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The Forest and the Fence: Colonial Control and the Remaking of Sahariya Identity in Bundelkhand

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Abstract*:This paper examines the impact of colonial forest policies on the socio-economic life and identity of the Sahariya tribe of Bundelkhand, with particular focus on the regions of Lalitpur and Jhansi during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historically dependent on forest-based subsistence practices such as hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation, specially the slash-and-burn technique known as* dhaiya, t*he Sahariyas had a close and autonomous relationship with their environment. The advent of British colonial rule, however, fundamentally altered this relationship through the introduction of forest reservations, restrictive land policies, and legal frameworks such as the Indian Forest Acts and the Criminal Tribes Act.Drawing on colonial gazetteers, census reports, ethnographic accounts, and official forest records, this study traces how forest regulation led to the criminalisation of customary practices, occupational displacement, and loss of access to ancestral lands. It argues that these policies not only undermined the Sahariyas economic base but also initiated a process of spatial dispersal and social reclassification. By the 1931 Census, the Sahariyas had largely transitioned from forest-dependent subsistence to wage labour and had become increasingly integrated into the Hindu caste order, resulting in the erosion of their tribal distinctiveness.*
Keywords: *Colonial Forest Policy, Sahariya Tribe, Identity Transformation, Tribal Marginalisation.*

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Introduction

The Sahariya tribe, classified among the Particularly Vulnerable Scheduled Tribes of India, has long inhabited the forested landscapes of Bundelkhand, particularly in the regions of Lalitpur and Jhansi. Traditionally reliant on hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation, most notably the slash-and-burn technique known as *dhaiya,* the Sahariyas maintained a subsistence economy deeply embedded in the forest ecosystem. However, the onset of British colonial rule in the nineteenth century initiated a profound transformation of their socio-economic world. Through a combination of forest reservation policies, land alienation, and repressive legal frameworks such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, the colonial state

sought to reconfigure both the physical environment and the tribal communities who inhabited it.

This paper investigates the colonial restructuring of Sahariya life, focusing on the complex interplay between forest policy, occupational displacement, and identity reformation. Drawing on an extensive range of primary sources, including district gazetteers (Jhansi, 1909; Eastern States, 1907), ethnographic accounts such as W. Crooke's *Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896), census records, and official forest reports, it reconstructs the shifts in the Sahariya's economic practices, spatial organization, and social classification under colonialism between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

According to W. Crooke, the Sahariyas are a Dravidian-origin tribe concentrated in Lalitpur and the adjacent regions of Bundelkhand. Their name is sometimes linked with the *Savaras*, a generic term for Central Indian forest tribes mentioned in Sanskrit texts, including races like Kols, Mundas, Kurkus, Bhils, Bhuiyas and their kinsfolk. Another name for these Sahariyas of Bundelkhand is *Rawat*, which comes from the Sanskrit word *Raja-putra* or "King's son", or *Raja-duta* or "King's messenger".[1] Sahariyas in the 1881 census appeared as 'Aboriginals', 'Animist' in 1901, 1911 and 1921, thereafter as a 'tribal.' In 1901, the Sahariyas were described as a quiet and primitive tribe. Crooke lists a number of exogamous gotras, among them are Sirausiya, Kodoriya, Thegotiya, Sanauliya, Chakardiya, and others, suggesting a complex internal social organisation with potential totemic origins. [2]

Traditionally, the Sahariyas were forest dwellers engaged in hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation. A note on Sahariyas by A.C. Turner (based on the investigations conducted by N.B. Bonarjee, Esq. ICS) reveals that the Sahariyas in the past were a *jungle* tribe. It states, "The *jungle* is their home and provides them directly or indirectly with their subsistence."[3] They occupied marginal lands on forest edges, and their economy depended on forest produce such as gum, tendu leaves, mahua, minor forest timber and other forest resources. Aitkenson's account in 1874 described them as follows:

The Sahariya, who, like the gods, dwell in the jungles of the district, are the aborigines… Closely allied to Gonds in manners and appearance, the Sahariyas or Singhariyas are found scattered all over the district, and more especially in the thickly wooded tracts, to the number of upwards of 10,000. They are supposed to be aborigines connected with the Kúrkús of the Central Provinces, and as regards appearance, they have

been not inaptly described as resembling monkeys rather than men. They subsist chiefly by cutting grass and firewood, and also on the produce of the jungles.[4]

The Sahariyas from time immemorial subsisted on *dhaiya* or *dhaya* cultivation, a type of shifting cultivation that involved the slash-and-burn agricultural technique. Aitkenson argues that "Daya cultivation is that made by wandering bands of the Sahariya tribe, who were formerly accustomed to "squat" at will in the forest, and clearing a site, raising crops of millet and oil-seed, and then decamping to another place when the first had been exhausted."[5]

