

# one **kangra: an overview**

## **Background**

Kangra is the most populous district of Himachal Pradesh (HP). It is bisected by an east-west valley approximately 128 km long and 58 km wide, with an elevation varying from 350 to 6,975 metres above sea level (masl). The valley is drained by the Beas River, and along its northern boundary lies the majestic Dhauladhar range, a massive snow-covered wall. The southern slopes fall precipitously to the valley's lush, fertile fields. Originally, the area's many different caste groups spoke various dialects of Pahari, the language of the hills.

To understand the background of forest management in Kangra, it is necessary to understand the prevailing land settlement and revenue systems. Throughout centuries of early rule, formal ownership of all land was vested with the raja, in the classical model of a Hindu state. Actual property rights, however, were in the nature of hereditary, customary 'rights of use' called 'warisees' that could be mortgaged and recovered more or less like property. At the same time, in addition to their warisees, every household enjoyed customary rights of use in the nearby forests and pasturage during the monsoon months in the nearby ranges. Thus, while the 'property' of land was not in the name of tenant farmers, their proprietary rights for cultivated lands were clearly defined and rights in nearby forests were also laid down by centuries of access and use. This system excluded large areas of forest land and pastures in the hilly uplands that were only used by long-range graziers.

The structure of governance created by the British Raj and its exploitation of India for Great Britain's revenue requirements required clear ownership of land and the formalisation of revenue systems. British land policies thus initiated a process of land settlements, demarcating and classifying lands under individual use as private. Forests and grazing lands to which village communities had access and defined shares of extraction were called 'shamlats' (common land) and the traditional customary rights were codified as formal rights. Forests far from a village which formed a common resource pool for timber and migratory pastoralism were given various designations with local communities exercising varying degrees of rights over them. Warisee holders became formal landowners and for the first time the Kangra hills saw private ownership of property.

The traditional form of revenue assessment and collection had varied from region to region with the raja's share ranging between one half and one fourth of the produce, depending on land productivity, irrigation, and other factors. The British made revenue a cash payment, creating stresses on the hills' non-cash based subsistence economy. Given Kangra's poorer productivity

compared to farm land on the plains, this revenue was not very significant. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the government saw that revenues from farm land in the hill areas could not provide sufficient profit and meet the cost of governance. Attention turned to the large tracts of forest land with their rich stands of commercially exploitable ‘devdar’, ‘chil’ (known in most of India and HP outside Kangra, as ‘chir’), ‘khair’ and other timber trees.

With the change to cash payment of revenue, the British also made all land owning farmers of a village collectively responsible for paying as a lump sum the revenue assessed for all the now privately owned cultivated lands in the village. While the revenue system thus required farmers to act as a co-propriety body, no community based institutional mechanisms were created for such new community behaviour. Although this privatisation of commons seems egalitarian, the actual degree of co-propriety in villages divided by caste hierarchies was apparently very poor, and led to the consolidation of the landed gentry’s control over socioeconomically weaker castes.

Early historical accounts reveal that nomadic pastoralism was another form of natural resource use evolved in the hills, diversifying communities’ dependence on fragile and limited agricultural land. These pastoral tribes kept large flocks, which they grazed on the valley floor during winter and on alpine and permanent pastures in the mountains at other times. Their grazing rights in the forests were recognised as customary warisees. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the British became increasingly interested in the higher earnings possible from timber and commercial forestry. Although the grazing pressure on forests was not heavy, the British required that forest land be liberated of the burden of grazing. Grazing was discouraged by converting the pasturage toll into cash, restricting flock sizes, and encouraging pastoralists to settle down and become cultivators.

## **Systems of Forest Management**

In the Kangra hills, as elsewhere in the Himalayas, forests played a major role in shaping the people’s socioeconomic destiny and the state’s political strength. Changes in systems of forest management radically redefined the relationship of people to their forests. When the British acquired Kangra in 1846, the complexity of the prevailing land and forest use systems confounded them. Lands that had belonged to the kings became state property by default and forests were placed under the deputy commissioner. The basic unit of revenue was defined as a group of hamlets, a ‘mauza’, and ownership of all the lands and forests they used was transferred to a co-propriety body formed from the residents.

The government initially retained only a general right on forest property in the form of timber, subject to the villagers’ right to extract fuel and timber for agricultural purposes. The process of consolidating the Raj, however, soon led to massive building programmes, in addition to the network of railway lines being spread across the country. Both required timber urgently, and the only forests capable of yielding timber of sufficient quality and quantity were on the Himalayan slopes. The British Government began to prioritise control over forest land. By 1853, while the soil of all Kangra forests belonged to the people, the government was the de facto owner of trees of spontaneous growth. With no formal declaration, total control of the management of all forests other than village commons had been taken over<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The state property in wastes was quietly announced by the Board of Administration in 1852, 26 years before the statutory enactment of the Forest Act of 1878. The Board proposed: “...after defining the village boundaries and allowing such reasonable extent of land as may suffice for the wants of the communities being included in each area, to declare lands beyond these boundaries government property.”



The forests of KFCS Arla Saloh

The formation of the Forest Department (FD) in 1870 institutionalised the system of forest exploitation. The government created more than 6,500 ha of reserved forests (RF), pleading that some forests had to be ‘unburdened from the rights of the people’, in other words, protected *from the people for the people*, and ignoring the fact that local communities had been successfully managing their forests themselves for thousands of years. Local people had no rights in these RFs; in lieu, affected communities were given forests of equal size near their villages and special monies and land concessions.

