

SOCIAL FRAME OF FOREST HISTORY

A Study in Ecological and Ethnic Aspects of Tea Plantation in the North Eastern Himalayan Foothills

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IT IS A paradox that the fast-growing ever-green rain forests of the eastern Himalayan foothills are also the region which suffers annually the most devastating floods, causing immense human misery and ecological damage. In the past there had been a symbiotic relationship between the Himalayan hill communities and the plainsmen from the Brahmaputra valley. However, with the establishment of the British empire on the Brahmaputra valley in 1826, an element of distortion was introduced in the regional economy through control over forest products, organized plantation, import of labour from outside and introduction of cash transaction. All these led to the insulation of the hill communities from the plains resulting in a parasitic relation between the two. Consequently, while plains were impoverished because of an organized exploitation of their land-based resources, the *jhum* cycle of the communal hill cultivation was shortened and even the limited forest resources were forced to be channelled to the colonial industrial enterprises. These resulted into ecological imbalance, ethnic conflict and over-all economic backwardness of the region. The paper, based on primary and secondary data, uncovers these facets of the scenario by analysing the situation in which organized tea cultivation as an aspect of the organized British metropolitan economy was introduced to the traditional peripheral economy of the region.

Ecological Setting of the Region

The characteristic of the Siwalik formation in the Himalayan foothills of the Arunachal Pradesh is found along the greater part up to the point where the mountain curves around the valley head. Geographers find so much variety at the tri-junction

of the Himalayan Patkoi hills and the Brahmaputra valley that they have divided it into three geographical regions—Assam valley, Purbanchal (eastern extension) and the eastern Himalayas.¹ At this point sharp features of the Siwalik ridge lose their typical character and are replaced by a series of low hills with easier slopes, which gradually merge into the higher mountains of the Himalayan ranges. Through these ranges and the centre of the Abor hills passes the mighty Brahmaputra, locally known as Siang, receiving many tributaries on the way. It leaves the hills and enters the plains at Pasighat; then it divides itself into two channels. After about 20 miles south of Pasighat and west of Sadiya, it is joined by the Lohit Brahmaputra. The eastern bank of the river in the hills is inhabited by the Bor (great) Abors and the western by the Pasi-Meyong. South-east of the Siang valley on the bank of the river Lohit lies the Mishmi hills, inhabited by the Miju, Idu and Bibijia Mishmis. The Khamtis reside just below the hills on the plains. The northern tip of the Purbanchal, known as Tirap district, is drained by Tirap, Buri-Dihing and Namphuk rivers. This is the land of Singpho, Nocte, Wancho, Tangsa and other smaller ethnic groups.

The ecological setting of the region was aptly described by W. W. Hunter in 1879 as thickly wooded from the base of the river Brahmaputra to the snow line.

Gigantic reeds and grasses cover the low lands near the banks of the great river; higher-up are extensive plains of fertile rice land dotted with villages, encircled by groves of bamboos and fruit trees; the background is formed by dark forests which stretch from interior table land high-up into the snow-capped mountains. The country in the vicinity of the large river is flat and over-grown with dense tangled jungle.²

It is known as the land of rivers, forests and jungles and the stretch of the ever-green high tropical forest is rightly referred as the barrier to hill from the plains. Twenty five years after Hunter, B. C. Allen recorded in his gazetteer of Lakhimpur:

...a broad belt of country along the foot of the hills is clothed in dense ever-green forest. Creepers spread in every

1. R. L. Singh, et al, *A Regional Geography*, Varanasi, 1965.

2. W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Accounts of Assam* (ed.) M. Horm, B. R. Publishing Co., Delhi Reprint, 1975, First Published in 1879, p. 294.

direction over the larger trees knitting them into one great mass of foliage... The forest is dense with bamboos, plantain, palms and huge tree ferns; and the creeping cane... A large portion of the country (north of the Brahmaputra) is still covered with tree forest, the level of land is lower and there are more *bhills* and marshes; while much of the country is exposed to inundation in the rainy season, and is covered with dense masses of grass and reeds, ranging from ten to twenty feet in height.³

Some two decades after Allen, the district gazetteer of Sadiya Frontier Tract, records:

The tree bearing portion (of forest) is typical mixed evergreen forest with dense undergrowth and creeper covered trees. Over the greater portion the trees are very scattered; standing singly or in groups, the intervening spaces being filled with masses of creepers and bamboos. Well stocked areas are generally of relatively small extent, but on these very large trees are found. The predominating species in the plains is *Terminalia Myriocarpa* locally called 'hallock', but on the south bank of the Brahmaputra along Noa-Dehing river. *Hallong* or '*Depterocarpur Pilosus*' becomes prevailing species over many areas. The foothills, as a rule, are covered with heavier timber than the plains but of the same mixed evergreen type...The most frequent and commercially, the most valuable tree, is Hallock (*Terminalia Myriocarpa*); the next place must at present be given to Simul (*Bombax Malabaricum*), followed by Hollong...and Uriam (*Bischofia Javanica*). Other trees, valuable because of the durable and other special qualities of their timber, though occurring sporadically, are Bela (*Morus Laevigata*), Cunseroi (*Cinnamomum Glanduliferum* and *Cecicodaphne*), Poma (*Centrela fetrifuga*), Boga Poma or Silling (*Chikrasia tabularies*), Mekahi (*Peoeba Hainesiang*), Gomari (*melina arborea*), Sam (*Artocarpus Chaplesa*), Jutuli (*Altingia Excelsa*), Phul sopa (*Mongolia Spp*) and Tita sopa (*Mechellia Spp*). The charmogra tree (*Taraktogenos Kurzii*) also occurs in limited numbers. The most valuable tree so far found in the higher hills is the Walnut (*Juglan Régia*).⁴

3. B. C. Allen, *The Assam District Gazetteer*, 1905, vol. VIII, Lakhimpur, City Press, Calcutta, pp. 2-3.

4. Anonymous, *The Assam District Gazetteer*, 1928, vol. XI, *The Sadiya Frontier Tract*, The Assam Secretariat Press, pp. 42-44.

Hamilton found these "forests and impregnable rampart of trees and undergrowth...an impressive majesty in the luxuriant...jungle...gigantic trees towards skyward blocking outshine".⁵

Ethnicity and Economic Organization in the Nineteenth Century

The plains at this tri-junction may be identified with the Sadiya and Matak divisions of Lakhimpur district in 1840. The region is surrounded by the hill tribes such as Abors (Adis), Miris (Nishis) and Mishmis, Khamtis, Singphos and some Nagas. The Adis, Nishis and Mishmis were transposed upon the Brahmaputra banks on hills between the eastern Tibetan plateau and the upper Brahmaputra valley. They were highlanders with slash-and-burn type of rotational subsistence cultivation and dependent on bartering their produce with their southern and northern neighbours. They also subsisted on collecting the forest produce and hunting of the rich wild games. However, life was difficult; population was sparse; there were no means of effective administration. There was no central authority system and obviously there was little of locally generated economic surplus to support a complex state structure. From the Himalayan high ranges on the Tibetan frontier to the southern foothills, there was extensive land on which they could freely move for jhumming and hunting.