The advent of colonial rule in Bundelkhand, however, saw the beginning of forest reservation, which gave primacy to Scientific management and conservation of forest. Aitkenson's account of 1874 and Jhansi Gazetteer of 1909 record early concerns regarding deforestation in the region of Lalitpur due to "wasteful system of *dhaiya* cultivation". Seen as ecologically destructive by the colonial foresters, the cultivation came under the target for restriction and was eventually prohibited. While an exact date of the official ban is unclear, restrictions against *dhaiya* cultivation appear to have become prominent in the 1860s, with forest reservation taking institutional shape through surveys and boundary marking initiated by officers like T. Webber and later Major G. F. Pearson. An estimated 24,927 acres in Jhansi and 90,694 acres in Lalitpur were initially declared as reserved forest. By 1909, total forest cover in the district of Jhansi (which by this time also included Lalitpur) constituted 111,213 acres, out of which 87,687.56 acres were declared reserved and 2,729 acres as protected forest.[6]

The Eastern States Gazetteer (1907) notes similar administrative patterns in the princely state of Orchha, where Sahariyas formed the principal jungle tribe. The forest was divided into three parts. First class forest contained trees covered with "*sagon, achur, tendu,* etc"; second class included "*khair, siras, aomla,* etc"; and third class forest "*chhihula, salai,* etc." The forest department, under the supervision of the State forest officer, who was subordinate to the revenue department, controlled the forest. They appointed rangers and guards in every tehsil who patrolled the forest and checked intrusions. The forests were further separated from the surrounding country by a treeless zone, with most boundaries marked by rivers and nalas. The state allowed no grazing or cutting of trees in these areas, although in times of scarcity, fruits and wild edibles could be gathered.[7]

For the Sahariyas, historically reliant on the forest for subsistence through hunting, gathering, woodcutting, and *dhaiya* cultivation, such policies resulted in a direct and devastating economic blow. The conversion of forests into reserved or protected government

lands criminalised practices that were once integral to their way of life. An important point to note here is that most of these guards employed by the forest department came primarily from the Sahariya community. They worked for the forest department and were paid at the value of "two annas per day for a man, 1 anna 6 pies for a woman, one anna for a child".[8] Aitkenson notes that before the process of forest reservation began and government rights in the forest were recognised, Sahariyas remained their "uncontrolled masters". The *jungle* tribe was thus reduced to the status of a *jungle* guard by the Colonial forest administrators, making them dependent on the colonial masters for survival and subsistence. The loss of customary rights and the reclassification of forest land as government property under the Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 contributed significantly to the marginalisation of the Sahariyas. Apart from working as guards, they were also employed by the forest department in the collection of minor forest produce such as lac, gum, honey, catechu, etc. Further, the right to gather lac and gum was sold off, and Sahariyas were employed by contractors to gather them, reducing them to the position of labour in their own territory.[9]

This shift also had ideological and legal implications; the colonial state began to perceive forest-dwelling communities such as the Sahariyas not merely as marginal populations but as inherently deviant, casting them within a framework of surveillance and control. As noted by W. Crooke, even in the absence of widespread coercive interventions by the late nineteenth century, the Sahariyas were broadly categorised as a "criminal tribe", a label rooted less in empirical criminality and more in colonial anxieties about mobility, autonomy, and non-conformity to settled agrarian norms. The association of the Sahariyas with activities such as petty theft, burglary and occasional forest-related infractions became grounds for their inclusion under the shadow of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. Although the Sahariyas were not initially subjected to the full provisions of the act.[10] Nevertheless, the stigma contributed to their marginalisation and justified surveillance. In doing so, the colonial state transformed a forest-dependent tribal community into an object of bureaucratic suspicion, encoding marginality into law and official record.

As forest access became restricted, many Sahariyas were compelled to leave their ancestral homes and migrate to non-forested villages nearby in search of employment. The 1931 Census report compiled by A.C. Turner offers a detailed ethnographic and socio-economic account of the Sahariyas of Lalitpur, revealing a community in the midst of profound transformation. Once a forest-dwelling tribe with an economy and culture intimately tied to the jungle, the Sahariyas had, by 1931, already experienced considerable

dislocation and cultural reorientation as a result of their growing interaction with settled Hindu society. The 1931 census remarks that the forest was formerly their home and source of livelihood, directly through forest produce and indirectly via associated practices such as shifting cultivation. However, by the time of the census, this model of existence had become increasingly untenable.

