

The Impact of British Forest Policies on the Ecology of the Ajodhya Hills during the Colonial Period (1765–1947)

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Abstract

*This article examines the ecological consequences of British forest policy in the Ajodhya Hills, a sal-dominated hill and plateau tract of the former Jungle Mahals and Manbhum region — today part of Purulia district, West Bengal — across the colonial period from the founding of the Jungle Mahals administration in 1765 to Indian independence in 1947. Using a qualitative, document-based historical method, the study analyses colonial administrative categories of "Reserved," "Protected," and "Village" forest; the commercial logic of railway-sleeper and naval-timber demand that drove the reservation of sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest; and the erosion of customary tribal rights of usufruct, grazing, shifting cultivation, and collection of minor forest produce. Drawing on the wider environmental historiography of colonial India (Guha, 1990; Gadgil & Guha, 1992; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999) together with recent regional scholarship on the neighbouring Jhargram forests (Sahoo et al., 2023) and national reassessments of colonial forest restoration (Roy & Fleischman, 2022), the article situates the Ajodhya Hills within the broader pattern of "scientific," monoculture-oriented state forestry that reduced species diversity, disrupted the sal-dominated dry deciduous ecosystem, and provoked cycles of tribal resistance from the Santhal Hul of 1855 through to the forest satyagrahas of the 1930s. The study concludes that colonial forest policy in the Ajodhya Hills produced a durable legacy of state-centred forest governance, biodiversity simplification, and tribal alienation from customary forest rights that persisted well beyond 1947.*

Keywords: Ajodhya Hills; Purulia; colonial forest policy; Indian Forest Act; environmental history; tribal rights; Manbhum; sal forest.

I. Introduction

The Ajodhya Hills — locally known as Ajodhya Pahar, and referred to in some colonial gazetteers by the neighbouring range name Dalma — form the principal upland tract of the present-day Purulia district of West Bengal, at the easternmost edge of the Chota Nagpur Plateau. The hills, whose highest points are Gorgaburu and Chamtaburu, rising to between roughly 650 and 855 metres, are drained by the Kasai (Kangsabati) and Subarnarekha river systems and are covered by tropical dry deciduous forest in which sal (*Shorea robusta*), along with piyal, palash, mahua, sidha, and segur, are dominant, sheltering elephants, leopards, wolves, pangolins, and, by contemporary counts, more than three hundred recorded bird species.

The administrative history of this tract begins in earnest with the formation of the *Jungle Mahals* district by the East India Company in 1765, immediately after the grant of the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, which brought the forested western fringe of Bengal — including the future Manbhum and Ajodhya tract — under Company revenue administration for the first time.

For most of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries this hill tract remained administratively marginal, governed loosely through local zamindars and tribal headmen, its forests functioning as a common-pool resource for Santhal, Munda, Ho, Bhumij, and Kurmi cultivators who practised a mixed economy of settled and shifting (jhum) cultivation, grazing, and the collection of non-timber forest produce (mahua flowers, sal seed, lac, honey, and fuelwood). This pattern of relatively autonomous, customary forest use began to change decisively from the 1850s, as the colonial state's growing demand for railway sleepers, construction timber, and revenue led to the extension of "scientific" forestry — and its accompanying legal apparatus — into peninsular and eastern India. The present study traces how that apparatus, embodied successively in the Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927, transformed the ecological and social order of the Ajodhya Hills between 1765 and 1947.

1.1. The Conceptual Framework

This study is situated within the field of environmental history as it has developed in relation to colonial South Asia since the 1980s. Two broad interpretive positions frame the debate. The first, associated principally with Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, reads colonial forest legislation as an instrument of state "annexation" of forest resources that displaced pre-existing customary and communal rights in favour of commercial exploitation, producing what Gadgil and Guha (1992) term an "ecological history" of dispossession.

The second, associated with Richard Grove and later revisited by Barton and Bennett (2008), argues that elements of colonial forestry — particularly the conservationist wing of the Indian Forest Service — pre-empted or resisted purely extractive tendencies and laid groundwork for later conservation science. The present study adopts an integrative conceptual framework, treating colonial forest policy neither as a monolithic project of exploitation nor as a proto-environmentalist enterprise, but as a contested field of "state simplification" (in James Scott's sense) in which commercial revenue imperatives, strategic timber demand, and an emergent forestry science combined to reclassify a heterogeneous, multi-use forest landscape into a small number of legally legible categories — Reserved, Protected, and Village forest — with lasting ecological and social consequences for tribal communities such as those of the Ajodhya Hills.

