

Colonial Forest Policy and Conservation in Assam

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Abstract- The history of forest policy and conservation in Assam is directly related to the growth and development of forest administration under the British colonial government. With the extension of British administration to Assam under 'Treaty of Yandabo' in 1826, the commercial use of forests found new expression. The forest policy and administration has been a subject of significant discussion and struggle ever since the British established a Forest Department and sanctioned enactments relating to forest service in the nineteenth century. The North-east, which is known for its unblemished beauty, lush green forests and rich biodiversity, is at a risk of getting depleted perpetually. The general population of the area who live in the proximity with nature is seen to get distanced from nature and natural resources essentially the land and woodland resources and experience a risk to its condition and occupation akin to nature.

This paper examines the British colonial developments in the relation to forests and their use and governance in the colonial Assam. In the colonial State's control over the forest in this region had systematically eroded people's right over their resources, posing a threat not only to their livelihood, but also to the delicate balance which rural and forest-based communities traditionally maintained with their natural environment. For the majority of the population in the region, the forest is not only a source of food, fuel, fodder, medicine, and timber, but also the abode of their tutelary spirits and deities; sacred beings that protect them from diseases, pestilence and otherworldly afflictions. Thus the state's appropriation of their rights over forest does not simply mean the erosion of their economic base alone, but also an onslaught on their culture and tradition. The paper also discusses how the recent development due to the high ecological and economic value of trees left the tribes in the region with little room to exercise their traditional rights over forests have left them disturbed. Both, in the colonial and post-colonial period, the notion of rights contested issue between the local community and states exercise of the power to govern rights over the land. History, however, reveals that the bottom line of forest policies, present and, past, is revenue rather than the conservancy of trees for than the conservancy of trees.

Keyword-Forest, Colonial, History, Assam, Development, Environment, Economy.

INTRODUCTION

North East India constitutes an important ecological region in the country. Also known as the land of the seven sisters, a metaphor for its seven states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, the region houses over a hundred tribal communities characterized by diverse linguistic, political and religious backgrounds. There are a number of arrangements provided in the Constitution for the administration of the region. Assam had been known for her rich and extensive forest resources in ancient period although commercial use of forest was not extensive. Timbers were used mainly for building houses, boats and furniture and fixtures for day-to-day common use. Neither agriculture nor forest dependent activities took place in extensive scale to put pressure upon forests in ancient Assam.

Forests have economic value and also provide a sustained source of income to a section of the population; hence, they turn out to be contested resources over which different sections of the society seek to assert control. Consequently, right of ownership and usage along with control becomes critical. These together give the authority to enforce the said right when the need arises and its enforcement is believed to secure control over future benefits. This authority may be vested with a community, a village, a state authority or the national government. The type of property rights regime set up by the state has a strong bearing on the economic and social dimensions of those who relate to its management and steer its governance. In most of the modern political economies, forests have been identified as resources of national importance and authorities have consequently assumed property rights and control. Notwithstanding the rights of ownership and management, forests are considered as common-pool resources ii because for many uses of a forest, one person's harvesting subtracts products that are not available to others subtract ability and in many cases it is difficult to physically exclude the potential users from using the resources, non excludability.

The ownership over forests was with the community inhabiting in fringe areas and these forests were classified under pastureland usually located in the outskirts of the proper village and sometimes along the boundary of the villages. Although very low, commercial interest in forests started growing since the beginning of Ahom rule in Assam. New forest areas were cleared for the purpose of cultivation in the plains and shifting cultivation in the hills. Historical records show that forest product especially timbers were used for revenue earning purposes in the Ahom dynasty. Although Ahom rulers did not follow any well-conceived rules for the management of forests, they valued forests and considered them as the royal property and realized royalties on them. The government also appointed officers to look after forest products especially timbers. They did not interfere with the traditional jhum cultivation practiced by the tribal population and the communal forest lands were left outside the revenue system. The jhum cycle was relatively longer with 15-20 years because of the high forest–man ratio and this 'length of the cycle' allowed natural regeneration of forests that were cleared for jhum.

Forest Cover: According to an official estimate based on satellite images, the north-eastern region has 1,63,799 km² of forest, which is about 25% of the total forest cover in the country. The management of the forest has suffered in the recent past due to pressure on land, decreasing cycle of shifting cultivation, exploitation of forest for timber and lack of scientific management strategy. The age-old practice of shifting cultivation has been a single factor responsible for the forest and land degradation, thereby changing the landscape extensively. About 0.45 million families in the north-eastern region annually cultivate 10,000 km² forests whereas total area affected by 'jhumming' is believed to be 44,000 km².

OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

1. This paper attempts to analyse the British Forest Policy from 1864 to 1947, in particular context of Assam. Situating the geography and history of the region, it traces the genesis and development of British forest policy.
2. It also examines the socio-economic and environmental impact of the policy on the people as well as on the state as a whole.
3. To highlight the socio-economic transformation with the impact of forest policy and environmental changes in colonial Assam.
4. To show the impact of industrialization on Environment and Environmental challenges include large scale landscape damage, deforestation, soil erosion, loss of forest ecosystem and wildlife habitat, air, water and soil pollution.