Harsh living conditions had chiselled them into a good fighting force. They could align themselves with various neighbouring communities in their inter-tribal warfare. With a view to augmenting their limited productive manpower and acquiring products from the plains, they raided their immediate southern plains. That is how they recruited slaves from the foothills and levied certain products such as implements, articles or ornamentation of status and even cattle heads. Many a time such raids resulted in reprisal slaughter of the proclaimed enemies. However, by the time the British emerged on the Assamese scene, a number of villages in the foothills were inhabited by the Abors (Adis) and their claimed slaves such as Miris (Nishis). These villages may be indentified with Dumbuk, Siluk, Membo, Padu, Pasi, Rumkang, Padumaru, Kerui; Lamsing, Ledun, etc. for the Adis. There appeared to be no Mishmi village in the plains as they were sandwiched between Indian plains and China.

Robinson reported some Abors settling at the foot of the hills

5. A. Hamilton, *In Abor Jungle of North-East India*, 1983, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, First Indian Edition.

near Sadiya, after being driven to cultivation, when their slaves, Miris, deserted them.⁶ Miris were settled in the foothills from whom the Abors extracted whatever they could. Harassed by the Abors, the Miris migrated to the British region. Naturally, this was resented by the Abors, who kept on raiding such settlements and demanding the return of the Miris. The British contracted to pay 100 iron hoes, 30 mounds of salt, 80 bottles of rum, 2 seers of opium and 2 mounds of tobacco annually to the Abors as tribute (*posa*) in 1862 and a treaty of peace was signed.⁷ However, in 1879 the Miri colonists' villages "were scattered from Dihing to the north of Dibrugarh; but in the years 1877 and 1878 most of these villages had to be abandoned in consequence of the exactions of the Abors, who yearly visited them to levy tribute and live at free quarters, claiming the people as their slaves, although these quiet, well-behaved Miris had to pay us revenue and were considered our subjects".⁸ With a view to securing the plains and foothills from the raids and reprisal of the hill tribes, a number of armed outposts were established by the British at Dirjeme, Poba, Sessiri, Nizamghat, Bomjor and Rukong by 1882.⁹

East of the Abors on the left bank of Lohit were located the Mishmis. Till 1880s they carried on a large trade in *tita*, a vegetable poison, in exchange for which they obtained swords, woollen cloths and salt from Tibet. They supplied the Abors with cloth made from the fibre of nettles of a texture so stiff and close as to have the appearance of cardboard. They used to bring beeswax, ginger, chillies and rubber into the plains for trading purposes.¹⁰ The rubber trees¹¹ were generally situated at the foothills in low and damp grounds up to the height of 2,500 feet. They were scattered and at a distance from each other.

6. W. Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, 1975, Sanskar Prakash, Delhi, Indian Print (First Published, 1841), p. 362.

7. J. F. Michell, *Report on the North East Frontier of India*, 1883, Suptt. of the Government Printing, Calcutta, pp. 58-59.

8. J. F. Michell, *ibid*, 1883, p. 64.

9. J. F. Michell, *ibid*, 1883, p. 71.

10. J. F. Michell, *ibid*, 1883, pp. 90-91.

11. "The Caoutchoue (India rubber) itself occurs very generally as a solitary tree, occasionally, however, two or three may be found grouped together. In size they are far superior to all other trees, and especially in the context of surface covered by their branches. They certainly deserve to be ranked amongst the largest known trees being probably inferior in size to the banian only"—"A Report on the Caoutchoue of Assam", *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. VIII, 1838, pp. 132-42.

Their juice was extracted by traversing incisions across the bark down to the wood. Lakhimpur district was divided into four parts for its extraction and was sold to the highest bidder for each year. Consequently, by 1859 a large number of trees were found to have been killed by over-tapping. The government decided in 1973 to establish a number of marts at advantageous places, where tribesmen would be induced to bring rubber for sale.¹² As late as 1908, Noel Williamson, on a tour to the Mishmi land, was requested by the coolies to issue permits so that they could cut rubber along with the Mishmis, which was not granted.¹³

The Khamtis and the Singphos inhabited the south-eastern portion of the Lakhimpur district. Both communities were the western extensions of larger communities residing in upper Burmese hills. The Khamtis were rice cultivators, traders, warriors and good artisans. They had their small estate which was denied to them by the Burmese invaders in 1818. The British reinstated the Sadiya tract to a Khamti chief known as the Bur Senapatti Khowa Gohain, who was finally dispossessed of it in 1834. Just south of the Mishmi land, the 20 square miles area, surrounded by rivers Tengapani, Noadihing and Buridihing and divided by the Monabhum ranges, is inhabited by six Khamti and seven Singpho villages. South of Manbhum ranges on the bank of Buri Dihing there are four Khamti and six Singpho villages. The Noa Dihing forms the west side of this rough square and on this river, are located nine Khamti and 18 Singpho villages. The banks of these rivers were very fertile inhabiting an estimated population of 5,700 in 1883. The Singphos and Khamtis were also in the habit of raiding the Brahmaputra valley and hill tribes with a view to recruiting the slaves for rice-cultivation. With a view to containing the two tribes, the British established their military station at Jinsha on a strategic location. The Singphos were loosely organized under two significant chiefs of Bisa¹⁴ and Duffa

12. Bengal, Revenue Papers (Foreign), March 1873, no. 1, Resolution, Extract, from the "Proceedings of the Governor General of India in the Foreign Department", 24 July 1872.

13. From Noel Williamson to the deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur, no. 233 G. dated 27.2.1908, "Report on a Visit...to the Zayul valley, Foreign Department, External-A Proceedings", October 1908, nos. 37-40.

14. Jonarhat, Nairagaon, Sankam, Palamapan, Kunungaon, Sentigaon, Bor Dirak, Bogamor, Kemtigaon, Nalamgaon, Myrtungaon, Nonogaon, Phakial, Monu, Mungram, etc. were significant Khamti villages, while Latao, Latolahgaon, Nanapani, Nibluang, Nichaigaon, Uachitagaon, Noagaon, Munangaon, Gagamgaon, Luangaon, Pessigaon, Keremgaon, Moko and Khotogaons were known Singpho villages.

across the Patkoi ranges in Burma. Besides the fertile rice valley and the rich forest land, this area was rich in mineral resources such as coal, lime and petroleum. This region was designed to play significant roles in British strategic and commercial interests when they decided to cross over to upper Burma.