Occupationally, the community had shifted from a subsistence model based on the forest to one increasingly reliant on casual labour. In forested areas, woodcutting remained a dominant occupation, but in non-forested regions deprived of secure access to forest land, they were forced to rely increasingly on wage labour, whether in agricultural fields, stone quarries, or as casual workers for upper-caste landlords. Regular cultivation was relatively rare, with only 800 men and 34 women reported as primarily dependent on it, while a much larger number, around 3,250 males and 3,409 females, engaged in field labour or woodcutting. *Dhaiya* cultivation, a slash-and-burn technique practised on uncultivated and often unregistered forest land, continued as a subsistence strategy but was already under threat due to forest reservation laws prohibiting such activities on government land.[11] This shift marked a structural dispossession, reducing a self-sufficient tribal community into a landless and dependent labouring class.

One of the most striking changes noted is the tribe's dispersal. The 1931 census report by A.C. Turner notes that:

Saheriyas are no longer a collected tribe. They were at this census found in 365 villages scattered over all seven parganas of the Lalitpur Subdivision, and a few were enumerated as far north as Jalaun district. They are now to be found not only in forest tracts but scattered throughout areas where no forest exists at all, and many reside in Lalitpur municipality itself… This scattering of the tribe is important because it has increased the contact with Hindu culture and greatly increased the rapidity of Hinduization. It is due to some extent to deforestation and to the preservation of Government forests.[12]

No longer confined to forest tracts, the Sahariyas were recorded in 365 villages across all seven *parganas* of Lalitpur Subdivision, and even in areas devoid of forests, including towns like Lalitpur municipality. This wide and scattered distribution, with Sahariyas typically residing in small clusters of 10-12 homes within multi-caste villages, marks a significant departure from their previous collective tribal settlement patterns in the forested region of Bundelkhand. This dispersal not only dismantled their collective habitation patterns but also subjected them to sustained contact with settled caste Hindu society, thus also impacting their

social organisation. In the absence of strong communal cohesion and autonomous spatial boundaries, the Sahariyas gradually underwent Hinduisation. As Turner observed, by 1931, their marriage and death rites had begun to mirror those of lower-caste Hindus, and they had come to identify themselves within the Hindu social order, occupying a position above Dalits like Chamars and Bhangis but below castes such as Gonds and Dhimars.

This shift marked not just cultural assimilation but also the erosion of tribal distinctiveness. The Sahariyas were no longer understood by outsiders or increasingly by themselves as a *tribe* in the sociological sense, but rather as a "low caste" within Hindu society. Their identity as a tribal group, once rooted in distinct economic practices, belief systems, and forest-based modes of life, was being redefined in caste terms, with all the accompanying implications of hierarchy, stigma, and social fixity.

The economic marginalisation and social assimilation of the Sahariyas by 1931 cannot be seen in isolation from the colonial forest regime. Forest laws not only dispossessed them of their economic base but also destabilised the very spatial and cultural foundations of tribal life. The resulting dispersal and dependency rendered the Sahariyas vulnerable to the homogenising forces of Hindu society, leading to a loss of tribal autonomy and the emergence of a subordinated caste identity. This historical moment, captured by the 1931 Census, reflects a broader colonial dynamic in which forest policy served not only as a tool of economic control but also as a mechanism of social reordering.

The historical trajectory of the Sahariyas under colonial rule illustrates the complex interplay between environmental governance, economic restructuring, and cultural assimilation. What began as a regulation of forest resources gradually evolved into a systematic displacement of indigenous lifeways, wherein the Sahariyas were divested of their customary rights and repositioned as criminalised, caste-like labouring subjects within the colonial economy. The prohibition of *dhaiya* cultivation and the reclassification of forests not only disrupted their means of subsistence but also undermined their identity as a distinct tribal community. Colonial forest policies, framed through the language of scientific management and conservation, rendered Sahariya practices illegible and illegitimate, recasting mobility, shifting cultivation, and forest dependence as signs of backwardness and disorder. Simultaneously, revenue imperatives and labour demands encouraged their gradual incorporation into agrarian and extractive economies as marginal, precarious workers. This transformation was reinforced through ethnographic classification, legal surveillance, and

administrative discourse, which increasingly represented the Sahariyas as socially deviant and economically unproductive, thereby justifying further intervention and control.

Conclusion

The Sahariya's dispersal into non-forested areas and absorption into the Hindu social order mark the culmination of this process, a silent yet powerful form of colonial violence that reconfigured their place within the socio-political fabric of Bundelkhand. This was not merely a loss of land or livelihood but a deeper erosion of collective memory, customary authority, and ecological knowledge. In recognising the historical specificity of their experience, this study not only uncovers the localised impact of imperial policy but also contributes to a broader understanding of how colonialism redefined the very meaning of community, territory, and identity in forested regions of India, producing enduring hierarchies that continue to shape postcolonial governance and tribal marginality.

Notes an References

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