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Article

Terrain of Conflict: Indigenous Outlook and Colonial Involvement in the Kumaon Tarai and Bhabar Landscape

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the intricate interactions and interpretations of the concept of landscape within the Tarai and Bhabar regions of Kumaon. It presents this landscape as a contested space, shaped by varying perspectives of the indigenous populations and colonial authorities. Significantly, it investigates the disruptions caused by colonial interventions, wherein the colonial state imposed a distinct vision of the landscape. This mental restructuring was executed through various policies, affecting a transformative impact on the local worldview. In this regard, colonialists acted as 'development experts', despite their overt aims being different. They sought to control the terrain by constraining the activities of local people, often perceived as wasteful or ignorant. The displacement of local knowledge, rooted in practical experience, in favour of external philosophical or ideological schemes illustrates a fundamental conflict. At the core of this exploration is the contrast between the perspectives of residents and colonial ideologies, each attributing disparate values to the landscape. Ultimately, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between indigenous perceptions and colonial impositions in shaping the cultural and historical landscape of the region.

Keywords: Nature, Cultural Landscape, Colonial intervention, Tarai and Bhabar Regions

1. INTRODUCTION

Until the late 19th century, the Tarai and Bhabar regions of Kumaon were regarded as entirely separate ecological zones within the geography of North India. The area was characterised by deep forests, wetlands, and grasslands and served as a habitat for numerous tigers and malarial mosquitos, rendering it unsuitable for human habitation. The Tarai-Bhabar tract was described in the writings of several European explorers who explored the region in the early 19th century. Reginald Heber was one such traveller. In the winter of 1824-25, Reginald Heber traversed the Tarai en route to Almora during his trip to northern India. Upon transitioning from Rohilkhand to Tarai, he was astonished by the region's agricultural deficiency. The region was enveloped in marshes and elevated meadows. Many of the communities were abandoned. Access was permitted solely with the use of an elephant or a horse. It served as a habitat for tigers, lions, and mosquitoes, which were harmful to life. During the wet season, the terrain becomes increasingly perilous, rendering crossing unthinkable. In his narrative, he recounts how, during challenging periods, even the animals abandoned that region (Heber, 1985, pp. 49-157). He states,

"I asked Mr Boulderson (the Collector of Moradabad) if it were true that the monkeysforsook these woods

> *during the unwholesome months. He answered that not only the monkeysbut everything which had the breath of life instinctively deserts them from the beginning of April to October. The tigers go up to the hills, the antelopes and wild dogs make incursions into the cultivated plain, and those persons, such as Dak-bearers or military officers,who are obliged to traverse the forests in the intervening months, agree that not so much as a bird can be heard or seen in the frightful solitude"* (Heber, 1985, p.157).

Even Jim Corbett, the former game hunter who later became a conservationist, described this region as an exotic place with tigers and leopards as well as a hazardous environment. Although the Tarai-Bhabar tract was described in a number of ways both before and after Corbett as an exotic region, the area has always had a small but important human population, comprising the Indigenes – Tharus and Buxas (Strahorn, 2009, p. 9). In addition, the region attracted seasonal migrants, particularly nomadic herders like the Gaddis, Gujjars, and Bhotias, who found pasture here during the winter months. This intersection of indigenous resilience and seasonal migration challenges the narrative of the Tarai as an untouched wilderness, underscoring its significance as a site of dynamic human-environment interactions.

Though this region of the sub-Himalayan tract has long been home to various tribes over the course of millennia, the Tharus and Buxas are traditionally recognised as the original settlers and are regarded as the autochthons of this submontane zone. For these indigenous groups, who adeptly navigated and adapted to the region's challenging and unpredictable environment, the region was more than a mere territory—it was their ancestral homeland. This stands in stark contrast to the perspective of the plains dwellers, who historically referred to the area as Mar-Land, viewing it as a forbidding or inhospitable space. While the Tharus live primarily in the Tarai portions of the Nainital districts in Kumaon, the Buxas live in both the Tarai and the Bhabar areas and foothills of the Nainital district (Hasan, 1979, p. 2). The Tharus are spread throughout the Tarai Region, from Gola or Kichha in the west (Nainital district) to the Kosi in the east (Bengal), but their headquarters are supposed to be in Sitarganj and Khatima tahsils in Nainital district (Nesfield, 1885, p.115). Although the Buxas are spread across the long stretch of Bhabar in four districts: Nainital, Bijnor, Pauri Garhwal, and Dehradun, the majority of them live in the Tarai area of Nainital (Hasan, 1979, p. 24). The Western Tarai, which includes the blocks of Gadarpur, Bajpur, Kashipur, and Ramnagar, is considered the '*Buxas*' primary territory (Nevill, 1932, p. 106).

