

Forest administration in Manipur during the British Colonial Period

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The expansion of the British dominion beyond Europe was guided mainly by the economic advantages. Manipur, though was economically unprofitable, was strategically important to the British colonists. Besides, it could serve as a market for the British manufactured goods. The economic viability in the north eastern region of India finally compelled the British colonists to extend their political control over the territory. The internecine wars within the ruling family subsequently led to the Anglo-Manipur war (1891) and as a consequence, Manipur lost her independence. Though, the Queen Empress regranted the state, the British colonists exercised political authority over the territory and undertook various attempts to tap its natural resources. The exploitation of the forest resources was one of such undertakings and their policy was that of economic enterprises. The hills which cover about 20,084 sq. km. out of 22,327 sq.kms. are inhabited by the various hill tribes and are covered with forests. Different varieties of animals and plants are found. In the pre-colonial period, the forest resources constituted one of the state revenue which were collected only on the Cachar border and no taxes were lived on timber or minor produces in the other forests¹. With the establishment of the colonial rule, the forest administration was taken up right in earnest as it continued to constitute one of the regular state revenue which could be collected in maximum with minimum expenditure. However, Manipur had neither a separate department nor police or trained personnel to look after its forests prior to 1930 while most of the forest departments in the country had started functioning as early as the middle of the 19th century². With a change of policy, the State Darbar was entrusted with the department since 1931³ with a view to develop the state forests on sound lines

On assuming the administration of the State Major Maxwell, the first Political Agent made a rough

estimate that if judiciously worked, the forests would yield an annual income of Rs. 20,000/- with less expenditure as few check stations and inland establishments were required and necessary⁴. The total receipt for 1892-93 accounted Rs. 4,037/- only much below the estimate with the expenditure of Rs. 452/- only⁵. They were collected mainly from the confiscated timber, auction price of monopoly of sales of ivory, elephant mahals etc. In the following year, the total receipt was the lowest. It was only Rs. 452/- with expenditure of Rs. 235/-⁷. The main cause was the policy of the Assam Forest Department in refusing the entry of Manipur forest produce without payment of a protective duty, equal to the full charges on such produce grown in British territory⁸. As a result, Manipur lost a profitable source of income. This unfair burden to Manipur was the most unjust because all import and export duties formerly heavy were by that time abolished by the State⁹. Besides, the ivory Mahal since 1892-93 was abolished to prevent the slaughter of elephants.

While the State forests near Cachar border remained unexploited and unproductive till 1898-99, the State Government took to other alternative measures by declaring certain hills as State reserved forests. Thus, Langlo hills near Imphal became the first State reserved forest after its survey in 1894-95 so as to meet the full demand of the town¹⁰. Another hilly tract at heingang a few miles from Imphal was proclaimed a State reserved forest in the following year (1895-96)¹¹. In 1898-99, the existing policy for the management of the Manipur forests on the Cachar border was changed. Henceforth, it was entrusted to the Deputy Conservator of Forest, Cachar, on condition that the gross income on the produce should be divided between the Government of India and the State in the proportion of 25 per cent to the former and 75 per cent to the latter for a period of 3 years subject to revision¹². Thus, with the sanction of the Government of India, the State forest along the Cachar border was thrown open to the public at the same rates for forest produce as in the neighbouring districts¹³.

The recently adopted forest policy was argued by the conservator of forest who opined that the proportion of the share of the Government of India would be raised but it was refuted by Maj. Maxwell on the ground that the former spent nothing for maintenance, fire-protection, watch and ward and the imprisonment and exploitation of the Manipur forests⁴. Finally, the Conservator too agreed that the existing system should continue till the question of modifying it was raised by one of the parties⁵.

