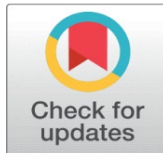


IMPACT OF BRITISH FOREST POLICIES ON JHOOM (NOMADIC) CULTIVATION AND THE PEOPLE OF UTTARAKHAND

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ABSTRACT

With the establishment of British rule in India, economic and environmental changes began. But the most environmental changes took place in modern Uttarakhand because forests were needed for railway sleepers. The wood needed for railway sleepers could only be found in the hill forests of Uttarakhand. To get it, the British Indian government started controlling the hill forests of Uttarakhand, which started causing economic and environmental losses. Those who had been doing Jhum farming for centuries were banned. Due to the stoppage of Jhum farming, they adopted an animal husbandry business, but the British Indian government also banned their animals from grazing in the forest.

Keywords: Jhoom, Uttarakhand, forest products, Kumaon, Ranikhet, Charagah

1. INTRODUCTION

Overexploitation of forests began with the establishment of British rule in the United Provinces (Uttarakhand). Initially, only local woodcutters, small farmers and coal burners destroyed limited forests, but their impact was negligible. Nomadic (*Jhoom*) agriculture was practised everywhere in Uttarakhand without any checks and the expansion of agriculture was considered the main concern of the British government. The colonial forest policies were primarily implemented to maximize the benefits of the British government. Their main objective was to increase the British government's revenue. For this purpose, the British Indian Government appointed Dr. J.A. Volker in 1889 to advise on the improvement of Indian agriculture through scientific methods. Agricultural reform was not his main objective and neither was the report in favour of the *jhoom* cultivators. The local hill natives have been practising *jhoom* cultivation for centuries, which can only be done in forests and mountains. But British Indian Government was not in favour of the *jhoom* cultivation because the government did not receive revenue from the *jhoom* cultivation. Volker pointed out "It is impossible to have forests and agriculture in the same area. If forests are left in the hands of people, they will not be able to manage them; they will not be able to conserve and use the forests in the best possible way."ⁱ

Jhoom farmers' aim was only to cut and clear the limited forest for the limited cultivation and till the soil became infertile they would cultivate there and then clear the forest elsewhere for the same purpose. J.A. Volker strongly opposed this type of cultivation. He claimed in this report that the 'British Indian Government will not support the centuries-old

practice of *Jhoom* cultivation done by the natives of the hill area, because it does not give any additional revenue to the government.”ⁱⁱ Moreover, The British Indian Government was not concerned about the haphazard destruction of forests, nor was it their main concern. The introduction of railways promoted the overexploitation of forests in India. Ram Chandra Guha writes “In the early years of railway expansion, there was an unprecedented attack on the more accessible forests. Large parts of forests were destroyed to meet the demand for railway sleepers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The idea of exploiting forests in colonial United Province (Uttarakhand) first came to the mind of a private British contractor named Wilson. He was the first person to obtain a shooting license from the British government, although this license was only for hunting in Uttarakhand. especially the wood of these forests is excellent for making railway sleepers. And with the expansion of railways, the demand for forest wood was increasing. Wilson took a license from the British government to cut forests to supply wood to the railways. The contract system of deforestation not only led to rapid exploitation of the forests of Uttarakhand but also reduced the perennial rights of the local cultivators. Joshi has rightly said that 'the contract system of exploitation of forest wealth caused the most damage to the forests.'^{iv} Undoubtedly, a lot of deforestation took place due to the need for railways, but most of the deforestation was done by the British through the contract system. Under the contract system, not only selective forests were cut, but forests unsuitable for railways were also cut. The problem was that it was very difficult to bring wood from dense forests to the market. Although the coming of railways made it easier to transport wood to the market, railways could not go into the mountains. Bringing wood from the forests to the plains was also a very laborious task. Wilson introduced a unique way of transporting wood to the plains through rivers.^v

This was the time of the beginning of modern industries in India under colonial rule. The British were promoting urbanization and industrialization in their country which was leading to the depletion of forests in their country. But they needed forest-based raw materials for their industries. Very soon the British Government realised the importance and vast wealth of forests. They realised that it was necessary to control deforestation because the system of contracting was not only benefiting the contractors but also the local people were being exploited, but the most important reason was that the Government was not getting much revenue from the forests. The contractors were the ones who benefited the most. On the expiry of Wilson's lease, in 1864, the British United Provinces Government took over the lease of all the state forests for 20 years and a Forest Department was also established. The creation of this full-fledged Forest Department (1864) helped exploit forest resources and maintain the monopoly of the colonial state over forests. "In 1864, Dr. Dietrich Brandis was appointed as Inspector General of Forests in the Government of India, and the Forest Act was passed by the Legislature the following year.”^{vi} All this happened so quickly that the colonial government did not clearly outline any Act.

