

Ecological Crisis in Central Himalayas: From Colonial to Post-Colonial Times

Anita and Ragini Raghav

The Himalayan mountains are believed to be the abode of gods. The practice of protecting nature comes to the people naturally because of their abiding faith in the gods and their strong belief that divine power is present in every element of nature. The Himalayan mountains have been inhabited by communities that are chiefly dependent on natural resources, i.e., forests and rivers, for their basic needs. The livelihood of the hill folk is mainly based on agriculture and herd keeping. The indigenous community of the Himalayan mountains has a diverse culture that includes various traditional practices and values of environmental sustainability and conservation. The high-rise mountains are considered the abode of several local deities, and these places are sacred to the people. They could not dare exploit the natural resources nearby, like land, trees, plants, and springs. The people also depended on the forest for medicinal plants, as many of the herbs found there have healing properties and can be used to cure various diseases.

There was community-based resource management prevalent in Kumaun. For generations, the hill people of the Kumaun region of the Himalayas have been using traditional knowledge and several cultural practices for the management and conservation of natural resources. The forests, groves, and grasslands were protected by the indigenous people, as their traditional beliefs and rituals consisted of the practice of revering various elements of nature as deities. Several water bodies, like *guls*, *naulas*, and *dharas*, that provided water for everyday use for the locals were worshipped on special occasions like weddings and other traditional ceremonies. Hence, these water bodies were kept clean and pure. There was a shared consciousness of conserving their

surrounding environment among the hill folk. The flowers, if unripe, were not plucked, and it was considered inauspicious to pluck flowers after sunset. There are many unwritten rules for conserving various natural resources that have been passed on from generation to generation. These natural sources were of great importance to the people because of the cultural and traditional values attached to them. Therefore, natural resources like land, water, and trees were spiritually significant in the religious and socio-cultural lives of the local people.

However, due to colonization and, after independence, the growing population and rapid urbanization, in recent years, various changes have occurred in the traditional structure of the use of natural resources like fuel wood, fodder, and grazing areas. The shared concern of the locals for natural resources is on the verge of depletion now. The growth in population and urbanization have led to growing economic activities in the hills, and since then, the traditional system of conserving natural resources has also withered. This has led to the exploitation of natural resources, including forests, land, water, pastures, and biodiversity. The ecological exploitation and challenges in the Kumaun region during colonial and post-colonial periods find expression in the works of several Kumauni writers. Namita Gokhale, in her books based on the Kumaun region, deals with the colonial history of the hills and the exploitation of the hills during that period. Girish Chandra Tiwari, an indigenous poet from Kumaun, lovingly known as *Girda*, has depicted the environmental crisis in the hills very passionately in his poems.

Narrative of Nature and Power: An Ecological Imperialism

Under colonial rule, the colonized people and land are exploited by the colonizers, and the exploitation is justified by projecting the natives as inferior and “others”, people who are to be civilized and then eventually subjugate them. The term ‘Ecological Imperialism’ was coined in 1986 by Alfred Crosby in his book *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*. In ecological imperialism, both environmentalism and colonialism are dealt with side by side. It studies

the disruption or disturbance of local ecology due to colonial expansion. For instance, the land of a particular place is an integral part of the cultural identity of the people living there. For them, the land does not just stand for a physical entity; it is a part of their identity. The colonial conquest of the material wealth of the colonies left a great impact on the lives of the colonized in countries like South Africa and India. Usurping the land of the colonized and taking their right to self-governance of their own land did not only deprive them of their source of livelihood but also of their very identity. As Franz Fanon puts it, "For a colonized people, the most essential value, because the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity" (9). During the colonial period, several forest acts were introduced by the British government in the Kumaun region. Under these acts, they introduced repressive forest policies. The Kumauni society has been egalitarian, and the people were completely dependent upon the natural resources for their survival. The Forest Act of 1878 took away the rights of the locals, and they were excluded from the resources of the forests. The forests were now under the monopoly of the British Administration, and the act allowed it to expand the commercial exploitation of the forests. The *sal* trees of Kumaun were felled in huge numbers, and pine trees were planted in the hills by the British Administration for commercial purposes.

