

Environmental Transformation and Tribal Society in the Ajodhya Hills of Puruliya under British Colonial Rule (1765–1947)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the environmental transformation of the Ajodhya Hills of Puruliya (present-day Purulia district, West Bengal), a tract of the eastern Chhotanagpur Plateau inhabited predominantly by Santal, Bhumij, Munda, Kharia-Sabar, and Birhor communities, under British colonial rule between 1765 and 1947. Situated within the historic Jungle Mahals — constituted as an administrative unit by Regulation XVIII of 1805 following the Diwani grant of 1765 and the Permanent Settlement of 1793 — the hills witnessed a sustained reorganization of land, forest, and water relations under colonial revenue and forestry regimes. Using a qualitative-historical method that triangulates colonial gazetteers, revenue and forest administration reports, ethnographic accounts, and secondary scholarship in environmental history, the study addresses three questions: the character of pre-colonial tribal ecological practice; the impact of colonial forest legislation (1865, 1878, 1927) on the region's ecology; and the consequences of colonial resource extraction — timber felling, mining prospection, revenue-driven agrarian expansion, and famine — on the physical and social environment of the hills. The article situates the Ajodhya Hills within the wider revolts of the Jungle Mahals, including the Chuar Rebellion (1798–1799) and the Bhumij or Jungle Mahal Uprising of 1832–33 led by Ganga Narayan Singh, reading these as expressions of ecological dispossession as much as fiscal grievance. Findings indicate that colonial intervention converted a customary, multi-use forest-agrarian landscape governed by communal and ritual regulation into a state-controlled, revenue-extractive terrain, precipitating deforestation, soil degradation, recurrent famine after the 1860s, and the criminalization of subsistence practices such as shifting cultivation (kurao) and hunting. The study contributes a locality-specific case to the historiography of Indian environmental history and situates the Ajodhya Hills within comparative debates on colonial forestry across South Asia and the wider colonial world.

Keywords: *Ajodhya Hills; Puruliya; Jungle Mahals; Tribal Society; Colonial Forest Policy; Environmental History; Santal; Bhumij; Deforestation; Permanent Settlement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Ajodhya Hills, an undulating plateau of roughly 320 square kilometres spanning the Baghmundi, Jhalda, Balarampur, and Arsha blocks of present-day Purulia district, form the easternmost spur of the Chhotanagpur Plateau (Wikipedia, 2026; West Bengal Tourism, n.d.). Rising to its highest point at Gorgaburu, the hill tract is drained by the Kangsabati, Subarnarekha, and Kumari rivers and was, in the pre-colonial and early colonial period, covered extensively by sal, mahua, piyal, and mixed dry-deciduous forest. Scheduled Tribes today constitute 18.45 per cent of the district's population, the largest group being the Santals, followed by Bhumij, Munda, Kharia-Sabar, and the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, the Birhor (Purulia District, 2026). These communities historically organized their lives around forest, hill, and river — dependent on shifting and terrace cultivation, minor forest produce, and communal hunting rites such as the Disom Sendra, an annual hunting festival held on the Ajodhya massif that continues to draw Santal participants from across the region (Gorgaburu, 2026).

Colonial rule in this tract begins conventionally with the Mughal grant of Diwani (revenue authority) over Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa to the East India Company in 1765, and acquires administrative concreteness with the formation of the Jungle Mahals district by Regulation XVIII of 1805, itself a response to the unrest that had convulsed the region since the Chuar disturbances of the 1770s–1790s (Jungle Mahals, 2026; Justdial, n.d.). The area that includes the Ajodhya Hills passed through the jurisdictions of Birbhum, Midnapore, Bankura, and finally Manbhum district before Independence, and became part of Purulia district of West Bengal only after the States Reorganisation of 1956, when Manbhum was partitioned between Bihar and West Bengal. For the colonial period under study (1765–1947), therefore, the Ajodhya Hills are best understood as a constituent tract of Manbhum within the wider Jungle Mahals — a region colonial administrators themselves described as ecologically and administratively distinct from settled Bengal.

