Decolonising Forest Geographies: Explorations of Colonial and Post-colonial North-East India

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Abstract

This thesis is a colonial and post-colonial study of forest policies in North-East India (NEI) that constituted Assam during the colonial period and the seven states of NEI in the post-colonial period. Focussed on the policies peculiar to the region during the colonial period, it sought to explore policies during the post-colonial period in relation to timber ban and Forest Rights Act. In doing so, this thesis perceives these policies through decolonial lens. Decolonial in this study refers to the act of the researcher in studying the forest policies and prioritisation the tribal indigenous perspectives on forest and their traditional governance system of land and forests.

This research has deployed archival and ethnographic research. Archival materials from the British Library, London, National Archives of India (NAI) and Assam State Archives (ASA) have informed the study about the colonial stereotyping of forest policies that continued until the contemporary period and policies peculiar to the region. Ethnographic work has been conducted in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest in the state of Meghalaya, which are Ethnographic materials feed straight into decolonising attempts of the forest villagers against the colonial and post-colonial forest policies that are silent in the archival records. By incorporating Quijano (1991), Mignolo's (2007), Mignolo (2011), Radcliffe's (2022) in decolonisation of forest- based identity and practices of the traditional forest users and dwellers.

This study reveals that through forest practices and place making the forest dwellers have been decolonising forest policies since the colonial period. The other way of decolonising is in the form of resistance against the forest policies. In the process of establishment of colonial Village Forests, the villagers made sense of the place by carrying the name of the place to the new Village Forests. Despite coloniality of spaces, cultures and forest governance, it has been found that through interweaving of tribal animist and Christian beliefs, the forest dwellers have been conserving forests that are considered 'forbidden' and 'sacred'. The methods of resistance deployed by the forest-dependent communities during colonial and post-colonial periods bring to light that coloniality of power and governance over forests was unable to create absolute dominion over forest-related practices of the people. It suggests that people have been adopting three modes of resistance against the forest policies that include open, institutional and subtle

forms of resistance. The study of resistance in Baghmara Reserved Forest has produced resistant discourses of the forest villagers' attempts to resist site-specific forest laws, which are absent in institutionalised archives from the colonial period.

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This four-year long PhD study has been a journey filled with learning and exploring concepts related to decolonial scholarship and forest-based discourses. I am extremely thankful and humbled to have received continuous support from my supervisors, the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham, Asian Research Institute, family members and relatives for their support in making in this study successful.

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List of Vernacular Terms

A·chik sam: A local medicine specific to Garo tribe prepared from traditionally identified plants and other organic substances.

A·si raka: A designated forested site that is kept away from human interference and activities that is believed to a home to deities. These deities are known to be 'owners' of the forests among Garos.

A·king: A land under the management of nokma or headman in the Garo Hills region.

Araa: A traditional method of removing the bark of tree stumps to let the tree die.

Anna: Anna is a monetary system in which 16 annas equal to one rupee.

Bigha: It is a traditional unit of measurement of area of a land, commonly used in India. There is no standard measurement for bigha. Roughly 1 bigha equals 17452 Square Feet.

Beel: It is a lake-like wetland formed by inundation of low-lying lands during flooding when water gets trapped even after the flood waters recede. It is originally a Bengali and Assamese term that is also widely used by the Garos.

Begar: Unpaid Labour practised during the colonial period.

Izarah: Izarah is a method of revenue assessment and collection that became popular in the 18^{th} century. When peasants lacked the means to cultivate their lands due to calamity, the lands were farmed out on izarah to a third party.

Jungle: An area of land overgrown with dense forest and tangled vegetation, typically in the tropics.

Jereti: It is a Garo term specific to Baghmara Village Forests that refers to temporary huts that are constructed to farm in the jhum plots. These are constructed in close proximity to the jhum sites.

Jhum: It is a term for Shifting Agriculture in which forested tracts are cleared and burned and cultivated for a limited period. It is then abandoned for a number of years to allow regeneration of vegetation and soil.

Jumang sia: A manifestation of consequences (both past and present) of one's deed through dreams.

Kokcheng: A traditional basket used by the Garos that is weaved from bamboo stripes.

Kukri: A knife that has a distinct recurve in its blade. It serves multiple purposes as a military weapon and also as a regular cutting tool throughout most of South Asia.

Lyngdoh; A residential authority in the Khasi Hills.

Matta: A traditional digging stick used by the Garos in jhum plots.

Mauza: It is a locality in a district. In Assam, several villages typically form a single mauza.

Mauzadar: A mauzadar was incharge of collecting revenue according to the land revenue Policy Resolution of 1870.

Nisfhirajdar: The nisfkhirajdars were those settlement holders who farmed the nisfkhiraj or the half-revenue paying estates or lands.

Nokma: Nokma is widely referred to as village headman. In this study, a Nokma is portrayed as owners of a'king lands under their management and control.

Nokkrom: A daughter who inherits the ancestral property of the family in a matrilineal society of the Garos.

Patta: It is a type of land deed issued by the government to an individual or organisation. The term is used in India and certain other parts of South Asia.

Pargana: It is a group of villages or a subdivision of a district in India.

Pucca houses: These refer to houses or dwellings that are designed to solid or permanent. This term is applied to housing in South Asia built of substantial materials such as stone, brick, cement, concrete or timber.

Ryat or Ryot: Ryot means a person, other than a planter, who holds or cultivate land in the maize in respect of which the permit is issued.

Siem: An indigenous Khasi king or leader is called a Siem.

Sirdar: A Sirdar is a person of high rank such as a hereditary noble especially in India. As per the petition, a Sirdar is described as a government servant paid by commission.

So·ka: It is a Garo term for cane, which is scientifically known as Calamus Viminalis.

Songsarek: A tribal indigenous religious practice among the Garos. Songsareks workship the forces of nature.

Taungya: The taungya system is a system during the colonial period where the labourers were given some amount of land to cultivate in lieu of their labour in forest-related work.

Tehsil: It is a local unit of administrative division

Zamindar: A large landowner with proprietary rights; they reserved the right to collect tax on behalf of imperial courts or for military purposes.

List of Abbreviations

ACF:	Assistant Conservator of Forest
ADC:	Autonomous District Council
ASA:	Assam State Archives
BL:	British Library
BSF:	Border Security Force
CoF:	Conservator of Forests
CFM:	Community Forest Management
DFO:	Divisional Forest Officer
FED:	Forest and Environment Department
FRA:	Forest Rights Act
FSI:	Forest Survey of India
GCL:	Garo Customary Law
GHADC:	Garo Hills Autonomous District Council
GoI:	Government of India
GoM:	Government of Meghalaya
GSU:	Garo Students' Union
ILP:	Inner Line Permit
JFM:	Joint Forest Management
LDA:	Lower Divisional Assistant
LP:	Lower Primary
MoTA:	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
MGNREGS:	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
NAI:	National Archives of India
NEI:	North-East India
NGO:	Non-Government Organisation
ONGC:	Oil and Natural Gas Commission
OTFD:	Other Traditional Forest Dwellers
PWD:	Public Works Department
SC:	Scheduled Caste
ST:	Scheduled Tribe

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Background

Having grown up in Tura, located in the state of Meghalaya in North-East India (NEI), the geographies of this thesis were both known and unknown to me. The landscape, its people, policies, traditions and language are something I grew up with. While I am an insider to the Village Forests of South Garo Hills district, located in the South Asian borderlands where I conducted my fieldwork, my higher education journey outside NEI and India places me as an outsider. Given my ambiguous positionality to the research, governing and working of the land and the lived experiences of those living this landscape was something I had not researched. Conducting this research in a British university has enabled me to view this work not just through the lens of decolonialisation, but as an act of it. An act of decolonisation in this study refers to my research activities of undertaking ethnographic work in the remote Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest. The research activities of immersing in the socio-cultural realm of the forest villagers, engaging in interviewing and casual conversations and participating in the everyday activities of the people enabled decolonising forest geographies of the Village Forests.

Colonisation and its subsequent production of knowledge has bequeathed a one-way transfer of understanding about the previously colonised world (Eliott-Cooper, 2017). With the emergence of inter-connected world order, the production of knowledge by carried out by the Western colonisers in Western European languages during the time of colonisation (Mignolo, 2017). It led to the creation of global ranking of continents as inferior to Europe by the European global powers. The incorporation of ethnographic work alongside archival research in this thesis to study ongoing coloniality opens up space for unpacking the ways in which the people of once colonised nations have been decolonising space, policies and socio-cultural structures. Undertaking the fieldwork in the non-settler nation and writing a thesis by a white scholar would produce a different perspective of knowledge as compared to production of knowledge by a non-white scholar who has encountered in close proximity the coloniality of identity, culture and resources. The insider perspective and social connectedness of the researcher have been instrumental in producing a research outcome of this thesis. This study

having been conducted by a non-white scholar, belonging to a non-settler nation and having been born and raised in a community which the colonial government and post-colonial nation state identify as a marginalised and deprived community, is in itself an act of decolonising the coloniality of forest-dependent community that persists to exist even during the post-colonial period.

The study of interventions into rights and privileges for forest-dependent communities who are known by the categories of Scheduled Tribes (ST)[1], Adivasis, tribes or indigenous people have been gaining attention in India. These followed earlier enquiries into colonial forest administration include enquiries into nature of colonial and post-colonial forest policies (Guha, 1983; Guha and Gadgil, 1989; Sangwan, 1999; Sivaramakrishnan, 1995). There has been a generation of numerable scholarship on the implementation of contemporary forest policies across different states of India (Bose, 2013; Chandra, 2019; Das, 2019). The research in the domain of forest-driven studies is also characterised by rising interest in the study and theorisation of forest-based resistance and contestations in the global South (Guha, 1999; Saikia, 2008).

The framing of monopolised forest policies in India had its foundations during the colonial period. The post-independence forest policies were an adaptation of the colonial policies in their nature and objectives that have been depriving the forest-dependent communities of their privileges of access to forest resources (Nongbri, 1999; Poffenburger *et al.,* 2007). The monopoly of forests by the state remained one of the characteristics of the contemporary forest laws such as the timber ban of 1996 that imposed restrictions on the movement of timber from the North-East states to other parts of India (Nongbri, 1999). The recent adoption of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in 2006 by the Government of India (GoI) has produced a shift in the discourse of forest history of India (Bose, 2013; Chandra, 2019; Das, 2019) as outlined in section 2.1.3. Rising concerns about environmental issues have added importance to the study of forest-dependent communities in the Global South which is conducted here.

[1] Scheduled Tribes are officially designated groups of people and among the most disadvantaged group socio-economic groups in India as recognised in the constitution of India. For much of the period of British rule in India, they were known as the Depressed Classes.

1.2 Research Focus

The forests in India became a colonial enterprise with the establishment of systematic forest policies to regulate their use and management during the colonial period. This brought about establishment of colonial forests in the form of reserved forests, unclassed state forests and village forests (Saikia, 2011). The exercise of colonial control over forests in the form of reserved forests, unclassed state forests and village forests led to colonial construction of forest-dependent communities and people that resulted in coloniality of these communities. The system of forest policies by the British became a hindrance to the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities who relied on forests directly or indirectly for their survival and livelihood. The colonial monopoly of forests in India deprived the forest-dependent communities of the customary rights enjoyed by them since time immemorial. These privileges include agricultural access such as shifting cultivation, which was widely practised in different parts of areas inhabited by the tribal groups or what are recognised as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the constitution of independent India. The post-colonial forest policies continued the British scheme of reserving forests and the continuation of the state's monopoly over forests (Tripathi, 2016). It also continued to perceive shifting cultivation as the major cause of decline in forest cover (Nongbri, 1999). This was evident from the Forest Policy of 1952 that attempted to do away with shifting cultivation and encourage communities into plough cultivation. On top of it, developmental projects were used as means to displace tribal communities when attempts to absorb them in plough cultivation did not work (Jewitt, 1995).

Prior to the implementation of the FRA of 2006 across different states of India, a timber ban was passed by the Supreme Court of India in 1996. It prohibited the movement of timber from the NEI leading to further deprivation of rights to those who depended on timber directly or indirectly for livelihood. The customary rights and claims of the indigenous forest dwellers that were not recognised by the colonial government paved the way for recognition of the long forgotten forest privileges of the forest dependent communities. The introduction of Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 allowed individual and collective claims of forest dwellers. This protective legislation is perceived to safeguard the indigenous forest rights of the traditional forest dwellers (Prasad and Menon, 2020).

The contemporary forest regulation in terms of NEI emanates ambiguousness where on one hand offers restoration of forest claims through FRA, and on the other brought economic hardships to the forest-dependent communities by passing timber ban in 1996 (Nongbri, 1999). This calls for researching into these forest regulations and related perceptions with respect to the forest-dependent communities. The existing literature on forest policies of NEI are more inclined towards producing discussions focused on the impacts of forest policies in the Brahmaputra valley region (Handique, 2004; Saikia, 2008). Works focusing on contemporary forest policies such as the timber ban and the implementation of the 2006 FRA do not explore their manifestation in micro-geographical settings. By bringing coloniality of forest-dependent community and colonial construction of identity of the Garos of NEI and traditional system of governance as an entry point of enquiry, this study seeks to fill the gap in existing literature by enquiring tribal people's attempts at decolonising forests in the forest villages of Baghmara Reserved Forest. Decolonising forest-related activities and perceptions about traditional system of governance and forests provides avenues for filling gaps in knowledge about the coloniality of forests in the hill districts of NEI and contestations against the colonial and postcolonial forest policies.

1.3 Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

The aim of this research is to unpack the coloniality of forests in NEI and the decolonising attempts of hill tribes in a micro-geographical setting. The thesis seeks to reveal how forest dependent-communities in the NEI in general and the hill tribe of Meghalaya in particular, have been decolonising forest policies in terms of forest-related practices and use of land in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest for well over a century. The study covers the period from circa 1870s-1930s and the contemporary forest policies such as timber ban of 1996 and Forest Rights Act 2006. It also seeks to unpack forest laws that are site-specific (Baghmara Reserved Forest). Indian forestry, which is a highly colonised sector with its imprints in the post-colonial period, needs an investigation in terms of micro-geographical manifestations of colonial and post-colonial forest policies.

The objectives and correlative research questions of the study are as follows:

1. What were the geographies of colonial and post-colonial forest policies in NEI?
    a. What was the scheme of classification of forests during the colonial period?
    b. What were the policies that were peculiar to the region?
    c. How were colonial policies manifested in the post-colonial forest policies of NEI?

2. How did colonial forest policies bring about coloniality of identity and traditional forestry in a micro-geographical setting?
    a. How did colonial policies bring about coloniality in the forest-related identities of the hill dwellers?
    b. How did forest policies bring about coloniality in traditional systems of farming?
    c. How is coloniality manifested in the socio-cultural realm and thinking about the environment among Villages Forests during the contemporary period?

3. What are the ways in which forest dependent communities have been decolonising the coloniality of forestry and post-colonial forest policies?
    a. What are the prevalent forms of forest beliefs and practices in the Village Forests?
    b. What were the conventional and non-conventional forms of resistance against the forest policies during the colonial period?
    c. What are the conventional forms of resistance during the post-independence period?

1.4 Scope of the Research

This research is situated within the domain of human geography in general and historical and developmental/rural geography in particular. Relevant concepts are borrowed from different fields of research that include cultural geography, indigenous studies, subaltern studies and decolonial literature. As this study encompasses colonial forest geographies and colonial and postcolonial micro-geographical contestations of forest policies, it fulfils the need to decolonise knowledge production by the West during the colonial period that continued to have imprints in the way the postcolonial nation state incorporated colonial forest policies. This contributes to human geography in a broader perspective and specifically adds to historical geographical knowledge of colonial forest administration. As forest geographies of NEI are still underexplored, this will add to wider literature in the study of forest policies in NEI. With the incorporation of decolonial concepts in understanding perceptions of indigenous tribes about

forests and forest laws, this thesis will add to the ongoing disciplinary drive towards decolonising geographical knowledge.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

2.1 Colonial and Postcolonial India and its forest policies

This section provides an overview of India's colonial history and colonial and postcolonial forest administration in India. It seeks to give a broad picture of India under the colonial regime and the nature and dimensions of forest administration in India.

2.1.1 Brief history of colonial India

The establishment and growth of British rule in India goes hand in hand with the setting up of the East India Company. The company was established in 1600 and was chartered by Queen Elizabeth. It was one of the major trading companies in Europe and had ambitions of tapping resources from the east. The nature of the company as a joint-stock enterprise that provided risk-sharing that came with trade and enabled them to raise funds as needed (Ogborn, 2008). The company secured a monopoly over of Britain's Asian trade and eventually entered into the profitable spice market of the East Indies (present day Indonesia). However, they encountered the better organised Dutch East India Company and, thus decided to focus their trading operations in India The company managed to set up a profitable trade despite the limited supply of spices as they were subjected to export of bullions to pay for Indian spice purchases. Against all these odds, they developed markets in Europe for Indian goods for indigo (blue dye), saltpetre used for gunpowder and hand-made Indian textiles. The English gained the support of the Mughals to overthrow the stronghold of the Portuguese and in the later years, and of the Dutch. The company's imports worth £360,000 in 1670 increased to a sum of two million pounds in the year 1740. The position of the Company was further strengthened by securing three presidency capitals by 1700 being Madras, Bombay and Calcutta that subsequently expanded their territorial control into the interior. Another factor that contributed to the Britain's success in retaining lies in the company's control over the resources of Bengal following the conquest of Bengal with the overthrowing of the Nawab of Bengal in 1757. Assam came under the administrative control of Bengal following its conquest in 1826 (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2001).

The colonial history of India had its different phases and impacts. The early phase includes the period when the British overthrew the then ruling Mughal dynasty, but this was a gradual and complicated process. The Mughal Empire faltered following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2001). The British did not want to cut their ties with the Mughal Emperor until it became difficult to maintain the relationship after the revolt of 1857, considered by the later nationalists as the first war of independence against the British. In the period until the revolt of 1857, the relationship between the Mughals and the British was characterised by inconsistency and ambiguity. In 1823, the company declined the tradition of sending letters by the Mughal Emperor to the King of England, which addressed the English king as his equal. In 1828, the Mughal Emperor was prohibited from correspondence with the governor-general or native rulers because of the Mughal imperial seal that the British interpreted to be a humiliating symbol of their subordination (Sen, 2002). The historian Kaye (1910) expressed the relationship of the British with the Mughals till 1857 as a 'political paradox' in which the Emperor was a pensioner and a puppet.

The foundation of colonial revenue administration was laid during the governor-generalship of Warren Hastings (1732-1818). This was done with the establishment of a colonial form of executive governance by appointing a 'Collector' of a district. The collectorship that existed during the Mughal rule found to be attractive in the eyes of Hastings. Cornwallis (1785-93) brought change in the revenue administration by high payment of salaries and monopoly of senior positions, which was filled in by the British to oversee the Indian subordinates. Lord Wellesley (1798-1805) also brought in reforms. He founded the College of Fort William at Calcutta in 1802 where the incoming civil servants were to learn local languages before their appointments (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2001).

The British rule in India that had its foundation in the mercantilist system from 1757 was able to bring the present-day areas of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma under the British political control by the middle of the 19th century. In these areas, two categories of administration were prevalent during the colonial rule. Firstly, the areas under direct India's colonial history which is referred to as 'British India' and secondly, the areas under indirect British administration, which are called 'native states' or the 'princely states' that were ruled by the native rulers (Iyer, 2010).

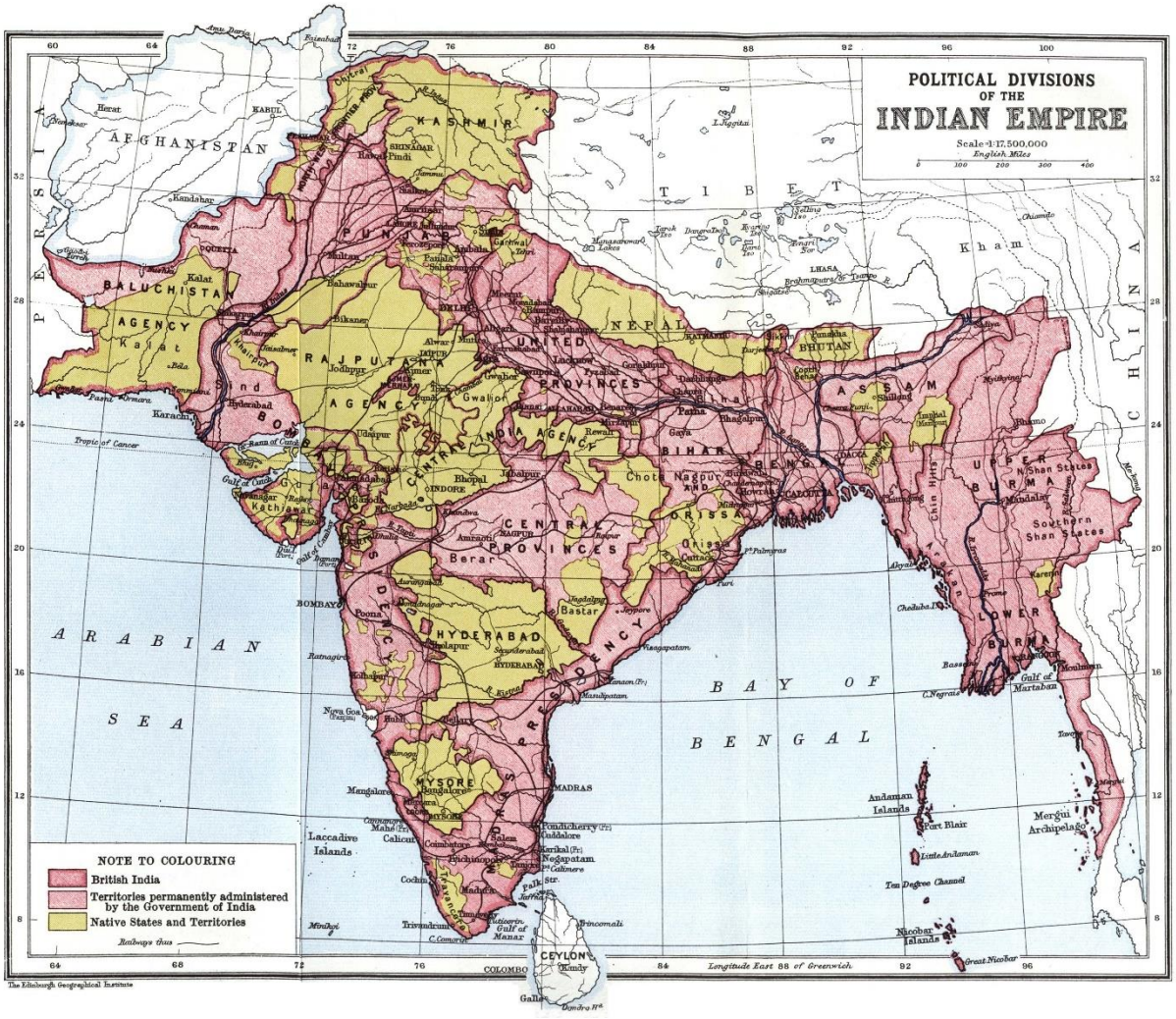


Figure 2.1: Political Division of British India

Source: Russel, R. V. (1916). *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*. Macmillan and Co., Limited St. Martin's Street, London. [Online]. Available at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20583/20583-h/20583-h.htm. [Accessed: 15 November, 2022].

The colonial regime in India witnessed changes in trading patterns at different points of time. The first phase of trading can be called a mercantilist phase that stretched from 1757 to 1813 that involved a direct plunder and monopoly of trade by the East India Company. The period from 1813 to 1858 that comprised the mercantilist phase saw a change in the set-up of Indian handloom industries because of the Industrial Revolution in England. It was turned into a market for capitalist exploitation from Manchester-made textiles from the raw materials from India. The 19th century saw the establishment of British banks controlled by the British banks, export-import firms and managing agency houses (Sarkar, 1989). After World World I, there

were changes in the colonial governance. The Government of India Act (GoI) 1919 was passed as a reaction to the World War I as an attempt to appease the rising nationalists. This act devolved policies to provinces and handed some over to the Indian ministers. In addition, following the Round Table Conference, the GoI allowed provincial autonomy and federation from 1935 if the princes opted to join, which they did not join before independence in 1947 (Legg, 2016).

The advent of Gandhi was a major event in the colonial landscape of India with his political ideas that shaped the nationalist movement towards independence of the nation. He emerged not only as the main architect of India's struggle for independence but also as the most influential Indian thinker of the 20th century. Through his materialisation of non-cooperation and non-violent methods of the freedom movement, he became the most influential political figure in India. The idea of India's independence for Gandhi was not the replacement of Britons by the Indians in the administration but a bottom-up transformation of the society. He believed in the realisation of the spiritual worth of the Indian masses. Gandhi's influence began to spread to the middle Gangetic Valley in the provinces of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. He found his devotees in Govind Ballabh Pant and Motilal Nehru whose son Jawaharlal Nehru ultimately became Gandhi's chosen successor. The Indian National Congress under Gandhi could reach out effectively to those who were outside the circle of the educated and pacify the potential threat to their predominance of elites in society. (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2001).

When the time grew closer to the declaration of independence, the issue of communalism grew worse and can be called the most serious development that would make permanent damages in the years to come (Pandey, 1990). Examples are the violent anti-Hindu outburst at Kohat in the North West Frontier Province in 1924, three waves of riots in Calcutta in 1926 and a series of communal attacks in UP. The Muslim League headed by Jinnah was formed at Lahore session in 1924 and demanded provincial autonomy to preserve Muslim-dominated areas from the spread of Hindu nationalism, whose supporters were Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gokhale (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2001). The masses on the other hand during the 1920's saw no improvement in their living conditions and agriculture became stagnant activity. This period also witnessed a series of peasant movements. The guerrilla war led by Alluri Sitarama Raju in 1924 in the Rampa region situated in the north of Godavari was the most striking one. As per the official report, this primitive rebellion was directed against the exploitation by

moneylenders, forest laws that restricted shifting cultivation and traditional grazing rights and unpaid labour used for the construction of forest roads (Sarkar, 1989).

India was granted its independence in 1947 with the partition of India, in which Pakistan was partitioned from India. Following independence, the integration of states occupied the important agenda of the post-colonial government under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru (Bhagavan, 2009). The last two months prior to partition witnessed the working out of Mountbatten's plan. The minority members of the Bengal and Punjab assembly had voted for partition. Sindh opted to join Pakistan and the Muslim League had secured the plebiscite in the Muslim dominated district of Sylhet district in Assam (Mishra, 2017). The partition entailed the drawing of boundary lines under two commissions headed by a British lawyer who had no knowledge about the prevailing conditions in India. It was done at an unimaginable speed in which local details were not taken into account (Khan, 2007). This created a sense of loss for the communities who had lost their lands in the process. While the Muslims Gurdaspur in Punjab and Murshidabad and Nadia in Bengal, Hindus and Sikhs lamented about the loss of Lahore and Canal Colonies of Khulna and Chittagong Hill Tracts. Despite all these doubts, India was declared independent on the 15th of August 1947 (Sarkar, 1989).

From this review of colonial Indian history, it is clear that the East-West spilt of Pakistan constituted, out of which East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) have major consequences for the current study area. In addition, it is evident that micro-geographical narratives pertaining to partition of North-East India into Banglaadesh does not feature in the classical works of India's colonial history and independence. However, the region features prominently in the forest history of India writings as shown below. The broader specificities of the region that dominate the narratives about the region is also discussed in the later section.

2.1.2 Colonial forestry in India

The first sign of the interest shown by the British in the forests of India was the reservation of Teak forests in Malabar in 1806 that was dictated by strategic imperial needs of England with the exhaustion of oak forests in England and Ireland. The system of reservation of forests during the colonial period was in contrast to the reservation system during the post-colonial period. Reservation during the colonial period was aimed at 'reserving' or 'stocking up' for the exploitation by the colonial government and not for the forest-dependent people. Table 2.1 has

shows forest acts and legislations that were enacted during the colonial period. The Forest Act of 1865 empowered the colonial government to declare any land covered with trees as forest and was brought under colonial regulation (Kulkarni, 1987). The Forest Act of 1878 was more comprehensive in nature under which forests were divided into three types, namely, reserved forests, protected forests and village forests (Prasad, 1999). The reserved forest lands in Bengal were established during the period of 1864-1878, much later in comparison to the forests in Malabar. In that period, seven forests tracts of Jalpaiguri district were declared as reserved forest. Madras also incorporated British forest policy by passing the Madras Act of 1882 that proposed three types of forests namely, reserved forests, reserved lands and private forests (Bandopadhyay, 2010).

Colonial Forest Acts	Rights prescribed for the forest-dependent communities
1. Forest Act of 1865	Customary rights turned into 'privileges' under government forests (Kulkarni, 1987)
2. The Forest Act, 1878	Forests managed under three types, namely Reserved Forests, Protected Forests and Village Forests. Extended government's control where trespassing and pasturing were prohibited (Prasad, 1999).
3. Forest Policy Resolution, 1894	Imposition of restrictions on the inhabitants and the neighbourhood of the forests (Prasad, 1999). Restriction of community use of forests (Bhargava, 2002). Limited traditional rights over forests (Tripathi, 2016).
4. Forest Act, 1927	Authoritative use of power by the forest officials. Deleted the reference to people's rights over forests made in previous act.

Table 2.1: Colonial Forest Policies (Constructed by the author by adapting from various sources)

In the initial stage of its rule, forestry was seen as an impediment to the expansion of agriculture in India. To expand agriculture that was the main source of income led to rampant destruction of forests in India (Guha, 1983; Guha and Gadgil, 1989; Sangwan, 1999). The control of forest resources by the British led to the shift in the control and management of forests that came in

conflict with the then existing local system of forest use and control. It affected the subsistence of the forest-dependent communities who relied on forests for their livelihood. The hunter-gatherer group known as Chenchus of Hyderabad for instance, was affected by the forest and game laws that declared hunting as an illegal activity and eventually led to forceful relocation of these tribes into large settlements (Guha and Gadgil, 1989).

Key characteristics of British forestry were its elaborate administrative structure, introduction of stringent legislations and practice of scientific forestry. E.P. Stebbing was a pioneer in introducing scientific forestry in India. His interest in determining destruction of forests in the catchment areas and drier parts of the country and its impacts on water level of rivers, decrease in rainfall and water supply led to the generation of a rhetoric of conservation and environmental protection that has become a commonplace in debates regarding forests (Sivaramakrishnan, 1995). The first piece of forest legislation that became a model for other provinces in India was the Indian Forest Act 1865 that was aimed at creating reserves for national and regional forest needs. It was followed by passing of the Indian Forest Act of 1878 and in the same year, a forest school was opened at Dehradun for training of forest officers. The legislation of 1878 emphasised monocultured tree species and also led to the categorisation of forests into Reserved and Protected Forests. By 1882, the areas under the administration of British rule had implemented the Indian Forest Act in their provinces or had alternatively carved out special forest legislations (Rawat, 1988; Bhattacharjee, 2016).

A traditional system of livelihood that was severely affected was shifting cultivation. The colonial administrators perceived it as a destructive activity to forests. As a result, they made efforts in abolishing this practice in the Central Provinces by imposing ‘axe tax’. They also brought Baiga and Gond communities to live together in the hope that Baiga communities would adopt plough agriculture practised by the Gonds (Jewitt, 1995). The colonial forest administration denied the forest rights of these forest dependent communities and ecological considerations were given secondary importance, as their main objective was revenue generation. Customary rights of the forest-dependent communities were turned into privileges with the exercise of state’s control over forests (Kulkarni, 1987). The demarcation and fencing of reserved forests brought about effective loss of forest control by the forest dwellers. On the other hand, the forest department made huge surplus by supplying urban needs for fuelwood, furniture, building materials that was facilitated by improved communications via railway network at the cost of the forest-dependent communities (Guha, 1983). These forest lands were

inhabited by communities, who are now known as scheduled tribes who access the forest resources under the provisions laid down by local customary laws. About 75% of tribes in India depend on forest resources for subsistence directly or indirectly (Sunderlin *et al.,* 2008).

