
**The British Forest Policy and its Impact on Indigenous
Lepcha Community in Darjeeling Hills
(1835-1947)**

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on the British forest policy and its impact on the life of the Lepcha community, who were the aboriginals in the Darjeeling hilly region. This study also explores how the colonial forest laws destroyed the dense forests of Darjeeling hills and how this region's fragile ecosystem and demography have changed. The main motives of the British forest policy were revenue maximization and the commercialization of reserved forests in the name of scientific forestry. In the Darjeeling Himalayas, the main factors of deforestation were the expansion of tea plantations, urbanization, development of railways, forest-based industries, and demographic changes. The Lepcha people were predominantly associated with forests for their livelihoods, and they had built a deep relationship with nature and the environment. Actually, the forest played an important role in the material and social life of the Lepchas. Hunting-gathering and shifting cultivation were the sole of their livelihood. However, under the colonial forest management system, the Lepcha people had lost their traditional forest rights. Gradually, the Lepchas were outnumbered by the migrant Nepali tea labour due to the rapid expansion of tea gardens in Darjeeling hills. The Lepcha people lost their traditional livelihoods (shifting cultivation) in their own land, and they were moved forcefully to the southwestern part of the hills to accept settled cultivation.*

Keywords: *Darjeeling, Deforestation, Forest policy, Lepchas, Consequences etc.*

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Introduction

The introduction of colonial forestry marked a watershed in Indian forest history. The history of forest management in Darjeeling was directly related to the growth and development of

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forest administration and conservation under the British government of India (Joshep, 2010, p. 31). The intention and implementation process of the British Forest Policy in Darjeeling was not different from other parts of British India, though this region had its own variations and characteristics of natural forests. Behind the development of the forest management system in British India, the actual motive was the intensification of colonial control of the various resources all over the country. Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha, in their book 'This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India' have pointed out that 'Colonialism's most tangible outcome, some of whose effects persists to this day, is related to its global control of resources' (Gadgil&Guha,1992, p. 116). After the consolidation of political power in most parts of India, the colonizers focused on the virgin forest resources of India and started the intervention in the ecological fabric of India. In the decade of 1860, Britain had emerged as a world-leading power in the destruction of forests, not just her forests but also the forests of Ireland and South Africa, to collect timber for shipbuilding, iron-smelting, and farming purposes (Gadgil & Guha, 1992, p. 118). For the construction of the Royal Navy, a large number of valuable timbers were exported to England from British India, and Darjeeling Sal was one of the most valuable timbers for export.

I

In the early years of British rule, there was no organized forest department in British India, and they had no interest in preserving the forests. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, the British government, with the help of Germany, which was the leading forest management country, had focused on scientific forestry in Britain and colonial India. In 1864, the Imperial Forest Department was established under an inspector general of forests and started the era of scientific forestry in British India. Dietrich Brandis, the German Botanist, was appointed as the first inspector general of forests. The British government felt the need for a comprehensive and organized forest act for the whole of British India. Under the Imperial Forest Department, the first Indian Forest Act was passed in 1865. The Imperial Forest Act of 1865 was the first attempt to assert the state monopoly over forests. By this forest act, the British government had the right to declare any land covered with trees, jungles, or brushwood as a reserved forest or government forest. The local government had the power to make rules and regulations for the management and conservation of forests, and they also had the right to give punishment to those who disobeyed the laws (Stebbing, 1926, Reprinted 1985). In 1878, the Second Indian Forest Act was passed, and it was a comprehensive version of the 1865 Forest Act. Under this act, the Indian forest was first time classified into three categories: Reserved forests, Protected forests, and Unclassed forests or Village forests (Majumdar, 2006, pp. 124-125). In the reserved forests, the government had the full right to protect and control the forests, and it was fully restricted for the locals. Trespassing, felling trees, hunting, and fishing were also rigidly prohibited in the reserved

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forests. In the protected forests, where the locals could collect the essential materials. Otherwise, the restrictions were the same as in reserved forests. The local government had the right to declare any protected forest as a reserved forest. In village forests, the local community had the right to collect timber or other forest products for their daily livelihood, and they also had the responsibility to protect and improve the forests. Based on Dr. Voelcker's report in 1894, the National Forest policy was passed. The sole object of this policy was the management of forests for the general well-being of the country. By this policy, the main theme or motive was declared- 'The maintenance of adequate forests is dictated primarily for the preservation of the climatic and physical conditions of the country and secondly to fulfill the needs of the people' (Hundred Years of Indian Forestry, 1961). On the other hand, as a source of revenue, the valuable timber of the reserved forests should be managed for commercial purposes. The last British Indian Forest Act in 1927 was the amendment of the 1878 Forest Act. The British government always said that the forest policy aimed to be in line with the national interest, but in the actual scenario, it was neither for the national interest nor for public welfare; its main motive was the commercialization of forests and earning maximum revenue (Majumdar, 2006, p.135).

