

Forest Conservation Policies in Assam: A Socio- Historical and Environmental Study from 1952 to 2004

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Abstract: North East region of India has a special status for rich heritage; therefore separate policy has been formed for the region by the Ministry of Environment and Forest, GOI. The problems affecting the forestry sector of Assam are largely home-grown; the foremost reason for steady depletion of forest cover in Assam has been the unabated violation within a few decades. In view of diminishing natural resources based in the state which becomes insufficient to meet the genuine demands of the people and the shortfalls of the protection and conservation of the forest, time has come to take a hard look at the fault in the existing policies. The basic objectives of the Assam Forest Policy 2004 is maintenance of environment stability, conserving natural heritage, promoting non- consumption use of protected areas, encouraging efficient utilization of forest resources etc. The principal aim of the Forest Policy 2004 is to ensure progressive sustainable development of the forest in Assam to meet the twin objectives of environment stability and ecological balance with improved livelihood support system for the people and Forest Legislation has come a long way since the British showed their interest in it which was basically for the fulfillment of their own benefits. As such the goals of Forest Legislation is not realized both in the Colonial and Post-Colonial period of India. Here an attempt has been made to examine the forest policies in a critical perspective.

Keyword: Forest conservation Policy, Assam, Government, Forest,

INTRODUCTION:

Human lives are closely dependent on the natural resource for their livelihood and survival. Conservation and exploitation of natural resources has been an age old phenomenon. However, the quality and quantity of this exploitation are different at different points of time. Due to some factors like the level of contemporary technology, population, demand pattern and socio-cultural attitudes of the society towards nature led to exploitation. The Indian society has not been an exception to this. A number of foreign invasions and the consequent integration of migrant groups from other civilizations into the Indian society influenced and altered its approach towards the exploitation of its natural resources.

The change and development in human civilization have always been affecting not only the mode of living of human beings but also their mode of studying and gathering knowledge and information. History is also considered as an integral part of human civilization. Studying and writing history changes over time. Most influential of all, French historians invented the famous *Annales* approach, drawing on all the social sciences to create what they sometimes called a total history. Those historians started studying history in a different way. Environmental history was started as a branch of total history.

Environmental history mainly focuses on three components. Firstly, it is the study of material environmental, the human involvement with forests and frogs, with coal and cholera. This entails study of the evolution of both human impact on the rest of nature and nature's influence upon human affairs, each of which is always in flux and always affecting the other. Second is political and policy-related environmental history. This concerns the history of self-conscious human efforts to regulate the relationship between society and nature, and between social groups in matters concerning nature. Thus efforts at soil conservation or pollution control qualify, as perhaps do social struggles over land and resource use. The third main form of environmental history is a subset of cultural and intellectual history. It concerns what humans have thought, believed, written, and more rarely painted, sculpted, sung or danced dealing with the relationship between society and nature.

Forest the 'green gold of nature' comprises of plants predominantly trees. The term Forest has been derived from the Latin word 'foris' meaning 'out of doors', the term does not apply only to trees but also to scrub vegetation and grassland. It is also defined as a peculiar organism of unlimited kindness and extends generously the products of its life activity; it affords protection of all beings, offerings made even to the one who destroys it¹. The Indian word "Jungle" has been adopted in English language to describe collection of trees, shrubs contrasted with forest. It was also termed as 'Aranyas' and considered to be abode of sages. According to the Oxford English Dictionary forest is ' a large area covered chiefly with trees and undergrowth, an area typically owned by sovereign and partly wooded, kept for hunting and use its own laws'. Forest is important for deep psychological reason, by returning to the forest we return to our origins.

To protect the forest and ecology means to give safeguard to entire human civilization. Thus, the forest conservation is much needed subject to our society. But the conservation of forestry is impossible without making and implementation of a proper law. It seems that during the Pre Colonial time, though the forests were free to all for exploitation there had not to be seen a forest conservation law till the middle of the 18th century when the British took over the region. The Britishers first showed their interest in the forestry in the reservation of teak in Malabar in 1806 (Saraswati, S.K. 2002). After the gap of three decades Lord Dalhousie the Governor General of India laid down the outline of permanent policy for forest conservation.