In contrast to the denial of customary rights of the forest dwelling communities, literature shows that British forest policies in South India devised pragmatic policies to exploit forest resources that gave considerable recognition of their rights (Sastri, 1956). The British adopted distinct policies to avoid conflict with the peasants in settled agricultural regions of Andhra Pradesh. For instance, customary rights of the peasants were restored by creation of communal forests to avoid confrontation with the politically conscious peasantry (Sharma, 2012).

Apart from the intrusion in the livelihood of the traditional forest dwellers, their identity came under colonial construction. The identity of forest-dependent communities who are increasingly referred to as 'Adivasi', 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST) or 'Indigenous People' was perceived as distinct and vulnerable by the colonial government. It was made visible in the Census of 1872 by the introduction of categories such as 'Aboriginal Tribes' and 'Semi-Hinduised Aboriginals' to distinguish communities who had no influence of Hinduism (Gupta, 2019). These perceptions were materialised in the administration of the colonial government that portrayed the tribes as distinctive and unable to be assimilated into mainstream society. With the introduction of Scheduled Districts Act of 1874, it is evident that normal laws applicable to other areas could not be applied to areas inhabited by the tribes. This act became the foundation for the notion of 'Backward Areas' in the Government of India Act 1919 (Prakash, 2001). This policy of segregating tribes from mainstream Indian society continued and was pronounced in the form of Government of India act 1935 that was passed for the administration of 'Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas' (Singh, 1985; Gupta, 2019).

2.1.3 Post-colonial forest policies in India

The post-independence forest policy was characterised by continuation of many aspects of colonial forest policies. The age-old practice of shifting cultivation was continued to be perceived as the major cause of decline in forest cover and this became evident in the National Forest Policy of 1952. To divert the people from this practice, they were encouraged to take up settled plough agriculture. When this strategy did not meet the expected outcome, a forest area was chosen for development projects such as large-scale irrigation, hydroelectric, mining and

agro-forestry projects. These projects created in the name of national interest displaced people from the forest lands (Jewitt, 1995).

Post-colonial Forest Acts	Rights prescribed for the forest-dependent communities
National Forest Policy, 1952	Private forests subjected to government control. Enforcement of grazing fee. Privileges were turned into concession (Reddy,1995)
Forest Draft Bill, 1980	Empowerment of government to declare any land a forest land. The central government reserved all the rights over forest and forest produce with it.
Forest Act, 1988	Special provisions made to prevent encroachments on reserved forests. Regulation of trespassing of cattle. Evolution of joint-forest management concept (Hiremath *et al.,* 1994)
Forest Act, 2006	Recognised collective and individual rights of the traditional forest dwellers and other forest dwellers where this act is implemented.

Table 2.2: Post-colonial Forest Policies

The National Forest policy of 1952 carried the imprints of the state's control over forests. It further led to government's extension of control over private forests (Tripathi, 2016). An important difference in the 1952 forest policy compared to the British forest policies was its provision for the creation of *taungya* village, as a replacement to Shifting Cultivation in forested lands. (Priyam *et al.,* 2009). While taungya is another name for shifting cultivation in Burma, this practice was adopted in the Village Forests of Assam and Bengal during the colonial period to cater to the labour needs of the forest department. It allowed the practice of shifting cultivation that had to be compensated by plantation of timber-yielding trees in return (Sonowal, 2007; Ghosh and Ghosal, 2019). The Draft Forest Bill of 1980 further empowered the post-colonial nation state to declare any land as forest land. It prohibited state governments to declare any forest land as reserved forests or declaration of any portion of the reserved forests as unreserved. The central government also reserved the right to allocate any portion of the reserved forests for other purposes within itself (Tripathi, 2016).

Scholarship on post-colonial forest policies suggests that the post-colonial nation state incorporated the colonial policies of incorporating the traditional forest dwellers' demands in the policy making process related to exploitation of forests (Sastri, 1956). The introduction of Community Forest Management (CFM) in the 1990s is said to be rooted in the British policy for South India (Kumar, 2012). This literature suggests that policies of the colonial rule in South India gave some considerations to the needs of the forest dwelling communities. To avoid confrontation and conflict with the forest dwelling communities in the dense forest regions of South India, the tribes were strategically absorbed into forest conservation projects and the claims of the peasant society were entertained in the policy process. In hilly areas,

As environmental awareness became an increasingly advocated issue globally after the 1960s (Guha, 2000), the South Asian region also experienced the same wave (Greenough and Tising, 2003). The Chipko movement in India advocated for the conservation of forests in the 1970s. It stood against the destruction of trees emanated by commercial exploitation of forests in Uttarakhand (Guha, 1989; Bhattacharjee, 2016). The Forest Act of 1988 brought a conservation turn to the forestry in India. Rules related to encroachment and trespassing of cattle on reserved forests were made stringent. It was influenced by the emerging international trends and awareness on environmental protection and the Stockholm Conference on various environmental issues. With the evolution of joint-forest management in the 1988 policy, there was a shift of focus from the reservation of forests that became a dominant phenomenon from 1947 to 1988, to a more inclusive policy that engaged forest dwellers in the management of degraded protected forests (Corbridge and Jewitt, 1997). The national prioritisation of environment and wildlife concerns over forest dwellers is evident from the Wildlife Protection Act that was amended in 1991 and was made more stringent with the establishment of series of protected parks and sanctuaries (Guha, 1989). There has also been a rising interest by the international agencies and state governments on use of the land and forest resources for profit accumulation that have led to a contestation of indigenous economic and socio-cultural rights of the forest dwellers. The creation of large protected areas as a part of global conservation efforts has added to the violation of rights of forest dwellers (Ranjan and Kashwan, 2021). This is reflective in India's deployment of 'command and control approaches' that regulates the mobility of the people living in forest lands (Igoe, 2004). One such example is that of Karnataka's case where with the enactment of the 1963 Karnataka Forest Act, the government prohibits economic activities and failing to adhere to the forest laws entails payment of fines and imprisonment (Negi *et al*., 2012; Anand and Mulyani, 2020).

The customary rights and claims of the indigenous forest dwellers that was denied by the colonial government was recognised with the introduction of Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006. By this act, the individual and collective claims of forest dwellers were recognised. This protective legislation is perceived to safeguard the indigenous forest rights of traditional forest dwellers (Prasad and Menon, 2020). Since the time of its adoption in India in 2008, it has been implemented across 20 states (MoTA, 2019). This piece of legislation is crucial in establishing land not merely as material or ideological but as containing both these elements (Chandra, 2019). By acknowledging the rights of the forest dwellers, it led to restoration of more than their lands. It redefined meanings and ecology of belonging and occupation.

There have been restitution of individual and collective claims of forest tenure in different parts of India (Bose, 2013; Chandra, 2019; Das, 2019). In Andhra Pradesh, most of the claims are individual claims and it has been revealed that a majority of the claims have been rejected on grounds of inadequate evidence and claims of revenue lands that are not eligible (Springate-Baginski *et al.*, 2013). The study of Bhils in Rajasthan also reveals the dominance of individual claims over collective claims. In addition, the settlement of claims in Rajasthan makes visible the prevailing dominance of the state government's failure to recognise their traditional kinship relation and belonging to ancestral land (Bose, 2013). This reluctance of the state government informs of the denial of forest rights to the tribal community in Rajasthan in spite of the provisions under the FRA. In the case of Raigarh district in Chhattisgarh, the restoration of forest tenure to the people in the form of FRA reveals the importance of landscapes as not only as a material but rather as an ideological asset (Chandra, 2019). In contrast to the scenario in Chhattisgarh, the case of West Bengal and its implementation of FRA reveals that inspite of the decentralised attempt to restore community forest rights, it has brought selective grant of rights due to inappropriate local arrangements in practice. The successful implementation of FRA in some states such as Orissa and Gujarat is attributed to collective pressure from civil societies, grass root mobilisations and steps taken by tribal departmental officials and district collectors (Das, 2019). The implementation of FRA in the post-colonial period proved to be fruitful in granting land titles to the forest dwellers in states where this has been implemented.

Early works on British forestry and post-colonial forestry in India are mainly descriptive historical analysis of forest policies in India and their establishment that focus typically on identification of characteristics of forest administration (Guha, 1983; Sangwan, 1999). The work of Guha (1983) was centred on nature of forest administration. Although, his work has taken the place of a national narrative of forest policies, his take on resistance from forest communities against forest policies mainly reflects experiences from Garhwal and Kumaon from North India. Similarly, Sivaramakrishnan (1995), also engages in the protest movement, popularly known as Chipko movement in Uttarakhand in his intervention about forest-dwellers' resistance against forest policies. The forest dependent communities of colonial Assam did not get the attention from these scholars in their discourse.

A classic work of resistance during colonial period by Guha (1999) that theorises resistance of the minority communities, who are referred to as 'peasants' in the book. 'Peasant' is treated as a category in this book and did not take into account the transformation of peasants in the historical processes and have not made distinctions of community, caste and ethnic differences. It is no doubt an enriching source for theorising subaltern rebellions by identifying six elementary aspects such as negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission and territoriality. It covers rebellions in India such as uprising of the Kols in the Chhota Nagpur region of Bihar in 1831-32, the rebellion of Santhals in Bihar and Bengal in 1855, uprising of the Mundas in 1900 and so on. Although this work is rich in terms of its theoretical contribution to subaltern resistance, it did not define peasants in its state of occurrence as peasants could both be dependent on agriculture as well as forests. The absence of distinction among peasants poses a trouble for identifying forest dependent-communities from his work. As such, the category of peasants include both the wealthy and deprived that remains absent in his work. In addition, his coverage of subaltern groups did not make it to subaltern ethnic groups of colonial Assam.

The literature review of forest policies of India as a whole brings to light the characteristics of colonial forest policy and its impacts on the socio-economic lives of the forest-dependent communities. In most of the works on colonial forestry and its impacts on forest-pendent communities, examples are cited mainly from the tribal communities of Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa and less focus is given to the forest-dependent communities from the North-East region and their contestations against the colonial and postcolonial forest policies.

2.2 Regional Historical Geographies

The British conquest of Assam in 1826 against the ruling Konbaung dynasty of Burma laid the foundation of their administration in Assam. North-East India as we know today had undergone multiple colonial and post-colonial administrative categories that spanned across 150 years of colonial presence in the region. In the middle of the 19th century, the growing possibility of tea plantation in Assam with a motive to compete China's production set the tone for the colonial regime's interest in investment in the region (Dey, 2021; Sharma, 2011). This was followed by the introduction of Bengal Frontier Regulation in 1873 as a measure to protect the hill dwellers from encroaching into the plains that was done to pursue this new colonial venture (Sen, 2021). While the British were determined to annex the region, they focused their governance and enterprise only in some plains and a few hill areas. The present day Manipur and Tripura were left under the rule of native rulers (Saikia, 2011). Assam was administered under Bengal until 1874 after which, Assam was granted as separate province.

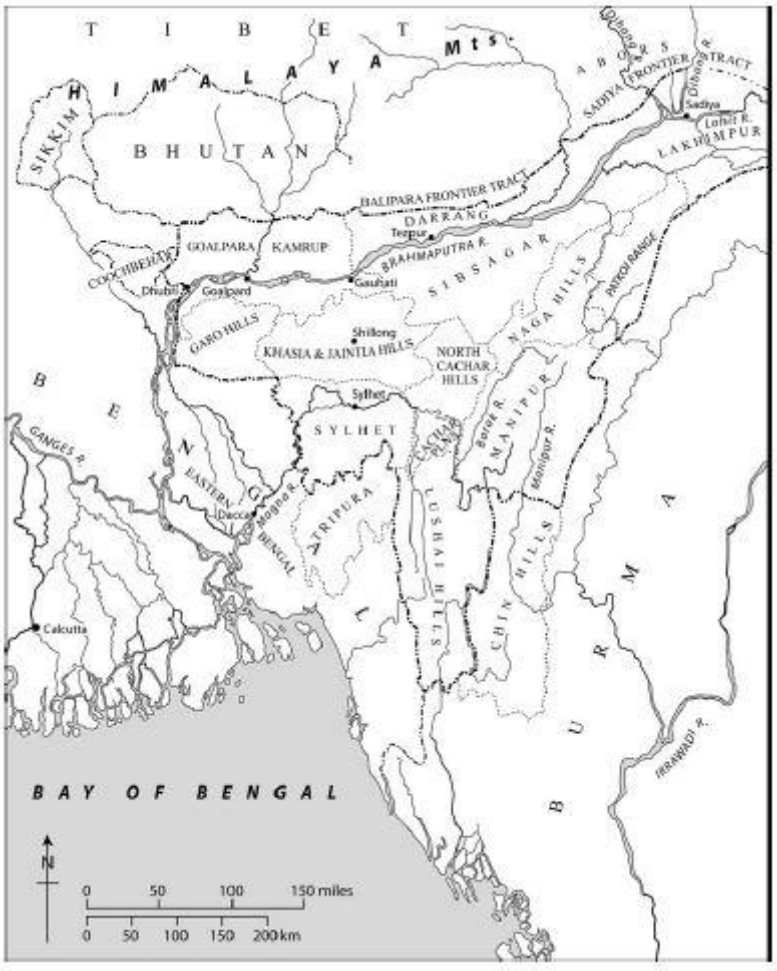


Figure 2.2: Map of British India in 1931

Source: Mullan, C. S. (1932). *Census of India 1931.* Report, Shillong, 3(1).

The colonial administration in the region, which is commonly referred to as 'North-East India' (NEI) led to objectification of the geo-body of British India (Zou and Kumar, 2011). The term 'objectification' here refers to surveying, mapping and demarcating of the India's North-East borderlands to thin boundary lands. This led to the creation of new territorial identities as pictured by European maps. The notion of peculiar frontier areas in the colonial mind necessitated the policing of the region (Reid, 1942). The region had the narrative of distinctiveness between the hills and the valleys. For instance, the division of Manipur into valleys and hills during the colonial period was not only geographical but was accompanied by environmental determinism as political systems were perceived not to be developed beyond the plains due to difficult landfoms and climate (Jilangamba, 2015). With the initial establishment of tea growing industry in Assam in 1830s (Bhoje, 2017), the colonial government became concerned about possible conflict and disturbance from the frontier tribes. The need to maintain peace in the frontier areas led to the framing of 'Inner Line Regulation' (Barua, 2017). It prohibited the movement of the outsiders beyond the inner line.

Prior to the implementation of Bengal Frontier Regulation, which is known as inner line regulation, the administrative scheme of 1874, called the Scheduled District Act determined that colonial laws did not have universal extents in Assam. The rules applicable in other area was not applicable in the scheduled areas of tribes, known as or 'frontier areas' (Gait, 1906; Barua, 2017). The GoI Act 1919 acknowledged the containment of provinces where political institutions were found to be lacking. This included not only the scheduled areas of tribes but the backward areas where colonial administration were to be wholly excluded or modified reforms were to be introduced (Legg, 2016). The GoI Act of 1935 protected the indigenous governance structures and the forest management practices of the tribes. Under the GoI Act of 1935, the region was divided into 'Excluded Areas' and 'Partially Excluded Areas'. This was seen as a protective move of the colonisers to safeguard the rights of the people included under the scheme of 1935 on grounds of political advance of the mainland Indian counterparts and from defence point of view because of the strategical location (Reid, 1942). To date, indigenous institutions continue to play an important role in managing and protecting their forests with the exception of reserved forests.

As numerous ethnic groups inhabit the region, the question of assimilation versus integration dominated the discussion of the architects of the new India during the time of independence. With the creation of special committee known as North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and

Excluded Areas Sub-committee constituent Assembly, outstanding issues were discussed pertaining to integration and provision of special constitutional provisions. The Chairman of the sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly Gopi Nath Bordoloi expressed the importance of continued protection due to danger to be swamped by the outsiders or non-tribals. He vouched for the need to integrate the tribes in a Ghandhian way (Chaube, 1973; Baruah, 2003). Hence, a special provision known as Sixth Schedule is granted to the state of Meghalaya in an unique attempt to resolve the concerns of assimilation and integration and to provide for self-governance according to their customs and traditions (Stuligross, 1999). It created Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) for the states with high tribal population. The other states In the North-East that have ADCs are Tripura, Assam and Mizoram. The application of Article 371C to the hill areas of Manipur in 1950 provided autonomy to the tribals, which they enjoyed prior to Indian independence.

The term 'North-East' as it is collectively known has a colonial root. At the time of partition of Bengal in 1905, the province in the east was set to be named as North Eastern Province (Guha, 1977). This was countered with protests from certain sections of Assamese elite such as Padmanath Gohain Borua who was concerned about disappearance of 'Assam' as a term of reference. The European planters also had similar concern, as they believed that the tea brand 'Assam Tea' would suffer. In the post-colonial era, the term 'North-East' is perceived as the outcome of categorisation of the Indian state to exert its control, governance and extraordinary legal provisions on the rebellious eastern frontier. McDuie-Ra (2017) reveals that the category of being a 'North-Easterner' or being 'from the North-East' ascribes a certain set of attributes to the individuals or groups constructed by others. In other words, the word 'North-East' denotes a racial category in India. The people from this region also use this category in declaration of solidarity. This term emanates solidarity in the form of protests and candlelight vigils against atrocities and injustice across mainland India.

The studies concerning NEI are conducted on numerous cases made through the lens of colonial anthropological approaches. The consciousness of being 'tribal' and possessing 'tribal' identity came about with the advent of the missionaries facilitated by the colonial rulers. The spread of education in the region resulted in the infusion of self-esteem among the tribes (Fernandes, 1999). This resulted in the birth of 'ethnonationalism' among the Mizos, Nagas and Manipuris (Das, 2009). All these factors culminated into the development of feelings of in-group-out-group, perceptions of themselves as 'marginalised' and minority-consciousness.

The factor of ethnicity among the tribes became the reason behind the deepening of binary categories of in-group and out-group rather with more aggression (Das, 1994; Das, 2004). This ethnic consciousness is considered as a major factor to unresolved ethnic problems in the region pertaining to demands for greater autonomy and self-rule. The colonial construction of identities in the region also culminated into stratification of the region into 'castes' and 'tribes' opposing each other under the British rule by the late 19th century (Bordoloi, 2014). Built around ideas of savagery and primitiveness, the societies were ranked in relation to eah other and in comparision to Europe at that point of time.

There are post-colonial writings that view the North-East through security-oriented lens (Saikia and Baishya, 2017). The security-oriented lens in viewing the region can be traced to the GoI's security-driven approaches in response to the regional conflict in the North-East. In order to keep the armed conflicts under control, the Indian government bestowed special powers to the army by introducing draconian laws such as the 1958 Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in the areas declared 'disturbed' by the government (Dutta, 2015). This security-oriented approach deployed by post-colonial nation has brought a transformation to the topography of the region and its people as 'disturbed areas' and 'suspicious' people (Kikon, 2009). As a result, the region continues to be a place of surveillance and contradictions. As people in the Naga Hills and beyond were perceived by the colonisers as 'bloodthirsty', 'treacherous' and 'revengeful' (Ziipao, 2015), these colonial notions and perceptions about such tribes are reflected in the post-colonial security approach deployed by the Indian government in the form of a draconian act called AFSPA. This act has a colonial root in terms of its enactment. It was originally known as Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance (Ordinance XLI of 1942) and was established during World War II to protect the Eastern frontiers of the British against the Japanese forces (Kikon, 2009). It came into force again in 1947 when the process of decolonisation turned into a violent transition. After independence, when the demand for self-determination surged in North-East India, a revised version known as AFSFA was reintroduced with an intention to regulate the region as a zone bearing security importance.

With the partition of India in 1947, the region underwent political turbulence. Creating a homogenous Indian nation-state became an objective of the post-colonial nation state. This is in turn was resisted by the ethnic communities of NEI. The idea of a nation with a single dominant language held together by a strong nation state was challenged by the Naga, the

Mizos and the Assamese. This attempt of the newly-created democratic nation culminated in the sudden process of nationality formation by different ethnic groups (Mishra, 2000). The struggle of the Nagas initiated as a struggle for autonomy aimed at safeguarding Naga way of life. The post-colonial state of Assam, on the other hand, was encountered with different issue of rehabilitation of the displaced people. The Assamese had been challenging the central government on a different issue related to accommodating Hindu Refugees from the newly created East Pakistan. There was also a rise of Assamese consciousness that led to Assamese-Bengali conflict. It was based on the reduction of Bengalis in Assam, which was also the cause of conflict starting from the colonial period to the 1980s. All these contestations and movements were merely perceived and analysed as 'ethnic conflict' (Kolas, 2017).

This section of the review reveals that the region have been countered with distinct administrative and structural features that is absent in other regions of India. It also unpacks the coloniality of identity and culture of the region owing to colonial construction of identities in the region.

2.3 Establishment of Colonial Forestry in Assam

The encounter of the British with the forest resources of Assam originated in the period when tea plants was discovered in Assam and this was followed by leasing out such lands to the European planters. By the 1830's the company had established large tea plantation in Assam. However, the forests of Assam did not attract the attention of the British administrators during that period (Nongbri, 1999). Conservation of forests did not feature in the colonial policy in Bengal until 1862 when Assam was still under the administration of Bengal. Towards the end of the 19th century, tea plantations became important colonial undertaking in Assam. In the process, tea-planters occupied vast tracts of landmass that led to clearing of jungles or forest cover and replaced them with tea plants. This determined the establishment of British administration of forests in the region. The provincial Forest Department was established in 1874 and it was only after this that the newly established department began to exercise its rights over the forests of this region (Saikia, 2011).

Forests in Assam before the colonial regime were not free of extensive use and cannot be called pristine and untouched. Assam was engaged in a rich and complex trade system that was forest-oriented during the pre-imperial period. The ambition of the Mughals to get access to the rich

forest resources of Assam including the prized elephants was often the cause of wars with Ahom rulers. Timber during that time was used for construction of boats for the security of its waterways. The Mughal Emperors demanded elephants as a compensation for wars (Saikia, 2011).

With the enactment of forest laws, valuable timber species were identified. The Indian Forest Act of 1865, which was the first forest legislation in India, identified valuable timber species needed for reservation. The arrival of British with the exploitation of forest resources for railways led to the introduction of definite forest policy by Lord Dalhousie in 1856. During the rule of the British Crown, the forest governance was authoritarian in nature, treating forests as national property, thereby imposing restrictions on forest dweller communities (Tripathi, 2016). In the North-Eastern Frontier Region, the traditional practice of Shifting Cultivation in the hills was pronounced as destructive. In the plains, rampant felling of trees by the indigenous timber traders and occupation of forested lands by agriculturists were cited as the reasons that had made conservation of forests crucial (Tucker, 2012).

In the establishment of colonial forestry in Assam, Dietrich Brandis, the Inspector General of Forests in India had a great role in the formulation of strategies that decided the fate of forests in Assam. His experiences with the forests of Burma made him well-acquianted with the forests and climate of Assam (Saldanha, 1996). His inspection and reports on forests in Assam was elaborate and methodologically based on scientific forestry. Accompanied by forest officials such as Gustav Mann, he prepared a report entitled 'Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration in Assam' that was influenced by scientific intervention rather than mere commercial account. His report was crucial in the management of forests in Assam as it aided in re-framing of existing classification of forests in Assam, accompanied by providing commercial potentialities and elaborate guidelines in management of forests. His successor Wilhelm Schlich who occupied the position of Inspector General of Forests in 1883 also prepared a report on the forests of Assam (Saikia, 2011). However, his account was written in a general tone and could not provide certainty regarding the forest affairs of Assam.

A more focused work on North-East reveals that colonial administration varied in different parts of the region. There was a difference in implementing forest policies for the hills and the plains. There was less presence of colonial administration in the hills as administrators worked through pre-existing institutions of power such as local chiefs for tax collection, policing

territories and maintenance of law and order (Hassan, 2007). In the valleys, the British managed to build an alliance with the native rulers. The forest administration also differed accordingly as the plains were under the direct governmental administration and the the hills were under strategic political control. (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The forest administration became a strategy to control the two conflicting communities by creating the Inner Line reserve in 1878 between the districts of Cachar and Lushai Hills. It was deployed as a control mechanism to keep people living on both sides at bay. It is widely established that introduction of Inner Line in colonial Assam was to regulate the movement of people from the Assam Valley that composed of administered revenue settlements to the Scheduled Areas that was later taken up as excluded areas (Bhattacharjee, 2020). However, in the case of Cachar Inner Line, the challenges faced by the British in controlling the people in the Lushai Hills compelled the colonial authorities to execute forest conservation as a pretext to strategic purposes, which is different from conservation plans in other parts of the region. Apart from the difference in governance for the hills and plains, the forest policies were perceived to bear normalising and paternalistic tendencies of Orientalism by the British officers. This is reflected in the decisions of the government in the context of tribal policy in the postcolonial period. This has been less apparent because of the 'exotic' character given to the tribal populations in the rich mineral and forest resources located in the Excluded Areas (Jewitt, 1995).

Apart from differences in the implementation of forest legislations in the hills and plains, it needs to be mentioned that British forest policy did not cover all the areas in the region. As such, the Brahmaputra valley as a whole was better penetrated in comparison to other areas of the frontier region and its effects were found to be explicitly manifested in these river valleys (Handique, 2004). While there are many historical accounts on the introduction of forest policies in the region, an exclusive work on resistance of hill communities was absent from these works. The review of Saikia (2011) reveals that the land claims by the East Company who claimed vast forested tracts of Assam and subsequent reservation of forests resulted in the loss of cultural rights of peasants over these lands. On the other hand, the reserves began to bear the burden of peasants from East Bengal and when resources became scarce, they started claiming these forested tracts and were eventually identified as encroachers.

The establishment of reserved forests in Assam also led to the creation of Village Forests, which formed part of the colonial forest management strategy. To meet labour demands for the extraction of timber, *taungya* villages were created. In the initial stages, villagers under the

taungya system had to render "free labour" to the forest department but later they were provided with homesteads and agricultural land in return of their services to the forest department in what came to be known as Village Forests (Sonowal, 2007; Sharma and Sarma, 2014). Section 72 of the Assam Forest Regulation 1891 provided for the creation of Village Forests. Under this scheme, people residing in Village Forests were supposed to render a specific number of days undertaking forest maintenance and other allied activities for the department. It was mandatory for adult villagers to render 20 days of labour per year at a local wage payable during that time in return for the privilege granted to them for reduced rate of revenue of cultivation and free grazing (Nongbri, 1999). By 1937, many Village Forests were created to provide labour in the reserved forests. Table 1 shows the names of the reserved forests in colonial Assam along with the number of Village Forests.

Name of Divisions	Name of Reserves	Number of Village Forests
Haltugaon	Monas	11
	Chirang	2
	Bengtal	2
Kochugaon	Kochugaon	90
	Ripu	3
	Guma	12
Garo Hills	Baghmara	4
	Angratoli	3
	Dibru Hill	3
	Rongrenggiri	1
	Dambu	1
	Darugri	1
	Dhima	1
	Rajasimila	1
	Dimla	1
	Ildek	1
Lakhimpur	Dibru	4
	Bharajan	1
	Dehingmukh	1
	Namdang	1

	Upper Dehing West Block	2
	Upper Dehing East Block	2
	Bogapani	2
	Kakoi	1
Kamrup	Garbhanga	4
	Barduar	16
	Mayang	1
	Kulsi	3
	Pantan	2
	Chaygaon	2
	Milmilia	3
Nowgong	Laokowa	2
	South Dijoo	1
Sibsagar	Doyang	4
	Upper Daigurung	1
	Kaliani	1
	Mikir Hills	1
	Nombor	2
	Hollongpar	1
	Desoi	1
Sylhet	Barsijura Hill	1
	Western Bhanugach	1
	Rajkandi Hills	1
	Harargaj	4
	Patharia Hills	1
	Tarap Hill	14
	Raghunandan	7
	Longai	25
	Singla	14
	Kapnagarh	3
Cachar	Inner Line Reserve	21
	Katakhal	13
	Upper Jiri	3

	Lower Jiri	1
	Sonai	3
Darang	Naduar	2
	Balipara	5
	Charduar	1
	Rowta	1
	Gohpur	2

Table 2.3: List of Reserved Forests along with the names of the Village Forests (Handique, 2004, pp. 71-72)

2.4 Post-independence Forestry in North-East States

The section is focused on the contemporary scenario of forest administration in the region. The post-colonial forest policies is characterised by centralising policies that led to systematic side-lining of indigenous cultures and practices and management of resources. In the post-colonial period, the state's monopoly of forest has side-lined the constitutional provisions given to the North-East states. Even though the control of state in administering both Reserved Forests and community forests is minimal, this does not ensure the absolute rights of people over forests. The rights over forests in both the colonial and postcolonial period is a heavily contested issue between the local communities and the state (Nongbri,1999). The unclassed forests for instance, that are managed by private owners are put through the power of the state.

The post-colonial forest policies continued with the British policy of reserving forests. It also continued to blame shifting cultivation as the major cause of decline in forest cover (Nongbri, 1999). This was evident from the Forest Policy of 1952 adopted the colonial government's policy to do away with the age-old shifting cultivation and encouraged the forest-dependent communities to undertake plough cultivation. Developmental projects were used as means to displace the forest-dwellers when the attempts to absorb them in plough cultivation did not work. These developmental works were often implemented in the name of the national interest. These centralising forest policies and lack of supportive agricultural policies led to reduction in rotation cycles. In Tripura, Mizoram and Meghalaya rotation cycle of shifting cultivation had been reduced from thirty or forty years to merely four or five years (Jewitt, 1995). The

investigation by Lele and Joshi (2009) on forestation rates, spatial forest cover changes in NEI for the period of 1972-1999 also reveals that the region had experienced a combination of land use changes from activities such as deforestation, fragmentation and afforestation. In areas where shifting cultivation is dominant, the usual expectations are regrowth of forests. However, because of the pressure of population, the abandoned *jhum*[2], which are areas of regrowth are unable to replenish its forest cover due to reduction in jhum cycles to 3-5 years at many places. The practice of jhum, which is prevalent in hill areas of NEI has been restricted and abolished by the state government and is not considered as a right but the district councils consider it as a right of the hill communities (Poffenberger, 2007).

Despite the colonial imprints in post-colonial forest policies, some literature reveals that tribes in North-East India have been conserving trees since time immemorial. A popular example cited by scholars with respect to conservation of forests by indigenous tribes is that of Sacred Groves preserved by the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya (Tiwari *et al.,* 2008). More recent works also reveal tribes' involvement in management of community forests. Examples of such works are Gupta's (2007) study of the Nishi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, Singh's (2007) work on Naga and Kuki tribes of Manipur and Darlong and Barik's (2007) study on Jamatia tribe of Tripura. Apart from narrating the experiences of the communities in managing their forests, these studies reflect on the challenges encountered by them in the management of their forests emanating from issues such as population growth, privatisation and commercialisation and changing values and beliefs.

The attainment of statehood of Meghalaya in 1972 with its bifurcation from Assam has established it as a hill state with its entire territory under the provision of Sixth Schedule or the provision for autonomous governance in the state with less state interference. The District Councils in the states of Tripura and Mizoram applied the same nature of law and governance adopted in Meghalaya but not all the areas come under Sixth Schedule.

