A C SINHA

BEYOND THE TREES, TIGERS AND TRIBES

HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF THE EASTERN HIMALAYAN FORESTS

The book reports on the forest resources of Eastern Himalayan region. It is divided into seven chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, a bibliography and an index. After examining the historical antecedents of the British forest policies, it analyses the issues of tea plantation and tea chest timber, forest reserves and shifting cultivation and timber trade and supply of the railway sleepers. The chapter on the forests in Bhutan is a counter case-study away from the urban-industrial market economy, providing an alternative course of ecological preservation. The conclusion makes a plea that the community control over the forests as it exists in the region is just not enough guarantee for a balanced regional ecology and something more positive and drastic has to be done about it.

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Introduction

It all started with the occasional observations on the tree cover around the highway between Shillong to Gauhati during the last fifteen years. Slowly and slowly, hills have turned naked, trees have become fewer, scattered and younger : thickets have replaced the clumps of trees and settlements have sprung up all around. During the dry days one comes across even clouds of dust. From nowhere a new problem of drinking water in the abode of clouds — Meghalaya — has been added to the list of the urgent issues which are to be attended. Then, one is startled on the paradoxical expression : 'the wet desert of Cherrapunji'. The Government Forest Officials claim not to be responsible for the alleged rape of forests as they hardly control an appreciable acreage of the forests. It is the community, represented by the District Council, which controls and manages the extensive forests as per the constitutional provisions. Elsewhere such as Almora and Garhwal and the Western Ghats the environmentalists are articulating the issue as a conflict between the state control and community interests and demand the forests to be given back to the community as they were in the hands of the local communities in the pre-colonial days. Is it so that the community control has led to destruction of forests in this region? How come, inspite of the large scale deforestation, there is no environmentalist movement worth the name active in the region?

With the above background, we started looking into the literature on environmental movements elsewhere. The emperical evidence suggested that north-eastern scenario did not fall into the national pattern, where the grip of the 'state' was strong on the forests and exploiters were invariable 'non-local' industrial interests. That took us to the archival forest records maintained

by the Government. We are not historians trained in historiography and, thus, we have our limitations to record the sequence of events in time perspective. Our concern has been to understand the vital social processes affecting the community life in a decisive way, as we claim to be the students of historical sociology. The present study may be seen in the sociological tradition of peasant and subaltern studies, which have drawn heavily on social historical data to reconstruct the role of peasantry and voiceless under-dogs (subalterns) in the struggle for a better deal.

With a view to focusing on the historical sociology of forests of the North Eastern Himalayan region, we have analysed the physical features, natural vegetation and pre-colonial economy of the region in the first chapter of the book. The second and the third chapters report on the introduction of British Forest Administration, creation of forest reserves, efforts to increase forest revenue, supply of the tea-box, timber and railway sleepers, and the policies towards wasteland, grazing and shifting cultivation. The British colonial policy in general and their revenue and forest policies in particular seem to have affected the local socio-economic autonomy of the relatively smaller ethnic groups and tagged them to the World-wide capitalist industrial economy. The readings in the historical sociology of the regional forests all through the British period highlights three themes continuously: tea plantation and tea box timber, forest reserves and shifting cultivation and timber trade with special reference to supply of railway sleepers. We have taken up these three dominant themes one by one for analysis.

The chapter four on 'Tea plantation and Forest Reservation' reports on the dominant colonial concern to introduce profit making tea cultivation as European enclaves, its consequent increasing demands on regional resources in general and *simul* timber in particular for the tea chests and resultant Abor expedition of 1911-12. We have examined in this chapter how apparently conflicting British strategic and commercial interests worked hand in hand to incorporate the timber bearing community forests of the present day of Arunachal Pradesh. The parts of the problems created by this expedient encounter remains unresolved till today as the boundary and forest disputes between

the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.

