



Forestry as Traditional Resource and Some Aspects of Human Interference on Forests of Garhwal Hills (1815-1947)

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to assess the impact of human activities on the forests and land resources of the Garhwal Himalaya region of Uttarakhand State in India, within the last two centuries. During British occupation (1815-1947), Garhwal was divided into two parts – British Garhwal, governed by British Empire in India and Princely State Tehri, governed by a native king. The land and resource management patterns were more or less same in both the parts, whereas forest department was better organized in British Garhwal. The major destructive factors for forests were traditional practices like Nayabad, in which new fields were created by cutting down forests for agriculture and dwelling purposes. Under the monarchy rule, villagers were used to encourage for the extension of farming. It was called Nayawad. It used to be rent free (Lagan mukt) land for a generation and ensuing the reign of new King, it was covered under the rent. Thus this Nayabad land was more fertile with free of rent. Farmers in this frame of reference, for farming preferred to cultivate virgin land deep in forests. This was one of the reasons, why scattered villages were created in far flung forested areas by local people. Traditional economy of this region was based on closed interrelationships between forests, animal herds and agriculture. Collectors, gatherers, huntsman and farmers all of these four elements were existed together at the same time, but there was harmony between human appetite and resource availability. While land settlement was done in British Garhwal, same was done bit later in Tehri state. Land and forest resources were the prime source of revenue for the state. Excessive encouragement was given for extension of agricultural land in the forested areas in the first half of 19th century and strictly discouraged later on from second half of 19th century, to conserve the forests wealth, as state became aware of high commercial value of this natural resource. State administration started taking Initiation of forest conservancy and management practices. State began to impose various restrictions on the activities of the villagers, as a result, Forest department and Land revenue department generated unrest among peasant. Resistant against this started since mid 19th century. After independence in 1947 the sovereign Indian state followed the same patterns of forest management with few exceptions. The dependence on forests for revenue increased more after independence, with consequent ecological degradation and emergence of new social tensions. The sources of information for this paper are primarily secondary and official in nature. An attempt has been made to review the available data intermixed with political, economic and revenue records in the perspective of forestry. A lot of new information was also gathered from local people.

Keywords: Forestry, Forest Degradation, Nayawad, Indigenous System, Hill Economy British Garhwal

Introduction

Forests have played a significant role in the development of civilization on this earth. Not only they provide indispensable source of food, fuel and material for shelters, but also played a vital role in the protection and maintenance of our natural environment and in the evolution of cultural institutions. The above situation is truer in case of Himalayan society whose economic structure and social organization is built around the

primary relationship with the natural resources. A series of studies have been undertaken to determine the different causes and aspects of deforestation and destruction in Garhwal Hills, a part of Himalayan region of Uttarakhand State. History can throw significant light on the causes of deforestation, transformation in patterns of livelihood, outmigration of people and of course environmental degradation. It has been tried to find out the roots and background of these problems in history which is relatively less known for the study area.

To trace the past history of forest use is a difficult task because of the paucity of written record and primary data on the forests. The main available sources of informations are secondary, from which relevant information has been taken and reviewed in the context of forestry and its use. In the past the population was very low in comparison of forested areas and there did not arise the question of keeping records of changes in forests till commercial exploitation of the forests started during British colonial rule. Under these limitations this study attempts to provide a general picture of the area and those aspects which have some relevance to forests in a historical perspective.

General History

Credit to integrate Garhwal region into a Garhwal Kingdom with its capital at Srinagar is given to King Ajaypal of local Panwar dynasty (Negi, 1988). The integration of Kingdom of Kumaon was done by King Rudrachand in Kumaon with capital at Almora (Rawat, 1987). Emergence of two separate states – Kumaon and Garhwal in Uttarakhand was the beginning of an important era; because then those socio-political and cultural institutional elements began to develop in Uttarakhand that determined the socio-political nature of modern Uttarakhand. Garhwal principality remained mostly independent though continuous attempts were made to coerce it to accept the nominal suzerainty of Mughals during and after emperor Shahjahan and Aurangzeb's time. Some of the valued exported forest products to Mughal Empire from Himalaya were medicinal plants, birds, particularly hawks, musk pods, holy Ganges water. Mughal Princess Jahan Ara had sent her firman to Sirmor and Garhwal States for luxury items like supply of ice of Himalayas (Tirmizi, 1979).

As a result of persistent invasions (attacks) Kumaon in 1790 and Garhwal in 1804 was conquered by the Gorkhas. In 1815 the war was fought between East India Company and Gorkhas. Gorkhas were conquered by the company, and it expanded its Indian empire in 1815 in Kumaon and Garhwal. In March 1815 treaty of Sigoli ended the Anglo-Gorkha rivalry. Garhwal was divided into two parts, western part of it was called Tehri Garhwal after the name of its Capital under the rule of local Panwar dynasty (Sankrityayan, 1953). In the eastern part of Garhwal and in Kumaon, company established its direct rule. This terrain was named as Kumaon Division and a commissioner was appointed on the top of its administration. British Garhwal became a district under the Deputy Commissioner.

