

INSIGHTS FROM THE FOREST VILLAGES IN ASSAM: DISCOURSES ON THE HISTORY, CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The history of Assam's forests has been intertwined with the intricate ethnic and cultural patterns of the state. The remote high hills and adjacent regions are homes to a wide variety of tribal groups. Amidst the rich natural landscape of the region, the discourse on the historical formation of the forest villages in Assam is an interesting subject. The forest villages embody a unique cultural landscape with regard to the history of human-forest interactions. Moreover, the region's unique history of land alienation among the indigenous peasants and their migration into the forest areas form an important part of the discourse on human-forest interface. However, the contemporary park management reveals intense conflict between the state-initiated conservation policies and the livelihood necessities of the communities. The crisis of conservation stems mainly from the exclusionary and unilateral nature of the present conservation regime that has failed to recognise the historical dimensions of people-landscape ties and the socio-cultural specificities.

Keywords: Forest, Culture, Communities, Remote, Livelihood, Landscape

I. INTRODUCTION

Assam, the north-eastern state of India represents a diverse man-forest interface, embedded in its unique ecological and social history. The relationship between people, land and forest are indeed an important part of the discourses throughout different historical periods. Moreover, the region has its own history of land alienation among the indigenous population both during the colonial and post-colonial periods. During the medieval times, though land was apparently abundant in the Assam valley, it was rather limited for the surplus-yielding wet rice cultivation. It necessitated a major drive by the semi-tribal Ahom state to reclaim agricultural land from the existing wastelands and forests. Under the corvee labour (called *paiks*) system of the Ahom state, each able-bodied peasant-subject was given some agricultural land for his service toward the state. (Guha 1991). Further, the peasants could supplement their subsistence with various

products from forests and wastelands which served as village commons relatively free from state interventions.

However, the landscape of Assam valley underwent a drastic change with the British colonial intrusion in the early part of the nineteenth century. With the introduction of the tea plantations in the upper and central Assam in mid-nineteenth century, a different kind of situation was unfolding. The process of transformation of the 'jungles' and 'forests' to (tea) 'gardens' usurped into a large quantity of village commons or community forest lands from 1830s to 1870s. The community property resources (CPRs) such as forests, forest products, rivulets, grazing lands, etc were brought under the control of the colonial administration posing a serious challenge to the future expansion of the Assamese peasant economy as the available land was shrinking very fast (Sharma 2001). The lands once freely used by the local peasants were brought under total control of the department. Thus, the communally owned lands of the locals were encroached upon (Handique, 2004: 106-107).

Further, under the Bengal Forest Act, 1865, forests of Assam were classified into two major categories: the Reserved Forests and Protected Forests. In the former, the Forest Department enjoyed the entire responsibility of administration and control over the forests and its products. While in the later category, control and rights of the department were confined to specific reserved trees. The main interest behind the reservation of forests was to secure monopoly control over the commercial value of the forests (Saikia 2011 a: 69-70). The Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 took care to make room for commercial exploitation of forests. Initially lands lying fallow or without any commercially productive timber were deforested or disposed off to meet the requirement of the tea companies. The major beneficiaries of the deforestation were the colonial railway companies and the tea planters (Ibid). A new category of forests known as the Unclassed State Forests (USFs) was created under the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 which came to incorporate the Open Forests. Constituted mainly of grassland forests, the areas under USFs have historically been targets for land reclamation for agriculture (Ibid). But the colonial regime kept on arbitrarily bringing vast amount land under this category without any consideration for the history of land use in the region so that at the time of independence the volumes of such forests far exceeded the Reserved Forests.

II. AGRICULTURE VERSUS FOREST LAND

Interestingly, it is the colonial administration itself which started the process of settling marginal peasants in the forest areas and they were allowed to practice agriculture therein in exchange of their labour in collecting forest resources, mainly timbers, and other activities on behalf of the colonial Forest Department. Since the early twentieth century the colonial regime saw the possibility of opening up the swampy wastelands of Assam for jute cultivation. The wastelands

of central and lower Assam were opened up for the poor, landless peasantry from the erstwhile East Bengal. Furthermore, the colonial regime adopted the policy of opening up more wastelands for agricultural production with a view to generating more revenue (Sharma, 2001: 4793).

The wastelands of central and lower Assam were opened up for the poor peasants from the erstwhile East Bengal as the local peasantry did not practice jute cultivation. The colonial regime also adopted the policy of opening up more wastelands for agricultural production with a view to generating more revenue. For this too, it encouraged the immigration of peasants, mostly Muslims, from East Bengal. As a result, immigration to Assam multiplied and vast areas of forest and wasteland of Assam became immigrant habitats (Sharma 2001: 4793).