The British identified *sal* as one of the most valuable trees in Assam required for the railways. It was found on the north-western part of tropical Assam in the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and Garo Hills. Sal was declared as a reserve tree, which meant nobody could cut it without paying taxes to the Government. Sal bearing areas were declared as the reserve forest but this decision was coupled with forced and unpaid labour in Garo Hills. Further more, the *Jhum land*, which was waiting for its turn for the rotational cultivation, was declared as wasteland, on which the Government established its authority as per rights of conquest. Unlike the adjoining Kamrup and Goalpara plains, the Garo economy in the hills was entirely dependent on forests. Thus, chapter five describes the practically successful Garo movement for the dereservation of the forest, the only forest movement from the region, which links it to other similar movements elsewhere in India.

The British Forest administration was continuously concerned with an increased revenue from the forests. For that timber trade was encouraged in terms of railway sleepers and tea-boxes. Assam had little tradition of professional timber cutters. In such a situation the sawyers were brought from Nepal and Chotanagpur. Side by side the Nepalese got settled as graziers-herdsmen-on the wasteland. With a view to easy availability of the inexpensive labour forest villages were settled on the forest reserves, causing serious ethnic problems for the future. It is rather intriguing that inspite of extensive timber and lack of labour force, it was never contemplated to introduce mechanical timber cutting, as it necessitated economic investment. Chapter six examines the issue associated with timber trade, revenue and forest labour in the regional forests.

The last chapter is a counter case study in forest management from the adjoining Bhutan. Some way or other, the British failed to extend their direct commercial exploitation to Bhutan and were satisfied with a level of political control on the newly established principality. It required rather heavy investment in development of communication network in Bhutan for exploiting its natural resources for which the British were reluctant. Though the Bhutanese were more than willing and soliciting to

invite the British investments in the hills, the British thought it inadvisable to invest in Bhutan after the First World War (Sinha A.C. 1991 A). By the time, the Bhutanese introduced modern forest management, the British had gone away from the regional scene. The Bhutanese are conscious of their forest wealth and are proceeding cautiously in retaining two-thirds of their land under forest cover.

The conclusion on the 'Forest' : 'Beyond the Trees, Tigers and Tribes' sums up the total perspective of the regional forests. The title owes its origin to Anil Agrawal's address (Agrawal, A : 1984) to the social scientists in the form of the Fifth Vikram Sarabhai Memorial Lecture in New Delhi. Here we have tried to see our study in the light of the environmental and ecological movements and debates going on in various parts of India. Among the various issues of ecological significance, communal subsistence control over forests against the commercial exploitation under the state control is strongly recommended. In the light of our study, where bulk of the forest is under community, we have found that this panacea of communal control over the forest resources has completely failed to safeguard the forests. We felt the need to raise certain pertinent questions : Is the community control on the forests in itself a guarantee to the reasonable ecological preservation? Has the community control on the regional forests fore-stalled the on-rush of the commercial loot of the timber, poaching of wildlife and wanton destruction of other natural resources? Who controls the forest resources in the name of the communal control? Is the traditional legal communal control over the resources such as forests a possible answer to the forest depletion or an awareness, a concern and a mass movement for a balanced environmental preservation is the demand of the time?

Popularly, the environmental study is identified with exotic issues of preservation of rare trees, endangered tigers and vanishing tribes. The present study suggests that the above notions are faulty and the forests refer to a much more wider horizon than any one of the above or even all of them taken together. Not only that; the forests sustain the environment in which a happier and prosperous future of the mankind is envisioned. The study owes its origin to a number of persons,

who inspired, encouraged and goaded the author to reflect on the forests history of the North Eastern Frontier region. My brother, B.P.N. Sinha, a trained forests administrator, who was posted to Bhutan in the early 1970's to develop the Bhutanese forests, made me aware of the relative social and scientific significance of forests in India and Bhutan. Prof. Richard Tucker, a friend for a decade, who teaches environmental history at the University of Michigan, U.S.A. encouraged me to examine the regional tribal economy in close proximity with that of the forest resources. Anil Agrawal, an old associate of over two decades, provoked me to think of writing on the regional forests through his occasional 'out burst' on inactivity of the academics. My students of 'Cultural Ecology of the Eastern Himalayan Frontiers' course during Spring Semester, 1989 University of California, Santa Cruz, U.S.A. led me to examine the larger issues of cultural resources, environment and small ethnic groups. In an informal talk with James O' Connor, editor of *Capitalism, Nature Socialism*, (Santa Cruz, U.S.A.) in April, 1989 on the nature of the community control of the Eastern Himalayan forests, the paradoxical status of the regional forests emerged vividly.

