EASTERN

Colonial Legacy and Environmental Crisis in North East India

A.C. Sinha

The Book

The book presents a historical and contemporary analysis of the environmental resources, examines the British colonial legacy in forest management and identifies the contours of environmental crisis in the Northeast India. After introducing the region, its natural resources and the pre-British socio-economic structure, the book describes the British forest policy, introduction of tea plantation, creation of forest department and forest reserves and initiation of timber trade for generating revenue for the state. The colonial short-sighted policy in creation of forest villages as captive labour required for clearing the forests and cutting timber, identification of grazing pastures in the forests for earning revenue leading to peasant settlements, and encouraging axe men to cut timber from tribal forests for supplying soft wood to tea planters boomeranged in present environmental crisis in the region. It reports on possibly one of the earliest environmental movements in the country as a reaction, raised by Sonaram Sangma against the forest reservations in the Garo Hills. At the end, the book refers to aspects of environmental crisis and how the region is coping with it through various environmental movements. Two appendices on colonial 'forest rules' and 'forest education, training and research in British India' are of great value to understand the predicament of the forest department at present. The book, based largely on the archival data and the government records, may be of interests to academics, planners, NGOs, environmental activists, foresters, and a wide range of concerned citizens of the region at large.

Prof. A C Sinha, an anthropologist and a sociologist by training, has authored a wide range of books on ethnic politics of Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepalis in India, urbanization, forest history and youth movements in Northeast India. Among others, he was Senior Fulbright Visiting Professor, Environmental Study in the University of California, Santa Cruz, U S A in 1989. Having taught for over three decades in various universities in India and abroad, he resides in Delhi after his retirement from North Eastern Hill University,

ISBN: 978 93 80261 56 0/ 2012/ ₹ 725.00

Colonial Legacy and Environmental Crisis in Northeast India

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ISBN : 978-93-80261-56-0

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First Published in 2012 by
EBH Publishers (India)
an imprint of Eastern Book House
136, M.L. Nehru Road, Panbazar
Guwahati-781 001 (India)

Phone : +91 361 2513876, 2519231, 92070 45352
Fax : +91 361 2519231
Email : info@easternbookhouse.in/easternbookhouse@gmail.com.
www.easternbookhouse.in

Printed in India at Bhabani Offset, Guwahati

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Preface

The Northeast India has an image of dense, ever green, and inexhaustible forests of precious timber, exotic wildlife, home to numerous tribal communities and hides-out of the armed insurgents. It is also known for its mountains and hills, turbulent rivers, flooded plains, proud and brave hill communities and colourful craftsmen of the river valleys. The region holds world record in the highest rainfall at a place and also being the wettest zone in the world. It exports its famous Assam tea all over the world. Among its exotic wild species of mammals, one-horn rhino is unique creature of its own type. The region is known for quick growth of vegetation because of heavy and recurrent precipitation. Though covered with forests all over the hills and plains, the 'states' as such have limited forests under their direct control and bulk of the forests is under the customary authority of the communities, a right guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. The regional communities are by tradition, non-vegetarian and many of them had been hunting in the forests and/or fishing in the water bodies of the region. The region is known for its relaxed, laid-back and tradition-bound style of life, which refuses be rushed in and it follows, as if, a policy of 'hastening slowly'.

The earliest experience of the organized colonial efforts in the region was that of to appropriate the forests and related resources for tea plantations. The ownership, control, management, and finance of the plantations were in the hands of the Europeans and so was its product, tea, consumed by them. The indigenous local communities were kept away in utter backwardness and so were the Chotanagpur tribal coolies, the indentured plantation labour, imported from distant central India, hidden on the labour lines, amidst the lavished life of the planters. The products and profits of the plantations were exported to the markets and its owners respectively overseas leaving behind the plantation labour struggling for survival. These islands of affluence changed hands after Indian Independence from the Europeans to distant Indian investors, who invariably diverted their profits elsewhere. That resulted in a number of plantations turning in to sick enterprise and forcing labour unrest among the *bagania Adibasis*. It is interesting to uncover the story of tea plantation

in the region and how the regional natural resources were exploited for a thriving plantation economy (chapters six and seven).

The British colonial rulers realized much earlier in their contacts with the region the commercial significance of certain products of the forests such as rubber juice, honey, wax, tusks, leather and hide, timber, bamboo, grass and et cetera. Moreover, they felt that forests could contribute significantly to the revenue deficit province of Assam. Though the colonial masters never formally initiated a distinct forest policy for the region, strands of the British forest policy may conveniently be identified with generation of cash revenue and support to the British enterprises with inexpensive raw materials (Chapter Four). The new rules were framed; a forest administrative structure was created; forests were classified and the portions, which possessed precious timbers, were turned into forest reserves (see Chapters Four and Five). The traditional users of these forests, the resident tribal communities, were legally debarred from *jhumming*, hunting and collecting forests products for their consumption on the spacious plea that the said forests were not individually owned by their claimed traditional users. Naturally, creation of the forest reserves raised hornet of protests, which were ruthlessly suppressed as tribal revolts. But there were die-hard dissenters even among the most isolated, illiterate and least exposed tribes such as the Garos, who rose in revolt. In this context, the book provides details of a little known (Chapter Eight), possibly the first environmental movement in the region and one of the earliest such a movement in the country, organized more than a hundred years back by a literate Sonaram Sangma.

There has been resentment among the communities on the 'forest reserves' as a colonial imposition on the unhindered flow of life lived by the regional hill communities. The members of communities go to the forests naturally for a number of reasons: hunting games, collecting fuel, roots, fruits, fibres, grass, thatching material, drift wood and the like; grazing the cattle and cutting timber for constructing abodes. But as per forest laws, all these activities have been termed as crimes of poaching, hunting, encroaching, grazing and unauthorized entry in to state 'forest reserves'. The regional communities did not see forests distinct and different their daily existential living. As the communities increased demographically, they found their natural environment shrinking; wild animals, birds, fishes, reptiles, vanishing fast; and their life support systems from the forests reaching to a critical point, when the chunks of their forests were declared 'national parks' and 'wildlife forest sanctuaries'. Added to them are two more activities of mining in the hills for industrial minerals and erection of

river valley hydraulic projects, displacing the communities from their natural habitats. All these have resulted in the situations, where a vigorous environmental movement is on in the region (Chapter Nine).

The book makes an attempt to examine the health of environment in northeast India beginning with the organized efforts to control the rich natural resources by the colonial rulers since 1830s. We have tried to cover the myth of abundant forests of precious timbers and variety of commercial products with thriving wildlife, hunted by the tribal communities (Chapter Three). The book begins with a preface (Chapter One), which informs the readers on the motives behind its composition, which is followed by a thematic introduction (Chapter Two), articulating the issues involved in the present regional environment, coming crisis on the horizon and nature of the environmental movements. The last Chapter (Tenth) undertakes a comprehensive glance on the reaction of the region on its understanding of the impending environmental crisis in the light of the colonial heritage, which continues unabated from the fiats of the distant federal authority.

Popularly, the environmental study is identified with the exotic issues of preservation of rare trees, degraded patch of forests, and endangered animals such as tiger, rhino, cheetah, python and the like. I did not harbour such lofty ideas. In fact, my interest in the environmental studies is a bye-product of my four decades old interests in the Himalayan studies. I have watched since 1964, how much the central Himalayas have changed during these years, and invariably the change has been an unwelcome one, to put it rather mildly. That made me eager to record as much as I can – the beauty, splendour, and grandeurs of the mountains, hills, jungles and the denizen of this heavenly land, the communities of people: the scheduled tribes and others.