In 1825 the Singphos were considered to be a powerful tribe, under Bisa and Duffa chiefs. It was calculated at that time that each Singpho possessed 40 to 60 Assamese slaves valued at Rs. 20 to Rs. 80 each and sold them to members of other tribes. In the first half of the nineteenth century the British administration was optimistic about its commercial interests across the Patkoi ranges through the Singpho land. The Khamtis and Singphos were in the habit of slave trade, to the extent that when slavery was banned in India, a Khamti chief was reported to have sold 6 Assamese slaves at Mandalaya, who were rescued and returned to Assam by the Political Officer¹⁵ in the year 1878-79. By then the British were losing their patience with the Singphos. John F. Michell writes in his confidential reports¹⁶ on the Singphos:

The Singphos are a very poor, widely scattered race, inhabiting a rich, fertile, but poorly cultivated valley. The hope of opening out a trade with such a country, inhabited by people impoverished by opium eating, drunkenness, and constant inter-tribal feuds, is not promising, and trade with China through Hukong valley cannot be very successful...

However, their region was known for wild tea-bushes and elephants which were attractive propositions for European colonizers.

Historical Context of the Frontier Productive Forces

William Robinson¹⁷ wrote in 1841 that the coronation of the Ahom king used to begin with planting of a tree (*Ficus Religiosa*). As both the land and the people were the property of the state, the individuals were allowed to cultivate the land as a royal gift. The individuals from sixteen years onwards were organized in pykes and were usually divided into khels or mels (clans or squads). These pykes were for various trades such as silk-weavers, gold-gatherers, oil-makers, fishermen, farmers, betelnut producers,

15. J. F. Michell, op. cit., 1883, p. 139.

16. J. F. Michell, *ibid.*, 1883, p. 125.

17. W. Robinson, op. cit., 1975, pp. 200-06.

etc. As a remuneration to his services to the state, each pyke was entitled to two puras of the best description of rice land (ropit) rent free, or its equivalent of inferior land. The pykes were also allowed hereditary ownership over land, for their houses and villages (bari and buri lands) were free of tax. There were grants of land to the service of the gods (deotar), for religious purposes (dhurmtter) and for the maintenance of the priests (brahmotter). The rest of the land was rented out at a low rate to any individual offering to cultivate it.

The system of land taxation was a complex one. It consisted of poll tax paid by the pykes, the tax upon the cultivation in excess to his allotted portion as a pyke, and a tax upon the hearth. For the purpose of taxation, land was divided into: (i) basti on homestead; (ii) repit or wet cultivable land suitable for rice, jute etc.; and (iii) the faringati or bam or dryland meant for the coarse grain and gardens, etc. It is significant that taxes were levied upon the plough and not on the land. Consequently, the population tended to concentrate on spots favourable for rice crops, while large tracts of inferior land remained unoccupied. Then there were bondsmen and slaves attached to the state. The bondsmen were either hill men or liberated slaves. The slaves were the persons taken prisoners in war, or bought from the hill tribes, or descendants of slaves.

Writing about the Sadiya Frontier Tract of Lakhimpur district Robinson found the area of cultivation within the tract very small. Beyond Sadiya in the north of the Brahmaputra river the tract was an uninterrupted jungle to the foot of the hills and on the southern sides, a few scattered hamlets from mere specks in the widely spread wilderness. The revenue was collected by a capitation tax at the rate of rupee one per head. These scattered plainmen used to exchange grain, salt, silk, cotton thread, ornaments, iron pieces, etc. with the hill tribes' jungle products such as bees-wax, borax, wool, hide, Mishmi teeta and other herbs, colour and dyes. We have already noted that slavery was a predominant feature of the then productive economy. Slaves were recruited by the plainmen from among the hill tribes besides the denizens of the plains. The hillmen especially Abors, Khamtis and Singphos conducted systematic raids on the plains settlement for capturing slaves. The slave-catching raids of Abors grew to such a menacing extent that the Ahom king Pratapa Singh found an ingenious way of posa system to contain the Abors in their high hills. This was a type of blackmail money

paid annually to the tribesmen so that they could not harass the plainsmen. Besides, there were some other articles which had economic significance. First, there were behheas (goldwashers), who worked on river sands to wash gold dusts from the northern rivers. Secondly, the nearby forest abounded in the natural rubber trees, which were tapped and the juice was processed for producing rubber. Thirdly, the eastern tribesmen, Khamtis and Singphos and specially the latter, were adept in elephant-catching and trading in ivory tusk and elephants. And lastly, the Singphos were known to maintain tea-bushes at jhumming level and produce a type of tea for their own consumption.

Introduction of Tea Cultivation and Its Demands on Local Resources

Tea was introduced to Europe in 1664, when it was presented in a small quantity to the English king by some merchants. Robert Bruce, a British merchant, chanced to meet a Singpho chief at Rangpore (Lakhimpur) in 1823 and made a written agreement to procure tea plants and seeds. For the Assamese, tea was known to grow as a wild plant in the Patkoi hills and the Singphos were reported to be using it as a beverage. When the country fell into the hands of the British, the Singpho chief presented plants and seeds to C.A. Bruce, Robert's brother and the commander of a division of the gun-boats at Sadiya. The British took this opportunity and scientifically examined the plant and explored its commercial feasibility. The governor general deputed Captain Jenkins to report on the resources of Assam in 1832. In his report submitted on 22 July Jenkins recommended a scheme of colonization by the Europeans on "ignorant and demoralized state of native inhabitants".

A Tea Committee was nominated by the government in 1834 with a view to introducing tea cultivation in the British Indian territories. Thus, a number of experimental tea nurseries were established on the foothills of the Patkoi ranges—especially between Buri Dihing and Tingri rivers. G. J. Gordon, the secretary of the tea Committee, was sent to China for securing tea plants and tea "manipulators". Very soon, C. A. Bruce was made in charge of the nurseries in upper Assam. In 1838, tea was successfully manufactured and its quality was approved. However, by then the government decided to entrust the cultivation of tea to private entrepreneurs. Thus, the Assam Company was formed in England in 1839, with its effective branch in Calcutta.

Incidentally, this was the first joint stock company and the sole tea planter in India till 1850. From the very beginning the objective of the company was to exploit the local resources to the maximum:

In deciding upon the name of the company, the committee was aware that lime, coal and oil were in the soil, and that gold was 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 the Assam Tea Company, although tea was the main object of the enterprise.¹⁸

Some four decades later, the Assam Railway and Trading Company was formed in the same region but it was engaged in railways, collieries, forest and plywood factories, oil and tea production.¹⁹

Land

Upper Assam provides with an interesting example of Interplay between the British politico-strategic and economic interests in India. The Brahmaputra Valley as the rice bowl had been an attractive prey to the surplus-seeking hill tribes. Among the various reasons for its thin population, the continuous raids by the hill tribes for enlisting slaves from the plains for their water logged hill cultivation may be enumerated as one. Apparently with a view to improving the economy of the land, Captain Jenkins in his above-mentioned report advocated a scheme of speedy colonization by a class of European planters, who could invest their capital in cash crops. As war-ravaged local population did not have even means of providing ploughs, seeds and cattle for themselves, he recommended their replacement by the European colonization. For that matter, he wrote:

To obtain the full advantages that could accrue from European settlers, it appears to me that grants (of land) must be altogether freehold, subject to no other condition than that of a fixed and an unalterable rate of rent and absolutely unencumbered, with any stipulations in regard to ryots or sub-tenants.