The political structure of independent India, which is of a centralising nature made the functioning of district councils subordinate to the state government. This made the decision of the district councils related to forests subservient to the state government (Nongbri, 1999).

[2] Shifting cultivation is widely known as jhum in North-East India.

The Supreme Court order on banning of movement of timber from North-East states to other central and southern states in 1996 curtailed the livelihood of forest-dependent communities. This piece of legislation that restricts the movement of timber from the seven North-East states by road, rail and waterways unless working plans are issued by the state government (Nongbri, 1999). This legislation proves the state of existing controversial forest laws where Sixth Schedule is in operation. A detail review of timber ban is discussed in a separate section.

The recognition of forest rights of the traditional forest dwellers, which is Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, 2006, widely known as Forest Rights Act has led to the production of scholarly works on its application and varied impacts across different states of India. As the FRA seeks to secure the rights of both the individuals as well as collective claimants, the studies pertaining to FRA settlements are constitutive of claims to individual properties and collective rights. There is limited literature on its implementation in the North-East states. From Sharma and Sarma (2014) it is evident of its implementation in the state of Assam. While in the mainland Indian states, FRA is being implemented, it has been found that in the North-East states, it is being implemented only in the states of Assam and Tripura. In both states, there are more individual claims than claims made as a community (MoTA, 2022) The Government of Assam has an indifferent attitude to the restitution of the rights of the forest dwellers. This has been prominent in the government's failure to discern who the Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFD) are in the context of Assam as they are peasants who depend on forests partially.

In the post-independence period, vast tracts of lands belonging to the tribes were lost in developmental projects and rehabilitation of displaced people. Displaced people from East Bengal were rehabilitated on lands belonging to tribal peasantry. In addition, developmental projects post-independence also took a toll on lands owned by the tribes adding to displacements emanating from intra-community land alienations (Soreide, 2017). This was legally made possible with the imposition of the Assam Land Ceiling Act, 1956 in post-colonial Assam, which disposed of the excess land owned by the landlords to escape the conditions of the act. In the process, an overwhelming number of tribal peasants who worked on others' lands were evicted from the surplus lands (Sharma, 2001). The worst victim of this historical act lost their land were bound to migrate forcefully to forest reserves, only to face evictions on grounds of encroachment (Sharma, 2001). Another example of land acquisition is from the state of Meghalaya for the development project. A grabbing of communal land for the New Shillong

Township Project in the early 1990s was backed by the Land Acquisition Act. This led to wrongful sale of community lands to people who do not have clan ties. Vulnerable families were rendered homeless in the process due to their inability to prove their ownership.

2.5 Timber Ban in North-East India

The forest policies of 1865, 1878 and 1927 encouraged timber production for revenue generation (Joshi *et al.*, 2011). However, with the current emphasis on the importance of biodiversity conservation, forest management policies in India have been diverted to sustainable use rather than rampant commercial timber extraction. The Supreme Court order on the ban in 1996 that prohibited movement of timber from NEI to other states was perceived as a victorious moment for the environmentalists and conservationists. However, it proved to be a setback for the forest-dependent communities in the region. In December 1996, the Supreme Court of India gave a verdict after hearing a civil writ petition of T. M. Godavarman against the Union of India and others with regard to tree felling in both government and non-government forests. This order suspended tree felling in all forests with the exception of the cases in which the working plans are produced by the state governments, which are in turn approved by the central government. In addition, the court ruled that the word 'forest' should from then on be understood according to the dictionary meaning. Prior to the order, the word was limited only to government declared forests. Even areas with large forest cover were not regarded as a forest because according to the government it was not considered a forest. This ban also prohibited transportation of timber from the North-Eastern region to other parts of India (Dutta and Kohli, 2005; Nongbri, 1999).

Following the Supreme Court order, there has been a huge gap between demand and supply of timber due to population growth and development activities. In this increasing demand for timber, it paves the way for trees outside forests (TOFs)[3] to meet the needs. The Indian government as mentioned in the National Forest Commission Report also recognises the scope of increasing timber production through TOFs. In addition to TOFs, National Agroforestry Policy is another initiative of the Indian government, which recognises agroforestry as the main source of timber (Ghosh and Sinha, 2016). This Supreme Court order prohibiting tree felling

[3] TOFs are defined as trees standing on land not designated as forests or other wooded land. In India, TOFs are trees growing outside government recorded forest areas.

clearly has many impacts on the livelihood of the people dependent on forests. The blanket ban on tree felling has affected not just the forest owners and contractors but has tremendously affected the livelihood of the farmers and woodcutters whose primary mode of subsistence is forest. In situations where men of the household are thrown out of work, this has increased women's responsibility by adding additional burden on women to meet economic needs. The ban has also added burdens linked to meeting basic needs of fuel, which was otherwise obtained from the residues from sawmills. This has a consequence on the quality of food the people eat as economic use of kerosene in the replacement of firewood from residues has resulted in a reduction of required cooking times. With regard to the legal imposition of the timber ban in all North-East states, the study points to the manifestation of colonial character in the imposition of the draconian law as it reveals post-colonial state's monopoly over forests (Nongbri, 2001).

Another impact of the timber ban is its direct effects on the economy. The lucrative timber trade in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, had been the means through which the Khamti elites accumulated wealth and accounted for most of the state's Net Domestic Product (NDP). After the ban, the entire timber industry in the state collapsed. As the demand for timber was mainly from outside the region, the timber industry in the state could not stand the test of the ban. The study also mentions ongoing illegal timber logging that accounts for major sources of income for many Khamtis. The state government on the other hand has invested in sectors such as tourism as an alternative for revenue generation. This is reflected in the way the state has relaxed entry formalities for the foreigners and in the strategies of the state is promoting development of ecotourism (Laine, 2012).

The study of the timber ban in NEI are mostly limited to its effects on the economy or its impacts on the economic welfare of the forest-dependent communities (Nongbri, 1999; Laine, 2012). Their everyday negotiation and contestation with the draconian forest law needs to be investigated. This urge has been given renewed urgency by the emergency this century of the "decolonial turn". This thesis presents a geographical contribution to this broader turn.

2.6 Emergence of Decolonial Thinking

This section deals with the evolution of decolonial thinking, beyond and within geography. In doing so, the meaning of the 'decolonial' or 'decolonising knowledges' is unpacked. This is followed by providing an account of the use of decolonial thinking' in plethora of studies based on settler and non-settler countries.

2.6.1 What does it mean to 'decolonise'?

Prior to unpacking the emergence of decolonial thinking in Geography, it is crucial to understand what it means to 'decolonise'. This new line of thought branching out from the criticisms of postcolonial works necessitates critically analysing hegemonic discourses and having a view from the perspective of otherness. In other words, decolonial ways of thinking privilege non-western ways of thinking and writing with an aim to facilitate multiple knowledge production (Grosfoguel, 2012) by rethinking the world from Latin America, Africa, indigenous places and marginalised academia in the global south (Radcliffe, 2017). It does not invalidate knowing the world through Western frames but it instead produces knowing the world that is multiple and varied (Vallega, 2014). While it prioritises non-western ways of knowing, it goes beyond knowledge deconstruction. The act of decolonising also encompasses practices and processes that actively seek to undo decoloniality. It involves a long-term process of delinking from colonial power in bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological realms (Radcliffe, 2022). Emphasising merely on knowledge decolonisation has a tendency to reproduce coloniality instead of decolonising structures, institutions and praxis (Esson *et al.*, 2017). There are varied approaches deployed by the decolonial theorists such as erasing of nature/culture division proposed by Escobar in practice (2008), liberation of subjugated knowledges as proposed by Dussel and Mandeita (1996), rethinking from multiple perspectives or border thinking by Mignolo (2000).

2.6.2 Evolution of decolonial thought

Both decolonial thought and postcolonialism are waves of thinking and writing within the broader politics of knowledge production. Both emerge out of political developments in resistance and in response to colonial world order under European conquest but scholars have been making distinction between these two schools of thought. These distinctions are made in

terms of chronology as postcolonialism can be traced to 19th century, to the writings of diasporic scholars from Middle East and South Asia (Bhambra, 2014). The postcolonial work of Said's Orientalism (1978), is a discourse, which has a decolonial way of approaching the western way of narrating and writing about the orient. He referred to the 'Orient' as an imaginative geography is produced in and through representational practices. Jazeel (2019) perceives this writing by Said as an inherently geographical writing that has relevance in the present day, particularly in the form of imaginative and material ways. Such geographical imaginations about oriental are prevalent in the current time because it is produced discursively. The decolonial approach formulated by Said is focused more on the imperial production of knowledge rather than generated perceptions (Labelle, 2022). In other words, Said's work is driven towards examining the politics of imperial production of knowledge but does not provide account on the particular knowledge that was produced.

The concept of decolonialty emerged from diasporic scholars in South America focused on South America and its imperial discourse (Bhambra, 2014; Jazeel, 2017). These Latin Amrican scholars are Anibal Quijano, Maria Lugones, Walter Mignolo and others. Although, decolonial approach was present in the postcolonial writings such as Said (1978), the articulation of lived subjectivities of the indigenous is absent in such writings. The difference between decolonial scholarship and postcolonial theory is in decolonial scholarship's focus on delinking from modernity's power structures. On the other hand, post-colonial theory is a project that constituted scholarly transformation within the academy (Asher, 2013). Another term that is closely related to decoloniality is anti-colonialism. As a term, it invokes historical social movements aimed at direct colonial rule. The anti-colonial movements as per the term 'anti' denotes these are open resistance that carry political tones directed towards overthrowing colonial power. It is also relevant to those communities in settler communities such as Canada, US, Australia and New Zealand who are in continued resistance in the form of practices and perceptions (Hiraide, 2021). As such, the proponents of decolonial scholarship are inspired by anti-colonial experiences in the colonies.

Presenting what it means to 'decolonise thoughts' remains incomplete without going through how this thought came into being. It is important to go back to the genealogy of decolonial thinking, which includes the works of Waman Puman and Cugoano and reinscribe them at present into our understanding of decolonising. The piece by Waman Puma known as 'New Chronicle and Good Government' is the first decolonial piece of work. He described the "good

government" to be the space where people co-exist and where there is co-existence among communities. The second case is that of Otabbah Cugoano whose work is entitled 'Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery in London'. The major proposals in Cugoano's discourse are abolition of slavery, compensation for the African nations for the damages caused and legalisation of labour. Failing to incorporate these ideas would result in a meaningless effort and would be nothing more than a gesture and in the process there is a tendency of inclining towards Greek and Roman genealogies (Mignolo, 2011), which would in turn reproduce coloniality rather than decoloniality.

In pursuing decolonial project, it is understood that coloniality and decolonising are two closely knitted dimensions of the modern world that revolves around urban landscapes, university spaces, political arrangements and perceptions about nature (Radcliffe, 2022). As such, these terms are widely used in this study that requires a definition. Prior to defining of decoloniality, it is important to look at the concepts associated with colonisation. These two terms, namely, colonialism and coloniality that are an outcome of colonisation are similar but different in their outcomes. Maldonado-Torres (2007) makes a distinction between these two terms, which is also adopted in this study. It is as follows:

> *"Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation with the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality instead, refers to a long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday". (p. 243)*

Since coloniality and decolonising are intertwined dimensions of modernity, it necessitates unpacking of the concept of coloniality. Radcliffe's (2022) conceptualises coloniality to be present in structures, institutions and practice. To understand the contemporary manifestations of coloniality, Radcliffe (2022) urges to engage in colonial processes.

> *"Coloniality works via the structures, institutions, flows and everyday processes that actively constructs systems of power, thinking and behaviour across differentiated social sectors and areas. Identification of key economic, social, political and ideological colonial processes provides the basis for understanding contemporary expressions of coloniality-modernity". (Radcliffe, 2022, p. 8)*

Though the ongoing focus on decolonising epistemic thought is a recent development, the pioneering work is that of Quijano written by the end of the 1980's. Quijano in turn was inspired by anti-colonial practice as a natural consequence of colonialism, which happened much earlier in South America in 1490s. The genealogy of decolonial thinking is rooted in the anti-colonial experiences of the Americas in the colony during the colonial period. It was in the 16th century that anti-colonial turn took place but it did not include the English colonies in the north and the Carribean and even the French colonies. In Asia and Africa, anti-colonial turn reappeared during the 18th century as a result of the changes and modalities brought in by the imperial expansion of the British and French empires and continued to pave its way to the 19th century (Mignolo, 2011).

In academia, decolonial thinking emerged in the Americas, in the Latin American indigenous thinking. It can be traced to the writings of Anibal Quijano. Other important proponents are Maria Lugones and Walter D Mignolo. All these pioneering works are focused on decolonisation of knowledge. Quijano (2007) produced his path-breaking piece 'Colonialidad y modernidad /racionalidad' (Coloniality and Modernity/rationality) which was published in English in 2007. Modernity in Europe coincides with the modalities of colonial domination and expansion, which is why it is called 'Coloniality/Modernity'. Quijano's main emphasis is on 'coloniality of power'. The 'coloniality of power' is related with 'coloniality of knowledge' which is responsible for coloniality in economic and political structures. According to Quijano, the one-way knowledge production of the Europeans brought in 'radical absence of the other' and led to the absence of acknowledgement of the 'idea of social totality'. The writer referred to the process of delinking as *Desprenderse* which means epistemic delinking or epistemic disobedience.

María Lugones develops her work on Quijano's coloniality of power and stands for Coloniality/Modernity to be articulated in association with race, gender and sexuality. This according to Lugones (2011) is not to have a gendered or raced perspective on

Coloniality/Modernity but rather to view and articulate Coloniality/Modernity through the lens of race, gender and sexuality. Apart from colonisation's creation of the 'colonised' it brought changes and deflections in the perception of patterns of society, gender relations and knowledge about communities and societies it was in association with. Lugones also brought about category, dichotomy and hierarchical paradigm into colonial writing comprising race, gender and sexuality.

Mignolo (2007) builds his work on Quijano's theoretical work. He emphasises coloniality/modernity and proposes epistemic decolonisation to change the categories of thought brought in by modernity and rationality of coloniality. Epistemic decolonisation is necessary because of people's set of beliefs associated with Theology, Philosophy, Science and capitalism. According to him, decolonisation of thought is the exposing of the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality with a hope to welcome a new possibility. Inspired from Quijano's work, he develops his concept of pluriversality as a universal project, which is in reciprocity with Quijano's idea of Desprenderse or delinking. Delinking results in decolonial epistemic shift and brings out other epistemologies, principles of knowledge and understanding, knowledge about economy, politics and ethics. By denouncing the universality of particular ethnicity or body politics situated in Europe, a centre of capitalism produced as a result of colonialism and hence, delinking can be put as decolonial epistemic shift that produces other universality, which is pluriversality or universal project.

Maldonado-Torres (2007) focusses on the concept of 'Coloniality of Being' that is concerned with the effects of coloniality in lived experience and not in the mind. He perceives decolonisation as not only the end of formal colonial relations but as the confrontation with the racial, gender and sexual hierarchies that were shaped by European modernity by way of colonisation. When he thinks of decolonisation, he means the coloniality of knowledge, power and being that may be more appropriately called as 'decoloniality'.

As such, decolonial approaches at present, engage with a wide range of scholarship like Indigenous theory, feminist and queer theory. Much of the scholarship engaging decolonial thought into their projects are from Latin America and are on Latin America. Such works go beyond epistemic decolonisation and attempt to decolonise power structures, institutions and practice. The recent works embracing decolonial approaches include decolonialising practices in the adoption of market diversification in Ecuador (Holst, 2016), adoption of decolonial

thought in environmental justice efforts of Indigenous communities in Latin America (Rodrigues and Inturias, 2018), identification of possible path to decolonise Literary and Cultural studies of the Americas on a transborder level (Radlwimmer, 2017). In the study of a small town of Carnarvon in South Africa, the framework of decoloniality has been used by placing schooling as the centre point that unpacks how equality take shape, endure and change over time (Christie, 2020). Focused on the establishment of Carnarvon as a town and its schools as a part of colonisation, this study of schooling in place reveals that power relations of coloniality take enduring forms. It is Radlwimmer who presents the postcolonial as a possible gateway to understand the decolonial and proposes that distancing of the decolonial from the postcolonial is a way of self-identification for the theory in the Americas, opening up space to deal with the decolonial explicitly.

One of the points of intervention of decoloniality is on the specificities of Latin American colonialism in shaping colonial modernity alongside the need to pay attention to intersectionality of race, place and gender and its production of economic, political and socio-cultural in history and at present. In addition, the emergence of categories and units of analysis in discourses from past till present Asher (2013), and also dealing with lived subjectivities of the indigenous and critical black thought which includes a written form absent in postcolonial writings (Walsh, 2007; Asher, 2013) are also significant contribution towards decolonial writing.

In the context of India, the term ‘decolonisation’ emanates a different notion from the decolonising phemomena prevalent in Latin American and African countries. The decolonial movement in practice in the previously colonised world is motivated by progressive goals to urge the European empires to lessen the burden of violent histories of slavery and racism. However, in India, the term ‘decolonisation’ is used by Hindu nationalism, the characteristic of which is rejecting of everything that is of foreign origin including law codes, Mughal architecture and so on (Tundawala and Salmoli, 2023). Hence, deploying this term in a liberal connotation needs a strong clarity. Nigam (2020) presents an approach to conceptualise the experience of India where he perceives India to have had experienced oppositional discourse only with the emergence of nationalist consciousness. This is different from Mignolo’s (2011) notion that decoloniality is rooted from the foundations of coloniality. Nigam perceives that modernity/coloniality did not produce oppositional stance in India. However, India experienced decolonised stance among the colonised intelligentsia towards the end of the 19th

century. He incorporates decolonisation as varied strategies to reconstruct the present without borrowing the concept from the West. Although, he does not totally denounce the western philosophies, he calls for thinking across traditions.

2.7 Decolonial Thinking in Geography

This section of is exclusively centred on doing decolonial geography. In doing this, the importance of taking up decolonial projects by geographers, ways of doing decolonial project, and methodological problems in adopting decolonial approaches are revealed. Some methodological practices are also suggested to minimise the impact of white privilege in the intellectual journey of decolonising knowledges.

In Geography, the focus on decolonial approaches is a recent phenomenon. Although geographers have critically engaged with the postcolonial past since the 1990's in doing development geography, it was far from producing discourse decentering from Western hegemonic domain. The cultural geographers such as Nash (2002) focuses on material and cultural geographies of colonialism and on spatial differences in postcolonial belonging. A recent historical work by Unangst (2022) engages in the articulation of race and space by the Germans evolving out of East Africa's colonisation. Political geographers have also engaged in postcolonialism for a long time to look for alternative approaches to engage with the world (Connell, 2007; Halvorsen, 2018). The engagement of political geography with postcolonialism has led to critiqueing the discipline's rootedness in colonial-imperial sponsored institutionalisation of power and knowledge (Esson, 2009). A work such as Naylor *et al.* (2018), are engaged in writing about the violence of imperialism, empire, state formation and global trade. However, none of these works are driven towards decolonising power structures and practice.

There are also literatures on colonial power relations among different countries and the path-dependent nature colonial statehood (Radcliffe, 2005). All these works however, received a wave of criticism for their reliance on western knowledges and post-structuralist works like that of Foucault, Derrida and Gramsci. These criticisms came to the notice of geographers and hence there is a search for more critical approach in doing postcolonial geography. Sharp (2009) suggests a more critical approach especially in terms of knowledge production. This is a call for alternative theorising of political complexities and entanglements across space and

scale. In development geography, decolonial thought emerges from the earlier criticisms of postcolonial and subaltern works in trying to deconstruct discourses.

The interest of geographers in the decolonial project is twofold. Firtsly, there have been an emphasis on the need to decolonise geographical education. Secondly, geographers are also driven by the politics of knowledge production within the discipline that establishes the need to decolonise production of geographical knowledges. A geographer based at a British university Eliott-Cooper (2017) reveals the situatedness of geographers at historical crossroads. Looking back at the history of colonisation of Africa, geographers historically played an important role in mapping the areas which Britain knew, which was known as the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa scarcely founded in 1788. It was only later in 1830 that the Royal Geographical Society came into existence. Considering the role of British geographers in contributing to the expansion of the colonies in terms of mapping the areas, geographers have a responsibility in academic practice to re-examine and dismantle manifestations of imperialism (Eliott-Cooper, 2017).

The second stream of decolonial agenda for geographers is decolonsing how knowledge is produced within the disicipline. Many debates are situated around practising and writing decolonised geography. This is about what 'decolonial thought' encompasses and the methodological framework involved in approaching decolonial geography. Legg (2017) upholds the term decolonialism rather than decolonising academic practice. Both terms are to do with colonial things but decolonialism projects a never-ending process unlike decolonisation where there is a state of final achievement. In the discipline of geography, decolonialism must also be a continuous process and in that process, the discipline will eventually transform itself. Given that, engaging in the decolonial is a continuous process, the question arises as to how to embrace this approach towards the decolonial. One of the ways is to engage in southern knowledges and thoughts for epistemic directions, which might otherwise be taken over by Eurocentric thoughts (Jazeel, 2017). This can only be achieved by cautious consensus of methodologies, academic networks, aims of the projects as there is a tendency to settle for finely-honed theoretical debates and that it will be inaccessible to the outside world like it usually happens at leading Anglophone geographical gatherings.

Talking of Southern knowledges, Clement (2019) and Shaw *et al.* (2006) add to ongoing debate on decolonising geography by suggesting ways to approach Indigenous knowledges in decolonised ways. The author proposes understanding the endeavour not merely as a collection of facts or an archive of information but rather as an intellectual journey. Another alternative decolonising approach is to take into consideration how indigenous people articulate earthly experience, self and non-human things. For indigenous people, the things of the land which are considered to be more-than-natural things are taken as sources of knowledge. These entities come in the process of interaction and co-becoming with the indigenous people, thereby producing indigenous knowledge base that requires making academic space for other ways of knowing apart from acknowledging western positional superiority. Another characteristic of indigenous discourse is that it is largely oral or in a story-telling mode. The inclusion of orally transferred stories has a capacity to add to indigenous geographies.

Radcliffe (2022) dedicates an entire work towards decolonising geography and offers a guide on the need to decolonise geography and he need to delink from foundational concepts that we rely on built on western and Eurocentric concepts. Drawing from Indigenous and Black geographies, this work focuses on overlapping of spaces, located configurations of colonial-modern ideologies, exclusions in terms of structure and White-Eurocentric place-making. It also identifies the actions to consider in the path of decolonising. Some of these include engaging in critical analysis of the colonial matrix of power, listening to the relevant voices and acknowledging the heterogeneity and hybridity produced through power and knowledge. Radcliffe also talks about Indigenous Geographies done by Indigenous scholars and allied anti-colonial researchers in her approach to decolonising geography. Indigenous geographies take into account duress as a result of coloniality in settler countries such as Canada, the United States, Chile, and New Zealand. Indigenous geographers focus on spaces of colonial labour and resource exploitation and capitalist expansion and resistance against such processes. As such, indigenous geographies unpack coloniality and indigenous agency and facilitates reconstructing of indigenous and geo-histories in terms of society, space and geophysical viewpoint. One of the ways is by opening human geography to insights and knowledges from thinkers, which are marginalised in the current time.

Halvorsen (2018) provides an example of focussing on Indigenous knowledges in dealing with Latin-American socio-spatial transformation. It deals with contemporary struggles to redefine territory beyond its narrow modern/colonial contexts under three themes namely, terrain, land

and the state as territorial manifestations. Given that territorial definitions are often rooted in modern/colonial experiences, this study attempts to deconstruct territory by acknowledging the limits of the Anglophone geographical perspectives and the regional decolonial approach proposed by the Latin American scholars have been outlined such as 'dissident territories', 'territories in resistance' and 'insurgent territories'. This work not only deconstructs the colonially constructed territory of the state but it opens up to broader political ideas and practices.

While large-scale actions, rallies and protests are considered as sites of resistance, the daily actions of the indigenous people, families and communities still do not form the basis of the narratives of decolonial writing which, undoubtedly is important in decolonising processes. The study of Hunt and Holmes (2015) can be regarded as unconventional perspective to decolonial approaches. They write from the perspective of queer scholars about decolonisation in daily life, in daily encounters with partnerships, families and friendships. The study exposes how the spaces of families, homes and communities can provide interesting accounts in challenging the assumptions and writing on indigeneity, whiteness, cisgender privilege and range of other identities.

Another study is Daigle and Sundberg (2017) which tries to be accountable to Indigenous knowledges. This study discusses an attempt to unsettle geographical knowledges through teaching undergraduates. The strategy includes inviting activists from the local community and emerging critical race scholars to share their knowledge and expertise. The process of decolonisation became materialised in this way as the leaders and scholar-activists who were exploited and deemed as objects of analysis became the source of knowledge production, autonomy and empowerment. The writers speak from the Canadian university perspective but it gives valuable insight into the search for curricular materials and pedagogies as a way of unsettling geographical knowledge.

The decolonial practice of accountability in terms of knowledge production is also proposed by Naylor *et al.* (2018). Writing from an Indigenous and Chicanx feminist point of view, they stress the need to be reembodied and acknowledge the positionality of a researcher in a study and describe the how the positionality of a scholar in regard to the project can have an influence in writing the decolonial. Failing to do so will result into nothing but a metaphor and the task of decolonising will remain as an academic buzzword. While it is methodologically difficult to

do away with colonising tendencies in embracing the decolonial, Hodge and Lester (2006) suggests that linking Indigenous community priorities to research and coursework, conventional research tendencies can be minimised. By challenging the conventional way in which cross-cultural research is conceived and also institutional practices, geographers can strive to decolonise their field of study and practice.

Despite the fertile scope for decolonising the discipline of geography, there is rising scepticism about practicing decolonial approaches in writing and learning environments. Noxolo (2017) addresses with scepticism the UK geographical discipline in the light of Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which she perceives as an infertile ground for decolonising geographical knowledge in the UK. She critiques the project plans of GCRF to be undertaken in the Global South to have colonialist features because of the repeated declaration of the UK to be 'driving' global development initiatives. Hence, the writer fears that GCRF will reproduce coloniality by brutal exploitation and removing them discursively and completely forgetting about Indigenous people. Similarly, the commentary by Esson *et al.* (2017) on the RGS annual conference addresses the tendency of the move to decolonise geographical knowledge to reproduce white supremacy and privilege. The commentary suggests a possible way to effectively pursue decolonial movements in the discipline of Geography. The foundational step to take decolonial move forward would be to engage in debates with the racialised and non-white about the decolonial and coloniality.

Decolonising geographical knowledge is not a task, which will be completed in a day or a year, rather it is an endless task with no finishing line (Legg, 2017). The colonial centres have shifted and the colonised have gained independence but there are manifestations of coloniality through many agencies like media, state-sanctioned languages and behavioural norms (Rodrigues and Inturias, 2018). As far as the discipline of geography is concerned, the narratives and discourse are entangled and situated in western ways of knowing the world (Sharp, 2013). In this connection, academia has a great role to play, particularly the discipline of Geography to deconstruct the world views and values which are based on coloniality/modernity.

2.8 On Resistance

Resistance according to Oxford Learners Dictionary means to refuse or accept or comply with something. In academia, it refers to efforts to minimise the condition of one's subordination that involves attempts to endure or withstand those conditions in everyday life; such acts are intentional and purposive to negotiate power relations from below to rework them into a more favourable condition or emancipatory condition (Chandra, 2015). Scholars have been investigating occurences of resistant behaviours. A theme central to researchers in the field of resistance is its occurrence in physical modes such as use of bodies and material objects (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). From silent marches to violent insurrections (Richards, 2020), from hairstyles (Kuumba and Ajanaku, 1998) to songs and from open confrontations with the people in power to non-confrontational behaviour, the forms in which resistance is manifested are varied.

The Marxist and feminist approaches perceive resistance as an act of opposing the domination or oppression arising out of established political movements. Following the cultural turn, study of weapons of the weak characterising everyday resistance and political identities form the central themes of resistance (Routledge, 2009; Legg, 2019). The use of 'resistance' as a concept is becoming increasingly diverse and it has become a central theme in political theory. The heroic form of resistance is often celebrated that discredits other forms of resistance (Mrovlje and Kirkpatrick, 2020). The systematic engagement of the discipline of geography with this concept is still rare (Hughes, 2020). Geographers are more engaged in challenging the operation of power rather than intervening in resistance itself (Legg, 2019).

2.8.1 Forms of Resistance

The forms of resistance under review is limited to three types on the basis of their nature of occurrence. These are open, subtle and institutional forms of resistance. The forms of resistance that entails direct confrontation with the people in authority that also includes collective violence on the authority characterise open forms of resistance. Those forms of resistance that do not need any confrontation with the authority are subtle forms of resistance. The other form of opposition is through the medium of legal institution in the form of filed cases and petitions. This is institutional form of resistance.

The rural everyday form of resistance is nuanced in its form and practice, which can be termed as subtle resistance. It is perceived to occur under the conditions of the peasants' constant struggle against the people in authority. Studying these forms of everyday resistance is difficult as historical and archival sources that reveal only those precise moments when peasantry poses a hindrance to the state's exercise of power. Other times when peasants are not considered harmful and destructive, they appear anonymously in the records (Scott, 1985). Being the most common form of resistance, it remains as the most difficult field of enquiry (Duncan, 2002). These hidden transcripts of resistance cannot be retrieved from what is being said in the face of power and differs from what is being said when placed out of gaze and surveillance from the authority (Scott, 1990). As such, the powerless are compelled to keep their rage under compression, which in itself is a strategy to overcome the impulse of physical violence.

There have been numerous enquiries into this everyday form of resistance that lack symbolic confrontation with the authority (Scott, 1985; Scott, 1990; Duncan, 2002; Duncan, 2020). Scott (1985) details everyday forms of resistance by revealing that the existing nature of labour control and assessment of the severity of retaliation influence the nature of resistance. In his account of everyday resistance, he presents the quiet and unsystematic ways of resistance. Such forms of resistance include foot dragging, dissimulation, pilfering, false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so on. These forms of disobedience take place with little or no planning and coordination. Such techniques of resistance are said to be adapted to the characteristics of existing peasantry in the context of rising forest crimes in Prussia due to low wages in the 1830s.

The cultural geographer Duncan (2002) identifies the subtle forms of resistance or 'weapons of the weak deployed by the plantation workers in Ceylon against the disciplinary tactic adopted by the planters to transform them. By looking at resistance as a site of embodied practices in his study, he identifies forms of covert resistance used by powerless people to challenge people in authority. The workers discovered ways to escape work and used their geographical knowledge to escape from the planters' supervision and surveillance. Other ways include discovering ways to avoid work such as feigning sickness and use of their knowledge of landscape in escaping work on pretext of forgetting something and hiding behind the coffee bushes and trees for rest. Other tactics include pretending to fulfil one's daily quota and intentionally lying to have completed the work and asking for wages. In this respect, household servants played an important role in counter-surveillance by reporting to the workers of the

unlikelihood of the planters' return to the plantation. Through the depiction of various forms of resistance, the writer argues that the workers never achieved the state of disciplinarity failed to create docile bodies in the plantation environment. The more recent work of Duncan (2020) also exposes two forms of resistance of the Ceylonese against the rule of law implemented by the British in the nineteenth century against three bureaucracies in Ceylon namely, the police, the courts and the prisons. These include subtle forms of resistance emanating from a 'negotiation' to lessen their experience of oppressive conditions from the bureaucratic structures in which the Ceylonese resisted from within as well as without. It draws on Chandra's (2015) reference to the Latin etymology of resistance as endurance or withstanding in everyday life that entails acting with the needed intention and purpose to negotiate power relations from below to place themselves in a more favourable and emancipatory direction.