The study owes its origin to a number of persons, who inspired, encouraged and goaded me to reflect on the forest history of the Northeast region. My brother, B P N Sinha, a trained forest administrator, who was deputed by the Government of India to organize forest service in Bhutan in early 1970s, made me aware of the relative social and scientific significance of forests. Late Anil Agrawal, an old associate of decades, provoked me to think of writing on the regional forests through his occasional 'out bursts' on inactivity of the academics. Professor Richard P Tucker, who teaches environmental history at the University of Michigan, U S A, inspired me to look in to archival data on forest administration as part of the tribal economy of the region. My students of 'Cultural Ecology of the Eastern Himalayan Frontiers' course during Spring Semester, 1989 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, USA, where I was Senior Fulbright Visiting Professor in

Environmental Studies, led me to examine the larger issues of cultural resources, environment and small ethnic groups. In a talk with James O'Connor, editor of *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*, in April, 1989 on the nature of the community control of the eastern Himalayan forests, the paradox of community customary control on the forests under free market economy emerged vividly. I learnt a lot by discussing the regional environmental issues from my students during the two courses on 'Sociology of Frontier Communities' and 'Sociology of Environment', which I offered at the optional level in the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 1990s.

Chapter Six on Tea Plantation and Forest Reservation was published in the Social Science Probing, Volume 3(2) and Chapter Seven on Timber Trade and Forest Administration was presented at the session on the History of Forest Economy in the *Pacific Science Congress,* held in May-June, 1991 at Honolulu, USA. We have taken liberty to include them after due procedures. My historian colleagues in the North Eastern Hill University, Imdad Hussain, J B Bhattacharjee and Milton Sangma, gave their patient ears to an 'uninitiated intruder' in their historical preserves and provided the author with their archival materials with generosity. Late professor R Gopalkrishna readily agreed to share his expertise on ecological spread of the vegetation in the region and relevant maps for the books. Professors Rahim Mandal, Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University, Rajarammohunnagar, Darjeeling, Abhik Gupta, Department of Ecology and Environment, Assam University, Silcher, Biren N Borthakur and historian Dr. Rajib Handique of Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Dr Rekhrani Sampliang of North Eastern Hill University, Shillong have helped me through their discussions on the regional forests and for which I am obliged to them. The archival data were collected from the Assam State Archives, Dispur, Assam and India Office Library, London in early 1990s. And for that thanks are due to special Officer Archives, A H Chaudhury, Assam State Archives and officers of the India Office Library. Lastly, Shri J P Sharma of Eastern Book House, Guwahati was patient enough to handle often apparently trivial suggestions of the author. I thankfully acknowledge his patience and expertise.

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Environment, State and Society in Northeast India

*Aranyas*** (forests) were inseparable from human society in ancient India. They were the abodes of the ascetics, hermits, sages and the dynastic seminaries for the royalty. Hunting, collecting fruits and roots, catching of the wild animals and birds, looking for herbal plants, honey and the like were considered normal vocations. More over, forests were not devoid of human settlements; there were flourishing human enclaves. The 'communities' such as Kirats, Kols, Bhils, Kinnars, Gandharvs and others, residing in the forests, which reportedly excelled in dancing and music. Elephants were caught for rulers or commercial transaction. Another precious forest product was the ivory, which was traded globally. In ancient Indian society, there were territorial units named after the mountains and forests such as Vindhyachal, Champaranya, and Saranya etc. There are a number of folk tales in which vanquished rulers retreat to the bush or a lonely prince appears from nowhere only to establish a new kingdom in the forests. Forests at times were treated as the boundary between two competing kingdoms such as the Nambor forest between Ahoms and Dimasa-Cacharis. That was also the time, when forestry and agriculture were not identified as two separate vocations; rather they were seen as complementary to one another. A good farmer was also an excellent hunter and similarly a forest dwelling person could as well possess some plots of cultivable land. The best example of this vocational combination one observes even today among the *Jhummians* of

Northeast region. We are concerned this morning not all the larger environmental issues, rather we shall deal with trees (the forests), tribes (the communities) and the tigers (wild life) and leave the minerals, water and urban pollution to more competent scholars to handle.

With coming of the organized state of Magadh, Kautilya, the Mauryan Prime Minister, classified the Indian forests into eight as per the quality of elephants found among them (Bhandari, R S and A S Rawat: 1993:31), to be used as the royal mounts and military purposes. However, some other scriptures classify entire vegetation into an eight fold classification (Rawat, A: 1991:259-260): a. *Osadhi* (bearing abundant flowers and fruits, but withering away after fructification, e.g. rice, wheat), b. *Vasanaspati* (bearing fruits without evident flowers), c. *Vrhsa* (bearing both flowers and fruits), d. *Guccha* (bushy herbs, e.g. Jasminum , Mallika), e. *Gulma* (succulent shrubs, f. (*Trna*) grasses, g. *Pratana* (creepers which spread their stems on the ground), and h. Valli (climbers and entwiners). This detailed classification was turned into a broad based four-fold division *of Vanaspati (*which bears fruits but not flowers), *Vrksa* (which bears both fruits and flowers), V*irudh* (which creepers on the ground or entwines) and *Osadhi* (annual herbs which wither away after fructification). Similarly, there are a series of regional and local folk categorizations of the vegetation found in different parts of the country.

Forests were considered something different from normal vocations of the people in ancient India. They were the abodes of the ascetics, places of hermit-teachers maintaining boarding amenities (*Gurukulas*) for their royal wards and virgin fields for the fugitive princes eager to establish new principalities. There were sacred forests, trees, plants, animals and birds associated with various communities and, in fact, many of the communities had them as their totems. Further more, there were trees, plants, animals and birds reserved for royal families. Cultivation and hunting in the forest were not considered two distinct vocations; rather there was a symbiotic relationship between the two, which may be identified with the prevalent shifting cultivation (*Jhumming*) in the Northeast India. Apparently, the technology was simple, production was limited by means of manual and animal labour and produce was basically meant for consumption. Society had a relatively stable population with high birth and high death rates. Everybody was a part farmer and a part hunter, fisherman, weaver,

carpenter, smith and so on, as vocational specialization was still in its early stages.

That was the background in which the British emerged on the Indian scene as the expanding colonial powers. By the beginning of the 19th century, Europe was already having industrial revolution and looking for more and more of raw materials from anywhere they could find. Their imperial power rested on a well- organized navigational network spread all over the world. For maintaining their imperial supremacy, they needed coal, iron ore and hard wood timber among others. By then they had already exhausted their own hard wood timber bearing forests. Naturally, their attention first turned to teak wood timber of the Malabar hills in India and teak trees were declared as the state plants and an Inspector of Forests was appointed to implement the order. That was also the period in the European history, when the catch words were; progress, science, industry, which the countries of the West like Britain claimed to possess. In that spirit, inventions and discoveries were made; transportation was being revolutionized; factories were erected; and scientific bodies were created. In the same spirit, with a view to enhancing the Imperial interests, a number of scientific bodies such as Anthropological, Botanical, Geological and Zoological Surveys were established over a period of time. And "that was also the heyday of the museums. Science teaching was focused around show cases exhibiting specimens classified by types- fossils, rocks, insects, stuffed birds, caged animals in zoo- fixed entities, changeless, everlasting (Hugh-Jones, S and James Laidlaw: 2000: 84). And there was also a new movement led by Sir C Linnaeus for establishing botanical gardens all over the world, which did not only have scientific motives, but also imperial and commercial ones.

Forest Policy and Forest Administration in British India

Looking for alternative sources for industrial and construction timber in India for the Royal Navy, the Court of Directors of the British East India Company enquired in 1805 whether a regular supply of teak timber from Malabar Coast could be ensured. The enquiry led to appointment of a Forest Committee to examine the issue and recommend the royalty rights on teak trees. The recommendation was based on the old feudal practice of reserving certain trees as the "royal

trees", though the forests in the olden days were open to all people for any sort of exploitation. Consequently, Captain Watson of the Police Department was appointed on November 10, 1806 as the first Conservator of Forests in India. His duties were to preserve and improve the production of teak and other timber suitable for ship building. He established a timber monopoly throughout Malabar Coast and supplied inexpensive timber for the British ship builders at the cost of the tree owners and merchants. Consequently, his vague authority and high handedness led to such a controversy that the office of Conservator was abolished in 1823. Nothing was heard of forest conservation for the next three decades, when the railways were introduced in India, which needed hardwood timber for railways sleepers. Incidentally, such railways sleepers were initially procured from distant Norway at a considerable cost. Thus, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India, issued a memorandum with that effect on August 3, 1855 leading to appointment of Dr. McCleland as the first Superintend of the Forests, who was succeeded by Dietrich Brandis (1824-1907) on April 1, 1864 as the Inspector General of Forests. Brandis, who came to be rightly recognized as the father of the Indian forestry, was instrumental during his three decades long stewardship in organizing the Forest Department as a professional body by initiating legal and educational measures (Sinha, A C: 2003).

