theJournals

Review of Social Sciences and Humanities Research, e-ISSN: 3107-7978
July-December 2025 | Volume: 01, Issue: 02, Page No.: 01-06
https://doi.org/10.64006/rsshr/1201

REVIEW ARTICLE |Received:18th July. 2025 | Revised: 20th August. 2025 | Accepted: 15th October. 2025 | Published: 12th December 2025

The Green Frontier: Environmental Histories and Colonial Exploitation in Chhotanagpur

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ABSTRACT

The Chhotanagpur region is known for its dense forests and Adivasi population. These forests have provided the basis for the socio-cultural, spiritual, and economic lives of the Adivasi people. This paper tries to explore the long environmental history of the region. Particularly, it looks at the impact of colonial forest policies and resource extraction. The paper argues that the core objective of the colonial forest policies was to generate state revenue. This process turned the forests into a global commodity and a source of raw materials for the industries. Further, it effectively separated the Adivasi communities like Munda, Oraon, and Santhal from their ancestral lands with the help of legal and physical force. The study analyses the shift from traditional *Sarna* (sacred grove) culture to state-controlled forestry during the 19th and 20th centuries. It also highlights the systemic roots of the ecological crisis in modern Jharkhand, including groundwater depletion and soil toxicity. Finally, it examines the continuous resistance of indigenous movements against exploitation during and after the colonial period.

Keywords: Chhotanagpur, Colonial Exploitation, Sarna, Adivasi, Forest

INTRODUCTION: The Plateau as an Ecological Crucible

Environmental history in India is mainly focused on either government-led conservation efforts or the study of the high-altitude ecology of the Himalayan range. However, the Chhotanagpur region is a unique case for study. As in this region, ecology and identity are interlinked to a history of violent exploitation of both natural and human resources. For the indigenous tribes, the forest was a sacred entity called Bir in the Mundari language rather than a collection of trees, a backdrop for life, or a commercial resource (Munda, 2002, p. 14). The Chhotanagpur region was governed by tribal customary laws that preferred collective ownership of the resources over individual ownership. These laws ensured the sustainable and regenerative management of forests based on treatment of interdependence between the people and their environs (Prasad, 2003, p. 42). The Chhotanagpur plateau's geography consists of undulating hills, lateritic soil, and dry deciduous forests. In this specific landscape, the Adivasi communities like Munda, Oraon, Ho, and Santhal tribes developed settled agriculture and forestry systems that were a balance between human need and ecological health (Xaxa, 2008, p. 31). Their agro-forestry was a combination of permanent rice terraces in the valleys and managed forests on the hillslopes. This system was able to sustain high levels of biodiversity, as well as support a population by providing food sources.

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How to cite: Ranjan, P., Hashmi, T., & Singh, M. P. (2025). The green frontier: Environmental histories and colonial exploitation in Chhotanagpur. *Review of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, *1*(2), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.64006/rsshr/1201

The entry of British colonialism into the region fundamentally changed this landscape. They viewed the region as a "Green Frontier" for capitalist growth and imperial expansion (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, p. 12). The Chhotanagpur forests had vast timber resources, especially the hardwood Sal tree (*Shorea Robusta*). These woods were needed to maintain the growth of the Indian Railways and the British Royal Navy. The need to access these resources by colonialists to support mercantile and military activities sparked the emergence of the so-called scientific forestry and the subsequent finding of huge stores of coal and iron ore. Moreover, this process resulted in a more methodological exploitation of the resources in the region, which was based on extraction as opposed to survival at the local level. This change essentially transformed the bond between the humans and the land. And turned a sacred geography into a mapped territory of assets. The paper demonstrates how colonialism turned indigenous cultural landscapes into administrative units for extraction. At the same time, the Adivasis of the region organised resistance movements that have lasted for over a century in multiple phases (Guha, 2000, p. 102).

Pre-Colonial Ecology: The Sarna and Khuntkatti Systems

The Adivasis of Chhotanagpur had a spiritual and ecological centre called Sarna (Sacred Grove). These were preservations of the old-growth forest, which are preserved without human interference. It was believed that these groves were the homes of village spirits referred to as Bonga (Munda, 2002, p. 28). The *Sarna* served as a kind of pre-conservation prototype. The tribals also maintained local seeds and ensured that the water table remained constant even during the most extreme dry seasons by conserving the forest patches as sacred groves (Jewitt, 2008, p. 114). These were also sacred groves where social meetings took place. The Adivasis concentrated here to hold the community rituals and strengthen the social ties and the ties with nature.