18. H. A. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company, 1838-1953*, 1957, T. and A. Constable Ltd. Edinburgh, p. 37.

19. P. Surita, *The Story of the Assam Railways and Trading Company Limited, 1881-1981*, 1981, A.R.T. Indka Ltd., Calcutta.

These recommendations were incorporated in the Wasteland Rules of 6 March 1838. And in a unsettled and depopulated Assam, there was little competition for the planters, who were endowed with courage, endurance, fortitude and state patronage.

The so-called wasteland was offered to the colonizers on a 45 year lease basis on condition that one-fourth of the allotted plot must be cleared within five years. Otherwise the lease was to lapse. No applicant with less than 100 acres of land lease at a time and a capital at the rate of Rs. 3 per acre was entertained. One-fourth of the leased land was to be held revenue free in perpetuity. For the rest of the grant, no revenue was to be paid for the initial 5 to 20 years depending on the type of waste land. All these resulted into a situation in which

The wastelands settlement policy tempted the planters to grab more lands than what was required or what they could manage. This was because such lands provided them with much more resources than what land as a factor of production ordinarily denotes. They contained necessary housing materials including, in many cases, even valuable timber. Being transferable under the 1854 Rules, such lands could later be sold with an unearned profit. Above all labourers could also be settled as tenants on the surplus lands of the plantations like so many serfs tied to the soil. It was an additional bait to allure land hungry tribal peasants from famine stricken areas outside Assam... (The planters) were the biggest landlords in the countryside they dominated, but they paid the lowest average rates per acre of holdings. Not only did they employ wage workers, but also settled tenant-cultivators on their lands, so that on peak seasons the latter could provide them with casual labour. The planters usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the jhum, rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. They often disrupted inter-village communications by fencing in portions of existing public roads and denying rights of way to the villagers. There were cases where cultivators' lands not yet regularly settled, were sold as wastelands to tea companies over the heads of their occupants.²⁰

20. A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, 1977, Indian Council of Historical Reserch, New Delhi, pp, 14-15.

Forest and Other Resources

C. A. Bruce chanced to see in 1836 a jhummed area, which contained a vigorous crop of tea trees after cutting down and burning of the old stumps on the Singpho tract. Once the tea plantation started on an organized scale, the clearing of the jungle for the extension must have provided all the wood fuel it required for its boilers and for the tea driers, when they first came into use.²¹ In the southern hills on the Nagaland, the Assam Company hoped to get plentiful of good quality of coal as early as in 1840. The permission to mine coal and extract timber and bamboos from these hills were secured from the Naga chieftains on a very nominal rent. Elephants were used for travel, transporting tea leaves and extracting timber from the forest. Antrobus²² reports that:

the elephants were a necessity for the working of the tea garden... It cost virtually nothing to keep an elephant, so by selling one for Rs. 250 to Rs. 300, the assistant manager in the tea estates would be able to augment substantially his meagre salary of Rs. 50. to Rs. 100 a month.

It was simply a loot of the local forest-based resources. The superintendent of the company Nazeerah²³ in his report on 16 February 1854 stated:

The cleared land in the Satsoocat forest... may be set down at 1400 poras and the further available land in the locality roughly estimated at 1600 poras. When this has been exhausted, we have only to fall back upon the forest towards the hills...within ten or twelve miles...

The only point that seems to require immediate consideration was labour. Besides the tea plantation, a number of collieries and brickworks, saw, vaneer and playwood mills and other allied industrial enterprises emerged in the region.

Labour

As a whole, the indigenous economy of the region was based on the extraction of the forest produce largely through communally organized labour force. The individual economic efforts in terms of earning wages and transaction through money was yet to emerge. In such a situation, the earliest tea planters (C.A. Bruce

21. H. A. Antrobus, op. cit., 1957, p. 310.

22. H. A. Antrobus, *ibid*, 1957 p. 351.

23. H. A. Antrobus, *ibid*, 1957, p. 483.

for example) thought of recruiting on monthly basis the Singpho chiefs to collect tea leaves from the jungle tea plants. Subsequently, the company employed Dewan Maniram, an influential Ahom dignitary, to help recruit the plains tribes such as Boro, Kachari, etc. Some Nagas were contracted on inducement of large white shells, cowries, lead and tin-made armlets and glass tumblers to work on plantations. In certain cases the tribesmen were induced to work on payment of rum. On one occasion 60 Nagas offered to work on the plantation and demanded a buffalo as their combined remuneration. In spite of all these inducements, the planters failed to recruit sufficient number of dependable local labour. The Naga labourers were not only seasonal, but the same set of labour were not ready to work on the plantation for consecutive seasons. Consequently they required coaching time and again in the delicate process of tea plucking. Antrobus²⁴ recorded the human aspect of this encounter:

...the Singphos, who only worked under their own chiefs and would brook no control as to whether they work or not... had no inclination to work for any one so long as they had enough rice and opium for their immediate needs.

In his *Report on the Manufacture of Tea in Assam* to the Tea Committee in 1839, C. A. Bruce²⁵ made an eloquent appeal to the government:

...the government would confer a lasting blessing on the Assamese and the new settlers, if immediate and active measures are taken to put down the cultivation of opium... we would in the end be richly rewarded...for our plantations, to fell our forests, to clear the land from jungle and wild beasts and to plant and cultivate...This can never be affected by the enfeebled opium eaters...With respect to what are called the Singpho Tea Tracts...we have not been able to get a leaf from them...nor do I believe we shall get any next year, unless we establish a post at Ningrew...and secure our tea. The tea from these tracts is very fine. Some of the tracts are extensive and many may run for miles into the jungles for what we know. The whole of the country is capable of being turned into a vast tea garden, the soil being excellent and well adapted for the growth of tea. On both sides of the Buri-Dihing river...the tea is grown indigenous-

24. H. A. Antrobus, *ibid*, 1957, p. 375.

25. H. A. Antrobus, *ibid*, 1957, pp. 474-76.

ly; it may be traced from tract to tract to Hootang (upper Burma), forming a chain of tea tracts from the Irrawady to the border of China east of Assam...(thus) a few years hence, it may be found expedient to advance this frontier post (at Ningrew) to the top of the Patkoi hills...They are said to be thinly inhabited, the population being kept down by constant broils, and wars...for the state of plunder...Our tea, however, is insecure here...we are at present obliged...to have the means of defending ourselves from a sudden attack...The natives at present are permitted to cultivate as much land as they please, on paying a poll tax of Rs. 2 per year to the governor of the country.