Brandis was largely involved in drafting a new Act VII for the forests. "In 1865, the colonial government introduced its first major forest legislation. The law relating to the administration of forests was codified for the first time through the Indian Forest Act of 1865. Forest legislation was a new thing in India. The local people were initially unaware of this law so there was no opposition to this law initially. But soon this law restricted the rights of the cultivators over the forests and there was opposition from the local people. The 1865 Act defined forests as land covered with trees, bushes, or woods and declared it a Government Forest under the Act.”^{vii}

It is necessary to clarify here that the reason behind this Act was the urgent need of the forests of Uttarakhand for the railway's requirement of sleepers. After the enactment of this Act, huge trees of Deodar, teak, and sal were ruthlessly cut down for sleepers to promote the commercial interests of the empire. Another case of deforestation can be seen in 1876, "when the Forest Department contracted to supply 70,500 Deodar sleepers to the Scindia State Railway. The British Forest Department was clearing the forests rapidly for commercial purposes and continuously reducing the rights of the local people over the forests. The British Indian Government was worried after seeing such a big contract because they feared that the Forest Department would clear the entire forest to fulfil this contract. With this concern, the Government of British India requested the North-West Province Government not to accept large indents and suggested cutting the wood most economically. On the contrary, the British Forest Department government justified the forest officials' making every effort to comply with the indents of the State Railway Department. By doing so, they were only following government orders.”^{viii}

For the first time, deforestation took place on such a large scale for the commercial interests of the British Empire. This government report shows that they were concerned about the felling of trees in large numbers, but their commercial interests overrode concern for the environment. Distance and railways greatly helped to increase British commercial activities. "An early commissioner of Kumaon, while examining the sources of fodder for a proposed iron mine, ventured to declare that the forests of Kumaon and Garhwal were boundless and inexhaustible in all respects."^{ix}

When the British took over the Uttarakhand region, given the name North-Western Province Oudh was also part of it. The region was divided into three circles: the North-Western Province and Oudh. The Progress Report of Forest Administration for 1881-82 states that "the area of reserved forests in the three divisions, i.e. Kumaon, Ranikhet and Garhwal, was 406,936, 4,480 and 302,536 acres respectively. The area of protected forests in the Nainital and Ranikhet divisions was 24,408 and 38,174 acres respectively. As far as the area under plantation is concerned, it was 264 and 367 acres in Kumaon and Ranikhet divisions."^x

A Forest School was established in Dehradun to promote research on forests. But this school was less of a research institute and more of a contribution to legislation on forests. Later it was changed into the Imperial Forest Research Institute and College. The forests of the entire Uttarakhand were divided into reserved and protected forests. Reserved forest areas were directly under the control of the government in which the rights of the Jhoom cultivators were abolished whereas in the protected forests, local cultivators had some limited rights. The extent of reserved forests was increasing which meant that the rights of the Jhoom cultivators over the forests were decreasing. This report also mentioned the total number of trees felled by departmental agencies, village rights holders, and buyers in all four divisions. What was important was that the rights of the villagers over the forests were mentioned in this report. Details of trees felled every year began to be recorded. The British Indian government wanted to control the illegal felling of trees. This report shows that a total of 11292 trees were felled in the Nainital division in 1881. Pine trees were the main trees cut by the departmental agency. The data did not mention trees felled illegally, otherwise, this number would have been even higher. The fourth most important division was Kumaon, where the maximum number of trees i.e. 301238 were felled. The government also received a quarter of the income from the forest from the sale of fallen or dry wood. One-third were sal and the rest were Khair and haldu. A large income was obtained from bamboo and small produce. In 1881-82 the revenue of Kumaon increased from Rs 185371 to Rs 194239. Sal wood was cut on a large scale in Garhwal. Pine, alder and oak were important in Nainital and Ranikhet, while bamboo, sal, Sheesham and khair trees were cut in the largest numbers in Kumaon and Garhwal. The Administration report of 1881-82 clearly shows that the production of timber produced for commercial purposes was a serious threat to the forest. This destruction was mainly caused by the expansion of railways, and sal, teak and pine were identified as the main sources of supply of strong and durable timber. Besides this the three important traditional uses of the forest, i.e. grazing, lopping and setting fire to forests also posed a serious threat to the forests. To protect the forests from these threats, the British Indian Government enacted several laws. The report shows prosecutions for violations of forest rules during 1881-1882. Despite various restrictions imposed on the local people, people were taking their cattle to graze in the reserved forests. The colonist was aware of the opposition of the local people because in many parts of India, the tribals were fighting with the British Government for the rights over the forests. The British Indian Government did not want this situation in Uttarakhand, so in 1881-2, a joint report was given by Mr. Greg and Mr. H.G. Ross on separating open forests from closed forests. "The open forest was used to fulfil the privileges of grazing, gear gathering and fuel wood. It included 48 square miles of closed forest area. However, the mentioned privileges to use the forests on payment were not considered by the local authorities as a right but as a privilege of the British Government. From now on, the open forests also came under the charge of the Forest Department."^{xi}