1.1. The Theoretical Understanding

This study draws on the theoretical vocabulary of Indian environmental history as it developed from the 1980s onward, particularly the proposition that colonial rule inaugurated a rupture in the relationship between agrarian and forest societies and the natural resource base (Guha, 1989). Guha's distinction between the "annexationist" phase of early colonial revenue extraction and the subsequent phase of "scientific forestry" after 1864 provides an organizing frame for periodizing change in the Ajodhya Hills. The study also engages the argument, associated with Grove et al. (1998) and Rangarajan (1996), that colonial conservation was never ecologically neutral but was structured by commercial and strategic priorities — chiefly the securing of teak and sal timber for railway sleepers, shipbuilding, and military engineering. Skaria's (1999) concept of the colonial construction of "wildness" — whereby forest-dwelling communities were classified as primitive and their customary land use delegitimized — is used to interpret how Santal, Bhumij, and Munda ecological knowledge in the Ajodhya Hills was displaced by colonial administrative categories such as "wasteland," "reserved forest," and "jungle." Finally, the study is informed by the political-ecology proposition, current in comparative colonial historiography, that forest law functioned simultaneously as an instrument of revenue, security, and ecological control (Collins, 2021).

1.2. The Statement of the Problem

Although the broader Jungle Mahals region — including Manbhum, Bankura, and Midnapore — has received growing scholarly attention in recent environmental historiography (Bhunia, 2022), the Ajodhya Hills as a specific ecological and tribal micro-region remain comparatively under-examined as a unit of environmental-historical analysis. Existing studies tend to treat the hills either as a backdrop to tourism promotion or as an undifferentiated part of Manbhum district's agrarian history, without disaggregating the specific sequence by which forest law, revenue settlement, and resource extraction reshaped this particular hill tract and its Santal, Bhumij, Munda, and Sabar inhabitants. The problem this study addresses, therefore, is the absence of a focused environmental-historical account of how colonial policy — from the Permanent Settlement of 1793 through the Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 — transformed the ecology and the customary environmental relations of tribal communities specifically within the Ajodhya Hills.

1.3. The Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is threefold. First, it contributes a locality-specific case study to the historiography of colonial forest policy in eastern India, complementing existing work on Manbhum and the wider Jungle Mahals (Bhunia, 2022; Kar et al., 2025). Second, it situates the environmental history of a small Indian hill tract within a comparative frame that includes colonial forestry in Africa and Southeast Asia (Depari, 2024; Gitau et al., 2025), thereby illuminating both the particularity of the Ajodhya Hills experience and its resonance with a broader colonial pattern of resource dispossession. Third, the study has contemporary relevance: the Forest Rights Act of 2006 explicitly frames its purpose as redressing the "historical injustice" inflicted on forest-dwelling communities by colonial forest law (IDR Explains, 2026), and an evidence-based account of how that injustice was constituted in a specific locality assists in evaluating present-day forest governance and eco-tourism development in the Ajodhya Hills.

1.4. The Research Questions

RQ1. What were the traditional environmental practices of the tribal communities in the Ajodhya Hills of Puruliya during British colonial rule (1765–1947)?

RQ2. How did British colonial forest policies influence the environmental transformation of the Ajodhya Hills?

RQ3. What were the effects of colonial resource extraction on the environment of the Ajodhya Hills during the colonial period?

1.5. Research Objectives

O1. To examine the traditional environmental practices of the tribal communities in the Ajodhya Hills of Puruliya during British colonial rule (1765–1947).

O2. To analyze the impact of British colonial forest policies on the environmental transformation of the Ajodhya Hills.

O3. To investigate the effects of colonial resource extraction on the environment of the Ajodhya Hills during the colonial period.

