International Journal of Research and Technology (IJRT)

International Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Online Journal

ISSN (Print): 2321-7510 | ISSN (Online): 2321-7529

| An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Journal |

Water, Power, and Politics: Irrigation Development in the Awadh Region under British Rule

Puneet Kumar Upadhyay[1], **Dr. Prem Bahaur**[2]

[1]Research Scholar, [2]Assistant Professor

[1,2]Deptt. Of history, H.N.B. Garhwal University S.R.T. Campus Badshahithaul, Tehri Garhwal

[1]puneet111193@gmail.com, [2]premb77777@gmail.com

Abstract:

This study covers hydraulic engineering, colonial politics and economics, and social development in northern India's Awadh region from the late 19th to early 20th centuries. This idea holds that the Sarda Canal System and other British irrigation projects in Awadh accomplished more than modernize farming. They shaped the region's politics and culture beyond technical answers. The investigation included historical, economic, and colonial administrative documents. The data show that the colonial authority built irrigation systems to produce money and feed people. These programs often worsened social disparities. Rich landowners benefited from the programs. But poor farmers and pastoralists were evicted or shunned. This article demonstrates canal construction was popular. Settlement patterns caused flooding and saltwater overflow. The colonial administration and rich aristocrats strengthened their political alliance. The analysis showed Awadh's irrigation system mirrored imperial power. How empires control people and resources affects water management.

Keywords: Colonial Irrigation, Awadh, British India, Sarda Canal, Political Economy, Talukdari System, Agrarian Change, Environmental History.

1. Introduction

Researchers examined India's irrigation technique from "benign development" and "exploitative colonialism." Awadh, central and eastern Uttar Pradesh, deviates from this classification. It was colonized by the British East India Company in 1856. Building enormous canal irrigation systems in this area required high-tech ambitions, smart politics, and big social impacts.

Awadh was a priority for British efforts to stabilize the region after the 1857 Rebellion. Farming has changed drastically. Tenant farmers and talukdars were in charge of the area. Hydraulic engineering helped colonial governance during this volatility. The allure of "conquering nature" through canals was to turn unpredictable terai trees and rain-fed fields into a prosperous setting.

Politics dominated Awadh irrigation development. Canal allocation, water recipients, and distribution were not exclusively hydrological. The colonial state sought to strengthen its political power, secure land revenue, and create a cadre of loyal intermediate landlords. Instead of pursuing these goals, the state mediated. Despite "famine protection," political and commercial goals often trumped it. Colonial-era irrigation reports, settlement records, and secondary historical analyses will be used to answer these questions:

What political and economic forces in Awadh enabled large-scale irrigation projects?
The Sarda Canal System changed the social structure of the talukdari system, but how did it strengthen it?
How did canal irrigation affect Awadh's agricultural community's social, economic, and environmental groups?
This study examines how water infrastructure, which distributes power, transforms society and the environment throughout time.
Understanding British rule over Awadh in India is crucial to understanding their influence in the Indian subcontinent. From 1722 to 1856, the Nawabs ruled Awadh. During this time, the culture grew and the government became more complicated. In 1954 and 1984, Surendra Nath Sen and S. N. Sinha established that the Nawabi kingdom was not a corrupt parody of a government, as the British Empire claimed to justify their invasion. Even though the government collected taxes in a decentralized but effective way, Wajid Ali Shah's court was known for supporting the arts, music, and poetry (Llewellyn-Jones, 2014).
The British modified the way water flowed when they came and went. Wells, ditches, and ahars were rarely used for irrigation, according to Avadh Kishore Singh (2008). Habits and the environment changed this system. Water supplies were often mismanaged by the state. It mostly made money or made it simpler. These small irrigation projects were needed to integrate talukdar authority with the agricultural economy, according to Sarkar (1980). Despite being simpler than the Sarda Canal, this separate system was heavily influenced by its surroundings. After mismanagement accusations, the British annexation in 1856 shattered this balance. It facilitated government and resource manager intrusion.