By 1830s, the British had realized the potentiality of Northeast as tea producing region, which required legal frame for acquisition of uncultivated land for forests and plantation. Any plot of land, which was not legally claimed by some body, was considered to be state property and thus the state had every right to declare it as reserved forest for claimed larger interests. In the light of that, the first Indian Forest Act VII, 1865 provided with the details of forest conservancy, 'reserved' and 'unreserved forests', their demarcations, privileges of the local villagers, types of acts prohibited within the forests, list of the reserved trees, and procedures for their removal of unreserved trees, grass, fuel, etc. Furthermore, procedures were detailed for firing the forests, grazing, shifting cultivation, felling and removal of timber and driftwood. One of the first questions to arise after the organization of the Forest Department was to ascertain the actual nature of the state proprietorship in land. Under the general trend of the British policy in governing India, it had been ruled that when the

population had settled in joint village communities, any forest or waste land that fell within their boundaries are considered common property. And this recognition formed the basis of all settlements made after the occupation of the country by the British.

But the above stipulation led to certain anomalies. For example, "in case of un-united villages (better call it settlements such as that of the *Jhumias*), no right to the wasteland was ever recognized. The old Rajas claimed all the areas which were not actually brought under cultivation, but any person who required wasteland for the purpose of cultivation, could obtain it without difficulty on agreeing to pay the assessment enforced. The rest of the wasteland had always been recognized as the property of the rulers and from them (it) was inherited by the British Government by right of conquest. In some cases, the cultivators had acquired prescriptive rights of users. It was right of this nature, which were to prove a source of trouble and difficulty to the Forest Department. For these prescriptive (and usually wasteful) rights of the users are often incompatible with the scientific and economic working of a forest" opined noted forest historian, E P Stebbing (Stebbing, E P: 1982:464-465).

Moreover, it was realized that the growth of the forest rights in India had been analogous to that of the similar rights to users in Europe. Consequently, the legal provisions for regulating and extinguishing them by means of suitable compensation must be analogous to the similar European experience. It was deliberately settled that the long continued customary rights of the users, e.g. the free collection of small produce such as fuel, grass, bamboos, grazing and shifting cultivation in the wasteland, must be held to continue a prospective right. Side by side, it was realized that the Government must insist on the regulation of these rights for efficient management of the reserve forests in the interests of the country. In the light of such expectation, the provisions of the Forest Act VII, 1865 were found to be insufficient and inapplicable within a few years. And accordingly, the need for a legal definition and separation of rights in forests property was realized by passing Act VII of 1878, which laid down elaborate procedures for "Reserved" and "Protected Forests".

The third Inspector General of the Forests, B Ribbentrop, described the process of forest settlement work and the idea behind the forest reservation: "The various forest laws in India make it quite

clear that the object of a forest settlement is, in the first instance, to fix and define legal status and extent of proprietary rights of the state in any forest or waste land, constituted or declared to be forest within the meaning of the forest laws, and consequently, to enquire and record to what extent the proprietary rights of the state are limited by legally existing adverse rights of private persons or communities. Secondly, to arrange for exercise or communication of adverse rights so recorded in order to allow the property being managed with a view of obtaining the best possible return, both for the present and in the future, for general public. The settlement of a forest, which has resulted in its constitution as a reserve merely, determines the rights of the Government and private persons over the forests and in no way aims at prescribing the agency, by which a forest may be managed, or the requirement which is intended to meet, are, in every instance, dictated by local circumstances. Thus, a reserve forest has not necessarily, the object as it is frequently believed, of producing large timber for export or public works, but (it is)more often that of supplying the local demands in smaller timbers, fuel, grass, or any other forest produce. A forest may be said to fulfill its highest function when it produces, in a permanent fashion, the greatest possible quantities of the material which is most useful to the general public, and at the same time, yields the best possible return to the proprietors" (Ribbentrop, R: 1888). Naturally, as per the provisions of the Indian Forest Acts, the Forest Settlement Officers (FSO) were designated to determine the legal status of claims to be entertained as rights. And in this way, as much as 81,000 square miles of Reserved Forests were created in India by the 1900.

Before the first quarter of the 20th century, forestry made a remarkable progress to the extent that the British felt the need of establishing a forestry school at Dehra Dun in 1873, which was later changed in to Forest Rangers' College. Extension of the forestry also resulted in unrest at the grass root level reflected through the Indian Home Rule and Civil Disobedience and Non-cooperation movements, which led to the defiance of the forest laws and extensive damage of the forests in different parts of the country in 1920s.Though the Indian Forest Act of 1878 continued to be the general law relating to the forest in the British India, a number of amendments were made in the body of law with a view to make it more effective in dealing

with emerging situations. The Indian Forest Act XVI, 1927 was enacted incorporating provisions of IFA VII, 1878, IFA V, 1901, IFA XV, 1911, IF Amendment Act,1918 and the Devaluation Act XXXVIII, 1920 and this legal provision continued to be in operation till the Indian Union came out with its own Forest Policy in 1952, which was replaced after about three decades. The provisions of the Indian Forest Act, 1927, from the points of view of the administration, tried to close all its perceived loopholes, it turned out to be more and more oppressive for the immediate rural communities. For example, all the *community rights* over the forests granted in 1865 Act were dropped; individuals were expected to file their claims on the forest land and forest produce before the FSO, who was to enquire the claims; rights in respect of individual claims were extinguished unless the individual claiming them satisfies the FSO. Similarly, the FSO was supposed to record the claims pertaining to the practice of shifting cultivation and record government's decision on them. The shifting cultivation was considered a privilege subject to control, restriction and abolition as per section 10 of the Act. Though the Act removed the wrongful arrests as granted by IFA 1865 and IFA 1878, it intensified local level conflicts by 1930s leading to *Satyagraha* in a number of places such as Kumaun and Garhwal. Not for nothing, that Reserve Forests and the Railways, two early British innovations, tuned out to be the easy targets of future anti-state agitations. Luckily, for the forestry in India, by taking advantage of the inexpensive manual labour, there had never been any efforts to introduce mechanized logging in the Indian forests.

Similarly, forestry in the Philippines formally started in 1863 with the creation of the *Inspeccion General de Montes*. Three main goals of forest policy could be discerned in the Spanish royal decrees: (a) providing Spanish civil and naval needs for timber, (b) contributing to government revenue, and (c) perpetuating the forest resources. But these goals were not met. Both, commercial forest exploitation for timber and government revenues from forest use, were low. (171) Under the Spanish regime, no forest land was allowed to be sold unless it was properly surveyed, had its boundaries marked out, and certified as alienable and disposable by the *Inspeccion General de Montes*. While timber could be used freely under a permit, illegal cutting of trees and cultivation in the forest lands increased among the natives. However, with a small population, pressure on forest land

was negligible, and forest loss was not extensive. In fact, when United States took over the Philippines in 1898, the country was still almost blanketed with forests. The first annual report by the American appointed director of Forest Bureau described the lush forest vegetation... as intact resources "waiting to be exploited by American capitalists". Paramount among the Forestry goals were developing and perpetuating the forest industry. Among the important work of Bureau were inventory, construction of volume tables, and botany. Mechanized logging was also introduced and extensive government ownership was enforced. All forestry activities were intensified, necessitating the importance of American foresters and creation of a local forestry school to train Filipinos. The Forest Act, enacted by the US Congress in 1904, became the bible of Philippine forestry and was the basis of all forestry regulations until 1975. While the industry flourished, the forests started to suffer, from both destructive logging and *kaingin*-making (local *jhumming* system). Laws to prohibit kaingin-making and illegal entry into public forests were enacted. The laws proved worthless and difficult to enforce because of the size of the population, the lack of enough forest rangers, and enormous areas of forest lands. (Boado, Eufresina L: 1988:171-172). As against the above, the British Borneo Timber (BBT) Company (1919-1952) in Malaysia behaved as any self-respecting monopolist: Sabah's highly desirable hardwoods were extracted at low levels in order to keep price high. With the demise of the BBT monopoly in 1952, logging expanded quickly, with entry of three other large foreign firms and eight local companies. By the end of the 1950s, virtually all logging was mechanized. The industry expanded through out the 1960s, as heavier and more powerful machinery enabled harvests in the new areas (Gills, M: 1988: 123).

