



British Forest Policy in Assam

Rajib Handique

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This study attempts to analyse the British Forest Policy from 1864 to 1947, in particular context of Assam. Situating the geography and history of the region, it traces the genesis and development of British forest policy. It also examines the socio-economic and environmental impact of the policy on the people as well as on the state as a whole. The book will be especially useful for historians, students, teachers, researchers, botanists, environmentalists and policy-makers.

Rajib Handique (b. 1967), M.A., (Gold-medalist from Gauhati University), is presently Deputy Registrar (Academic) of Dibrugarh University. He has earlier served as lecturer in History at M.D.K. Girls' College and in the Department of History, Dibrugarh University. A life member of the Indian History Congress and the North East India History Association, he is actively associated with various academic bodies and organisations of the country. Dibrugarh University awarded him the Ph.D. degree in 2000 for his thesis *British Forest Policy and its Impact on Assam, 1864-1947*. He has a large number of research papers to his credit.

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About the Author

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*Dedicated to
My parents
Dr. H. K. Handique
and
Mrs. Shanti Handique*

*But for whom I would not have seen
this beautiful world*

FOREWORD

With the emergence of the concept of 'total history', the dimension of the subject has got so expanded that without an interdisciplinary approach, study of any problem in historical perspective now-a-days is not possible. This has strengthened the relation of History with other subjects of Social Sciences, Science and Humanities. A study on forest policy of any government is such a subject, the comprehension of which is not possible without taking into account the relevant questions of Politics, Economics, Geography, Geology and Ecology, in the main. Dr. Rajib Handique, a young and promising historian with such an approach attempts in this work to analyse the British forest policy in India in the context of Assam during the period 1864, which marked the beginning of forest administration in India to the end of the British rule in 1947. This book is based on his Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Dibrugarh University under the able guidance of Professor S. D. Goswami of the Department of History of the same university.

The word 'forest' is derived from the Latin root *forist* meaning, 'out of doors'. Etymologically it means 'a large uncultivable tract of land covered with trees and underwood'. In the Indian Forest Records [New Series, Vol. 2(1), 1936], forest is defined as "an area set aside for the production of timber and other forest produce or maintained under woody vegetation for certain indirect benefits which it provides, e.g., climatic or protective". In Ecology, it signifies, "a complex organism composed of distinct biological units called forest communities that have come into being by the continuous action, reaction and co-action of a variety of organisms with the complex function of the habitat that themselves change both in space and time" (G.S. Puri, *Indian Forest Ecology*, 1960, p.1). Forest is, therefore, not an artificial aggregation of trees and plants planted by man, but developed and arranged naturally following certain definite biological laws.

In the distant past, man's relation with forest had been very harmonious. He looked to the forest with awe and wonder which made him realize his smallness in its vastness, taught him the values of greatness and instilled into his heart the sense of beauty, happiness and harmony. In India, there are still millions who worship the big trees as dwelling place of certain deities. Felling of big trees is still a taboo in some countryside. If one does it, he is to perform certain rituals and plant at least three seedlings of the kind before destroying the old one. Indian sages meditated and had their hermitages in the forest. In the *vanaprasthasrama*, the third of the four stages of his life, an Aryan led the life of a forest hermit. Forest was an indispensable part of man's life, which provided him food and shelter and also served as a teacher. When the states developed, forest provided materials for defence, for building boats, forts, etc. and animals like elephants for military strength. At all times in the past, there had been a deep understanding between man and nature. It is for this reason that while Indian saints prayed for the peace of mankind they did it also for the birds and animals, the earth, water and the trees.

The symbiotic relation between man and forest was disrupted first in England since the Enlightenment, which gradually spread to all parts of their Empire and by about 1860, England had emerged as the world leader of deforestation devastating its own wood and those of Ireland, South Africa, and North Eastern United States to draw timber for ship-building, iron smelting and farming. Thereafter the British turned their attention to the 'virgin' resources of India, as the Indian forests were called by them and where meanwhile they consolidated their imperial hold. The basic aim of their policy in this country was commercialization of the forest produce so as to earn optimum revenue, even though it meant wanton destruction of forest wealth and serious ecological imbalance. This was more visible in the case of Assam than in other parts of India.

When the British took possession of Assam, the province had throughout 'six-eighth' or seven-eighth of its extent covered with forest'. This had happened as a result of the prolonged internal disturbances started in 1769, followed by the repeated

Burmese invasions (1817-1821) in course of which, the population of Assam got reduced to more than one-half and large tracts of cultivable lands became covered with jungle. During the days of the Ahoms and earlier to that, there were no forest laws in Assam in the strict sense of the term, and the state's role was limited to collecting revenue from a few items, like ivory and Agar wood. Men were collecting from the forest freely whatever they needed to sustain their life and shelter like bamboo, wood, cane, honey, nutritious and medicinal herbs and roots. There were officers called Kathkatiya Barua and Habial Barua who were in charge of forest products and forest timbers respectively. But during the days of the British, taxes came to be levied not only on major forest produce like timber but also on minor ones like lac and rubber. To add to the marketable value of the Assam forest, the British made experiments with plantation of commercially viable trees like teak, going against the geographical condition and ecological fabric of the region and violating biological laws, which met with total failure. They even considered forest as impediments to agriculture and hence hindrance to the prosperity of the Empire. Instead of taking measures for the improvement of the techniques of agriculture, they were taking steps, since the beginning of their rule, to bring the wastelands under cultivation, for which they encouraged immigration to Assam from the populous districts of Dacca, Sylhet and Mymensing of East Bengal. This had an injurious effect not only on the demographic pattern of this state but also on its forest cover leading to reduction of its extent.