Unlike earlier settlement officers who were sensitive to the relationship of communities with their forests, the new officers of the nascent FD followed principles of ‘scientific forestry’, viewing forests as resources whose returns, timber and revenue, should be maximised. All forests composed of non-timber trees were called ‘wastes’, their soil-binding, water recharging, and wildlife aspects being relegated to secondary importance.

New forest acts provided legislative teeth to these intentions and by 1897 nearly 5,500 ha of forests were notified as demarcated protected forest (DPF) for which the FD was totally responsible. In this type of forest, the trees belonged to the government, subject to the reservation of the rights of the users, and the soil belonged to the people. No appropriation of land was permitted and a quarter to a third of the total forest area could be closed for regeneration. Forests, as well as grazing and pasture land, were largely converted to commercial timber forests. Forest contractors became the focus in the village economy for short-term wage labour based on intensive working of the ‘government forests’. Interest in this work divided communities, suppressing effective opposition to the state’s interest in commercialising the forests.

Other economic changes included the intensive linking up of the Kangra hills to the vibrant market economies of the plains and the new livelihoods and opportunities provided by the infrastructure of local government offices. Kangra’s affluent classes had developed a diversified subsistence base in response to the limitations of hill agriculture. Enjoying a high degree of mobility within the options for off-farm profit making, and a stronger risk-taking ability, they

reaped the maximum benefit of monetisation of the hill economy and thus promoted the state's interests while increasing their hold over the village economy. The mid-level primarily agrarian castes suffered the most from the shrinkage in forest use and access. Although they comprised more than three-quarters of the population, they were spread over the district and could not organise any strong opposition to these policies.

A significant and unique feature of forest management in Kangra was the age-old system of formalising each family's exact usufruct right, with the specific forests they could access being recorded. In the 1890s these were accepted as a households' legal entitlement, but by 1920 the orthodox forestry conservancy saw these rights as a burden. State policy declared that they could not be exercised if they might "endanger the existence of the forests over which the rights are admitted<sup>2</sup>." Such restructuring of people's rights – limiting those of marginal farmers, tenants, and sharecroppers – used the increasing influence of the upper castes, who shared the state's dominant commercial interests, to redefine forest rights in favour of the commercial exploitation of forests.

The British period saw great population growth; by the end of 1901, Kangra's population density had reached 322 persons per sq.km of cultivated area. The simultaneous growth in the needs of livestock, agriculture, and habitation put intense biotic pressure on the village, or unclassed, forest (UF). Even the existing DPFs proved inadequate. Local systems of grazing management, whereby livestock were rotated among different sites during different seasons, were burdened by the shrinkage of buffers due to the contemporary land policy. The limited common lands crossed the level of sustainable extraction and became degraded, bringing biotic pressure to bear on both DPF and undemarcated protected forest (UPF).

To counter this deforestation, the FD employed essentially restrictive strategies, as follows.

*Reservation*: reducing or curtailing people's rights to forests to conserve the existing stands. The FD sought to take over unclassed and shamlat lands, which were already inadequate, and close them as reserved forests. This provoked opposition from the farming castes.

*Reduction of flocks by taxation*: limiting excessive grazing by taxation of flocks in excess of actual agricultural, as opposed to pastoral, requirements. Differential taxes were introduced, penalising goats as opposed to sheep. Grazing fees were levied on migratory animals and a cattle tax was levied on indigenous flocks. Thus, efforts were made to restrict, in favour of agriculture, the use of different types of land for cultivation or for pastoralism

*Rotational closures*: attempting to have village communities voluntarily close their grazing lands and wastes. These attempts, however, could not provide a solution to the rapidly worsening condition of the forests and were strongly opposed by most village communities.

## The Status of Forest Resources

British policies restricted people's access to major forest areas, and reduced their dependence on these forests by turning them into commercial monoculture forests of chil, khair, devdar, and other species irrelevant to the local communities' needs. These policies concentrated biotic pressure on the few remaining scrub forests left open. Along with privately owned agricultural land, these became the main sources of fodder and fuelwood.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson. Final Report of the Settlement of Kangra District; Article 15 of Kangra Forest Record of Rights.

At the same time, the government inhibited pastoralism, a major occupation in the hills, forcing people into settled agriculture. By the 1920s, no more land could be cleared for agriculture and the increasingly fragmented agricultural land could hardly provide for the newly settled families' fodder and fuelwood requirements. Pressure for fodder shifted onto the already stressed scrub forests, especially those in the rain-fed subsistence areas of Kangra's fragile lower Siwalik hills. These forests had long been providing for local needs, but suddenly faced a rapid increase in extraction processes. The newly naked and sloping terrain experienced high rainfall, and unprecedented soil erosion ensued.

The FD blamed uncontrolled grazing and illegal felling for the deforestation and soil erosion of undemarcated forests, failing to understand the role its own revenue-oriented policies had played. Removing large forest areas and converting them into commercial forests forced people to focus extraction on the few remaining buffer forests, leading to rapid deterioration. Such non-participatory forest management promoted both wasteful and illegal extraction. Some conservation-oriented foresters in the FD cited the ecological damage brought about by this system of forest conservancy and built pressure from within to experiment with alternative forms of forest management and for the FD to shift towards participatory forest management mechanisms.

The department also began feeling pressure because of its poor financial returns. This contributed to the decision to experiment with a changed forest management strategy in which the users were given more responsibility for forest protection and also a share of the profits. Further, the specific problems of mountain areas like inaccessibility, fragility, marginality, and diversity (Jodha 1990) also played a role in making centralised and commercial forest management economically and ecologically unsustainable and were another factor that encouraged the FD to experiment with alternative management systems.