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Research Paper

An Analytical and Critical Impact of Forest in the progress of Hilly state under the British Rule with special reference to Himachal Pradesh

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ABSTRACT: *The British consolidated their rule over the Western Himalayas after 1846, absorbing as British districts, (e.g., Kangra and Shimla) directly under British control. as well as the smaller princely hill states (e.g., Mandi, Chamba, Bhushar) of Himachal, which were governed independently under the political department of Punjab Province and were collectively known as the Punjab Hill States. Although local rajas were left in nominal charge of their territories via allotment of Sands, "forests always remained in the charge of the British Government". During this period, land use patterns and forest management underwent significant changes. As a result, conflicts between local communities and the British over forest rights increased. The British forest policies also had effects on the socio-economic lives of local communities. This research paper highlights upon the importance of forest in the socio-economic development in the hilly states such as Himachal Pradesh. This paper also focuses on the impact of forest resources in the development of Himachal Pradesh under the British Rule.*

KEYWORDS: *Forest, Development, Himachal Pradesh, British Rule, British Policies.*

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I.INTRODUCTION

Forests are essential ecological units that provide vital ecosystem services, supporting the livelihoods of over 1.6 billion people worldwide. They produce resources such as water, hydroelectric power, timber, biodiversity, mineral resources, flood control, and recreational opportunities. Forests also supply a variety of ecosystem goods, including food, forage, wood, biomass fuels, natural fibers, and medicinal plants, as well as raw materials for industrial use. These services enhance human well-being and improve quality of life.[1]

Himachal Pradesh is a mountainous state with two-thirds of its land covered by forests and other natural ecosystems. Over 90% of the population resides in rural areas, with most of them relying on forests for at least part of their livelihoods.[2] Local communities in the hills primarily use forests for subsistence, with their livelihoods heavily reliant on resources such as fuelwood, fodder, grazing, timber for construction, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs);[3] they also conserve forest areas for spiritual reasons.[4] Key income sources related to forestry include selling fodder, fuelwood, medicinal herbs, and fruits, as well as employment from afforestation and forest management.[5] Tourism, recreation, and aesthetic values are becoming increasingly important, alongside other forest services such as climate regulation, soil protection, water management, and biodiversity conservation.[6] Early colonial interest in hill forests was driven by economic demand (railway construction, timber contracts) – "contractors of Colonial Government found it easy to take the woods", prompting the first regulations (e.g., the Indian Forest Act of 1878) to "regularize the forest policies in the region".[7] The British government aimed to fulfil its colonial needs and generate revenue from forest resources, leading to the large-scale harvesting of valuable timber species, including deodar (Cedrus deodara), chir pine (Pinus roxburghii), and khair (Acacia catechu), primarily for economic reasons and demand to meet the expansion of civil and military infrastructure in Punjab.[8]

II.ECONOMICAL AND ECOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE OF FORESTS IN BRITISH PERIOD

The people of the hill state reside in rural areas, and their livelihoods are highly dependent on forest resources in several ways.[9] They use non-timber forest products (NTFPs), such as medicinal herbs, wild foods, and other forest products, which were of high importance to their sustenance as well as their economic life.[10] For local people, forests remained central to the hill economy. Wood provided fuel for heating and cooking in the cold hills, as well as construction timber and thatch, and served as fodder for livestock. Non-timber forest products – leaves, grasses, herbs, fruits – supported cottage industries (basketry, fodder sales, medicines).[11] Ecologically, forests regulate watersheds, preventing soil erosion in steep terrain. Colonial observers in the late 19th century often noted that Himalayan deforestation (which had begun in the late 18th century under increasing demand) led to land degradation and floods. Even as the British sought to commercialise forests, they acknowledged the forests' crucial role as a watershed. Victorian foresters in the Himalayas pioneered early "conservancy" principles to sustain river flows for the Punjab plains.[12] Nevertheless, the advent of commercial forest exploitation during the British period tended to divert the rights of local communities, resulting in socio-economic issues as communities were deprived of adequate access to forest resources that were essential to their traditional livelihood.[13]