Wasteland Rules were first passed on 6th March, 1838 when Major Jenkins was the Commissioner of Assam to invite the European planters to the state for opening tea gardens. Under these rules, wastelands were settled with the planters on a nominal assessment for a period of 45 years. This was revised in 1854 when wastelands were settled for 99 years and the rate of assessment was further reduced. These wastelands included substantial areas of forest and consequently many forest reserves were converted to tea gardens. In the process, exploitative operations were done not only by the government but also by non-indigenous people.

In the situation created by the alien government which exercised its full imperial control over the forests, the people who had since time immemorial been using the forests as nature's free gift were alienated from them. As outsiders in their own land they had to remain silent spectators to the felling of trees done by government personnel and others. What is more, they had to pay various taxes for using forest resources which included levies on timber called *Gorkhati*, on grazing called *Khasury*, and even on reeds called *Bankur*.

It is not that the British forest policy went on wholly unchallenged. Voices were raised against it on the floors of the Assam Legislative Council and Assembly. At the same time protests were coming against the grazing tax from different quarters. The peasant movements of the later part of the nineteenth century were also in some form agitation against the British forest policy. Environmental awareness however was yet to emerge and these concerns were mainly on economic and political grounds. The British also thought that forest resources in Assam were inexhaustible and by converting forest lands to agricultural fields and plantation, they were only creating grounds for a 'Green Revolution', although their real intention was augmentation of revenue.

What is curious to note is that there was practically no change in the forest policy even under the National Government. Deforestation had continued unabated and with greater pace and extent in view of the increase in population both by natural growth and immigration. It is only in recent years that the government has been thinking seriously over the question of environmental degradation and taking measures to ameliorate the condition, but meanwhile very serious harm has been done not only to the physical or ecological aspects of Assam, but also to its socio-economic life. During the period 1993-95, Assam had topped the list of states in respect of degradation of forest area. As a result of continuous deforestation, natural environment of the state got so drastically altered that it has brought about significant changes in its soil composition making it favourable for soil erosion. Bio-scientists have predicted that within a few years, Assam might become a heat-cum-draught

zone. This state which had once been a paradise of flora and fauna, for which it received high appreciation from the Persian chroniclers like Shihabuddin Talish and Mahmud Qazim, had meanwhile suffered extinction of a large number of species of both the groups. The Muga-silk industry for which Assam has a worldwide reputation is also facing serious threat, resulting out of deforestation. In spite of all this, forest resources still form an important source of revenue to the state and demands attention and care of all concerned for their management and development.

All these various aspects of the British forest policy in Assam have been discussed by the scholar in this book in their proper perspectives and their relation to the present context has also been examined. This is a pioneering and valuable contribution made by the scholar to the socio-economic history of modern Assam in a wide spectrum enabling the reader to understand man's relation with nature. The book will definitely be of great benefit to the students of history and of profound interest in the scholarly circle.

Dibrugarh
25th April, 2003

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PREFACE

Assam, situated in the North-Eastern part of India has always been known for her rich forest resources. The very mention of the area conjures up in our minds scenes of green verdure of the hills and plains of the country, making green in all its hues – from deep, almost darkish shade to a pale yellowish green – the primary colour of the physical appearance of the country. At the time of British occupation of the province, Assam was mostly covered with forests. After the coming of the British, the forests of Assam, which did not have wide commercial use till then, came to be regarded as a source of revenue and resource extraction, which totally revolutionised the outlook of the government and the people towards the forests. In fact, the advent of the British marks an ecological watershed in the history of Assam.

A historical assessment of the colonial forest policy and its impact is thus long overdue. It is worth mentioning the fact that the edifice of colonial forestry has been taken over by the Government of independent India as the post-independence legislation would prove. Hence a critical study of the forest policy is essential not only for knowing that aspect of India's colonial past, but also to understand the all-pervading nature of British imperialism. This book is an attempt to analyse the broad contours of the British forest policy in the context of Assam and the socio-economic as well as environmental impact that it had on the people and on the province. It is hoped that this humble endeavour will not only provide the necessary background for studies in future, but will also indirectly contribute towards a comprehensive reconstruction of Assam's colonial history. It is also hoped that this work will help all the students and teachers of the faculties who have included environment as a part of their courses of study. Last, but not the least the book might also

prove helpful to botanists, environmentalists, research-scholars, and policy-makers.

The period chosen for this work is from 1864 to 1947. This has been made considering the fact that on the 1st day of April, 1864 the first Inspector-General of Forest to the Government of India was appointed, marking the break of day for forest administration in India. On the other hand, 1947 is taken as the terminating year of this work as India became independent in that year.

The work is based mainly on primary sources consulted in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, State Archives, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, Assam State Archives, Dispur, Guwahati, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) and the Assam Secretariat Records Office, Dispur.

There are many to whom I am indebted for their help, cooperation and guidance in completing my work. I sincerely acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Shrutidev Goswami, Professor of History, Dibrugarh University for his enthusiastic and valuable supervision of my Ph.D. thesis, which forms the basis of this book. Without his unremitting encouragement and able guidance, it would not have been possible for me to complete the research in time. I must also put on record my heartfelt gratitude to the family members of Professor Goswami — *baideo*, Surabhi and Bashabi for their forbearance.

