Kumaon villagers campaign against British forest regulations, 1916-1921

1916 to: 1921

Country: India
Location City/State/Province: Kumaon

Goals:
To reclaim the use of forest resources for subsistence, and bring an end to forest exploitation on the grounds of commercial profitability under British colonial rule.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 023. Destruction of own property › Incendiarism
- 029. Symbolic reclamations › Incendiarism
- 063. Social disobedience
- 067. "Flight" of workers › Threatened
- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 023. Destruction of own property › Incendiarism
- 029. Symbolic reclamations › Incendiarism
- 063. Social disobedience
- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 023. Destruction of own property › Incendiarism
- 029. Symbolic reclamations › Incendiarism
- 063. Social disobedience
- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
• 135. Popular nonobedience
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 4th segment:

• 023. Destruction of own property  › Incendiarism
• 029. Symbolic reclamations  › Incendiarism
• 063. Social disobedience
• 101. Refusal of impressed labor
• 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
• 135. Popular nonobedience
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 5th segment:

• 023. Destruction of own property  › Incendiarism
• 029. Symbolic reclamations  › Incendiarism
• 063. Social disobedience
• 101. Refusal of impressed labor
• 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
• 135. Popular nonobedience
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 6th segment:

• 023. Destruction of own property  › Incendiarism
• 029. Symbolic reclamations  › Incendiarism
• 063. Social disobedience
• 101. Refusal of impressed labor
• 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
• 135. Popular nonobedience
• 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 048. Protest meetings
• 097. Protest strike
• 099. Peasant strike
• 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Democracy
Economic Justice
Environment
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:
• Villagers and rural residents in Kumaon

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Not known

Partners:
Not known

External allies:
Not known

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
Joining order not known

Segment Length: Approximately 1 year

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
British colonial government and the forest department

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
From 1916 to 1921, villagers in Kumaon in northern India set hundreds of forest fires to protest the colonial British state’s increasing regulations of the natural environment.

Rural residents of Kumaon depended on forests as a source of firewood for heating and cooking, fodder for livestock, and manure for fields. However, the British looked to fell thousands of trees to create railway sleepers. Commercial forestry thus acted as the impetus for a decision to carve extensive reserves in Kumaon forests. Furthermore, department officials associated local practices with environmental destruction and deforestation, and used such justifications to defend efforts to regulate vast stretches of forest. Over the course of three decades, the forest department took control of nearly half the land in Kumaon, and classified most of it under specific rules and regulations. By 1907, the forest department sought to protect land from fire, as well as to restrict fodder harvests, cattle grazing, and lopping. Between 1911 and 1916, the continued creation of forest settlements put an additional 3,000 square miles of forest in Kumaon under restricted use.

Commercial forestry and the changes it brought in its wake—tighter regulations and reclassifications—left Kumaoni villagers with less control over forest resources for grazing and collecting fodder. The imposition of forest management severely dislocated traditional agrarian practices.

Villagers adopted a wide range of strategies to protest the forest reservation policies of the government. They broke almost all the rules they were supposed to follow. Many actions occurred at the individual level, such as when a villager would—in direct defiance of forest regulations—extract forest products such as fodder and fuel, and graze their livestock. A group of villagers belonging to Tindarpur in Garhwal considered the option of flight, and expressed wishes to migrate into another district and climate rather than endure the new forest regulations and restrictions. Villagers also used noncompliance with imposed regulations by giving misleading information to Divisional Forest Officers (DFOs).

Collectively organized breaches of forest law occurred most often at the peak of new restrictions, such that more militant forms of resistance emerged with the onset of forest management. A growing campaign sprung from the same motivations underlying the sporadic protests that took place during the early years of forest administration. Between 1916 and 1921, Kumaon villagers led massive demonstrations and strikes in response to territorial aggrandizements and growing restrictions on forest access and use.

In deliberate and organized incendiarism during the summer of 1916, villagers set a number of newly constituted reserved forests ablaze. In May, villagers set forests in the Gaula range of Naini Tal on fire. The damage took place exclusively in forests with trees that the colonial government was interested in using for commercial purposes. As a result of the fires, 28,000 burned trees had to be prematurely felled. Many other fires broke out simultaneously over large areas. At times, a particular incident of fire acted as the signal for general incendiarism in the surrounding area. In North Garhwal, forty-four fires occurred. Villagers wiped out a crop of seedlings in Naini Tal—an area that had been ‘fire protected’ for many years. In Airadeo, a fire lasted for three days when locals restarted it as it died down.

Forest protests came to a head once again during the organized and widespread incendiarism of 1921. Although hill peasants occasionally used labor strikes to cripple the administration, burning the forests continued to be their main method of protest. An estimated 246,000 acres of forest were burnt in a total of 395 recorded fires. The protests enjoyed wide popular support, and the administration was unable to detect people involved.

In the years 1916-1921, village protest against government policy regarding forests intersected with grievances about the coolie system of forced labor extraction, under which villagers were required to meet the colonial administration’s labor needs. In 1916, leaders in the hills of Kumaon established the Kumaon Parishad, with the aim of abolishing forced labor. The opposition to forced labor also coincided with the forest campaign when it took a turn toward greater radicalism in 1921. An upsurge in incendiary fires in forests was mirrored by fiercer protests against forced labor. Hundreds of villagers risked arrest by refusing to
perform required labor, and many attended a series of continuous meetings in different Kumaon villages. Meanwhile, Kumaon residents showed opposition to the coolie labor system in demonstrations and meetings.

Mass discontent also coincided with the return of more than ten thousand Kumaoni soldiers that the British had recruited to serve in World War I. It is likely that the influx of these trained soldiers with strong ties to the Kumaon villagers pressured the British government even further.

Annual reports of the forest department reflected the vehemence of the villager protests in Kumaon. The 1921 annual report admitted that working plans in East Almora had to be abandoned, and the entire subject of forest policy under Kumaon was under review. The following year’s annual report attributed a breakdown in control of forest offences to pressure from the forest campaign. Forest officials stated contemplated abandoning the forest due to pressure from an increased number of grazing infractions.

Eventually, the forest campaign led the state to concede to the demands of the Kumaonis, and compelled the forest department to forsake many of its working plans. The government appointed the Kumaon Forest Grievances Committee. Composed of government officials and local political leaders, the committee examined more than 5,000 witnesses in Kumaon. It became clear that many of the laws were unenforceable rules that directly interfered with the villagers’ ability to secure a livelihood. The committee composed a set of nearly 30 recommendations from the resulting evidence. The recommendations advocated a reduction in the area of forest under control of the forest department, and a repeal of all regulations on grazing and collecting of fodder from the forest. The provincial government accepted the recommendations of the Kumaon Forest Grievances Committee. The committee also recommended that villagers be permitted to set up forest councils that, following the transfer of land, would manage forests lying within the village boundaries. This recommendation was eventually formalized by the creation of the Forest Council Rules of 1931. The Rules led to the establishment of 3,000 elected forest councils to manage Kumaon forests. Villagers successfully reclaimed their use of natural resources for subsistence and brought an end to forest exploitation on the grounds of commercial profitability under colonial rule.

Research Notes

Sources:


Additional Notes:
Although sources refer to the campaign as the 'Forest Movement of 1921,' villager resistance to the colonial British state’s regulation of the environment began as early as 1916. The campaign against forest regulations occurred simultaneous to an anti-(forced)labor campaign, and the two drew energy from each other.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (23/06/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Anjali Cadambi, 25/10/2010

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