1.6. The Delimitations of the Study

The study is delimited temporally to the colonial period, 1765 to 1947, beginning with the Diwani grant and ending with Indian Independence, and does not extend to the post-colonial reorganization of Manbhum in 1956 except by way of orientation. It is delimited spatially to the Ajodhya Hills and its immediately administering revenue jurisdictions (Manbhum district and, within it, the Baghmundi, Jhalda, Balarampur, and Arsha tracts), rather than the whole of the Jungle Mahals or Chhotanagpur. Substantively, the study concentrates on forest, land, and agrarian-ecological change and the tribal communities most closely associated with the hills — chiefly Santal, Bhumij, Munda, Kharia-Sabar, and Birhor — and does not attempt a comprehensive social or political history of the wider region. As a qualitative-historical study, it relies on documentary and secondary evidence rather than field ethnography or oral-history interviews, a limitation acknowledged in the methodology section.

2. THE REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

International Literature

Collins, Y. A. (2021). Plotting the coloniality of conservation. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 28, 977–998. This paper develops the concept of the "coloniality of conservation," arguing that colonial-era "scientific forestry" continues to structure contemporary conservation interventions in Tanzania, Nigeria, Peru, and elsewhere in the Global South. Collins (2021) demonstrates how Eurocentric forestry knowledge discredited indigenous ecological practice and was operationalized through exclusionary administrative law — a pattern that this article identifies as directly comparable to the treatment of shifting cultivation and communal hunting in the Ajodhya Hills.

Depari, C. D. A. D. (2024). The persistence of colonial forest control in a social-ecological system. *Global Journal of Environmental Science and Management*, 10(4), 1629–1654. Applying an adaptive-cycle, social-ecological-systems framework to Dutch colonial and post-colonial Indonesia, Depari (2024) traces how colonial forestry decrees (such as the Dutch Gouvernements Besluit of 1897) reorganized customary forest use and produced path-dependent institutional legacies that persisted long after decolonization — a comparative parallel to the durability of the Indian Forest Act of 1927 in independent India.

Gitau, P. N., Kinyanjui, R., & Roberts, P. (2025). Colonial-era settlements and post-colonial legacies have increased the loss of montane forests in the central highlands of Kenya. *Communications Earth & Environment*, 6(1), Article 728. Using historical maps, archival records, and satellite data spanning 1910 to 2024, this study estimates that approximately 46 per cent of Kenya's montane forest cover was lost during the colonial period (1910–1975) owing to large-scale forest concessions and agricultural conversion, with a further 20 per cent lost after independence due to colonially-structured resettlement patterns (Gitau et al., 2025). The study's long-durée, quantified approach to colonial deforestation offers a methodological model, though this article's qualitative approach is necessitated by the comparative scarcity of quantifiable colonial-era forest-cover data for the Ajodhya Hills.

National Literature

Bhunia, A. (2022). Forest management and its impact on tribal livelihood: An imperial political perspective in colonial Jangalmahal in West Bengal. In M. I. Hassan, S. Sen Roy, U. Chatterjee, S. Chakraborty, & U. Singh (Eds.), *Social morphology, human welfare, and sustainability* (pp. 45–68). Springer. Bhunia's (2022) chapter is the most spatially proximate secondary source to this study, examining how forest regulation and commercial leasing in colonial Manbhum — the district within which the Ajodhya Hills lay until 1956 — dislocated forest-dependent Santal, Bhumij, and Munda communities from their ancestral land, forcing many into wage labour and altered agrarian occupations. The chapter's use of Bengal Forest Department correspondence (citing officials such as John Johnstone and William Schlich) directly informs Objective Two of the present study.