The subsistence of Tharus and Buxas, who inhabited the Tarai and Bhabar regions, largely depended on foraging as their primary means of livelihood. The cultivation of grain was infrequent, and when practised, it involved a form of slash-and-burn agriculture. To clear ground for cultivation, they would burn a part of the forest and then cultivate the garden for two or three years; when the soil was depleted, they would repeat the process elsewhere (Bedi, 1984, p. 17). In order to ensure a consistent supply of water for irrigating this field, they also built earthen dams and bunds across several streams. Apart from this primitive agriculture, they also practised hunting, fishing, and gathering. They collected forest fruits and vegetables, grazed cattle and buffaloes, produced ghee, and raised pigs, poultry, and goats. The main game animals they hunted were wild boar, deer, and antelope, while porcupines, hares, and river tortoises were also part of their diet. In times of scarcity, they resorted to consuming field rats. To preserve beef, they sun-dried it. Fishing was a crucial activity, utilising methods such as hook and line, nets, and funnel-shaped baskets. They captured and domesticated wild elephants for the Rajah of Balrampur and other local nobility. Similar foraging patterns were followed by the Tharu and Boksas, though the latter were particularly noted for flooding their fields to cultivate rice (Crook, 1975, pp. 401-2). Basically their survival was closely tied to the natural resources of their environment, reflecting a deep connection to the land and its ecosystems.

Nevertheless, the Tharus and Buxas were not the only nomadic groups in the region. Inhabitants from elevated sub-Himalayan districts, like the Bhotiyas, travelled to the region during the winter months to graze their cattle. These pastoralists established several permanent and temporary settlements in the bhabar known as "*khattas*" (Hasan, 1979, p. 9). The Gujjars, an unclassified Muslim pastoral clan, also relocated between the hills and the Tarai Bhabar Government Estate. (Rawat 1998) Additionally, people from Rohilkhand and Punjab migrated to the Tarai in pursuit of agricultural land. SD Pant delineates the extensive seasonal migration to the Tarai-Bhabar regions during winter. He stated that four different classes among the Kumaonis migrated to this region: Ghamtappas, or transient dwellers; nomadic professional cow breeders, or ghee producers; traders; and agriculturists (Pant, 1935, p. 178). This demonstrates that, for these indigenous inhabitants of the Tarai and Bhabar regions of Kumaon, the landscape formed an integral part of their lifeworld, deeply intertwined

with their socio-economic practices, which catered to the natural environment—land, rivers, and forests. Through these daily activities, they imbued the landscape with cultural and economic significance. However, the colonial state imposed its own vision of the landscape, reshaping it according to its objectives. Through various policies, the colonial administration altered the indigenous relationship with the land, disrupting their traditional ways of life.

2. SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES: A NEW VIEW OF THE LAND

Prior to the advent of British colonial rule, the economic framework of the region was not solely dependent on agricultural production. Instead, a multifaceted array of subsistence strategies, including foraging, pastoralism, agro-pastoralism, and trade, were integral to sustaining local economies.

During this pre-colonial era, the emphasis of local communities was predominantly on the identification and utilisation of pastures rather than on the conversion of land for cultivation. This pastoral focus was fundamentally at odds with the colonial aspirations of the British, who viewed the Tarai-Bhabar region not merely as grazing land but rather as an area of untapped agricultural potential. As articulated by historian Neeladri Bhattacharya, the British perspective rendered barren or 'wasteland' unacceptable; for them, leaving nature untamed was synonymous with a lack of civilisation (Bhattacharya, 2019, pp. 33-34). As Michael Adas perceived any inefficient use of land as indicative of an underdeveloped society and a reflection of 'uncivilised' practices (Adas, 1990). Even Pierce Blaikie and Harold Brookfield argue that colonial regimes across various territories prioritised agriculture, particularly the cultivation of cash crops, at the expense of other traditional livelihood practices. This shift not only reoriented local economies but also undermined indigenous subsistence strategies and ecological stability. This ideology had also been applied to the Tarai and Bhabar regions of Kumaon. The British colonial agenda sought to convert these landscapes into productive agricultural fields, driven by the intention to cultivate market-orientated cash crops. In this process, the Tharu and Buksa communities, along with other indigenous groups, faced increasing pressure to abandon their diverse subsistence activities in favour of monocrop cultivation, particularly of cash crops, which aligned with colonial economic goals. This ambition is eloquently illustrated by the observations of Atkinson, who noted that