Historically, Hill agriculture in Himachal Pradesh has been characterised by terraced cultivation of cereals, pulses, and fruits. Forests often abut cultivated lands, and villagers customarily clear small patches for fields. However, large-scale deforestation for agriculture was limited by steep slopes. Under colonial land settlement, cultivators were given individual land titles (a change noted in many areas)[14], which sometimes encouraged clearing hill forests for cash crops (e.g., low-elevation tobacco, sugarcane). The Forest Department later imposed regulations to control illegal felling and swidden ("Shifting") cultivation.[15] Nevertheless, many villages continued to follow agro-pastoral lifeways, relying on forest fringe zones for fallows and pasture.[16]

Indian agriculture heavily relies on cattle, sheep, buffaloes, goats, and pigs for their essential nutrients and dairy products, thereby supporting the rural economy. These animals graze on stubble, straw, and nearby forests. Traditionally, farmers and herders kept livestock in a mixed farming and animal husbandry system, with herds moving over large distances during the dry season.[17]

Communal grazing was a long-standing practice in the Himalayan forests. Pasture lands (often called Dhar in local terms) were either open meadows or lightly wooded tracts used by shepherds and nomadic tribes (e.g., Gujjars, Gaddis).[18] Seasonal transhumance – moving flocks up to alpine pastures in summer – was common. The Colonial Forest Act of 1878 codified grazing rights, dividing forests into Reserved, Protected, and Village categories, and requiring permits or grazing taxes (called trini) where grazing was allowed.[19] Colonial officials often sought to limit free grazing to protect forest regeneration and promote its recovery. For example, after 1878, the British imposed a tax on Gujjars (nomadic pastoralists) who traditionally had open grazing rights, auctioning off seasonal pasturage. This disrupted centuries-old patterns and led to tensions: villagers now had to pay taxes or restrict stock to official pastures (Dhar) instead of freely grazing the forests.[20]

Forest products supported many household industries. Women collected leaf litter and twigs for cooking fuel; grass and leaf fodder fed cows and buffalo.[21] Bamboo and wicker were used for baskets and furniture. Bamboo forests are considered especially important, as many villagers earn income by making baskets from bamboo. These forests are mainly found in the Sewalik hills ranges.[22] Several high-altitude communities made woollen textiles (from sheep) and wood crafts (from deodar and fir), relying directly on forest resources.[23] In the hills, people primarily use wooden plows for farming and occasionally for commercial purposes.[24] The Forest Department's timber concessions and sal wood sales also impacted local supplies: once prime poles and pines were cut down for railway work, villagers found it difficult to obtain material for ploughs and roofs. (By the early 20th century, some officials noted "timber has become scarce" in populated districts.) Therefore, colonial forest exploitation had ripple effects on household industries.[25] Additionally, the houses in the hills were mostly made of wood, a fact also noted in the Kullu Valley during the Punjab Government's Forest Commission survey of 1937–38.[26]

III.PRE-BRITISH INDIGENOUS FOREST MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION PRACTICES IN HIMACHAL PRADESH DURING THE BRITISH RULE

Historically, Wood was extensively used for housing, furniture, agricultural tools, musical instruments, and numerous other handicrafts, as well as a primary source of energy, which significantly contributed to its growing importance. As civilization progressed, the need to conserve this critical natural resource became increasingly evident. Few communities recognized the need to preserve and utilize resources judiciously. Few such conservation efforts have been recorded from Rajasthan. The Bishnoi community from Rajasthan is renowned for its environmental stewardship. Arising from the teachings of its founder, Jambhoji (1451-1536), it gained a wider following in Rajasthan, especially in the arid regions of Bikaner and Jodhpur. By the 18th century, the sect had become so influential that rulers were forced to respect its sermons. We come across official orders, called parwana, issued by the kings of Jodhpur and Bikaner that prohibited the cutting of green trees. The

importance of the Khejri (Prosopis cineraria) tree, as evident from its depiction on the flag in the 17th century, continued into the following centuries, as felling this tree was prohibited.[27]