1.2. The Statement of the Problem

The Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927, the creation of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864, and the resulting conflicts with tribal and peasant communities — are well documented for regions such as the Central Provinces, the Western Himalaya, Madras, and, more recently, the neighbouring Jhargram tract of West Bengal (Sahoo et al., 2023), the specific ecological and social trajectory of the Ajodhya Hills within the former Manbhum–Jungle Mahals region has received little dedicated scholarly attention. Existing literature on Purulia and Manbhum tends either toward general district gazetteer description or toward post-independence eco-tourism and forestry statistics, leaving a gap in the historical record regarding how colonial forest law was actually administered, resisted, and ecologically felt in this specific sal-forest tract. The problem this study addresses, therefore, is twofold: first, to reconstruct, from the available administrative and secondary historical record, how the successive Forest Acts were applied to the Ajodhya Hills and the wider Manbhum forests; and second, to assess the resulting ecological transformation — in terms of forest composition, extent, and management regime — and its consequences for the traditional resource-use practices of the tribal communities of the region.

1.3. The Significance of the Study

The study is significant on three counts. First, it contributes a locality-specific case study to the environmental historiography of colonial Bengal, extending the existing body of work on the neighbouring Jhargram forests (Sahoo et al., 2023) and on Chota Nagpur tribal history more broadly to the comparatively understudied Ajodhya–Manbhum tract. Second, it has direct relevance to contemporary forest governance, understanding the colonial genealogy of forest administration in the Ajodhya Hills sheds light on present-day tensions between the Forest Department and the Forest Rights Act (2006) regime in the same tract. Third, the study offers a source of comparative material for scholars of tribal resistance and environmental justice, situating the Ajodhya Hills alongside better-documented episodes such as the Santhal Hul of 1855 and the Birsa Munda Ulgulan of 1899–1900 within a single regional field of colonial forest conflict.

1.4. Research Objectives

- O1. To analyze the impact of British forest policies, particularly the Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927, on forest administration and ecological transformation in the Ajodhya Hills.
- O2. To investigate the effects of colonial forest exploitation, including timber extraction and forest reservation, on the ecological balance of the Ajodhya Hills.
- O3. To assess the impact of colonial forest management on the traditional rights, and resource-use practices of the tribal communities in the Ajodhya Hills.

1.5. The Delimitations of the Study

The study is delimited in the following respects. Temporally, it is confined to the colonial period proper, from the formation of the Jungle Mahals administration in 1765 to Indian independence in 1947, and does not extend its primary analysis into the post-independence Forest Policy of 1952 or subsequent legislation, though these are referenced briefly for continuity. Geographically, it is confined to the Ajodhya Hills and their immediate administrative hinterland within the historical Manbhum district (the present Purulia district of West Bengal and adjoining tracts of Jharkhand), rather than the whole of the Chota Nagpur Plateau. Methodologically, given the qualitative, document-based design, the study relies on published secondary historical scholarship, gazetteer material, and secondary compilations of colonial administrative data rather than on unpublished archival forest-settlement records specific to the Ajodhya range, which — as noted in the Findings — remain a gap for future archive-based research. Finally, the study's ecological assessment is necessarily qualitative and comparative rather than based on quantified colonial-era biodiversity survey data specific to the Ajodhya Hills, since no such granular dataset is available in the secondary literature consulted.

II. The Review of Related Literature

International Literature

Roy and Fleischman (2022), writing from the University of Minnesota, trace the long history of forest restoration policy in India across the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Their central finding, directly relevant to the present study, is that the colonial forest administration's definitions of "forest" changed as revenue priorities shifted, and that the involvement of forest-dependent communities in restoration and management was structurally limited throughout the period under review. As the authors put it, the "colonial exclusion of people from forests was based on an irrational and inadequate understanding" of ecological requirements (Roy & Fleischman, 2022). This finding supports the study's second objective regarding the ecological consequences of exclusionary reservation in tracts such as the Ajodhya Hills.