> *"Under more enterprising hands, this Dun (specifically referring to Kota Dun in the Bhabar) would probably become a grand field for the growth of cotton, sugarcane, and indigo, while the ginger and turmeric cultivation might be largely improved"* (Atkinson, 1982, 63).

However, this initiative of agricultural colonisation that began under British rule did not cease with the end of colonial governance. In fact, the post-colonial state, despite its rhetoric of nation-building and development, largely continued along the trajectory laid out by the colonial administration. In the decades following independence, the Indian government, driven by the need to boost agricultural productivity and secure food supplies, adopted similar methods of land reclamation, irrigation development, and settlement that were initiated during the colonial period. The Tarai-Bhabar tract, which had previously been seen as a marginal or frontier zone due to its challenging ecological conditions, gradually became an integral part of the northern plains, thanks to state-led efforts to enhance its agricultural potential. Though, this integration came at a cost. The persistence of these policies disrupted the traditional livelihood practices of indigenous communities like the Tharus and Buxas, whose subsistence strategies had long been shaped by the ecological rhythms of the region. The large-scale cultivation of cash crops and increased migration of settlers from other parts of India fundamentally altered the demographic, social, and environmental landscape of the Tarai-Bhabar. In the long run, while these initiatives succeeded in aligning the region with the national agricultural economy, they also led to the marginalisation of indigenous populations and the degradation of natural ecosystems.

3. TRANSFORMING SWAMPLANDS INTO FARMLAND: COLONIAL AGRICULTURAL INITIATIVES

The 19th century marked a pivotal period of transformation in the traditional livelihood strategies of the region, largely driven by the intervention of the colonial state. Through a series of concerted efforts, the British colonial administration sought to reorganise and systematise land use, primarily for the expansion of agriculture. In executing this agricultural colonisation, the colonial regime introduced new land tenure systems, survey and settlement procedures, and new irrigational facilities that significantly disrupted pre-existing subsistence methods such as pastoralism, foraging, and agro-pastoralism. As a result of the establishment of colonial rule, there came a marked shift in land-use priorities, with significant emphasis placed on the permanent cultivation

of the Bhabar and Tarai regions.

Tarai

Before the advent of British colonial rule, the Tharu and Buksa communities had already been engaged in small-scale cultivation within the Tarai region. However, the British administration sought to expand agricultural activities by encouraging settlers from the surrounding hills and plains to cultivate this fertile land. At this juncture, the government deemed the Buxas and Tharus as "unreliable" and "capricious", concluding that the Tarai could "only be rehabilitated through the immigration of settlers from the south" (Whalley, 1991, pp. 158; 271). Land grants were offered on favourable terms, with the condition that the land belonged to those who successfully cleared it. A key challenge was the reclamation of swamplands caused by the region's high water table. The British, however, attributed the issue of waterlogging to what they perceived as the overuse of water for irrigation by the indigenous communities, which they believed was a contributing factor to the spread of severe malarial fever in the region. To address both water management and public health concerns, the colonial authorities initiated efforts to develop a formal irrigation system—an essential step in promoting large-scale agriculture. Early endeavours in this direction were made by Fleetwood Williams, and in 1844, Captain Jones furthered these efforts, though with limited success. His work, however, was eventually disrupted by the Indian Rebellion of 1857. It was not until 1861 that systematic efforts to construct a comprehensive canal system began, with focused attention on reclaiming the swamps and making the land more suitable for cultivation.