Chapter four on Tea Plantation and Forest Reservation was published in the *Socio Science Probing* Vol. 3(2) and chapter seven on Forests of Bhutan was included in an anthology *History of Forestry in India*, Indus Publishing Co. New Delhi. We thankfully acknowledge the permission from the two editors to include those sections in this book. Chapter six on Timber Trade and Forest Administration was presented at the Session on the History of Forest Economy in the *Pacific Science Congress*, held on May 27 to June 2, 1991 at Honolulu U.S.A. As it is yet to be published in proceedings of the Congress, we have taken liberty to include it in the volume. The historian colleges of the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong — Prof Imdad Hussain, J.B. Bhattacharjee and Milton Sangma — gave their patient ears to an 'uninitiated' in their historical preserve and provided the author with all the archival data available with them. Prof. R. Gopalkrishnan, Dean, School of Earth Sciences, NEHU, Shillong readily agreed to provide the relevant maps for the book. A. Dkhar and R. Dutta typed and N.P. Sharma assisted in preparing the manuscript. To Mr. A.H. Choudhary, special officer, Archives,

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Conclusion

Forests: Beyond the Trees, Tigers and Tribes

Our above analysis introduces to the readers the physical features, rich natural vegetation and pre-colonial economy of the Eastern Himalayan region. The early man in the region seems to have established relationship with his environment. There was no excess use of resources in time and space as happened in the case of large scale industrial establishments and, there was a type of ecological balance within and with adjoining regions. The British administration drew upon the experience of the German foresters to introduce forestry in India in the second half of the last century with a view to extracting 'valuable' timber for the European sponsored industrial enterprises. The traditional rights of the community over land, forests, wild-life, and even water were drastically curtailed. In case of the region a bastard system of cultivation—tea plantation—which was neither agriculture, nor an industry, but garnered benefits of both the sectors, was patronised at the cost of local resources and communities. The book reports on three specific aspects of ecology of the region : tea plantation, forest reserves and timber trade. The last chapter provides us with a unique case study from Bhutan, which reports on a situation of ecological equilibrium. This was made possible because the Bhutanese authorities spurned the proposals from the British industrial and mercantile interests to 'develop their forest resources'.

"Prior to the advent of colonalism most of the Third World

societies consisted of a mosaic of long settled and sophisticated agrarian cultures which had a finely tuned but delicately balanced relationship with their natural environment. Colonial and Post-colonial capitalism had disrupted this relationship in many ways. While social consequences of this disruption are widely documented, what is less often observed are the devastating ecological consequence. In the absence of a 'frontier' such as was available to European colonists, even state-planned industrialization has to contend with a limited resource and rapid environmental degradation.... Urban and Industrial Development, while not even successful on its own terms, has wrecked tremendous havoc on the country-side, pauperizing millions of people in the agrarian sector sand diminishing the stock of plant, water and soil resources at a terrifying rate." (Guha, R : 1989 : 195-196). The above chapters of this book focus on the same historical process in which a non-cash and non-market social system was coersed to integrate itself to an urban-industrial-metropolitan capitalist economy.