Sahoo, K. P., Ghosh, S., Allarakha, S., & Siddique, G. (2023) this study of the Jhargram forests — geographically and ecologically the closest published analogue to the Ajodhya Hills, lying in the same lateritic, sal-dominated belt of south-western West Bengal — finds that colonial-era legislation "imparted negative impact both on the forest ecosystem and the livelihood of forest dwellers" and that the indigenous forest people of the district, "those dependent on the services of forest ecosystems have been deeply affected by the forest policies implemented before and after India's independence" (Sahoo et al., 2023). Because Jhargram and the Ajodhya–Manbhum tract share a common colonial administrative lineage in the former Jungle Mahals, this is the single most directly comparable published source for the present study and is used throughout Section 4 as a regional benchmark.

National Literature

Rajak and Chaturvedi (2023), of the Department of History, Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University, provide one of the most data-rich recent Indian analyses of colonial forest and wildlife legislation, compiling long-run statistical series on forest ownership, land-use change, and wildlife bounty payments drawn ultimately from Gadgil and Guha's (1992) *This Fissured Land*. Citing Guha's (2001) description of the effect of the 1878 reservation process on forest-dependent communities, the authors quote the vivid contemporary characterisation that "the poor tribe instantly found themselves outcasts in their own wilderness" (Guha, 2001, as cited in Rajak & Chaturvedi, 2023). Their compiled statistics on the growth of government forest area from 40 million acres in 1850 to 120 million acres by 1947 are used as a national benchmark in Table 2 of the present study, in the absence of Ajodhya-specific colonial statistics.

Patil (2025), of MIT World Peace University, offers a broad environmental-history synthesis tracing Indian ecological policy from precolonial sustainable-use traditions through colonial exploitation to postcolonial industrialisation. The study's relevance to the Ajodhya Hills case lies in its characterisation of colonial forestry as an administrative apparatus that "systematically dismantled indigenous resource management systems, imposing extractive models that prioritized revenue generation over ecological sustainability," and its observation that the colonial forestry department "managed forests primarily for commercial timber production, particularly teak and sal for shipbuilding and railway sleepers, disregarding multiple forest values recognized in indigenous management systems" (Patil, 2025). Because sal is the dominant commercial species of the Ajodhya Hills, this national synthesis provides direct corroborating context for the present study's account of timber-driven reservation in the region.

2.1. The Research Gap

The reviewed literature converges on three points directly relevant to this study: that colonial forest legislation reorganised forest tenure around state revenue rather than ecological or subsistence criteria (Roy & Fleischman, 2022; Patil, 2025); that this reorganisation had measurable negative consequences for forest-dependent tribal communities in the sal-forest belt of south-western Bengal (Sahoo et al., 2023); and that the administrative categories it created persist, in modified form, into the present (Rajak & Chaturvedi, 2023). None of the five sources, however, nor the wider literature consulted for this study, offers a dedicated historical-ecological account of the Ajodhya Hills specifically. The Jhargram study by Sahoo et al. (2023) is geographically and ecologically proximate but examines a different administrative unit; the remaining sources are national or India-wide in scope. This constitutes the research gap that the present study addresses: a locality-focused reconstruction of colonial forest policy and its ecological and social effects in the Ajodhya Hills of the former Manbhum–Jungle Mahals tract.

III. The Methodology of the Study

Research Method — Qualitative Research Method

This study employs a qualitative, historical-documentary research method appropriate to environmental history as a discipline. Rather than generating primary quantitative data, the study systematically collects, triangulates, and interprets published historical scholarship, colonial legislative texts, gazetteer descriptions, and

secondary compilations of colonial administrative statistics bearing on forest policy in the Ajodhya Hills and the wider Manbhum–Chota Nagpur region. The qualitative approach is chosen because the object of inquiry — the administrative, ecological, and social transformation of a specific forest tract over nearly two centuries — is best reconstructed through the interpretive synthesis of textual, legislative, and historiographical evidence rather than through experimental or survey-based quantification.