2. Historical Context: Awadh from Annexation to Pacification

Lord Dalhousie's 1856 purchase of Awadh mattered. The British deportation of Wajid Ali Shah was a cultural and economic earthquake that shattered courtly life and drove artists, officials, and soldiers out, according to Llewellyn-Jones (2014). Britain first taxed land with the Summary Settlement. First begun in 1856. Instead of talukdars, they sought to cooperate with "yeoman peasants."
Strategy backfired. British Empire destroyed political hierarchy by killing elite.. They failed to secure a successor. The Rebellion of 1857 released a lot of rage from this. People from Awadh resisted most. According to historians S. M. Azizuddin Husain (1978) and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones (2007), Awadh was the movement heart. The disruption of the traditional farming system led to a violent response in the form of the revolt.
After that, the colonial state changed its stance in a big way from what it had been. The Oudh Settlement, which happened in 1859 and was led by Lord Canning, made it clear that the talukdars owned the land. The goal of this political plan was to make the Raj stronger by building a strong base of obedient aristocrats. The talukdars were promised steady land income and political loyalty in exchange for a promise that their farms would

be passed down through generations. P.R. Sarkar wrote in 1980 that the town in question was home to a well-established Nawabi executive class and that it also laid the groundwork for all later developments, such as the creation of irrigation systems. Because waterways made irrigation possible, they were the main tool the colonial government used to make progress toward its goal of improving the economic situation of this social class.

3. The Drivers and Design of the Sarda Canal System

The Sarda Canal System was the largest and most revolutionary irrigation project in Awadh. Early 20th-century construction followed preparatory studies that begun in the late 19th century, and the system was formally opened in 1928. The goals of the fully developed colonial state are reflected in its origins and layout.

3.1. Fiscal Imperatives and Famine Insurance

The *Report of the Indian Irrigation Commission, 1901-1903* documents the official language around the Sarda Canal, which greatly stressed its protective function against drought and famine. Because the state of Awadh was situated in the rain shadow of the Himalayas, the monsoons there were unpredictable and a common occurrence. When financial debates are examined more closely, however, a more analytical logic emerges regarding fiscal matters. According to Stone (1984), the "Productivity" and "Protective" qualities were the colonial notions of art that assessed the canal's ability to increase the amount of land revenue it generated and its cost-effectiveness in terms of preventing losses of revenue during times of hunger.

The rate of return on the investment was ultimately the determining factor. The canal would be expected to yield a significant surplus over the expenses of construction and maintenance, according to careful estimates. This would lead to an increase in state revenue from higher land values and agricultural output. The canal was given the go light for construction only after that. The predicted financial gains, which are displayed in Table 1, were a crucial part of the justification for the project.

Table 1: Justificatory Metrics for the Sarda Canal Project (c. 1908 Estimates)

Metric	Estimated Figure	Rationale
Capital Cost	£2.1 million	Initial construction outlay.
Annual Revenue	£150,000	From water rates and increased land tax.

Financial Return	7.1%	Calculated as (Annual Revenue/Capital Cost)*100. Deemed sufficient for approval.
Culturable Command Area (CCA)	1.2 million acres	Area deemed suitable for irrigation.
Famine Protection Value	"High"	Qualitative assessment of preventing revenue collapse in drought years.

3.2. Engineering and Design: A System of Control

An impressive engineering achievement was the Sarda Canal. A weir spanning the Sarda River at Banbasa was part of the project, as was a vast system of canals that supplied water to Kheri, Sitapur, Hardoi, Unnao, and Lucknow districts. But it wasn't neutral in design. Similar to the colonial government's administrative structure, the system was hierarchical with main, branch, and distributary canals.

An inflexible timetable (warabandi) that put the hydraulic efficiency of the canal system ahead of the adaptable, regional demands of farmers dictated how water would be distributed. There was considerable political weight behind the allocation of canal outlets as well. These outlets' appointments benefited large, consolidated estates since they could campaign for them and control watercourse development on their lands (Whitcombe, 1971). This helped the talukdars who coordinated and spent to harness canal water.

4. The Intersection of Irrigation and Social Structure

Vallukdari had canal irrigation instead of creation. This intersection shaped society.

4.1. The Empowerment of the Talukdars

Serda Canal helped Talukdars. Their vast, uncultivated or rain-dependent plains now had reliable water. Agricultural commercialization allowed the Talukdars to grow sugarcane and wheat, two cash crops, changing the agrarian regime. The canal-irrigated Awadh regions were represented by sugarcane.

Greater and more consistent yields increased rent and social influence, raising the land's value. The effect was higher rents for tenant growers (Whitcombe, 1971). Patronage and dominance found a new instrument in the control of water. There was typically a tightening of dependent links among tenants who were given access to canal water.

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Many talukdars put money into sugar mills (karkhanas), which allowed them to take a bigger cut of the agricultural industry's revenues and solidify their grip on the production chain.