Introduction of Forest Administration in Northeast India

Missionary turned education officer in the administration of Assam, W Robinson found in 1841 that 'the forests in Assam were on an extensive scale, but they were yet to be surveyed' (Robinson, W: 1950: 40). And that was exactly the time; the British were examining the land tenure and land laws with a view to facilitating an extensive tea plantation. At last, patterned on the Gorakhpur Wasteland Rules in Nepal Terai and the Sunderbans Grants on the Gangetic marsh land, the Waste Land Rule of March, 1838 was promulgated. This new dispensation envisaged three categories of land for tea plantation in

Upper Assam: (a) the first class, the forest and high waste land to be held rent free for five years, (b) the second class, the extensive high reed (*nal*) and grass (*kangri*) for 10 years, and (c) the third class, the grassland amidst cultivated lands, to be held for 20 years. And even after the above period, the rent was nominal, e.g. rupees one and half for the local measure for the three-fourth of the allotted land and one-fourth was rent free in consideration for other establishments (Barpujari, H K: 1980:236). The above provisions were revised in 1854 to permit a 99 year long land lease on more favourable terms, which rightly came to be known as "land-grabbing" and "land rush" all over the plains of Assam (Guha, A:1988:14). In this way, the extensive forested foot hills of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgaon, Silcher, and Sylhet districts on the southern bank of the river Brahmputra and Darang, Kamrup and Goalpara on the northern bank of the river, even extending up to Darjeeling hills in the west were turned into thriving tea plantations at the cost of verdant forests.

Introduction of Tea Plantation and Tea-mania

In 1839, a joint stock company, Assam Tea Company, was formed in England with its effective branch in Calcutta. "In deciding upon the name of the company, the (Tea) Committee (nominated by the government in 1834 for introducing tea cultivation in British India) was aware that the lime, coal and oil, and that gold were alleged to have been found in the rivers. With an eye on the possibility that they might want to develop anyone of these other commodities, the Committee decided to adopt the general designation of 'Assam Company', rather than Assam Tea Company, although tea was the main object of the enterprise" (Antrobus, H A: 1957:37). Some four decades later, Assam Railway and Trading Company was formed in the same region, but was engaged in railways, collieries, forest and plywood factories, oil and tea plantation (Surita, P:1981). Coming to the absurd theatre of "tea mania" in the Upper Assam, apart from the tea, railways as well became a catalyst. "Almost all the private capital spent on Indian railroads was raised in Britain, of the 50,000 holders of Indian railroad shares in 1868, only 400 were Indians, because shares could only be traded in London, It was the policy of the railroad companies, the East India Company and the British Government to hire British contractors and discourage Indian enterprises. Two fifths of the capital raised for the railroads was spent in Britain. Skilled

workers, foremen, and engineers were brought from Britain and were paid twice the home rate, plus free passage, medical care, and the allowances. Rails, locomotives, rolling stock, and other iron goods were imported. A lack of suitable timber for sleepers, resulting from the unreliable practices of Indian merchants, led the railroads to bring to India the sleepers of Baltic fir creosoted in England. Even the British coal was preferred to the cheaper Indian coal" (Headrick, Daniel R: 1982:190).

There was a popular myth among the British that the vegetation grew very fast in Assam: so much so that 'if you leave your walking stick outside in the lawn in the evening, it will turn into a tree in the next morning' so goes the saying. Another myth was that the forests were inexhaustible: one could cut as much as possible; it was considered essential for the progress and development of the province. The regional forests were known as the ideal for hunters of the great game such as tigers, elephants, Rhinoceros, bison, mithuns and others. At the top of all these, there was no labour force willing to work on wages and the entire land was very sparsely populated, to the extent that there were no towns in the plains or hills, no industry worth name and no market for timber produced. Neither there were saw mills, nor was a local tradition of turning timber into planks. The hills were considered abodes of the so-called savage, barbarian and primitive communities, unsafe for the British administrators to venture. The tribe's men were not only good hunters, but they were also by habit non-vegetarian living on the meat of the animals and birds they hunted in the forests. With the exception of boat ride on the Brahmputra and elephant mounts elsewhere, there was no reliable surface transportation available in the region. And at the top of it, there used to be heavy monsoon rainfall inundating extensive areas and causing malarial and other epidemics annually.

The forest report for the year, 1869-70 of the Government of Bengal Presidency, estimated an area of 400 square miles of valuable forest cover in Assam. Tea companies were turning the timber from the forests into charcoal, tea chest, logging and so on without authority. Once Assam was created into a separate province in 1874, Gustav Mann, Assistant Conservator of the Forests estimated about 8,000 square miles of valuable forests, untouched by the axe, through his first annual report on the forests of Assam. However, his superior, Dr.

W Schlich, the Inspector of the Forests, suggested for the formation of reserve forests up to an area of 700 square miles and rest of the forests were to be left open for the time being except *sal, soom,* and rubber trees. In his opinion, Assam was provided with much timber and wood than was likely to be required for local use for a long time to come. Further more, because of the inaccessibility and high cost involved in removing the timber, export did not appear to be feasible at that time. In the year 1875, the forests in Assam were divided in to five divisions: Cachar, Goalpara, Golaghat, Gauhati and Tezpur. One of the recurrent concerns of the administration was revenue generated from the forests. For example, it was ruefully noted that the annual revenue surplus for the ten years between 1879-80 to 1888-89 amounted to Rs. 25,000 only. By the end of the year 1899-1900, the total area under the Department of Forest was 20,061 square miles or 44.2 per cent of the total area of the province, comprising 3,609 square miles of reserves, 16,452 square miles of un-classed forests. The Assam Forest Regulation, 1881 was enacted in 1890, which defined the land at the disposal of the Government as "(a) land in respect of which no person has acquired a permanent, inheritable and transferable rights of use and occupancy under any laws for the time being is enforced, (b) land in respect of which no person has acquired any right by grant or lease made or continued by, or on behalf of the British Government (3:8 of the regulation)". Similarly, right of *jhum* cultivation (10:3), penalty for trespass or damage in reserved forests (24: a, b, c,) and the village forests (29:1 & 2) were spelt out.

Once Assam was re-organized as a distinct province in British Indian Empire on April 1, 1912, the forest administration was also divided in to two circles: Eastern and Western. While the former included the forest divisions of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Cachar, Sylhet, Lushai Hills, and North East Frontier Tracts (present Arunachal Pradesh), and it also dealt with the forestry issues of the Naga Hills District and the princely state of Manipur. The later consisted of Nowgaon, Kamrup, Darrang, Goalpara, Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills. The forest administration filed an annual report on a set pattern, divided in six chapters: constitution of the state forests, financial results, research and experiments, administration and 'general'. We have the forest administration annual reports from 1911-12 to 1932-33, when state began to pay attention to its forests in a concerted way and the year, when decline in Assam forest set in for a variety of reasons, from

which it is yet to recover. This period of about twenty years exposes all the ills and strength of the forests in the state such as forest reservation, timber extraction, labour, forest villages, encroachment on its resources, transportation, *jhuming*, grazing, and forest finance and revenue.