Research Design

The study follows a historical-descriptive and interpretive research design, structured in three analytical stages: (a) a chronological reconstruction of the legislative and administrative framework applied to the Ajodhya Hills (the Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927, and associated reservation and settlement processes); (b) a thematic analysis of the ecological consequences of that framework, including changes in forest composition, extent, and management regime; and (c) an analysis of the social consequences for tribal resource-use practices and the resulting patterns of resistance and accommodation. Triangulation is achieved by cross-referencing regional secondary literature (particularly the Jhargram study of Sahoo et al., 2023) against national-level colonial forest statistics (Gadgil & Guha, 1992, as reported in Rajak & Chaturvedi, 2023) and locality-specific gazetteer and heritage documentation on the Ajodhya Hills themselves.

Population

The "population" for this document-based qualitative study consists of the universe of published scholarly and archival-derived material bearing on colonial forest policy in eastern India generally and the Manbhum–Ajodhya Hills tract specifically

Sample and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was used to select sources for detailed analysis, guided by three inclusion criteria: (i) direct relevance to colonial forest legislation and its administration in India, with priority given to sources treating Bengal, or the Jungle Mahals/Manbhum region; (ii) relevance to the ecological character of sal-dominated dry deciduous forest of the type found in the Ajodhya Hills; and (iii) relevance to tribal (Santhal, Munda, Ho, Bhumij) forest-rights history in the same region.

Research Instrument

As a qualitative documentary study, the principal research instrument is a structured document-analysis protocol (a source-coding matrix) applied uniformly to each source, recording: (a) the legislative or administrative provision discussed; (b) the geographical scope and period covered; (c) the ecological outcome reported or implied; (d) the social/tribal-rights outcome reported or implied; and (e) any quantitative data (forest area, revenue, species composition) provided. This protocol was used to build the comparative tables presented in Section 4.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection proceeded in four stages. First, a systematic literature search was conducted across academic databases and repositories (Elsevier ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, Cambridge Core, SAGE Journals, Semantic Scholar, and Google Scholar–indexed institutional repositories) using search terms combining "Indian Forest Act," "colonial forestry," "Ajodhya Hills," "Purulia," "Manbhum," "Jungle Mahals," "Chota Nagpur," and "tribal forest rights." Second, locality-specific gazetteer, heritage, and tourism-department documentation on the Ajodhya Hills (West Bengal Tourism Department; Centre for Environment Education heritage portal; Wikipedia's consolidated gazetteer entry) was collected to establish physical and administrative-historical facts about the tract. Third, foundational monographs and articles in the environmental history of colonial India (Guha, 1990; Gadgil & Guha, 1992; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999; Barton & Bennett, 2008) were consulted to establish the interpretive framework. Fourth, all collected material was coded using the source-coding matrix described above and synthesised thematically into the analysis.

IV. The Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents four evidentiary tables, each drawn from documented sources, followed by detailed interpretation connecting the national and regional data to the specific case of the Ajodhya Hills. Because no digitised, locality-specific colonial forest-settlement statistics for the Ajodhya range were located in the secondary literature consulted.

4.1. The Legislative Framework Applied to the Ajodhya Hills

Table 4.1. Provisions of the Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1927 and their Application to the Manbhum–Ajodhya Tract

Act / Year	Key Provisions	Application to Ajodhya / Manbhum Tract	Source
Indian Forest Act, 1865	Empowered government to declare any forested land a "Government Forest"; first legal assertion of state control over forest produce.	Extended the reach of the newly created Imperial Forest Department (1864) into the Jungle Mahals administration inherited from 1765; began the formal legal separation of forest from customary tribal tenure.	drishtiiias.com (2024); ebooks.inflibnet.ac.in
Indian Forest Act, 1927	Consolidated the 1878 classification; described in the Act's own preamble as "expedient to consolidate the law relating to forests" (Weil, 2006/2022); codified forest-offence and penalty provisions; incorporated the revenue-favouring 1894 Forest Policy Resolution.	Formed the standing legal basis for Ajodhya/Manbhum forest administration for the remainder of the colonial period and, with modification, into the post-1947 era; underpinned the later Forest Rest House and reserve-forest infrastructure still present at Ajodhya Hill Top and Matha.	History Cooperative (Weil, 2022); Indian Forest Act 1927, Wikipedia

Table 1 shows a consistent legislative trajectory: each successive Act narrowed the legal space available for customary tribal forest use while widening state administrative control. In the specific case of the Ajodhya Hills, this trajectory is corroborated by the tract's own institutional legacy — the presence, still visible today, of colonial-derived Forest Rest Houses at Ajodhya Hill Top and at Matha, and the retention of "Reserve Forest" as the dominant land classification of the hills, as reflected in present-day tourism and forest-department documentation describing the area as the "Ajodhya Hill and Forest Reserve Area" (superbcollections.com, 2024).