At first the plantation organization attempted to recruit the Chinese tea makers. In fact, a number of them were employed in skilled and semi-skilled aspects of tea manufacture. These Chinese labourers were brought to the tea tract through a sea route, which was found to be very costly. An ambitious, though impracticable, scheme of recruitment of the labour from Yunan province of China overland on foot to Assam, a distance of some 800 miles through almost impassable country, was conceived. This scheme was to be abandoned after a considerable financial loss. Ultimately, a number of European recruiting agents were appointed to enrol the tea labour from various parts of the then Bengal Presidency. Ultimately, the tea plantation labour as a distinct ethnic group from the indigenous communities came to be drawn from three ethnic stocks: the plain tribals from Assam such as Kachari, Koch, Mech, Miri, Sonwal, etc., the tribals from Chotanagpur such as Santal, Munda, Oraon, Kharia, etc, and the Nepalese originally from Nepal, but also from Darjeeling and northern Bengal.

Conflict between the Metropolitan and Indigenous Peripheral Economies

In the context of the British economy and colonial expansion into the N. E. Indian frontiers, A. G. Frank's observation appears to be relevant:

Associated ever since the very beginning with the growth of powerful states, the expansion of mercantile-capitalism led to the development of a metropole and related to it through ties of commerce and force, of a periphery. Variousy related to each other through colonialism, free-trade, imperialism, and 'neo-colonialism' the metropole exploited the periphery in such a way and extent that the metropole became what

we today call developed, while the periphery became what we now call underdeveloped.²⁶

Simir Amin²⁷ found these new social structures form a structured, hierarchical totality, dominated by the "great absentee" of colonial society: the dominant metropolitan bourgeoisie. As its relations with the metropole is crucial, the economic system of the periphery cannot be understood by itself. Similarly the social structure of the periphery is truncated and cannot be properly understood without locating it in a world (metropolitan) social structure.

In a very generalized way, one finds here the metropole—the British commercial and industrial interests backed by force—using the raw materials and capital from the upper Assamese periphery to accelerate its own development. Not only that; this one way exploitative process also resulted into underdevelopment of this tribal periphery all the more. This conflicting sequence of development between the British metropole and the indigenous peripheral economy may be understood by examining the issues around (i) the insularity of the indigenous community; (ii) depletion of the forest resources; and (iii) extending administrative boundaries to hills.

Insularity of the Indigenous Communities

The author of the *Lakhimpur District Gazetteer*²⁸ correctly presented the British approach to the region:

Lakhimpur has in fact been 'discovered' by the British. They found it a remote inhospitable jungle, inhabited by a rude and scanty population who were at the mercy of the even ruder tribes who haunt the hills that surround it on three sides. They fell on the forests and turned them into prosperous tea gardens. They imported labourers in thousands, whose requirements in grain and clothing the *Marwari* merchants were not slow to fill; and thus, it has come about that all the wealth and all the weight and influence in the district are in the hands of foreigners.

Up to the middle of the 19th century the Abors had been receiving levies from the Biheas (Sonwals—gold-washers) and

26. A. G. Frank, *On Capitalist Underdevelopment*, 1976, Oxford University Press, Bombay, Reprint, p. 95.

27. S. Amin, *Unequal Development*, 1979, Oxford University Press, Bombay, First Indian Edition, p. 284.

28. B. C. Allen, *The Assam District Gazetteer*, vol. VIII, Lakhimpur, City Press, Calcutta, 1905, pp. 80-81.

fishermen on Dihang, Dibang and Brahmaputra rivers. They charged such levies even from the Miris, who were settled within the British district. Since 1848 for about 15 years the Abors kept on raiding the settlement of the gold-washers even on the southern bank of river Brahmaputra. In 1861, the government decided to establish a chain of forts along the frontiers, construct roads within its territory and establish an effective military command for restraining them.

Soon after, it appears that Abors realized the futility of the encounter and showed interest in settlement with the British. The deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur impressed upon the Abors the futility of their claimed sovereignty over the land up to the Brahmaputra and rights over the gold-washers and alleged slaves—the Miris. He also persuaded them to acknowledge the benefits of peace and friendship. He promised them to pay individually some stipend in kind for the loss thus rendered by them. As a result of this the Miyong Abors agreed in 1862 not to violate the British sovereignty up to the foot of the hills in lieu of the provision given to them in specific quantities—which came to be known as *posa*. These articles were 100 iron hoes, 30 mounds of salt, 80 bottles of rum, 2 seers of opium and 2 mounds of tobacco.²⁹ By 1866 Kabeng and Bor Abors followed suit and agreed to accept the tribute. The British government formally declared the entire foothills within its effective administrative boundary and the adjoining hills within its outer reach through the inner line regulation, 1873.³⁰

In 1877 the payment in kind was stopped in favour of the cash fixed at the existing market rate. The British discovered to their discomfort that various sections of Abors had refused to accept the *posa*. Not only that, they were also collecting blackmail money from the timber cutters from the forests of the foothills considered to be in the British territory. They were also threatening the right of passage to the Mishmis from north to Dibrugarh. With a view to keeping an eye on such activities a guard-post was established at Nizamghat on the river Dihang in 1878. This experiment was so encouraging for the British that the chief commissioner of Assam proposed to appoint an assistant to the deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur to help him conduct political relations with the Abors and other tribals. Jack

29. *Judicial Proceedings (Bengal)*, January 1863, nos. 310-11.

30. "Bengal Papers in Assam Archive", F. 921, 1973.

Francis Needham was appointed the political officer at Sadiya, who established an ambivalent relationship with them during his tenure (from 1882 to 1905). However, the relation between the Abors and the British was far from cordial so much so that the British sent an expedition party, stopped the payment of the *posa*, and finally resorted to the blockade of the Abor frontiers in 1900. With these restrictions the indigenous tribal communities such as Abors, Mishmis, Singphos and various Nagas were confined exclusively to the hills and were made dependent on the British for the supply of every article of daily necessity other than the produce of the forest.

The British attitude to these tracts was of colonial expansion with an eye on exploitation of the economic resources. F. J. Monahan, secretary to the chief commissioner of Assam, wrote to the secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department³¹ on 9 December 1903:

Between the Sissi and Mesaki (rivers) there is no definite foot of the hills as the boundary...A line of broken colour would be used to indicate this portion of the 'outer line' as also for the portion between Nizamghat and the confluence of the Noa-Dihing with the Brahmaputra. The tract of the country enclosed between the two lines is practically uninhabited and has no present value. But it is reported to be suitable for tea cultivation...the maps which are to be issued by the Survey Department should throw no doubt upon the rights of the British government to it. From the confluence of the Noa-Dihing with the Brahmaputra the maps should show in broken colour the present inner line...to extend a little south, so as to coincide with the right bank of the Trip river. There would appear to be no advantage at present in exhibiting British territory as extending eastwards and southwards to the west of the Dephabum and Patkoi ranges, including extensive tracts of mountain and jungle with which we have at present nothing to do, and which are not likely to be taken up by settlers. Should at any time it be desirable to extend our jurisdiction over this country, we shall not be prejudiced by the fact that it lies across a line which is professedly only an 'inner line'.

