

Title

“Shaping the Hills: British Imperial Policies and their Impact on Uttarakhand (1815-1947)”

Introduction:

We know that the British came to India in the beginning of the 17th century as traders under the banner of the East India Company. By this time, the Mughals held supremacy over the vast areas of the Indian subcontinent. However, by the beginning of the 18th century, the Mughal Empire began to decline which led to the weakening of a central authority therefore political disintegration took place across the subcontinent. In these circumstances British who till then were merely traders, took the advantage of this situation and started establishing their sovereignty bit-by-bit in India. The British had ruled India for approximately 190 years and they had conquered the Uttarakhand in 1815. In this way, they ruled Uttarakhand for about 132 years. During this period they almost entirely affected political, administrative, judicial, economic, and social fabric of India as well as of the state of Uttarakhand. In fact, British rule almost altered the whole medieval feudal system and converted it into the modern political-administrative system as we witness in India and Uttarakhand today.

Aim of the Study:

Through this paper, I will get to know about how the modern governing system was established by the British during their colonial rule and how it affected the people of Uttarakhand. Just prior to the British rule, Uttarakhand was governed by the Gorkhas. Before the invasion of Gorkhas, Uttarakhand was divided into two kingdoms, the kingdom of Kumaon, and the Garhwal kingdom and both the kingdoms were governed by their respective native rulers, the Chands and the Parmar rulers. In 1790, Gorkhas attacked on Almora, which was the capital of Chand rulers and conquered it.¹ After some years, in 1804, they defeated the Parmar rulers of Garhwal and established their supremacy over there.² Gorkha's imperial rule in Uttarakhand was very short and barbarous. Gorkha's governing system was also almost as same as the previous rulers of Uttarakhand, but as compare to native rulers their purpose was to extract more money from the people of this hilly region and the method which they applied here was too brutal. In this way, till the arrival of British, Uttarakhand was governed by the medieval governing system, which is also known as feudal system. This paper will analyse the British sovereignty in Uttarakhand and how they transformed the

medieval system into a modern system and how it affected the lives of the people of Uttarakhand.

General History of British Sovereignty:

We know that during the reign of Parmar ruler Ajaypal (1500-1519 AD) started subjugation of all the independent chiefdoms of Garhwal and formed the Garhwal kingdom.³ Similarly Chand rulers of Kumaon also defeated the independent small rulers of Kumaon and established their supremacy over the Kumaon region. But in 1790, Gorkhas of Nepal, under the ruler of Prithwinarayan Shah they conquered Kumaon and imposed their barbarous imperial rule in the region.⁴ Shortly after establishing their rule in Kumaon they tried to conquer Garhwal but the brave soldiers of Garhwal saved it.⁵ But in 1804 they again attacked Garhwal and in the battle of Khudbuda, Dehradun, they defeated and killed the Parmar ruler Pradyumnshah.⁶ In this way the Gorkhas also conquered Garhwal and established their supremacy here. But their rule was not so long as the British East India Company invaded the Uttarakhand and completely defeated the Gorkhas during the Anglo-Nepal war in 1815. After defeating the Gorkhas, British under the chairmanship of Gardner and Gorkha commanders' Bamshah, Chamu Bhandari, and Jasmardan Thapa concluded a treaty on 27 April, 1815.⁷ According to this treaty Gorkhas had to surrender their empire to British and they were compelled to keep a British resident in Kathmandu. A lot of discussions were done between British and Nepali officers and finally a treaty was concluded on 2nd December 1815 at Sugauli, Champaran, Bihar, India, by this treaty, the boundary line was decided between Nepal and British India.⁸ Initially Nepal Darbar did not show any positive interest in this treaty but when another armed force was sent to Nepal then finally in March, 1816 Nepal Darbar accepted the 'Treaty of Sugauli'.⁹