There were tribal festivals such as Sarhul and Karma, which were celebrated based on the seasons of the plateau. E.g. *Sarhul* was celebrated during the flowering of the Sal tree, the start of the agricultural year. It is a period when the tribal community requests permission from the forest spirits to use the resources of the forest. This harmonious life was destroyed when the British came into the picture, and they brought the legal concept of eminent domain. According to this idea, all the so-called waste land or land not subject to permanent cultivation and taxed as such was owned by the state (Gadgil & Guha, 1992, p. 116). This definition deliberately disregarded the complex forest-fallow and gathering systems of the Adivasis that had been in use for thousands of years.

Colonial Forest Policy: The Criminalisation of Tradition

It was not until the 1865 and 1878 Forest Acts that the formal exploitation of the forests was taken seriously. These regulations classified forests into: Reserved, Protected and Village. They have succeeded in removing the traditional rights of Adivasis to hunt, collect non-timber forest produce, and access to woods for their daily needs (Sundar, 2007, p. 88). The act also prohibited the practise of shifting cultivation or *Jhum*, which the British considered a primitive method that destroyed the growth of timber. As a matter of fact, *Jhum* was a well-regulated fire-succession regime that kept the forests healthy, which could not serve the British interest of having tall and straight timber crops (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, p. 45).

Colonial forestry had no connection with ecological conservation, but rather, it was an instrument to increase the territorial control of the state over the landscape. In Chhotanagpur, the Sal tree became a standardised property of the British Crown, rather than a source of local medicine, ritual resin and leaf-plates. Sacred *Sarna* groves had often been neglected or deforested by colonial foresters to create rows of plantations. This brought about profound spiritual traumas and social breakdown in the tribes since the very homes of their spirits had been burnt to make money (Munda, 2002, p. 35).

The 1878 Act was particularly draconian, since it changed the burden of proof regarding land ownership completely. It involved tribal villagers to write written documents which are called the deeds of land that had been under oral practises and collective memory for centuries (Skaria, 1999, p. 192). The British made it a criminal offence to collect wood or even graze cows in places that were now designated as the Reserves. This way, they made the Adivasis trespass in their own ancestral homes (Guha, 2000, p. 105). This was one of the main reasons

behind agrarian unrest, as this was a legislative enclosure of the commons. It has put the tribal people into a condition of perennial illegality. The above pressures saw a direct result in the significant uprisings and messianic movements that were witnessed in the late 19th century as the people struggled not only for land but also their right to live in their own environment (Gadgil & Guha, 1992, p. 132).

Timber, Railways, and the 'Sal' Economy

The mid-19th century witnessed a massive "Railway Boom" across the Indian subcontinent. This infrastructure project required millions of wooden sleepers to support the expanding tracks. Because Chhotanagpur was located near the industrial centre of Calcutta and the nascent coalfields, it became a primary source of timber (Corbridge, 1988, p. 10). The expansion of railway lines, such as the Grand Chord, did more than just transport wood. It physically carved through the plateau, breaking the geographical isolation of the tribes and opening the region to the *Diku*, or "predatory outsider," economy (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, p. 108).

The ecological consequences were catastrophic and long-lasting. Vast areas of primary forest were clear-felled. Without the canopy to break the monsoon rain, the lateritic soil suffered from rapid erosion, leading to the permanent drying up of perennial mountain streams (Gadgil & Guha, 1992, p. 145). For the Santhal and Munda communities, the forest had served as a vital "buffer" against famine. It provided food when crops failed. When the forest was destroyed, this safety net vanished, leaving the population vulnerable to starvation during natural fluctuations in rainfall (Prasad, 2003, p. 55).

The colonial state promoted the railways as a civilising advancement. The railways, however, served as suction pumps to the local people. They drained the natural wealth of the plateau toward imperial ports. A predatory group of contractors and money-lenders were also the result of the timber economy. These agents of the middle classes manipulated Adivasi labour by debt bondage and forced labour, called Begar (Sundar, 2007, p. 112). By 1910, the forest cover of such districts as Ranchi and Hazaribagh was reduced by almost 40 percent. This destruction permanently changed the micro-climate of the region making them to experience high temperatures and less humidity (Sivaramakrishnan, 1999, p. 115). The wildlife such as the tiger and the elephant also died because of the destruction of the forest and this affected the ecological balance that the tribes had been maintaining over generation.