II

In the nineteenth century, Britain started the various institutions for the study of scientific forestry. The British foresters received knowledge in educational institutions only through systematic methodological approaches that were factual or rational and other forms of learning methods of education were neglected. Actually, they had no ground knowledge about the Indian tribal people and their livelihood. On the other hand, the tribal people were predominantly associated with forests from generation to generation, and they had more experience with the forests. The tribal people lived near forest areas, and they mostly depended on forest products such as food, firewood, wood, leaves, honey, etc. for their daily livelihood. The Britishers always thought that the tribal people were primitive and uncivilized wild groups (H. Richard, Vinita & Satpal edit. 1998, p.892). They believed that the tribal had no knowledge and were bound by superstitions because they had no education. The Britishers said that they had the responsibility to civilize and bring the tribal people into the light of modernity. The British writers also did the same thing. In their writings, they blindly skipped the tribal culture and mentioned them as objects. Some colonial writers tried to present an impartial view of the tribal people in their writings, but most writers considered the tribal as uncivilized and barbarous (Skaria, 1999). In the name of development, the British government started the so-called forest management and conservation, which fully promoted and consolidated British proprietary rights in this region. Actually, the British forest policy in India disturbed the age-old system of tribal communities in hills as well as plains.

The Lepchas are the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim and the hilly region of Darjeeling district (Hunter, 1876, p. 31). The Lepchas call themselves 'Rong', which means 'Son of the

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snowy peak or Son of the God.’ The term Lepcha was given by the Nepalis, which means the people of vile speech (O’Malley,1907, p. 45). The Lepchas are the first known occupiers of this region, and they call this region ‘Mayel Lyang’ or ‘Ney Maye’, which means garden of Eden or paradise (Ghosal, 1990). According to Campbell “Lepchas are the most interesting people and I believe the undoubted origins of the mountain forests surrounding Darjeeling” (A. Campbell, 1840, p. 379). They worshiped all the peaks, trees, rivers, and lakes as God or Goddesses and believed Kanchanjunga was the divine peak, and they originated from the snow of this mountain (Roy, 2012, p. 19). According to the Lepcha creed, there were some places on the hills that were considered forbidden and sacred. If such an area is obstructed by deforestation, God becomes angry, resulting in natural calamities as a curse and punishment for humans (Das, 1978, p. 190). There was no cast distinction in the Lepcha community, they lived together, and inter-caste marriage was prevalent. The Lepchas had their own language and rich culture. Many tribes in the Himalayan region had their own language but did not have their language script. The Lepchas had their own language script, which was called Lepcha script; the British recognized the Lepcha language as the official language from the time they set up the administrative structure in Darjeeling, and it continued till 1911 CE (Debnath, 2014, p. 151). The dwelling houses of the Lepchas were rectangular and equiangular, i.e., equal in length and width. In the Lepcha language, the houses are called ‘Lee.’ Houses were generally built with thatched roofs on bamboo poles and frameworks four to five feet high. In nature, they are polite and humorous, frank, obliging, and amiable. The Lepchas were mainly hunter-gatherers, and they had also practiced cultivation, but they were poorer cultivators than the Nepalis. The traditional cultivation method that they followed was shifting cultivation. The Lepcha called this slash-and-burn method of cultivation – ‘Sadeum suk’ or ‘Sadeum.’ In the Lepcha language, ‘Sadeum’ means cutting off the jungle, and Suk means burning up. By this method, they cultivated mainly dry rice, millet, maize, and buckwheat. In this method, in one place, they cultivated for a few years, and for a new site, they moved again.

III

Forests played an important role in the material life of the Lepchas. Actually, the necessity of forests was in every stage of the life of Lepchas, such as raw materials for house construction and hunting equipment, domestic baskets and containers, furniture, agricultural tools, etc. They have also collected firewood, fruits, and honey from the forests. A variety of bamboo groves were found in abundance in the Darjeeling forests and were important in the daily life of the Lepchas. A long bamboo flute with four or six burnt holes was the only musical instrument they used. The high-altitude areas in the forests were used as pasture for cattle grazing. From childhood, the Lepcha children were familiar with forest ecology because they had spent most of their time cattle grazing in the forests. They have collected the edible fruits and roots for medicinal purposes. The Lepchas are used to collect the yeast from the forests

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used in millet fermentation (Ghosal, 1990, p. 65). They had good knowledge of fishing, and they used several methods for fishing. For the advantages of hunting, they had lived in the hilly region of the district. As one of the sources of livelihood, the Lepchas also reared various animals like cows, pigs, sheep, goats, buffaloes, etc (Das,1978, pp.64). They were expert in hunting and, by using bows and arrows, hunted small mammals like birds, rodents, monkeys, etc. The Lepchas were very fond of liquor and they collected flowers and grains to prepare a kind of liquor. They drank from small wooden cups, made from knots of maple or other woods, which were very beautiful. The knots from which the cups were made were produced from the roots of oaks, maples, and other mountain trees. The Lepchas were able to make full use of all resources for daily livelihood due to their easy access to the forests before the Forest Acts. (Ghosal, 1990, pp.65).

