

Environmental Evolution of the Cultural Landscape of Purvanchal “The Karmsthalee of Baba Raghav Das”

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ABSTRACT

Eastern Uttar Pradesh commonly referred to as Purvanchal. This is the soil where Baba Raghav Das, an Indian saint and social reformer devoted his entire life for the awakening and upliftment of the people and became famous as the Gandhi of Eastern U.P. (PurviUttar Pradesh Ke Gandhi). Purvanchal occupies a distinctive position in the physical and cultural geography of northern India. Enriched by the river systems of the Ganga, Ghaghara, Rapti, and their tributaries, the region has historically sustained dense populations, advanced agrarian systems, and important cultural centres. This paper examines the physical structure, drainage system, soils, climate, vegetation, and human–environment interaction of eastern Uttar Pradesh. It argues that the region’s contemporary socio-economic challenges are deeply rooted in its physical geography and the historical disruption of traditional agrarian–industrial balance during the colonial period.

Key Word- Purvanchal, physical structure, drainage system, soils, climate, vegetation,

INTRODUCTION

Baba Raghav Das occupied a distinctive position in the political history of late colonial and early post-independence north India. His public life combined Gandhian constructive work, socialist-oriented agrarian mobilisation, and electoral politics, forming a hybrid political tradition. In 1937, Baba Raghav Das emerged as a leading figure in peasant mobilisation in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Alongside political agitation, Baba Raghav Das devoted sustained attention to rural reconstruction. The Barhaj Ashram functioned as a centre for village industries, vocational training, and political education, linking economic self-reliance with democratic participation. Through this research paper environmental evolution of the cultural landscape of Purvanchal is looked into that is once “The Karmsthalee of Baba Raghav Das”.