I acknowledge my heartfelt gratitude to Prof. (Mrs.) S.L. Baruah for having consented to write the foreword to this book, in spite of her very busy academic schedule.

I am extremely grateful to all the authors whose works I have extensively consulted and used to write out this book, especially to Dr. Ramchandra Guha, Madhav Gadgil and David Arnold, whom I have always regarded, and who are in fact the torchbearers of any study of this nature in India.

I take this opportunity to offer my thanks to the teachers of the Department of History, Dibrugarh University for their suggestions and words of encouragement. I am also grateful to the Dibrugarh University authorities for providing all necessary help and assistance during the period of my research. Thanks are

also due to all my teachers — Udayaditya Bharali, Anindita Dasgupta, and Lopita Nath of Cotton College, Guwahati who were always inspiring and forthcoming with their valuable suggestions.

I am thankful to the officers and staff of the National Archives of India, New Delhi, State Archives, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, the Secretariat Records Office, Dispur, Guwahati and the Assam State Archives, Dispur, Guwahati for their valuable help and cooperation at every stage of my work. I am also grateful to the officers and staff of the Cotton College Library, the Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, and last but not the least the Lakshminath Bezbarua Library, Dibrugarh University. I take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Dharmeswar Sonowal, officer-in-charge, Assam Secretariat (Records) Office, Dispur for his valuable help and cooperation.

I acknowledge my gratitude to all the members of my family and especially to my wife Alpana, and daughters Mithoo and Manya, for their constant encouragement and forbearance.

Last but not the least, I offer my sincere gratitude to Mr. A.K. Mittal, proprietor of Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, for being kind enough in taking up the publication of the work. I am also grateful to every member of the diligent staff of the Company for the care and patience with which they printed this work.

I take this opportunity to crave for the indulgence of the readers to bear with the inadvertent errors, if any, that might have remained in spite of the best efforts on our part to make this publication as free as possible from the mite of Printer's Devil. I shall remain ever grateful and obliged if the readers are kind enough to offer suggestions for improvement of this work and point out the omission and commissions, if any, so that those may be rectified in the next editions.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAR	:	Report on the Administration of Assam.
ASA	:	Assam State Archives.
ASR	:	Assam Secretariat Records.
ERFEC	:	Evidence Recorded by the Forest Enquiry Committee, Assam, 1929.
LAD	:	Assam Legislative Assembly Debates.
LCD	:	Assam Legislative Council Debates.
NAI	:	National Archives of India.
NEIHA	:	North East India History Association.
PRFA	:	Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam.
PRFEBA	:	Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
RFEC	:	Report of the Forest Enquiry Committee, Assam, 1929.
RFUER	:	Report on the Forest Utilization and Economic Research in Assam 1935-36.
u/s	:	under section.
WP	:	Working Plan.

GLOSSARY OF VERNACULAR TERMS

<i>Ali</i>	:	Road.
<i>Basti</i>	:	A small area with a small human habitation.
<i>Beel</i>	:	A large body of stagnant water caused usually by a natural depression or an abandoned course of a stream.
<i>Bund or Bundh</i>	:	A dam along the banks of rivers to prevent overflow.
<i>Bunkar</i>	:	A tax on cutting reeds.
<i>Char</i>	:	Sand banks deposited by rivers.
<i>Dao</i>	:	A long knife having a bigger blade; used mainly for cutting trees and bamboo.
<i>Doloni</i>	:	Shallow depressions covered by aquatic plants.
<i>Daffadar</i>	:	A recruiting agent.
<i>Ejaradar</i>	:	A revenue farmer.
<i>Holla</i>	:	A natural depression where water stagnates during the rainy season.
<i>Jan</i>	:	A streamlet.
<i>Jhum</i>	:	Shifting cultivation, also forest burnt and cleared for cultivation.
<i>Jhumia</i>	:	Person who does jhum cultivation.
<i>Khasury</i>	:	Grazing tax.
<i>Kutchra</i>	:	A non-durable structure usually made of mud.
<i>Mahal</i>	:	A defined locality leased out for collection of a particular forest produce.
<i>Mahaldar</i>	:	The person who takes the lease of a particular <i>mahal</i> .
<i>Mouza</i>	:	A revenue circle or a fiscal unit consisting of a number of villages.
<i>Mouzadar</i>	:	A fiscal officer in charge of a <i>Mouza</i> .
<i>Nadi</i>	:	A river.
<i>Pattah</i>	:	Land deed

- Pucca* : Masonry built structure.
Sanad : A declaration.
Tahsildar : A revenue officer.
Taungya : Plantation of forest trees along with field crop.
Zamindar : A hereditary collector of revenue.

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INTRODUCTION

Situating the History of Forests in Assam

Societal developments and changes 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. The existing societal milieu measures the ascendancy of a branch of knowledge or the relevance of it. History has that way been a subject whose importance has never seen a descent though it must be admitted that sometimes it has been tampered with and used, with bias.

History as we know has developed from chronological studies of the past to more detailed and specialised perspectives. The established historiography at one time focused only on the documented achievements and failings of the ruling dynasties and took little cognizance of what had happened in the lives and minds of common people or in the realm of nature. Later on the notion of studying and writing history from below gained wide importance and caught up with the historians and scholars. However, historians of late, especially under the influence of the Annales School of Historians have realised that to understand how societies changed over time, a historian's quest should encompass every aspect of human existence. It might be because of such a perspective that history now-a-days reflect an interdisciplinary nature which exudes an element of universality, irrespective of region, period or time.¹

Environmental History and Assam

Global environmental concerns have of late led some historians to study the environmental aspect of the past human societies. Environmental change is arguably the most pressing and potentially disastrous problem facing the global community. Pollution, global-warming, species extinction and massive disruptions of critical ecosystems have become commonplace topics.²

Environmental history is a fast developing field of historical enquiry. It may be because of the growing environmental concerns that such historical enquiry is taking place, though it must also be admitted that such concerns have led other disciplines of knowledge as well, to relate their studies with the changing environment.