The culture of petitioning comprised the common mode of protest, request and expression during the colonial period in the colonies. As such, the focus of many historians is petitions or institutional resistance as sources to study conflicts and resistance. The petitions in general have come to be acknowledged as the archival sources that is instrumental in studying structural transformations in the state and society and the attempts of the common people to make their sufferings and grievances heard (Huzzey and Miller, 2022; Kidambi, 2019). The British colonial state established a system of centralised legislation and homogenised system of judicial redress that enabled the culture of petitioning in South Asian colonies that became a mode of creative form of protest for the colonised subjects (De and Travers, 2019). Kidambi's (2019) study of petitioning in colonial Bombay against the unprecedented degree of state's intrusion into lives shows that petitions submitted by ordinary Indians to different agencies of the government reveal orientations to the colonial state by people asserting their rights via claims to urban amenities and resources. In addition, petition by a range of subalterns placed their acts as 'political' in the public gaze as petitions were discussed in the assemblies claimed to be known as public opinion. Duncan (2002) classifies the planters' use of courts as medium to collect their unpaid wages as an open form of resistance. Another study by Duncan (2020) classifies the acts of approaching the courts with filed cases as an open resistance and describes how peasants who embraced the courts and flooded the courts with false cases. The prisons, which are the spaces that are designed to be visible and regulated, became a space of artful resistance to disciplinary control of the prisoners and guards. Thus, the colonial institution became the medium of supplication for the colonised subjects both in the urban and rural areas.

The powerless or subordinate choose open collective means of resistance when this is the only way available and all other forms do not work and they perceive themselves to be in a safer position (Scott, 1990; Flam, 2004). This type of resistance is concerned with all the forms of resistance that are practised in direct confrontation with the people in authority. Insubordination or openly disobeying the orders of the people in authority is cited as one of the ways of open resistance (Duncan, 2002). Scott's (1985) account on open resistance takes into account those forms that are dramatic in nature. Such open confrontations include open attack, public invasion of land that openly challenges property relations and open mutiny that replaces officers. Guha (1999) identification of elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in India that brings to light the characteristics of resistance that is named as 'insurgency' prevalent in India from 1783 to 1900. He highlights open means of resistance to show how peasants' negative consciousness is an import aspect in producing an insurgency in the form of physical attacks and bloodshed. The peasants under this consciousness directed their rebellion against a particular class of enemies without any distinction of good individuals from the bad. Such kind of uprising also is targeted against all classes and sections of the population who are found hostile to the peasants, without taking into consideration the particular person or group of individuals who might have been the rebels' initial target of rebellion. While, during the colonial regime, such kind of revolts were not only limited by ethnicity and it was not only the Europeans who faced the revolt. The local representatives such as Sarkar, sahukar or zamindar was the first to experience the initial brunt of revolt such as the Moplah rebellions in the nineteenth century Malabar. In explaining of territoriality as an elementary aspect of insurgency, he identifies ethnic and physical spaces of resistance. He perceives tribe not only as the initiator but also as a site of a rebellion. As such, this notion occurs in all tribal revolts and the extent of the revolt was considered to be as large as the tribe itself. The physical space on the other hand, is said to have its origins in the adivasis' dispossession of lands and land alienation to the outsiders. These dispossessed people became active participants in the revolt against the oppressors such as the Bhumij rebellion and Sardar agitation.

2.8.2 Uncertanities and intentions in resistance

In the geographical work of Hughes (2020), resistance is perceived as both oppositional to and entangled with power. Resistance as oppositional to power views the movements originating from below, identity-based movements and collective movements of struggle to create identities and solidarities. These are performed by the actors who are distant from the support

of institution of power is also characterised by opposition to overthrow the suppression of power. This kind of movement can take a form of a large-scale movement (Certeau, 1988). On the other hand, resistance as entangled with power is built on the foundation that resistance and domination cannot exist independently but rather these two elements contain the trace of one another (Sharp, 2000). This suggests that resistance occurs no matter how pathetic the situation.

In literatures pertaining to studies of social injustice and attempts to overthrow the oppressive kingdoms or rulers, the ultimate outcome of resistance is situated within the moral binary of good and evil. Underpinning such oppositional movements is promised triumph over evil reign to finally end such oppression and bring about freedom. The elements that are not present in such writings are uncertainties, complexities and the unpredictable nature of these heroic insurrections (Anker 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2019). Given this ambivalence of collective movements, Mrovlje and Kirkpatrick (2020) reveals these challenges encircling heroic resistance where behind the unwavering bravery lies the cloudy areas defined by unending solidarity and dreadful betrayal and virtous commitment and cowardly cessation. This area of uncertainty is referred to as 'grey zone' of resistance. The grey zone of resistance looks beyond heroism and posits that there is no right course of resistance.

There have been studies that perceive resistance possessing 'grey zones' (Levi, 2015; Leebaw, 2011; Mihai, 2019). Under this scheme, resisters are seen as pluralistic actors with varied embedded interests of their own and are placed under a plethora of situational factors. The study of everyday resistance in Palestine reveals the existence of multiple sovereignties and varied agents of resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2015). It further sheds light on the complex nature of interactions among multiple actors and complex entanglements with resistance and power. Resisters in this study are found to be supportive of the structures of domination that necessitates the practice of opposing. This reiterates the point made by Hollander and Einwohner (2004) that resistance is not always pure.

Studies pertaining to the act and practice of resistance are characterised by questions related to presence of intentions in such acts (Rose, 2002; Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). In the same way, there are studies that indulge in unintentional resistance. The perception of Cresswell (1996 b) and others such as Routledge (1997) on resistance add to understanding of intentional resistance. It is seen as a conscious practice that is directed to overcome the effect of power. This category of resistance includes visible political acts such as demonstrations, marches,

terrorism and collective action. Unintentional resistance refers to those acts where the subversive actions are not perceived as conscious ideological struggle (Cresswell, 1996b). An example of this is a graffiti art where the focus is not directed on the actors but on the results. In researches focused on Immigration Removal Centres in Europe, resistance is perceived as requiring intention. A study conducted by Hughes (2016) that focuses on Immigration Removal Centres goes beyond the requirement of intention in acts of defiance, in which 'creativity' as an element in resistance produces no links to future events. It reveals that going beyond intentionality leads to unpacking of multiple possibilities.

When everything seems to be perceived as a resistance and at this current stage when geographers' engagement with resistance has become an impasse, it is important to engage with the contemporary moment. Geographers who are engaged in conceptualising resistance agree that resistance is meted out against a pre-established system of power (Rose, 2002; Hughes, 2016). Hughes (2020) urges geographers to think about resistance as emergent. Firstly, this means to engage with potentiality that comes from the Latin word 'potential'. It means to engage with what is not yet distinct or widely known. Secondly, thinking about resistance as emergent means displacement of intention as a pre-requisite for resistance to take place. It departs from the existing scholarship that considers intention as the pre-requisite for resistance. Thirdly, resistance as emergent refers to the resistance as characterised by ambiguity where the actors are caught in entanglements and as such the narratives of resistance can be determined by alternative subjectivities and materialities.

2.8.3 Resistance against forest policies

Forests in general, before 1947 were important raw materials that served imperial interests particularly in terms of expansion of railways. In the post-independence period, the main uses of forests have been for commercial and industrial purposes. In both cases, the implementation of forest policies to meet such interests have been at the cost of forest communities and their support systems. According to Guha (1983), the deprived communities have responded through different kinds of protests which involved spontaneous outbursts and some took a form of organised social movements.

There is no comprehensive accounts of resistance against colonial forest policies in Assam during the colonial period. However, in the comprehensive account of colonial and post-colonial forest discourses, there are accounts of three types of resistance namely, open, institutional and subtle resistance. Karlsson (2011) presents the occurrence of open resistance the colonial power. The forest villagers of Goalpara staged a protest against the practice of compulsory labour by the forest department in the Village Forests. The forest rules formed under the provisions of the Assam Forest Regulation brought about brought about conflict between the forest villagers and the forest department. Shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering that were the main sources of livelihood were challenged by the laws of the forest department and became an unpleasant encounter for the forest villagers. In 1920's the forest villagers in Goalpara refused to carry out prescribed duties assigned to them and this resulted in the use of army to evict the villagers from the village. This type of resistance can be termed as an open resistance that involved grouping of villagers into an intentional act of openly resisting against the forest the law of the forests.

A brief account of institutional resistance by the Garo tribe of Goalpara district led by Sonaram Sangma is also provided in the work of Karlsson (2011) and Nongbri (1999). The Sangma agitation constituted a series of petitions that opened up the issue of rights. This is an example of a 'forest settlement' case. The means of agitation included submission of a memorandum in 1906 to the Viceroy of India requesting the government to restore or give compensation for the lands that had been acquired by the Forest Department. The Garos from Garo Hill and adjoining Goalpara district collectively challenged the colonial forest department's acquisition of lands and consequent deprivation of their traditional rights. Sangma also published a book that was sold in the hills, which contained documents and other types of written material which were deemed useful in claiming Garo rights. About the lands acquired under the Forest Department, the Commission decided to pay some compensation to those who had lost their land. It was decided that the reserves, which were deemed worthless should be dis-forested and the establishment of additional reserves was discouraged unless fair compensation was agreed upon.

The 1960s saw the eviction drives against the peasants settled in Doyang-Tengani region of Assam. Doyang and Tengani were parts of two reserved forests that share borders with Nagaland. The eviction drives became fatal at the start of 1970s when they claimed the life of a college girl and several others lost their lives in police firing (Mishra, 2011). In 2002-03, the

forest settlers formed the Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti. Later, the peasant organisations of Doyang and Tangani came together resulting into the formation of Dayang Mukti Sangram Samiti and Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti. This gave birth to Dayang-Tengani peasant movement led by Akhil Gogoi. The movement stood for the hill dwellers who consisted of people belonging to the lower strata of society engaged in daily labour jobs. Saikia (2008) provides an account of the same peasant movement. This particular resistance took the form of an organised movement that was different from earlier movement by the petty commodity producers, managed to sustain alliances and attained progression in their negotiation with the government of Assam.

The accounts of tribal unrest and movements in NEI during the post-independence period is an example of open resistance. Because of its socio-political background, the tribal movements have been very political which range from autonomy to independence in terms of bifurcation of states. The movements rely on means like constitutional agitation and armed insurgencies, which is the opposite from tribal agitation in central India because of its close integration into the colonial system, resulting into their movements aimed at political autonomy, recognition of forest rights and scripts (Singh, 1982). These movements differ in its motive and intention with the movements that are forest-based.

It is evident from the review of resistance against forest policies that there is limited existing works on resistance against forest policies. Works such as Nongbri (1999) and Saikia (2008) brings to light the resistance of the Garos during the colonial period and resistance by Assamese peasants during the contemporary period respectively. This identifies the need to research into forms of resistance during the colonial and postcolonial period.

2.9 Summing up the Review

It is clear from the review of forest policies in India that contestations and negotiations of the tribes are absent from the classic works that have become the main sources of references for the colonial and post-colonial forestry in India. The classic forest historians such as Guha and Sivaramakrishnan emphasise that the livelihood enjoyed by the forest-dependent communities were heavily impacted by colonial policies. In the same manner, the review on North-East forest policies also highlights ongoing colonial imprints in contemporary policies such as timber ban in North-East states that adds to the state's monopoly of forests. The FRA which

has been a saviour to the central states in granting of individual and community claims of forest rights have solved the issue of deprivation of forest rights across various states of India. However, there are less studies that shed light on the ongoing state of decision making of the respective state governments in NEI for its implementation.

There is no extensive account on the nature of resistance against forest policies by the indigenous people during the colonial and at present. From the existing works on forest policies in colonial Assam and post-colonial NEI, three broad types of resistance can be identified namely, outright or open resistance that includes violence and physical fight, structural or institutional resistance that includes petitions and complaints and subtle resistance, which can be also called as 'weapons of the weak'. More research needs to be done in documenting how the hill communities resisted colonial forest policies and the current forest policies of the postcolonial nation state. The works of Handique (2004) and Saikia (2011) provide a comprehensive account of British forest policy in Assam. Handique (2004) and Saikia (2011) are works that intervenes from the perspective of wider environmental, ecological and socio-economic perspectives. These works are more focused on the Brahmaputra valley and have side-lined the effects of British policy in the hill districts. Nongbri (1999) brings to light about the state of forestry in the hill districts but did not cover. In addressing these gaps in my thesis, the decolonial concept that originated in Latin America is used in the study.

The review on emerging decolonising literature that runs across different domains such as feminist, indigenous and subaltern schools including literature. It reveals that coloniality is not uniform across time and space and throughout its operations, it remains contested and challenged, both in settler and non-settler nations. The scholarly works on decolonising geographical knowledges inform the research theoretically on decolonising framework.

2.10 Conceptual Foundations

This section aims to summarise conceptual foundations that have informed this study. Key concepts that form the rationale of this research are discussed in this section. In addition, key terms that will be used in the study are outlined in this section.

This study falls within the domain of Human Geography but the conceptual approaches adopted in this study are not limited to Human Geography. Concepts borrowed for this study cut across

Human, Cultural and Historical Geography and from other domains such as Subaltern and Indigenous Studies. As this study seeks to tackle colonial and postcolonial forest administration of NEI through decolonial lens or the framework of decoloniality, the concept of decoloniality or decolonisation is informed by the Latin American thinking and works based on Latin America. Such works include Mignolo (2011), Quijano (2007), Mignolo (2007) and Radcliffe (2022). Concepts are not confined to Latin American thinking of decoloniality, but includes postcolonial works of Said (1978) and Jazeel (2019) that inform the study of the western centric ways of knowledge production and their implications in the contemporary period.

This study attempts to unpack 'coloniality' of forest and people associated with forests that is alive in the power structures, cultural patterns and lived realities of the people created as a result of colonisation of forests. In doing so, the framework of 'decoloniality' is used to reveal that in spite of colonialism that had brought modification in the power structures, cultural patterns of the people associated with forests in North-East region of India, traditional forest users have been contesting these power structures through their own ways. Radcliffe (2022) identifies four ways geographical tools of decolonising, one of which is to examine geophysical and socio-cultural spaces shaped by coloniality and contested by different groups. 'Decoloniality' in this study is taken from Mignolo's (2007) concept of epistemic decolonisation where he refers to 'decoloniality' as a framework that unpacks the rhetoric of modernity brought in by colonialism. The concept of pluriversality or creating of new universality is helpful in this study that focusses on the idea of bringing forth other epistemologies, principles of knowledge and understanding, knowledge about economy, politics and ethics. Mignolo (2007), in his work writes:

> *"Delinking presupposes to move towards a geo and body politics of knowledge that on one hand denounces the pretended universality of a particular ethnicity (body politics), located in the specific part of the planet (geo politics), that is Europe, where capitalism accumulated as a result of colonialism. Delinking then shall be understood as a de-colonial epistemic shift leading to other-universality, that is, to pluriversality as a universal project". (p. 453)*

Thus, being informed by the concept of pluversality or other universality, the study aims to other universality in the realm of forests in NEI. By taking into account multiple ways of resistance and contestations of forest reliant people, this study attempts to place resistance from

the perspective of the forest reliant people. It also strives to delink from the common narrative of the colonial writings of the forest reliant people as destructors of forests that will also be termed as 'decolonial'. The 'decolonial' approach in this study has also been derived from the study of Clement (2019) in his emphasis on the importance of indigenous peoples' articulation of earthly experience, self and non-human things as means to decolonising dominant discourse. Another conceptual source is the work of Hunt and Holmes (2015) in understanding and building the 'decolonial' in this study. This work informs the research about the daily actions of indigenous people, families and communities as important sites of resistance that are not recognised in the narratives of decolonial writing.

Since the emphasis is on decolonising forest policies by traditional forest users, the following extract taken from Mignolo (2017) provides an understanding as to how perceptions and ways of being of the traditional forest users and resistance against forest policies fit within the decolonial framework.

> *"You cannot become European even if you wished to do so. You can pretend and you can be successful in passing as European. Or you can decide to affirm yourself in the memories, languages, and ways of being that European modernity told you to abandon should you want to become modern. If your choice is the second option, you are dwelling in the border and engaged in border thinking, doing, and being. You are in the process of delinking from Western modernity and European cosmology" (Mignolo, 2017, p. 16).*

Mignolo talks about people's delinking from western modernity who choose to affirm in the memories, languages and their ways of being rather than emulating Europeans ways. The colonial institutional establishment of Village Forests that led to the making of 'forest villagers' can be linked with people who choose to stick to their languages and ways of being in settler countries. The forest-based perceptions and their ways of being that denounce the fabric of Village Forest and the laws governing them are seen as decolonial. The resistant strategies adopted by the forest users are actions that reveal that they choose to be silent spectators of the forest laws. Hence, both these paths are seen as decolonial.

By producing knowledge about understanding, interpretation and encountering of forest policies from the perspective of the forest users and natives who live in close association with forests and nature, this study seeks to delink from the coloniality of forestry sector. It brings forth indigenous tribal histories of place-making and prevalent forest practices in the reserved forest and resistance to forest policies by forest users.

In this study 'decolonisation' or 'decolonising' is deployed in a progressive way. It departs from the Hindu nationalism's discourse of decoloniality, which promotes refusal of anything that is foreign in origin (Tundawala and Salmoli, 2023). I refer to decolonisation as the forest dwellers' adopted scheme of perceptions and strategies to forest laws. 'Decoloniality' is used in two senses. Firstly, 'decoloniality' or the term 'decolonising' is used to indicate the forest users or natives' way of interpretation of forest laws, adoption of resilient livelihood strategies and doing the everyday. These strategies could be potentially termed as 'forest offences' by the forest department. This usage of 'decolonialty' is to do with the forest users' and natives' ways of contestation with coloniality produced by existing forest rules and regulation. Secondly, my act of writing about the indigenous tribal's interpretation of forest laws and their strategies of resistance can be termed as 'decolonial'.

2.10.1 Terming the populace of the study

In colonial records and studies on North-East India terms such as 'Scheduled Tribes', 'hill tribes', 'tribals', hillsmen, are widely used to denote communities who live in close association with forests and are distinct from the majority of the Indian population. I use the term 'indigenous tribal' and 'tribes' to refer to the forest villagers in the study area. When the term 'Scheduled Tribe' is used in this study, it refers to the status of the forest-dependent communities as 'Scheduled Tribes'. The use of terms such as 'tribe' or 'tribal' in India have been intertwined with manifestations of extreme racisms associated with stereotyping such as being primitive and savage, this study deploys Xaxa's conceptualisation of the term. Xaxa (1999) reiterates the use of 'tribe' as a group or regional community such as Bengalis, Assamese and other communities. Thus, the usage of the term in this study does not mean caste, occupation and social heterogeneity but a group of community like any other community. The use of 'tribal indigenous' refers to tribes as having spiritual and ancestral connection to their land and whose ancestors took charge of their lands since the pre-colonial time as theorised by Shaw *et al.* (2006). The Indian anthropologists are sceptical of the concept of 'being

indigenous' and it is highly contested based on the history of migration. This study as such does not seek to intervene into migrational history of the tribe, the question of who is indigenous in terms of migration remains out of scene. Another term that is used for the people who live closely with forests is 'forest-dependent' that refers to all communities who depend on forest, including Scheduled Tribes (STs) and non-scheduled tribes.

Chapter 3
Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This thesis's study of forest policies in NEI focuses particularly on the coloniality and decoloniality of forest dependent people and their forest practices both in the colonial and post-colonial periods entails the deployment of qualitative research techniques including archival and ethnographic research. During the course of the fieldwork, the Covid-19 pandemic severely affected the research plans as discussed in the chapter's concluding section.The study on forest policies during colonial, postcolonial and contemporary periods required collection of primary and secondary data. Primary data collection has been obtained from ethnographic work at Baghmara Reserved Forest. Secondary data on the other hand has been obtained from the archival work at National Archives of India (NAI) in New Delhi, Assam State Archives (ASA) in Assam and British Library in London.

There are three broad objectives in this study. The first objective of the study requires an intervention into colonial and postcolonial forest policies that include categorisation of forests, policies peculiar to NEI based on the analysis of government reports and proceedings. The second objective is to unpack the coloniality of traditional forestry that brings to light colonial influence in traditional system of *nokmaship*[4], colonial perceptions of shifting cultivation, prevailing coloniality in the socio-cultural practices of forestry and perceptions about the environment. Coloniality of traditional forestry refers to colonial imprints in the way forests and related resources were used traditionally. This requires analysis of colonial reports, interviews, field diaries and making of village maps. The third objective is to unveil the decolonial attempts of the forest dependent people in which indigenous tribal epistemologies, forest beliefs and practices and open, subtle and institutional forms of resistance are unpacked. This objective requires analysis of interviews, colonial reports and proceedings and field diaries. Table 3.1 gives an overview of the objectives of the study and the techniques applied to fulfil the objectives.

[4] Nokmaship is the traditional system of land governance in the Garo Hills region, where land and forests are under the governance of a headman or nokma.

Broad Objectives	Questions	Methods/Techniques Applied
Forest History (Chapter 4)	• Categorisation of forests • Policies peculiar to the region's geography • Post-independence forest policies	Analysis of Government Proceedings and Notifications, Colonial Reports
Coloniality of traditional forestry (Chapter 5)	• Reshaping of age-old system of *nokmaship* • Colonial construction of Shifting Cultivation • Seeds of colonialism in socio-cultural realm and thinking about environment • Tribal indigenous epistemologies in land governance	Analysis of Interviews, Colonial Reports, Government Proceedings and Circulars, Field Diaries, Field Observations
Decoloniality in forest practices (Chapter 6)	• Tribal indigenous forest beliefs and practices • Open forms of Resistance • Institutional forms of Resistance • Subtle forms of resistance	Analysis of Interviews, Government Proceedings and Circulars, Colonial Reports, Field Diaries, Field Observations

Table 3.1 Research Method and data sources

3.2 Qualitative Research

The engagement of geographers with qualitative research is not new but a profound transformation in practising qualitative research with the cultural turn in geography (Cope, 2010). In the past, geographers did not term their research as qualitative and as such their research were constituted of observations, theories about places and reflection on certain methods. With the transformation in the 1950s and 60s towards qualitative research, the discipline in the contemporary period has turned to rising understandings of power of epistemology, critical feminist methods and cultural turn.

The objectives of this research require deploying of qualitative research namely, archival research and ethnographic research. This new turn in the discipline urges the geographers to be critical towards all stages of research from the formulation of objectives to data production. This archival work at National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi and Assam State Archives (ASA) at Dispur in Assam was conducted in the year 2020 and 2021. Ethnographic research was conducted at Baghmara Reserved Forest situated in the state of Meghalaya that extends across 2020 and 2021. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the research scheme and activities that took place over the period of four years. A reflection on qualitative research is further explained under archival and ethnographic research. A write-up on rationale of deployment of relevant methods is provided in sections 3.3 and 3.5.

	Methods	Research Activities	Covid-19 Impacts
Year One (2019)	• Literature Review • Preparation for Fieldwork • Archival Work	• Identification of research focus • Framing of research questions and objectives • Identifying of suitable methodology • Recording relevant colonial files • Requisition of archival materials	No Covid-19 Impacts
Year Two (2020)	• Archival Work (New Delhi) • Ethnographic work (Baghmara Reserved Forest)	• Visits to the Forest Department • Recording of relevant colonial files • Requisition of archival materials • Telephone Interviews • Conducting field visits • Writing field reports • Conducting interviews • Field Observation	• Inter-state travel restrictions in India • Inter-district travel restrictions Closure of Assam Archives
Year Three (2021)	• Archival work (Assam) • Ethnographic Work (Baghmara RF) • Analysis of data	• Recording of relevant colonial files • Requisition of archival materials • Conducting interviews • Transcribing of interview transcripts • Translation of interview transcripts • Coding of data	• Impact on normal functioning of Assam Archives • Strict inter-state travel rules • Reduction in number of archivists • Strict international travel
Year Four (2022)	• Literature Review • Analysis of data	• Analysing Interview transcripts • Selection of case studies from archives • Follow up telephone interviews • Writing up thesis	No impact

Figure 3.1: Research Scheme

3.2.1 Archival research

Archival research traditionally involves collection of relevant institutionally deposited archival materials within a certain period of time. Archival work not only entails mere collection of colonial records but also learning about the procedures involved in the archival work (Lorimer, 2010). It involves learning about the registration process, familiarising with cataloguing and with the procedures of requisition and discovering about where to find different colonial records. As the process of extracting knowledge from colonial archives traditionally did not pay attention to its peculiarity and forms, there is a need to look at colonial archives not only as sources of knowledge retrieval but as sources of power production (Stoler, 2002). As such, in the process of archival work and writing from such sources, the researcher is pays attention to biasness of archival recordings and depiction of tribal resistance in the archival materials.

The study of colonial forest policies required the undertaking of archival research from the colonial archives. The first phase of archival work was conducted at the British Library in London for one month in December 2019 prior to the archival work at New Delhi and Assam. The library contains the India Office Records that comprises archives of the East India Company (1600-1858) and the India Office (1858-1947). Government Proceedingswere obtained from the Revenue and Agriculture Department from 1886 to 1887 and Home Department Proceedings from 1882 -1886. These files contain important information on establishments of colonial forests in Assam and enforcement of forest rules. The second phase of archival work was conducted at NAI at New Delhi. The archival work at the NAI was conducted from 31st January to 17th March 2020. This archive is a repository of the non-current records of the GOI and preserves it for the use of administrators and research scholars. Originally established as the Imperial Record Department in the year 1891 in Calcutta, this archive contains colonial records that include Imperial Gazetteer of India, District Gazetteers, Proceedings of Home Department, Proceedings of Foreign Department, Proceedings of Foreign and Political Department and Ministry of Agriculture and Environment Files. The third phase of Archival work was conducted at ASA at Dispur in the state of Assam from mid-January 2021 to mid-June 2021. This state archive has been keeping administrative records since 1874. A Record Brand was created under the General Department when Assam was granted a separate Chief Commissionership.

This archival research in India was scheduled to complete within five months. The archival work at New Delhi and Assam was supposed to be completed within the span of five months from the last week of January to month of May 2020. However, these research plans were heavily impacted by the rising spread of Covid-19 globally.

The colonial archives are known for their imperial nature and silence on the experiences of marginalised communities (Scott, 1985) and as such, it is difficult to find sources on the contestations of the hill tribes and other forest dependent communities against the colonial forest policies. Colonial petitions that constituted as the sources for colonial resistance against the British forest policies contain sparse information on the petitioners. However, petitions that were considered to be a hindrance to the colonial empire was recorded in the proceedings. Such petitions include petitions from the village chiefs and the Maharaja of Tripura. This provides a fruitful space to reflect and articulate on colonial archives' records of events.

3.2.2 Ethnographic research

This research is also built on ethnographic research, which is a form of qualitative research. Ethnography is a research that incorporates various means of source materials such as formal interviews, material culture, participant observation, participant action research, engaging in informal conversations, and informal map-making (Watson and Till, 2010). In this research, participant observation, taking field notes, semi-structured interviews, map-making, collection of visuals in the form of photographs are the range of methods deployed in this study. It is different from conducting interviews and surveys as it allows examination of discrepancies between what people say and what they actually do (Eyles, 1988). In the discipline of geography, ethnography enables understanding of peoples'encounter with their worlds through place making (Watson and Till, 2010).

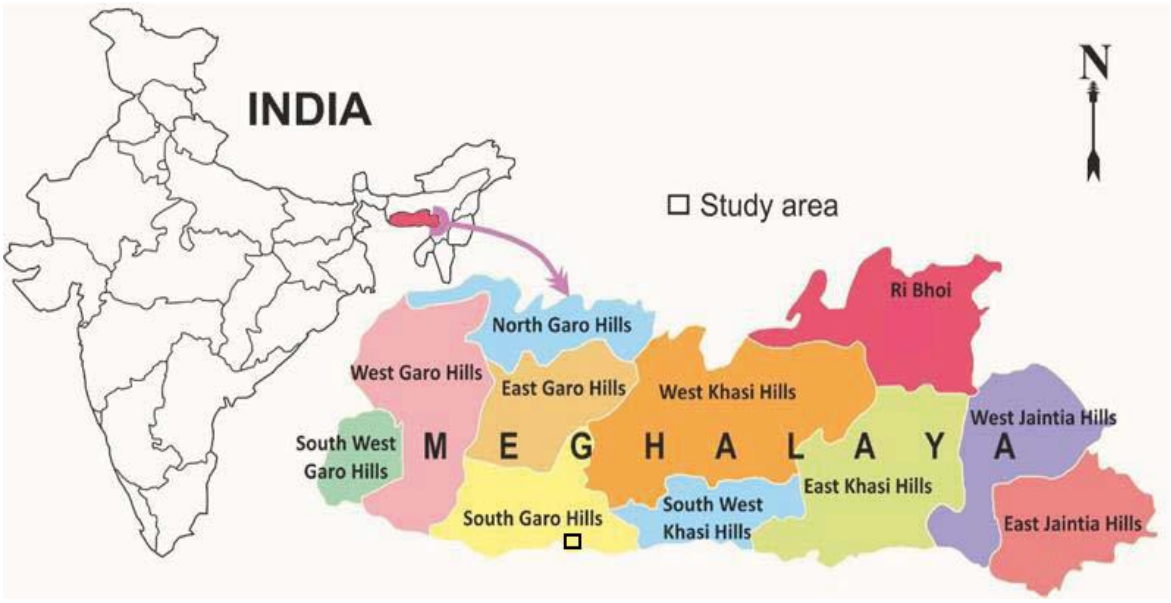


Figure 3.2 Map showing South Garo Hills District of Meghalaya where forest villages are located

Source: Umrao, R. V., Singh, R., Sharma, L. K. and Singh, T. N. (2016). Geotechnical Investigation of Rain Triggered Sonapur Landslide Meghalaya. *INDOROCK: 17th-18th June, 6th Indian Rock Conference, pp. 302-313.*

Ethnographic work, which is commonly described as temporary immersion in the culture and geographies of the selected field site that allowed close interaction and observation of forest related activities and contestations of the forest villagers. It is an intersubjective process in which, the researcher is subjective to one's own intellectual position and knowledge and familiarity with the field site that in turn has bearings on his report writing and interpretation (Herbert, 2000). During the course of the ethnographic journey, my positionalities had bearings on the conduct of ethnographic methods and the related meanings I derived from those methods. It is discussed in detail in section 3.3 of this chapter.

Initiated in mid June 2020 immediately after the Covid-19 restriction on inter-district movement of private vehicles was removed, my ethnographic research continued until July 2021, as it took place in three phases. The first phase was from mid-June 2020 to mid-August 2020, the second extended from October 2020 to early January 2021 and the third phase took place in the month of July 2021. Ethnographic work at the Village Forests constituted use of methods such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Observations from the field were recorded in the field diary. Photographs were also taken to capture the landscape of

the field sites, everyday activities of the villagers and their places of residence. For the interviews, mobile recorder was used to record the conversation, which was later transferred into a password-protected computer.

The field sites chosen for ethnographic work were the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest. The location of these Village Forests is shown in the map (see the black square in the yellow area in Figure 3.1). It is located in the South Garo Hills District of Meghalaya and occupies an area of 43.91 sq. km. It is one of the largest reserved forests in the state. Declared as a reserved forest in 1887 and subsequently populated with forest villagers to cater to the need of forest labour (Handique, 2004), the Village Forests as fieldsites are relevant due to the direct bearings of colonial and postcolonial forest policies on the socio-cultural lives of the villagers. Originally having four villages, the number of Village Forests have now increased to five namely, Rangasora, Meatda, Bilkuna, Badimbari and Bobanipur. These five Village Forests are identified as the research sites for the study and are introduced in detail below.