Kar, S., Subedi, M. R., Kadam, P., & Dwivedi, P. (2025). Assessing the impact of customary ownership of trees and socioeconomic factors on the participatory forest management in Jharkhand, India. *Environmental Management*. Advance online publication. Drawing on the neighbouring Chhotanagpur tract of Jharkhand — ecologically and administratively continuous with Manbhum and the Ajodhya Hills before 1947 — Kar et al. (2025) show that the centralized forest governance regime established in the colonial period disrupted a previously symbiotic relationship between tribal communities and forest resources, a disruption whose institutional afterlife continues to shape participatory forest management outcomes in the present. Their finding that displaced households show systematically lower participation in community forestry corroborates this article's argument that colonial dispossession produced not merely a one-time ecological transformation but a durable alienation of tribal communities from forest governance.

2.1. The Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes, with considerable comparative and regional consistency, that colonial forest law restructured forest-tribal relations across South Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia (Collins, 2021; Depari, 2024; Gitau et al., 2025), and that the Manbhum-Jungle Mahals tract specifically underwent comparable transformation (Bhunia, 2022; Kar et al., 2025). However, none of these studies — nor the older regional historiography on which they build (Guha, 1989; Rangarajan, 1996; Sen, 2013) — offers a dedicated, source-based reconstruction of environmental change within the Ajodhya Hills as a bounded micro-region, disaggregated from the wider Manbhum or Jungle Mahals narrative. There is, further, no existing study that systematically connects the region's known agrarian revolts — the Chuar Rebellion (1798–1799) and the Bhumij or Jungle Mahal Uprising (1832–33) — to the specific ecological grievances of communities inhabiting the Ajodhya massif, nor one that traces the chronological sequence of forest legislation (1865, 1878, 1927) against localized evidence of deforestation, famine, and demographic change in this tract. This study addresses that gap.

3. THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Research Method

This study employs a Qualitative Research Method, appropriate to environmental history as a discipline that reconstructs long-term socio-ecological change through the interpretive analysis of documentary, administrative, and secondary textual evidence rather than through statistical inference

from primary field data. The qualitative method allows the study to attend to the meaning tribal communities themselves attached to land and forest — evident, for instance, in the ritual vocabulary surrounding the Disom Sendra hunting festival — in a way that a purely quantitative approach would not capture.

Research Design

The study follows a historical-descriptive and interpretive research design, structured around the three stated objectives. Evidence is organized chronologically (1765–1793; 1793–1865; 1865–1927; 1927–1947) and thematically (customary practice, legislative change, resource extraction), and is triangulated across colonial administrative sources, secondary academic literature, and available census and gazetteer statistics. Given the absence of granular colonial-era statistical series specific to the Ajodhya Hills, the design substitutes triangulated qualitative evidence — legislative texts, administrative correspondence quoted in secondary sources, gazetteer description, and post-colonial census figures used as a terminal reference point — for the quantitative time-series that a purely statistical environmental history would require.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through systematic documentary review comprising: (a) colonial legislative texts, including the Bengal Regulations, the Permanent Settlement Regulations of 1793, and the Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927; (b) colonial administrative and gazetteer literature relating to Manbhum and the Jungle Mahals, including the accounts of Hunter (1877) and O'Malley (1911) and administrative correspondence quoted in later scholarship (e.g., Johnstone, 1871, as cited in Bhunia, 2022); (c) peer-reviewed secondary literature in Indian and comparative environmental history published between 1989 and 2026; and (d) Census of India and district-level statistical data, used principally as a post-colonial baseline against which colonial-era qualitative claims of demographic and ecological change can be contextualized. Sources were read for explicit description of the Ajodhya Hills/Manbhum tract, cross-checked against at least one independent secondary source where possible, and organized into the analytical tables presented in Section 4.

4. THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF OBJECTIVES

4.1. Traditional Environmental Practices

Prior to sustained colonial intervention, the tribal communities of the Ajodhya Hills practised a mixed subsistence economy combining terrace and shifting cultivation (locally kurao), collection of minor forest produce (mahua flowers, sal seed, resin, honey, and tussar cocoons), communal hunting, and pastoral grazing, all regulated through customary and ritual institutions rather than written law. Bhumij chieftains and their subordinate paiks held paikan and ghatwali tenures — service lands granted rent-free in exchange for policing frontier passes — a tenorial arrangement that colonial administrator J. C. Price described in his account of Manbhum, noting that hill communities had been "granted paikan lands by their Rajas for their subsistence" (Price, 1876, as cited in secondary colonial-era administrative literature). Baden-Powell's classic survey of Indian land systems similarly recorded that a local ghatwal chief "was allowed to take the revenue of a hill or frontier tract" in

return for maintaining an armed police force, illustrating how pre-colonial land right in the Jungle Mahals was inseparable from forest and frontier management (Baden-Powell, 1892). Table 1 summarizes the principal categories of traditional environmental practice reconstructed from gazetteer and ethnographic description.

Table 4.1. Traditional Environmental Practices of Tribal Communities in The Ajodhya Hills, Reconstructed from Gazetteer and Secondary Ethnographic Sources

Practice / Institution	Description	Primary Community	Illustrative Source
Kurao (shifting cultivation)	Rotational clearing and cropping of hill-slope forest plots, left fallow to regenerate	Santal, Munda, Bhumij	Modern Forests / Springer gazetteer terminology (dokumen.pub, 2026)
Paikan / Ghatwali tenure	Rent-free service land granted for policing hill passes; hereditary occupancy	Bhumij	Price (1876); Baden-Powell (1892)
Disom Sendra (hunting festival)	Annual communal hunt and worship of Sendra Bonga (forest deity) on the Ajodhya massif	Santal (regional participation)	Gorgaburu (2026)
Sacred groves and sacred water sites	Ritual protection of forest patches and springs (e.g., Sita Kund) restricting felling and pollution	All hill communities	Ajodhya Hills Info (n.d.); Gorgaburu (2026)
Minor forest produce collection	Gathering of mahua, sal seed, resin, tussar cocoons, and medicinal plants for subsistence and barter	All hill communities	Bhunia (2022)
Manjhi-Paragana governance	Village and supra-village Santal council regulating land, forest, and social disputes	Santal	Bon Polashi Eco Hut (2025)

Interpretation. The evidence in Table 1 indicates that pre-colonial and early colonial environmental practice in the Ajodhya Hills was governed by an integrated set of communal, ritual, and tenorial institutions in which land, forest, and water were not administratively separated as they would later become under colonial classification. The Disom Sendra festival, still observed on the Ajodhya massif, is significant evidence of the ritual embedding of hunting practice within a moral-ecological order — one that colonial forest law would later criminalize as poaching under the reserved-forest provisions of 1878 and 1927. This finding directly answers RQ1 and satisfies Objective One: traditional practice combined subsistence shifting cultivation, communal forest-produce gathering, and ritually sanctioned hunting, secured through hereditary service tenures (paikan, ghatwali) rather than individuated private property.

4.2. Impact of Colonial Forest Policies

The transformation of the Ajodhya Hills' forest-tribal relations proceeded through a sequence of colonial legislative interventions, beginning with the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which fixed land revenue and converted zamindars into hereditary revenue collectors with strong incentive to convert forest into cultivated, rent-yielding land (Jhargram district, 2026). J. C. Price and the commissioner of the Tributary Mahals, John Johnstone, both recorded advancing forest destruction across Manbhum in the mid-nineteenth century; Johnstone warned in 1871 that "beautiful forests can only remain if carefully and meticulously conserved," a statement made precisely because such conservation was, in his assessment, already failing (Johnstone, 1871, as cited in Bhunia, 2022). The formal apparatus of state forest control began with the Indian Forest Act of 1865, which for the first time empowered government to declare any wooded land a state forest, followed by the far more comprehensive Indian Forest Act of 1878, which classified forests into Reserved, Protected, and Village categories and asserted state sovereignty over all "wasteland," a category by definition inclusive of tribal common forest (Indian Forest Act of 1878, 2026; IDR Explains, 2026). The Indian Forest Act of 1927 consolidated these provisions and remained, remarkably, the principal forest law in India for the rest of the colonial period and long after (Indian Forest Act 1927, 2025).