It was J.C. Macdonald, Superintendent of the Tarai from 1871 to 1890, who made significant efforts to establish a canal system in the region, constructing canals in Kashipur, Gadarpur, and the Katna canal in Kilpuri. Earthen dams were built to divert water into the fields, but they were vulnerable to flood damage and siltation. Due to harsh weather during the rainy season, repairs could not be made promptly, causing frequent disruptions. After Macdonald's death in 1890, the canal system quickly fell into disrepair. Nonetheless, the British managed to construct a network of canals in the Tarai. The Pathri stream fed the Bazpur and Narainpur canals in the Tarai's westernmost subdivision. In the Gadarpur pargana, there were 78 kilometres of canals with an irrigation capacity of 15,000 acres. In pargana Rudarpur, the portion between the Dimri and Baro streams was intersected by numerous small streams that had a steady supply of water, and as a result, the tract was irrigated by a network of small channels spanning 11 miles, irrigating nine villages with a cultivated area of 5,000 acres. Until the end of the century, pargana Bilheri had only one proper canal, the Lohiya, which was 13 miles long and had an irrigation capacity of 4,000 acres. In Kashipur, an old irrigation system (with four main canals) existed, but it was upgraded. The Kashipur canals watered around 8,000 acres and created an income of Rs 10,000, which was used for maintenance and new construction.

Though efforts were made in the Tarai to build a proper irrigation system, maintaining it has always been an issue. When the system was intact, it was possible to crop; when the canals were broken, people abandoned villages, resulting in less agriculture. As a result, the Tarai problem remained unresolved until the late nineteenth century. The canal system, similar to other regions of the Gangetic plain, facilitated the proliferation of malaria. Moreover, the British colonial administration actively promoted the timber trade as a means to clear vast tracts of forested land in the

Bhabar

Similar initiatives were undertaken in the Bhabar region to cultivate land. Its climate, similar to that of the Tarai, was similarly detrimental to health, resulting in its sparse habitation in the early 19th century. The absence of irrigation impeded agricultural production in this area. Additionally, the region functioned as a refuge for dacoits and individuals of ill repute evading legal authorities from the adjacent plain districts (Atkinson, 1982**,** p. 52). Historically, individuals were required to get security by compensating the leaders of the 'Mewati robbers' (Atkinson, 1982**,** p. 65). This rendered permanent settlement in the region challenging.

Despite this, the British implemented several policy measures to promote cultivation in the Bhabar region. One of the key initiatives in this respect was reforming the tenurial system. Historically, the area had been cultivated by the hill people, and the Bhayachara system of communal landholding had prevailed. While this system was retained in the older, established villages, the British introduced the zamindari system in newly settled areas. Under the zamindari arrangement, proprietary rights were granted to the fiscal representative of the family that first acquired the lease. This individual was given the responsibility of overseeing land expansion and attracting cultivators to the region (Atkinson, 1982, pp. 65-66). In this process anyone who cleared the

waste was given proprietary rights (Trail, 1828, p. 53).

Secondly, to incentivise individuals to engage in land cultivation, the revenue was maintained at a minimal level. Henry Ramsay, the Commissioner of Kumaon during the 1850s and 1860s, stated,

> *"As a rule, new villages are allowed to be held free of revenue for two years that the settlers may clear the jungle and build their huts. The third year, four annas a bigha is charged;the following year, six annas; and then eight annas per bigha, or three rupees per acre"* (Atkinson, 1982, pp. 72-73).

Thirdly, roads were constructed to enhance agricultural development in the region. Consequently, Atkinson noted,

> *"… a great road from the Sarda to the Ganges, known as Ramsay Road, passes throughthe whole tract, besides good, metalled roads from Bareilly to Ranibag and from Moradabad to Kaladhungi, and now a railway to Ranibag passing by Haldwani will revolutionise the economicbearing of this tract and render its possession in every way more valuable"* (Atkinson, 1982, p. 52).

Fourth, to address recurrent desertion and neglect of cultivation, the Bhabar estate was established under direct governmental oversight (first by Ramsay in the 1850s), wherein the farmers acted as tenants and remitted rent to the government.