After occupying Uttarakhand, the East India Company divided the Garhwal region into two parts – The eastern part was called British Garhwal and the western part of Garhwal was restored to the son of the last Parmar ruler of undivided Garhwal kingdom.¹⁰ In this manner, Kumaon and the eastern Garhwal was ruled by the British from 1815-1947, and this whole region was known as the Kumaon Division. On 3rd May, 1815 Edward Gardner became the first Commissioner of the Kumaon division.¹¹ The region of Uttarakhand was totally different from the plains due to which the East India Company did not apply the same administrative system by which they used to govern the plains. The administration of the Kumaon division was governed as per the Non-Regulation province, where most of the

affairs of government were in the hands of the local officer which was known as Commissioner.¹² These commissioners with the help of other officers and employees were responsible for the entire administration of the newly conquered province. Most importantly, the commissioner was authorised to take decisions and he was also authorised to either make new rules or modify the existing rules and regulations according to the requirement of the region, but in any condition those modifications in regulations could not be contradictory to the British rules and regulations which were established by the British Parliament in England. Therefore, this system was known as the 'Non-Regulation System', and for quite some time British-Uttarakhand was governed by this system. In 1874, British Parliament passed the 'Scheduled District Act' and after that the administration of Kumaon division was governed by this Act.¹³ In 1937, the 'Scheduled District Act' was abolished by the British authority and now the British Uttarakhand was governed same as the entire British India.¹⁴

Once British established their supremacy in this region from then they altered the entire political, economic, judicial, and socio-religious fabric of the Kumaon division. First of all, they concentrated their attention on the land revenue system of this region to secure a fixed income, and gradually they focused on the trans-Himalayan trade which was immensely profitable. Then they focused on the rich forest of the entire region. We all know that all the policies which were prepared by the colonial administration their primary attention was to get the maximum benefits for the British. The main purpose of the colonial rulers was to extract more and more economic resources of the region and for this purpose the colonial authority used all the methods and techniques to exploit Indians of their vast economic resources.

As soon as they established their supremacy their major focus was to establish land revenue settlements in India. Their major concern was to collect the maximum revenue. Therefore, for this the East India Company's administration formulated three different systems of land revenue settlement- the Permanent Settlement was made with the landlords, the Ryotwari Settlement with the ryots or farmers and the Mahalwari Settlement with the village community.¹⁵ As we have already mentioned that the main motive of all these settlements was to get the maximum revenue income. Similarly, when they conquered Uttarakhand after the Anglo-Nepal war in 1815, from then to till 1947, they organized 11 land revenue settlements in Uttarakhand.¹⁶ After each settlement we witness that there is an increase in land revenue, although the increment was not so high.¹⁷ It was not so high due to the geographical conditions of the region because most of the land was covered with dense

forest, barren and could not be irrigated. Mostly British historians claim that the condition of farmers was improved during the British administration, but the contemporary accounts of that time suggest otherwise. In this regard the historian and famous painter Molaram along with the poet Gumani of that time mentioned in their accounts that the condition of farmers was not adequate during the British administration. Both of these scholars made negative remarks about the British administration in Uttarakhand.¹⁸ Still some remarkable work such as the measurement of fields, categorization of land, and the land revenue was decided after visiting each village by revenue officers during the colonial period.¹⁹ But it is difficult to say whether it was done for the well-being of the people of Uttarakhand or it was done for the extracting more land revenue. The table provided below help us to get an idea of how income from land revenue increased after each settlement.

Land Revenue during 1816-33²⁰

No.	Year	Duration	Land revenue in Garhwal Rs.	Land revenue in Kumaun Rs.
First	1815-16	Annual	37,792	86,071
Second	1816-17	Annual	44,587	93,722
Third	1818-20	Triennial	45,548	99,199
Fourth	1820-22	Triennial	54,995	1,08,858
Fifth	1823-27	Quinquennial	64,900	1,19,989
Sixth	1828-32	Quinquennial	67,725	1,23,164
Seventh	1833-37	Quinquennial	69,244	1,25,589

Similarly we see that almost at the end of 19th century the numbers of peasants and area of cultivated land was increased. According to Shekhar Pathak, from 1890-1896, the numbers of peasants was increased from 50,298 to 62,058 and the area of cultivated land was also increased from 1,28,491.4 acre to 6,09,533.3 acre.²¹ Still we cannot find ways to know that what the financial condition of farmers was during that period, however it can be supposed that perhaps by these reforms peasants would have been benefitted.