3.3 Baghmara Reserved Forest as a Research Site

There are five Village Forests in the Baghmara Reserved Forest namely, Rangasora, Bilkuna, Bobanipur, Badimbari and Meatda. Out of these villages, Rangasora is the largest village in terms of highest concentration of households. It has sixty-eight households followed by Meatda, which has thirty-seven number of households. Bilkuna has twenty-eight and Bobanipur has twenty-six households. Badimbari is the smallest village in terms of concentration of households that has thirteen households during the time of my fieldwork.

Climate in the South Garo Hills district is tropical and experiences high temperatures throughout the year. The region also receives heavy to very heavy rainfall during the monsoon months that usually commences from the month of June to October. The area is prone to tropical cyclones that result in incessant rains and thunderstorms during spring months and retreating monsoon season. In May 2020, the region experienced cyclone Amphan that originated over Bay of Bengal that brought heavy rainfall and thunderstorm to Assam and Meghalaya.[5]

[5] Times of India, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/cyclone-amphan-heavy-rain-alert-in-assam-meghalaya/articleshow/75857776.cms, Accessed on 01/07/2022.

The population of the Village Forests is made up of Garo ethnic community, who belongs to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group that forms the second largest ethnic group in the state of Meghalaya after the Khasis. Unlike forest villagers in Assam that constituted population belonging to different ethnic and religious groups (Sharma and Sarma, 2014), the forest villagers of Baghmara are all Garos and are Christians converts. There are no concerns of them being a migrant population unlike the Village Forests of Assam as the tribal-dominated Village Forests were opened to non-tribal immigrants from present-day Bangladesh in the post-independence period (Sonowal, 2007). The Village Forests of Bagmara were absorbed from surrounding villages prior to partition of India. The Garos are also among the few remaining matrilineal societies in the world. The Garos in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest are matrilineal that is characterised by tracing their lineage through females. With the coming of the American Baptist missionaries in the 19th century and the Roman Catholic Mission in the 20th century, the forest villagers were converted into Christians. Rangasora is a Catholic village while the other villages compose of both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Forests constitute the source of resources for these villagers for timber, firewood, vegetables and fruits. The non-forest means of livelihood is agriculture and livestock rearing. Almost all the households rear livestock and this contributes to the livelihood of the villagers.

3.4 Baghmara Reserved Forest and its Relevance to Colonial Forestry

The forests of colonial Assam and postcolonial NEI remains less researched particularly the new states of Assam such as Nagaland, Tripura and Meghalaya that contain forests that were reserved during the colonial period. The forests of Assam remains unexplored both in terms of its situatedness in the national narratives of colonial forest history and postcolonial forest administration. To be specific, the contestations and negotiations of the forest dependent communities with the forest policies have not been explored. The implementation of contemporary forest policies such as FRA 2006 and impacts of timber ban need to be intervened, as there are no scholarly works focused on these forest policies. The existing works on implementation of FRA 2006 are focused on states such as Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal (Bose, 2013; Chandra, 2019; Das, 2019). The study of timber ban extends over a macro geographical setting (Nongbri, 2001) and its impacts are still not examined in the context of micro-geographical areas. The forest villagers are distinct with respect to absorption of forest villagers at the time of its establishment. The Baghmara Reserved Forest and its Village Forests

offer as a potential site for the intervention of the forest policies peculiar to the these reserved forests in both colonial and post-colonial contexts.

The villages of Baghmara Reserved Forest have a relevance in the colonial forest history of India as this was established as a forest project of the colonial regime. It was declared a reserved forest in 1887 by section 19 of the Indian Forest Act.[6] The establishment of reserved forests in Assam suffered lack of labour for the maintenance of forests. To cater to the needs of labour in the reserved forests in Assam, Village Forests were created, out of which Baghmara is one such reserved forest that created four Village Forests (Handique, 2004). It has an area of 443.91 sq. km and is one of the largest reserved forests in Meghalaya.[7] Treating reserved forests as spaces of inhabiting entails observing all the forest laws framed by the central government and locally regulated laws introduced by the state government.

3.5 Secondary Data

This section provides detail account of secondary data collection at NAI, ASA and British Library. The main sources include Imperial Gazetteer of India, District Gazetteers, Proceedings of Home Department, Proceedings of Foreign Department, Proceedings of Foreign and Political Department, Ministry of Agriculture and Environment Files, Assam Chief Commissioner files, Revenue Department and Progress Reports of Forest Administration in Assam.

3.5.1 National Archives of India

The important sources of files at the NAI were obtained from the District Gazetteers, Home Department, Foreign and Foreign and Political Department. The materials were obtained in photocopied format as self-scanning by using personal mobile phones and cameras is prohibited. District Gazetteers of India are one of the important sources of information as far as forestry in the colonial period is concerned. The Imperial Gazetteer was revised and published in 1907-1909, which consisted of 26 volumes. The district gazetteer was written as

[6] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department Proceedings, Bagmara Forest Reserve, from the Secretary to the Chief Commission of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India, No. 495, 1st March 1887.

[7] Meghalaya Forest and Environment Department, https://megforest.gov.in/forest_reserved.html, Accessed on 30th June 2022.

an authoritative reference book for the administrator, the traveller, the public servant, and the social worker. Information on physiography, climate, flora and fauna of a district, including changes as the administrative unit are described (Chaudhary, 1975). As the records in the District Gazetteers contain information on how the colonial anthropologists and surveyors perceived and understood forest resources of the districts across India, these District Gazetteers are important sources of information for my research. Apart from forest resources, brief information is also given on agricultural practices across districts during the precolonial and colonial period. These records have informed my research on the perception of forests by the colonisers and also about the pre-existing agricultural practices of the indigenous people which revolved around forests.

Proceedings from the Home Department include files, reports and notifications such as Judicial Reports, Administration Reports and Forest Administration Reports. Files dated from 1860's to 1890's were accessed. Judicial reports provide information on uprisings and insurrections against forest surveys which would be useful in writing about indigenous people's resistance against surveys aimed at colonising forest resources. Many of the judicial reports are irrelevant to my study while there are few files, which have records on outbreaks against the colonisers. Survey reports, on the other hand contain information on the nature of forest surveys and the way forests were viewed from the eyes of the colonisers. These reports shed light on the initial set up of forestry in the region. There were fifty-five files selected for viewing from the Home Department. Unfortunately, most of the files, particularly issued by the Conservator of Forests, reports on the administration of land revenue and Assam Proceedings from Forest Branch are all in brittle condition and are not available for viewing. Hence, only five relevant files were successfully obtained for a photocopy from the Home Department.

Files from the Foreign Department and Foreign and Political Department have been accessed from the year 1870 to 1940. The two Departments, namely, Foreign and Foreign and Political Department are basically the same. The Foreign Department later changed to Foreign and Political from the year 1915. The files obtained are in the form of survey reports, forest administration reports, frontier tribes reports, administration reports and documents issued by Conservator of Forests. These reports are valuable and important in writing about resistance by the indigenous people, difference in forest policies between the hills and the plains and reserved forests as means to colonial territorialisation.

The files from Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Environment and Forest are departments set up during the post-independence period. Since Indian independence, the ministry was known as Ministry of Agriculture, which later changed into Ministry of Environment and Forest. There are seventeen relevant files from these ministries, which are obtained for a photocopy purpose. Since the departments were set up during the postcolonial period, almost all the files view and given for photocopy are in a good condition. Almost all the files obtained from these departments are on conversion of reserved forests into oil drilling sites, cement plants and other government enterprises. The oil drilling sites were performed by ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Company) which is a government undertaking, situated in Assam and some exploration sites are located in the state of Tripura. These files dating to the post-colonial period informed my research of the post-colonial forest policies, particularly in articulating the ways in which reserved forests became means to establishment of the NEI as a part of post-colonial nation state which was in turn a part of the project of Nehruvian development.

3.5.2 Assam State Archives

The departmental proceedings from two departments namely, Revenue Department and Assam Commissioner's Office were accessed during the archival work at ASA, Assam. Apart from departmental files, Progress Reports of Forest Administration were also accessed. The Revenue Department files were accessed from 1870-1914. The relevant files were self-scanned and some of them were obtained as photocopies. Most of these files are related to establishment of reserved forests in the region and enforcement of forest rules. Materials that contain rules that are distinct to the region such as Assam River Rules and Drift Timber Rules have also been obtained from this archive.

The Progress Reports of Forest Administration are valuable sources of information that inform my research about the nature of colonial forest administration. These reports contain information on the colonial perspectives on the traditional method of farming and accounts of illegalities related to forests. Since these are the extensive progress reports of colonial forestry in Assam, it highlights the research of their working plans and objectives.

The files obtained from Chief Commissioner's Office consist of reports particularly conservancy reports and some files on petitions reflecting the individual claims to government forests and its resources. However, most of the files given for requisition could not be viewed due to fragile condition of the documents.

The archival work at ASA did not go in a normal manner due to the Covid-19 pandemic that still continued to affect the official procedures at the archives in the early 2021. The number of workers at the archives was reduced to half due to which only five files could be given for requisition in a day. In addition, Assam State elections held in the month of April 2021 in two phases led to the closure of archive further leading to severe interruption in my archival work.

3.5.3 Insights to Archival Work

Archival work entails more than gathering of archival materials. It also involves certain conduct that is culturally acceptable in the archival space and adherence to researcher's own timeline. It is often not straightforward as it also comes with uncertainties. Uncertainties in terms of getting access to requested archival materials is one such issue associated with archives. Lorimer (2010) has put up this issue, peculiar to archival research where he described his first archival encounter as overshadowed with confusion and disorientation. As this was my first encounter with archival work, I was on the same page of having to deal with confusion and uncertainties. The first two weeks at the archives was more about learning the requisition process followed by accustoming myself to not being able to find the relevant materials from the catalogues. Due to fragile condition of some of the archives, some crucial documents could not be viewed. Other factors that could not be speculated prior to the archival work were the effect of pandemic on the archival work that meant concluding the work before the scheduled time.

3.6 Primary Data

Primary data collection via semi-structured interviews and participant observation has produced important sources of materials for the study. Information on the villagers' perception about contemporary forest policies such as FRA 2006, general conservation of forests and their daily negotiation with the forest laws have constituted the integral ethnographic materials for

this research. Keeping of diary records is crucial, as it becomes a repository of daily encounters of the researcher with the research subjects and the forest landscape.

Baghmara Reserved Forest is situated in the South Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. Meghalaya is one of the eight states in NEI that gained its statehood from in 1972. The South Garo Hills district where the reserved forest is located lies in the southern part of the state. The district is situated between 25° 10', 25°35' N latitudes, 90°15', and 91°0' E longitudes. The population of the study sites belong to one of the major ethnic groups in the state of Meghalaya called as Garo and speak the dialect that is also known by the same name. In all these five villages, the villagers speak Garo, which is also the dialect I speak. Considering my unfamiliarity with the villages, a male field assistant was hired for the first two months to assist in fieldwork in the initial stage. His name is Ezekiel D. Sangma, a forest villager of Rangasora village. He was instrumental in the introductory visits with the forest villagers. The remaining amount of fieldwork was done independently without the guidance of the field assistant.

Figure 3.3: Map of Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest from Google Map

The study sites that include the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest namely, Rangasora, Meatda, Bobanipur, Badimbari and Bilkunaare shown in Figure 3.3. These villages are located in the extreme borders in the close vicinity to Bangladesh. The commute to the

Village Forests was made from Baghmara, which is the district headquarter of the South Garo Hills district.

3.6.1 Participant observation

The researcher has engaged in participating in community celebration and daily activities of the forest villagers to gain insights to social and cultural practices of the forest villagers. This method of data collection has provided me with the information in the understanding of economic and cultural lives of the villagers. Details that are specific to these micro-geographical settings were recorded in the diary such as agricultural sites, sites of religious importance, places of community gatherings both informal and formal. My mental responses to the encounters with the elements in the fieldsites are also recorded in the diary. As photographs represent our research experiences (Watson and Till, 2010), forested landscape, settlements, agriculture and allied activities and everyday activities of the forest villagers were captured during the course of fieldwork.

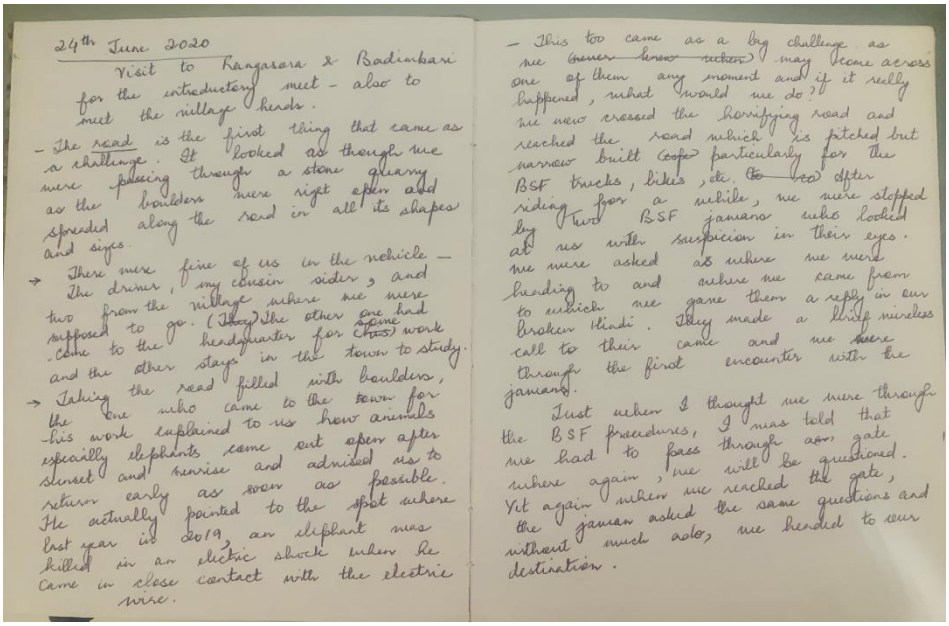

24th June 2020
Visit to Rangsara & Badimbari for the introductory meet - also to meet the village heads.
- The road is the first thing that came as a challenge. It looked as though we were passing through a stone quarry as the boulders were right after and sprouted along the road in all its shapes and sizes.
→ There were five of us in the vehicle — The driver, my cousin sister, and two from the village where we were supposed to go. (They) The other one had come to the headquarter for (some) work and the other stays in the town to study.
→ Taking the road filled with boulders, the one who came to the town for his work explained to us how animals especially elephants come out open after sunset and sunrise and advised us to return early as soon as possible. He actually pointed to the spot where last year in 2019, an elephant was killed in an electric shock when he came in close contact with the electric wire.
- This too came as a big challenge as we (never know when) may come across one of them any moment and if it really happened, what would we do? We were crossed the horrifying road and reached the road which is pitched but narrow built coz particularly for the BSF trucks, bikes, etc. (to) After riding for a while, we were stopped by two BSF jawans who looked at us with suspicion in their eyes. We were asked as where we were heading to and where we came from to which we gave them a reply in our broken Hindi. They made a (call) wireless call to their camp and we were through the first encounter with the jawans.
Just when I thought we were through the BSF procedures, I was told that we had to pass through one gate where again, we will be questioned. Yet again when we reached the gate, the jawan asked the same questions and without much ado, we headed to our destination.

Figure 3.4: Diary Entry on 24th June

Taking field notes is an integral part of my ethnographic work. It was kept in mind not to take notes in the presence of the villagers to avoid making them feel uncomfortable. Another reason of not taking field notes in the field is not to intrude into the spontaneous nature of the everyday activities of the villagers.While it is advantageous to write the field notes daily, there were

times when it could be recorded daily as I returned from the field site to the district headquarter mostly by dusk. Writing a report at night was interrupted due to frequent power cuts during the monsoon rains. In this way, the recording of newly observed social and cultural aspects of the Village Forests could not be written on a daily basis that had an impact on the nature of reports that might be different had it been written while it was still fresh on the researcher's memory. Figure 3.4 gives a glimpse of my research diary written on 24th of June 2020. It gives an overview of undertaking fieldwork in the remote borderlands of Meghalaya and subjectivities the outsiders have to encounter with respect to entry into and exit from the Village Forests.

Another aspect of participant observation that needs to be addressed in respect to this research is recording of daily observation itself. As I am not new to the region's landscape and culture, the initial stage of recording my observation of landscape and culture was hampered by the geography being so familiar. As it is common to write down only those encounters that strike us in some way, this led to some hesitation in distinguishing between the important and less important aspects of the Village Forests. Caught up between what to and what not to record, writing of field reports proved to be a daunting task in the initial days of my fieldwork. These issues related to my positionalityis discussed in section 3.3.

There were ethical aspects that were kept in mind while deploying participant observation. Attention was given not to intrude into the privacy of the forest villagers. As photographs were also captured, their consent was sought to photograph them including their houses and other belongings. The outdoor group activities were captured from a considerable distance that aids in anonymising the villagers.

3.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structure interview is an interview where there is verbal extraction of information of the interviewer from the interviewee by asking questions (Longhurst, 2003). The interview takes a conversational manner by deploying a list of pre-determined questions, which allows the participants to explore issues important to them. Semi-structured interview in this study has been deployed to interview the forest villagers and the forest officials and forest personnel. During the course of my fieldwork, 25 interviews were undertaken. Out of these 25 interviews, 11 were forest-based interviews, seven were interviews of forest officials and personnel and six were urban-based interviews. The forest-based interviews constituted five women and six

men. The interviews with the forest officials involved only one female interviewee who is the DFO of West Garo Hills Division.The urban-based interviews constituted three male and three male interviews. It also included telephone interviews conducted during the nationwide lockdown in India in the month of April and May 2020. Follow-up telephone interviews were made in 2021 to extract specific information pertaining to nokmaship and akingship. Cut-off from access to archives, the landscape and face-to-face contacts, I used telephone interviews in the town of Tura to establish local views on the forests, their management and their inhabitants. It was recorded in the phone recorder with their consent.

The pre-prepared questions for the semi-structured interviews are different for these three types of interviews namely, the forest-based, urban-based and forest official interviews. The questions deployed for forest-based interviews include open-ended questions pertaining to participants' economic activities in the reserved forest, their perceptions of the forest laws and negotiating with the laws. Detailed follow-up questions were then asked depending on the responses the interviewees provide. Appendex 8 includes a list of the questions deployed in forest-based interviews with the forest villagers.

The urban-based interviews included two types of interviewees depending on the nature of questions deployed. These are interviewees who have moved out of Village Forests that were recommended by social network. From these interviews, oral histories of Village Forests and institutional resistance against colonial forest authorities and views about forests came to light. The other type of interviewees constituted interviews with participants to gather views about forests, traditional institution of the Garos and indigenous tribal religious practice. They were also recommended by social network. Focused questions pertaining to nokmaship, a·kingship and indigenous tribal religious practice known as songsarek were deployed to the interviewees who practice indiginous religion called 'Songsarek'.

The interviews with forest officials were secured by social network with the exception of forest officials from South Garo Hills Division. The forest-based interviews from West Garo Hills Division were established with recommendation from friends and family members. The guide for the interviews with forest officials and forest guards is given in Appendix 9. Questions deployed in the interviews were related to perceptions about forest villagers, issues pertaining to illegalities in the Village Forests, people's participation in conservation and FRA and its implementation.

Ethical considerations with regard to conduct of interviews were given importance during the fieldwork. A Participation Information Sheet was provided to participants who could understand English, particularly in urban-based interviews (Appendix 11). Humility constitutes an important aspect of sound ethnographic practice (England, 1994; Winders, 2001). Not paying attention to refusals leads to poor research practice. Consent is crucial for a sound research practice and hence, informed consent was taken prior to interviews in which the objectives of the research were explained to the interviewees. Consent was obtained verbally in forest-based interviews. In the case of urban-based and forest official interviews, a consent form was handed out to the participants (Appendix 10). The anonymisation of their identities and their freedom to withdraw from the interview was made clear to them prior to interviews. Rural-based interviews were conducted in the comfort of their homes. Interviews were deployed after the potential participants agreed to them. There was no prompting and compulsion deployed in the process. No monetary payments were awarded to the partcipants.

In the interviews of forest villagers, the headmen of the Village Forests were crucial who acted as gatekeepers to my fieldwork. The role of the headmen of the Village Forests needs to acknowledged in the selection of the forest-based interviewees. The village headmen recommended potential interviewees who could provide oral history about Village Forests and related conflicts with the forest department. The interview of the forest villagers was conducted after having established rapport with them that would facilitate easy flow of conversation and opening up of their perceptions and views. Interviews were conducted in the comfort of their homes. Another condition that worked in the researcher's favour was without having to appoint translators in the field as I speak the same dialect. Although there are variations in the dialect spoken by me and the villagers in the use of specific terms relating to landscape and agriculture, the field assistant was instrumental in translating these terms.

There were challenges in finding the interviewees at home particularly during the peak agricultural season from the month of July to November. Their family members provided the schedule of their availability. Inspite of the information, it was difficult to find them, particularly women owing to prevalent gender roles, as they are responsible for household chores, firewood collection and food gathering. Women are more informative in regard to narration of their daily experiences with forests due to their gender role. Men tend to be more familiar with official prodecures.

There were no prerequisites to take the permission from the male head of the family often common in patriarchal societies prior to interviewing the female participants. This could be due to matrilineal seeting of the villages. There were no controversial cases I had to encounter when women had to seek permission from their spouses. The matrilineal root of the village also proved advantageous for the research in terms of psychological feeling of safety. Throughout the research, I did not experience any unsafe incident or encounter circumstances that would prove unsafe for women in general.

The other group of people that were interviewed was the forest officials who are distinct from the forest villagers and low-ranking forest personnel such as forest guards. The urban-based interviews and interviews with forest officials were secured using recommendations of social network. Their interviews can be described as 'elite' interviews as they hold authority and power in their department. These are two Divisional Forest Officers (DFO) from two different divisions, namely the West Garo Hills Division and the South Garo Hills Division. The others include Conservator of Forests (CF) of West Garo Hills Divisionand Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF) of South Garo Hills Division. Taking into account their busy schedule, interview questions had to be prepared prior to the interviews. The interviews of three forest guards were secured using my personal contacts. While high-ranking forest officers from different division were approached through my social network, the DFO and ACF of South Garo Hills division where my field site is located were approached in person directly. Conducting of elite interviews was different from interviewing the forest villagers and the low-ranking forest personnel in terms of the researcher's conduct. Since it was a formal interview at a formal setting, the interviewees were more composed and conscious of their responses and their responses were placed under the departmental roles they were supposed to perform.

A strong interconnection between the methods of ethnography in the research, which is between observation and interviews is also worth pondering. Observation of the forest villagers played a crucial role in conducting and approaching the interviewees. Unlike the common tendencies of the ethnographers to rely heavily on interviews as a main source of information (Hammersley, 2006; Hitchings and Latham, 2020), the observations of the physical and cultural landscape of the forest villages have led to framing of specific questions to be asked during the interviews. For instance, the process of observation has provided with skeletal information about existence of cash crop cultivation in the forest villages, which formed one of the questions during the interviews with the village headmen. Another key factor that influenced

conducting of interviews is paying attention to recurring themes in casual conversations, which is emphasised by Counter (2018). In the course of casual conversations about strictness of forest laws with the forest villagers, they often made explicit references to the heroic resistance against the forest authorities that became one of the questions for the interview.

3.7 Reflecting on Positionality

During the course of my fieldwork, my relation to the field sites significantly impacted the nature of my research. Ethnography as such is a qualitative form of research, which is characterised by intersubjective relation between the researcher and the researched, insider and outsider and home. It is also a process in which these intersubjective relationships are negotiated (Watson and Till, 2010). Being from the same region and as a speaker of the same language as the forest villagers, these factors have an influence in my ethnographic work. The established social networks that includes family connections through my father and spouse have been instrumental in securing interviews particularly with the forest department officials. Certain positionality in relation to research elements have also been beneficial in this research. Being a daughter of the headman or nokma of a non-Village Forest village has facilitated familiarisation with traditional system of governance, which in turn is instrumental in critically writing about traditional institution of governance and a variation in its functioning in Village Forests. At the same time, the socio-cultural aspect that I was raised by Christian parents who are more oriented to Christian values than the tribal indigenous belief system entailed efforts to decolonise my own mind.

While I belong to the same ethnic group as the forest villagers and speak the same dialect, it did not automatically create an image of an insider in their eyes. I was still an 'outsider' to them in the initial stage of my fieldwork. In the first day of my fieldwork, I was not anticipating the kind of questions that I encountered. For an instance, when I met the headman of Badimbari, I was enquired about the particulars of my department that came out of their preconceived notion that I am a representative of some government departments. Insignificant factors, which are but appealing to the forest villagers such as the use of an SUV vehicle that is commonly used by the government officials in Meghalaya have influenced how the forest villagers perceived me at the first meeting. Upon learning about my designation and my research, the villagers became more welcoming and open. In all these, the factor of speaking the same dialect

and sharing the same ethnic roots cannot be side-lined in building quick rapport with the villagers.

It is a commonly established narrative that being an 'insider' is advantageous in conducting social science research by means of sharing a common language or dialect and sense of belonging (Hill-Collins, 1990). However, this holds to be partially true in this current fieldwork experience. As a person who is an 'insider' because of the familiarity with the region's everyday cultural aspects, it was difficult to efficiently observe their behaviour and hence miss out on subtle and nuanced elements of people and the activities involved in making of village in the 'colonially constructed forested landscape'. While my positionality in terms of this research is more of an insider, it needs to be taken into account that I am also an 'outsider' to the field site in many aspects. Due to my university affiliation, I was also an embodiment of British geographical practices and discourse who was observing and taking part in the everyday activities of Village Forests in the non-settler remote village of NEI. The functioning and behavioural potentialities in the field were influenced by my research objectives and the need to complete the research activity on time.

Interviews are an exciting research technique for the researchers themselves but they can be less interesting for the interviewees as pointed out by Limb and Dwyer (2001) and McDowell (2010). There have been reflections on how interviews affect the interviewees in the process by these authors. As far as my experience with the interviewees is concerned, it was rather a different one. They did not seem to be disinterested in my questions, particularly the interviews with the forest villagers. On one particular interview with the village headman of Rangasora, when I highlighted about my research objectives, he expressed words of excitement and happiness over my work and appreciated that he was happy that someone is going write on the lives of forest villagers. Other village elders also appreciated my work as nobody have ever visited the Village Forests for research purposes other than surveys and census. This act of appreciation and hope instilled that responsibility of representing them in my work cautiously and be careful not to reproduce colonialism through my work. It will not be an exaggeration to write that I went through a transformative phase of seriously taking up this responsibility of representing them cautiously and no to add to their prevailing state of coloniality.

It needs to be acknowledged that social networks have a great role in securing appointments for the elite interviews such as interview with the DFOs and CoF of West Garo Hills Division. This implies that the chain of networks that I am connected with benefitted my research in securing appointments. It has to be noted that these interviews took place when the cases of Covid-19 in the state was still high. Under such circumstances, they could decline to be interviewed in person but my network with the resourceful persons in the respective district has enabled conducting of interviews in person.

Another factor that had an influence in my research is my university affiliation. This particularly had an impact in conducting elite views. Securing interview appointments with the DFOs, CoF and ACF was not difficult for me. With someone who had come from the UK based university and who needed to complete the field work on time might have led to easy securing of appointments with the forest officers. In a public sector work place in India, characterised by hierarchical order in organisational setting and in the daily workplace etiquettes such as a prevalent culture of addressing the senior office bearer as 'Sir' or 'Madam', securing an appointment within a short period of time can be looked as a special treatment and privilege. This falls in line with the Harvey (2010) in doing elite interviews that shows how university affiliation may have negative or positive impacts in gaining access.

Another factor that needs to be discussed is the family background of the researcher. The kind of environment that I was brought up in and having been accustomed to seeing my father make decisions in the matters of land allotment and maintenance of law and order in the village helped me in making distinctions between the system of village headman in the Village Forests and non-Village Forests during the course of my research. To be more explicit, being a daughter of a village headman of a non-Village Forest was instrumental in thinking critically about the system of traditional governance. However, it needs to be mentioned that it did not grant me special privilege in terms of recieving special treatment. It rather facilitated discussions about headmanship under Village Forests and headmanship under traditional system of governance. The people with whom I shared about my background also treated me in the same way other visitors would have been treated. The serving of tea and snacks for frequent and for the first-time visitors is a cultural etiquette among the Garos of which I was also the recipient. However, this does not imply any special treatment on their part. The social connectedness of my spouse and his family in the South Garo Hills district was beneficial in my ethnographic work. One such advantage was in securing key interviews. Such interviews include the conversation with

the headman of Meata village and interviewing the grandson of the pioneer person who resisted against the British. In addition, my initial visits to the Village Forests were accompanied by my spouse's family member who introduced me to the village headmen of the Village Forest. This in a way enabled to build trust and rapport with the Village Forests easily.

A socio-cultural aspect of a researcher has influenced the ethnographic work. This is prominent, particularly in taking note of existence of hybridised beliefs in the Village Forest. The Christian values that I was brought up with had an influence in conducting ethnographic work. The Village Forests characterised by hybridity of cultures and practices is a space that required the researcher to perceive through decolonial lens. Such prevalence of hybridised forms of practices, were difficult to ascertain. In other words, the religious set-up of the villages that comprises of Christian population demanded the researcher to be critical of the underlying practices of hybridity related to forests. For instance, the forest villagers' belief in the existence of deities in the forested tract of Meata came into light only towards the end of the fieldwork. The reason for this delayed account on hybridity can be attributed to researcher's pre-conceived notion about the Village Forests. Upon learning that the villagers follow Christianity in the Village Forests, the questions about hybridised forest-related beliefs had seemed to be irrelevant that led to the notion that such belief system would not be prevalent.

Thus, it can be said that the coalescence of researcher's own family's social networks with that of the researcher's spouse social connections and the researcher's university affiliation added to what can be called a 'privilege' that have influenced the research in a beneficial manner. In short, it can be said that the researcher's multiple situatedness in the traditional system of governance, social network and university prospects had proved advantageous in the ethnographic work. On the other hand, the researcher's own subjectivities such as religious values and pre-acquired knowledge about the Village Forests' religious composition became a disadvantage in taking note of distinct forest-based practices.

3.8 Analysis

Analysis was performed on the primary and secondary data to produce a coherent presentation of collected information with emerging debates concerning decolonising geography, subaltern resistance and studies on forest policies of NEI.

As mentioned earlier, twenty-five interviews that were conducted during the course of the fieldwork have been transcribed and then translated from Garo dialect to English. All interviews were conducted in Garo, which is my mother tongue due to which there was no need for hiring of translators. The original version of interviews taken in Garo were first transcribed after which, translation was done using the interview transcripts in Garo. While translating, the words that were originally spoken in 'English' are written in 'italics' and 'emboldened' that could depict the contextual scenario to the research, which are otherwise limited to and by spoken words. The following extract is the original transcript in Garo that is taken from the interview of the former village headman of Rangasora village. It reads:

> "Skango chinga rangerko okamatenba, nokon mi song·ate chinga cashewnutrangko ge·na bi·achim…biaba agana bolko wa·ako den·nabe, chinga forest departmentde maming **facility** koara on·ja. Indake aganani gimin chingade o·aba o·jok ge·aba ge·jok… ukoara bisong **seize** ka·enba cahewnut bolrangko den·ne galpila… chinga nokking 19 ge·achimde… ja·man chingna **sermon** sokaro, **statement** ra·a… ja·mano na·songba **illegal**de ong·jok indina aro mikkangchi bagan dakdapnabe, jekon ge·aha ukon niroksandie cha·bo ine hokum on·aro chingna".[8]

This extract has been translated into English, which is given below. The words that were originally spoken in English by the villagers are reflected in the translated version of the extract. These words are highlighted in italics in the extract and in the chapters that follow.