The teak forest in the Kobo valley all along the eastern border of the State was leased out to the Bombay Trading Corporation of Rangoon by the local authorities in 1910 on the agreement that the Corporation would give a royalty of Rs. 14/- per ton on all teak exported and that the import duty levied by the Government of Burma would be given by the Manipur State⁶. The demand of the Government of Burma of the import duty of Rs. 14/- a ton on teak and Rs. 1/- on all other reserved timber floated down the Chindwin river into Burma was according to the Chief Commissioner of Assam was too high because of its inferior quality and it should not exceed Rs. 3/- per ton⁷. Finally, the Lt. Governor of Burma reduced the rate to Rs. 3.50 p. per ton.⁸

Hitherto the State Darbar had no direct control over the working of the forests and the initiative for its involvement came from the Chief Commissioner of Assam. He was of the opinion that a better workable system which would leave the forest department in charge at the same time empowering the State Darbar in the management should be introduced⁹. Accordingly, A.J.W. Milroy of the Indian Forest Service was deputed and he made an intensive studies of the forests and finally concluded that the introduction of a system of rotation would eventually recover and become a source of considerable and steady income, both to the State and the hillmen inhabiting the locality²⁰. The involvement of the State Darbar, thus became necessary and inevitable and considering the note on the proposals of Mr. A.J.W. Milroy (Asst. Conservator of Forests) the Darbar adopted two resolutions²¹.

1. "That it is desirable to put the forests under the management of a European Forest Officer to be appointed by the state, rather than under an extra Assistant Conservator of forests.
2. That there is no objection to the payment to such officer of a commission on the net profits accruing under his management of the forests."

The Darbar also started to lease to Bombay-Burma Trading Corporation Ltd. for teak in the drainage of Nampanga and any forests on the Burma-Border on the same condition as the lease already in existence between it and the State²².

With the outbreak of the anti-British movement the State Government took different measures to administer the State as a whole and the hills in particular including the forest department. The hitherto existing forest management was brought under the direct administration of the State Darbar in 1931 in which year a separate forest department was constituted under the charge of a Member of the Darbar in the person of L. J. Bungohal Singh with²³ a view to develop the State forests on sound basis²³. The State Darbar under the Presidentship of Captain C. W. J. Harvey of Political Department assigned Mr. D. C. Kaith in 1932 to survey the forests of²⁴ Manipur and submit proposal for better management²⁴. The forest-member and Assistant to the P. M. S. D., made an enquiry into the question of 'Ukok' and as a result the Darbar passed a resolution reserving a quarter of a²⁵ mile round each hill village as the village reserve.²⁵ The rest of the hill village land was classified as 'Open Reserve' and passes were issued by the Forest Officer on payment, authorising the²⁶ cutting of timber and fire-wood from those reserves²⁶. However, nothing was paid to the hillmen and the indiscriminate cutting of wood led²⁷ to a certain amount of dissatisfaction among the hillmen²⁷. Provision was made not to injure the jhum land but due to the unfamiliarity with the theory and practice of the jhum cultivators, it was very often not observed by the passholders²⁸. Another provision was also made for the constitution of a 'State Reserved Forests' and for the preservation of the rights of those valley

village which had always extracted timber and fire-wood for their own use from the neighbouring hills²⁹. Assessments were made on the valley and sold to the hill villages on whose land they stood, at nominal prices³⁰. Some modifications regarding the 'village Reserves' and 'Open Reserves' were made by the Darbar on the 8th March, 1933 to give the hill villages the option of buying the³¹ monopoly right in the forest produce of their land³¹. Thus 'Open Reserves' were abolished in respect of those villages which bought the monopoly right for their own lands and prices were fixed at more or less nominal rates by the forest member in consultation with the Hill Officer³². The system prevented indiscriminate cutting of timber on own lands and prices were also fixed for the forest produce sold by them. Passes continued to be issued on payment by the forest offices as before to those villages which did not buy the monopoly right.

Ukok survey in the Moirang and Mombi areas was carried out by the forest Member and Assistant to the President in the hills, as a result of which certain Manipuri villages were allowed to cut fire-wood free for their own use from the neighbouring hills the³³ privilege they had been enjoying from time immemorial³³. In the following year another reserve in the hills near Koirentak was created by the President and the monopoly system continued to exist. Hence, it was decided that the 'hill village mahals' should be sold by the Hill office instead of the Forest Member and as a result the sales were made by the Assistant to the President in the Hill Office³⁴. In the same year 'Ukok' survey was carried out by the forest Member and the Assistant, to the President in the hills in the Ayapurel area³⁵. As in the other cases, the Manipuri villages near the hills were permitted to cut firewood free for their own use from the neighbouring hills since they had been enjoying the privilege from time immemorial³⁶. In 1935-36 3 reserves in the western range were created and approved by the President of the M.S.D. Viz., Thingcham Kaimai, Tolbung and Vangai³⁷. One more reserve was created in 1936-37 in addition to the former namely Sambei and was approved by the President and the Darbar

vide D.R.No.4A of 7.10.1936³⁸. Reserved station was created at Jirimukh as it was the most convenient and was in fact the only place within Manipur³⁹.