Similarly, during the British period natural resources of Uttarakhand were exploited. From 1840, British officers gave vast local and forest land to British businessmen for the purpose of Tea plantation. Apart from it, when British established railways and wanted to expand it in India they needed wooden sleepers. Uttarakhand was famous for its forest resources, therefore for the purpose of wooden sleepers, forests were given to businessmen. Due to which, those businessmen exploited different natural resources of Uttarakhand like wood, wild animals, herb/medicinal plants, and minerals.²² As we have already mentioned

that, Uttarakhand was very well-known for its dense forest and its rich natural resources. Forests in the Himalayas provided many products which were very beneficial for the people of this region. The people of Uttarakhand were very much dependent on their forest for their livelihood. In 1864, British administration formed the Forest department in India and for this purpose a German specialist was invited.²³ But the main purpose of the establishment of forest department was not the well-being of the people or the protection of the forest, the main purpose was to ensure the requirement of the wood for the Railways and the Navy. In 1878, 'All India Forest Act' was passed through which the forest of Uttarakhand was divided into two categories – the 'Reserved forest' and the 'Protected forest', and after that people's rights of making their livelihood through forest/forest products were completely curtailed. 'Reserved forests' were completely banned for the local people and in 'Protected forests' their rights were limited to a certain extent.²⁴

In 1893, colonial government passed an order by which all the unmeasured land was put into the 'District Protected Forest' (DPF), according to it, the forest of Uttarakhand was divided into 'Closed Civil Forest' and 'Open Civil Forest'.²⁵ 'Closed civil forests' were completely banned for the people of Uttarakhand and in 'Open civil forest' some limited rights were given to the people of Uttarakhand. After some time government made such hazardous policy that forced the local people to take permission from the forest officers for small necessities as repair of their houses etc.²⁶ According to forest rule – 78, people were bound to inform the forest officer if something happens in the forest also they were responsible to extinguish the fire spread in the forest. If they were failed to do so a fine would be levied from them.²⁷ Thus, during the colonial period, people's forest rights were almost completely curtailed. The People of Uttarakhand were now fed-up with the policies of colonial government and they started to raise their voice against these unfair laws. It is believed that apart from other policies the forest policy was more responsible for the birth of nationalism in Uttarakhand and thus the people started movements against these forest laws and colonial rule. In 1921, the colonial government paid some attention over the problem of the people and tried to resolve the people's grievances by establishing the 'Kumaon Forest Grievances Committee'.²⁸ By this, to some extent, limited forest rights were given to the people of Uttarakhand, still, it could not fulfill the basic needs of the people of Uttarakhand and therefore forest movements remained to continue. In 1927, colonial government planned to establish "Village Forest Council System" (Panchayati Van-Vyavastha), where Village councils were responsible for the protection and sustainable use of local forest. To implement

this plan in 1931, some rules and regulations were framed and in this way it came into existence.²⁹ But all these changes could not fulfill the aspirations of people of Uttarakhand and once again people of Uttarakhand started raising their voice against the colonial rule.

Therefore, there is no doubt that during the British imperial rule, the people of Uttarakhand were extremely exploited and used to face many difficulties but at the same time, during this same rule people also got benefitted because when British imposed their imperial rule in the hilly region then they forcefully changed the political, administrative, judicial, social, educational and other institutions in Uttarakhand through which came the modern setup of these institutions developed as we find them today to some extent. There is no doubt that, we have paid a very heavy price for all this, still it might be said that to some extent, the British imperial rule can be considered beneficial for the people of Uttarakhand because, as the colonial rule had several negative impacts, but at the same time it also had some positive impacts which help shaping Uttarakhand from medieval to modern era.

Various positive impacts of British imperial rule on the People of Uttarakhand:

We know that imperial rule had numerous adverse impacts on the lives of people of Uttarakhand, but during this era, several other changes also took place, which were undoubtedly progressive for the people of Uttarakhand. When British rule established here then they brought modern system in every field of administration in Uttarakhand. As we have already discussed, that primary focus of the British was on the consolidation of an authority over this region and establishing a revenue system. In this process, the imperial government laid the foundation of modern political, administrative, judicial and western education systems. Although, all this was done for securing imperial interests, but it also laid long-lasting impacts on the people of Uttarakhand.