Finally, it was the British's advancement of the irrigation system that catalysed the extension and clearing of the Bhabar. The Board of Directors was alerted as early as 1818 of the necessity for irrigation in the Bhabar. Traill conducted preliminary surveys but encountered numerous impediments, deeming the endeavour 'premature'. Soon the government acknowledged that the

> *'[T]he extension of cultivation, the enhancement of the land revenue, the progress of the people towards a state of prosperity, and the improvement of the now deadly climate all depend upon the proper application of the water to be drained from the swamps of the Tarai'* (Whalley, 1991, p.160).

In order to execute this, the government started making systematic efforts to repair and extend existing irrigation works. The optimisation of water usage was deemed so critical that Boksa irrigation methods were labelled as inefficient and wasteful, resulting in their removal from their villages and relocation to Gadarpur, allowing the 'wasted water' from their inadequate irrigation system to be redirected to the Tarai for enhanced agricultural productivity (Atkinson, 1982**,** p. 69). Shortly, Ramsay started working systematically to build the irrigation system. Atkinson writes about this.

> *"Irrigation is now systematically adopted and arranged from the Dewa to Kosi. All the lakes in the hills are embarked to serve as reservoirs, and all the principal courses (rajbahas) are constructed on a plan to admit of the largest number of distributaries (guls) with the least waste of water. Without irrigation, the Bhabar cultivation could not exist. There are no water rates. Every stream almost is used, and the water is regulated by sluice gates placed at the head of each gul, which are opened and shut on a fixed plan, according to the extent of cultivation and nature of the crop, so as to prevent over-flooding and its attendant evils. At present, nearly 130 miles of masonry channels exist under the charge of the officer administering the Bhabar"* (Atkinson, 1982, pp. 70-71).

The culmination of these factors led to an expansion in agricultural practices and a rise in state revenue. Atkinson notes, 'For every anna the government now gets a rupee, whilst the people themselves have been equally enriched and are now as contented and well-off a peasantry as is to be found in British India' (Atkinson, 1982**,** p. 106). Revenue figures evidently surged. Haldwani exemplifies this transformation, evolving from a few grass huts into an urban centre of 4,000 inhabitants (Atkinson, 1982**,** p. 72).

Efforts quickly yielded results: from 1869 to 1879, the revenue from Bhabar rose by 42.42 per cent. In the Bhabar estate, the settlement was regularly amended to increase revenue and rent. By 1903, the revenue from established villages had risen to Rs 56,592, up from Rs 1,185 in 1815 and Rs 8,599 in 1850. During the period from 1898 to 1903, the average cultivated area in the established villages was 56,280 acres, although during Batten's time, the cultivated area was about 17,600 acres (excluding Chilkia). This was a remarkable expansion.

Despite these concerted efforts to reclaim the swampy, malarial lands and convert them into productive agricultural fields, the results were limited throughout much of the 19th century. It was not until the late 19th century that significant strides were made in expanding arable land in the region. However, the comprehensive transformation of the Tarai—from a malarial swamp into a fertile agricultural zone—was only fully realised by

the post-colonial government in the 20th century.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paper has delved into the intricate dynamics surrounding the concept of landscape in the Tarai and Bhabar regions of Kumaon, exploring its evolution from a contested terrain shaped by indigenous communities to a transformed space influenced by colonial interventions. The historical perspective provided highlights the contrast between the indigenous perceptions of the landscape, rooted in practical experience and cultural significance, and the colonial ideologies that sought to impose a distinct vision driven by agricultural and economic considerations. The indigenous communities, particularly the Tharus and Buxas, regarded the Tarai as a homeland, adapting to the challenges posed by its environment. Their connection with the land, rivers, and forests shaped their livelihood practices, including cultivation, trade, and seasonal migrations. The arrival of Ghamtappas during winter months further added to the socio-economic fabric of the region.

However, colonial interventions aimed at agricultural colonisation and the imposition of a new vision for the landscape led to conflicts and disruptions. The colonial state, acting as development experts, sought to control the terrain by constraining local activities perceived as wasteful or ignorant. The imposition of new policies, including irrigation projects and timber trade, aimed to transform the Tarai and Bhabar into productive agricultural fields, often at the expense of indigenous knowledge and practices. The clash between local perspectives and colonial ideologies illustrates a fundamental conflict in the shaping of the cultural and historical landscape of the region. The paper contributes to a deeper understanding of this conflict and its historical transformation, shedding light on the struggles, adaptations, and changes that marked the Tarai and Bhabar regions.

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