Forest as a Social Institution in the Indigenous System

The best quality of cultivation in mountains was to be found in villages (1000 – 1500 m asl) having access as the one hand to good forests and grazing grounds and on the other to riparian field in the valleys. Village sites were equally usually chosen half way up the spur below oak forests and perennial springs associated with them, and below and above cultivated field along river bed. In such situations all types of crops could be raised easily. A stable and elevated site was available for houses, and herds of cattle could be comfortably maintained. Until 1890 most of the villages came close to this ideal (Walton, 1910).

Animal husbandry was another important feature of hill economy in addition to grain cultivation. The hill folk and their cattle migrated annually to grass rich area of the forests from tropical to temperate and alpine regions. The sheep and goats were reared above tree line till the first snowfall. In the permanent hamlet, oak forests provided both fodder and fertilizer. Green and dry leaves which served the cattle as animal beddings were mixed with grass and excrete of the animals and fermented to give manure to the fields. In winter

manure was molded from dry leaves. Thus the forests enhanced the fertility of agricultural fields, directly through its foliage and indirectly through the excrete of the cattle feed with fodder leaves and forest grass. Broad leaved tree also provided the villagers with fuel and small timber for house construction and agricultural implements (Heske, 1931).

In the lower hills pine (chir) forests served for pasture. Every year dry grasses and pine needle litter in the chir forests were burnt to make room for fresh grass. In certain parts where pastures were scarce, trees were grown and preserved for fodder (Paw, 1896). In such multifarious ways the extensive forests were central to the successful practice of agriculture and animal husbandry. In addition they were the prime source of medicinal herbs and in time of dearth of food as well. Forests also helped hilly people to overcome moderate food scarcity as forests were rich in fruits, edible vegetables and roots (Walton 1910).

This dependence of the hill peasants on forest resources was institutionalized through a variety of social and cultural mechanism. The old customary restrictions on the use of forests operated in the following manner over large areas. While no formal management existed, practical protection was secured by customary limitations on uses. For oak forests, there was a unwritten rule which prohibited the loaping of leaves in the hot weather while the grass cut by each family was strictly regulated (Pearson, 1869). Traditionally many villages had fuel reserve even on gaon sanjait (common village land) where the villagers cut over in regular rotation by common consent. Planting of timber trees was a common phenomenon. The forests preserved within their boundaries were zealously guarded by villages nearby.

In Tehri state peasant strongly asserted their claim to species like Bhimal (*Grewia oppositifolia*) avuluable fodder tree usually found near habitation (Raturi, 1910). In Birtish Garhwal Chaundkot pargana was singled out for its oak forests within village boundaries ciled bani (banjanis), where branches of trees were cut only at specified time with the permission of the entire village community (Stowell, 1907). In remote areas, untouched by commercial exploitation of forests, one can still come across wel maintained banjanis containing oak tree of quality rarely observed elsewhere (Guha, 1989).

This situation was facilitated by near total control exercised by village on forests near their habitat. The waste land and forest land never attracted the attention of former Government (Paw, 1896). In such circumstances where the people exercised full control over their forest habitat, co-operation of high order was exhibited by adjoining villages. Every village in the hill had fixed boundaries existing from the time of pre-Gurkha rulers and recognized by Traill in 1820 at the time of first settlement (Gairola, 1936).

Forest Degradation in Historical Perspective

Before the British rule villagers and peasant of Uttarakhand used to enjoy freely its traditional forest rights over the forests without any let & hindrance. Only forest related tax a rural farmer used to pay to the state was on grazing of cattle. In addition dairy products and handicrafts made from various forests materials such as baskets, wooden utensils, mats and various other animal products were also given for the use of court and king. Excessive exploitation took place widely around local copper mines where large amount of wood was required to melt the iron. But it was within its regenerative capacity.

The forests around the capital city were however, became sparse increasingly because of the practice of 'Pala' and 'Bisah' in which dairy products were sent per day to the Durbar (Royal Court). With this arrangement villagers were bound to bring a large number of mulching cattle to the neighborhood forests of the capital city on rotation basis (Saklani, 1987). Due to overgrazing, construction of cattle shed, needs of fire wood for city and farmers camping in surrounding, forests dipleated faster, first in Srinagar and then in Tehri. This practice continued unchanged until 1880 in Tehri state (Saklani, 1987). Members of the royal family were entitled to thousands of kilograms of firewood for their respective royal kitchens and similar demand for fuel was also there by other court officials. To meet the needs of excessive amount of wood, neighboring forest of the capital were exploited. At the same time firewood was required to supply from remote locations to the