The first permanent policy for Forest Conservation was done through the Memorandum of Government India on August 3, 1855. At first Dr. McClelland and then Sir D. Brandis were appointed as Forest Superintendents. Dr. Brandis is also known as the 'father of Indian forestry'. The Indian Forest Act VII 1865 was the first formal Act which deals with the details of forest conservancy 'Reserved' and 'Unreserved' forests, their demarcation, privileges of the local villagers and types of acts prohibited within the forest. Need for a legal definition and separation of rights in forest property was realized by passing Act VII 1878 which provided for constitution of 'Reserved' and 'Protected' forest.

After the Britishers many factors led to the acceleration of forest loss and deforestation in newly independent state. New legislations with predecessor were introduced leading to change in land tenure system which led to large scale felling of trees. Another major change was the abolition of the zamindari in all states of India resulting in vesting of large areas of private forest to the government.

Newly independent India faced an acceleration of forest loss and appeared increasingly unable to provide for rural subsistence needs. The rural needs were actually relegated in order to meet the needs for industry. The post colonial period saw the continued control over management of forests and utilization of resources by the administrators which was an imprint of its colonial past. It can be seen from the first forest policy of 1952 which affirms that the policy shares with its predecessors some common features like the one of state monopoly right at the expense of forest communities. It can be said that the management of the forest in the post independent India can be characterized on the acceptance of colonial norms.

North East region of India has a special status for rich heritage; therefore separate policy has been formed for the region by the Ministry of Environment and Forest, GOI. The problems affecting the forestry sector of Assam are largely home-grown; the foremost reason for steady depletion of forest cover in Assam has been the unabated violation within a few decades. In view of diminishing natural resources based in the state which becomes insufficient to meet the genuine demands of the people and the shortfalls of the protection and conservation of the forest, time has come to take a hard look at the fault in the existing policies. The basic objectives of the Assam Forest Policy 2004 is maintenance of environment stability, conserving natural heritage, promoting non- consumption use of protected areas, encouraging efficient utilization of forest resources etc. The principal aim of the Forest Policy 2004 is to ensure progressive sustainable development of the forest in Assam to meet the twin objectives of environment stability and ecological balance with improved livelihood support system for the people.

Forest Legislation has come a long way since the British showed their interest in it which was basically for the fulfillment of their own benefits. As such the goals of Forest Legislation is not realized both in the Colonial and Post-Colonial period of India.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of the propose study are

- To develop a theoretical framework for understanding the politics related to forestry
- To analyze policies of forest conservation in Assam
- To examine politics between the state and the people, state of Assam

METHODOLOGY

The propose research is primarily a historical analysis of the forest conservation policy in post colonial Assam during the period 1952-2000. The source materials for the research work are both primary and secondary.

The methodology adoptable for this particular study is qualitative. The relevant data collected both from primary and secondary sources are examined using analytical method. Primary sources include archival materials, in the form of files, reports and other testimonials, housed in the National, State and district archives. Attempt also made to consult materials preserved in the private archives. The biographies and autobiographies of the people will also helpful to make a better understanding of the study. Some primary data of the study should be arranged from field survey with the help of interview schedule and personal interviews with relevant persons using simple random sampling technique.

Secondary sources, in the form of published books and papers on the area of study will be used. Among the published sources, books, periodicals, leaflets, seminar papers, newspapers, etc., consulted. The available materials have been critically, analytically and logically examined and as per their credibility, omission and retention have been done.