Elsewhere in India as in the case of this region the absence of clear and simple rights of the small and localized communities over the natural resources in the pre-colonial setting was seen as ambiguous. This ambiguity relates to the fact that "the tribal people's knowledge of the forest and ability to manage it for their needs is both old and enduring, even if it is now becoming increasingly more limited by a large population competing in scarcity. This very knowledge and capability, however, seems to have eluded the planners" (Anderson, R.S. and W. Hueber: 1988: 126) and developers. This situation has led to a vigourous debate among intellectuals, policy makers and grassroot organisations on two opposed notions of property and resources use : communal control over forests being paired with subsistence use on the one hand, and state control with commercial exploitation on the other (Guha, R:1988:46). This issue was taken up earlier as 'politics of environment' (Roy, D and Agarwal, A: 1985:354 - 383), which was further debated through an interesting communication between Ramchandra Guha (*Seminar*, 334, June, 1987 : 45-47) and J. Bandyopadhyay and Vandana Shiva (*Seminar*, 336, August, 1987 : 42-46). In the process a new concern on 'the politics of ecology' emerged as "inevitable and imminent crys-

tallizations of alliances and groups among those, who are beginning to assert their rights in the face of the depredatory system of development being wilfully persued both by our political elite and the consumer society it wishes to breed" (Sanjeeb Prakash : 1987 : 13).

The north - eastern Himalayan region has one of the largest reserves of tropical forests in India—one seventh of the total Indian area under forest. It plays host to a variety of birds and wild animals and rare species of plants. But the forest wealth of the region is disappearing at an alarming rate. Before the advent of roads, railway lines and so-called economic 'development', the region was covered with lush green sub-tropical forests. The hill people lived in harmony with the forests around them and used a form of agriculture that allowed them to cultivate the steep slopes. Even to-day many of the tribes follow the same old method of cultivation — *jhumming* —, an estimated 1.6 million people are engaged in it, but there is a disharmony between man and nature. The forest areas are decreasing, human habitations are increasing and the fertility of the soil is diminishing at such a rate that land is turning barren (Agrawal, A. et.al : 1982 : 40). How was the paradise of the plentiful forests lost?

We have tried to analyse the historical process (our first three chapters) beginning in the second quarter of the 19th century through which the British administration reached the heart land of the hills, established a system of communication, imposed an alien market economy on localised autonomous systems and froze the vibrant tribal systems to an artificial colonial administrative equilibrium. The tribal ethos never accepted these impositions and rose in countless revolts throughout the British rule. But this was an unequal struggle between an alien imposition and indigenous survival. It was a loosing battle for the latter, which is not completely over. Even in the post-independence period, spirit of indigenous autonomy seems to have indentified some steps of the Indian Union as continuation of the colonial trappings. Part of the rampent regional insurgency, autonomy demands and 'regional party' movements may be identified with this on-going struggle to disentangle itself from the unseen bondage of the urban-industrial market economy. But in the process a neo-tribal elite has emerged on the scene. He is utterly

confused because of the conflicting demands made on him. He cannot and must not disown his roots and, at the same time, feels uneasy without consumer articles given by the market economy, which his system could not produce. In the process, the newly emerged tribal elite is condemned to continue with a facade of old spirit of defiance, but goes on living on the left-over of his limited resources such as forests.

It is a paradoxical situation in the region. Most of the hill states — Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal, Bhutan and Sikkim — have evolved their own land laws in which with a few exceptions 'non-locals' cannot possess landed property. Still there has been considerable alienation of land and other resources. All these states, with exception of Bhutan, do not have an appreciable percentage of their forests under the Government forest reserves. In fact, the bulk of their forests are under communal control — either through the District Council as in the case of Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, Karbi-Anglong district of Assam, or within the control of the clan, village or tribes as in the case of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Because of the guarantees provided to the customary laws in these states under the Indian contribution, even their own state governments cannot enact forest laws affecting the basic customary practices. The State Forest Departments have a small patch of reserve forests and possess no land of their own to afforest and extend their activities. Unlike elsewhere in the country, the forests are completely under the community control, still the forest resources are depleting, trees are cut on an unprecedented scale and wild life is wantonly destroyed. In this case, the much acknowledged panecea of communal control over the forest resources against the state (Government) control appears to have completely failed to safe-guard the forests. The pertinent questions to be raised here are : Is the community control on the forests in itself a guarantee to the reasonable ecological preservation? Has the community control on the regional forests forestalled the onrush of the commercial loot of the timber, poaching of the wildlife and wanton destruction of other natural resources? Who controls the forest resources in the name of the communal control? Is the traditional legal communal control over the resources such as forest a possible answer to the forest depletion or an aware-

ness, a concern and a mass movement for a balanced environmental preservation is the demand of the time?