The management of the Jiri-Barak area continued to be managed as before by the Cachar forest authorities but it was handed over to the local staff by the Government of India on the 1st October 1936 and Hari Singh, a Retired Inspector General of Forests was appointed as the first State Forest Officer.⁴⁰ Henceforth the Darbar had full power over the State forests.

More state reserves were created between 1939 and 1946 in different areas of the hills but without any change in the working plan. The system of issuing bullies and timber from the Hill Open Reserves according to the recommendation of the Hill Authorities was introduced. Issuing of permits of monopoly fee and royalty and the realisation of⁴¹ surcharge fee on forest produce were also continued⁴¹. This had led to the indiscriminate exploitation of the forest's.

The British colonists were not without the future planning as far as forests were concerned. Thus afforestation was undertaken since 1936-37 and planted teak wood in three state reserved forests. In 1939-40, plantation of teak, mahagony, jawl, pine, sal, chan and tairen both direct and indirect sowing and by transplantation, was carried out at Chingaiching, Kangchup, Kangbung and Jiri and of these, teak, mahagony and pine plantations proved successful.

With the extension of the reserved forests in the state, the receipts from this source increased from rs. 4,037 in 1891-92 to rs. 2,39,898-5-6 in 1946-47 with no expenditure in 1891-92 to an expenditure of Rs. 40,406-7-9 in 1946-47. The hill forests were for the first time categorised into village reserves, state reserves and open reserves.

Passes were issued to the public for extracting timber and for other purposes as well as the teak forests which were leased out for exploitation. These created adverse effects upon the hillmen who depend upon the vast forests for their livelihood. Henceforth, they no longer were the sole owner and exploiters of their forest resources, The British officers were

against the direct administration of the Maharaja of Manipur over the hill tribes. Yet, the management of their forests was brought under the direct control of the Manipur State Darbar to which the tribes had no representation. In the post-independence period, with the extension of the forest Act of 1927, the forests came to be administered more effectively by the Government of Manipur.

Notes & References

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3. **Ibid.***
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6. **Ibid.**
7. Administration Report of Manipur Agency for the year, 1893-94, p.6.
8. **Ibid.**
9. **Ibid.**
10. Maxwell H.P., Administration Report of Manipur Agency for the year, 1894-95, p.14.
11. Administration Report of Manipur Agency for the year, 1895-96, 1895, p. 14.
12. F. Deptt. Extl. A., Progs. September 1898, No. 59-70 quoted in Lal Dena, 1984, p.50.
13. Administration Report of Manipur Agency for the year 1898-99, p.20.
14. Lal Dena, **Op.cit.**, p. 50-51.
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16. **Ibid.**, p. 57.
17. Lal Dena, **Op.cit.**, p.51.
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22. **Ibid.**, dated 12th August, 1914, No.5.
23. Th.Ibohal Singh, **Op.cit.**, p.4.
24. **Ibid.**
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26. **Ibid.**
27. **Ibid.**
28. **Ibid.**
29. **Ibid.**
30. **Ibid.**
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32. **Ibid.**
33. **Ibid.**, p. 17.
34. Administration Report of the Manipur State for the year 1934-35, Imphal, 1935,p.19.
35. **Ibid.**
36. **Ibid.**
37. Administration Report of the Manipur State for the year 1935-36, Imphal, 1936, p.17.
38. **Ibid.**, for the year 1936-37, Imphal, 1937, p. 40.
39. **Ibid.**, p. 94.
40. Th. Ibohi Singh, **Op cit.**, p. 4.
41. **Ibid.**, p. 13.