Aspects of Environment in British Assam and Its Legacy

Forest Villages and Grazing in the Degraded Forests : Assam was a province, where inexpensive labour to work arduously in the forest was, difficult to find. With a view to alleviating the shortage of labour, the Department came with an ingenious idea to create temporary captive labour force in the agriculturally suitable locales by settling labourers on the condition that they must be available to the Departmental work for a minimum period in a year. And for that, they were offered certain measure of cultivable land per family; they were permitted to keep up to five numbers of cattle heads. They were provided with muzzle loading guns to ward off wild beasts from destroying their crops. But experience was far from satisfactory. Obligatory labour was never popular with the labour in these villages. They raised such bumper crops with little efforts on these fertile forested locales that they had little incentive to work for poorly paid forest work. Then against the permitted strength, more unauthorized persons/families would reside with the connivance of the others. Pressed by the officials, they would resort to temporary desertion from the spot only to return later. So much so that some Manipuri villagers were to be evicted with the help of the Assam Rifles from Jarul Tola locale in Cachar Division in the year 1927 (Sinha, A C : 1993:60). However, the Department was so helpless to procure labour force to work in the forest that it went on creating new forest villages in different Forest Divisions. Then the Department of Revenue emerged on the scene demanding for imposing land rent for the cultivation. Another dimension was added to the problem during the non-co-operation movement launched by the Indian National Congress in 1920-21, when the villagers refused to work for the Department and in many places, in fact, burnt the forests and plantations. The non-co-operation was resorted at Kachugaon in Goalpara and Boko in Kamrup division in the year 1921-22, when armed forces were called to intervene in favour of the Department.

A Forest Enquiry Committee consisting of the forest and civil authorities was set up in the year 1928 to examine the issues associated with the forest villages. In the light of that, the Government decided to abandon the policy of creating forest villages under the Regulation. And thus, the villages, which were not already created, were cancelled. But this reprieve was short lived. The minority Muslim League Government of Assam (1937-'45), led by Sir Syed Mohammad Saadulla, launched a programme known as "Grow more food", which was termed by Lord Wawell, the Viceroy, as "Grow more Muslims" (Hazarika, S: 1995: 59-60). It is alleged that taking advantage of the Indian Forest Act, 1927, thousands of Mymansinghia Muslims were settled on the swamp and reserve forests. The provisions of the above Act allowed for a limited number of forest villages to be located inside the reserved forests mainly to help the Department to work on the forests. But each of the family now was entitled to eight hectares of land to clear the forest and cultivate and also to keep five heads of cattle. But after Independence of India, the scenario changed for the worst for the forests. *The First Citizen's Report* records: "After independence, however, the forest villages began springing up at a rapid rate. Those living in them worked outside the forest, but used provisions, such as tax exemption to their advantages. The size of the original clearing would grow unchecked and eat into the forest. In just one Division of Cachar district, Silchar, there are 116 forest villages today. The creation of more forest villages was stopped with the promulgation of the Forest Conservation Ordinance on October 6,1980, which was later converted into an Act. This law restrains State Government from using any forest land for a "no-forest" purpose without prior approval of the Central Government" (Agrawal, A et al: 1982: 45).

Story of grazing cattle in the forest is much older, as the increase in the number of buffaloes in the province was remarkable. There were 12,915 grazing buffaloes at full rate in the un classed state forests in the year 1893-94. After a gape of 11 years, this number went up to 45,893 in the year 1904-05. Their number got trebled within 20 years in the Garo Hills forests. As the Nepalese herdsmen used to move their cattle away at the time of counting with a view to avoiding paying rates imposed on the grazing, the Government even considered opening grazing reserves for the Nepalese in the year

1911-12. In the year 1912 there were some 86,389 buffaloes and out of 3,36,323 cows and bullocks on the forests, only 5,079 were charged for grazing fees. In the month of October, 1912, a Conference was held at Shillong between the forest and civil authorities to discuss the regulation of grazing. It was decided to provide grazing grounds to the herdsmen on lower rates to prohibit the removal of cattle from one ground to another without special permission and to prevent grazing ground to be converted in to cultivation. Consequently, 1,976 square miles of reserves were closed for grazing in the Eastern Circle of Assam forests and only 470 square miles in the Sibsagar division were opened for the grazing. However, the entire government wasteland, 7,700 square mile in all, were open to free grazing by settlement holders. In a portion of the forests of North Cachar Hills, the professional grazers were to pay Rs.1 per buffalo and anna four per cow per year.

In the un-classed forests, 25,706 fee paying and 27,543 free of payment animals were permitted to graze. As the rapid increase in the number of the cattle and migration of the Nepalese cattle owners in to the Assam Valley became significant, damage to crops was a frequent complaint against these herdsmen. The grazing fees from the professional grazers for the year 1913-14 on 25,409 buffaloes, 15,898 cows, 632 other animals and 22,178 buffaloes, 65,265 cows, 100 other animals grazed in the government wasteland free of cost, a privilege granted to settlement holders. As the grazing scenario was turning chaotic, the Government decided to raise the rates: "...not nearly enough suitable grazing grounds will be available, and with this increase, greater damage to thatching grass and other areas occur, it has been decided to increase the fee in respect of buffaloes during the current year from Rs. One to Rs. Two and those for other animals from four to six annas. Further, a detailed investigation will now be made district by district by an officer of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) in order to endeavour to arrive at a satisfactory policy for the future" Wrote B C Allen, on December 21, 1914 in the Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Revenue Department, on the file number 5109R.

In the year 1918-19 as much as Rs. 3,11,274 from the Western Circle and Rs. 2,11,274 from the Eastern Circle were received as the grazing fees and Rs. 29,469 remained arrears on the account. However, in the next year the revenue was reduced to a mere 4.2 per cent of

the previous year. This drastic change was because of the fact that the Government took a conscious decision to transfer grazing fees from that of the forest department to that of the revenue. However, the Department of the Forest would continue to bear the burnt of this decision for the years to come. Deforestation, poaching, squatting, land alienation, and other forms of forest related crimes continued to be reported from the marginal forests, wastelands and degraded forests of the region. Climax of all that resulted in 1921-22, when Chabilal Uppadhyay, the first President of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee and the spokesman of the Nepalese herdsman; went on non-cooperation and civil disobedience against the decision of the Government to turn their grazing ground in to now famous Kaziranga Rhinoceros reserve. Moreover, in the years to come, these two immigrant communities, Mymansinghia Muslims and the Nepalese herdsmen turned peasantry, would cause havoc to the regional social and economic fabric.

Forest Revenue : The dual motives for creation of forest reserves were the timber supply to the urban and industrial sectors and increasing the revenue for financially deficit province of Assam. Accordingly, the Department of Forest was organized scientifically as a profit making enterprise as far as possible. And its success and efficiency in its management were measured in terms of revenue and consequent surplus over expenditure. To begin with, the Department had a small trained staff in forestry and a poorly paid Forest Watchers and Forest Guards at the bottom. The Department was a Government establishment and thus, its expenditure had to be sanctioned at the highest level subject to the financial rules. The Conservator of the Department of the Forests had to file an annual progress report on his charge, which was sent to the government for its perusal and approval. The Governor in Council would review the Report and the relevant portion of it would be sent to the Conservator by the Chief Secretary of the Province for implementation. The surplus revenue generated by the Department would add to the general revenue of the province and the Department as such would not have a specific claim on it.