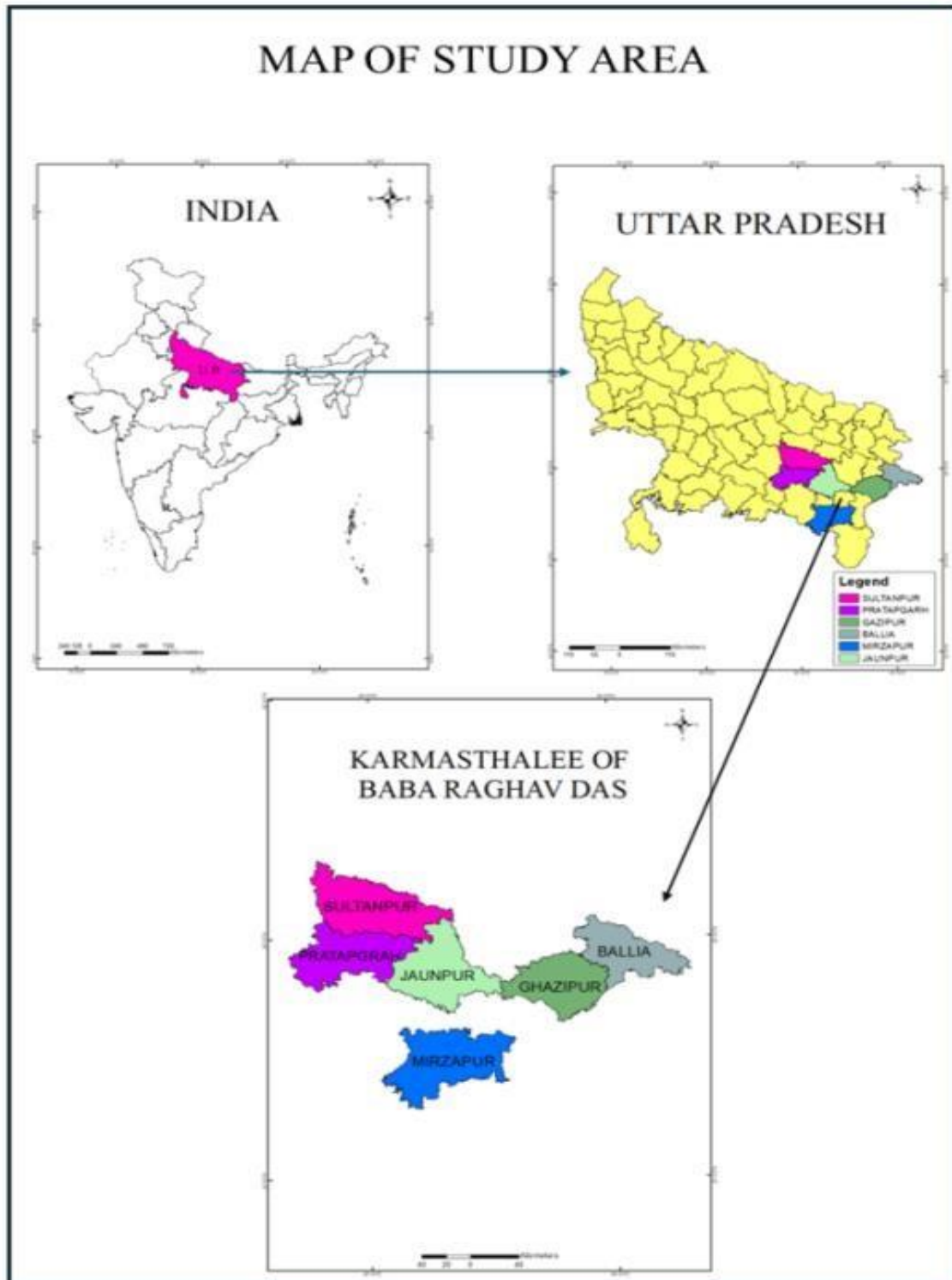


Figure-1

Eastern Uttar Pradesh, nourished by the sacred waters of the Ganga, Ghaghara, Rapti, and associated rivers, lies between the Himalayan foothills in the north and the Vindhyan–Satpura highlands in the south. This region has long been celebrated for its courage, sacrifice, cultural creativity, and civilizational continuity. Varanasi, one of the world’s oldest living cities, represents the intellectual and spiritual nucleus of this landscape, while nearby Sarnath marks a turning point in global religious history through the rise of Buddhism.¹

From ancient times, Purvanchal sustained a harmonious relationship between agriculture, local crafts, and trade. However, the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857 marked a decisive break. British colonial policies undermined indigenous industries and disrupted agrarian equilibrium, transforming a once-prosperous region into an economically stressed and demographically overburdened area.²

Regional Extent and Administrative Composition

The study region broadly includes the districts of Jaunpur, Mirzapur, Ballia, and Ghazipur of the Varanasi Division, along with Pratapgarh and Sultanpur of the Gorakhpur Division. The total geographical area of eastern Uttar Pradesh is approximately 24,885 square kilometres, forming a substantial portion of the middle Ganga plain.³

Major Physiographic Divisions

Eastern Uttar Pradesh can be divided into two principal natural regions:

The Ganga Alluvial Plain

The Southern Rocky (Vindhyan) Tract

The southern rocky region constitutes nearly one-fifth of the total area and marks the transition from the alluvial plains to the peninsular plateau.⁴

The Ganga Plain

The Ganga Plain of eastern Uttar Pradesh forms part of the extensive Ganga–Sutlej plain of northern India and ranks among the most fertile regions of the world. It lies between the Himalayas to the north and the rocky plateaus of peninsular India to the south. The general slope of the plain is towards the east and south-east, with elevations declining from about 300 feet in the west to 200 feet in the eastern margins.⁵

This plain is composed of deep alluvial deposits brought by the Ganga, Ghaghara, and their tributaries. Except for minor riverine levees, the surface is remarkably flat.

Sub-Divisions of the Ganga Plain

1- Saryu-par Plain

The Saryu-par Plain lies between the Himalayan foothills and the Ghaghara River. Its northern margin includes the Bhabar belt, where rivers disappear beneath the surface and re-emerge in the Tarai, creating marshy and waterlogged conditions. After forest clearance, this land becomes exceptionally suitable for rice cultivation.⁶

South of the Tarai, the terrain slopes gently from north-west to south-east, with an average elevation of around 300 feet, forming an almost level agricultural plain.

2- Ghaghara–Ganga Doab

The Ghaghara–Ganga Doab is broad and elevated in the west but gradually narrows and lowers towards the east. It may be divided into western and eastern sections, separated approximately along the western boundary of the Varanasi region. The Gomti River flows centrally through this tract. Saline and barren lands are more common here, and the average elevation decreases from about 300 feet in the west to 200 feet in the east.⁷

3- Ganga-par Region

The Ganga-par region represents an extension of the southern rocky tract up to the banks of the Ganga. It is relatively elevated, uneven, and largely unaffected by floods. Groundwater in this region is often saline, making irrigation more difficult and agricultural productivity uneven.⁸

The Southern Rocky (Vindhyan) Region

The southern part of eastern Uttar Pradesh is characterized by rugged terrain with elevations ranging from 500 to 2,000 feet above sea level. This region slopes northward towards the Ganga plain and can be subdivided into the eastern Vindhyan plateau, the Kaimur ranges, and the Sonpar region.