Table 4.2. Chronology of Colonial Legislative and Administrative Measures Affecting Forest and Tribal Society in The Jungle Mahals/Ajodhya Hills Tract, 1765–1927

Year	Legislative / Administrative Measure	Provision	Impact on Ajodhya Hills / Jungle Mahals Tribal Society
1765	Grant of Diwani to the East India Company	Company assumes revenue authority over Bengal, Bihar, Orissa	Beginning of colonial fiscal claim over Jungle Mahals hill tracts
1793	Permanent Settlement (Cornwallis)	Land revenue fixed; zamindars given hereditary proprietary right (~89% of rental value)	Incentivized forest clearance for cash-rent cultivation; erosion of communal tenure
1798–1799	Chuar Rebellion	Armed resistance to revenue demand across Midnapore, Bishnupur, Manbhum	Reveals early tribal resistance to fiscal-ecological intrusion
1805	Regulation XVIII of 1805	Formation of Jungle Mahals district	Administrative consolidation of hill tracts including future Ajodhya area
1832–1833	Bhumij Revolt / Jungle Mahal Uprising (Ganga Narayan's Hungama)	Bhumij insurgency against zamindari and colonial fiscal control	Direct resistance from communities of Manbhum/Barabhum adjoining Ajodhya Hills

Year	Legislative / Administrative Measure	Provision	Impact on Ajodhya Hills / Jungle Mahals Tribal Society
1855	Santal Hul	Santal rebellion against zamindars, moneylenders and colonial revenue system in the wider Chhotanagpur-Rajmahal tract	Reinforced colonial view of Santal areas as requiring stricter administrative and forest control
1864	Creation of Imperial Forest Department (Dietrich Brandis)	Institutional apparatus for "scientific forestry"	Beginning of systematic forest survey and demarcation in Bengal
1865	Indian Forest Act, 1865	State empowered to declare any wooded land a government forest	First legal displacement of customary tribal claims to forest
1878	Indian Forest Act, 1878	Forests classified Reserved / Protected / Village; state sovereignty over "wasteland"	Reserved-forest area in Bengal grew from c. 14,000 to c. 76,000 sq. miles by 1890, restricting access
1927	Indian Forest Act, 1927	Consolidation of prior forest law; strict penal provisions for forest offences	Criminalization of shifting cultivation, grazing, and hunting (e.g., Disom Sendra) in reserved tracts

Table 2. Chronology of colonial legislative and administrative measures affecting forest and tribal society in the Jungle Mahals/Ajodhya Hills tract, 1765–1927.

Interpretation. The chronology in Table 2 demonstrates that colonial forest policy did not intrude upon a static tribal ecology at a single moment but unfolded across more than a century and a half in escalating stages: fiscal intrusion (1765–1793), agrarian conversion under the Permanent Settlement (1793 onward), administrative consolidation of the frontier (1805), and finally direct legal appropriation of forest itself (1865–1927). The recurrence of major tribal uprisings at almost every stage of this sequence — the Chuar Rebellion of 1798–1799, the Bhumij Revolt of 1832–33, and the wider Santal Hul of 1855 — indicates that communities of the Jungle Mahals, including those of the Ajodhya Hills, understood and resisted this transformation as it occurred, rather than experiencing it passively. This finding answers RQ2 and fulfils Objective Two: colonial forest policy proceeded from indirect fiscal pressure toward direct legal dispossession, culminating in the 1878 and 1927 Acts, which redefined customary forest use in the Ajodhya Hills as criminal trespass.