31. "Foreign Department External (A) Proceedings", April 1904, nos. 302-39—Delineation of the Northern and North-Eastern Boundaries of Assam of the Official Maps of the Province, no. 480 for 5476, dated 9 December 1903.

We have noted above that with the expansion of tea cultivation, a number of subsidiary economic activities sprang up in the region. Among them mention may be made of the timber and saw mills, which provided tea-chests for packing tea safely for export through the waterways. Such factories were located near the forests, where simul (*Bombox Malabaricum*) and mekai (*Shorea Assamica*) were in plenty and the floating of the timber through the river streams was convenient. Two such significant factories were the Sissi Saw and Trading Co. and Maklanuddy Saw Mills Co. near Sadiya. The *Bengal Forest Administration Report, 1869-1870* reports that the timber forests were spread beyond the administrative control of the civil authorities and that facilities existed for exploiting the wealth of the forests with the help of water communications. Though the forests lay within the boundary of the British territory, for political and other reasons, they considered it desirable to abstain from interference.

Twenty four year after the above-mentioned report, A. C. Hill, the Inspector General of Forests, found the adjoining Singpho tracts well-wooded. He further anticipated that "when the unclassified forests, which were then heavily worked for the supply of the various mills came to be exhausted", the wood supply of the district would be drawn from the Singpho hills. A decade after Hill's observations the *Assam Forest Administration Report, 1904-1905* appears to be exercised with questions of depleted timber and creation of the forest reserves: "Question of reserving areas suitable for the growth of Simul has engaged the attention...the only suitable forest... was, however, situated beyond the 'inner line' and was open to objection." Further it added that "simul is the most suitable indigenous wood for tea-boxes, and it appears that the supply of this wood is not likely to last unless special measures are taken to assist its growth". As the demand for reserve forests arose out of the demand for simul timber for tea-boxes, the same source provides the figures of the annual out-turn of tea-boxes from the saw mill which worked under the box-royalty system:

PRODUCTION OF THE TEA-BOXES, TIMBER AND ROYALTY PAID BY THE
SAW MILLS IN LAKHIMPUR DISTRICT, 1895-1906

Years	No. of Tea Boxes	Cft. of Timber	Roylty in Rs.
1895- 96	384,488	—	20,917
1896- 97	447,563	—	24,200
1897- 98	444,045	—	23,595
1898- 99	458,272	291,216	24,340
1899-1900	410,619	263,034	23,034
1900-1901	386,076	250,795	20,938
1901-1902	412,887	267,160	22,362
1902-1903	433,703	285,664	23,924
1903-1904	429,942	289,000	24,201
1904-1905	537,805	—	—
1905-1906	512,657	—	—

Source: *The Assam Forest Administration Report, 1904-05 and 1905-06.*

The decrease of the out-put in 1905-1906 was attributed to the depletion of simul tree in the neighbourhood of Sissi Mills.

Incidentally, the government records show that up to 1881, the tract between the Brahmaputra and the hills from where the above-mentioned mills had been drawing timber was practically uninhabited. The only settlements was that of the Abors at Bomjur and the Miris had already withdrawn within the inner-line in the south. Some 25 years later Noel Williamson found seven Abors villages with about 80 households scattered within the inner-line in the district. These settlers had informally divided the tract with a view to jhumming and were not paying any type of revenue to the British. Before that Needham had reported in 1902 that the managers of the saw mills had been in the habit of obtaining timber from Miris, who did not require permits to cross the inner-line to the hills. However, the Miris were paying royalty on the timber to the Abors without protest. As the simul timber near the rivers got exhausted because of the excessive felling, the saw mills employed the contractors, who hired the Miris for cutting the trees and sent the elephants with their mounts to drag the logs to the river side. The Abors used to harass them by demanding blackmail money for the same timber at various entry points. While the chief commissioner of Assam, Sir B. Fuller, agreed that the tribesmen should not be permitted to ignore the fact that the territory belonged to the British, he saw no reason why the managers of the

saw mills should not pay the hill tribes some commission on timber extracted from this area, if they found it convenient to do so.³²

Meanwhile, as an economy drive the factories started sending their own employees to the hills for timber extraction. Thus, the saw mills through their own employees, came in direct contact with the Abors, who blackmailed them to pay so that their employees are not molested. The managers of the two saw mills made representation to the governor of the state in November 1906 at Sadiya and prayed for protection for those employed in the timber-cutting industry. The memorandum also suggested that the outposts to the foot of the hills on the Poba, Lallu, Dihing, Dibong, Sisiri and Brahmakund rivers should be established with a view to taking effective possession of this valuable forest country. The governor of the state, Sir Lancelot Hare,

was strongly impressed with the necessity for a firmer assertion by government of its rights of supervision and control up to the further frontier both for the protection of the existing trade and for the purpose of preserving the valuable stock of simul timber in the forest...The need for forming reserves of the simul timber...has been represented by the conservator of forest, and though Sir Lancelot is not at present advised in favour of allowing to the officers of the Forests Department any authority outside the inner-line, he is inclined to think that some *simple ruler* for working of selected forest areas might be drawn up for the guidance of the political officer.³³

Sir Lancelot recommended that the government should prohibit and, if necessary, prevent the extortion of blackmail from timber cutters or traders...Simultaneously with the prohibition of the levy of extractions from British subjects...steps should be taken to realize a tax from all Abors settled in the plains. Whether this tax should take the form of a poll-tax or of a house-tax, and at what rate it should be levied are matters which will be considered hereafter if the general scheme is approved...the tax must in the first instance be very light...the constitution of the village

32. From the secretary to the chief commissioner to the deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur, no. 646 F., 23.1.1904, p. 292.

33. From secretary to the governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam to the secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, "Proceedings", no. 3923 J., dated 9 September 1907.

will permit of a tax being imposed on the village as a whole... The amount of the tax would be fixed in each case on a consideration of the resources of the village and the area of the land cultivated...

With a view to collecting relevant information and impressing upon the hillmen, the political officer was advised to visit Kebang, Padu, Membo, Siluk and Dambuk villages with an escort of 150 military police. Sir Lancelot was convinced that the prevailing policy of aloofness was foredoomed to failure.³⁴ Further, he contemplated that the Abors "must be made to understand that when they enter British territory they must obey the law and conduct themselves as subjects of the British crown and before long...schools will be opened for Abor children, probably under the management of one of the missions..."