Anil Agarwal in his Vikram Sarabhai Memorial lecture reminds us on the consequences of the government forest control: ".....the Government has decided to control the forest resources itself, leaving little or no control in the hands of the forest dwellers. The Government control over forests has definitely meant a reallocation of forest resources away from the needs of local communities and into the hands of urban and industrial India. The net result is both increased social conflict and increased destruction of the ecological resources itself "(Agarwal, A : 1984 : (11). But the above scenario is not applicable in the tribal states of the region. The conflict between the tribal forest users and the urban-industrial interest in not visible, because of the fact that the latter are not located within the region and, thus, they remain unseen and hidden from the gaze of the public. Secondly, it is the newly emerged tribal elite in the form of contractor — politicians, who are more resourceful, articulate and able to subvert local interests for supplying timber to the industries away from their states. A telling instance is the failure of the Meghalaya Government to enforce a law enacted by the state Assembly in 1981 to establish state timber depots with a monopoly on timber trade within the state. Thirdly, the newly emerged middle class in these states is still embronic in the sense that it has not been able to cause a split at societal level, there is little evidence of a conflict between 'the wretched of the earth' and the emerging middle class, and in any way, there is no upper class in the classical sense of the term. In fact, it is the middle class which articulates the various interests of these states on behalf of the masses against the 'others.' Thus, they are not seen as exploiters and oppressors of their own community and communal resources.

Fourthly, this middle class-neo-elite combine has been instrumental in championing the cause of the local level 'order-dogs' vis-a-vis 'non-locals' through various violent and non-violent movements for creation of the hill states. They are seen as the saviour of the local interests in the aftermath of the statehood. Many of them, really suffered politically and financially during the long drawn years of agitations. In fact, armed struggle was waged in the state of Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Manipur

and the insurgents were rehabilitated with grants in cash and kind and employment. When they use the community controlled forest resources to augment their private income in some way or other, it is just not taken note of. Fifthly, in some way it is the common belief in the hill states that if the 'local' tribal elite do not exploit their resources and take advantage of it in their favour, it will be a matter of time in which the 'non-locals' will fleece them away of the resources such as forest.

Sixthly, unlike Baster (Madhya Pradesh), Singhbhum (Bihar) and elsewhere, where the local tribals and *Dalits* have suffered because of the excessive exploitation of the local resources by the non-tribals and upper castes. Such a divide between tribals and non-tribals as suffering masses and exploiters respectively, has not been established in terms of forest resources of the region.

And lastly, in view of the fact that the middle-class-neo-elite combine has been able to focus on the various 'ethnic' demands on behalf of the community as a whole vis-a-vis the Indian Union, they have been able to divert the attention from the internal contradiction within the states. And thus, in spite of depleting forests, we do not find a noticeable awareness and grass root movement to safeguard their interests in forests in particular and environment in general.

Environmentalists in general and ecologists in particular are charged with retarding the pace of development ensuring the basic necessities of the global move to feed the starving masses of the Third World countries. The charge is not based on sound reasoning. Wood is good, but tree is better; the tiger skin may be sacred, but the tigers themselves are grand; and the tribals' resources make ideal raw materials for keeping the pace of development, but tribal traditions are invaluable treasure for postersity.

At the end, one must understand that: "The environment is not just pretty trees and tigers, threatened plants and ecosystems. It is literally the entity on which we all subsist, and on which our entire agricultural and industrial development depends. Development can take place at the cost of the environment only upto a point. Beyond that point it will be like the foolish person who was trying to cut the very branch on which he was sitting. Development without a concern for the environ-

ment can only be development for the short-term. In the long run, it will become anti-development and it can go on only at the cost of enormous human sufferings, increases poverty and oppression". (Agarwal, Anil : 1984:2).