Pt. Govind Ballabh Pant, a prominent political leader of Kumaun, condemned the Forest Act introduced by the British Administration in his booklet entitled *The Forest Problem in Kumaon*, 1922. He called the Forest Act the "burial of the immemorial and indefeasible rights of the people of Kumaun" (Guha 228). According to Pant, "the policy of the Forest Department can be summed up in two words, namely, encroachment and exploitation" (Guha 228). Observing the disastrous consequences of the forest policy, Pant wrote:

Symptoms of decay are unmistakably visible in many village: buildings are tottering, houses are deserted, population has dwindled and assessed land has gone out of cultivation since the policy of

[forest] reservation was initiated. . . . Cattle have become weakened and emaciated and dairy produce is growing scarce every day: while in former times one could get any amount of milk and other varieties for the mere asking, now occasions are not rare when one cannot obtain it in the villages, for any price for the simple reason that it is not produced there at all. (70-72)

In his book, Pant describes the plight of the people of Kumaun who were dissatisfied by the Forest Act. The displeasure of the people provoked a resistance in them against the policy that was imposed on them by the British administration. This policy had hindered and violated the harmonious relationship of the local people with the environment.

In Namita Gokhale's historical novel *Things to Leave Behind*, the natives of Kumaun worship nature, and they believe that every element of nature holds some divine power. They have several myths and beliefs attached to the rivers, lakes, hills, and trees. Naini Lake is believed to have been formed from the eye of the goddess *Sati*, which fell in that spot while Lord *Shiva* was carrying her deceased body in his arms. As a result, the place is considered sacred land by the natives, and they despise the interference of the Englishmen in their land. They try hard to keep the lake a secret from the Englishmen. As mentioned, "the great annual fair of Nanda Devi was held in the grounds near the lake every autumn. There were no houses there, for it was a sacred spot, not to be polluted by human habitation" (11). Later, the place was discovered by an Englishman who tricked a native into leading him to the secret lake. The natives of Kumaun were deceived by the British into owning the land rights to the place. The colonizers established a township there, and the hill station of Nainital was established. The people simultaneously shape and are shaped by their local environment, and this delineates how the natives of Kumaun were denied their right to situate their own history and environmental locality.

In the novel *The Book of Shadows*, the place where the British missionary intends to build a house is considered a sacred site by the natives. As William Cockrell states, "On ridges like the one whereupon

we planned to site the house, they built only temples to their bloodthirsty gods. But this ridge, I had heard it muttered, was a bad one; it had a resident spirit that was inimical to happiness or reason” (43). This same house later witnessed the unnatural deaths of many of its inhabitants. The hill people believe in several folk deities and have ardent faith in them. Most of these gods are considered guardian angels by the natives. Some places in the hills are worshipped as sacred spots of the folk deities, and they are believed to be guarded by them; no human inhabits these places. For instance, Lord *Airee* is considered the guardian spirit who protects the land, people, and animals of the hills. In *The Book of Shadows*, Lohaniju, the caretaker of the house in Ranikhet, believes that the British missionary William Cockrell disgraced the sacredness of the place by building the house on the arrow of Lord *Airee*. He says,

The missionary was foolish to build his house in this lonely spot. We hill people prefer to live together, near each other. Humans need each other, it is pride to think that they don't. Besides, he knew that this was a sacred spot, and that the arrows of Lord *Airee* lie buried here, deep in the soil, below the rock even. These arrows never rust, and when the time comes, the gods will deign to use them once again. (209)

At the beginning of the novel *Things to Leave Behind*, six women are singing mournfully in the month of *shraddha*, and they are circled around the lake wearing black and scarlet *pichauras* (a traditional yellow and scarlet colored stole worn during auspicious occasions by the Kumauni women). The natives believe that these women are evil spirits; they have donned black and scarlet-colored *pichauras* instead of the regular yellow and scarlet tones, and the incident symbolises an evil force in the environment of the place, which is associated with the arrival of the British in Kumaun. The natives are concerned about the disapproval of the lake goddess, *Naina Devi*, for the intrusion of outsiders into her land. When an Englishwoman dies by drowning in the lake by accidentally stepping into a slippery rock, the native folk believe it to be the revenge of the lake goddess on the outsiders for dishonoring the sanctity of her land. The British did not pay any heed to this rumor that

was spreading like wildfire among the natives. However, the landside of the year 1870 shows the resistance of nature against human intervention. The wrath of nature took the lives of hundreds of people, including both Britishers and natives.