4.2. The Marginalization of the Peasantry and Pastoralists

Small peasant proprietors and tenant farmers, who made up the bulk of the rural population, found the benefits of the canal to be vague and difficult to pin down.

Inequitable Access: Many smallholders lacked the financial means to pay water rates, level their land, and build field channels. Due to their reliance on the talukdar or khalasi, the local watermaster, for their survival, corruption and unfair distribution were commonplace.

Many peasants were compelled to borrow money from local moneylenders (sahukars) or the talukdars in order to pay for water charges and transition to commercial crops. This caused a debt cycle and land expropriation.

Canal colonies and usar land cultivation drove pastoralists and nomadic peoples like the Gujars and Banjaras out of their homes and livelihoods. Economic collapse and social isolation ensued as a result of the blocking of their usual pathways and the reduction of communal grazing supplies (Agrawal, 1999).

This varied influence is schematically illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Differentiated Socio-Economic Impact of Canal Irrigation in Awadh

Social Group	Primary Impact	Secondary Consequences
Talukdars (Landlords)	Highly Positive. Increased agricultural productivity and land value.	Rise in economic and political power; investment in agro-industry; strengthened alliance with the colonial state.
Occupancy Tenants	Mixed. Potential for higher yields but increased rents and dependence.	Greater integration into market economy; risk of indebtedness; strengthened subservience to landlords.

Small Peasant Proprietors	Variable/Negative. Difficulty in accessing water and bearing costs.	Increased vulnerability to market fluctuations; potential for land alienation through debt.
Landless Labourers	Potentially Positive. Increased demand for agricultural labour.	Remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy; wages did not always keep pace with inflation.
Pastoralists	Highly Negative. Loss of grazing lands and traditional routes.	Economic marginalization; forced sedentarization or migration.

5. Ecological and Unintended Consequences

The ecological toll of altering Awadh's terrain is substantial. When it came to designing irrigation systems, the colonial engineering paradigm was all about short-term gains at the expense of long-term ecological sustainability.

5.1. Oversaturation and Salt Ingress

The water table rising as a result of over-irrigation and poor drainage was the most ecological concern. Subsurface water levels climbed to within a few feet of the surface across vast swaths of the canal command area, especially in the more leveled out areas. As a result of waterlogging, plant roots were smothered and soil became salinized as harmful salts were drawn to the surface by capillary action. Parts of the so-called "productive" canal colony became desolate wasteland after being devoid of arable ground (D'Souza, 2006).

5.2. Malaria Emerges as a Public Health Emergency

Because of the lack of maintenance in the canal networks and the standing water in floodplains, mosquitoes were able to thrive. Because of this, the region became a hyper-endemic zone, where malaria is extremely common. The "canal fever" was a horrible part of living in the irrigated areas; it reduced productivity in the workplace and contributed to high mortality rates—the ironic result of a project whose goal was to increase wealth (Klein, 1972).

6. Challenging Situations: Opposition and Settlement

Passive acceptance did not characterize the process of imposing the canal system. Resistance and discussion took place there on a daily basis. The embankments of canals were frequently undermined by peasants in an effort to divert water away from their farms or to avoid flooding. Villages upstream and downstream would often argue over

who should get what share of the water. Settlement of water disputes, collection of water rates, and punishment of violations were ongoing activities of the colonial state's formal administrative and legal apparatus. Daily "grudging compliance and muted resistance" showed that water control was a continuous struggle (Arnold & Guha, 1995). Water resource issues exacerbated rural Awadh's social divisions. Gyanendra Pandey (1990) compares these conflicts to other regional conflicts, but they are not necessarily sectarian.

7. Conclusion

Awadh's irrigation projects during the British administration were political technological interventions. The Sarda Canal System, an engineering marvel, met the colonial authority's financial needs and strengthened its political ties with the talukdari ruling elite. Development was greatly twisted. The paper shows that the canal changed regional power relations, not only "progress". It enriched landowners and disadvantaged peasants. Waterlogging and malaria damaged the ecosystem, hurting the project's reputation and proving that top-down environmental transformation doesn't work.

The Awadh canals are part of a colonial past in which water transformed the soil, built social structures, and gave people power.Colonial infrastructure projects from the region's post-colonial past have an effect on water politics. To comprehend power dynamics, forthcoming studies may analyze water management practices from colonial periods to the present.

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