The historic Chunar Fort stands on the northern escarpment of the Vindhyas, symbolizing the strategic importance of this terrain. Rivers such as the Belan, Karmanasha, and Rihand drain this region, while the Rihand Dam represents a major modern intervention in water management.⁹

Geological Structure

Geologically, eastern Uttar Pradesh consists of deep alluvial deposits accumulated between the Himalayan and peninsular landmasses. The thickness of these deposits increases towards the centre of the plain and is estimated in some places to exceed 30,000 feet, indicating long-term sedimentation processes.¹⁰

Drainage System

The drainage system of eastern Uttar Pradesh is dominated by the Ganga and its major tributaries, including the Ghaghara, Rapti, Gomti, Saryu, Varuna, Karmanasha, Belan, and Rihand. The Ghaghara, Ganga, and Rapti originate in the snow-fed Himalayan zone and carry enormous volumes of water during the monsoon, frequently causing destructive floods. Seasonal rivers from the Vindhyan plateau further intensify flood hazards in the plains.¹¹

Climate

The climate of eastern Uttar Pradesh is monsoon-dominated. Average annual rainfall exceeds 40 inches, with nearly 75 percent occurring during the monsoon months. Summers are marked by extreme heat and hot winds (loo), while winters are comparatively cool and pleasant. Climatic variability contributes to frequent health challenges in the region.¹²

Natural Vegetation

The region falls within the tropical evergreen and deciduous vegetation zones. Forest cover has declined sharply due to agricultural expansion, except in parts of Gorakhpur, southern Mirzapur, and the Vindhyan hills. Common tree species include sal, shisham, khair, mahua, jamun, mango, neem, banyan, and bamboo.¹³

Soils

Two major soil types occur in eastern Uttar Pradesh:

Alluvial soils, highly fertile and widespread in the plains

Residual soils, developed locally through rock weathering

The Gandak valley contains lime-rich soils ideal for sugarcane cultivation, while the Ganga-par region has heavy black clay soils suitable for rice.¹⁴

Population Pressure and Land Use

Eastern Uttar Pradesh is predominantly agrarian, with over 70 percent of land under cultivation. The region supports one of the highest rural population densities in India, resulting in severe pressure on agricultural land and increasing fragmentation of holdings.¹⁵

Industry

Approximately 43 percent of Uttar Pradesh’s sugarcane area and a significant share of sugarindustry labour are concentrated in eastern Uttar Pradesh, particularly in Deoria and Gorakhpur districts. Small-scale industries such as handloom weaving, carpet manufacturing in Bhadohi– Mirzapur, and lac and silk production in Mirzapur remain economically significant despite structural challenges.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The physical geography of eastern Uttar Pradesh has endowed it with immense agricultural potential and cultural significance. However, recurrent floods, soil degradation, population pressure, and historical policy neglect have constrained sustainable development. A comprehensive understanding of the region’s environmental setting is therefore essential for addressing its contemporary socio-economic challenges and planning balanced regional development.

Table Representation-

Administrative Composition of Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Division	Districts Included
Varanasi Division	Jaunpur, Mirzapur, Ballia, Ghazipur
Gorakhpur Division	Pratapgarh, Sultanpur

Source: District Gazetteers of Uttar Pradesh¹⁷



Figure-2

Major Physiographic Regions of Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Physiographic Region	Approx. Share of Area	Key Characteristics
Ganga Alluvial Plain	~80%	Fertile alluvium, flat terrain, flood-prone
Southern Vindhyan Region	~20%	Rocky terrain, plateaus, escarpments

Source: Spate, O.H.K.; Husain, Majid¹⁸

Major Rivers of Eastern Uttar Pradesh

River	Origin	Nature	Economic Importance
Ganga	Himalayas	Perennial	Agriculture, transport
Ghaghara	Himalayas	Perennial	Irrigation, floods
Rapti	Himalayas	Perennial	Rice cultivation
Gomti	Plains	Seasonal	Local irrigation
Rihand	Vindhya Plateau	Seasonal	Hydropower, irrigation