Establishment of the Modern Administrative system:

After defeating the Gorkhas, in the Anglo-Nepal war, in 1815, the British took over the Kumaon and eastern-Garhwal regions. Before the arrival of British, the governance of this whole region was carried out by the Gorkhas. The Gorkha rule was brutal and their main aim was exploitation of the people of Uttarakhand. They imposed military rule here which was totally despotic. When British occupied this territory they gradually turned the region into a modern state by introducing modern practices of governance. We understand all this was established to secure their colonial interest. Instead of imposing the complex district

administrative structure used in plains, they introduced a special centralized system in the entire Kumaon division (comprising Kumaon, British Garhwal, and later parts of Terai-Bhabar). This system was known as the 'Non-Regulation System', in which the commissioner had extraordinary powers and was given authority to change or modify some rules and regulations according to local requirements. In this manner, Initial Commissioners like Edward Gardner, and after him G. W. Traill (1815-1835) played a foundational role in the establishment of a modern system in this hilly region. After that commissioners like Gardner and Traill, Goyan, Batten and Ramsay and many more commissioners were appointed, all these commissioners played an important role in shaping modern governance system in Uttarakhand.

For the pioneering of this system, in 1815, Commissioner Edward Gardner was appointed as the first head of the newly formed Kumaon Division. The Kumaon Commissioner performed the supreme civil, revenue and jurisdictional authority, and was assisted by Deputy Commissioners, Tehsildars, Kanungo and village Patwaris. Till the mid of the 19th century, the administration was developed in a more structured way. Several land revenue settlements were carried out, mapping of villages, and village records were systematically maintained.³⁰ To control the criminal activities in the adjacent areas of the Kumaon division the police system was established and in some areas such as Almora and Srinagar 'thanas' and 'chowkis' were established. In 1845, Nagar Palika was established in Nainital, and in 1867, Municipality was established in Dehradun. These municipalities were responsible for education, water-supply, maintenance of drains, and arrangement of the lights by the road-sides.

Although the administrative structure was designed for maximum revenue extraction, and gaining maximum economic benefits from Uttarakhand, but it also carried out certain welfare functions for the people of Uttarakhand. Mapping villages and codification of land rights reduced some conflicts among the peasants and it also reduced some form of exploitation by local elites.

Introduction of the Modern Judicial System:

During Chand, Parmar and Gorkha period, the judicial system in the entire hilly region was mostly bestowed upon the village council, caste-panchayats, and by local rulers or landlord but there is no doubt that the medieval judicial system was arbitrary and biased in favour of the dominant castes or clans. Initially, 1815-1829 the Kumaon Commissioner was

vested all the judicial powers.³¹ But later on judicial system was gradually elaborated. Till 1840s, separate civil and criminal courts started to operate in Almora and Pauri, and lower courts were set up in tehsils. The commissioner's court performed as the uppermost appellate authority in the entire region. The Indian Penal Code (1860) and the Indian Evidence Act (1872) were applied to the region, replacing customary punitive practices with a uniform legal code. District Judges, subordinate judges and Munshifs were appointed to settle the disputes among people and Court clerks were also appointed to maintain record of court proceedings. Significantly, the imperial authority codified certain customary laws, particularly regarding land rights, marriage, and inheritance, so that these could be recognized formally in legal proceedings.

In this way, British rule introduced some legal rights, reduced or abolished the judicial power of local elites and established uniformity in the existing legal system. Although, this modern judicial system also had some anomalies but now disputes could be resolved through a procedure that was considered impartial, at least in theory. The establishment of modern courts, despite of being distant for villagers, provided a mechanism for settle their disputes beyond the influence of local elites and dominant castes.

Establishment of Modern Education System:

We know that, education is essential for the all-round development of human beings. It plays a vital role in human life. Since beginning India has been a habitat of quality education, similarly, people of Uttarakhand were also very much cognizant about the importance of education. Before the establishment of British rule in Uttarakhand, education was provided by the Brahmins in their homes.³² The subjects like Hindi, Sanskrit, Maths, Astronomy and Religious education were part of the curriculum of the students. Initially, British authority showed little interest in providing formal education in Uttarakhand, but Christian missionaries focused on providing English education in India and in Uttarakhand. However, their main motif was the conversion of people into Christianity. Later on, British authorities also focused on introducing modern education here. In this regard, the Court of Directors unenthusiastically made some efforts for the beginning of education in India in 1813. By the Charter Act of 1813, a sum of rupees one lakh was provided for the promotion of education in India.³³ Although, till 1833, British authority could not have decided that what kind of education should be provided to Indians. In 1833, Macaulay became the first law member, and the contemporary Governor General William Bentinck, gave him