Although recent improvements in the quality and quantity of data documenting environmental change have been dramatic, those who studied the problems or sought solutions to the problems (this change will generate) have until recently been physical scientists, engineers, or administrators with little or no training in the social sciences. Global climate models, fine-resolution remotely sensed data and the computer assisted manipulation of spatial information, computer simulation, to name a few, have offered sophisticated means by which environment could be seen to vary through time. Along with established techniques, such as geomorphology and chemical and physical dating, impressive arrays of scientific tools are now available with which environmental change can be traced. Although these developments have enabled researchers to ask complex questions about the relationships among elements and factors affecting and affected by climate, few efforts have been made to incorporate information either about how human beings have altered the environment or about how environmental change revised human activity.³ Changes in civilisation and culture have through time resulted in both intentional and unintentional modification of the global environment of which forests constitute the most important component.⁴

The awareness of men's dependence upon nature had a long ancestry; but the realisation of the significant role of man as the *maker and unmaker* of nature has developed only recently.⁵ Human history has been a story of *prudence and profligacy* and man's destructive role as far as his relation with the environment is concerned is quite evident today.⁶

Environmental history leads the subject closer to disciplines like economics, anthropology, art, religion, literature and geography. But one of the undoubted attractions of environmental history is its ability to draw upon the insights and techniques of several disciplines and then to combine them in novel, provocative and constructive ways.⁷ Compared to other parts of the world, environmental history in India is yet to make much headway. Probably that is why David Arnold and Ramchandra Guha, the pioneers of ecological history of India (relating to forest mainly) have remarked that though globally, environmental history may be said to have come of age in recent years, in South Asia as well as in India, it is by and large under-developed.⁸

The impact of British colonial policies and laws on their Indian Empire has always been a fertile ground, providing subjects for academic pursuits. Of late, because of increasing and aggravating environmental problems faced by the country and the world at large, academicians have turned back to study the role played by British Forest Policy in the long drawn-out process of environmental degradation. This on the other hand does not rule out a significant socio-economic impact that the forest policy had on the country. In fact, British forest policy appears to be one of their most subtle and ingenious imperial creations.

Assam, situated in the north-eastern part of India, has always been known for her natural resources. The hills and forests, besides enhancing the beauty of the land, contain valuable flora and fauna, some of which are rare in the world. In course of her historical development, Assam became part of the British Indian Empire as per the provisions of the Treaty of Yandaboo, signed on February 24, 1826. Since the passing of Assam into the sphere of British colonial rule, the province like other parts of

British India, was subjected to fulfilling the imperial interests and needs of the British empire.

With a very large land area in its charge, the Forest Department of Assam has been since its inception in the nineteenth century, one of the biggest landlords.⁹ Hence a critical study of the British forest policy is essential not only for knowing that aspect of the Assam's colonial past, but also to understand the all pervading nature of British imperialism.

Prior to the coming of the British, the forests of Assam did not serve as a very significant source of revenue. Except on a few forest products like ivory, aloes wood, etc., revenue was not collected from other sources. But, after Assam was colonised, every bit of available land was sought to be brought under imperial control for imperial gains. The development of the idea that the forests were a source of revenue and that the forest produce could be commercially exploited, changed the very outlook of the government as well as the people towards the hitherto imperially unexploited *virgin* forests of Assam. This change of outlook marked a radical departure from the prevalent opinion regarding the forests and resulted in drastic change in the overall development of Assam as the province was full of forests at the time of British occupation.¹⁰ The British forest policy that way was responsible not only for the subsequent change of forest cover in the province, but also for the number of other socio-economic changes brought about as a consequence for that imperial intervention. Thus, the establishment of the British colonial rule marked an ecological watershed in the history of Assam.

A Word on the Existing Literature

Scholarly works of research had already been done on various subjects relating to the colonial phase of the British rule. In the all India context, of late, the impact of British forest policy has been studied in various regional perspectives and researches are carried on to unravel more truths about that aspect of British colonial administration.

In Assam, however, such studies have been of a minimal nature if not non-existent. Even *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Volume V (1993) edited by Professor H.K. Barpujari contains no reference of the forest policy and administration of the British Indian Government. In spite of the importance of the forest policy of the British during the colonial period, available literature is very limited and far in between. In the all-India context, Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha's work *This Fissured Land: The Ecological History of India* (Delhi, 1992) is a pioneering work. In spite of the immense theoretical importance and other details, it contains few references on Assam. Shrutidev Goswami in his *Aspects of Revenue Administration in Assam* (Delhi, 1987) has made a significant attempt to study the importance of forest as a source of revenue for the British in Assam. But, his study, done on revenue, has not gone beyond 1874, thereby leaving ample scope for further study covering the entire period of British rule. A few forest administrators had written histories of the Forest Department. Of them, *A Short History of the Assam Forest Service 1850-1945* (Shillong, 1946) by H.P. Smith and C. Purkayastha *A Brief History of the Forest Department of Assam*, (Simla, 1898) by T.J. Campbell are useful enough, though they fall far short of any comprehensive account of the British forest policy, not to speak of its impact on the people.