AREA OF THE STUDY

The focus of the study is limited to state of Assam which comprised of 33 districts, the period chosen for the study is 1952 to 2002. The year 1952 is taken as the starting period because the first forest conservation act of post colonial India introduced in this year. The work is limited to 2002, due to the fact, that the new forest policy has been drafted in 2004 and implemented in 2004, popularly known as Assam State Forest policy 2004. This study will also include the state forest policies implemented by Government of Assam and other departments in the study area and its impact on Assamese Society.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Steady degradation of ecological systems caused by miscellaneous agencies is a serious issue which the current century has to deal with. The seriousness of this degradation is such that the natural system and sub-systems of the environment are eternally worsening. Such unceasing alterations in the status of ecology and environment are accelerated by economic changes. Undoubtedly, there is a close link between economic development and such growing ecological degradation of the world. Present mode of economic development necessitates demanding use of natural resources and thus generates huge ecological and environmental problems. Subsequently, this new paradigm of economic development brings about repercussions on political and social systems. Since socio-economic and political conflicts relating to ecology and environment are linked to present liberalized economic processes, they are in need of adequate political responses. There is no exemption to India as well in terms of adopting commercial oriented ecological policies as far as the natural resources of the country is concerned. Politics of ecology (forest as source of revenue) which was prevalent during the Colonial rule has not totally been wiped out in post-independence period as well, because most of the conservancy policies have remained rather revenue oriented despite holistic intensions of preventing further degradation of ecology and the environment.

Natural resources of the country are exploited to the maximum for serving the interests of few at the expense of the vast majority of less privileged people and ecological deterioration. Through the National Forest Policies of 1952 and 1988, the government of India has constantly been trying to fulfill the ecological need that 33 per cent of the total land area of the country should be brought under the forest cover (GOA, 2012-13). With a view to achieving the twin objectives of maintaining ecological balance and steady income generation, multiple conservancy policies have been adopted due to the size of vast majority of people. The state apparatus has not stepped back from justifying such policies in the name of preventing rapid deterioration of forest ecology and its adverse impact on environment. In the process of taking such revenue oriented ecological policies, neither the environmental degradation has ceased nor the national target of achieving 33 per cent of forest cover fulfilled. The India State of Forest Report 2019 released recently shows an increase of 5,188 square kilometers (24.56 percent) of forest and tree cover across the country compared to the ISFR 2017(24.39 percent). However, the report highlights that northeast India continues to lose forests when compared to ISFR 2017 and previous reports. Therefore a study is needed to realize and explore the role of govt. policies related to the conservation of existing forest area after Independence.

The North East region of India lost 79 percent of its tree cover in 2020, recording the biggest dip in the country, recording the biggest dip in the country, according to an analysis by *Down To Earth*. Over 110,000 hectares of tree cover vanished from the region last year, according to the University of Maryland's forest change data. The "seven Sisters" Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland individually were responsible for 5-14 percent of the country's loss in forest area from 2001 through 2020. Assam the second largest of the seven states, contributed the most (14.1 percent) to the national tree cover loss during this period (Ray, p. 2021). Assam has lost forest cover in recent years. There is large scale unabated encroachment in the reserved forests by the new settlers, people displaced by floods and ethnic clashes in the State, immigrants and excessive dependence of the people in the rural areas on the forests leading to deforestation (*Assam Forest Policy 2004*).

There is no exemption to the state of Assam either as far as the ecological problems are concerned. In the pre-independence period, Assam's rich forest resources got dwindled due to colonial policy of treating them as a source of revenue and emphasis on cultivation (inclusive of tea and rubber plantations) to conservation (Handique, R2004). In the post-independence period also, the revenue oriented ecological policies have continued to affect its ecology and socio-political relations. Fast growing population, immigration, urbanization, industrialization, illicit felling, overgrazing, conversion to cultivable lands and other unplanned developmental activities have accelerated the depletion of the forest cover. Due to such reasons, the percentage of Assam's forest area which was 36.83 per cent in 1975 has declined to 34.81 per cent in 1983 and from 32.07 per cent in 1987 to 30.19 per cent in 1999. Although due to alteration in the understanding of the concept of forest, the forest cover of the state had hiked from 30.19 per cent in 1999 to 35.33 per cent in 2001, it again got depleted to 35.27 per cent in 2013 and 35.22 in 2015 and then it increased to 36.11 percent in 2017. The latest report (ISFP-2019) on Forest Cover in the State has increased by 221.51 sq km (0.22 percent) as compared to the previous assessment reported in ISFR 2017. Such ups and down in the past years have prompted the state forest department to conserve the forest resources from further depletion by involving the general people of the state in protecting them through Joint Forest Management, Committees (JFMCs). As per the report of the Department of Environment & Forests, Government of Assam, till 2021 there were about 503 numbers of Joint Forest Management Committees operating in different forest areas of the state. It is to be noted that in