The Revenue and Agriculture Department was consulted. They advised Mr. Hill, conservator of forests, to be included in the expedition to the Aborland so that he could examine: (i) the value of the forests generally and with special reference to the tea box industry; (ii) whether there is danger of serious permanent injury if measures are not soon taken to protect the forests; (iii) the nature of the measures to be introduced in order to ensure the adequate protection of the forests. This letter from the secretary of Sir Lancelot was replied by the department secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department:³⁵

The Government of India regrets that they are unable to sanction His Honour's proposal in their entirety...While agreeing that something should be done towards the conservation of the forests, they consider it doubtful whether the steps proposed by the Lt. Governor would be effective, without further knowledge of the forests. It is also desirable that the country should be surveyed, as far as possible, before a definite scheme for its future administration is adopted... the utmost to which the Government of India can agree is that Mr. Williamson should undertake a tour in the tract between the 'inner' and 'outer' lines in order to ascertain actual position of affairs...(He) should be accompanied by a forest officer and a surveyor and his instructions should be as follows:

(a) to inform the villagers that the collection of black-mail within our border must cease;

34. Ibid, Foreign Department, "Proceedings".

35. Vide No. 177-E. C. on 16 January 1908.

- (b) to collect information as to the forest;
- (c) to survey country as far as possible; and
- (d) to test the feelings of the people in regard to the proposed taxation on settlers within the outer line.³⁶

The Viceroy in Council agreed largely to the above stipulation. The council was of the opinion that:

it will be sufficient to prohibit the collection of blackmail within this tract, impose a reasonable poll-tax or house-tax on those settlers within (the 'inner' and 'outer' lines) it who have not been called upon to pay any such tax and take such measures as can conveniently be enforced for the preservation of the forests. We are anxious to avoid the risk of provoking disturbances among the tribesmen by too sudden an extension of active control... we consider that some action is necessary and that the course now proposed will involve less interference than extending the 'inner' lines as requested by the saw mills companies.³⁷

While the above mentioned correspondence was on, Noel Williamson toured the Lohit valley during December 1907 and January 1908.

R. Hughes-Buller, the officiating judicial secretary to the government of Eastern Bengal and Assam communicated the draft instruction for the guidance of N. Williamson on his proposed tour to the Abor Hills.³⁸ Among several instructions he was advised that:

Should the tribesmen 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 tribesmen may consider themselves to have sustained by the prohibition of the exactions from saw mills companies, which they have hitherto considered to be a legitimate source of revenue...the services of the tribesmen may be enlisted in the 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

36. From the deputy secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department. "Proceedings", no. 177 B.C., 16 January 1908.

37. From the viceroy in council to his majesty's secretary of state for India, Foreign Department, External, no. 112 of 1908, dated 11 June 1908.

38. From R.B. Hughes-Buller, judicial secretary, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam to the secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign Department, no. 4801, 31 October 1908.

offered on the sale of forest products from 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 and outer lines.

Extension of the Administrative Boundaries

Williamson along with Dr. Gregorson went across the 'inner line' in the Abor hills in March 1911 and except 6 coolies, who managed to escape, were murdered at Komsing by Kebang Abors. An impressive expedition under Major General Bower was sent to punish the Abors in the cold weather of 1911-12. Along with expedition these missions were despatched up to the Himalayan watershed with a view to exploring and surveying the country and recommending a suitable frontier line between India and Tibet. What Williamson wanted to do in his lifetime, i.e. to bring the Abor hills under direct British control, was accomplished only after his death. A. H. W. Bentick's (the deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur) Political Report on the expedition, dated 23 April 1912 furnished the proposals as to the future of these tracts.

Accordingly the North East Frontier was divided into three sections, the central and eastern sections to control the Rangpong Nagas, Singphos, Miju, Digaru, Chulikata, Bebejia Mismis and the various tribes of Abors as far as the Siang-Subsansiri divide, and the western section to deal with the tribes from this divide westwards to Bhutan... the two north east sections were placed in the charge of one political officer with headquarters at Sadiya, the name subsequently changed to the more simple 'Sadiya Frontier Tract'. One assistant to the political officer was placed in charge of the Abor subdivision with headquarters at Pasighat. A Lohit Valley subdivision with headquarters at Walong was mooted.³⁹

Since 1919, the names of the western and the central and eastern sections were changed to Balipara and Sadiya Frontier Tracts respectively. The present Siang district, in the name of the Abors hills, with its headquarters at Pasighat, underwent various changes in 1935, 1936, and 1946. It was formally carved

39. Anonymous, *The Assam District Gazetteer*, Vol XI: The Sadiya Frontier Tract, Assam Secretarial Press, Shillong, 1928, Dunbar, G 1984, (Reprint) *Frontiers*, Omrons, Gauhati, Chapter XII.

out of the Sadiya Forntier Tract in 1948. In 1953, the North East Forntier Area was divided into Kameng, Subansiri, Siang, Lohit and Tirap divisions after the significant rivers running through their expanse and their divisional headquarters were moved to the hills. They were designated as the districts from September 1965 under the NEFA administration. It was turned into a union territory in the Indian Union in 1972; now the bureaucrats administer it directly on behalf of the central government. In this way, the process initiated in 1902 led to the complete indentification of the hill peripheral region with the Indian metropolitan core within seven decades.

During 1912 to 1928 the entire landscape changed to the extent that the district had 68 square miles of timber and fuel reserves and 354 square miles of protected forests in 1928. All the wasteland was technically termed unclassed state forests. *The District Gazeteer*⁴⁰ provides the details of the canvas:

The general control of all government forest is vested in a deputy conservator, whose position is defined as that of adviser on forest matters to the political officer... All persons holding land temporarily settled cultivation are allowed to remove all forest produce needed for their own use free of any royalty. The largest forest industry is the manufacture of tea boxes, and this is in the hands of the Assam Saw Mills and Timber Co. Ltd. who have two mills in the district... at Murkong Selek... (and) Laimukuri... Formerly these species (*Bombax Malabaricum*) alone were used but of late their supplies have become less accessible and several other pieces (such as *Pichola Metio sura simplicifolia*) and Borpat (*Ailanthus grandis*) are utilized... Each of these factories consumes daily about 1,000 c. ft. of timber... A lease for a period of 30 years granting the sole right to exploit timber from the plain's portion of the district was granted in 1922 to the Assam Saw Mills and Timber Co. The greater part of the timber exploited by them is used for the manufacture of tea-boxes... but quarters of hardwoods are also exploited as scantlings.

Various administrative dispensations brought the hill tribes within an effective administrative and extensive economic network of the British metropole. Land and forest, the two most significant means of the tribal productive organization, were brought

40. Anonymous, 1928, pp. 43-44.

under the direct control of the government through the Sadiya Frontier Tract Jhum Land Regulation Act 1947. The Act envisages the ownership of individual or clan or village over land only in respect of permanent and semi-permanent cultivators and the land attached to dwelling houses. The ownership of all the land including the jhum rests with the government. The act defines the jhum land in the following ways:

Jhum land means and includes all land which any member or members of a village or a community have a customary right to cultivate by means of shifting cultivation or utilizing by clearing jungle or grazing livestock, provided that such village or community is in a permanent location but does not include:

- (i) any land which has been terraced or is under the process of being terraced for the purpose of a permanent or semi-permanent cultivation whether by means of irrigation or not, or
- (ii) any land attached or apportioned to a dwelling house and used for the purpose of permanent cultivation, or
- (iii) any land which, in the opinion of the political officer, is subject to permanent cultivation.