Tucker in this regard laments, "(E)ven more so than in most parts of India, the history of Assam's forests has been intertwined with the intricate ethnic and cultural patterns of the state. The remote high hills of Assam and adjacent regions are homes to a wide variety of tribal groups, whose subsistence has been based primarily on shifting agriculture. Until recently tribal populations were thin enough that they presented no fatal threat to the mixed forests, it left to themselves. But the Brahmaputra lowlands supported a much denser and rapidly growing, culturally different populace of Hindu rice farmer" (2012: 170). Further he writes, "(I)n the twentieth century, Assam had the fastest growing population of any state in India: from 3.3 million in the 1901 census to 15 million in 1971, nearly all of the growth before 1947 occurring in the lower areas of settled agriculture...Most challenging of all, downriver in Bangladesh lies one of the densest rural populations in the world. By the late nineteenth century Bengali peasants, most of them Muslim, began surging upriver into the fertile Assamese forest fringe. Even before World War I, one cause of depletion of Assam's vegetation was the steady encroachment of these immigrant peasants on the forest lands of lower Assam" (2012: 171).

All these had seriously restricted the access of the local peasantry, tribal and non-tribal, to the land resources. Besides, the two great earthquakes of 1897 and 1950 also had a cataclysmic effect on the topography of Assam (Sharma 2010). The 1950-earthquake caused an alarming rise in the Brahmaputra river bed which in turn resulted in more flood and erosion and land alienation among the indigenous peasantry, especially in upper Assam. Post-1950 period witnessed large-scale migration of upper Assam peasantry in search of agricultural. The available wastelands including forest reserves, grazing land, etc became their main target (Ibid). This flow of peasants continued as the problem of landlessness only accentuated over time with the advent of other private commercial interests as well as development projects of the state which were looking for vast land resources for different enterprises. On the other hand, in the lower and central Assam, immigrant peasants have grown exponentially creating a serious crisis of land among the local peasantry. A number of these risings have been witnessed among the forest villagers and the new

settlers in the forest lands. The mainstay of their mobilisation has been reclamation of forest land and tenurial rights on the land so reclaimed (Sharma 2010).

III. UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF FOREST VILLAGES

The creation of FVs was a part of the colonial forest management strategy. The colonial Forest Department had to meet the demand of large-scale timber extractions from the forests for railway expansion and had to accumulate more revenue to support the British imperial government. For this, a stable supply of labour was required to exploit the forest resources, mainly timbers (Saikia 2011 a, Sarma 2012). In the early phase of forest exploitation, supply of labour was “met through the introduction of ‘*taungya*’¹ system as was earlier practiced in Burma and Malaysia...” (Sonowal 2007: 47). In India, *taungya* system “was followed mainly in the areas where the local people refused to lend their labour for government sylvicultural programmes. Initially, the forest labourers were treated as serfs by the government as they were forced to render free service for forest work for a number of days in a year as earmarked. Later, the situation changed slightly as the migrant labourers were provided homesteads and one hector of land in lieu of services rendered by them to the Forest Department. These settlements came to be known as forest villages.” (Sonowal 2007: 48).

In the early phase of the extraction of forest resources by the Colonial administration, supply of labour was “met through the introduction of *taungya* system as was earlier practiced in Burma and Malaysia...” (Sonowal 2007: 47). A similar practice exists under the name of *Kumri* in Madras and under names in other provinces (Brandis 1923: 37). In India, *taungya* system “was followed mainly in the areas where the local people refused to lend their labour for government sylvicultural programmes. Initially, the forest labourers were treated as serfs by the government as they were forced to render free service for forest work for a number a days in a year as earmarked. Eventually, the situation changed as the migrant labourers were provided one hectare of homestead land in lieu of their services rendered by them to the colonial Forest Department. These settlements came to be known as the Forest Villages. In the province of Assam, cultivable and of the settled *taungya* villages had never occupied large areas, it had remained confined to a limited area of operation. It was allowed primarily in places where shifting cultivation (Swidden cultivation) was wide in practice (Saikia 2011 a: 239-240).

¹ *Taungya* believed to have been developed by the British in Burma during the nineteenth century, is a system of forest management in which land is cleared and planted initially to produce food crops. Seedlings of desirable tree species are then planted on the same plot, leading in time to a harvestable stand of timber.

