree cover as Government Forest. In 1878 the first elaborate classification (after Mauryan Empire) of reserved protected and village forest became effective. With the emergence of Railways, rules of forest administration increased many a time till forest policy statement of 1894¹⁶. The costs of transport on existing railway lines were prohibitively high. Some source of sleepers had to be found in

north India itself to free the crop- marketing potential of the rich north Indian plains¹⁷. Though the Government was aware of the danger of felling trees in the hill slopes and the necessity of a management policy for minor forest products as fuel wood and fodder¹⁸.

The forest Department in Dehradun district of western Uttar Pradesh was organized for the first time in 1868. Here the work of building up a forest estate proved a long and uphill task as elsewhere¹⁹. In first phase they had surveyed, examined, described and demarcated the extensive areas of trackless forest. In many parts it were unhealthy and broken, this terrain was populated by the wild animals. They had to do it in order to organize the protection of forest against fire and other natural damage. To record minutely, in conjunctions with civil authorities. all existing rights and on top of everything, to wage a perpetual and often thankless war against the customs and malpractices of peasants. Like uncontrolled grazing and lopping, indiscriminate felling, incendiarism the vested interests of get-rich-quick timber contractors. In fact, due to several influences had reduced the more accessible and valuable forests of the state to a state semi-ruin²⁰.

The professed main objective of British colonial forest policy was to improve the forest and at the same time to produce the maximum revenue consistent with such improvement. In other words, to realize the best possible return from the existing stock while improving it so that it would yield greater revenue in future²¹. The British rulers also initiated a new line of systematic study of Indian flora. The knowledge of flora of India and research on their possible utilization in botanical gardens and silvicultural practices opened new avenues of forestry in India. Simultaneously the work on pests and diseases of forest, flora and their aspect control etc. were given importance through the newly set up Forest Research Institute of Dehradun²².

Protest in Mountain Region

The establishment of forest department and implementation of conservancy practices changed the traditional relationship between the state and the peasantry. The forests were no more to be treated as community property. The prescriptive rights of peasantry over forest products, honoured since time immemorial ended. Instead, these rights in their modified form were granted as 'concessions' by the generous state. The modification of 'natural rights' into 'concessions' was a painful change and created various new situations of confrontation between state and the peasantry. The traditional activities of the villagers in the forest like grazing, lopping, cutting of trees for agricultural and domestic uses became penal offenses. Spectra of fines, imprisonment and other harassments haunted the people. On its side, the biggest problem confronted by the State was how to reconcile the contradictory claims of forest conservancy and management on the one hand, and unchecked use of forests for its needs by the peasantry, which was causing law and order problems and other disturbances. A British forest officer reported that in the popular perception the 'forest

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department has been created for a running fight with the villagers. Commissioner of Kumaon, Henry Ramsay appeared to side with the peasants by claiming that 'the villagers had prescriptive rights to grass, grazing, timber and firewood and even realizing dues from the outsiders who fed their cattle in the grazing lands within the village boundaries'. He further conceded that 'State had granted proprietary rights over land to people and similarly they have some right over the forest also. Another sympathetic officer, Nelson (1916) remarked that the encroachment on forest rights of the people looked like 'robbing them of their own property'. In an editorial note, local Hindi monthly newspaper 'Garhwal Samachar (1914) wrote "since the day forest department set foot on our land (Garhwal), it has curtailed our freedom sickles have been snatched from the hands of our women cutting grass in the forest". The same paper published on Jan. 1914 about new forest settlements that it is a scheme 'to ruin human settlements and grow forests on them'. Opposed to these views and guided by the demands of colonial apparatus, British officials justified the claim on the basis of the assumption of 'right of conquest over forest. thereby nullifying village or individual claims. This also justified sale of large-scale forest lands in the hands of tea planters.

In British territories forest movement reached its peak in 1921, when large tracts of forests were put to fire by the peasants. About 321 miles of forest were damaged and 6,400 mounds of resin was destroyed deliberately by the local people. The arson of 1921 was apparently explicit expression of local forest grievances in an atmosphere surcharged and motivated with the Gandhian Nationalist Movement. The forest issues were hotly debated among the local educated leaders and reformers like Tara Dutt Gairola, Badri Dutt Pandey, Govind Ballabh Pant, Mukandi Lal and Ansuya Prasad Bahuguna (Shakti Hindi Newspaper, 14 July 1925). During the forest movements of Tehri State in 1901, 1907 and 1930, state forest officials were manhandled, forest boundary pillars were removed. To quell the disturbances army action was contemplated in 1907, and in 1930 it was executed, hundreds of people were injured, wounded and few died in Rawain region of Princely State of Tehri Garhwal.

Conclusion

According to a statement on the forest policy made by the secretary of state in 1863 that for the proper growth and preservation of forest it was more important for government to cultivate any other crops which the soil produces and in some instances more important. Since the destruction of forests would affect most injuriously the climate and perhaps the fertility of the soil²³. It was in this context that a decision was taken to form a separate. Forest Department, to regulate the legal forest demands²⁴. Therefore the rule and regulation were dwellers and by the department which gave birth to conflicts between the forest dwellers and the rulers. The issue of shifting cultivation played a central role in tribal ethos which was never really appreciated and became another major point of conflict with the state.

For several decades the forest department remains engaged more in conservation than exploitation. The forest was in semi-ruin conditions so it required careful nursing. It was called conservation policy.

The Indian Forest Act of 1878 even considered the accepted daily activities of local villagers/farmers as a punishable offence with imprisonment a term up to six months. Offences included slash and burn cultivation and grazing in the forest land. The law provided to the state, the legitimate right to property, of total control over forest land and people²⁵. Therefore, farmers were dispossessed of their forests, the newly created forests became a source of harassment. The aim was then no longer to manage the communal good. People did not trust the foresters who in turn did not consider the farmers as valid interlocutors²⁶.

The British Forest Policy pretended that state forest were administered for the public benefit. In some cases, the public to be benefited were the whole body of taxpayers. In others, the people of the tract within which the forest was situated were made beneficiary. But in almost all cases the constitution and preservation of a forest involved to a greater or less degree, the regulation of right and the restriction of privileges of user in the forest area which had previously been enjoyed by the inhabitants of its immediate neighbourhood²⁷. The regulations and restrictions were justified only when the advantage to be gained by the public was great. The cardinal principle to be observed was that the right and privileges of individuals must be limited for their own benefit.

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