Source: Central Water Commission¹⁹

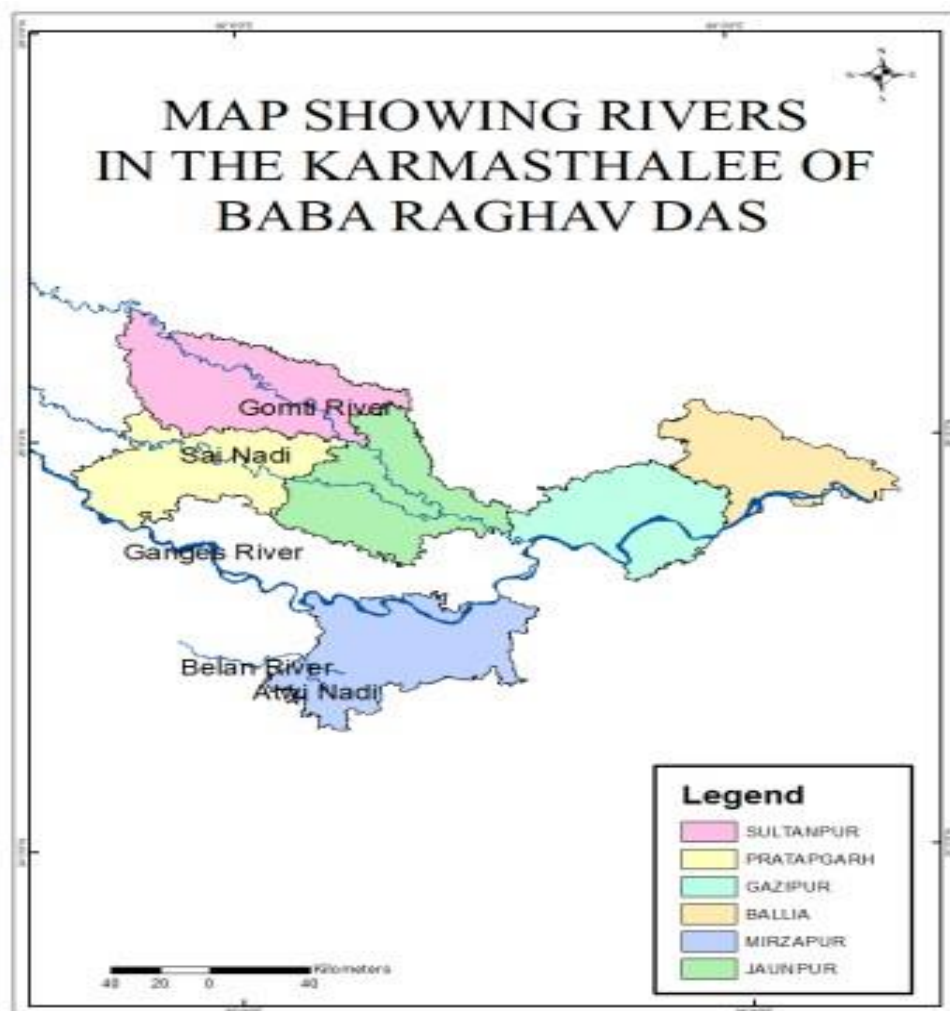


Figure-3

Soil Types and Agricultural Suitability

Soil Type	Region	Major Crops
Alluvial loam	Ganga plain	Wheat, rice, pulses
Clayey black soil	Ganga-par region	Rice
Lime-rich soil	Gandak basin	Sugarcane
Residual soil	Vindhyan region	Millets, pulses

Source: Sehgal, J.L.; ICAR²⁰

Climatic Characteristics

Element	Observation
Average annual rainfall	> 40 inches
Monsoon contribution	~75%
Summer temperature	Very high (loo winds)
Winter climate	Cool and pleasant

Source: Indian Meteorological Department²¹

Major Forest Species of Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Tree Species	Distribution
Sal	Southern Vindhyan region
Shisham	Riverbanks
Khair	Plains
Mahua	Vindhyan plateau
Bamboo	Scattered

Major Traditional Industries

Industry	Region
Sugar industry	Deoria, Gorakhpur
Carpet weaving	Bhadohi, Mirzapur
Handloom	Jaunpur
Lac & silk	Mirzapur

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