Before 1846, Himachal's forests were primarily managed by local communities and hill rajas according to traditional rules and regulations. In many villages, "Shamlat" or common lands—such as forests, pastures, or woodlands—were overseen by panchayats and village elders. Different castes and clans often held customary rights, including grazing, collection of fuelwood and fodder, and gathering medicinal herbs and minor forest products.[28] For instance, Rajputs and Brahmins might have controlled sacred groves,[29] while pastoral Gujjar and Gaddi tribes maintained seasonal grazing routes in the foothills and lower mountains.[30] Indigenous practices involved rotational shifting cultivation, regulated grazing, and protecting specific species (like deodar and oak) for temple rituals. Forest use was closely tied to rural life: villagers gathered firewood, fodder, and minor products as needed, and disposed of waste into the forests for grazing.[31] British officials later lamented that such practices were "primitive," but in reality, many forests were sustainably managed under local norms. The Rajas technically owned the forests of the hill states, but most daily management was conducted according to customary practices.[32] (In contrast, some areas, such as sacred groves or high pastures, remained outside formal administration.) The communities of Himachal had complete control over the forest ecosystem before colonization.[33] Overall, a semi-communal system existed: British reformers later dismissed these as "waste lands," but for local people, they represented essential community property.

Despite colonial pressures, traditional ecological knowledge persisted in the hills. Shepherds, pastoralists, and village elders maintained keen observations of animal behaviour. Their deep understanding of wild edible plants encompasses knowledge of the region's flora and fauna, as well as medicinal herbs and their applications.

IV.IMPORTANCE OF THE HIMALAYAN FORESTS DURING THE BRITISH PERIOD

Historian Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha's argument in their monumental work," This Fissured Land", highlights that in pre-colonial India, human-nature relations were harmonious, backed by cultural customs, religious precepts, and legal decrees.[34] However, the emergence of the colonial economy in the early 19th century led to a growing anthropocentric worldview and the European Industrial Revolution, causing a shortage of raw materials, particularly timber.[35] European nations began to rely more on their colonies, with India emerging as a significant supplier. India's forests became crucial to Britain's naval shipbuilding industry, resulting in a significant increase in timber procurement. By 1860, annual timber procurement had increased from 12.78 lakh tonnes in 1778 to 49.37 lakh tonnes, reflecting a sharp rise in timber extraction. The establishment of railways in India in 1853 worsened deforestation due to careless tree cutting. Colonial policies also encouraged agricultural expansion, resulting in extensive deforestation, forest fires, uncontrolled woodcutting, charcoal production, and the burning of seasonal grasslands. This systematically exploited India's forests to fulfil Britain's military, industrial, and infrastructure demands, causing widespread ecological damage.[36]

The British Government consolidated its rule over the Western Himalayas after 1846, absorbing Kangra, Kullu, and the smaller hill states into Punjab Province. Although local rajas were left in nominal charge of their territories (via sanads), "forests always remained in the charge of the British Government".[37] Early colonial forest policy focused on revenue and resource extraction. Well-wooded regions in Chamba, Kangra, and elsewhere were soon declared Reserved Forests for timber supply. British officials recognised the potential of these well-wooded hills for valuable timber and other forest products; they inherited this rich ecological legacy, prompting the first regulations (e.g., the Indian Forest Act of 1878) to "regularise the forest policies in the region".[38] The Forest Department therefore imposed a formal forest conservancy system across both British districts (e.g., Kangra, Simla) and princely states (e.g., Mandi, Kulu). Throughout the hill tracts, colonial officials carried out forest settlements (detailed surveys of forest rights and resources) and drew up Working Plans to control and exploit forest resources.[39] By the mid-19th century, a historian notes, "the Ordnance Department required timber…for shafts, wheels of carriages, platform planks, and sleepers, ammunition boxes, musket stocks, and plugs for Minie rifles." Vast tracts were surveyed and demarcated as state forests, excluding local use.[40]