4.2. Forest Ownership and Land-Use Change: National Benchmark Data

Table 4.2. Forest, Private, and Communal Land Ownership in Colonial India, 1850–1947 (million acres)

Year	Government Forest	Private Forest	Communal Forest	Interpretation for Ajodhya Hills
1850	40	60	10	Pre-reservation baseline; Manbhum/Ajodhya forests still substantially under zamindari and communal tribal management.
1900	100	20	0	Post-1878 Act reservation drive largely complete nationally; communal tenure category eliminated from the official record — consistent with the disappearance of Ajodhya's customary jhum and grazing commons from colonial administrative categories by this date.
1947	120	10	0	Government forest area reaches its colonial-period maximum; private forest reduced to a residual category. The Ajodhya Hills enter independence almost entirely under Reserved/Protected classification.

Source: Gadgil, M., & Guha, R. (1992). *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (as reported in Rajak & Chaturvedi, 2023).

Although Table 2 reports national aggregate figures rather than data specific to the Ajodhya Hills, the trend it documents — the near-total conversion of communal forest tenure into government forest between 1850 and 1900, followed by continued growth to 1947 — is structurally consistent with, and provides the quantitative backdrop for, the qualitative record of forest reservation in the Manbhum tract described in Section 4.1. The elimination of the "communal forest" category by 1900 is of particular interpretive significance for the Ajodhya Hills: it corresponds to the period in which the customary jhum-cultivation and grazing commons of Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij cultivators in the tract would, under the logic of the 1878 Act, have been reclassified as either Reserved forest (with usufruct prohibited) or Protected forest (with usufruct permitted only as a revocable state concession).

4.3. Land-Use Shift: Forest and Agricultural Area, 1850–1947

Table 4.3. Land-Use Shifts in Colonial India, 1850–1947 (million acres)

Land Use	1850	1900	1947	Interpretation for Ajodhya Hills
Agriculture	200	250	300	Expansion of settled cultivation at the forest margin nationally parallels the encroachment of paddy cultivation onto the lower slopes of the Ajodhya Hills and the Kangsabati valley, displacing shifting cultivation upslope into increasingly restricted Reserved-forest margins.
Forest	40	100	120	Reflects the same reservation dynamic as Table 2; today Purulia district retains 29.69% forest cover, concentrated substantially in the Ajodhya and Panchet hill tracts, a proportion broadly consistent with the colonial-period reservation pattern having fixed the outer boundary of forest land that survives to the present.
Other (wasteland, urban, etc.)	60	50	30	Steady decline in the residual "wasteland" category nationally corresponds to the colonial administrative tendency to reclassify tribal-managed fallow and jhum-cycle land — often recorded as "waste" — into either agricultural or reserved-forest categories, removing the buffer land on which shifting cultivation depended.

Source: Gadgil, M., & Guha, R. (1992) (as reported in Rajak & Chaturvedi, 2023)

Table 4.3 indicates that between 1850 and 1947, colonial land-use policies substantially altered the balance between agricultural and forested landscapes. The steady expansion of agricultural land reflects the extension of settled cultivation into the lower slopes and valley regions of the Ajodhya Hills, reducing the area available for traditional shifting cultivation practiced by tribal communities. Simultaneously, the increase in recorded forest area resulted largely from the reservation of forests under colonial legislation rather than from natural forest regeneration, bringing extensive tracts under state control. The decline in the "other" land category demonstrates the administrative reclassification of tribal-managed fallow and jhum lands as either agricultural or reserved forests, thereby restricting customary land-use systems. Overall, these land-use shifts transformed the ecological landscape of the Ajodhya Hills while undermining indigenous resource management practices and altering the relationship between tribal communities and their environment.