We have drawn a statistical table for the financial results of the forest operation in the province of Assam for the years, 1910-1911 to 1932-1933 with the break up in terms of expenditure, revenue received, and surplus generated (Sinha, A C: 1993:64). An analysis of the above

statistics shows that the Department spent the lowest amount of money (Rs.6,46, 877) in the year 1917-1918 and maximum in the year, 1929-1930 (Rs.22, 21, 304) in managing its charge. Though the maximum revenue (Rs.37,67,873) was earned in the year 1928-29, but the maximum expenditure on the forest (Rs.22,21,304) resulted in the poor financial result (Rs.1,46,136) in the year 1930-31. The surplus generated by the Department ranged between Rs.1,46136 (6.5 % on the gross) in the year 1930-31 and Rs.21,81,260 for the year 1927-1928. But this surplus was achieved at the indifferent cost of the quality of forests and appalling condition on which the functionaries, especially at the lower ladder of the hierarchy, worked in the Province. R M Robinson, Conservator of the Western Circle, recorded in 1912-13 the poor state of the Forest administration: "During the period one Ranger retired, one Ranger died, one Forester and five Forest Guards were removed from the service, 8 Guards and one office peon were dismissed, one clerk, one moharrir and 3 Guards were dispensed

Table : Annual Financial Results: 1911-1912 to 1932-1933

Years	Revenue (Rs)	Expenditure (Rs)	Surplus (Rs.)	% of surplus on the gross
1910-11	13, 01, 640	8, 02,514	4, 99, 126	38.3
1911-12	11, 17, 569	8, 32,158	2, 85, 411	23.5
1912-13	11, 33, 228	8, 15, 671	3, 17 557	28.0
1913-14	10, 89, 878	9, 16, 657	1, 73,221	15.9
1917-18	14, 63, 297	6, 44, 877	8, 16, 420	55.8
1918-19	15, 11, 823	7, 49, 951	7, 63, 872	50.5
1922-23	17, 18, 853	11, 14, 635	5, 99, 218	42.1
1923-24	19, 79, 709	11, 48, 062	8, 31, 647	42.1
1925-26	30, 35, 672	15, 67, 980	14, 67, 782	48.0
1926-27	33, 39, 473	16, 49, 619	16, 89, 854	53.9
1927-28	36, 13, 460	14, 32, 200	21, 81, 260	60.0
1928-29	37, 67, 873	21, 32, 472	16, 35, 401	42.4
1929-30	35, 20, 007	22, 21, 304	12, 98, 703	36.9
1930-31	22, 62, 793	21, 16, 657	01, 46, 136	06.5
1931-32	19, 27, 078	16, 11, 208	03, 15, 870	16.4
1932-33	16, 16, 405	14, 10, 217	02, 06, 188	12.8

Source: Progress Reports of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam, 1910- 1911-to 1932-1933.

with. The Department does not attract a class of Government servants suitable for the work, or who will serve in order to profit by the attraction of the upper grades. ...The controlling staff has proved wholly inadequate to deal with the work now before the Department". (Sinha, A C: 1993:75).

The above situation did not improve even in years to come. Because of the paucity of the forest officers, Darrang, Nowgong and Sadiya divisions were put under the charge of the civil authorities in the year 1918-1919. On the issue of the staffing pattern vis-à-vis the revenue surplus generated by the Department, an interesting controversy was raised between the Forest Department and the civil administration of the province in the year 1926-1928. W R L Jacob, the Conservator of the Forests in Assam, noted in the Progress Report of the Forest Administration in the Province of Assam in the year, 1926-27 that the resignation of foresters and guards had not decreased and the number of yearly resignations showed that the forest service in the lowest grades was not sufficiently attractive to hold them back to their posts. He pleaded that the surplus generated for the said year (Rs. 16,89,854 i. e. 53.9% of the total expenditure for the year on the Forest) was far too large compared to the expenditure incurred (Rs. 14,43,819) and more money might be put back in to the forests in order to increase the value of the forests in the Province.

The next year surplus generated by the Department went still higher. But in the view of the Conservator that position was totally false. Every division in the Eastern Circle was under-manned and newly created Working branch of the Department was carrying on with a totally inadequate staff. Improved housing of the subordinate staff and provision of suitable camping grounds in the forests with good water supply, opening up of communications in the forests were among some of the most urgent undertakings. Without additional staff and funds, the existing position would steadily grow worse. The Governor in Council recognized the justice of the above views of the Conservator and acknowledged the need for revamping the forest administration. However, the Governor of the province asserted that the large surplus, which the Department had yielded, had been of inestimable value in resorting the financial stability of the province and providing funds for many important schemes of the provincial development in other fields.

Saw Mills and Tea Chests : Light and soft wood is required for packaging finished tea for dispatching the products to the markets. Initially, the British plantation owners imported tea chests from Scandinavian countries at considerable costs. The logic of economy forced them to look for alternative sources and that led them to the modest timber of *Simul (Bombox Malabaricum*). As there was no local tradition of planking of the logs, the planters had to erect saw mills and then train local expertise to turn the planks into tea chests. There was another problem; Simul tree is invariably found in scattered numbers mixed with other species of the trees on sandy soil found by river banks and the like. As the Department of Forest got organized in 1860s, the planters sought permission to cut Simul trees for the purpose from the forests, which was granted free of cost. However, a nominal charge per chest was levied to the companies. This was apparently a very wasteful arrangement, as there was no accounting for how many trees had been fallen to turn them in to how many chests. A total of 4,95,544 cubic feet free timber at the concessional rate costing Rs. 30,095 was extracted by the saw mills for the year 1913-14. The forest department viewed the royalty assessed on the manufactured tea chests unsatisfactory and proposed it to substitute with that a royalty on logs. Though the timber industry was facing a lean period in late 1920s, however, there was an increasing demand from the match factories for soft wood However, the royalty on timber used for plywood tea boxes was retained at old rate of six pie per cft for the year 1928-29.

Once the trees located by the riverside convenient for the float were exhausted, the saw mills began sending their wood cutters in deeper and deeper jungles looking for right type of trees for the timber. The rustic and greedy wood cutters would not understand where did the forbidden Inner Line between the Province of Assam and Sadiya Frontier Tract begin and happily cut the timber and float them in the river to the saw mills. When intercepted by the local tribes men, who would challenge the wood cutters for trespassing, the latter would buy peace by offering a few rupees of inducement or blackmail money and try to claim the same from their employers. This so-called blackmail money hurt the pride of the all powerful tea planters' lobby, which reached the Governor of the Province with their complaints against the alleged culprits. The Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya,

Noel Williamson was instructed on October 31, 1908: " Should the tribes men meet you in a friendly and conciliatory spirit, it will be open to you to discuss with them the question of compensation for any loss, which the tribes men may consider themselves to have sustained by the prohibition of the exactions from the saw mills companies, which they have hitherto considered to be a legitimate source of revenue...the services of the tribesmen may be enlisted in collection of the poll-tax by the offer of a commission and similarly it is open to you to consider whether a commission may be offered on the sale of forest products from the those tracts from which the tribesmen have hitherto derived certain advantage. It will be your duty to consider and advise on the executive measures required for the protection, so far as possible of the more valuable forests between the inner line and the outer lines" Williamson along with Dr. Gregorson, the doctor for the expedition, went across the Inner Line on an expedition in the Abor Hills in March, 1911 and with exception of 6 coolies, who managed to escape, was murdered at village Komsing by Kebang Abors. An impressive armed expedition under Major General Graham Bower was sent to punish the Abors during the winter months of 1911-12, which resulted ultimately in the creation of North East Frontier Tracts, present Arunachal Pradesh.

Railways Sleepers and *Sal* Timber Extraction : The railways were introduced in the province of Assam to reach tea to the port cities of Chittagong and Calcutta and bring inexpensive indentured plantation labour from tribal heartland of central India on a most inexpensive term. Thus, one finds the rail route meander from plantation to plantation making its tract unnecessarily longer. By then old boat ride to the Brahmaputra as a trade route was turning uneconomic and cumbersome in view of the relatively better organized alternative of the railways. Very soon the railways would emerge as substitute to the old boat making industry for timber utilization. As its network increased in operation, its requirements for the railways sleepers increased, constituting as much as 60 per cent revenue in the year 1912 of the forest department. However, the price offered by the railways for the sleepers was un–remunerative to the extent that the Goalpara Forest Division made a representation to the main customer, Eastern Bengal State Railways in the year 1912. Consequently, this resulted in an agreement on a 23 per cent raise in the price of the railways sleepers.