terms of making decisions pertaining to forest ecology, the state apparatus and the forest department get influenced by economic interests and try to justify their activities even to the extent of using power and influence.

Forest policies are tightly integrated with the management of natural resources, particularly when public or communal lands are being considered. Policies arise from controversies, and because the array of controversies regarding the management of natural resources may change over time, real or perceived controversies will continue to shape the management of natural resources. The propose study will focus to understand forest policy is a purposeful course of action, or inaction, and dealing with a concern regarding the use of forest resources. To continuous increase and development of forestry in our state a proper policy and implementation of it much needed at present time. For this purpose a research is required. The present paper endeavors to understand the issue of deforestation and degradation in forests with the link to forest policies that have evolved in the State and how far these policies have embedded scope for forests to become a hotspot of in Assam.

Review of Literature

The following literatures mainly depicting colonial and post colonial Assam's forest ecology, exploitation of natural resources and conflicts are mentioned here with

Rajib Handique, in his book *British Forest Policy in Assam (2004)*, has pointed out how the revenue oriented British forest policy in Assam has been continued in independent Assam regardless of the forest dependent natives and environmental consequences. The author also analyze the British Forest Policy from 1864-1947 with a focus on Assam and the genesis and development of the Policy and examines the Socio-economic and environmental impact on the People and State as a Whole.

B.C Allen's *Assam in Journal of the Royal Society of Arts (1927)* describes briefly about Assam's history, its natural surroundings, forest resources, revenue, tea industry and other industries, immigration of outsiders as laborers and merchants.

Tilottoma Misra's article *Assam: A Colonial Hinterland in Economic and Political Weekly (1980)*, argues that there has been a systematic exploitation of the rich resources of Assam during colonial rule and continuance of the same by the state apparatus and capitalists in independent era too. It details some of the features of this exploitation in the extractive industries of oil, tea, jute and forest products.

Arupjyoti Saikia's book *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife: A History of Forests in Assam (2005)* depicts how the imperialism and capitalism coupled with population pressure and demand for forest products have led to large scale destruction of forest wealth of the state both in colonial and post colonial times. The author's intention is to introduce his audience to the making of the modern forests of Assam, to show how the present-day landscape emerged through complex processes involving nature, state and human agency. He shows how even more than the colonial revenue and plantation systems, it was the forest department which was the primary intruder into the peasant's world of rights, land and commons access. The working of the department is well located in the specificities of the local situation, where, for instance, forest officials often dissented and deviated from the general policies of the imperial government, justifying their stance by reference to local variations in Assam's history and ecology. In doing so, he has made a considerable contribution to the literature on colonialism and its impact upon South and South-East Asia. While there

remains ample scope to further explore the wider, cultural and social dimensions of this environmental history, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife* is an important work, especially given the scanty academic scholarship on Northeast India.

Arupjyoti Saikia's *Forests and ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000 (2011)* presents detailed account of how Assam's forests and ecology have undergone several changes since early 19th century to the end of the 20th century and links present ecological conflicts to the colonial past.

Binoy Musahary in his doctoral thesis *Politics Of Ecology In Assam With Special Reference To Kokrajhar District (2017)* discuss the linkage between the colonial and post-colonial ecological policies in the context of Assam and finds out how the revenue oriented colonial ecological policies have been influencing the politics of ecology in post-independence period as well.