In the novel *The Book of Shadows*, Gokhale shows the general perception of the Englishmen and their experiences with the natives of Kumaun in the journal of the missionary William Cockrell. In this journal, he has written about the beliefs and superstitions of the local people and the problems he faced during his stay in the hills. The concept of the binary opposition of “orient” and “occident” to portray the colonized as “other,” uncivilized, and savage in order to justify the imperialistic endeavors explored by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* is depicted in the journal of the missionary. Rumina Sethi in an article in *The Tribune* writes:

The journal written by William Cockerell throws light on the role of the missionaries and their rather orientalist views on the nature of the natives who are taken to be lethargic and immoral. He imagines the natives as shadows hovering around him and wonders if they were really human or only shadows belonging to some other “unchastened un-christian world.” (Sethi)

As in the case of the other European colonies, Indian natives too were considered primitive and savage by the colonizers. The British mocked the natives of Kumaun for their strong belief in several superstitions. William Cockrell writes that the people in the hills believe in nonsensical superstitions. He mocks the natives, as they worship monkeys as gods and avoid killing a snake, as it is also considered divine. He says that the people also have several superstitious beliefs attached to the trees. The pine trees are considered extremely unlucky, and the cedar or deodar trees are considered divine. The people would not dare cut the tree, and if it had to be cut due to a certain compulsion, then they had to seek divine permission by worshipping the deity.

The actions of the two Englishmen, Marco and Munro, in the novel *The Book of Shadows* represent the colonial practice of exploitation of the

native land and people. These two Englishmen came to the house built by the missionary in Ranikhet. They both exploited the humans as well as the animals on the hills. They were followers of the occult and were sadistic people. They used to capture young panthers, hang them in the courtyard, and inflict several tortures on them, sometimes by feeding them extravagantly and sometimes by starving them to enjoy the sufferings of those wounded animals until they died. The hill folks were also not spared from the tortures of these people. As mentioned, "Once, Munro even pushed a hill-man into the pit of hungered beasts, but he escaped and ran away from the house, never to return" (99). These Englishmen even went to the extent of sacrificing a child just to revive their fading energies. This shows how the colonizers manipulated not only nature and animals but also the humans of the hills. They asserted their rights to the environment as well as to humans. The natives came to hate the Englishmen for their actions and considered them madmen. They believed that these Englishmen interfered with their beliefs and insulted the spirits of the mountains by polluting the sanctity of their land.

The natives could no longer tolerate the tortures imposed by the Englishmen on them and decided to avenge them. The hill people believed that the gods of the mountains had ordered them to take revenge on Marcus and Munro. As Lohaniju mentions, "Our mountain gods disguised themselves as panthers and attacked the white sahibs, right here in this house, one black amavasya night" (14). From the stories that Lohaniju narrates to Rachita of the Kumauni locale, it can be inferred that the hill folk of Kumaun were not pleased with the arrival of Britishers in their native land. He believes that the 'English sahib' who came to Kumaun were bad people. They polluted the mountains, which are considered sacred by the people of Kumaun. As Lohaniju asserts, "They insulted the spirits of these mountains. They were rude and arrogant and very, very foolish" (13). This shows the general perception that the Kumauni folks hold of the British. In these novels, Gokhale depicts the colonial exploitation of nature as well as the humans of the Kumaun hills.

Ecological Crisis and Kumaun Hills

After the independence of India, the increase in economic attributes, industrialization, and rapid urbanization resulted in the overexploitation of natural resources. In the colonial era, the British rulers exploited the ecology, and post-independence, the government carried forward the same policies in the name of development. The hills of the Kumaun Himalayas, rich in natural resources, were sought after for energy consumption. This led to the overexploitation of natural sources in the hills. There was large-scale cutting of the forest trees initiated by the timber merchants, certain government schemes, and private industries. The growing commercial and industrial interest not only led to the degradation of the hill forests but also of the age-old traditional and cultural practice of conservation in the hills. These projects had an adverse effect on the traditional practices of conservation of natural resources. The local people were now less concerned about conservation of nature and indulged in getting as much benefit as they could out of the ongoing scenario. The external interference of exploitative development policies in the hills was responsible for withering away from traditional conservation practices.

In the early 1970s, there was a large-scale cutting of the trees in the hills, which resulted in ecological catastrophes like floods and soil erosions due to deforestation. The local people were then alarmed to protect their natural resources. The exploitation of the hill forests by outside agencies and government policies was resisted by the locals, and this united resistance and struggle of the people for the protection of the forests led to the Chipko Movement. The movement had a very humane appeal: “Cut me down before you cut down the tree. The tree is far more important than my life, it is the basis of my survival” (Mitra). It was also a crucial movement in this respect that the women folk of the hills were a part of the movement, and they participated in the protest in large numbers. They hugged the trees, saying, “chop me before you chop my tree.” Poet and renowned social activist of Kumaun, Girish Chandra Tiwari, who people lovingly and affectionately call *Girda* (elder

brother Girish), composed a poem that depicts the plight of nature in the hills and urges the hill folk to resist the exploitation of the forest. *Girda* personified nature in his poem and depicted its sufferings:

*Aaj Himaal tuman ke dhatyoochhaujago,
jago ho myara laal.*

Ni karan diyo humari neelami

Ni karan diyo humaro halaal

(Tiwaree 26)

The Himalayas are calling out to you today; wake up, my child. Do not let them maltreat me; do not let them auction me. (Translated by us)

This poem became an inspiration for the rallies of the Chipko movement. It inspired the hill people and awakened in them the responsibility to save their environment and natural resources. The poem inspires people to resist the rapid urbanization and development activities that are leading to the degradation of the environment as well as the traditional culture of the hills. *Girda* has written many poems that mirror the dire situation of the hills, which are under threat due to the exploitation of their natural resources. It was not only the forest but also the rivers that became victims of the development activities in the hills. There were several large-scale projects that were initiated for energy consumption from the rivers. The ecology and humans had to suffer from these projects. *Girda* wrote a poem on the plight of the water resources of the hills and how the government and state had become traders by destructing the rivers:

*Aji vaah! Kya baat tumhare, tum ho pani ke vyapaari,
Khel tumhara tumhi Khiladi, bichi hui ye bisaat tumhaari,
Saara paani choos rahe ho, nadi samandar loot rahe ho,
Ganga-Yamuna ki chaati par, kankar patthar koot
rahe ho. . .”*

(Tiwaree)

“Oh! Great, what you’re doing; you are the trader of water,
You are the player, and the sport is also yours,
You are sucking up all the water and looting the rivers as well as
the oceans.

You are crushing pebbles and stones on the bosom of the Ganges
and Yamuna . . .” (Translated by us)

The poem is a satire on the government officials who had become blind to the destruction that the large-scale projects were causing to the rivers. In 2008, a movement called “Save the Rivers” took place to save the rivers from destructive development projects that had adverse effects on the water resources in the hills. *Girda’s* poem expresses the contemporary scenario of the ecological crisis in the hills.

Conclusion

Environmental degradation is a serious issue that needs to be taken into consideration by both local people and the government in the hills. There are looming dangers of the ecological threat across the world. The increase in the frequency of several natural disasters like floods, soil erosion, landslides, etc. due to ecological crises is evident in the hills. The beginning of ecological exploitation can be traced back to the colonial period, when the forest acts introduced by the British administration allowed the state to expand the commercial exploitation of the forest while restricting the locals from using the resources for their sustenance. It hampered the relationship between nature and the local people. The hill folks were deprived of the right to self-governance over their natural resources.

In Gokhale’s works, we find ecological imperialism during the colonial period in the Kumaun Himalayas. During this period, the environment as well as human beings were manipulated by the colonial powers. After independence, ecological exploitation continued in the hills. Many government and non-government schemes were responsible for this exploitation. The local people too became unconcerned with the exploitation of natural resources, and the traditional practice of conserving natural resources also diminished. Girish Chandra Tiwari’s poems demonstrated the continuing onslaught on the natural resources of the Himalayas, and his poems are a call to preserve natural resources in the hills.

Work Cited

- Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove, 2004.
- Gokhale, Namita. *The Book of Shadows*. Penguin Books, 2001.
- . *Things to Leave Behind*. Penguin Books, 2018.
- Guha, Ramachandra. "The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India." *Environmental History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2001, pp. 213-38. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985085>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2023.
- Mitra, Amit. "Chipko: An Unfinished Mission." *Down to Earth*, 30 April, 1993, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/chipko-an-unfinished-mission-30883>. Accessed 21 Nov. 2023.
- Pant, Pt. Govind Ballabh. *The Forest Problem in Kumaon*. Gyanodaya Prakashan, 1987.
- Sethi, Rumina. "Dawn of Life's Truth Up in the Hills." *The Tribune*, Dec 1999, <https://m.tribuneindia.com/1999/99dec05/book.htm>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2023.
- Tiwari, Girish. *Uttarakhand Kavya*. Pahad, 2002.
- Tiwari, Mohan Chand. "'Girda': Uttarakhand Andolan Ke Jankavi Aur Yugdrashta Chintak Bhi." *Kumauni Culture*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.kumauni.in/2023/06/girda-ki-11vee-punya-tithi-par.html?m=1>. Accessed on 20 Nov. 2023.