> "It was a long time ago… there was a ranger and we called him, cooked food for him and talked about the possibilities of planting cashew nuts saplings. He directed us not to cut down trees but to plant them in areas where there are no trees since there is no **facility** from the Forest department. We cleared the bushes planted cashew nut saplings following his order… They later **seized** our plantation and some of them were even cut down… There were 19 households who were involved in the plantation… we were given a **sermon** and our **statement**s were taken… The ADC said we were on the **illegal** side and he gave us a verdict that we should not extend our plantation and we were permitted to still obtain the produce of our cash crops".

[8] Interview with the former village headman of one of the forest villages, 18th July 2020.

Since there are rising concerns on the importance of revealing the whole event of the interview related to interviewees' participation in the text rather than copy-pasting the extracts from the interview (Mackian, 2010), an effort has been made to highlight the use of English words by 'italicising' those words in their responses. Transcribing was done manually and no analytical software such as Nvivo Suite was used in the process. Working through notes and transcripts by hand is the key method in the process of coding. The potential quotes that could be used in the main body of thesis are then typed under several themes.These quotes have been used to support the narratives in the main body of thesis.

The main themes that emerged from the analysis of interview transcripts and research diary are contemporary forest-based practices, indigenous forest governance, attitudes to forest laws, perceptions of forest officials and oral histories. Many sub-themes emerged accordingly under these broad themes. Archives describing contemporary forest-based practices are channelled into writing about the livelihoods of the forest villagers and forest-based beliefs contributing largely to Chapter -5. They also informs about the ongoing subtle forms of resistance that are featured in Chapter -6. Materials related to indigenous forest governance are instrumental in writing about traditional institutions and their adherence to these institutions. Attitudes to forest laws are instrumental in writing about perceptions of forest villagers on conservation, forest regulaltions such as the timber ban and FRA. Themes constituting perception of forest officials add to articulation of villagers' participation in conservation and narratives about timber ban. The oral histories contribute largely to forest villagers' place-making through memories and cultural references. They are instrumental in writing about colonial resistance that had its origin in the Village Forests.

As geographers have been taking up the path of decolonising ethnography in which research is considered as a collaboration rather than appropriation, participant observers have to be cautious not to give direct relevance to the marginalised communities. This is mainly concerned with communities who have to undergo everyday lived experiences under surveillance and policing of the forest department. In an attempt to protect the privacy of the marginalised, attention has been given not to give direct reference to the marginalised interviewees. The identities of the interviewees are kept anonymous. Naming the interviewees and identifying them by their villages would entail disclosure of their identities in matters related to illegalities in the Village Forests. For instance, while quoting the interview transcripts of the headmen of the Village Forest, the name of the village has been withheld to protect their identities. Direct

reference to their villages by revealing the name of their villages would mean breaking the trust of the marginalised community who are accountable to the forest department in observing forest laws and restrictions. In addition, the identities of the villagers who participated in the semi-structured interview have been protected by anonymising them. In such cases, the name of their village and their age are revealed.

As observation was used as a technique to take note of social and cultural practices, these were recorded in field diaries. Themes emerging from these records have been summarised and are used as narratives in the main text. Photographs taken from observation have also been used as visual evidence in support of the narratives. The identitities of the forest villagers are protected as photographs included in the analysis are not taken from close distance. No software tools were used to alter the readability and clarity of images.

As secondary data in the form of colonial documents were also gathered from the government archives, analysis of these materials has been in a systematic way. These archival sources are key sources of information that feed the research about colonial forestry and resistance. These archival materials were obtained both in the form of photocopies and in digital format. In the analysis of these materials, the relevant archival materials were arranged according to the emerging themes. Case studies of rebellions and contestations were selected in the process. These were read in detail and relevant information such as quotes have been extracted. These quotes have been used to support the narratives in the main body of the thesis. The analysis from photocopied files were more efficient as compared to digitised materials as annotations were easier in photocopied materials.

The reading of colonial archives is not a straightforward task. Colonial archives remain silent on various issues, including when issues were not recorded and when records were destroyed deliberately (Stoler, 2002; Fowler *et al.,* 2017). The silence also encompasses colonial petitions by ryots who depended on forests directly or indirectly. Despite the biased record of historical events, Zeman (2023) constructs knowledge from the available archival resources and the same approach is adopted in this thesis. By treating archives as subjects and not as sources (Stoler, 2002), the analysis of archival texts is instrumental in producing meaningful themes. Reading petitions as sources of resistance is challenging particularly when the resisters are treated as

not knowing the rules.[9] Under such colonial stereotyping, complete recording of their petitions are absent in colonial archives. The available sources are in the form of translated summaries that are compressed under one umbrella.

The archival resources were arranged according to the recurring themes that emerged during analysis. There are five broad themes namely, colonial geography of the North-East, forest legislations, colonial forest practices, colonial resistance and post-colonial forest conversions. These themes form the foundations of detailed analysis by producing meaningful sub-themes. Materials constituting the colonial geography of the North-East were important sources in writing about colonial Assam and colonial construction of the region. Under forest legislations, the resources consist of colonial forest regulations such as Drift Timber Rules and Assam River Rules and other legislation such as Inner Line Permit. These also include constitution of reserved and unclassed state forests. These materials and materials constituting colonial geography are widely used in Chapter -1 of this thesis. Materials informing colonial forest practices informed the study of colonial forest-based livelihoods in the region contributing to Chapter -1 of this study. Colonial petitions form an important source of archives for Chapter -6 informing about three forms of resistance namely, open, institutional and subtle forms of resistance. Post-colonial forest conversions inform Chapter -1 on the scenario of forestry in the region and the post-colonial nation state's focus on developing its industries.

3.9 Covid-19 Pandemic and its Impacts

The Covid-19 that began to spread globally in 2020 and assumed pandemic proportions in 2020 had a drastic impact on my research activities. The archival and ethnographic work that was required for my research are based abroad in India were severely delayed by the pandemic. Figure 3.1 shows the overview of the impacts of pandemic over two years of my PhD period (2020-21). The nationwide lockdown in India caused several delays in my research. The lockdown delayed the archival work in Guwahati. The first phase of lockdown was imposed from 24th March for 21 days limiting the movement of the entire population as a preventive measure against Covid-19 pandemic. After the first phase, three more phases of lockdown were imposed until the 31st of May. This had a severe impact on my fieldwork plans.

[9] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Working of the Forest Rules in Assam, From the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, To the Secretary of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.1396, 31st March, 1887.

3.9.1 Impact on archival work at New Delhi

During the course of my archival work in New Delhi, Covid-19 had started to spread in the city. This caused me to work under mental pressure so as to complete the archival work before the lockdown. In that tensed situation, archival work had to be done under the pressure of upcoming lockdown. This meant that materials that were given for requisition had to be viewed under pressure and some files could not be viewed because they were yet to be produced as the number of files allowed for requisition is restricted to 10 files per day. Apart from working under stressful conditions, the photocopies of the archival materials could not be collected in timeas the archives had to be closed because of the lockdown. They were eventually collected in the month of August 2021 before leaving the country, meaning that I could not consult or work on them during my 16 months stay in India after Covid-19 impacts.

3.9.2 Impact on archival work at Assam State Archives

Archival work at ASA could not be conducted due to its closure on account of nationwide lockdown in India that began in the month of May 2020. The closure continued until the month of December 2020. During the period of closure, emails were sent to the archive enquiring about the possible reopening of the archives to find out about the reopening of archives. The work could only be conducted from mid-January that was far behind the original plan that was scheduled for the month of April and May 2020. Impacts were further experienced with the reduction of staff members at the archives due to the pandemic. This resulted in the reduction of total number of requisitions allowed in a day that was reduced to five files. In addition, research scholars were allowed to work only on alternative days to maintain social distancing in the months of April and May that resulted in further delay of archival work.

3.9.3 Impact on ethnographic work at Baghmara Reserved Forest

The ethnographic work in Baghmara Reserved Forest could not be conducted as per the schedule. The ethnographic work started only in the month of June 2020 was originally scheduled for the month of May. This was because of Covid-19 inter-district travel restrictions due to which I was confined at home. This delay caused several more delays as by the time I had secured rapport with the forest villagers in the beginning of August, it was already the peak

of the monsoon rains. The rains disrupted my fieldwork plans as the roads are prone to landslides and flash floods whenever there is incessant rain. In addition, the months of August and September are the months of peak agricultural activities such as ploughing of land and transferring of seedlings, owing to which most of the villagers are away from their homes. Due to Covid-19, the entry exit points at the international border between India and Bangladesh became stringent to outsiders, because of which on numerous occasions I was not allowed to enter the Village Forests that added to my delay in my ethnographic work.

3.9.4 Impact on the archival work at the British Library, London, UK

The archival work at the British Library, London was scheduled for the month of August and September 2020. However, it was delayed because of the Covid-19 nationwide lockdown in 2020 and its continuation in states like Assam led to the severe delay in the archival work in London. The archival and ethnographic works in India was completed only by July 2021. It took me another month to secure my second dose of covid-19 vaccination and could return to the UK only in the month of September 2021. Upon arrival, the ongoing pandemic entailed me to undergo quarantine for 10 days. Considering all these delays, further archival work was not undertaken at the British Library, the decision being made to focus on the rich material gathered in India.

Chapter 4

Colonial Forest Policy: Geography and its Continuities

4.1 Introduction

The making of colonial forest landscapes in colonial Assam had its roots in the East India Company's interest in the region and the discovery of tea-plants called *Camellia Sinensis* in Assam. This was followed by leasing of lands to the European planters for commercial production of tea in the region (Saikia, 2008). It was done by means of various legal enactments by which the forested tracts were leased out to British planters who eventually became the legal owners of these vast forested tracts. Assam was administered under the province of Bengal until 1874 when a separate province of Assam was established. As such, the first Inspector-General of Forests was appointed in 1864 under Bengal but the colonial administration started to exercise its rights over the forest resources of the region with the establishment of separate forest department in Assam in 1874. Prior to the management of forests by the Assam provincial administration, the Government forests in Assam which sanctioned provisions under Act VII of 1865, either as 'reserves' or 'open forests' were managed under the Bengal Forest Rules sanctioned by the Supreme Government in the Public Works Department.[10] During the 1870's, after the Forest Survey and Working-plan Department was formed in October 1872, there were survey and demarcation drives conducted by the Topographical Survey Department.[11] These eventually led to maps being made of the forests in Assam.[12] With the establishment of provincial government in Assam in 1874, the forest department was created under the provisions of the Indian Forest Act, 1865.

This chapter provides an overview of colonial and post-colonial forest legislations with a focus on particular forest policies distinct to colonial Assam with an objective to unpack the making of colonial forestry in Assam. It contributes to two streams of narratives. Firstly, it adds to Saikia's (2011) interpretation of forestry in colonial Assam that large-scale removal of forest resources in Assam did not take place prior to British introduction of scientific forestry for

[10] Assam State Archives, Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1875-76, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1876, p. 2.

[11] Assam State Archives, Operations of the Forest Survey, Assam Secretariat, Revenue, Forests B, Nos. 19, September 1875, p.2.,

[12] Assam State Archives, Progress Report of Forest Administration in Assam for 1877-78, p. 2.

commercialisation. Trade in forest produces was not new to the people in the region as forest produce from the region reached the markets in Calcutta through Goalpara in the west of Assam. However, the prevailing state of trade did not result in massive exploitation of forest resources backed by the introduction of scientific forestry and monopolisation of forest-based trade. These culminated in extensive policing of the region with enacting of Assam River Rules and Drift Timber Rules under the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 under the provision of the Indian Forest Act of 1878. Secondly, it adds to understanding that forest policies in colonial Assam were formulated based on the geographical distinctiveness of the region.

4.2 Assam in the Colonial Records

The unpacking of Assam in term of its physical features and forests is important prior to discussion of colonial forest administration and particular policies distinct to the region. The Imperial Gazetteers provide a detailed account of the physical features of the region that were meant to act as guidelines to the colonial administrators. This Gazetteers in turn, help in understanding colonial narratives of the geographies of the region. The province of Assam was divided into three natural divisions, namely, the valley of the Surma or Barak, the valley of the Brahmaputra or Assam proper and the intervening range of hills. Figure 4.1 shows a map of colonial Assam constructed in 1908. The Surma Valley is a flat plain that was described to be 124 miles long and 60 miles wide, surrounded by ranges of hills on three sides. The source of the river after which the valley is named, originates from the southern slopes of the mountain ranges on the borders of the Naga Hills District and flows through the Manipur Hills. The river Surma flows into Cachar District where it divides into two branches on the western boundary of Cachar. The western end of the valley lies very low and at Sylhet, the low water level of the Surma is only 22.7 feet above the sea. The banks of the river are raised by the silt deposits.[13]

[13] *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vo. VI, Argaon to Bardwan, Clarendon Press, 1908, pp. 15-16.

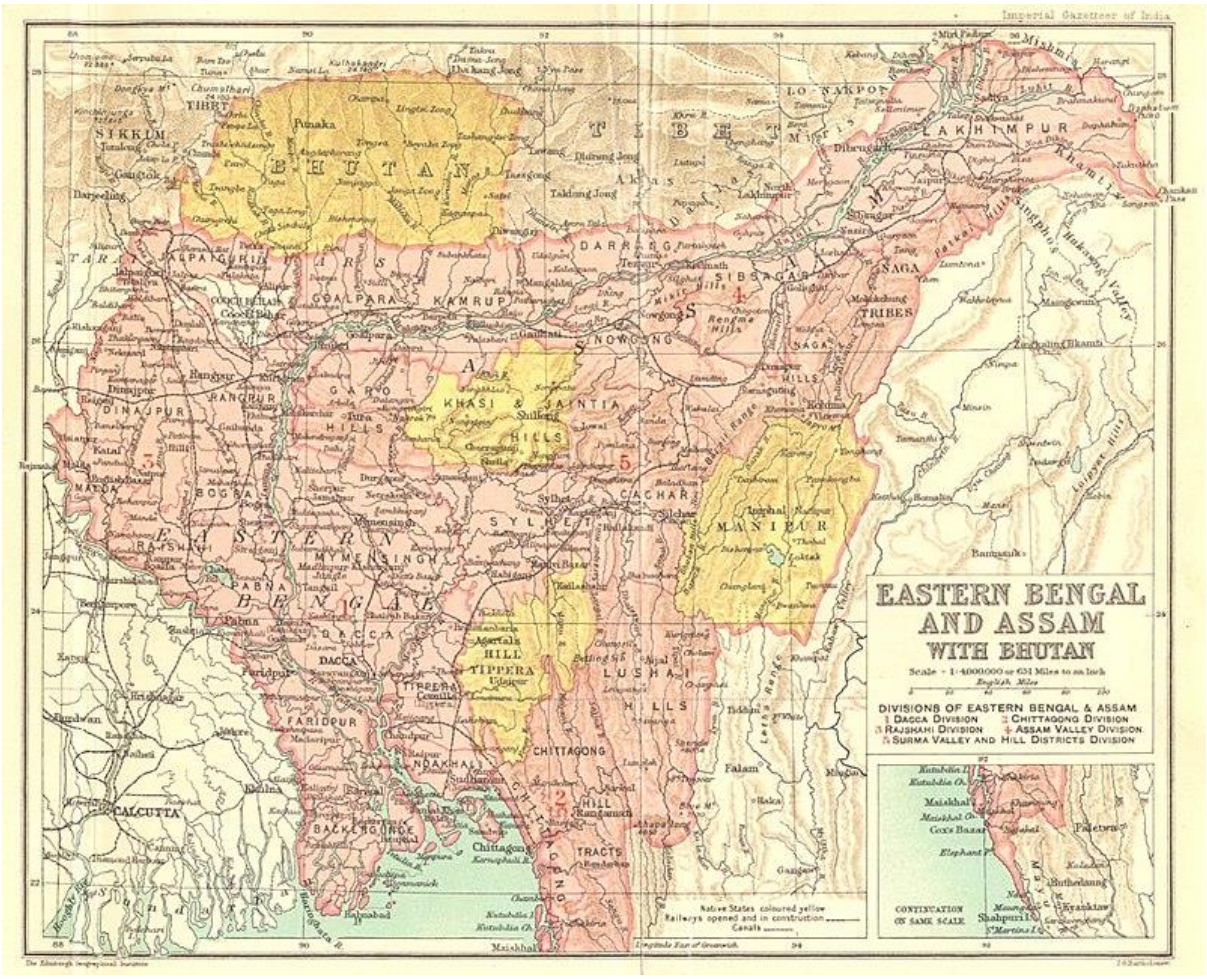


Figure 4.1: Map of Eastern Bengal and Assam with Bhutan in 1909

Source: Bartholomew, J. G. (1909). *Eastern Bengal and Assam with Bhutan; In Meyer, W. S., Burn, R., Cotton, J. S. and Risley, H. H. The Imperial Gazetteer of India.* Clarendon Press, Oxford.

The Brahmaputra Valley, on the other hand, is described to be comparatively more extensive than the Surma valley and it is about 45miles in length surrounded on the sides by hills. The Brahmaputra flows through the centre of the plain and is fed by the Himalayas on the north, and Assam range on the South. The major rivers that feed Brahmaputra are also mentioned. The principal tributaries on the north bank are Dibang, Dihang, Dhansiri, Subansiri, Manas, Bhareli, Barnadi and others. On the south, the main affluents are Noa, Buri Dihing, Jhanzi, Disang, Dikho and Dhansiri. This valley is an alluvial plain of fairly uniform breadth except in the centre where the Mikir Hills project from the main mass of the Assam range. Brahmaputra through the greater part of its course is bounded on either side by stretches of marsh land covered with thick grass jungle with prevalent cultivation of crops such as mustard and summer

rice in scattered patches. The sites of permanent cultivation were recorded in the interior part of the valley, where the plain was covered with rice-fields. Most parts of the valley supported a dense population. At the foot of the hills, the cultivation of rice started to fall off. The uncultivated portions of the valley are described to be usually covered with forest, or with grass and reeds.[14]

Another physical feature taken into note by the Imperial Gazetteer is the range of mountains that separate the two valleys at right angles from the Burmese system. The tallest peaks in each range is mentioned. For instance, the peak of Nokrek that attains the height of 4,600 feet at its western end above the station of Tura. It is described as characterised by sharply serrated ridges and deep valleys that were covered with forests. Shillong peak is another peak that attains the height of 6,450 feet where the range is dotted with clumps of oak and pine. The highest point in the east is also described in the colonial account and is recorded to be at Japvo situated on the borders of Naga Hills District. The hill sides on this range are covered with forests. The fallowing jhums on this range are covered with dense bamboo or grass jungle. The Lushai Hills, that runs parallel to Assam Range is describes to be bamboo jungle and open grass-covered sloped in the eastern portion accompanied with groves of oak and pine. Manipur, which was not a part of colonial administration was narrated as composed of fertile valley that covers an area of about 650 square mile surrounded by ranges of hills.[15]

For administration purpose, Assam was divided into three divisions, namely, a) the Brahmaputra Valley that included the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur, b) Surma Valley that comprised districts of Cachar and Sylhet, and c) Areas under political control including the hill districts of Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and Naga Hills. Lushai Hills and Manipur were not a part of British forest administration (Bhattacharjee, 2016). However, North Lushai Hills became a part of the colonial administration and were placed under the administration of the Chief Commissioner of Assam towards the end of the 19th century in 1895.[16] The British forest administration included the present states of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and parts of Mizoram and the present day Assam but it did not penetrate every nook and corner of the mentioned areas. The

[14] Ibid
[15] Ibid
[16] Assam State Archives, Revenue-A, Levy of duty on timber imported from the North Lushai Hills, From Denzil Ibbetson, Secretary to the Government of India, To the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 100, 4th February 1986.

present day states of Tripura and Manipur were monarchical units and were not included in the jurisdiction of the area termed as 'Assam'. The colonial administration had limited control in Goalpara that was controlled by the Zamindars (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

The uncultivated portions of Assam Valley are described to be covered with forest or with grass and reeds. At the western end of the valley, the prevalent species of trees are identified as sal (*Shorea robusta*). In the farther east, the forests are described to be evergreen where the chief species are *Amoora*, *Michelia*, *Magnolia*, *Stereospermum*, *Quercus*, Castanopis, *Ficus* and *Mesua*. The greater part of Assam Range is described to be under the cover of dense tree forest or bamboo jungle. However, the Khasi plateau is described as a distinct zone in terms of its species that is covered with groves of oak and pine. The flora of Naga Hills was found similar to that of Khasi Hills in many respects while that flora of Lushai Hills is described to be the part of Burmese system.[17] Figure 4.2 shows the distribution of forests in Assam based on Wilhelm Schlich's description of forests in Assam. The map depicts some stretches of land along the Brahmaputra river to be covered with bush and small wood and most of the lands along the river as cultivable lands. Most part of Assam are shown to be under forest cover, divided into lower hill and upper hill forests.

[17] *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, The Indian Empire, Vol. III, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1908, p. 19.

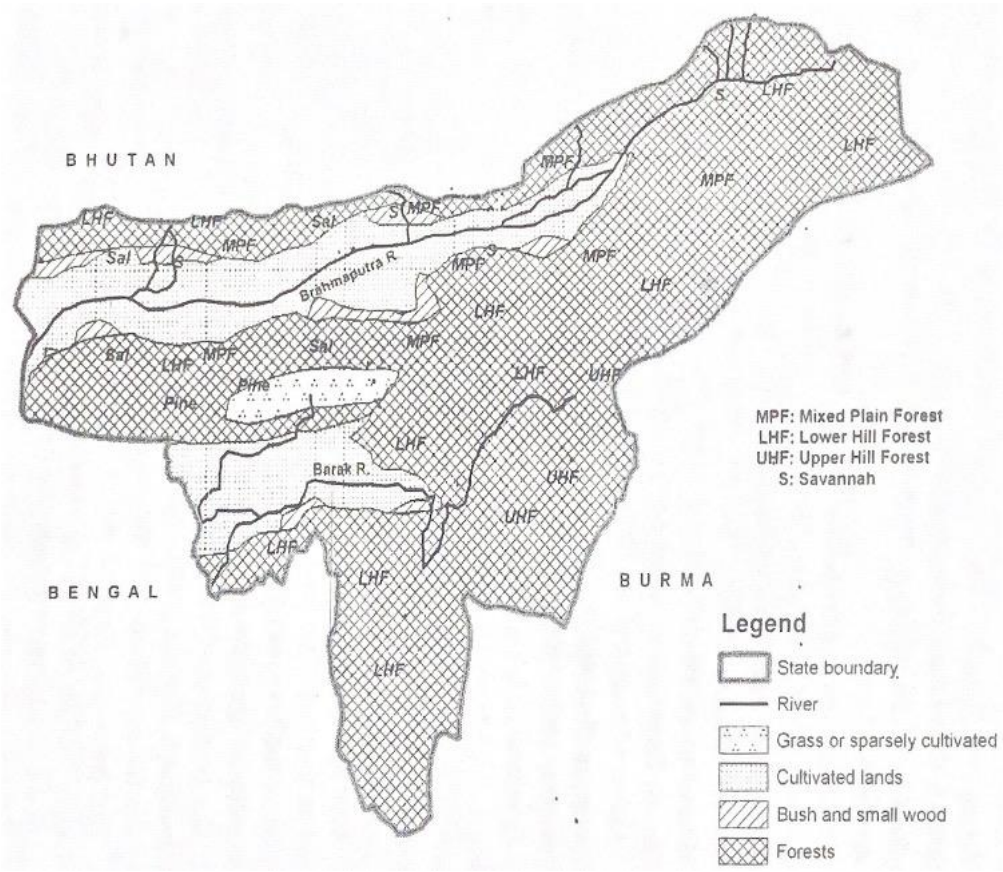


Figure 4.2: Map showing distribution of forests in Assam. Based on Wilhelm Schilch's descriptions of Assam during 1870s

Source: Saikia, A. (2011). *Forest and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000. Courtesy; Prasanta Bhattacharya.* Oxford University Press. p. 58.

4.3 History of Categorisation

The 'frontier tribes' are often called 'hill tribes' in colonial forest-related administration. The history and geography of the making of the contemporary identities of these tribes is a complex one. In colonial histories (Kar, 2016),'tribes' were depicted using terms that are blatantly racist such as 'savage', 'wild', 'primitive' and 'backward'. The term attached with 'tribe is 'adivasi' and being 'adivasi' is often confused with being 'tribal' and are used interchangeably (Prasad, 2022).'Adivasi', means original inhabitants, a term that cannot be found in any early epigraphy or texts. It is rather a modern Hindi translation of the English word 'aborigine' (Chatterjee, 2016). The Adivasis portray themselves as distinct from the Scheduled Tribes. According to the Adivasis, the term 'scheduled' has its foundation in the colonial framework of categorisation, that came into use in the late 19th century when the scheduled (tribal) areas were

identified by the colonial government (Savyasaachi, 1998). The state-recognised category of Scheduled Tribes that constitutes most of the tribes of NEI, was defined as a group of people possessing primitiveness, distinctive culture and as geographically isolated. With Indian independence, these hill tribes continued to be a prime category of governance with the introduction of tribe-specific allocations and developments (Wouters, 2022). The states of NEI have high concentration of tribal populations out of which, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh are often referred to as tribal states. Although I do intend to dissect the origin and evolution of the term and terminologies of tribe in detail, I am driven towards trajectory of tribe as a category of governance in the colonial and post-colonial forest policies to understand the places of tribal forest users in such policies. This is discussed below.

The categorisation and subject-making of the original inhabitants of tracts that the deemed important for commercial forestry took place during the British colonial regime (Bose *et al.*, 2012). With the establishment of colonial forests in the frontier region, the autonomous, self-sufficient and independent forest users and so called original inhabitants were not only placed under a heavily capitalised economy but their subjective identities were also constructed. The pre-colonial economy of the indigenous communities in Assam constituted slash-and-burn agriculture, commonly known as shifting cultivation. It was accompanied by hunting and gathering barter exchanges with Tibet and the plains of Assam (Harris-White *et al.*, 2009). The establishment of reserved forests and demarcation of the forest boundaries produced a particular discourse in forest administrative reports and proceedings that differentiated hill dwelling communities from the colonialists. As jhum cultivation was perceived as 'destructive' to commercially valuable timber and forests in colonial Assam, a series of efforts were made to discourage shifting cultivation (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). The conservators themselves were engaged in visits to jhum fields to produce reports of the destruction done. According to the report on timber in North Cachar, H.G. Young, the Sub-Assistant Conservator of Forests in Cachar Division, the probable estimate of destruction of forests was made based on the mere observations of the remaining trunks and stumps of large trees on the jhum fields apparently cultivated by the Kukis. The 'tag' was given to the Kukis as the most destructive to timber of all the hill tribes in the report.[18]

[18] British Library, Home Department, Report on the Forests in North Cachar, Report on the Timber in North Cachar visited by H.G. Young, Esq., Sub-Assistant Conservator of Forests, Cachar Division, No. 12, July 1882.

During the 1860s, marginalised castes and tribes were grouped as 'Depressed Classes' (Revankar, 1971). In 1919, the Indian Franchise committee created a separate sub-category within the Depressed Classes to recognise the identity of ethnic minority groups for the provision of jobs. The Government of India (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1936 contained a list of castes for reservation of seats in educational institutions and creation of government jobs. This list was inclusive of the tribal communities whose forest claims the colonial government granted as rights. In terms of administration, the Government of India Act 1935 declared areas with high concentration of tribes as 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' areas and were placed under provincial governance as opposed to central legislature. These provisions were reapplied into the Indian Constitution after independence through the Scheduled Tribes Order 1950. Henceforth, these tribes were categorised as 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST) under this act (Kijama, 2006). This categorisation also led to reservation of seats in the parliament, education institutions and government jobs. The term 'Scheduled Tribe' at present is widely in use in India in both economic and cultural contexts to indicate that these groups are 'backward' and 'endangered' (Haokip, 2016; Elliott, 2019). STs are often referred to as 'Adivasis' which is a Hindi term meaning 'original inhabitants' has been used by many groups and scholars (Rycroft and Dasgupta, 2011). An English translation of the term Adivasi which is 'indigenous' is also used in India but its uses has many oppositions (Elliott, 2019).

Whilst in settler nations such as Australia, the ongoing evolution of tradition and its resultant transformations have caused negotiations, selective appropriations and appropriations (Shaw *et al.*, 2006), the policies in non-settler countries such as India have also had selective policies for the tribes during the colonial and postcolonial period. Both the colonial and post-colonial governmentality of the British and the Indian states respectively have changed the outlook of indigenous people and played an important role in them identifying as citizens of the state. The ST status that was introduced by the Scheduled Tribes Order, 1950 has become a matter of political privilege as well as contestation. For instance, there are many ethnic groups in NEI who have sought recognition as 'Scheduled Tribes'. When the amendment to the Constitution of Scheduled Tribes Order, 1950 was introduced in the Rajya Sabha on 9th January 2019 by the Minister of Tribal Affairs to grant Scheduled Tribe status to six communities in Assam, the existing STs came in solidarity to resist the move of the Union cabinet. The Coordination committee of Tribal Organizations of Assam (CCTOA) issued a 12-hour hour state-wide shut down on 11th January 2019 as a mark of protest. The CCTOA held that the aim of the Union ministry to grant new tribal status would place "genuine tribal people" at the risk of elimination

(Business Standard, 2019). Thus, resistant moves from the existing STs indicate that the post-independence assigned provisions for the STs have become important status for the existing STs. As such, there are reservation of seats in central and state government jobs and in the central and state educational institutions for the STs, which is why the ST status is sought by the non-ST communities due to the existing reservation quota.

4.4 The Indigenous Tribes, their Conquests and Negotiations: An Overview

The Imperial Gazetteer of India provides an account of the conquest of Assam and areas resided by certain indigenous tribes by the British. It involved a series of conquests and annexations. By the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the Burmese ceded Assam to the East India Company. In the process, the people who lived in the plains were under direct rule by the British. The Moamaris who lived in the South of Lakhimpur district were left to be governed under their own ruler. The Bor Senapati and the Sadiya-Khowa Gohain or the Khamti chief of Sadiya were brought under the Company's feudatory. After the demise of Bor Senapati, the area was annexed by the British. Similarly, the Raja of the Jaintia was dispossessed of his estates in the plains and eventually he was deprived of his hill territory due to his inability to manage his possession. The Khasi Hills located to the west were brought under colonial rule in 1833. However, the people were left in a state of quasi-independence under the governance of their own rulers with the exception of a few villages that were put under colonial governance for special reasons. Among such areas was Shillong, which was the capital of the province. The occupation of Naga Hills was a gradual process that was intentionally pursued to protect the British subjects from the Naga raids. The last Naga area that was brought under the British control in Naga Hills was in 1904 when the area inhabited by the Angamis was annexed. As far as Garo Hills is concerned, it remained a part of Goalpara district until 1869 when it was formed into a separate district. The Garos who constantly raided the adjoining plains were brought into subjection in 1872-73 with the establishment of police outposts.[19]

Likewise, the establishment of colonial scientific forestry in Assam involved a series of process in which certain negotiations and policies had to be pursued in dealing with what the British referred to as 'frontier tribes' or 'aboriginal tribes'. The frontier areas inhabited by the frontier tribes, entangled between the outer mostly 'unmapped' boundary and amendable inner

[19] *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Argaon to Bardwan, Vol. VI, Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1908, p.33-34.

intermittently surveyed boundary of the British empire were also capitalised regions in terms of the involvement of commercial companies in extracting the region's resources (Kar, 2016). The history of the making of colonial and post-colonial forests in the frontier region is also the history of British relations with the frontier tribes during the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the process of building the colonial empire in Assam and in acquiring lands, the politics of agreement and negotiation with the frontier tribes was crucial. It is difficult to comprehend as to why the tribal chiefs agreed to or insisted on contractual agreements with the British. During the second half of the 19th century, written agreement involving a signature and oath-taking was in practice in that revealed the contractual practice during the colonial rule in North-East frontier. A practice known as '*posa*' was also another form of colonial agreement that is instrumental in understanding the relationship between the frontier tribes and the British in the North-East frontier. It was an annual payment made to the hill tribes in fulfilment of the explicit demands of their joint proprietary rights in their soil by the frontier tribes (Kar, 2016).

