

Uttarakhand -I

Before the Ghurkhas established their rule in 1790, the Garhwal and Kumaun regions were ruled by the Parmar/Panwar and Chand dynasties respectively. After the Anglo Ghurkha war of, 1815, the Treaty of Sigauli allowed Sudarshan Shah to rule over Tehri Garhwal, while the Pauri Garhwal and Kumaun was brought under the Governor General, who administered it as a Non- Regulation Area by the Commissioner of Kumaun who was more powerful than any other commissioner in the United Provinces. He had both executive and judicial powers and also acted until 1937 as the British agent to the Tehri principality .It was then placed under the Punjab Hill States Agency, and later under the Ministry of States. Between 1815 and 1947 Kumaun had some legendary Commisoners, and the tenures of G. W. Trail 1816-36), Henry Ramsay (1856-84), and Percy Wyndham (1913-24) are remembered in local folklore as well.

However, by 1864, the operational 'power' in the hills started shifting to the Forest department. In 1868 the management of the forests of Kumaun was handed over to this department .The Indian Forest Act of 1878 outlined process whereby the state could take over forest areas for its exclusive use. This has to be seen in the context of the great railway expansion project by the colonial Empire, especially after the Crown took over the direct administration. The objective was wanted to ensure the movement of men and materials across the length and breadth of the sub-continent. Even in the administrative

headquarters of Kumaun , the forest around the town of Nainital was demarcated and declared 'protected'.

The kingdom of Tehri Garhwal followed the British example even more brazenly for there was money to be made from 'wooden sleepers' and the income from forests was the mainstay of the revenue of the Tehri Raj. Tehri was also home to Frederick Wilson, who began collecting the pelts of animals and stuffing the skins of the monal pheasant , rare white tigers, black and brown bears, and the musk deer for commercial profit. Later he used his extensive knowledge to provide a major chunk of the two million sleepers requisitioned for the Railways.

However all this meant that the peasants, artisans and craftsmen who lived in the vicinity of the forest lost their traditional sources of livelihood. The boundaries of the reserved forest now extended right up to their fields and houses. Forest exploitation was proceeding apace even as villagers were no longer allowed to practice shifting cultivation .The consequence of all this was sporadic *dhandaks* (protests) under the leadership of Badri Singh Aswal and Lachham Singh Kathait .The prominent nationalist leader G. B. Pant drew up a detailed chart to show the reality of this "resource kidnap" between 1897 and 1916. The First World War intensified the demand for timber and 400,000 sleepers were sent out of Kumaun, but by this time, the peasants rose in revolt against the restriction on their traditional and customary rights. The other irksome issue was the institutionalised system of *Begar* (*work without remuneration*) for the visiting officials of the forest and revenue departments.

In 1916, with the formation of the Kumaun Parishad and a clear position taken by the local press, protest began to take the shape of an organized movement. Forest issues had merged with the strife against *Begar*. The merger had lent depth to the struggle. In various gatherings the abolition of *Begar* and the

restoration of forest rights were permanent demands presented repeatedly. On 11 May 1919 a gathering chaired by Hargovind Pant in the Nandadevi Prangan (temple compound) of Almora demanded the abolition of Begar and the restoration of full rights over forests.

In 1921 a Kumaun Forest Grievances Committee (K.F.G.C.) was constituted to understand problems relating to forest land. To a large extent, this committee restored the forest rights of local farmers. While valuable forest areas remained with the state, villages were encouraged to manage the areas close to their settlements – those designated as “van Panchayats”. By the time of independence, there were close to 500 van Panchayats in the Kumaun Division.

Meanwhile, in 1938, the Congress Party held a conference at Srinagar in Garhwal and raised the issues pertaining to both Kumaun and Tehri. Jawaharlal Nehru participated in this conference held under the Presidency of Pratap Sing Negi. Nehru agreed that the people in these hills had a right to take their own decisions and enriches their culture in view of their peculiar circumstances. Later in 1939 the Congress, in its political meet at Pauri, witnessed the emergence of *Garhwal jagrit Sanstha* which comprised those Congressmen (like Pratap Singh Negi) who were not satisfied with the progress in regard to the demands of the hill people. In Kumaun in the meanwhile leaders like Badri Dutt Pande (Kumaun Kesri) and Puran Chand Tiwari demanded a separate administrative unit for the hills in a meet held in 1946 at Haldwani. Later Badri Dutt Pande sent this demand for the consideration of the States Reorganization Commission.

Meanwhile, the popular protest movements in Tehri were also gaining strength, and even though the maharaja had banned all political activities in his state, the Rawain and the Saklana revolts over forest restrictions and chess on potatoes,

and the resistance to Pontoti tax (customs duty) were the precursors to the freedom movement on princely Garhwal. Chandra Singh Bhandari 's refusal to open fire on his fellow Indians at Peshawar Cantonment symbolized the Garhwali resistance m and made him a legendary figure who inspired Garhwali youth against both feudal and British oppression. Meanwhile , a Praja Parishad came up in Dehradun and leaders like Sridev Suman, Paripurnananda Penyuli and Virendra Datt Saklani fought for the fundamental political and economic rights of the people of Tehri. (TBC)