The Subterranean Shift: Mining and the Industrial Gaze

Towards the end of the 19 th century, the colonial gaze changed its focus out of the forest canopy to the minerals that are deep in the ground. The much more devastating stage of exploitation was triggered by the discovery of coal of high quality in Jharia, and huge reserves of iron ore in Noamundi (Padel & Das, 2010, p. 22). Chhotanagpur plateau is positioned on a crystalline shield, which is mineral-endowed (coal, iron, copper, and bauxite). The colonial power was fast to ensure that these resources were available in the international industrial market and the expanding steel industry in Jamshedpur (Corbridge, 1988, p. 15). Heavy mining operations involving open-cast mining destroyed the topography of the land. Complete hills, which were holy to the tribes as abodes of the high spirits were cleared to flat and bare land (Padel & Das, 2010, p. 45). The Damodar and Subarnarekha rivers received toxic waste and tailings of these mines. This contaminated the drinking water of thousands of people and killed aquatic organisms upon which the tribes depended (Prasad, 2003, p. 62).

This 'subterranean shift' brought about colossal demographic transformation as well. Migrant workers were imported as mine labourers in large numbers. This resulted in the large-scale eviction of the original Adivasi people out of their land (Xaxa, 2008, p. 65). The Jharia coalfield remains a haunting legacy of this era. It was once a thick and vibrant forest, but due to such exploitation of the natural resources it was transformed into a underground furnace of uncontrollable coal fires. These fires are more than 100 years old and emit poisonous gases and the surface cracks. Permanent seismic and atmospheric damage brought about by these fires was overlooked by the British who were desperate to get energy (Padel & Das, 2010, p. 58). To the Adivasi people the mine was a wound in the earth and a literal desecration of the mother goddess, Dharti Aba. It was not only an

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economic shift but a complete cultural and spiritual meltdown as they were replaced with mine labour as opposed to forest gathering (Munda, 2002, p. 52).

Post-Colonial Continuity: Nehruvian Temples and Displacement

The Indian independence in 1947 did not stop exploitation of Chhotanagpur. The stress exerted to the environment in the plateau was in most aspects heightened during the new national government. Prime Minister Nehru considered heavy industry and massive engineering as the key driver of a modern India. The concentration of minerals in Chhotanagpur made it to be declared as the industrial powerhouse of the nation (Xaxa, 2008, p. 82). The state formed the Heavy Engineering Corporation (HEC) in Ranchi and the gigantic Bokaro Steel Plant. Hydroelectric schemes organised by the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) also did start their projects with much fanfare. Nehru used to refer to them as the temples of modern India (Baviskar, 2004, p. 26).

However, these temples were constructed directly over the Adivasi village graveyards. Thousands of acres of fertile forest and farmlands were flooded by the DVC dams alone. This compelled movement of more than 100,000 people with the majority being the indigenous population (Baviskar, 2004, p. 28). Such families could hardly be compensated fairly or well rehabilitated. They were instead usually transported to rehabilitation colonies which did not provide the possibility of land and forest which they needed to survive.

The postcolonial state merely borrowed the logic of eminent domain of its British predecessor, which is often more efficient (Xaxa, 2008, p. 88). It considered the plateau as the land of resources whose sole aim was to support the greater national interest. It was during this time that the so-called Developmental Refugee was born. This displaced character, who is no longer attached to the land and forced to work precariously in the cities, is one of the key and tragic figures of the present-day political rhetoric of Jharkhand (Corbridge, 1988, p. 22). This industrialization came at an environmental price of mass deforestation and the pollution of the soil and air by the industrial heavy metals.

Ecological Resistance: From Forest Satyagrahas to Pathalgadi

History of Chhotanagpur is not only a history of victimisation but a history of aggressive and well organised opposition. The ecological integrity of the indigenous movements has always been associated with their political independence (Guha, 2000, p. 110). The Santhal Hul of 1855 and the Munda *Ulgulan* (Great Tumult) of 1899 were not just tax revolts. They were environmental rebellions. They were waged to restore the right over the traditional land and forests from the alliance of British officials and outsider landlords who were perceived to be desecrating the earth (Sundar, 2007, p. 142).

During the period of the 1920s and 30s, the area saw several Forest *Satyagrahas*. The national independence movement contributed to these protests, but they were mainly different in the sense that they were concerned with immediate repossession of certain forest usage rights, but they were instigated by the local grievances of forest access (Guha, 2000, p. 125). Symbolic resistance became common with tribal communities cutting wood and grazing cattle in areas designated as reserved blatantly opposing the ownership of the forest by the state.

This resistance, in the post-colonial period, has changed to resisting massive projects which prove to be threats to the very existence of tribal life. The Koel-Karo movement in the seventies of the last century is a historic achievement. Over 19 years, the tribal communities have managed to prevent a mammoth dam construction project which would have floated 200 villages and clear thousand hectares of forest. Mass mobilisation and court battles were employed (Baviskar, 2004, p. 52).