The frontier tribes residing in the upper part of the Brahmaputra valley such as the Minyongs were also at a receiving end of the posa, although the payment was in kind. Similarly, the Bor abors also came into the same kind of agreement with the British. Although the Minyongs showed their contempt for the agreement later on, they continued to receive posa from the British that was converted into a money payment in the year 1878.[20] The Abors were the frontier tribe, whose behaviour the British were suspicious of during the triangulation survey of the upper part of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1876. The Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Lakhimpur Major Clark and his successor Lieutenant-Colonel Graham by means of demi-official correspondence had alerted Lieutenant Keatinge about the likely disturbance in the survey of the north banks of the Brahmaputra.[21] Based on the frontier tribes report for 1873-75, the period when the province of Assam was created, it was found that Miris, Mishmis, Singphos, Garos, Khasias, at present known as Khasis, and Kukis were reported to have a peaceful and friendly relation with the British. However, the relationship of the Nagas with the British was not cordial. The Nagas grew suspicious of the survey conducted in the Naga Hills

[20] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Policy to be pursued in dealing with the Abors and other tribes in habiting the hills to the north of the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract, No. 33-38, June 1908, p.1.

[21] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Reporting our relations with the Abor tribes, No. 310-318 A, August 1877. pp. 1-2.

district that resulted in the massacre of Captain Butler of the survey party in 1875.[22] This is discussed in detail in Chapter -6.

According to the treaties of 1863-66, free trade and intercourse between hills and plains were allowed in the upper Brahmaputra Valley and a recognition of the possibility of the hillsmen cultivating was allowed in the plains upon payment of revenue.[23] However, all these proved to be in vain as the Abors continued to collect revenue from the saw mill companies for timber and never allowed plainsmen to their hills other than Miris. As such, these kinds of inter-tribal feuds outside the Inner Line were left unattended by the British and it was emphasised that conflicts within the Inner Line were to be taken under scrutiny. For instance, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in his letter clearly stated that the British were to interfere in inter-tribal outrages only if the outrages involved British subjects, violated the inner line and brought danger to the people inside the Inner line by the proximity of disturbance.[24]

The Abors were also at a receiving end of *posa* from the British that was originally the contribution the Bhuteas, Daphlas, Miris and other hillsmen levied from the plains. The *posa* that the Abors received was of a different nature, that was more of a subsidy paid by the British to secure peace on the frontier. Initially the payments were in kind but it in 1878, money payments were made. It could be seen that no such difficulties were encountered with other hillsmen such as the Mishmis. With the extortion of money from the saw mill companies and the alleged 'improvident' and 'ignorant' felling of trees by the Abors, the colonial Government was convinced to put an end to posa. Rather, it was deemed ideal by J. E. Webster to give presents to those headmen who behaved well.[25]

The introduction of Regulation I of 1873 marked a crucial breakthrough in the relation of the British and the frontier tribes that prohibited outsiders from passing to villages beyond the inner

[22] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Report on our relations with frontier tribes (Assam) for 1873-74 & 1874-75, Nos. 103-104, April 1876, pp.1-12

[23] Policy to be pursued with the Abors and other tribes to the North of the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract, Foreign Department, External-A, Nos. 11-17, December 1908, p. 4, National Archives of India.

[24] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, External-A, Relations of the British Government with the Naga tribes adjacent to the boundary of the Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, and Naga Hills Districts, Nos. 389-394, October 1884, pp. 3-4.

[25] National archives of India, Policy to be pursued in dealing with the Abors and other tribes inhabiting the hills to the North of the Dibruagarh Frontier Tract, External-A, June 1908, Nos. 33-38, p.1.

line.[26] This is discussed in detail in a separate segment below. In this way, policies for the hills people dwelling in the hills were different from the plains people residing in the plains. This restricting line also regulated the territories of Abors and other tribes residing to the north of Dibrugarh Frontier district as the outsiders were not allowed to enter these territories. As per the Inner Line, no revenue was collected from the tribes residing in the hills.[27]

4.5 Multiple Garo Identity

Since the colonial period the Garos have been subjects of identity construction. The post-colonial Scheduled Tribes Order 1950 recognised Garos as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and at present they are identified as one of the STs of India. The ethnographic element of this study is based on this ethnic group, which is one of the few surviving matrilineal tribes in the world. In an attempt to preserve tribal distinctiveness, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides for certain areas to exist as autonomous entities (Choudhury, 2016). The Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) is one such autonomous body that was created in April 1952 (The Shillong Times, 2015). Predominantly seen as the amalgam of 'otherness', tribes such as Garos did not originally practise Hinduism or Islam and were not integrated into modern economy or civilisation during the colonial period. The measure of setting up Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) was consistent with the post-independent India's policy of integration with protectionist measures as opposed to policies of assimilation into a liberal Indian state. With the policy's development tracing to the 1920's, the approach of tribal 'distinctiveness' proposed by Verrier Elwin (Stuligross, 1999; Wahi and Bhatia, 2018) in a motive to provide political and social autonomy was adopted. It provides for self-governance and protection of their customary rights and traditions, land and property. This ADC approach has become a matter of tribal legacy and pride as it is considered as the body that frames customary rights for the respective ADCs.

With the granting of statehood of Meghalaya in 1972, the Garos became one of the majority tribes of the newly created state along with the Khasis and Jaintias. With the provision of the Sixth Schedule, the ownership of land by the tribals have been protected, restricting the state

[26] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Political-A, Report on our relations with frontier tribes (Assam) for 1873-74 & 1874-75, No.103-103, April 1876, p.12.

[27] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, External-A, Policy to be pursued with the Abors and other tribes to the North of the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract, Nos. 11-17, December 1908, p. 10.

ownership of land (Haokip, 2013; Soreide, 2017). With this provision, the sale of land to the outsiders is prohibited. It also came with other provisions such as reservation for government jobs, exemption from income tax and obligatory inclusion of the tribals in the state legislative assembly (Maaker, 2020). There have been changing patterns in the ownership of land with 60% of it being owned by private individuals (Baruah, 2013). However, it needs to be reiterated that the reserved forest and Village Forests contained in the reserves are under the direct control of the government.

Colonial and post-independence constructions of identities are crucial in understanding where Garos are placed in terms of their administration and provisions granted by the state leading to certain discourse and perceptions about them. With multiple identities attached to them, the traditional tracing and identification of unilineality is central to the Garos. Among the Garos, unilineality is traced through exogamous matrilineal clans (Nakane, 1967). There are five broadly identified clans among the Garos, namely, Sangma, Marak, Momin, Shira and Arengh. This classification of clans that forms an integral social organisation among the Garos is called chatchi. Hence, it forms the most important social indentifier among them. The Garos were believed to be far from having a legal framework despite the existence of political structures (Scott, 2009). Legality in the case of the Garos is closely related to customary principles. These customary laws play an important role in the life of the Garos determing matters related to marriage, divorce and inheritance. Customary principleas are passed on by senior kinsmen and kinswomen orally.

Another dimension of looking at the construction of Garo identities is in term of their conversion from indigenous religious practice to Christianity. Through the coming of American Baptist Missionaries to the Garo Hills region, followed by the Roman Catholic Mission, identities were created through conversions from indigenous beliefs and practices (Makeer, 2007; Ghosh, 2011). Christianity in the state of Meghalaya constitutes 74.57 percent of the total polulation (Population Census, 2011). Among Garo communities, a majority of the population follows Christianity and those who practise indigenous religious rites and rituals have become a minority. Christians constitute the majority in the South Garo Hills district where the fieldsites are situated. They account for 93.3 % of the total population (Population Census, 2011). Construction of churches and their beautification has become an agenda in every area. In the Village Forests of Baghmara, the construction of churches was evident in every village the ethnographic work was conducted.

Although Garos are recognised as ST and have their own ADC, they are in constant fear that their identities are at risk. Garo identity is complex at the present time. In a move to codify Garo customary laws in the Garo Hills region, the GHADC passed the Garo Customary Bill, 2009 on 29th March 2017 to implement a uniform set of customary laws across all clans and villages. As per the law, any person born of a legal marriage between a non-Garo father and a Garo mother cannot be called a 'Garo' even if he/she take the family name or Ma·chong of her/his mother. Likewise, a person born of a Garo father and a non-Garo mother cannot be called a 'Garo' (The Shillong Times, 2017). This has caused resentment, particularly among the 'Mothers' Union' in West Garo Hills district who claimed it to be discriminatory and filed a petition to the Governor not to give his assent to the bill. However, the Garo Students' Union (GSU) were in favour of the bill, as this will prevent non-tribals acquiring lands through marriage (Saikia, 2022). As the passing of this bill would not grant the 'Scheduled Tribe' status to the children born of a wedlock between the Garo and the non-Garo, this bill is seen as a mechanism to prevent non-Garos from acquiring lands. The enactment of this bill into an act has been withheld until today.

Since the colonial period, Garos have been subjected to complex laws, policies and administrative strictures. From calling them a 'frontier tribe' during the colonial period to assigning them as ST is an example of this. Thus, in many invisible ways, their identity had been shaped and are being made from colonial until the present time.

4.6 'Forest': The Main Source of Livelihood

In the hilly and forested areas of colonial Assam, shifting cultivation was the main form of agriculture where plots were burned and left fallow for some years to allow rejuvenation and replenishment of soil and lost nutrients (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). The Imperial Gazetteers described shifting cultivation as a nomadic agricultural practice where patches of forests were burned down in areas where the amount of rainfall and soil are favourable. It is known as *taungya* in Burma, *dahya* in Central India, *kumri* in the Western Ghats and *jhum* in Assam. Rice, maize, millets, oilseeds and cotton are described to be the main crops grown under nomadic cultivation. It was in practice by majority of the hill tribes.[28] In contrast to shifting agriculture in the hills, in the low-lying lands of Assam valley, permanent cultivation was done

[28] Ibid, pp. 24-25.

where rice was grown in April or May and reaped in the month of November. Beyond this lowland is the sub-montane tract that is higher than the lowlands where crops were grown.[29] The areas settled by the Tangkuls and Angamis in the Naga Hills are too high in elevation for jhum cultivation and instead, terraced rice farming was done in which terraces were built up with stone-retaining walls at different levels and irrigated by skilfully designed channels that distribute water over every terrace. Terraced-rice farming and irrigated rice farming in the valleys were also practised in the Khasi Hills district.[30]

Apart from jhum cultivation and settled agriculture, there was a distinct professional class of woodcutters in the forests of western Assam. In the Southern banks of Brahmaputra, there were lumbers who were also known as *Mechies* who were also engaged in cultivation. Saikia also mentions the Garos who lived in close proximity to the Mechies who were involved in felling and removal of timber. The control of timber trader was in the hands of headmen or *daffadors* (Saikia, 2011). Another distinct form of livelihood during the colonial regime related to timber is a boat-making business prevalent in proximity of Lakhimpur inner line. Boats and canoes were dug out of trees and that was the only way forest produce was exported from the forests of Lakhimpur. This boat-cutting was rather done in a systematic way in which trees were felled in the forests during the cold season. The roughly-shaped boats were then transported during the first flood and brought to the villagers via rivers. These were further opened out and put to a finish by native artisans. These boats were cut in largest numbers by the Miris that was followed the Abors, then the Mishmis, Singphos and Khamptis, and Assamese and Dooms. [31] These boats were dug out from trees such as Sam (*Artocarpus Chama*), Mekoi (Shorea assamica) and Poma (Toona Celiate). Hallock (*Portulaca oleracia*) were used for small and medium sized boats.[32]

From the above discussion, it is clear that people during the colonial period in Assam lived in close dependence on forests and forest resources. As such, the livelihood strategies of people, particularly of the hill tribes were dependent on natural resources such as land and forests. This close connection and dependence on nature and forests perceived as destructive towards forest resources by the colonial surveyors and administrators. This perception was particularly

[29] *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Argaon to Bardwan, Clarendon Press, Vol. VI, 1908, pp. 54-55.
[30] Ibid, p.56.
[31] British Library, Home Department Proceedings, Timber Cutting beyond Lakhimpur Inner Line, April 1882, p.59.
[32] Ibid, p. 60

directed towards the jhum system, which was the main form of agriculture in the hilly and forested areas of colonial Assam, which is still prevalent in some corners of present-day NEI (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). The colonial administrators started opposing jhum and was regarded as unlucrative and perceived it as the most destructive of all practices by the British administrators. There came a series of efforts to discourage shifting cultivation that started during the 1860's in the present day Madhya Pradesh (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). Gustav Mann who was the Deputy Conservator of Forests in Assam percieved the agricultural activities inside the forests as an issue of worry. With a disregard to shifting cultivation, he pushed for urgent need for conservation of forests on various occasions (Saikia, 2011). In colonial Assam, the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 prohibited jhum cultivation, kindling of fires and prescribed certain measures to be taken to prevent the spread of fire and prohibited quarrying activity, burning of lime and charcoal. This also regulated cutting of grass and cattle grazing (Handique, 2004).

4.7 Colonial Forest Acts and Indigenous Forest Rights

Prior to the passing of the Indian Forest Act, 1878, the rules were gazetted under Rule 7 of Part II of the Bengal Rules and Section 2 of Forest Act 1865 that was followed by Assam Forest Rules of 1876 (Handique, 2004). This was the first Forest Act that empowered the state to declare any forested tract to be brought under colonial management provided that the act did not abrogate the existing rights of the individuals or communities. This led to transformation of the customary rights of the communities into 'privileges'. The consolidation of colonial control over forests was made with this Forest Act of 1865 that restricted the public use of species useful for railway sleepers and other commercial purposes (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Thus, any forested tract under governmental control was impacted by this act (Kulkarni, 1987; Tripathi, 2016).

This act was followed by the passing of Forest Act of 1878, which was more comprehensive than the earlier act. It extended the state's authority over forests. The monopoly over forests that was in the hands of the colonial government was safeguarded by this act that served as a model for other British colonies (Handique, 2004). This piece of legislation allowed demarcation of large tracts of forests for railways. The monopoly over forested tracts that were under the control of the local rulers were put under colonial control by establishment of customary use of land as a 'privilege' but not as a 'right' (Guha, 1983). With the

implementation of Assam Forest Regulation 1891, it constituted forests into three categories namely, Reserved Forests, Unclassed State Forests and Village Forests (Saikia, 2011). Forest officers were also authorised to enact local rules to conserve forests. (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Under the recommendation of agriculturalist Dr J A Voelcker, the Forest Act of 1865 was strengthened in the Forest Policy Resolution of 1894 to maintain forest cover for the prevention of soil erosion and relevant losses in terms of agricultural production. It aimed to produce the largest amount of timber that was possible and agricultural revenue for Britain alongside subjugating the 'native' village and rights of the forest dependent communities. The legislation based on this advice was known as Voelcker Resolution (Jewitt, 1995).

The Indian Forest Act of 1927 replaced the Indian Forest Act 1878 and allowed the state to acquire lands for the purpose of constitution of forests (Wahi and Bhatia, 2018). This act facilitated the codification of the practices of forest officials and led to the interaction of the forest officials with the forest communities at the grass root level. It restricted shifting cultivation to some extent, as that was perceived as one of the causes of forest depletion. By restricting the community ownership of forests by means of deleting references to communities' rights over forest, it led to change of occupation among various communities (Sengupta, 1988; Tripathi, 2016).

The settlement of forest lands or the processes involved in negotiation with the forest dependent people who lived in the proposed reserved forest or in the vicinity was a crucial part in the establishment of government forests. This settlement process fixed the respective rights of the government and private persons over the forested tracts through a process called forest settlement. It is worth mentioning that the forest rights that were claimed by the traditional users and granted by the colonial authority through forest settlement were viewed as existing rights. In other words, the claims of the individuals or the community over the respective lands were taken into account only if such rights were recorded in the register of the forest deparment to be vested in some person or group of persons who could claim at the time of settlement.[33]

[33] Forestry in British India, by b. Ribbentrop, Inspector-General of Forests to the Government of India, Office of the Superintendent of Government of Government Printing, Calcutta, 1900, pp. 124-125.

With the establishment of a separate forest department, the province of Assam was divided into ten forest divisions, namely, Cachar, Darrang, Garo Hills, Goalpara, Kamrup, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Lakhimpur, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Sylhet. At its outset, forest establishment were not extended to all the districts of the Province. The forest establishment was still in its early phase in the year 1877. There were ongoing proposals to bring the forests of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar under the direct administration of the forest department. No forests in the Garo Hills district was taken up under the direct control of the forest department during the initial stage of Assam as a separate province. In the Lakhimpur district, jhumming that was identified as a threat to forests had been put on check. Most of the colonial government's efforts in forestry were driven towards forest surveys and demarcation of boundaries.[34]

4.8 'Forest' as per Indian Forest Act 1878 and Assam Forest Regulation of 1891

This section explores the making of forests by the colonial Government. The enactments of forest acts gave the colonial administration to demarcate forested tracts as government forests, which this section aims to unpack. As it aims to unpack the making of colonial forests through enacting of forest laws and policies, it seeks to give a detailed account of the Assam Forest Regulation 1891 that was formulated based on the Forest Act of 1878. The Indian Forest Act of 1878 provided for the constitution of reserved forests and protected forests. While the constitution of reserved forest was surrounded by safeguards against the potential infringement of private rights, the 'protected forests' did not offer sufficient stability and protection of the existing private rights.[35] The process that led to the constitution of government forests did not determine the rights of the government and private claimants over the forest and did not describe the ways in which the forests will be managed and administered. A way in which a forest is administered was dictated by local circumstances.[36] The Assam Forest Regulation took into account the geographical features of Assam and the needs emanating from these features that led to the categorisation of three forests, namely, reserved forests and unclassed state forests and village forests.

[34] Assam State Archives, Progress Report of Forest Administration in Assam for 1877-78, by Gustav Mann, Conservator of Forests, 1879, pp. 1-3.
[35] *Forestry in British India* by B. Ribbentrop, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1990, p.110.
[36] Ibid, p.123.

Most of the rules prescribed in the Assam Forest Regulation were taken from the Forest Act of 1878. The rules were not just mere abstract classifications but were actual hierarchies that dictated how forests were remade and managed during the colonial period. Secondly, the rules that prescribed under three types of forests contributed to the understanding of the state's reservation of forests as purely a commercial establishment. The discussion of colonial categories of forests aims to bring into light the coloniality of forest spaces with the introduction of stringent forest rules and regulations that regulated people's activities and everyday movements.

4.8.1 Reserved forests regulations

The notion of 'reserves' during the colonial period differs from the post-colonial period. While the reservation system during the post-colonial period is the provision made for the people, the nature of reserves under discussion was colonial-oriented as opposed to people-oriented. In other words, the reserves during the colonial period were made for the colonial government and not for the people. These were called reserves because the land was meant to be reserved from sale and maintained as forest reserves to continually supply the timber requirements of the country and of export trade. As such, the reserved forests were forests intended to be maintained particularly for the supply of timber, fuel and other produce and for the protection of water supply or other similar reasons.[37] The area of reserved forests in Assam for the period of 1897-98 was recorded to be 3590 square miles.[38] As such, reserved forests became a site where certain activities were prescribed as forest offense under the forest laws. These were meant specifically to cater to the needs of the then government's need of timber for development purposes and for the existing trade.[39] The reserved forests became a space of restrictions in and around the forests. Restrictions were in operation to prevent forests from harm through people's activities.

One of the rules laid down under reserved forests in the regulation of 1891targeted shifting cultivation. It was made necessary to provide a prior notice to the Local Range Forest official for burning of jhum. Precautions were also listed to prevent fire beyond the limits of the jhum

[37] Assam State Archives, Revenue-A, Rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, Assam Secretariat, Nos. 70-107, June 1896.
[38] *Forestry in British India* by B. Ribbentrop, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1900, p.122.
[39] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat, Revenue Forests B Forest Legislation, Nos. 44-51, March 1876, p.1

to the neighbouring reserve in the process of burning. Other than rules that governed jhum cultivation, there were rules related to people's movement such as camping on any road passing through a reserved forest or along the boundary of the same unless at such places appointed for camping purposes. It became a restrictive space and prohibited carrying of torches and firebrands and other materials to reserved forests or along its boundary. Inflicting injury to trees by fire or otherwise was prohibited alongside activities including quarry stone, burning lime or charcoal or collecting or removing any forest produce from a reserved forest.[40] In terms of ownership, land that were vested in the hands of the Government, these forests was remained to be in the domain of the state and were designated as State Forests. The Government was also a proprietor of a large portion of wastelands that formed part of the unreserved or district forests. The right to cultivate in these forests was granted provided they have a permit issued by the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO).[41]

The prescriptions for grazing of cattle inside the reserved forest varied from one reserved forest to another. For instance, in the Goalpara division located in the plains of Assam, grazing in reserved forests was allowed free in certain selected areas in the vicinity and to Nepali herdsmen. This was allowed in isolated places where labour was scarce in return for the quantities of work done by the villagers in connection with fire protection. In Sibsagar division, grazing of cattle in reserved forests were permitted on payment. In the Garo Hills division, grazing of 41 cows was permitted in payment in 2 square miles of Chima Bangshi Reserve.[42]

One such characteristic of reserve forests that needs to be unpacked is its strictness in respect to people's entry into the reserved forests. It became a heavily protected space particularly from the jhumming tribes. For instance, the Assistant-Conservator in Golaghat forest division, during the initial stage of separate provincial forest department warned the people to restrict themselves from trespassing. The same was done by him in connection to Mikir Hills reserve. The attempts of trespassing by the inhabitants were stopped by the forest guards upon discovering their intention.[43] Forest dependent communities' resistance to establishment of

[40] Assam State Archives, Revenue-A, Rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, Assam Secretariat, Nos. 70-107, June 1896, p.1.
[41] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat, Revenue Forests B Forest Legislation, Nos. 44-51, March 1876, p.1.
[42] Assam State Archives, Progress *Report of Forest Administration in the province of Assam for the year 1894-95*, A.L. Home, Conservator of Forests, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, p. 9.
[43] Assam State Archives, *Progress Report of Forest Administration in Assam for 1877-78*, Gustav Mann, Conservator of Forests, 1879.

reserved forest during the colonial period in the form of petitions is discussed in Sections 6.5.1 and 6.5.2.

4.8.2 Restrictions under Unclassed State Forests

Unclassed State Forests were those forests, which were not included in a reserved forest, or village forest at the disposal of Government. This category included all lands at the disposal of the government as defined by Section 3 (8) of the Assam Forest Regulation 1891. Prior to the enactment of Assam Forest Regulation, protected forests were an important category of colonial forestry (Saikia, 2011). The area of unclassed state forests constituted 15,683 square miles for the period of 1897-98.[44] This category of forest included all areas that were not necessarily under forest cover or having any potential of forest produce until 1895. The Deputy Commissioner (DC) of a district was responsible for the management of the unclassed state forests. It served the purposes of a stock available for peasant cultivation and also as a potential area to be put under the category of reserved forest (Saikia, 2011). It is interesting to note that the rules prescribed for this type of forests restricted access to certain tree species. The Assam Forest Regulation 1891contained a list of twenty-seven reserved trees that were of high commercial value that were declared as 'reserved'. Prior to Assam Forest Regulation 1891, these trees were earlier reserved under the Indian Forest Act 1878 under Section 29 (a) of Act VII that was published in April 1882 for district forests.[45] This scheme of reservation was carried forward to Assam Forest Regulation 1891. These trees were Sal (*Shorea robusta*), Jarul (*Lagerstroemia speciosa*), Khair (*Senegalia Catechu*) and Indian-rubber trees, to name a few. Under this forest, rights were issued in the form of permits.

Unlike the reserved forests, use of forests for trade and domestic purposes were allowed in Unclassed State Forest, the rules for which were sanctioned in the form of permits. These permits were of two types, namely, called trade permits and home consumption permits. Trade permits were issued for cutting of timber and other forest produce for trade purposes. The other was a home consumption permit for timber of unreserved kinds and other forest produce for use by the *ryot*[46] and these permits were not transferrable. These reserved trees in the Unclassed

[44] *Forestry in British India* by B. Ribbentrop, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, p.122.
[45] British Library, Home Department, Felling of Timber and other Forest Produce in District Forests, April, 1882, No. 3, p.2.
[46] Ryot means a person, other than a planter, who holds or cultivate land in the maize in respect of which the permit is issued.

State Forests were prohibited from felling unless under the provisions of a trade permit issued the DC, DFO or under a lease granted for cultivation of such lands. Unlike reserved forests, activities such as quarrying of stone, boiling of catechu, and burning of lime and charcoal were permitted under the provisions of a trade permit. Jhum cultivation was put on check as it was allowed under the permit issued by the DC and DFO or under land obtained as a lease for cultivation. In the same way, tapping and collecting of forest produce was to be done under the provisions of a permit lease for fixed period for collecting of rubber, cane, lac and other forest products for sale was prohibited.[47]

Grazing activities in an Unclassed State Forest and pasturing of cattle that were kept exclusively for domestic and agricultural purposes was allowed free of payment after the implementation of Assam Forest Regulation of 1891. Professional graziers and others who herd cattle on behalf of persons for trade purposes were prohibited from grazing cattle in such forests except under the provisions of a trade permit granted by an authorised forest or other official and on payment of annual grazing fee of eight *annas*[48] per buffalo.[49]

The levy of royalties in Unclassed State Forests were not restricted to reserved trees that were specified in the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891. There was a spatial variation in the imposition of rules on forests under unclassed state forests. The forest lands of Khasi and Jaintia Hills that were acquired by the colonial government in the year 1875-76 gave free grants of timber to the people during the establishment of the unclassed state forests. However, this provision was taken away from the people. The pine trees (Pinus Khasia) of Khasi and Jaintia Hills that was not a reserved tree became a timber of high demand for construction purposes. For this purpose, this species of tree was ordered to be taxed according to their girth and length. In addition to the sanction of royalty on pine trees, royalty was imposed on thatching grass and ekra.[50] This adds to the understanding of colonial forestry as directed and motivated by generation of revenue rather than protection of environment.

[47] Assam State Archives, Revenue Forests B, Forest Legislation, Nos. 44-51, March 1876, p.1.
[48] Anna is a monetary system in which 16 annas equal to one rupee.
[49] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, June 1896, No. 70-107.
[50] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A, Levy of royalty on pine trees, thatching grass, etc., From the Conservator of Forests, Assam, To the Secretary to the chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 138, 3rd August 1897.

4.8.3 Constitution of Village Forests

There was another type of forest that was called 'Village Forests'. The establishment of Village Forests was a part of the colonial forest management in the beginning of the 20th century. These type of forests were established under Section 27 of the Indian Forest Act, 1878. While these forests were constituted under the Indian Forest Act, it gave local government the authority to draft rules for the regulation and management of Village Forests. The prescriptions of conditions under which the forest villagers were to perform their activities in respect to protection and improvement of such forests were undertaken by the local forest authorities. The establishment of Village Forests in Assam was labour-oriented. It was a great concern for the British to obtain labour particularly during the sowing season until rice harvesting season. Setting up of village forests was a solution to the labour crisis when work related to forestry became intensive (Handique, 2004). This was manifested in the practice of unpaid labour, locally known as *beggar*. The forest villagers were to contribute specific amount of workays to the forest department towards the maintenance of the government forests. the failure to observe the laws issued by the local forest officers made villagers subject to eviction from the Village Forests (Nongbri, 1999; Sonowal, 2007). The total area under village forests rose to 26,203 acres towards the end of 1926.[51] As per the Forest Act of 1878, the village communities and private persons had the right to expect from the government for the protection of their properties and forest lands. This not only included protection against trespass but against the accrual of new rights. However, prior to the constitution of village forests, the area should be first established as a reserved forest that became a matter of suspicion to the forest-dependent communities.[52]

Established to meet the labour needs of the colonial forest department, the first Village Forests were set up in three villages namely, Cachar, Goalpara and Kamrup. The process started with 8, 15 and 12 Village Forests respectively. The framework for the establishment of Village Forests was based on the Burma Forest Regulation Act due to which categorical differences were observed in the administration of the Village Forests in colonial Assam. The traditional practice of shifting cultivation dating to the pre-colonial period paved the way for setting up forest settlements in the form of taungya villages. The indigenous tribal people seldom opt for

[51] Assam State Archives, *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1925-26*, W.R. LeG. Jacob, Conservator of Forests, Government Press, Assam, 1926, p.1.
[52] *Forestry in British India*, Ribbentrop, B., Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing: Calcutta, 1900.

wage labour as their means of livelihood. This suggests that their absorption into the Village Forest system was mainly due to their need for agricultural land for shifting cultivation known as *taungya*[53]. In contrast to the perception that population composition of the Village Forests are dominated by tribals, the state of Assam has 47% of tribal forest villagers post-independence (Sonowal, 2007). Scheduled Castes and other communities inhabit these villages alongside the tribal communities. In the post-independence period, the beggar system was abolished with an order passed by the Supreme Court. However, in the state of Assam, the practice of unpaid labour was evident from the official records of the forest department.

There were issues of rights concerning land tenancy in the colonial period until the introduction of the FRA in 2006 and its implementation in some states of NEI. In Village Forests, the villagers do not have right to their lands in which they perform agricultural activities. The agricultural lands in the Village Forests are counted as government land and are placed under the administration of the government. As inhabitants of remote Village Forests, these villages do not fall under centralised development unit called Block. Another concern is villagers' disqualification to get financial criteria from financial institutions due to an inability to produce documents certifying their right to land and other properties (Sonowal, 2007).

4.9 Confusion over the Applicability of Assam Forest Regulation

The application of Assam Forest Regulation was not a straightforward matter, particularly in its application to the hills. As such, its applicability to the Garo Hills district was in question if at all, the regulation itself was in force. The district composed of two entirely distinct portions, namely, the two plain *mauzas*[54] that were settled tracts of the country and similar to plain tracts of other districts and the hills proper, which were inhabited by the Garos placed under the jurisdiction of the *laskers*.[55] Adding to this confusion, was the existing Garo Hills Regulation 1882 that placed no restrictions on the Garos and could be applied only against the non-natives of the district that implied that control regarding timber and other forest produce could be

[53] The taungya system is a system where the labourers were given some amount of land to cultivate in lieu of their labour in forest-related work.
[54] Mauza is a locality in a district. In Assam, several villages typically form a single mauza.
[55] Assam State Archives, Revenue-A, Applicability of the Assam Forest Regulation to the Garo Hills District, No. 92-96, August 1895, p. 9.

exercised only against the non-natives.[56] The following is an extract taken from the letter from J.C. Arbuthnott to P.G. Melitus who were both Indian Civil Servants.