Himangshu Dutta done his doctoral work on *Man animal Conflict in the Forest and Fringe Villages of the Protected areas in Barak Valley Assam (2017)* the study was immensely helpful in understanding the various aspects of human wildlife conflicts in Barak Valley. It threw light upon the its fluctuating nature during different months of year, losses caused by wild animals and factors affecting depredations as well as assessing the same from the socio-economic point of view.

Sangita Saikia on her research work mentioned *A sociological study of the forest villages in Assam (2017)* about the forest acts and its impact on Assamese village societies.

Here some literatures dealing with tribal land alienation, conflicts (ethnic and political) and displacement in Northeast in general and Assam in particular are reviewed.

Monirul Hussain's article, *State, Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in the North-East in Economic and Political Weekly (2000)*, focuses on the problem of internal displacement resulting from conflict in Assam and the northeast.

C.J. Sonowal's "*Demographic Transition of Tribal People in Forest Villages of Assam*" in *Centre for Dalit and Tribal Studies (2007)*", pinpoints that the tribal populations living in forest villages in the state of Assam have been numerically outnumbered by the other communities.

Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora, through their self edited article, *Tribal Land Alienation in the Northeast: An Introduction* in Walter Fernandes and Sanjay Barbora ed., *Land, People and Politics: Contest over Tribal Land in Northeast India (2008)*, have attempted to establish a close link between the tribal land alienation and the consequent conflicts in the North-eastern region.

In this section, literatures stressing on the significance of conservation of forests through people's participation are reviewed. Abraham Varickamaekal, in his M. Phil dissertation, *Forest Management and Administration in Meghalaya (1985)*, has stressed that state, forest department and the district councils should involve forest dependent people in protecting forests through forestry programme.

Mahesh Rangarajan's *The Politics of Ecology: The Debate on Wildlife and People in India, 1970-95* in *Economic and Political Weekly (1996)*, emphasizes that ecological issues cannot be addressed by dependence on state machinery alone and calls for a set of relations with the forest which will be enduring both for the people and the natural world.

M.M. Deka's *Joint Forest Management in Assam (2002)* describes Joint Forest Management as a system of managing the forest with the people in place of the past system of management forest for the people.

Dilip Hazarika, in her doctoral thesis, *Environment and Politics with Special reference to Assam (2004)*, has attempted to bring the concept of environmentalism into the political programme and ideology by

encouraging local peoples' involvement in preventing environmental degradation by stressing on resource utilization through folk culture and tradition.

Debnarayan Sarker's article *Joint Forest Management: Critical Issues in Economic and Political Weekly* (2009) argues that the Joint Forest Management system since early 1990s has failed to utilize forest wealth to improve local livelihoods because of inclination towards the forest department in place of equal opportunities and rights to the participating communities.

Neena Ambre Rao in her thesis *Colonialism and forest conservation policies in Maharashtra 1850 to 1950(1998)* discuss the conservation policies in a critical way..

RESEARCH GAP

Although several aspects of ecological and environmental issues have been probed by the existing literatures, no such type study has been undertaken on Post Colonialism and Forest Conservation Policies in Assam from 1952 to 2002. So the researchers have taken the present study for further research to find out the research gap of the topic. The existing literatures of Assam and adjacent areas also have not covered the commercial oriented conservation policies, contest for space within the forest areas for legacy (between forest department and the people), claims and counter claims among different groups of people and the specific role of middlemen, timber smugglers and poachers. Moreover, the exiting literatures have not covered the recent trend of income generating policies and activities of the forest authority concerned and the most recent trend of forest depletion. Hence, the propose study has to attempted to cover up the gap left behind by the existing literatures.

CONCLUSION

Through the study it is to be found that the government after independence has been playing a two side role in implementing the proper forest low. Protect the forest means to protect the environment and to protect the environment means to protect the human civilization. So central and state government has to take the issue carefully and implement properly its policies. And there should be a possibility of proper research or deep study about our conservation policies.

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