capital as a royal tax called Bisah. Another practice due to which damages were made in the forests was use of huge log of woods for building the houses (AAR, 1930). The practice of making beams and planks was introduced only during early 20th century (AAR, 1930). It is said that in the Yamuna valley to build a single house hundreds of Devdar and pine trees were cut and used. The practice of exploitation of forests remained continued till commercial importance of the forests was not realized by the mid of nineteenth century. Apart from that, contracts were given by the state to gather forest products like bark of certain trees, medicinal plants and useful organs of animals in the forests of foot hill. During the pre British period one of the cause of forest destruction in rural areas is considered to be the shifting cultivation which was known as 'Kureel', 'Katil' or 'Khil' in different parts of the region. This practice was prevalent more regularly in the temperate zones where population was scarce and productivity was low. In the Kureel and Khil practices forests were cut down and after cropping this land it was used to be left blank for a number of years and in a cyclic order the crop was grown again on the same land (Pau, 1896). During the tenth land settlement of Garhwal, Pau, the land settlement officer, reported that miles of arable land was left blank due to such practices by the farmers (Pau, 1896). The reason for abandonment was mainly decrease in the fertility of cultivated land, religious and divine sanctions and insufficient amount of water.

From earlier times the main source of the income of the state was the tax levied on the land. So, state has always encouraged the expansion of agricultural land in the forests areas (Tucker, 1983). In Garhwal this type of the land was called Nayawad. Nayawad land was rent free for a generation and only in the reign of new king tax was levied on this land. Land settlement were made often the enthronement of a new King only once in his life time. In a society where 50-60% of revenue was taken on production (Saklani, 1987) this type of farming was profitable for farmers. It gave a relatively high productivity and tax-free produce. Therefore large-scale extension on new forest lands in each generation took place. For this reason each generation of farmers realized cultivating Nayawad land as a tax free profit it caused large scale destruction of forests and also abandonment of some old settled farm land (Pau, 1986). However, Nayabad extension met resistance in northern patties (situated in the temperate zone) who were predominantly pastoral communities, as Nayabad destroyed best grazing lands (Paw, 1896). With the introduction of commercial exploitation of the forests, state discouraged and stopped the Nayawad and encouraged the protection and conservation of the forests. This ban on extension of agriculture land into the forested lands had given rise to new factors of tension in the rural areas during late nineteenth century onwards. It was a dormant, limited and potential situation of aggression.

British Colonialism – Reservation and Exploitation of Resources

Trail, the Commissioner of Kumaon, wrote – houses in the villages are surrounded by the forests at first site it does not explain the extent of the village from where it starts and from where the forest starts (Atkinson, 1884). Probably beginning of the dissociation of land holding was limited to the land that had been cultivable under the royal system for the rent. The concept of demarcation between land holding and grazing land of the village and forest land was entered into the society here in Garhwal and Kumaon region after the land revenue and forest settlements. Then boundaries of the village and forest were determined (Webber, 1902). In the early nineteenth century limitations of the village in relation of cultivated land was transformed to confirm the concept of Western capitalist contract system, villages were tied up to the maps and their limitations had been noted. Forests and grass land were outlined like farming land of the village forests were also categorized on the basis of their quality and economic viability (Pearson, 1869). For the first time in the history of Uttarakhand, state imposed its statutory authority on the forests. Now, the forests were reserved by the government for the economic exploitation.

Under the previous regime forests also were the property of the state. But the villager could have consumed forest resources freely without any let and hindrance. Now, there was a legal curve on the use of the forest and for this comprehensive administrative system was setup (Osmastan, 1921) which was controlling the use

of the forest resources by the villagers. For the contempt of the forest related laws and regulations villagers were punished. It was clarified by the forest laws for those villagers who were dependent on the forests, that it will be given limited amount of fuelwood, timber for building houses and wood for agricultural implements. On the other hand forests of Uttarakhand were exploited rapidly to meet the needs of imperialist interests. Railway has an important place in the history of Indian forest policy and management. In the latter half of the nineteenth century construction of railway tracks to connect different part of the empire started. To meet the high demand of railway sleepers for track laying the forest of the Tarai Bhabar areas of the Uttarakhand were cut ruthlessly. First, as well as the second world war also made an adverse impact on the forests. For the military needs forests were damaged wantonly (Rawat, 1991). Before the British rule punishment to the villagers was given only when law relating to the land was broken but during British rule similar kind of conviction and punishment was arranged for the violations of forest laws and regulations. Rivalry between forest department and villagers was now common (Mac Nair, 1907).