In Assam, extensive tracts containing valuable forests were reserved under the Bengal Forest Act, 1865. The above process of setting up *taungya* and forest villages was also undertaken in Assam for an assured supply of labour for the Forest Department. Accordingly, the rights and privileges of the forest villagers were also informed by colonial biases. Thus, according to the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891, each adult member of the forest villages was required to render 20 days of physical labour annually to the Forest Department at the prevailing local ordinary wages. This system was locally known as '*begar*'. In return for their work, the forest villagers were allowed to collect thatch, firewood, cane, etc. from the forest. Apart from this, they were also allowed to collect sufficient timber to build and maintain their houses. Further, each family was entitled for ten cartloads of fuel wood every year in return for another ten days of labour (Saikia 2011 a: 102).

The nature of *begar* services rendered by the villagers/local communities varied from region to region. In the Western Himalayan region, Tucker observes, "(W)e must not overlook the composition of the workforce for the timber harvest: which group were recruited for the labour, and how the relatively highly differentiated tasks of felling, dressing, and transporting the timber functioned. Through the nineteenth century, labour for timber operations was primarily local in origin. Peasants who owned their land, as well as the landless service castes, the Doms, traditionally were required to provide *begar*, or unpaid labour for transport and trail maintenance. They were the primary wage labour available for timber operations, and anyone who owned land would resist timber work at crucial times in the agricultural cycle" (2012: 83). It is to be mentioned that *begar* "(W)as the north Indian term for corvee labour, which had been required of all landowning peasants in lieu of money taxes. In the Kumaon hills a vast majority of the male population were landowning small peasants, living in a rather more egalitarian society than in the plains below. In a region where there were almost no motorable or all-weather roads, *begar* was demanded by the British to meet the needs of both government officials and private travellers on tour...Villagers were required to provide unpaid *begar* whenever it was demanded, regardless of the point in the annual agricultural cycle". Thus, the FD officials used the coolies, both on official tour and on holiday (Ibid: 99-100).

In this backdrop, the paper intends to highlight the specific nature of human-forest interfaces in the forest villages. Secondly, it seeks to understand the unique cultural landscape of forest villages to provide a deeper understanding of the issues to address for a more inclusive paradigm on forest management.

IV. CULTURAL AND SOCIAL LANDSCAPES OF THE FOREST VILLAGES

It is in this context, a distinction must be made between the forest dwelling communities and forest villages in Assam with those located in other parts of the country. The forest villages in

Assam own peculiar features in terms of their history of formation, the settlers and their patterns of livelihood. As Lele observes, "Socially, in India, the livelihoods of 100-200 million people are intertwined directly with forests. These people live in close proximity to forests, and most of them have a long tradition of forest use, and therefore of a sense of customary rights and of how a forest should be. Indeed, in many tribal communities, there was no simple separation between 'forests' and 'non-forests': forests are completely integrated into their systems of shifting cultivation. And even settled agriculturalists think of pastures, woodlots and dense forests as all part of their 'jungle'..." (2011: 96).

In contrast, the forest villages in Assam represent different reality of human-forest interface. The forest village in Assam does not mean any human settlements formed deep inside the forests. These are mainly found in the buffer areas (vicinities) of the forests with vast agricultural lands, acting as life-supporting system for the dwellers. These villages consist of tribal as well as non-tribal populations. It is pertinent to mention that the socio-economic systems of these tribal and non-tribal forest villages hardly present any worthwhile differences. The dominant activities of both tribal and non-tribal forest villagers revolve around agriculture and their dependence on forests are only supplementary limited to collection of firewood (Sarma 2012; Sharma and Sarma 2014). The agricultural activities, primarily cultivation of rice, however, have become increasingly hazardous in some of the forest villages in the state, since crop raids by wild elephants are regular occurrences. Man-elephant conflicts have also intensified over the years and incidences of elephant attacks on villagers are common (Sarma 2012).

It is observed that the women in forest villages play a significant role in the sustenance of their families. Except using the plough for tilling the land, a woman does everything in the agricultural field. However, they never go out to the jungle to collect firewood, which is always done by the male members of the household. This is in contrast to the fact that in most protected areas in other parts of the country, a majority of the forest produce collectors are women who often face the ire of the forest officials and harassment by the forest guards (Prasad 2008: 228). This applies to other forest villages of the state as well. It is clear from the above that the forest villagers (both tribals and non-tribals) are primarily agriculturists with minimal dependence on forest products such as non-timber forest produces (NTFPs).

V. CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

In Assam, the question of local peasants' migration into the forest areas and the creation of agrarian space for livelihoods are the two most critical issues. With the elapse of time, growing population coupled with their unsustainable agrarian practices has emerged as threats to the existence of forests. However, state initiated conservation programmes have further accentuated

the problem. Since, state's conservation strategies have failed to reconcile livelihood needs of the forest dwellers, pressure on forest lands for agriculture is mounting.