Geographical Limits

Assam during the period of our study included all those areas which were included in the colonial Assam, i.e., the present states of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram besides Assam, comprising the two valleys of Brahmaputra and Barak along with the surrounding mountain ranges. All these areas thus would be within the geographical limits of Assam in the context of our work. However, it needs to be mentioned that the British forest policy probably did not penetrate all the areas. Considering the vastness of the area, we admit, it would not be possible to do justice to all the nooks and corners of the province in this study. However, the management of forest resources in

these far-flung areas could be placed within the broad contours of the British forest policy as applied to the province of Assam as a whole. That of course leaves ample scope for future research on spatial basis.

The Brahmaputra valley as a whole was better penetrated by the British imperialists than the other areas of the province. Therefore, it would be found that the effects of British forest policy and its implementation manifested itself more boldly in that area. The study, therefore, would appear to use more examples of the Brahmaputra valley area to explain the various facets of the British forest policy.

The Nature and Scope

The work is an analytical study of the British forest policy as implemented in Assam. Further, the socio-economic and ecological impact of the British forest policy in Assam also forms a part of the study. In course of the study we have found that the impact of the British forest policy was not uniformly felt in all parts of Assam. The British Forest Policy was more intensely implemented in the Brahmaputra and the Barak river valleys of the province than in the adjoining hilly areas. There were a lot of regional and even district-wise variations. We have tried to make the study as comprehensive as possible to encompass the various facets of the British forest policy basically at the macro level. It is expected that this would not only be a spade work, stimulating further works on environmental history, but will indirectly contribute towards making a comprehensive reconstruction and understanding of Assam's colonial history.

Theoretical Framework

It is rather difficult to develop a theoretical framework while studying a comparatively virgin field like the British forest policy. Theorists are not in plenty and therefore, choice is limited. Apart from the colonial critiques, which help us to understand the economic impact of colonial penetration in the

realm of forest resources, we find it difficult to find a theoretical framework to study the ecological dimensions of British Forest Policy. However, the theoretical framework expounded by the two pioneers of ecological history of India, Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha provides us with a very potent alternative.¹¹

Under the framework, a new concept of *mode of resource use* is propounded. The new framework is supposed to complement the Marxian concept of *mode of production*. As rightly pointed out by the duo, the Marxian analyses usually deal with the material, i.e., the economic infrastructure – concentrating mainly on the so called relations of production – without investigating the ecological context, i.e., the water, soil, mineral and the flora and fauna – bases on which the infrastructure of the society is embedded.¹² The scholars, both non-Marxist and Marxist, even of recent political and economic histories appear to be ignoring the ecological infrastructure of human society. Thus Gadgil and Guha elucidate,¹³

While focusing on spheres of production, such as the field and factory, most analyses of modes of production have ignored the natural contexts in which the field and factory are embedded – the contexts to which they respond, and which they in turn transform. The concept of mode of resource use extends the realm of production to include flora, fauna, water and minerals. It asks very similar questions. With respect to relations of productions, for example, it investigates the forms of property management and control, and of allocation and distribution, which govern the utilization of natural resources in different societies and historical periods. And with respect to productive forces, it analyses the varying technologies of resource exploitation, conversion and transportation that characterize different social orders.

From the long sweep of human history, therefore, under the framework evolved, four distinct modes of resource use have been identified, viz. Gathering mode (which includes shifting

cultivation); Nomadic Pastoral mode; Settled cultivation mode; and Industrial mode.

The differentiations of the various modes are based on certain distinctive characteristics such as the aspects of technology which in turn includes the sources of energy, materials used, and the knowledge base relating to resource use, the aspects of economy such as the spatial scale of resource flow and the modes of resource acquisition, the aspects of social organisation such as the size of the social group, the division of labour and mechanisms of control over access to resources, the aspects of ideology including the broad perceptions of the relationship between man and nature, as well as specific practices promoting resource conservation or destruction.¹⁴

As far as our subject matter is concerned, the colonial intervention in Assam as well as in India was a consequent product of British industrialization, which commenced with so much vigour after the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Therefore, the colonial period of Assam history can be regarded as an extension of the British industrial mode as propounded by Gadgil and Guha. That way the period of our study definitely would fall within the *industrial mode of resource use*. It should be kept in mind that industrialisation in India is mostly a post-1857 phenomenon.

However, within the paradigm of the British industrial mode, there will definitely exist certain paradigms affected by the variations in resource base as well as distance from the *metropolis*. For example, in the case of Assam, the extent and density of forest developed a peculiar sense of certitude in the minds of the British administrators that the forest resources were inexhaustible. This affected the general policy of the British towards the forests and the liberal Wasteland Grants may be viewed accordingly. Thus within the general framework of *industrial mode* as propounded by Gadgil and Guha, there would definitely be regional factorial variations that would affect the mode of forest use. Even within India, such variations of British forest policy based on local considerations are in plenty and variations in taxation patterns evince us of this fact.

Methodology

The study is basically a qualitative analysis of the British forest policy and the impact it had on the province of Assam. We have adopted an eclectic method to study and analyse the problem at hand. Thus, we have also included qualitative analyses of quantitative data.

The logic of reasoning used in the study is both inductive, i.e., from the particular to general and deductive, i.e., from the general to the particular.