Although the Forest Act of 1878 had already put the largest forest areas in the reserved category. Since the government's objective was clear that all important forests should be under government control, the forests near villages were still used by local people for grazing their cattle and for firewood, Gadgil and Guha have also highlighted a "third category of forests- the rural forests."^{xii} From 1865 to 1905 "the total area of reserved forest increased to 23,103 acres. In the protected forests, there was a decrease of 21,493 acres, mainly due to the exclusion of the area of fee simple grant in Almora district."^{xiii} Where most of the villagers were exercising their rights without any interference from the government. However, the British Indian government was gradually bringing these forests into reserved areas as well, where the British Indian government had a direct influence. Stebbing mentioned that "due to increasing commercial

demand, protected forests were gradually converted into reserved forests so that the state could maintain full control. The state forest of 14,000 square miles in 1878 increased to 56,000 square miles of reserved forests and 20,000 square miles of protected forests in 1890.^{xiv}

On silvicultural grounds, grazing was beneficial; it helped reduce thick grass and shrubs, indirectly favouring species like pine and deodar. On the contrary, it became a threat as it increased the element of insecurity. It had to be strictly regulated so that a clear example of maintaining control could be seen in the report of the Chief Secretary of the Government of the North-West Province, J. This is shown in a letter written by Woodburn to the Secretary to the Government of India, which mentions that "National division of the central circle Rs. 1983 were expounded on erecting a single strand of barbed wire to protect from cattle trespassers."^{xv} Once these forests were reserved, grazing was regulated and grazing without permission was now prohibited. Mr Blanchfield, an officer of the British Indian Government in the North-Western Province, wrote that "From the very beginning, hordes of poor people frequented these forests in search of roots, fruits and nature, a large number of them nomads from distant places and from the native states, who had no permanent home of their own. But by the Act of the British Government, they could not enter within the boundaries of the forest. Due to this regulation, 115 people were prosecuted for illegal grazing practices in 1881, this number decreased significantly to 23 in the year 1897."^{xvi}

It is also true that some areas were open for cattle in all three divisions, i.e. Kumaon, Garhwal and Nainital. In the Nainital division, the local population had full right to graze. But now they had no right over most of the forests. But people were continuously taking their cattle to graze in the restricted forests. The Jhoom cultivators were not ready to give up their rights over the forests easily, but the British government was rigid in curtailing their rights over the forests. British Indian Government continuously imposed fines on them. However, Jhoom Cultivators slowly shifted to husbandry occupation, because they had banned Jhoom cultivation. Result, they increase their domestic animals for livelihood. Another problem was created by the British Indian Government that stopped their animals from grazing. Jhoom cultivators had no way to send their animals to forests for fodders. The reports show that "The total number of cattle (including buffaloes, cows, goats and sheep and other animals) brought into the forest increased from 342,175 in 1895-1896 to 353,854 in 1896-97."^{xvii}