FOREST POLICIES IN INDIA UNDER THE BRITISH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION:

Forest conservation and protection within a legal framework was introduced in India during the British colonial administration. Till 1935, forest was a subject with the central government. In government of India Act of 1935, the dual system of government was brought in to operation and separate list of subjects were formulated for the provinces and the federal provincial legislative lists under the Act. vi In the constitution of India, the subject of forests was included in the State List in the VI schedule. vii However, till independence forests were controlled by the individual states under the same legal framework defined by the first forest legislation, the Indian Forest Act of 1878. After independence, forests continued to be placed on the State list of the Constitution. Forest Departments of individual states continued to regulate forests as per the regulations set by the Indian Forest Act of 1927. However some states had their own forest Acts e.g. Assam: Assam Forest Regulation 1891, Tamilnadu: Tamilnadu Forest Act 1882. In the post independence period forest was the subject in the State List in the VII schedule of the constitution of India till 1976. It was transferred from the "State List" to the "Concurrent List" by the 42nd amendment in 1976. This resulted in the reduction of power of the states to control and regulate forests within the territorial jurisdiction of the State. The Government of India used its power drastically and further curtailed state's rights over

forest by the promulgation of the forest conservation ordinance issued on October 25, 1980 (No. 17 of 1980) which was later converted into an Act.

FOREST POLICIES IN ASSAM DURING THE BRITISH ADMINISTRATION:

The History of forest policy and conservation in Assam is directly related to the growth and development of forest administration under the British colonial government. With the extension of British administration to Assam under 'Treaty of Yandabo' in 1826, the commercial use of forests found new expression. British interest was mainly in teak which was needed by the Royal Navy as English Oak was entirely depleted before 1800. When the British annexed Assam, six-eighths or seven-eighths of the province was under forest cover. These were considered as waste lands as they earned no revenue for the administration and hence expansion of agricultural land was encouraged by clearing waste lands (forest areas). In addition to the requirements of British Navy, the timber from teak was also used for extending railways to the interior forest areas. The expansion of tea estates in Assam began a new era in the management of wastelands and they contributed to large scale degradation of forestland. With development of tea industry, opening up of railway lines, setting up of plywood factories, safety matches factory etc. forest products came to be directly used as industrial inputs such as railways sleepers, tea chests and plywood products, match sticks and boxes. The growing commercial interests of the British required conservation of forests at equal pace. This necessitated complete control over the forest resources- thus began the classification of forests into different zones viz. reserved forests, open forests or protected forests. After culling out Assam as a separate province from Bengal in 1874, the Forest Department of Assam was set up in 1874 with the responsibility of managing the forests. The British forest administration in Assam during the period from 1874-1947 promoted the commercialization of the forest resources with conscious State control on forest resources of the State. The Assam Forest Regulation Act (AFRA) enacted in the year 1891^{viii} defined itself "a regulation to amend the law relating to forests, forests produce and duty leviable on timber in Assam". The Act empowered the State administration to constitute any "land at the disposal of the government" a reserved forest^{ix}. Further British administration recognized grazing as one of the important factors for deforestation and degradation of reserved forest in Assam and hence it was believed that prohibition of such activities will help in checking further deterioration to the forest cover of Assam. It also empowered the State administration to restrict or abolish the practice of jhumcultivation and it conferred State Government with the absolute privilege to control such practices irrespective of the local customary rules and forest protection practices. The AFRA recognized three basic rights viz. a right of way, a right to water course or to use water, a right of pasture or to forest produces to the claimants over and above the right in or over any land but conferred the State Government with predominant power in the determination of right of way or water course instead of the deemed necessity of the people for whom it was meant for. In respect of right of pasture, the Act provided for such provision of land by the State Government in lieu of payment of some money by the claimant or grant of a land. The Act empowered the State Government to create Village Forests on any land at the disposal of the government for the benefit of any village community or group of village communities. However the village communities were not

given any right in its management and continuance of such villages was at the discretion of the government.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the drastic change from a quasi-feudal economy to a market economy under the British colonial rule was marked by an unprecedented and unparalleled ecological degradation across the upper Brahmaputra Valley. S Baruah (2001) has observed, or exemplified, in his “Class of Resource Use Regimes in Colonial Assam: A nineteenth-Century Puzzle Revisited”, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, that in “the late 19th century Assam has witnessed nothing short of an economic revolution accompanied by massive ecological destruction”. However, this economic prosperity did not translate into an overall development of the valley and a century later, the region still remained underdeveloped, a phenomenon which the economic historian Amalendu Guha applied termed as “a big-push-without-a-take-off”. The population of the valley began to increase during the late 19th century resulting in escalating conflicts over resources as these were now under the complete control of the British. The large-scale deforestation, which had started in the late 19th century, increased in intensity and acquired a new feverish pace in the next century, particularly during the 1940s, when amidst complex politicisation of the land problem in Assam, the provincial government decided to distribute land from the reserved forests to landless peasants.

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