However, even that was hardly to compensate for the cost of labour involved in the extensive departmental saw operations, but it was still perused because it enabled the Department to assist the Railways without an actual loss of potential revenue.

The railways sleepers required heavy hardwood timber such as *Sal (Shoria Robusta)* closer to the tract, which was available in plenty in Kachugaon, Goalpara, Garo Hills, and Kamrup divisions of the Western Circle in Assam. However, only Goalpara Division worked on the railways sleepers departmentally. The description of the railways sleeper in the annual reports filed by the department is fraught with a number of ambiguities: the sleepers are categorized as broad gauge (BG), metre gauge (MG); special and tram sleepers in numbers; they are also occasionally shown in cft; they are entered as per clients: Assam Bengal Railways, Eastern Bengal State Railways; they are displayed as per the timber such as Sal, or others; then they are shown against the source of production: departmental, or locally or supplied through timber agents and there were problems of the payments: advanced payment, failure of supply, sleepers ordered, but not lifted from the railways sidings, etc. In such a situation, working out a comparative picture of the railways sleepers supply from the Department of the Forest is not an easy task. The annual report for the year 1926-27 recorded production of 102,095 BG sleepers, 50,203 MG sleepers and 21,756 special sleepers worth Rs.9,53,400. The following year, 3,05,457 sleepers were supplied to the Eastern Bengal and Assam Bengal Railways. In the year, 1928-29 some 1,75,607 railways sleepers of various specifications were supplied to the railways. However, the cost of producing sleepers was increasing and demands from the railways were shrinking. The Department of Forests was so much engrossed with increasing its revenue by supplying sal railways sleepers that it ran in problems with the Garo Jhumias, which we deal in the next section.

Forest Reserves : Reservation of the forest was secured keeping in mind the quality of marketable timber in a particular area. We have noted earlier that some of the best forests were cleared to make room for tea plantation in the Himalayan foothills, Upper Assam, Barak Valley and elsewhere. In fact, one of the reasons for creation of forest reserves was to make tea chests available for packaging for the exporting tea to the distant markets more safely. Another pressing reason for

creation of forest reserve was that of provision of inexpensive hardwood timber as the railways sleepers for expanding railways. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, tea plantation was some six decades old. Similarly, railways, though relatively new to the region, were still being extended. So with these two potential customers in mind, the Government of Assam intended to extend forest reserves on the densely forested terrain with required quality of timber. However, the Department of Forest faced two serious handicaps: shifting cultivation resorted by the tribal communities as per their customary rights and lack facilities to transport the timber to the markets. So, the forest reserves rose from 4,344 square miles to 5,145 square miles in the period 1912 to 1932 in the region (Sinha, A C: 1993:57). The extension of reserves on two ends: northeastern corner in present day Upper Assam-Arunachal interface and western corners in the Garo Hills District led to serious development, which we shall discuss below.

Forest Reserves and Movement for its Dereservation by Sonaram Sangma : The Government of Assam deputed, Assistant Conservator of Forests, Mr. Fisher, to report on the forests of Garo Hills District in the year 1881. He undertook an extensive tour of the district and provided a detailed report on the forests, which formed the basis for future conservation and reservation. The Deputy Commissioner of the District commented on Fisher's recommendations on September 11,1882: "...Since the Garos Hills were occupied by the British Government and personal security secured to the plains as well as to the hill people, many of the latter have gone to reside at the foot of the hills and have commenced cultivation with plough. The Dibru Hill Reserve is vested with no permanent population near it. The remaining reserves are Chima and Bangshi, Darugiri, Dambu, and Rongrenggiri. These are hills. The first two offer no difficulty, as population is small and wasteland belonging to the villages interested in the tract is abundant, so much so that most of the land in the proposed reserves shows no sign of ever having been cultivated. The instances of other two reserves, Dambu and Rongrenggiri, are somewhat different, and if the forests were not so valuable, I would not recommend their alienation from the two villages after which they are named".

Out the 18 forest reserves in the district, as many as 14 with an area of 89 square miles, were reserved in 1883 at the cost of Rs.1,235,

paid to Garos of four villages only and in case of the rest, no compensation was paid. For the next five years another four reserves were added. "In all, the Government paid Rs. 5,030 for 141 square miles of reserve forests. The move to reserve another 25,400 acres in 1900 and de-reserve 1,654 acres of land to the Bijni Maharaja in 1904 on the northern edge of the district gave momentum to the movement against the forest reservation" (Sinha, A C: 2003A: 201). Among others, Sonaram Sangma was identified as the leading light of the movement for Garos' cause resulting from the Government decision to reserve the forests in the Garo Hills mainly for the Sal timber. The bare sketch of Sonaram's life looks like this: born in 1867 at the village Rogrokgre on the border of Goalpara district, educated up to class IV standard from the American Baptist Mission School at Tura, worked for 10 years as moharrir in the Public Works Department, was dismissed for refusing a transfer, got busy in dealing in raw cattle hide, travelled distant places such as Goalpara, Guwahati, Calcutta, claimed belonging to a notable Garo family, whose land was usurped by the Bijni Zamidars, which was partly turned into forest reserves, was jailed in 1904 for leading movement for de reserving the Garo forests, petitioned to the Governor General with more than a hundred thousand Garos' signature on February 9, 1906, got the J C Arbuthnott Commission appointed on October 29, 1906, got its demands vindicated by the Commission, but with no relief to the Garos, shifted his residences for about half a dozen sites and expired at village Bakrapur (Goalpara) on August 27, 1916 and was buried there.

The Earliest Environmental Movement and Legacy of Sonaram Sangma : Sonaram Sangma and the petitioners like him had articulated their demands to the Governor General in the following way:

(i) Removal of encroachment on Nazrana Mahal land, Habraghat Pargana,

(ii) Restoration of Reserved Forests to the Garos, and

(iii) Abolition of Begar (unpaid compulsive labour for carrying officials' baggage) system, or impress of labour.

The Commission among others held public hearing on the spot and more than hundreds of witnesses were examined and it submitted its report to the Chief Secretary of Assam on May 11, 1907 and

largely found the petitioners' demands tenable. The Government processed the report and decided on March 20, 1908:

"As regards the complaint of the Garos that the formation of the forest reveres reserves them of valuable privileges, it seems clear (that) the reserves in the Garo Hills were constituted in the same way as in many other parts of the country. The waste land was treated as being at the disposal of the Government and no compensation was given for such lands when taken up. It is now proposed that a careful examination of the existing reserves should be made and that areas, which were found not worthwhile to retain, should be surrendered to the villagers. It is recommended that compensation representing roughly the approximate value of the land should be an act of grace for the reserves, which are retained, the amount being treated as a forest charge. The Government of India is prepared to accept these proposals. The diminution of reserve is prima facie undesirable, but there need be no objection to the surrender of worthless portions. The proposal to give compensation now in unusual, but political reasons in favour of liberality is strong, and the Government of India does not think that merely technical objection should be allowed to stand in the way of giving fair compensation"

It appears that no steps were taken to fulfill the above orders. Two major demands, de-reservation of the 'forest reserves' and compensation for the land taken away from the villagers, were not met. But there was one tangible benefit of the agitation and the continuous representations made by the Garos. The British stopped reserving the Garo forests any further. Sonaram even filed a civil suit against the Bijni Zamindars for recovery of pargana Habraghat in 1910. As Sonaram changed his residence about half a dozen times in two districts, no place made a claim that he belonged to it. Further more, he appears to have worked in relative isolation. He sought no support from the legal fraternity for the struggle he was engaged in along with other Garos. Possibly this humble but ambitious man had opened so many fronts to fight with at the same time: the British bureaucracy, American Baptist Church, and neighbouring zamindar from Goalpara. The business he was engaged in was not considered a respectable one, which could entitle him the company of the social notables of the time. There is no evidence that he engaged himself in any constructive or creative work for his community. Neither an

industry, nor in a handicraft, nor any social reform for the community is documented as part of his activities. Assessing his contributions almost nine decades after his demise, we had recorded earlier: "Sonaram's contribution as a community leader was lost in course of time, neither his own creativity, nor the results of the movement led by him could directly benefit the Garos of his time. There were very little remnants of his contributions left by him; once he was no more...No settlement staked a claim to Sonaram's heritage, a necessary prerequisite to create a myth of an inspiring future leadership. Not to talk of the 'Garo nation', there was little evidence of community consciousness across the Garo Hills. Though his efforts to agitate for 'de-reserving the reserved forests' and handing back the forests to the community was much ahead of the time, it is unfortunate that he is not counted among the pioneers of environmental movements in India" (Sinha, A C:2003A:210-211).