To protect the forests from these threats, the British Indian government made several laws. A report of 1881-1882 shows that violations of forest laws were on the rise since the local people were restricted from entering the forest. The number of violations committed by the cultivators of this hilly region shows that the policies of the colonial government were creating a difficult situation for them. Their existence revolved around the forest, and the very restrictions imposed on them forced them to break the laws made by the government, as it had become necessary for their survival as well as the survival of their livestock. This was just one example of the extinction of customary rights. Seeing all this, Mr. Blanchfield, a British Indian government official of the North-Western Province, wrote, "From the very beginning, the poor local people have been going to the forest in search of roots, fruits and ripe vegetables, a large number of them were nomads from distant places and from native states, who had no home for themselves, and stayed within the forest limits. However, the Forest Department was careful not to interfere too much with the rights of these people, so that by doing so the government does not appear to be getting into trouble with them. Due to the 1881 regulation, 115 persons were prosecuted for illegal grazing. In 1897, this number fell significantly to 23. This did not mean that people were not exercising their rights or sending their animals to graze in the forests, but the reason for this was that the government had now become aware of the local rights and it did not want any conflict with the local people, so the British government allowed the local cultivators to graze their animals in the protected forest area. In the Nainital division, the local cultivators had full grazing rights. The government considered it unnecessary to allow non-rightsholder cattle inside the forest to graze the grass needs of the settlements and cantonments of Nainital, Ranikhet and Almora. The Administrative Report of 1895 shows that "the total number of cattle brought into the forest increased from 342,175 in 1895-1896 to 353854 in 1896-97."^{xviii}

Another threat has resulted in the elimination of many tree species in large numbers and the dislocation of the original inhabitants of the hill region. However, this process of construction of roads and bridges was quite slow. "In Garhwal Division (1889), the total length of roads constructed was only 16 miles. The roads constructed include Gonjera Sol Road, GaliRewad Road, ChotaRulia Road and Delidinga Sot Road. These roads were built mainly for commercial purposes."^{xix}

“In Kumaun division the Dhanour-Kathal road of 6 miles length was constructed and in Garhwal division, 7 miles of new cart road was constructed in 1897.”^{xx} The next important threat was lopping, and illegal felling of trees which threatened the survival of selected tree species in the forest. As recorded in an administrative report of 1892 “Looping increases the proportion of commercially valuable species (mainly conifers) in the forest crop.”^{xxi}

Though the villagers were allowed to cut down trees of oak and other broad-leaved species, soon the entire forest turned into pine trees only. This had the significant effect of depriving the villagers of grass as the felling of trees prevented the grass from growing, and this also posed a serious threat to the cattle. The Progress Report of the Forest Administration for the years 1881-82 clearly showed that timber produced for commercial purposes was a serious threat to forests. This destruction was caused mainly not only by the expansion of railways but also because sal, teak and pine were identified as the main sources of supply of strong and durable timber to railways. Besides, the three important traditional uses of forests, i.e. grazing, lopping and forest fires, also seriously threatened the forests. The threat to the forests was slowly increasing but the government was not able to understand this. Another serious threat to the forests for them was forest fires which were being carried out by the local people. According to the villagers, burning the forest to get fresh pasture was an age-old custom. “Not being accustomed to any interference in their customary practices, it was obvious that for the peasants, universal fire protection would always be a source of complaint.”^{xxii}

The British Indian government was taking the necessary steps to stop the fire from entering the forests by crossing exterior fire traces. This consideration was important as the cases had increased in Nainital and Kumaun burning 28 and 22 acres respectively in the year 1898.

By 1909, the British Indian government was under pressure to change its forest policy and give some concessions to the locals regarding the forests. The British Indian Government introduced a new act in 1909 that introduced rules for the protected forests of Terai and Bhabar. It introduced the re-licensing system, under which a person holding a license could cut forest wood for his personal use, and collect and remove the produce free of cost. But the British Indian government still considered Jhoom cultivation to be harmful to forests, although relief was given in certain circumstances. The 1909 Act clarified that the clearing of land in forests for cultivation or for any other purpose, where the local government has not prohibited such clearing, may be permitted by order of the Deputy Commissioner for Jhoom cultivation under the control of the Commissioner. But agricultural land cannot be cleared by setting fire. It stated that no person shall set fire to forests or any part thereof, or carry fire or means of lighting fire, except under such conditions and within such areas as the Commissioner may determine.

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None.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST:

None.

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