The study is based mainly on the primary sources, while secondary sources are consulted wherever and whenever it is found necessary. A detailed list of the primary as well as the secondary sources is appended in the bibliography at the end of the book.

There is always the risk of getting biased while selecting the sources for reconstructing history. Ideology and prejudices have always affected history-writing. In view of this fact, and acknowledging that there can only be 'a history' and never 'the history', we have tried our best to be as objective as possible while selecting the sources and using them in the book. As already stated, the book is mostly based on primary sources in the form of contemporary official records, manuals and proceedings of the various departments housed in the State and National Archives, etc. There have been some apprehensions against historical research based on British official records. It is alleged that most historians and researchers of the North East India working on the colonial period of history are prone to develop a colonial bias.¹⁵ Probably the unquestioning acceptance of the writings of the British ethnographers as their first premise of information and perception and the use of sources which are largely colonial or official have provided the basis to such a bias.¹⁶ However, the viewpoint which regards official and colonial records as biased *per se* can be regarded to be erroneous as there are documents relating to the period which were not steeped in the so called bias. The annual Progress Reports of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam can be a case in point. In most of these reports, the management of the forest

resources by the British gets properly reflected. Probably, the absence of any significant political consideration in the process of development of the British forest policy have made the reports somewhat uncontroversial and more objective in nature. The statistics given in the reports provide a very conspicuous view of the whole situation. The British attempt to intensively and extensively exploit the forest resources of Assam is in fact depicted in these very reports. Moreover, mention may also be made of some such reports, one of which is stated below, where a critical view of the British forest policy is provided:¹⁷

For many years it has been the opinion of the majority of the inhabitants of Assam (including many officials) that the Province had limitless forests, and the tendency has been to regard them in general as a nuisance to be cleared away as rapidly as possible, in order to make room for smiling crops and orderly tea gardens. Forests were permitted to be retained only in remote corners of districts, where land for other purposes was not at the time required, with the idea in the background, that such forests should also come under the axe, at any time when land was no longer available in the rest of the district for extension of crops ... The forests of Assam are not inexhaustible...

For the purpose of our work, reports as the one mentioned above, would help a lot in formulating the perspectives of the British forest policy. Moreover, the debates that took place in the Legislative Council as well as the Legislative Assembly of Assam and proceedings thereof would provide us a clearer picture of the impact of the British Forest Policy on the province of Assam.

Therefore, in the absence of other traditional sources, we have to be largely dependent on the official records though not necessarily developing a colonial bias. For in many cases, as indeed in our case here, the actual volume of evidence yielded by common folklore, oral as well as written, rhymes, ballads, anecdotes, etc., is very rare or meagre to the point of being insignificant, compared to the size of documentation available from the so called colonial sources to develop a thesis on British forest policy.

The spelling of geographical and personal names is a problem when dealing with the history of Assam. No system of romanization is fool-proof. Moreover, political changes have produced new names that are favoured by some purist and pedants. We have followed a simple if not a satisfactory rule in the research work : the spellings and names most commonly in use in the contemporary sources have been mostly used, while at the same time the current terminology and the spellings of names are employed in other places keeping view of the fact that the matters represented do not become incomprehensible.

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4. *Ibid.*
5. Arnold, David and Guha, Ramchandra (ed.) *Nature, Culture, Imperialism : Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, p.3.
6. Gadgil, Madhav and Guha, Ramchandra, *This Fissured Land : An Ecological History of India*, pp.1-5.
7. Arnold, D., and Guha, R., *loc cit.*
8. *Ibid.* p.1. They have used the word 'adolescence' to explain the present stage in South Asia.
9. Gadgil, M., and Guha, R., *loc. cit.* In Assam, the extent of forest under the Forest Department might have been more considering the largeness of the area.
10. M'Cosh, John, *Topography of Assam*, p.36.
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13. *Ibid.* p.13.
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15. Sharma, Manorama, *Writing of History : The Colonial Bias in The Proceedings of NEIHA*, Eighteenth Session held at Agartala, Shillong 1998, pp. 54-60.
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CONCLUSION

The geographical setting of Assam has always supported a vast variety of life forms. The moist tropical climate and the overlapping mountain chains by providing diverse habitats for a large variety of life-forms have contributed to the richness of the forest wealth of the area. When Assam was colonised by the British, the province, coupled with a sparse population, had very large areas covered with forests. Early British travellers had mentioned of the extensive wastelands (which included forests) which they saw in Assam during the early part of their stay in the country.

Before the establishment of British rule, there was limited use of forest resources in Assam. There were practically no proper forest laws and the state's role was limited to the collection of revenue from a few forest products. Forests became a resource to which the colonial policy of revenue extraction and revenue maximisation got extended to after the advent of the British rule. With that end in view, the British forest policy was formulated and laws and regulations were enacted to give legitimacy to the exploitative operations. Under the British administration, hegemony of the state was more strongly established over the vast wastelands of Assam, which contained large areas of forests.

The British forest policy was primarily formulated to earn as much revenue as possible even at the cost of wanton destruction of the forest wealth. The regenerative exercises were also done with a commercial mindset. Thus, the tree plantations that were

started by the British forest administration favoured the growth of a few commercially viable species of trees neglecting the ecological context of Assam, which is well known for the endemic flora.