Outlook on the Northeastern Environment

The hurried review of the environmental scenario during the British rule presented above exhibits that every thing that is wrong with the regional environment today, began with the British forest administration and their propensity to opt for short-term gains at the cost of the environmental health. The British colonial forest policy was an extractive one, meant for providing support to the British industries, commerce, and raising revenue for the administration. We may thank them for the little mercy that they did not introduce mechanized logging, as done by the colonial powers elsewhere. But the steps they took for carving out forest reserves and its upkeep led to a series of problems in course of time. For example, they established a number of 'forest villages' as potential source of captive labour, which was never a success even during that period. However, the practice continued indefinitely. Politician with sectional interests such as Sir S M Saadulla added further misery to the forests by encouraging Bengali immigrants on the forest land. Similarly, the Nepalese herdsmen and grazers were encouraged by the British to graze their cattle on degraded forests with a view to increasing state revenue by levying grazing fees. The forests of the region have yet to recover from these inherited maladies. The division of British India in to Indian Union and Pakistan in 1947 led to arrival of a horde of refugees and then, the illegal settlers in the region, who were invariably settled or they

encroached on the forests and riverside marshes. Moreover, illegal settlement and unauthorized grazing leading to encroachment on the public land have become a menace beyond state control. Further more, if the British can be faulted for treating the forests merely as source of revenue for the state, in the changed circumstances of the day, the attempts on the part of some of the community leaders to use the forests as if it was a post-dated cheque to be in cashed in the market at convenience.

Ill-staffed and poorly provided functionaries of the forest department are simply no match to the armed and organized poachers on the look for hunting tigers, rhinoceros, tuskers and other animals. To the extent that the heavily guarded Wild life Sanctuaries of Kaziranga, Manas, Balpakram and Namdhapa are not free from the occasional crimes like poaching. Insurgency and counter-insurgency operations, which operate from inaccessible forests, have further added to the woes of the reserved forests (Sinha, A C: 1997: 56). In fact, many of the forest reserves are just on the paper, but on inspection one may land on degraded bushes full of burnt tree trunks and roots. The regional food habit has not helped very much in this regard, as most of the wild life— animals, birds, insects—has been hunted for the table. The unauthorized timber is floated down the streams and rivers with connivance of the corrupt functionaries even from the community forests. Naturally, the famed forests of the Northeast along with its equally famous rhino and other forms of life are under severe threat for their existence. Naturally, in such an appalling situation, when they are overwhelmed in their routine work, one does not find many efforts on the part of the regional forest functionaries to integrate local/ regional folk knowledge/expertise in the fold of modern forestry relevant to their normal operation.

The contest between the state and the community over the control on the forest resources, which had begun with the British period, continues to be in practice even today. The state has trained manpower for protection, conservation and exploitation of the forest resources, but its forest share is negligible. On the other hand, the community controls the forests, but it has no trained manpower to operate them scientifically with maximum benefit to the community. Moreover, the famed community solidarity itself has changed to a situation, where newly educated community leaders are playing more and more crucial

roles. In such a situation, as the interests of the state and the community are complementary to one another, how best can they co-operate with each other in taking advantage of the trained manpower to maximize the benefits and enrich the resources? Sonaram Sangma's a century old historical efforts for community control over the forest resources may be taken as beacon by the regional youth to stake such new roles. Further more, the message of and the lessons learnt from the environmental movement launched by Sonaram need to be reached far and wide in the country and elsewhere.

Our review of the environment in the region ends effectively in 1933, when symptoms of economic depression were visible leading to shrinking of the revenue from the forests. Within next five years, another disaster knocked on its doors in the form of the Second World War. Northeast region in general and eastern forests in particular were turned in to a limited theatre of war, causing havoc to the forest resources. A number of forest officers were drafted for the war duties. There was a heavy demand on the timber of all types resulting in unplanned felling of the trees. By the time the World War ended, the British were getting ready to leave India as the rulers. The refugees began to pour in and the region was cut off from other parts of the Indian Union because of the transport dislocation. Not only had the Department of the Forests, but the entire administration of the state also been to be re-organized by the new idealist, but inexperienced leaders. However, organizationally, the Department of Forests was in an enviable position, but it had potentiality. We had noted earlier the views of a former Conservator of Forests: "...the prospect for the future of the forests of Assam (the regional environment) are very promising; but it will take years of strenuous applications before the efficiency of the management equals to that of the majority of the Indian states; they are badly handicapped by having areas too large for proper control, by poor communication, and an unhealthy climate." (Sinha, A C: 1993:76).

There is another aspect of modern scientific approach to environment, which tends to label various sets of human activities such as agriculture, industry, and hunting and collecting fruits and roots from the forests as distinct human activities. Environment is seen as a source of raw material for the industries. The idea is to use the scientific expertise to 'develop' the forest dwellers and agriculturists

into urban industrial entrepreneurs. What will be the cost? How much displacement will it cause? How much time will it take to develop every laggard? And what will be the cost-benefit analysis of this massive exercise? Who will perform this onerous assignment? And what happens to the misery / or the human tragedy in which the millions of people are caught in this unending process of development? For the time being let us forget a billion plus Indians for a moment and ask: Does the world have enough resources to bring the rest of the world to the level of an average American citizen of today? These are some of the endless questions on the development praxis; for which answers are difficult and even impossible to find. Still it is touted as the panacea for the human race: the men and the women as well have to develop. Naturally, Northeast India refuses to be backyard of development. Though statistics suggest critical situation for the regional environment, but of late, the region has been awakened through a series of environmentally oriented initiatives such as Aranyak Nature Club, Nature's Beckon, Nature's Foster, CEE-NE, Society for Appropriate Technology (SAT) and the like. And naturally, there is hope that fabled rich natural habitat of the region will once more be pulsating with a renewed lease of life.

***Aranya,* opposed to the '*Pura*', i.e. *Nagara,* or cities, is seen as equivalent to the 'forest'. One of the Indian interpretations of 'aranya' is, where, there is no 'run' (war) between the kings. *Aranyani* is said to be the female spirit of the forests, who is to be propitiated by the hunters before undertaking their expedition. The rules of the aranya were creature equality; every body was equal to compete for its survival. English language has three terms, which need to be understood in their literal sense; in stead of being used synonymously. And they are: wild, forest and jungle. In common parlance, they are used inter-changeably; but they have distinct meanings. For example,

Wild has the following connotation: 'living or growing in its original, natural state; not domesticated or cultivated; desolate, waste; not civilized, savage, primitive, as a wild tribe; not easily restrained, or regulated; not submitted to control; dissipated; sensuous, lack of moral restrain, immoral, unbridled, orgiastic; violently disturbed; turbulent, stormy; in a sense of mental excitement; in a state of disorder, dis-management, confusion, fanatically impractical; visionary; showing a lack of sound judgment; reckless, imprudent; going wide of mark aimed at; missing the target.

Forest, derived from the Latin root '*forist*', meaning 'out of doors'; or 'a large uncultivable tract of land covered with trees and undergrowth'; woodlands

often used figuratively; the trees on such tract; a tract of woodland or waste land usually property of the king, preserved for games.

We are concerned here with the forest; by which we shall take the official definition as "an area set aside for protection if timber and other forest produce or maintained under woody vegetation for certain indirect benefits, which it provides, e.g. climatic or protective".

Jungle, derived from Hindi roots and means: land covered with dense growth of trees, tall vegetation. vines, any thick tangled growth.