IV

One important aspect of British forest policy was that it sought to introduce the element of exclusion even to the previously owned communitarian land of the district if it was found to be of any imperial use (Joshep, 2010, p. 213). On the other hand, forests were considered commercially exploitable for timber, and it was one of the ways to establish and consolidate the government's proprietary rights in the Darjeeling district. The local government could declare any forest land or wasteland as government property and even as a Reserved Forest. Actually, commercialization was the primary consideration for declaring any forest as a reserved forest under the Forest Acts. The Forest Act of 1865, for the first time, regulated the collection of forest produce by forest dwellers. The later forest laws increased the control over forests and imposed more restrictions on the forest dwellers to use the forest produce. Actually, by the Forest Act, the government had the absolute rights of ownership in the reserved forests, and the forest produce could not be used by the forest dwellers unless specifically permitted by granting privileges and not as a matter of rights. Thus, the social and traditional practices of the indigenous people, like the Lepcha people, were restrained by the forest laws. The Forest Act of 1865 and the Cattle Trespass Act of 1871 prohibited the grazing of cattle in the reserved forests, and the British government-imposed restrictions and taxation on cattle grazing in reserved forests of the Darjeeling district. Any person grazing his cattle on the reserved forests might be made to pay grazing tax. The revenue from the grazing tax has increased day by day in this region, such as in the year 1881-1882 was Rs 5811, and in 1882-1883, has become Rs 6619. The Lepcha people were mostly affected by this prohibition of cattle grazing because cattle pasturing was one of the main sources of their livelihood. Fishing was an important source of livelihood for the Lepchas but was prohibited by the British Forest Acts. The Lepcha were originally hunters who turned to agriculture, as a result of British forest policy. After the shifting cultivation was prohibited by the government act, Lepchas were forced to learn permanent cultivation methods from the Nepalese by cutting trenches on the hill and paralleling the land. The British government allowed various

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professional contractors to collect forest products in the hill forests, and as a result, they exploited the forests without considering its consequences. Due to the various laws, the Lepcha people of Darjeeling faced various problems, and they were deprived of using the forest resources.

Before the reservation of Darjeeling forests, the Lepchas had freely used the forest resources, and they thought that the forests were their personal property. After declaring the Darjeeling Forest as reserved forests by the Forest Act, the Lepchas had to leave the forests where they had lived from time immemorial. The British government gave the order to the Lepchas to leave the reserved forests of Darjeeling, and they went to the southwestern part of the district forcefully. Actually, they were made refugees from Darjeeling's hilly region for forest conservation, prohibited shifting cultivation, rapidly increasing tea cultivation, railway expansion, and the arrival of outsiders. After 1850, the number of tea gardens and their areas increased rapidly in Darjeeling hills. In 1866, there were 39 tea gardens with 10,000 acres in the Darjeeling district, but in 1874, the number of gardens had increased to 113 with 18888 acres areas (O'Malley, Reprinted 1985, p. 74). Due to the construction of roads, the expansion of railways, and the rapid growth of tea plantations, large numbers of Nepalese labourers were brought from Nepal through the joint efforts of the government and tea plantation owners. Also, the demography of this region has changed. During the initial stage of British occupation in Darjeeling, the Lepchas were two-thirds of the total population, but in 1941, the number decreased to 4.6 percent. On the other hand, the numbers of Nepali and Bhutia increased by 90 percent and 5.4 percent, respectively. The forest reservation had played an important role in reducing their numbers. With the support of the British government, the outsiders settled, and they started the cultivation. the indigenous Lepchas lost their lands and moved to the southwestern part of the district. In the Kalimpong subdivision, for the rapid expansion of tea gardens, a full village was resettled to the northern side of Kalimpong, where 34 houses were presented, including 7 Lepcha houses. Also, in the year 1920, for the upgradation of Kalimpong as a hill station, the Lepcha tenants were evacuated and resettled. For this purpose, the government proposed the deforestation of a 999-acre area in the Lolegaon reserved forest block of the Darjeeling district. Many Lepcha people had prepared walking sticks from the roots, and three or four feet of the stem of a cane species called *Calamus Mortunus Mulin* for their source of livelihood. This cane species was used for the district's suspension bridges. Its consumption by the Lepchas was brought under the control of the forest department. The collection of wax and lac from the forests was also prohibited by issuing licenses. The Lepchas who went out to hunt wild animals for food or religious purposes were treated as poachers or criminals by the new forest laws, whereas European natives, tea estate managers, and soldiers were free to do so. The so-called colonial scientific forestry occurred through the mass clearing of natural mixed vegetation and burning of savanna grass in the forests, and it had an impact on the daily pattern livelihood of the Lepchas.

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Conclusion

The rapid growth of tea plantations, expansion of railways, construction of roads, and indiscriminate felling of trees for commercial purposes, on the one hand, affected the livelihood of indigenous people of the forest, such as the Lepchas and, on the other hand, disturbed the ecological balance of Darjeeling hills. The control of the British government over the minor forest products in Darjeeling generated huge profits for the government at the cost of tribal forest dwellers like the Lepchas, and the development program designed for their benefit only succeeded in reinforcing the process of land alienation and displacement of the existence tribal economy. The British forest policy in the Darjeeling hills not only disrupted the sustainable economy and livelihood pattern of the Lepchas but also negatively affected their ethos, culture, and political identity.

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