4.3. Effects of Colonial Resource Extraction

Colonial resource extraction in and around the Ajodhya Hills combined commercial timber felling, prospecting and small-scale mineral extraction associated with the wider Chhotanagpur-Manbhum mineral belt, and agrarian revenue pressure that drove forest clearance for cultivation. Captain Charles Morgan, an early Company official travelling through the adjoining Ghatsila-Mayurbhanj tract in 1768, described the country as "surrounded on all sides by high hills," densely forested and, in his words, unlike anything available for extraction in Europe (Morgan, 1768, as cited in Price, 1876) — a description that captures the scale of the primary forest resource the colonial state subsequently targeted for revenue. The consequences of sustained extraction and the accompanying agrarian conquest of Manbhum were, by the second half of the nineteenth century, recorded as chronic ecological degradation: contemporary secondary scholarship notes recurrent famine in Manbhum after the 1860s as a direct consequence of the transformation of "centuries old traditional modes of production and environmental resource management systems" under colonial policy (Notion of Resilience, 2023). Table 3 presents indicative quantitative evidence of the scale of change, drawing on both period administrative estimates and later census data used as a terminal reference point.

Table 4.3. Indicative Evidence of Environmental and Demographic Change Associated with Colonial Resource Extraction, Manbhum/Ajodhya Hills Tract

Indicator	Pre-1878 / Early Colonial Baseline	By c. 1890–1911	Source / Notes
Reserved & protected forest area, Bengal Presidency	c. 14,000 sq. miles under state claim (1878)	c. 76,000 sq. miles under state forest control by 1890 (three-fourths Reserved)	IDR Explains (2026)
Forest condition, Manbhum tributary tracts	"Dense forest" reported three decades earlier by Johnstone	Timber described as "becoming scarce," land "bare and barren"	Johnstone (1871), as cited in Bhunia (2022)
Famine incidence, Manbhum district	Not systematically recorded before 1860s	Recurrent famine and nutritional crisis from the 1860s onward	Notion of Resilience Among the Adivasis of Jungle Mahals (2023)
Land revenue assessment	Variable customary render pre-1793	Fixed cash assessment averaging 10–11 annas per bigha in adjoining Jungle Mahals tracts	Jhargram district (2026)

Indicator	Pre-1878 / Early Colonial Baseline	By c. 1890–1911	Source / Notes
Scheduled Tribe population share (terminal/post-colonial reference)	Not enumerated on tribal criteria before late 19th-century census	18.45% of Purulia district population (2011 Census, used as long-run reference)	Purulia District (2026)
District forest cover (terminal/post-colonial reference)	Extensive sal-dominated forest reported in gazetteers	29.69% forest cover, Purulia district (2011)	Purulia District (2026)

Interpretation. Because granular, tract-specific statistical series for the Ajodhya Hills alone do not survive in accessible form, Table 3 combines period administrative testimony (Johnstone's 1871 report, revenue assessment data from adjoining Jungle Mahals tracts) with later census figures used as a long-run reference point for the cumulative scale of forest loss and demographic pressure. The nearly six-fold expansion of reserved and protected forest area across Bengal between 1878 and 1890 corroborates, at the provincial scale, the localized testimony of accelerating deforestation in Manbhum recorded by Johnstone. The recurrence of famine in the tract from the 1860s, closely following the intensification of revenue-driven agrarian conquest, supports the interpretation that resource extraction eroded not only forest cover but the food and ecological security of tribal cultivators. This finding answers RQ3 and fulfils Objective Three: colonial resource extraction — timber felling for railway and naval demand, revenue-driven forest clearance, and the reservation of common forest — produced measurable deforestation, soil and water stress, and recurrent subsistence crisis in the Ajodhya Hills and its surrounding Manbhum tracts.

5. THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. Pre-colonial and early colonial tribal society in the Ajodhya Hills operated an integrated forest-agrarian economy — shifting cultivation, forest-produce gathering, communal hunting, and hereditary service tenure (paikan, ghatwali) — regulated through ritual and communal institutions such as the Disom Sendra festival and Manjhi-Paragana governance, rather than through codified colonial property law.
2. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 was the structural starting point of ecological transformation: by fixing cash revenue and vesting hereditary proprietary right in zamindars, it created a durable incentive to convert forest into rent-yielding cultivated land, a pressure recorded across the adjoining Jungle Mahals tracts.
3. Colonial forest legislation escalated in three clearly identifiable stages — the Indian Forest Act of 1865 (assertion of state claim), the Act of 1878 (classification into Reserved, Protected, and Village Forest and assertion of sovereignty over "wasteland"), and the Act of 1927 (consolidation and penal enforcement) — each stage progressively narrowing tribal legal access to forest resource.

4. Tribal resistance in the wider Jungle Mahals region — the Chuar Rebellion (1798–1799), the Bhumij Revolt of 1832–33 led by Ganga Narayan Singh, and the Santal Hul of 1855 — closely tracked the escalation of fiscal and forest control, indicating that ecological dispossession was a central, not incidental, grievance behind these uprisings.
5. Contemporary colonial administrative testimony (Johnstone, 1871) explicitly recorded advancing deforestation in Manbhum by the early 1870s, describing land that had been densely forested only decades earlier as having become "bare and barren," corroborating the study's periodization of accelerating ecological decline from the mid-nineteenth century.
6. Provincial-scale data show reserved and protected forest area in Bengal expanding roughly five- to six-fold between 1878 and 1890 (from approximately 14,000 to 76,000 square miles), a scale of state forest appropriation consistent with localized qualitative evidence of tribal exclusion from customary forest in Manbhum.
7. The transformation of land use and forest access is linked in the secondary literature to recurrent famine in Manbhum from the 1860s onward, indicating that the environmental consequences of colonial policy directly threatened, rather than merely inconvenienced, tribal subsistence security.
8. Ritual and customary practices with strong ecological content — notably the Disom Sendra hunting festival — persisted in modified form despite the criminalization of hunting under the 1878 and 1927 Forest Acts, indicating a pattern of cultural continuity and adaptive resistance alongside material dispossession.
9. The comparative literature (Collins, 2021; Depari, 2024; Gitau et al., 2025) situates the Ajodhya Hills case within a wider global pattern in which colonial "scientific forestry" reorganized indigenous land relations across very different colonial contexts, suggesting that the mechanisms identified in this study — legal reclassification of common land, criminalization of subsistence practice, and revenue-driven agrarian conversion — were general features of colonial environmental governance rather than a uniquely Indian phenomenon.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has traced the environmental transformation of the Ajodhya Hills of Puruliya under British colonial rule from the Diwani grant of 1765 to Independence in 1947, situating a locality often known today chiefly for eco-tourism within the wider historiography of Indian and comparative colonial environmental history. The evidence assembled — spanning colonial legislative texts, gazetteer and administrative testimony, and recent secondary scholarship on the Jungle Mahals and comparable colonial contexts — supports the conclusion that colonial rule converted a customary, ritually regulated forest-agrarian landscape into a state-controlled, revenue-extractive terrain, with cumulative consequences for forest cover, subsistence security, and the legal status of tribal environmental practice. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 initiated the process by incentivizing forest clearance; the Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 completed it by legally appropriating the forest itself and criminalizing customary use. The persistent recurrence of tribal uprisings across this period — from the Chuar Rebellion to the Bhumij Revolt and the Santal Hul — testifies that this

transformation was contested at every stage, not passively absorbed. As India's Forest Rights Act of 2006 itself formally acknowledges a "historical injustice" inflicted on forest-dwelling communities by colonial law, a source-grounded reconstruction of how that injustice was constituted in a specific tract such as the Ajodhya Hills contributes both to the historiographical record and to the evidentiary basis for contemporary forest governance and eco-tourism policy in the region. Future research would benefit from oral-history fieldwork among present-day Santal, Bhumij, and Sabar communities of the Ajodhya Hills and from systematic archival research in the West Bengal State Archives and the National Archives of India to recover tract-specific quantitative data currently unavailable in secondary literature.

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