The British valued Himalayan forests for multiple reasons. Economically, these woodlands supplied strategic timber (deodar, pine, and sal) for empire-building, including railway sleepers, telegraph poles, shipbuilding, and military stores.[41] For example, British ordnance officials explicitly recorded the need for cedar shafts, wheels, and ammunition boxes in the hills.[42] Forests also had strategic value: hill timber was essential for frontier posts and public works, and forested watersheds were later linked to river management. Intellectually and scientifically, colonial foresters (Brandis, Schlich, Ribbentrop, and others) saw India as a field for modern "scientific forestry". They promoted conservationist ideas (e.g., studying the links between deforestation and river flows).[43] Aesthetically, the forests formed the scenic backdrop of hill stations like Shimla. British officials and visitors admired Himalayan cedar groves for their cooling shade and picturesque beauty, making forested hillsides a prized part of colonial life— [Figure 1]. In sum, forests were seen as "valuable assets" – both for commercial exploitation and (later) for preserving imperial interests in climate, water, and prestige.[44]

Economic: Timber for railways, navies, and construction; forest produce (resin, gum, fuelwood) for revenue.
Strategic: Military needs, frontier posts, watershed protection.
Scientific: Development of forestry science and "conservation" discourse.
Aesthetic: Hill-station landscapes, hunting reserves, and climate.[45]

Figure: 【1】Figure: Himalayan cedar (deodar) forests, Himachal Pradesh.[46] The British prized such forests for timber and scenic value; by the 1850s, colonial foresters were already planning to "exploit and sustain the mountain forests" of the Himalaya. [47]

The table **[1]** outlines the duties and confirmed powers of designated forest officers in the states of Punjab and Shimla Hills.

Table: [1] Detailed Table of Forest Officers and Their Duties

Forest Officer	General Duties / Powers (as per the Notification & Act VII of 1878)
Conservator of Forests	The highest authority in a province or region manages forest operations, administration, revenue collection, and protection, with full powers under the Act.
Deputy Conservator of Forests	Oversees forest divisions, including settlement, law enforcement, and timber extraction, under the supervision of the Conservator.
Assistant Conservator of Forests	Helps the Deputy Conservator oversee forest ranges, checks illegal felling/grazing, and ensures implementation of silviculture, plantation, and timber accounts.
Sub-Assistant Conservator of Forests	Junior officer in charge of smaller areas or subdivisions. Assists in boundary protection, plantation work, and enforcing forest rules at the local level.
Forest Rangers	In charge of a Range (subdivision of a forest). Supervises Foresters and Guards. Conducts inspections, patrols, prevents encroachments, and seizes illegal timber.
Foresters	In charge of **Beats** (smaller units of a Range). Directly responsible for daily forest protection, reporting offences, and guiding plantation and nursery work.
Forest Guards	Lowest level officer. Patrols forests daily, prevents theft, grazing, fires, and encroachment. Reports offences immediately. Keeps watch and ward.

Source: - Notification No. 533 F issued by The Lieutenant Governor of Punjab on December 28, 1879, under Section 75 of Act VII of 1878 (The Indian Forest Act), Bundle No. 20, File No. 40, regarding the enforcement of Forest Rules in Punjab Hill State, Office of the Deputy Commissioner Kangra, 1911. (H.P. State Archive Shimla). (See also) The Indian Forest Act of 1878, Punjab Forest Manual-1, 1916, Dated 12th July, 1956, Chief Conservator of Forest, Punjab, Shimla.

V.CONCLUSION

Forest played an important role in Himachal Pradesh during the British period and present due to its utilization of resources which provide in the socio-economic development in Hilly states. The demonstration and exploitation of forest resources, results degradation of forest and wildlife in the hilly state. Even today the forest utilizations are the symbol of progress in economic condition of Govt. and it's played an important role and have contributed to the further development of hilly state. British govt. also introduced many policies in forest reservoir in Himachal Pradesh.

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