4.4. Tribal Resistance in the Chota Nagpur–Manbhum Region

Table 4.4. Chronology of Tribal Resistance to Colonial Land and Forest Policy Relevant to the Manbhum–Ajodhya Region

Year(s)	Event	Relation to Forest Policy	Source
1855–1856	Santhal Hul, led by Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, and Bhairav Murmu and their sisters Phulo and Jhano, beginning 30 June 1855.	Primarily a revolt against zamindars, moneylenders, and land alienation under the Permanent Settlement, but directly implicated the colonial administration's reorganisation of forest and hill tenure in the wider Bengal–Chota Nagpur belt within which Manbhum lay; led to the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act of 1876.	Drishti IAS (2024)
1893	Recorded unrest in Chotanagpur over forest and land policy.	Cited explicitly among the forest-related tribal uprisings of the late nineteenth century alongside Gudem-Rampa (1879–80) and Bastar (1910).	Rajak & Chaturvedi (2023)
1899–1900	Munda Ulgulan ("Great Tumult"), led by Birsa Munda, in the Chota Nagpur region contiguous with Manbhum.	Combined resistance to loss of the Khuntkatti communal land-tenure system with resistance to forest and land alienation to "dikus" (outsiders); led to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908.	Dalvoy UPSC (2025); Drishti IAS (2024)
1920s–1930s	Coordinated agitation against forest reservation and "the arbitrary behavior of forestry staff," converging with the wider nationalist movement.	Prompted limited colonial concessions such as forest grievance committees and van panchayats in other provinces; in Bengal and Bihar these decades saw continued tribal petitioning against Manbhum forest-settlement operations.	IJNRD (2023)

While the documented major uprisings (the Santhal Hul and the Munda Ulgulan) occurred in adjoining tracts of the wider Chota Nagpur–Santhal Parganas region rather than being confined to the Ajodhya Hills specifically, the hills' Santhal, Munda, Ho, and Bhumij population placed the tract within the same social and administrative field as these movements: Manbhum, of which the Ajodhya Hills formed the upland core, lay directly between the Santhal Parganas and Chota Nagpur proper, and its forest-settlement operations under the 1878 and 1927 Acts were administered by the same provincial forest bureaucracy that provoked resistance in both neighbouring tracts. Guha's (2001) description, quoted by Rajak and Chaturvedi (2023), that reservation left "the

poor tribe instantly found themselves outcasts in their own wilderness," applies with equal force to the customary forest-users of the Ajodhya Hills, even though village-level petition records specific to the tract were not available for this study.

4.5. Ecological Interpretation: Species Composition and Forest Simplification

The colonial forestry regime's ecological logic was overwhelmingly commercial rather than conservationist in the Ajodhya Hills, as in most of the sal belt of eastern India. Sal (*Shorea robusta*) — prized for railway sleepers, construction timber, and its resistance to decay — was the primary commercial target of reservation, and its silvicultural management under "scientific forestry" typically favoured single-species regeneration (sal coppice-with-standards systems) over the mixed, multi-storey forest composition (sal alongside piyal, palash, mahua, shirsh, and segur, as still recorded in present-day botanical descriptions of the hills) that had supported the tract's traditional multi-resource tribal economy. As Patil (2025) observes at the national level, the colonial forestry department "managed forests primarily for commercial timber production, particularly teak and sal for shipbuilding and railway sleepers, disregarding multiple forest values recognized in indigenous management systems." Applied to the Ajodhya Hills, this commercial silvicultural logic can be read as the ecological mechanism underlying the long-term simplification of the forest's species structure — even as the tract's present-day forest cover (part of Purulia's overall 29.69 percent) demonstrates that outright deforestation, as opposed to compositional simplification and use-restriction, was not the dominant colonial-period outcome in this particular tract, a finding consistent with Barton and Bennett's (2008) broader argument that the Indian Forest Service did not uniformly accelerate deforestation nationally.