It may be noted that any land which is otherwise jhum land according to the definition given above shall be deemed to be so, notwithstanding the fact that a portion of or the whole thereof may have been planted with fruit trees, bamboos, or is reserved for growing firewood. Secondly, a village or community (the residents of a village as whole, the clan, sub-clan, phratry or kindred) shall be held in permanent location if it always remains within a specified area although a part of the whole village or community may migrate from time to time to different localities within that area.⁴¹

Ethnicity, Economy and Ecology: An Overview

In his ecological interpretation of Burmese history, C. L. Keeton has described the efforts made by various Burmese rulers to control the surplus from the Irrawaddy delta region. Subsequently, the ecological process of deforestation set off a number of ecological disturbances in terms of draught, human migration, inter-ethnic and even inter-state conflicts. He provides a model

41. S. Dutta Chaudhary (ed.), *Lohit District Gazetteer*, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Shillong, 1978, p. 199.

concerning the relationship between tropical ecology and empire. In this context, he indentified the strategic-political pattern as the dominant and a secondary recurring pattern of commercial profit operative in British-Burmese relations between 1800 and 1878. Though the study began with an examination of the relative significance of the two patterns, it was found that "British strategic-political interests were *more important* than British economic interests"⁴² in Burma. Possibly, the economic and commercial interests of the empire acquired paramount significance in the region with which we are concerned presently.

In pre-British phase of the region, ecology determined to a great extent the economic structure of the communities. While Abors (Adis), Mishmis, Khamtis and Singphos had developed their own hill agriculture fed with rain-water, the denizens of the Brahmaputra valley evolved an extensive irrigation system with the help of the pyke⁴³ system of obligatory labour. It appears that the two ecologically varied but contiguous productive systems had a symbiotic relation. Slavery by capture and purchase was in common practice. Though coins were minted and circulated in the plains in a limited way, the barter system was the normal practice of exchange. Even revenue, levies and tributes were paid in kind. Thus, efforts were made to produce goods and services of excellence which had immediate and local demands. Even from a technological point of view, the differences between the hill communities and the plainsmen, with the significant exception of the use of the hoe and plough, was not otherwise striking. Their material culture, social organization and style of life were marked by similarities rather than differences. In a sense, at the most these communities were sub-societies⁴⁴ of each other, a phenomenon which was limited to an identifiable regional techno-cultural development.

The British emerged on the scene with their commercial and administrative interests controlled from a distant nerve centre—the London metropole. All the stretegic and economic expansions were addressed to the strengthening of the metropole. Even the regional sub-centres such as Calcutta—which could effectively control their Indian activities—functioned as satellites of the British empire. Similarly the British colonies in the rest of the world

42. C. L. Killeton, *King Thebaw and the Ecological Rape of Burma*, 1974, Manohar Book Service, Delhi.

43. W. Robinson, *ibid.* pp 200-205.

44. Robert Redfield. *Human Nature and the Study of Society*, vol. 1, (ed), M.P. Redfield, University of Chicago Press, part II: Folk Society.

were linked with the British metropole as peripheries in terms of political, commercial and industrial controls. They were coerced to provide commodities, services and all the manageable surplus to the metropole.⁴⁵ The British political and economic interests were imposed on the region in 1826. Very soon it was discovered that an insignificant plant from the frontier, i.e. bush-tea, was required for the metropolitan consumption. Within no time all efforts were geared to produce it on a large scale. The local resources in terms of forest, minerals and human were organized in such a way that all contributed to the flourishing tea economy.

By the turn of the 19th century, there were two sets of British administrators in India—those who wanted to consolidate already acquired territories and those who desired to march forward to the maximum extent of the British Indian empire.⁴⁶ While the former desired to consolidate and effectively rule the plains, the latter wished to push the administrative limit of the empire to and even beyond the Himalayan water-shed. However, these two sets of administrators did not necessarily work in contradiction of one another. Noel Williamson, the assistant political officer at Sadiya, was committed to the cause of the tea planters and was eager to extend economic and administrative boundaries of Assam from the foothills to the Himalayan water-shed right in the inaccessible mountains. As a whole, the local administration was for such a push with a view to immediate economic and effective administrative control. However, one gets the impression that the British administration in London pursued a strategic line of their imperial frontiers, as they were possessed with a larger perspective. In the final analysis, one may not find a basic contradiction between the two. And that is how as a result of counterbalancing the north eastern boundary of the British Indian empire came to be known as the MacMahon Line. Consequently, the hill communities south of Tibet and north of the Brahmaputra plains were brought under the loose British control. This was done, no doubt, with a view to securing an effective strategic boundary. However, there was a complementary requirement of the extension, which may be identified with the efforts to bring the region within the effective orbit of the British metropolitan economic interests.

45. S. Amin, *ibid* and W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Bogle—L' Ouverture Publications, London, Chapter VI.

46. C. Collin Davies, *The Problem of the North-West Frontier, 1890-1908*, 1975, Curzon Press, London, Chapters I & II.

All these resulted into an amount of distortion in the local economy and inter-ethnic relations between the hills and the plains. By and large, the British controlled the extractive industries in the plains and the hillsmen provided them with the raw materials. As a result of this British intermediary role, the hillsmen began to be seen by the plainsmen as the "savage brute" and they reciprocated by labelling the plainsmen as "timid" and "effeminate". Slowly but steadily, the two got insulated from each other and the provisions of the "inner line" caused a havoc for a normal inter-ethnic relationship between these neighbouring communities. Insulation of the hillsmen within the inner line led to the over-exploitation of their natural resources, resulting in a shorter cycle of the rotation of the shifting cultivation, deforestation, soil erosion, flooding of the plains and over-all ecological imbalance.

We shall like to conclude this essay by quoting Robert Reid, the governor of Assam,⁴⁷ on the ecological imbalance of the region, an exercise done about 100 years after the introduction of tea cultivation and thirty years after the Abor-hills Expedition of 1911-12:

To their indolence, their vast and laboriously prepared jhums are empathic contradiction, in this workmen, women and children share, and...few sights are more remarkable than many hundred acres of steep hill-sides cleared not only of jungle, but at sowing time of every weed and blade of grass, and this by means of a *dao* and a pointed bamboo ... (Thus) the abors have reached a period of their history at which they must either adopt new methods such as we are able to teach them or must risk their whole existence... For many miles no virgin soil is left... While some of the oddest lands on account of repeated jhumming steep hill sides, and heavy rain, are suffering from denudation.

47. R. Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering Assam*, 1983, Eastern Publishing House, Delhi, First Published 1942, p. 235.