Transformation of Livelihood and Out Migration

Control over freedom of farming within the forest for farmers was forced to cultivate within the village only. Cultivation within the limited area and due to use of same field twice in a year regularly the years on led to the decline of land quality. Due to the expansion of farming families, farmers were forced to share the same piece of land among the family members. Agriculture related benefits started decreasing. On every inch of irrigated or un-irrigated land farmer was forced to pay land revenue. Because of continue division of farming land, there was a increase in quarrels over limits of their fields and for the water of irrigation. Fragmentation of family land brought very high pressure on village land. That was the beginning of new social tensions in the hilly society and intervention of civil and criminal courts. Now, hard working farmer by his entrepreneur, could not create a new thatch (Chhan) and a new village. He was deprived of his chances of making a new farm. Thus, the working and functioning of daily life and economic activity of male was interrupted badly. Because of the interruption in the daily life and economic activities men had too much free time (Garhwal Samachar, 1919, Saklani, 1987). Thus, in the new system imposed by the colonial masters stopped the entrepreneurships of the hilly men. In contrast all socio economic activities of the mountain women like fetching water, collecting grass and dry leaves and all other house hold works not only remained unchanged, rather increased her labour because of men's external migration for the livelihood. Possibly to a general observer men commonly seen as sitting empty hands without any work and women seen as hard working. Because of these pressures in the course of time the enterprising hilly men prepared themselves for external migration in search of work. Now, agriculture was a boundation for those who were helpless or could not go anywhere or were not able to do anything else.

A small section of population of the Uttarakhand, who didn't like the physical labour and agricultural work, made a partnership with colonial power to make a living. This group initiated efforts to achieve education and made a place for themselves in the administration. This section of the society was instrumental in the freedom struggle and played a pivotal role in the social reform movements in Uttarakhand. At the same time these people aligned themselves with the India's emerging educated class.

Stresses resulting on the rural agricultural subsistence economy of the Uttarakhand, young farmers got a chance to join the army. Now, because of the limited opportunities mountain farmers became soldiers. Britishers used the poverty and illiteracy of the people of this region to meet their colonial and imperial interests. By getting opportunities these soldiers showed their commitment and valor and got honoured worldwide and came back with increased self esteem. Despite all the difficulties, farmers remained well connected with their land. Thus almost 150 years of British rule changed the tradition way of life of mountain farmers and the nature of production.

Tehri Riyasat was a neighborhood princely state of British Garhwal, after the penetration of colonialism in the forest of the state the traditional socio-economic structure begun to show new strains. Farmers in the

British Garhwal were owner of the land but in Tehri state land was not owned by the farmers, it was state owned. King had the monopoly ownership on land. When the king of the state reserved the state forest for commercial purposes, people of the state came out and agitated against the delimitation of forests and land. These people's agitations are known as 'Dhandak' which were quite radical at that time (Saklani, 1987).

Consequence of Colonial Interventions in Himalayan Society

With the introduction of land and forest settlement operations an impersonal bureaucratic form of rule was set up in this Himalayan region in order to cater vested interest of colonial rule. These operations caused widespread changes and modifications in the nature of traditional relationship of man with agricultural land, forest and livestock during 19th and 20th century. Whether it was the native King of Tehri state or commissioner of Kumaon, bot tried to gain control and domination over natural resources through administrative measures.

The practical need to stabilize the tax system prompted the British at the outset of the colonial rule to introduce a modern form of private property. In the Himalayan region the requirements of the commercial capitalism forced the state to invoke and assert the dormant proprietary claims in its favour and usurp the traditional prescriptive rights of the rural community (Saklani, 1987). On the opposite the private ownership rights were granted to an individual over agricultural land tenure which was traditionally owned by the native King alone. These two contradictions trends of usurpation of natural rights on forest resources and granting of proprietary tenure on agricultural land had far reaching consequences.

The establishment of forest department and implementation of conservancy practices changed the traditional relationship between the state and peasantry. The forests were no more 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 were a painful change and created various new situations of confrontation between state and peasantry. The traditional activities of villagers in the forest like grazing, lopping, cutting of trees for agricultural and domestic uses became penal offences, spectra of fines, imprisonment and other harassments haunted the people. A British forest officer reported that in the popular perception 'forest department has been created for a running fight with the villagers (Mac Nair, 1907). In an editorial note of 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 forests'. The same paper published on Jan 1914 commented about the new forest settlement that 'it is a scheme to ruing human settlements and grow forests on them'. Opposite to these views and guided by the colonial apparatus, British officials justified the claim on the basis of the assumption of 'right of conquest over forest' (Ameri, 1876), thereby nullifying village on individual claim. This also justified sale of large scale forest lands in the hands of the tea planters. The turmoil and agitations due to forest questions forced both native King and the British administration to concede liberal forest concessions on their respective sides. The state was forced to mellow down its aggressive assertion of proprietary rights and retrieve considerably its interfering tentacles from the forests. However, the issues of economic greed of the state and wreckless use of forests by the peasantry remain unsettled even today.

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