responsibility to decide that what type of education should be provided to Indians. Then Macaulay introduced his famous minute on 7 March, 1835, by this minute it was decided that European literature and sciences will be provided to Indians and it will provide in English language.³⁴ In this regard, it is also important that British did not introduce modern education here for the welfare of Indians, but for their administrative requirement as they were compel to educate Indians.³⁵

Till this time, Uttarakhand was under the domination of the British, thus slowly and gradually they began imparting modern education in Uttarakhand also. In 1840, first school was established in Srinagar Garhwal by the British authority.³⁶ In 1842, two vernacular schools, one in Kumaon and other in Garhwal were established.³⁷ In 1857, an education department was established in Kumaon division. Beckett did admirable job for the promotion of education in Uttarakhand. Till the first decade of 20th century, there were 8 middle schools, 106 basic schools in the entire region which were governed by the government. Later on, Thomson Engineering College was also established in Roorkee which is today known as I.I.T. Roorkee. In 1878 Forest College was established in Dehradun now known as Forest Research Institute (FRI). In 1922, Royal Indian Military College was established in Dehradun to train young Indian Princes. Today this institute is known as the Rashtriya Indian Military College (RIMC), Dehradun. Till 1946, there were only two degree colleges in Uttarakhand.

Apart from British authority, social institutions like ‘Arya Samaj’ and ‘Ramkrishna Mission’ etc. also did tremendous job for the upliftment of modern education in Uttarakhand. The spread of modern education did a tremendous job in raising awareness among the people of Uttarakhand, because of modern education, people became more aware of the consequences of oppressive imperial rule, the nature of exploitative British rule, social inequalities etc., this laid the foundation of political awareness among the people and later it got converted into political mobilization and participation in the freedom movement.

Emancipation of women:

Similarly, British rule also helped a lot for the betterment of women’s emancipation. During medieval period conditions of women in Uttarakhand were much subjugated as comparing to the modern period. We had many evil practices like Sati-Pratha, child marriage, polygamy, trafficking of women, slavery, devdasi-pratha, and banning of widow-remarriages were very common in the society before the arrival of British. Initially British administration did not interfere in the social practices; in fact, Christian missionaries raised their voice

against these malicious practices. Slowly and gradually, educated people also raised their voices against these practices and urged the contemporary British authority and then British government passed some acts against these immoral practices. By the efforts of Great Raja Rammohan Roy, the contemporary Governor General of Bengal, Lord William Bentinck, passed the Regulation -17 in December, 1829, by which, practice of Sati tradition was banned, and this practice was declared illegal and punishable offence.³⁸ In 1856, Act-15 was passed, by great efforts of Dr. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar banning of widow remarriages was also banned and after this women were allowed to remarry.³⁹ Although, British authority passed this regulation but they did not pay proper attention on spreading awareness against this malicious practice. Therefore the act failed to gain mass popular support and could not achieve the success which was expected from it.

From 1872 to 1930, British colonial rule passed many laws for the banning of child marriages and many time they increased the marriage age of boys and girls. In this regard, in 1929, British passed another act which was implemented in 1930, by this act the age of marriage was fixed for girls and boys 15 years and 18 years respectively.⁴⁰ In 1836, Slavery was completely banned. Devdasi Pratha was also very prevalent in society; because of this tradition girls were physically exploited. During British period, Devdasi system was abolished. Therefore during the British period, many evil practices were banned from the society which led to the emancipation of women to some extent.

Conclusion

We understand that, during the British colonial rule, the establishment of modern political, legal system and western education was tied to their imperial objectives of control, and economic exploitation, yet, these institutions established the era of modernity in every aspect in the lives of the people of Uttarakhand. This modernity opened new pathways for the social mobility and political awareness later though which we attained independence. When we attained independence, we adapted and shaped the colonial system according to our own requirements. Thus we can say that the British colonial rule had many adverse impacts but at the same time it also had some positive impacts which benefitted the people of Uttarakhand.

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