This trend of claiming a territorial sovereignty is still practised through the recent Pathalgadi movement of the Khunti district. The community claims its sovereign right to natural resources by building stone slabs inscribed with constitutional rights and tribal laws at the village entry points. According to the movement, the state is not allowed to interfere with their land since the supreme authority can only be the Gram Sabha (village council)

(Xaxa, 2008, p. 115). These movements indicate that Adivasi people continue to perceive land as a living, sacred being and cannot sell it to industrial development.

Contemporary Crisis: Mining, Climate Change, and Jharkhand

The Chhotanagpur plateau is in an ecological crisis that is unprecedented and multi-layered in the 21 st century. The extractive regime has just expanded with demands of steel and aluminium all over the world (Padel & Das, 2010, p. 112). The small areas of primary forest that still exist have been wiped out by illegal mining that is usually defended by the local political and criminal elite. These mines work without any supervision on their environmental front that has left a disfigured landscape that will never revert to its normal state (Jewitt, 2008, p. 156).

The subsequent deforestation has led to drastic reduction in the ground water table within the region. Previously existing wells that supplied water throughout the year dry now during spring. This water shortage has devastated the traditional farming thus, compelling most families of Adivasis to leave their homes and travel to distant cities such as Delhi or Mumbai to become unskilled and exploited labourers (Xaxa, 2008, p. 142). Deforestation also implies that the so-called wild foods which fed on lean months will be lost as well, and the result will be a health crisis in most tribal blocks.

These local environmental wounds have been exacerbated by the global climate change. The plateau had been characterised by a pleasant climate and stable monsoons. The heat waves and unpredictable rain patterns that occur today are leading to extreme weather conditions in the region that render conventional farming virtually unfeasible (Prasad, 2003, p. 88). Deforestation of the great Sal forests has also greatly diminished the capacity of the area in carbon sequestration, and this is part of the feedback loop of warming. Environmental history is not a far-off academic pursuit to the people of Jharkhand. A battle to survive physically and culturally is a constant struggle. The plateau view of the violated landscape also acts as a clear awakening call to the fact that the colonial project of commodifying nature is still a living project and is not yet completed (Jewitt, 2008, p. 182).

CONCLUSION: The Path Toward Decolonial Ecology

The Chhotanagpur's environmental history is a story of an immensely violated landscape. This colonial culture of treating nature as a mere warehouse of products has been carried on to the new age. This is exploitation in the pretext of national development and international economic integration. The ongoing environmental crisis in Jharkhand characterised by disappearance of forests, inaccessibility of water, and poisonous pollution is the immediate consequence of two hundred years of extractive policies which focused on profit maximisation at the expense of human beings (Gadgil and Guha, 1992, p. 182). These policies were very selective in recognising the symbiotic and spiritual connexion of the Adivasi people with their surroundings.

It will take a decolonial strategy towards environmental management to create a sustainable future of Chhotanagpur. This is not only planting trees or making green areas where people are excluded. It involves the realisation of legal and moral rights of the indigenous communities as the main and the best custodians of the land (Jewitt, 2008, p. 210). The state needs to stop the rhetoric and implement the Forest Rights Act of 2006 to its full potential, which offers the community an opportunity to manage the forests in a community-based approach. The only thing that would restore the situation is to incorporate the traditional tribal wisdom, e.g., the Sarna model, with the contemporary ecological knowledge. The region can only be headed to an ecologically stable, socially just, and indeed sustainable future once the sacred and ancestral connexion between *Jal, Jangal, and Jameen* (Water, Forest, and Land) is restored (Munda, 2002, p. 85).

AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

CRediT author statement / Author contributions
Prabhat Ranjan: Conceptualisation; Validation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Writing – Original Draft.
Tabish Hashmi: Supervision; and Project Administration.

How to cite: Ranjan, P., Hashmi, T., & Singh, M. P. (2025). The green frontier: Environmental histories and colonial exploitation in Chhotanagpur. *Review of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, *1*(2), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.64006/rsshr/1201

Man Prakash Singh: Writing – Review & Editing; Visualisation.

Acknowledgement: The authors would like to state that no specific funding or support was received for this study.

Conflict of interest: The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest.

AI statement: This work has benefited from the use of Grammarly, an AI-powered language tool, which assisted in grammar checking, spelling correction, and clarity improvements. No generative content was produced by Grammarly; the responsibility for the ideas, interpretations, and conclusions remains solely with the authors.

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