Taxes were levied increasingly on a number of forest products which consisted of both major forest produce like timber and minor forest produce like lac, rubber, elephants, etc. Experiments to find out the commercial value of the trees were carried on extensively. The colonial economy however made the forest produce of Assam a part of the world market. The woods from Assam got international exposure under the British administration. Way back in 1877-78, a collection of 78 specimens of wood from Assam was forwarded to the Inspector General of Forests for the Paris Exhibition and other purposes. With the appointment of a Forest Utilization Officer from 1st July, 1935 we find a significant increase in experimental activities to augment the commercial value of the forest products of Assam. Commercialisation of the forest resources was a very significant fallout of the British forest policy.

Ironically, the British forest policy attached more importance to agriculture over preservation of the forest resources. It was because the forests were considered as an obstruction to agriculture rather than otherwise and consequently a hindrance to the prosperity of the Empire. It was in fact an all-India policy, as according to the Old Forest Policy, 1894, it was stated :¹

...wherever an effective demand for cultivable land exists and can only be supplied from forest area, the land should ordinarily be relinquished without hesitation; and if this principle applies to the valuable class of forests under consideration, it applies *a fortiori* to the less valuable classes ... When cultivation has been established, it will generally be advisable to disforest the newly-settled area.

Moreover, the British authorities from the very beginning were imbued with the idea that unless the vast tracts of wastelands were brought under cultivation, neither the resources

of the Government, nor the condition of the people could be improved.

With that end in view, as early as 1832, immigration was encouraged from the populous districts of Bengal, viz. Dacca, Tipperah and Mymensing to Assam and to such immigrants, wastelands were offered rent-free for a term of years. Assam's forests had always been put under new pressures from the influx of refugees from former East Pakistan who used to move northwards into Assam. They used to have on their side the general British assumption that settled agriculture was a far more productive and stable means of forest use. At the same time, agricultural methods remained more extensive than intensive thereby requiring more land for more food. Therefore, forest cover in Assam continued to shrink in face of demographic changes and extension of agriculture.

The Wasteland Grants of the British was another very important measure through which the vast tracts of wastelands, which contained a lot of forests in the province, were sought to be made revenue-bearing areas. After tea cultivation (plantations) started in Assam, the grant of wastelands was done on very liberal terms. As there were no inducements for the applicants to limit their applications to the area actually required by them for tea plantation, substantial areas of forests over and above the actual requirements were alienated by the government for tea plantations. Thus it is found that the Forest Department therefore always used to concede to the agricultural or the planters' interests.

Thus, land, which was once used free by the peasants, was taken over by the British and subjected to total imperial control and use. British rule in Assam should not be viewed in isolation, and like other Western empires elsewhere in the developing world, should be perceived as an elaborate system of resource extraction and allocation of the nature's bounty. However, it should be remembered that the system of natural resource management in Assam was by no means monolithic or unchanging, nor did the British exclusively control it. Mention may be made of the significant role played by the non-

indigenous people in the exploitative operations carried out in the forests of Assam.

However, it should be mentioned that there were reactions to the British forest policy at various levels in Assam. The debates that took place in the Assam Legislative Council and the Assam Legislative Assembly confirm the importance that the leaders of Assam gave to the British forest policy. There were, however, no environmental critics as the main concern shown was economic and political. The numerous instances of forest fires, which the British administrators reported to have been done with 'malicious' intent by the natives, may also be interpreted as a symbol of protest against the British forest policy. The grazing tax was vehemently opposed in the various forums of Assam.

There were some sections of people in Assam, who worked with the British forest administrators to exploit the forest resources. Even a person of the stature of Manick Chandra Barooah, so very well known for his patriotic services towards Assam, indulged in timber trade. Again, the concerns were economic rather than environmental.

One of the most longstanding effects of the British forest policy was that, it introduced the element of exclusion even to the erstwhile communally owned lands of the province, if they were found to be of any imperial use. The traditional relationship between the people and the forests in Assam saw a paradigm shift as the proposition of reserving forest areas gave rise to the feeling of separation beyond the fenced boundaries. Forests were understood by the British policy makers in terms of commercially exploitable timber and therefore, it was considered necessary for the government to establish *proprietary* rights on behalf of those (contractors, etc.) who could exploit them.²

That the policy of exclusion was erroneous for the forests in the long run is proved by the latest forest policy promulgated by the Government of India in 1988. Therein it has been stated that "The holders of customary rights and concessions in forest areas should be motivated to identify themselves with the protection and development of forest from which they derive benefit. The rights and concessions from forests should primarily be for the *bona fide* use of the communities living within and around forest

areas, especially the tribals.”³ Therefore, the government now-a-days advocate *Joint Forest Management* in place of the exclusionist policy.

However, the British forest policy should be viewed from the then prevailing subjective and objective conditions. It should be noted that the extensive forest areas of Assam had made the earlier British administrators feel, with a large degree of certitude that, there would be an unending supply of forest produce. Ecological concerns definitely got neglected under those circumstances. The British forest policy was formulated under conditions of plenty of a resource, which was in fact not inexhaustible. Thus, if the forest policy as formulated by the British is continuously followed without change, scarcity of the resource will eventually develop. According to the most popular definition of sustainable development, ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.⁴ This paradigm of sustainable development incorporates environmental sustainability on the one hand and economic sustainability on the other. Viewed from the angle of sustainable development, it is rather difficult to completely justify the British forest policy.

Large scale degradation of forest wealth in Assam as well as the North-East has posed a serious threat to the environment. According to the latest Annual Report of the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India, Assam has topped the list of states in respect of degradation of forest cover during the period from 1993 to 1995.⁵ This depletion of forest cover is not a new phenomenon; and the British forest policy also had contributed to such a development.