The distinctive features of the forest villages in Assam made it a concern over the issues of land rights in the forestland. Like other parts of India, the promulgation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, popularly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 created new possibilities of entitlements on their land and forest among the forest dwelling communities. The implementation of the FRA 2006 has created an atmosphere of uncertainties in the state. Some of the crucial provisions in the Act do not match with the ground realities of the forest villages. For example, the provisions for rights over the land occupied, especially for the 'Other Traditional Forest Dwellers' (OTFD) provided in the Act do not mesh with the ground realities (Sharma and Sarma 2104). Section 2(o) of the Act defines OTFD as any member or community who has for at least three generations prior to December 13, 2005, primarily resided in and depended on the forest or forest land for *bona fide* livelihood needs (Upadhyay, 2009:31). Perhaps, this definition holds true for a large number of tribal forest-dwellers who have been residing in most protected areas of the country for generations. Most of them are 'gatherers' although agriculture is also practiced. They have a long tradition of forest use for sustenance (Sharma and Sarma 2014).

However, the definition for the OTFD does not hold true for the forest-dwellers residing in forest areas in the Assam. The local realities are at variance with this definition. The villagers cannot be termed as 'traditional dwellers' because they are neither the traditional inhabitants of forests nor they are dependent on forests for their day-to-day sustenance. In most cases, only circumstances and natural calamities, as already discussed earlier, had forced many indigenous poor peasants to move into the forest areas in search of land and livelihood (Sharma and Sarma 2014; Sarma 2012). They do not have any explicit history of forest protection and of cultural and religious ties with the sacred groves (Bose 2009). In other words, human-forest interface has its own regional specificities and is at variance with the all-India perspective.

It is to be mentioned that in most forest villages across Assam, the implementation of the FRA 2006 created many problems, especially in providing land rights to the non-tribal forest villagers. In the forest villages in the sixth scheduled area, the process was smooth unlike such non-tribal villages. For example, in Nameri National Park, the implementation of the FRA 2006 was undertaken in December 2008. Implementation of the Act has created uncertainties, for instance, the use of the phrase the 'other traditional forest dwellers' (OTFD) in the Act is a problematic one, especially in the context of Assam. Section 2 (o) of the Act defines OTFD as any member or community who has primarily resided in and depended on the forest or forest land for *bona fide* livelihood needs (Upadhyay, 2009: 31). This definition holds true for a large number of tribal

forest-dwellers in residing most of the PAs in India for ages. In Assam, as already discussed, the forest dwellers are settled agriculturalists not gatherers and they do not depend on forests for sustenance (Sharma and Sarma 2014).²

This definition of the OTFD shrinks the scope of broader definition and states that the OTFDs are those who have been residing in forest land for 75 years. Thus, it excludes a large number of OTFDs through its constrictive definition. In Nameri National Park, the process of recognising the rights over the occupied land by the forest villagers started with enthusiasm, they could also submit their claims. Unfortunately, their rights over the land were not recognised on the ground that they have not yet completed 75 years of occupation (Sharma and Sarma 2014). This happened not only in Nameri, but also in many reserves of the state where there are non-tribal forest dwellers. However, my own fieldwork in the forest villages located in the buffer areas of the Nameri National Park and the prevailing oral history of the area suggests that the history of human settlement therein is more than 75 years (Ibid).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary experiences show that there is an urgent need to incorporate the local historical and livelihood specificities into the broader policy perspective. The case of Assam thus represents a unique ecological history. The participation of the forest villagers in conservation programmes has to be defined in terms of issues that squarely address livelihoods and tenurial securities. It is also critically important for the government and the Forest Department to create alternative livelihood opportunities for the forest villagers beyond agriculture in order to divert pressure from forest lands (Sarma 2012, Sharma and Sarma 2014).

In this context, it is to be noted that Assam has its own specificities in terms of the history of man-forest interface, the formation of human settlements in the forest areas and so on. Any Act would succeed in Assam, if the regional specificities are taken in consideration (Sarma 2012). A historian, in this regard comments, "... (T)he Act nowhere suggests that the term 'forest-dweller' is equivalent to 'banavasi' in the classical anthropological sense. The legal meaning as spelled out in the Act draws our attention to the historically and anthropologically relevant subjects of 'habitat' and 'dependence'. These notions are widely explained keeping in mind the key features of the eastern and northern Indian historical transition. Essentially such explanations skip the nuances of historical transition of societies in Assam. Similarly, no efforts have been made in public or academic debates to explain these issues in the context of Assam" (Saikia, 2011 b).

² For details refer to Sharma and Sarma. 2014. "Issues of Conservation and Livelihood in a Forest Village in Assam". *International Journal of Rural Management*. Sage Publications. 10(1). Pp. 47-68.

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