V. The Findings of the Study

- Legislative escalation: The Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1927 progressively narrowed the legal space for customary tribal forest use in the Manbhum–Ajodhya tract, converting communal and zamindari forest tenure into state Reserved and Protected forest categories by the turn of the twentieth century (Table 2).
- Commercial rather than conservationist motive: Reservation in the sal-dominated Ajodhya Hills was driven principally by railway-sleeper and construction-timber demand, consistent with the national pattern documented by Patil (2025) and the specific regional pattern documented for Jhargram by Sahoo et al. (2023).
- Persistence of forest cover with compositional change: Unlike some heavily logged colonial tracts, the Ajodhya Hills retained substantial forest cover into the present (part of Purulia's 29.69% district forest cover), suggesting that the dominant colonial-period ecological impact was compositional simplification and use-restriction rather than outright deforestation — a finding aligned with Barton and Bennett's (2008) reassessment of the Indian Forest Service's national record.
- Erosion of customary tribal rights: Grazing, shifting (jhum) cultivation, and minor-produce collection — central to Santhal, Munda, Ho, and Bhumij subsistence — were curtailed or converted into revocable state privileges under the 1878 and 1927 Acts, corroborating the third research objective.
- Regional pattern of resistance: Although no village-specific Ajodhya Hills petition or uprising record was located, the tract lay within the same administrative and social field as the Santhal Hul (1855) and the Munda Ulgulan (1899–1900), and the wider literature records the same pattern of everyday resistance — trespass, arson, and non-compliance — that characterised other tribal forest tracts under the 1878 Act.
- Institutional legacy: Colonial-derived forest administration infrastructure (Forest Rest Houses, Reserve Forest classification) persists in the Ajodhya Hills into the present, illustrating the continuity noted in Rajak and Chaturvedi (2023) between colonial and post-independence forest governance.
- Evidentiary gap: No digitised, locality-specific colonial forest-settlement statistics for the Ajodhya Hills were located in the secondary literature consulted; the quantitative analysis in Section 4 therefore relies on regional (Jhargram) and national proxy data, a limitation for future archive-based research.

VI. Recommendations

- Archival research: Future studies should undertake dedicated archival research in the West Bengal State Archives and the National Archives of India to recover Manbhum district forest-settlement records, revenue records, and Forest Department annual reports specific to the Ajodhya range for the period 1865–1947, which were not accessible for this document-based study.
- Oral history: Given the continued residence of Santhal, Munda, Ho, and Bhumij communities in and around the Ajodhya Hills, structured oral-history collection of inter-generational memory regarding colonial-era forest restrictions would substantially strengthen the social dimension of the historical record, complementing the documentary approach used here.

- Comparative regional study: A systematic comparative study linking the Ajodhya Hills with the neighbouring Jhargram forests (Sahoo et al., 2023), Dalma, and Panchet tracts would help establish whether the ecological and social patterns identified here are tract-specific or characteristic of the wider former Jungle Mahals region.
- Policy continuity analysis: Given the documented continuity between colonial-era Reserved Forest classification and present-day Forest Department administration of the Ajodhya Hills, further research should examine the interaction between this colonial legacy and the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (2006) in the tract.
- Ecological baseline reconstruction: Where possible, historical vegetation-survey and forest-working-plan data from the colonial and early post-independence periods should be digitised and compared with present-day forest-cover and species-composition data for the Ajodhya Hills to quantify the compositional simplification hypothesized.

VII. Conclusion

This study has traced the ecological and social consequences of British forest policy in the Ajodhya Hills across the full span of the colonial period, from the formation of the Jungle Mahals administration in 1765 to independence in 1947. Although no dataset specific to the tract itself was available, the convergence of legislative evidence (the Acts of 1865 and 1927), regional comparative evidence (the Jhargram study of Sahoo et al., 2023), and national quantitative evidence (Gadgil & Guha, 1992, as reported in Rajak & Chaturvedi, 2023) supports a coherent account: colonial forest policy reorganised the Ajodhya Hills from a multi-use commons governed substantially by customary tribal practice into a state-administered Reserved and Protected forest estate managed principally for commercial sal timber, with the accompanying curtailment of grazing, shifting cultivation, and minor-produce rights central to Santhal, Munda, Ho, and Bhumij subsistence. The tract's continued forest cover into the present suggests that the dominant colonial-period impact was one of ecological simplification and legal enclosure rather than wholesale deforestation, while its persistent Reserved Forest classification and Forest Rest House infrastructure attest to an institutional legacy that outlasted colonial rule itself. The study accordingly underscores the value of locality-focused environmental history in illuminating how national-level colonial forest law was lived, resisted, and ecologically registered in a specific, comparatively under-documented tribal forest tract, and it points to archival and oral-history research as the necessary next step for deepening this account.

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