Increasing population had always played a role in depletion of forests. In Assam, large scale immigration of population coupled with the natural increase of the indigenous population have led to population explosion, thereby putting tremendous pressure on the forests. The United Nations Population Fund in its study *Population and Forests : A Report of India, 2000* states that growing population, changing lifestyle patterns as well as poverty threaten forests.

The proprietary right established by the British over the forests was later taken over by the Government of independent India. The nexus which had developed during the colonial period between the Forest Department the contractors and the Government survived and exploitation of the forests of Assam went on as in the colonial period. For several decades following the independence of the country, the British Forest Policy, like many other colonial policies was not changed to suit the needs of an independent country or to address to the environmental needs.

It is quite obvious that the unrestricted deforestation of the forest areas in Assam must have led to significant change in the soil composition of the province. The denudation and weathering of exposed soil is a well-known fact. At the same time, flood, which was a common phenomenon in Assam might have led to more transportation and deposition of soil. That forests produce climatic effects is also an acknowledged fact. In the ultimate analysis, it can be aptly stated that, after the introduction of British rule in Assam, the natural environment of the province got drastically altered under the impact of their forest policy and it led to a marked change in the area and composition (both flora and fauna) of the forests of Assam.

Be that as it may, the British forest policy should not be assessed only from the present-day standpoint of the environmentalists. When the British had established their rule in Assam, there were extensive forest areas in the province. The British were in Assam as an imperial economic force. Economic exploitation under that system was a state enterprise as states took the initiative as well as the lead in the whole process entailing exploitation. The expanding hegemony of such colonial regimes led to establishment of imperial control over the forests. However, it must be mentioned that the British were faced with a peculiar problem of making the vast forests of Assam productive from the imperial point of view. Revenue maximisation being the predominant objective, the forests were used accordingly. Needless to say that under a well-planned and regulated system, the forests of the province could have been better managed.

As already stated, there was no drastic change in the British Forest Policy in the post-independence period. The policy of the British is continued to be followed by the Government of India so far as the exploitation and management of forests are concerned. Forest is still regarded as an important source of revenue for the government. There is no attempt made by the Government of India as well as of Assam to put the forests to any alternative way of earning. No concrete step is taken so far to develop eco-tourism. There was at the same time no bar put to limit the increase in the number of saw-mills until late 1980s. Artificial regeneration is sought to be made through schemes like social forestry which are more often not in tune with the ecological needs of the state. There was no hint of a biosphere reserve until 1989. The prevalent outlook of the British administration towards the forest of Assam as an inexhaustible resource dominates the policy of the forest administrators of Assam. Thus with the help of hindsight we may safely state that the British alone were not to be blamed for the depletion of forests of Assam, as the independent India's government too is found to be merely copying the policy of its predecessors, thereby giving it a semblance of legitimacy.

The forests of Assam are still regarded as a revenue earning source by the government. It is only lately, because of the international reaction to environmental degradation, that the governments have waken up to address the problem. Bio-scientists have now warned that Assam will turn into a severe heat-cum-drought zone in the early part of the new millenium if corrective steps are not taken forthwith.⁶ According to estimates available with the Forest Department not less than 1,800 sq. km. of forest cover in Assam have been thoroughly denuded during the period 1987-99. The denuded forest areas have fast turned into fallow lands. There has been serious conflicts among the various indigenous tribes and illegal migrants from Bangladesh to encroach on forests, – reserved or otherwise.

Public awareness campaign has been launched to educate the people about forest and the environment. Voluntary and non-governmental organisations have been playing a vital role in this regard. Yet much remains to be done so far as introduction of

environment as a subject in the curriculum of the schools and colleges is concerned.

Environmental accountability can be made mandatory for the accounting systems of the industries. Environmental impact assessment should be made mandatory and strictly and meticulously carried out for any industry sought to be newly established in Assam. Forest based industries should not be encouraged. Advanced agricultural methods to increase yield per acre of land should be adopted so that more food would not always mean more land under the plough.

The forest policy of India as well as of Assam is likely to change soon with the introduction of a uniform law to conserve and develop forest. In culmination of the effort begun in 1989, the Union Environment Ministry is finalising a note for the cabinet for amending the Indian Forest Act, 1927, shifting the emphasis from commerce, i.e., forests managed for production to forests managed for ecological conservation.⁷ The changes would empower the Central Government to direct states on how to protect and improve forests. If need be, it would also direct states to constitute a reserved or protected forest within a prescribed time frame. Among the amendments, there is a suggestion for controls on shifting cultivation to restore the affected areas as well as for giving the village communities greater say in managing forests to meet their requirements – a significant change from the colonial law which alienated communities. Moreover, tree plantation on private land will be actively encouraged; a landowner who does this could register himself as a tree grower. More importantly, plantation forests would not be included in agricultural land holding for the purpose of ceiling laws. State governments will be empowered to relax curbs, especially on felling of trees and transport of certain species from private land, to encourage social and farm forestry. There is also suggestion of declaring minimum support price for certain forest produce in order to save the villagers from exploitation. Encroachment would become a non-bailable offence under the proposed laws. The changes sought to be incorporated in the new forest law, in the process, point out several deficiencies inherent in the British forest laws.

Thus, the British forest policy forms a very vital component of the history of colonial period in Assam. It had significant socio-economic and environmental impact on the history of the province. Apart from being one of the most subtle and insidious of the imperial policies, the British Forest Policy marks an epoch in the ecological history of Assam.

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