> *"The question is - Does the Garo Hills require hard-and-fast Forest Regulation and Rules for the protection of Government interests? I do not thinks that the district does, or that Government interest would suffer if the Assam Forest Regulation were held to be not in force in the district. The Regulation, has however, been held to be in force and I do not consider that any harm will be done if its operation be confined to the plains portion of the district, viz, the mauzas Fulbari, Mahendraganj, in which the population is mainly Muhammaden and Hindu. I am at the same time of opinion that the regulation is much too rigid an Act to introduce into the hills proper, viz, the four hill mauzas which are managed by Garo Mauzadars and in which the civil police has no jurisdiction".*[57]

It is evident from the above quote that application of Assam Forest Regulation to the hills was a confused affair even to the Indian Civil servants. It was because until the passing of Assam Forest regulation, the cases were tried under the Garo Hills Regulation and that colonial regulation could be exercised minimally as administration was in the hands of the local headmen. This led the Deputy Commissioner to take into account the ethnical and geographical differences in the application of Assam Forest Regulation to the district. It was decided that Assam Forest Regulation and the Rules were to be applied to the two plain mauzas in its entirety. However, the parts of the Rules relating to reserved forests and their protection were applied to the hill mauzas. These hill mauzas were to be freed from the rules specified under unclassed state forests. The Garo Hills Regulation of 1882 was to be applied in the hill mauzas with the objective of controlling the operations in unclassed state forests from non-native timber-traders.[58]

This particular state of affair in the Garo Hills district establishes that there was clearly a confusion with the applicability of Assam Forest Regulation to the hill area of Garo Hills district. The preference in applying the regulation only to the plains was highly considered by

[56] Ibid, p. 11
[57] Ibid, p.9
[58] Ibid, p.11

the Civil servants at the beginning of its enactment. However, the regulation was eventually implemented in the hill areas following the passing of Assam Forest Regulation.

4.10 Policies Peculiar to the Region's Geography

Alongside the admiration for the forests of the North-East Frontier region of India particularly in the Imperial Gazetteers, the colonial records contained information on the region's landscape. In the records, the physical features of the plains proved to be advantageous to their forestry, particularly in the Assam valley districts. However, in the hills, the nature of terrain and its associated challenges stood as a hindrance to colonial forestry endeavours. Both the hills and the plains contained valuable trees. Forests on the hill slopes were identifies as valuable and hence encouragement of further growth was deemed essential.[59] The plains of Goalpara was described to have a large area covered with sal forests, which was considered to be the most valuable of tree species.[60] As such, forests in the North-Eastern frontier region was a subject of admiration and were designated as ideal forests, possessing rich forest resources such as timber, bamboos, creepers and ferns and possessing physical features such as wild gorges and bold cliffs.[61] While there existed a considerable trade in timber along the banks of Brahmaputra river as such areas were favourably situated for trading purposes, the sal forests of Garo Hills were inaccessible and was found impossible to work them on a commercial scale even towards the start of the 20th century.[62] The forests in the region were extensively surveyed.[63] With the prevailing physical features of the frontier region, the Assam Forest Regulation was enacted to meet the specific needs of the region, under which Assam River Rules and Drift Timber Rules were prescribed. Another regulation that was not a part of Assam Forest Regulation but was relevant to the region's geographic distinctiveness was the Inner Line Regulation. A brief introduction to these regulations are given below and a detailed discussion are presented in the following section.

[59] National Archives of India, Minority arrangements, Foreign Department, Internal-A, Nos. 8-17, February 1895.
[60] The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. VI, 1908, p. 67.
[61] The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XVII, 1908, p. 184.
[62] The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. VI, 1908, p. 68.
[63] National Archives of India, Policy to be pursued in dealing with the Abors and other tribes inhabiting the hills to the north of the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract, Foreign Department, External-A, Nos. 33-38, June 1908, p. 2.

Under the rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, VII of 1891, Assam Valley River Rules were introduced that were supposed to regulate the transport of timber or forest produce in the Assam Valley districts. This discussion on Assam River Rules will add to understanding of colonial use of the region's geographical features to their full potential. It can be seen from the river rules that rivers under the mentioned districts of Assam were kept under the operation of Assam River Rules. These districts included Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts.[64]

Another forest legislation introduced by the colonial authority was Drift Timber Rules under the Assam Forest Regulation 1891. In the Assam Valley districts, the use of drift timber was granted for domestic and agricultural purposes to all ryots free of cost but not for sale or trade purposes. However, Bhoroli river in the Darrang district of Assam and other such rivers were subjected to be closed from time to time by the Chief Commissioner and was to be notified in the Assam Gazette with the exception of Dayang and Dhansiri rivers in the Sibsagar district. [65]

Another piece of legislation that was crucial in colonial forestry is the Inner line Regulation, which was based on Regulation V of 1873. It gave power to prescribe an Inner Line in each of the districts along the North-Eastern Frontier beyond which no British subject or foreign resident could pass without a license. The drawing of the line also meant that the British officers beyond the line exercised no authority or jurisdiction and that tribes beyond the Inner Line could manage their own affairs. With the passing of the inner line, the residents were placed out of the protection of colonial rule.[66] Originally, a draft regulation submitted to the Government of Bengal with the sanction of the Government of India known as the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation I of 1873 under the Act of 1870 that came into effect on 1st November 1873 that led to demarcation of inner line in the frontier region. This act was initially made applicable in the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Cachar and Chittagong Hills, which is a part of present-day Bangladesh (Sharma and Sharma, 2006).

[64] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat, Revenue-A, Rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, No. 70-107, June 1896, p.1
[65] Ibid
[66] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, External-A, Expedition against the Bebejiya Mishmis, Nos. 70-96, p. 15, January 1900.

4.10.1 Control of rivers as per Assam River Rules

Under the Assam River Rules prescribed under the Assam Forest Regulation for the province of Assam, all timber and other forest produce brought down any river in the Assam Valley districts were made to stop for examination according to the directions of the Chief Commissioner. This was for the payment of amounts that might be due to the Government as a royalty, duty or any other account at the revenue stations. In case of timber brought down by the forest department permit and timber brought down from a private land, it was made mandatory to produce a printed certificate of origin stamped by the owner of the land or by is agent. These signatures and stamps had to be registered at the local divisional forest office. For the movement of all timber and other forest produce, the forest officer in charge of the revenue station must grant a pass. In case of timber brought down under a forest department permit and timber brought down from private land, a royalty fee was payable to the forest officer in charge of the revenue station. All timber and other forest produce brought down any river in the Assam Valley districts were to be stopped and examined by any forest officer or police officer and the person in charge of timber or forest produce was bound to produce any permits or passes, which might have been granted to them for the timber and other forest produce.[67]

The revenue stations were prescribed to be at Sadiya, Dibrugarh, Mekla and Dehingmukh in the Lakhimpur district. Other revenue stations included Dhubri and Fakirganj in the Goalpara district. The towns identified as revenue stations were strategically and purposely placed on the banks of river Brahmaputra that made logical the setting up of revenue stations. Figure 4.3 shows the revenue stations along the Brahmaputra river. It is worth mentioning that Lakhimpur district had four revenue stations and can be said that Lakhimpur district was more regulated compared to Goalpara district where only two revenue stations were notified. By 1879, Lakhimpur district had seven reserved forests, namely, Solaguri, Jokai, Dehingmukh, Parapara, Makum, Kuddum and Bhorolwah.[68] It is in this district that the tributaries of Brahmaputra such as Dihang, Dibang, Dhansiri and Subhansiri join the Brahmaputra river that made this district a strategic zone to set up revenue stations.

[67] Ibid
[68] Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration in Assam, D. Brandis, p. 8.

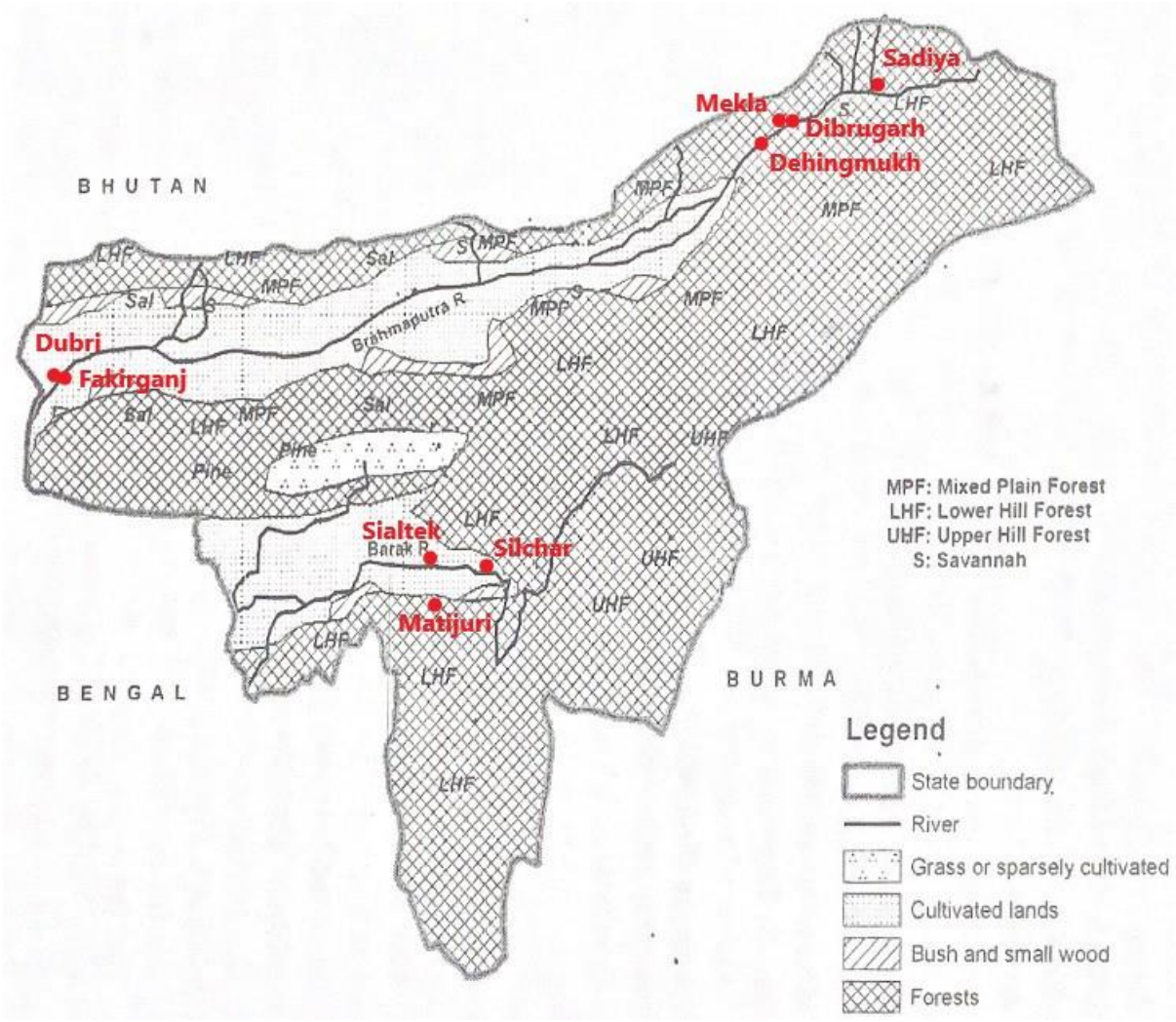


Figure 4.3: Map showing Revenue Stations superimposed on the Forest Map

Source: Developed by the author based on forest map of Assam during 1870s by Prasanta Bhattacharya, p. 58.

River rules for the districts of Cachar and Sylhet were prescribed separately, which were different from Assam River Rules in terms of prescription of revenue stations. Revenue stations were identified for the granting of passes for all timber and other forest produce brought down by the Barak and Katakhal rivers. The revenue stations in the Cachar district were Silchar, on the Barak river, Sialtek on the Barak river and Matijuri on the Katakhal river (Figure 4.3). No person was allowed to move any timber or other forest produce at any other places except at the prescribed revenue stations. In case of Sylhet district, Silua on the Juri river, Muchikandi on the Kuala river and Dinarpur on the Gopla river were identified as revenue stations. Passes

were to be granted for all timber and other forest produce brought down by the rivers at these prescribed revenue stations.[69]

Assam River Rules prescribed in the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 reveals that the movement of timber and other forest produce in the province of Assam was placed under a colonial scrutiny through establishment of revenue stations. Placing the major rivers of Assam under the regulation of river rules, the movement of timber and other forest produce were put into check. As forests managed directly under the colonial government, which were reserved and unclassed state forests were put under strict regulations, the timber and other forest produce from private lands were also indirectly put under check. In other words, the private lands that included the hill districts in which lands and forests were managed under the local headmen were also placed under indirect examination of the colonial administration. Transportation of timber and other forest produce from private lands implied payment of royalty fee to the Forest officer at revenue stations.

4.10.2 Drift Timber Rules for drifting timbers

Any timber that was found adrift, beached, stranded, or sunk in any of the rivers in the district of Assam Valley Districts were brought under the regulation of Drift Timber Rules. Such timber had to be landed at a place specified specially for this purpose that was time to time notified by the District Forest Officer as depots. Rates for timber and bamboo were fixed as salvage to be paid at certain depots. Timber or bamboos were allowed to be delivered only with the receipt of the sum paid as salvage money and any other expenses incurred in the transportation. Failure to produce receipts were to be resulted in sale of these produce in a public auction at rates sanctioned by the Conservator of Forests (CoF). From all these rules, timber measuring two feet in girth and five feet in length that were found adrift, beached, stranded or sunk in any of the district of Cachar were exempted with the exception of Jarul, Nageswar and Gandrai timber.[70]

[69] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat, Revenue-A, Rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, No. 70-107, June 1896.
[70] Ibid

According to the Drift Timber Rules, the Bhoroli river in the Darrang district and other rivers with the exception of Dayang and Dhansiri rivers in the Sibsagar district were to be closed from time to time by the Chief Commissioner. Under the Assam Forest Regulation, rules were specifically prescribed for the Cachar district. In addition, with the prevalence of Rule I of Drift Timber Rules, the rivers in Kamrup district were controlled by this piece of legislation.[71] The rivers in Kamrup that were under the enforcement of Drift Timber Rules were Kulsi and its tributaries, Jaghi, Kulmani, Bata, Moira and their tributaries, Boko and its tributaries and Singra.[72]

Now this drift timbers in the literal sense of it were to do only with timber carried by water. However, the rule was extended to the timbers drifted ashore, to the point where the movement of timber ceased and it was called claimed and unclaimed timbers.[73] For all claimed timber, salvage was collected at depots and if there was no claimant, it was sold at a public auction. Further, to determine the location of timber where its movement ended, terms such as adrift, beached, stranded, and sunk were used. These kind of timbers measuring less than 5 feet in length and 2 feet in girth with the exception of sal and ajhar were exempted from salvage collection and were allowed for use as firewood for the *raiyats*[74] and restricted for sale.[75]

As can be seen from the Drift Timber rules, timber and bamboo that were found adrift, beached, stranded and sunk were put under the regulation. With the implementation of this forest regulation, the forest produce such as timber and bamboo that were transported directly by water by floating or drifting without the use of boats and dug outs were placed under stringent regulation. With this regulation, timber and bamboo brought down by rivers irrespective of their source of origin whether it was from government or private forests were made to pay salvage duties. It was charged for every raft containing more than five logs and for every single log from 5 to 10 feet in length and from 2 to 4 feet in girth. In case of bamboos, for every raft 10 percent of the valuation made by the District Forest Officer was supposed to be paid.[76] This

[71] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A, Proposed Rules regulating the salvage collection and disposal of drift timber in the Kamrup district, January 1897, p. 2.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid
[74] Raiyat are the ryots as mentioned in the Assam Forest Regulation, 1891
[75] Ibid
[76] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat, Revenue-A, Rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, No. 70-107, June 1896.

piece of regulation brought hardships on the lives of the forest-dependent communities as discussed in Sections 6.5.3 and 6.5.6.

4.10.3 Inner Line and its Relevance to Forests

This section aims to throw light on the strategic use of the Inner Line and how it was connected to control and management of forests during the colonial period. As inner line generally marked the territorial limit of British administration, the forests produce of the areas beyond the inner line belonged technically to the colonial government in terms of imposition of duties when entering the British territories. This is discussed in detail below.

The passing of Inner Line that was justified as a paternalistic regulation by the British officials is interpreted by scholars to be constituted of varied motives that benefitted the British themselves (Das, 2018; Bhattacharjee, 2020). The implementation of Inner Line in the said districts came into effect considering the clashes between the British and hill tribes during the 19th century that can be traced to the establishment of tea gardens in the region. This led to acquisition of lands for the commercial production of tea culminating into clashes with Singpho tribe in 1843, with Lushai tribe in 1855 and the Naga attack on the British in 1880. These developments that threatened the security of the tea gardens and the mutual relations of the British and the tribes prompted the British in the framing of Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation 1873 (Chakrabarty, 1995). The theorisation of the Inner Line reserve in Assam in the frontier region of Lushai Hills by Bhattacharjee (2020) makes the narrative of Inner Line as a protective shield to the colonial capitalistic ambition more convincing. Here, Inner Line is seen as a facilitation of colonial administration in the region as it was set up as a protection for the tea gardens from the raids. The Inner Line being a protectionist regulation advocated by the British is witnessed to be side-lined by Das (2018). He perceived it rather as a political tool as opposed to a protectionist one that acted as an administration tool to access the unclaimed land of the Nagas. The Inner Line in the contemporary period is seen as "divisive" in the case of Manipur. It is still instrumental as the term "outsiders" emerged during the demand for Inner Line Permit (ILP) post the passing of Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 that led to the reoccurrence of insider-outsider divide (Thoudam, 2021).

When narrating about the Inner Line and its relevance to forests, it is crucial to unpack the procedures involved in the enforcement of Inner Lines. Following the declaration of an Inner Line, these lines were converted into actual boundaries in terms of physical demarcation by laying down stones or pillars. The numbered pillars laid during the Revenue Survey of 1872-73 served as boundaries for marking Inner Line restrictions. As such, pillars were built originally during the Revenue Survey and were later identified and prescribed as boundaries regulating the outsiders' movement from colonised space to non-colonised space. Hence, these pillars were shown in the Revenue Survey map of the respective district. The following notification from the Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam of 1906 regarding Kamrup district reveals that the Inner Lines were prescribed lines. This reads:

> *"A line commencing from the Eastern boundary of the district of Goalpara, that is from pillar No.79 on the Manas River and following in a north-easterly and south-easterly direction, the southern boundary of the State of Bhutan, as laid down in the Revenue Survey of 1872-72 and shown in the Revenue Survey map of the district of Kamrup, and demarcated by pillars Nos.807-97(from pillars Nos. 90-91 the Deea Nadi is the boundary) upto pillar No.98 on the Bor Nadi where the eastern boundary of the Kamrup district ends and whence the "Inner Line" of the district of Darrang commences".*[77]

These lines, according to Das (2018) emerged because of the constraints the British administrators encountered in maintaining its territories as the district boundaries were prescribed far into the interior all the way to the hills. This necessitated the drawing up of a line up to which the colonial government intended to work. This kind of Inner Line that was subjected to periodical changes to suit the interest of the colonialists in the plains in acquiring land lands from the areas beyond the Inner Line (Barua, 2017). The Inner Line of Sibsagar frontier was never static and permanent and it was subjected to frequent oscillation to control territories considered critical to the tea gardens (Das, 2018).

[77] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Control of Europeans and others passing over the Northern and North-Eastern Frontier of Assam, May 1906, Pro. No. 150, p.1.

The Inner Line had significance in terms of colonial forestry. The Inner line served as forest boundaries for Barak, Sonai, Katakhal, and Dhaleshwari reserves in Cachar Division.[78] This implies that the Inner Line acted as restricting boundaries for people's activities such as felling of trees. In other words, it served as a protective barrier against the use of forest resources by the surrounding tribes as the line would restrict them from trespassing these reserves. With the rules of the reserved forests in place, the prescription of Inner Line as a boundary served as a bonus shield to the reserved forests in Cachar Division.

As valuable stretches of forests were taken into control by the colonial government during the 19th century with the reservation of certain tracts that were considered valuable and revenue worthy, there were certain tracts with valuable timber forests that technically were not reserved and located outside the Inner Line.[79] These forests were located in Dibrugarh frontier Tract. The Abors, who were one of the frontier tribes had access to the timber that had come into the notice of the colonial government. The area in consideration is located on the bank of Dihong river where the Abors claimed the right of hunting in the forests and fishing in the rivers that brought into conflicts with the British authority resulting into series of raids and depredations on the part of the Abors.[80]

Simul (*Bombax*) was important to the flourishing tea-box industry in Assam. There was a valuable stock of simul beyond their reach as it was located beyond the Inner Line in the forests north of Brahmaputra river. This simul tract that was not yet reserved would cater to the requirements of resource needed for the sustenance of tea-box industry. Simul was considered as the most suitable indigenous wood for tea-boxes. These valuable stock of simul was in the hands of the Abors whose activities related to these trees were disregarded by Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Lancelot Hare as 'ignorant' and 'improvident' felling that needs to be checked from being ruined for the protection of existing trade and for preserving the valuable stock of simul.[81] The Abors on the other hand were at a receiving end of posa from the British to secure peace on the frontier. This stretch of land came under the radar of colonial scanning both for the existing trade. This made preserving the valuable stock of simul timber in the forests north of Brahmaputra necessary and crucial from being ruined by ignorant and improvident felling.

[78] Assam State Archives, *Progress Report of Forest Administration for the Province of Assam for 1877-78*, p. 27.
[79] National Archives of India, Policy to be pursued in dealing with the Abors and other tribes inhabiting the hills to the north of the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract, Foreign Department, External-A, Nos. 33-38, June, 1908.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

The following extract is from the letter of Lieutenant Governor of Eastern and Assam that dates to 1907 regarding the policy to be pursued in dealing with the Abors. It reads:

> *"From the point of view of the dwellers in the plains next in importance to the mountains which we have in so many instances ignored, is the strip of land which lies at their foot, which should be a well-wooded country where the hill torrents change into a floating streams. It is essential that this area should be protected if the industries below are to be secured…"*[82]

From the above extract, it is clear that crucial steps had been considered to secure the forested tracts to protect the industries within the Inner Line. The forested tracts beyond the Inner Line is located at such a strategic location, which is at the foothills where the fast-flowing rivers of the hills gain a steady flow once it enters the foothills. From this perspective, securing of the forested tracts at the foothills was deemed crucial to the colonial administrators. As the tea-box industry served as one of the sources of income to the state, preservation of simul wood was necessitated. Apart from protection of these forests at the foot of the hills from what was believed to be ignorant felling, a check on advance of civilisation to the foot of the hills was also crucial.

Pushing back the Inner Line was perceived as an important step towards securing the simul-covered tracts. There had exchange of words of discussion between the Secretary to the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam and Secretary to the Government of India concerning pushing back the Inner Line towards the simul tracts. It was considered to be the need of the time. However, the maintaenance of law and order was considered more important than extending the Inner Line. The extension of their administration would mean pushing back the Inner Line so as to include the tracts that possessed simul trees that could provoke the anger of the Abors. They did not want to provoke disturbance among the tribes by a sudden extension of their administration at any expense. Hence, a decision to amend the Inner Line and assert British sovereignty over the tract was discarded by J.E. Webster albeit it was desirable to do so. Rather, the Abors settled on the plains were imposed a reasonable house-tax who had not been previously taxed. Although, the colonial administrators acknowledged the importance of

[82] Ibid.

these simul covered tracts, they did not want to interfere in the affairs of the Abors as this could give rise to uprisings and raids[83].

The prevailing peace between the Abors and the British that was maintained by payment of posa was chosen not to be compromised by extension of Inner Line. The decision to discard the extension of Inner Line implies that decisions relating to implementation and extension of Inner Line was carefully and cautiously pursued. It took into consideration the colonial administrator's relation with the tribe in question. The Abors in this case were capable of uprisings and disturbances that the British did not want. The intention of the colonial government to extend the Inner Line did not feed into the narrative of paternalistic regulation. On the other hand, the withdrawal of the British from amending the Inner Line suggests a contrast narrative of the colonial government's conscious step towards protecting themselves of unnecessary disturbances from the Abors.

While the colonial administration did not extend beyond the prescribed inner line, the forest products brought from areas outside the Inner Line were indirectly controlled by the colonial administration through imposition of forest taxes. Although the matters of residents from beyond the Inner Line were left to be governed by the residents themselves, the ground reality painted a different picture altogether. According to this rule, forest produce brought by the Brahmaputra river that included forest produce from beyond the Inner Line was subjected to payment of taxes at a forest revenue station to obtain a pass or license and that they were bound to be stopped for examination of their passes. This implies that areas beyond the Inner Line, albeit not administered directly by the colonial government, their commercial means of livelihood was placed under a colonial subjection and examination. Even though matters related to forests were not in the hands of the colonisers, they took it upon their shoulders albeit in an inconspicuous manner. The following extract has to do with Assam River Rules that came into effect on the 1st October 1880.

[83] Ibid.

"Forests beyond the Inner Line are as much Government forests as those within, and you should attend to the matter mentioned at the conclusion of your diary of the 14th of June at once and ask the Deputy-Commissioner to issue strict orders that no such timber is to be landed without your permission or the permission of any other officer authorised on your behalf as required by Rules IV and V of Assam River Rules".[84]

The above extract reveals that forests located beyond the Inner Line was considered as government forests. As such taxes were imposed on timber and other forest produce when transported by the medium of rivers particularly the tributaries of Brahmaputra river according to the provisions under the Assam River Rules.

While the imposition of Inner Line in the vicinity of Lushai Hills is conceptualised to have had facilitated protection of the tea gardens (Bhattacharjee, 2020), the Inner Line in the Dibrugarh frontier tract became a hindrance to get access to the simul covered forested tracts inhabited by the Abors. In the case of Barak, Sonai, Katakhal, and Dhaleshwari reserves in Cachar Division, the inner line served as a protective barrier from the surrounding tribes' use of forest resources but in the Dibrugarh frontier tract it instead stood as a barrier. Inner Line with respect to Dibrugrah frontier tract did not work fruitfully for the colonial government. As far as transportation of timber and other forest produce is concerned, taxes were imposed from the forests beyond the Inner Line. Any timber irrespective of their direct or indirect control were imposed taxes when entering into British territories. Often termed as a protectionist regulation towards the tribes beyond the Inner Line, this regulation rather acted as a protecting line for the British themselves from the tribes' increasing settlements.

4.11 Tracing the ongoing 'colonial'

This section aims to unpack two crucial governmental interventions related to forestry after independence by the postcolonial nation state. These are de-reservation of reserved forests for the purpose of industrial expansion in the 1960s and the timber ban of 1996 that restricted movement of timber outside NEI. By doing this, it aims to establish that the postcolonial forest

[84] British Library, Home Department, Timber-Cutting beyond the Inner Line, No. 48, June 1881, p. 56, India Office Records.

laws have colonial imprints in the way the rights of forest-dependent communities have been suppressed.

4.11.1 Background to postcolonial forest policies and constitutional provisions in North-East India

The journey of Indian forestry from colonial to post-colonial period is a crucial one to recount in order to critically review contemporary forest policies. With the end of the colonial regime in India, the reserved forests in Assam covered only 9.7 percent of the total area of the province, the reserved forests and unclassed state forests both accounting for 6,784 square miles by the end of June 1947 (Saikia, 2011). Post independent India carried forward the state monopoly over forests. The 1952 forest policy, which was the first forest policy of independent India, incorporated the policy of 1894 with its inclusion of some of the fundamental concepts. One such policy was the explicit assertion of state monopoly at the expense of the rights of the forest communities. Other objectives of the policy included balanced and complimentary land use, checking of soil erosion, afforestation, supply of fuel, grazing and small timber to the agriculturalists, and sustainable production of timber and other forest produce for defence, communication, industry, and realisation of maximum annual revenue. This was reflected in the post-independence forest policies (Guha, 1983). The forest Act of 1988 emphasised the importance of environmental stability and maintenance of ecological balance. This piece of postcolonial legislation introduced the concept of Joint Forest Management (JFM). With this people-oriented approach, this act still carried forward state ownership of forest and cited industrial needs at par with national needs (Tripathi, 2016).

During the initial years of Indian independence under the Prime Ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru, rapid industrialisation was given high importance along with infrastructural developments such as constructions of hydroelectric projects. The forestry policies became subordinated to the post-independent national goal of industrialisation (Saikia, 2011; De, 2014). The GoI established oil refineries in India such as IOC in 1956 for marketing petroleum products and ONGC in 1955 for exploring oil in India. In the 1960's, the GoI was able to set up oil refineries in the public sector in India (Verma and Abdelrehim, 2017). The previous forest policies such as the Forest Act of 1865, 1878 and 1927 prioritised timber extraction for revenue generation over biodiversity conservation (Guha and Gadgil, 1989; Joshie *et al.*, 2011).

The post-colonial Government of India had provided certain rights for Scheduled tribes in states such as Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram and Assam by way of introducing *Sixth Schedule*[85] for the prescribed areas of these states. In addition, there are also constitutional provisions applicable to some states. These include Article 371 A[86] in Nagaland, Article 371 B[87] in Assam, Article 371 C in Manipur, Article 371 G in Mizoram and Article 371 H in Arunachal Pradesh (Roy and Alam, 2007). Regardless of all these provisions, postcolonial India still carries the colonial imprints of resource use and utilisation. India enacted its own forest policy in 1952 and unlike the prior forest policies, it denied statutory rights to tribes over forests, although it recognised tribes have been forest dwellers for centuries. In the case of North-east India, the state monopoly over forests dilutes the special provision and rights made for the tribes (Nongbri, 1999). The ongoing state monopoly over forests in the North-Eastern region of India is discussed in an exceptional regulation passed by the Supreme Court of India, popularly known as timber ban and in the postcolonial nation state's rapid move in de-reservation of reserved forests in the name of development.

4.11.2 De-reservation and nation-building

During the colonial regime, the de-reservation and conversion of forest lands were directed towards the needs of the tea-planters and establishment of saw-mills (Saikia, 2011). Upon independence, de-reservation came under the influence of new postcolonial developmental project and one of it was expansion of independent India's industries. This resulted in nationwide construction of river valley projects and improvement of transport network (Ghosh and Sinha, 2016; De, 2016). In the post-colonial state of Assam, vast stretches of forested tracts were turned into oil drilling and refinery sites. In Sibsagar district, 2.80 hectares of forest land under Deroi Reserved Forest was granted by the Ministry of Agriculture to the Oil India Limited for oil drilling.[88] In Dibrugarh district of Assam, 4 hectares of land under Dehing Reserved Forest was de-reserved for oil exploration by conducting drilling operations by the

[85] Sixth Schedule was enacted in 1949 that provides for the administration of tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram to safeguard the tribal rights of the tribal population in these states.

[86] According to Article 371 A, no act of Indian Parliament that includes the ownership and transfer of land and its resources shall apply to Nagaland unless the State Assembly makes its own decision.

[87] Article 371 B empowers the President of India to provide for the creation of a Committee of the Assam Legislative Assembly consisting of members elected from Tribal Areas of the state as he/she may specify.

[88] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 2.80 ha of forest land for drilling location by Oil India Ltd. In Sibsagar district, No. 8-299/84, July 1984.

Oil India Ltd.[89] Apart from diversion of forest lands into oil drilling sites, forest lands were used for laying of pipelines and roads needed for the functioning of oil companies. In Dibrugarh district, 9.860 hectares of land was diverted for this use alone for the Indian Oil Corporation.[90] The de-reservation of forested land into drilling sites was not confined to the state of Assam but to the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram. In the West Tripura district, forest lands were converted into oil exploration spaces where 3.881 hectares of forest land was granted for this purpose.[91] In the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, 6.04 hectares of Namchik Reserved Forest land was released for oil drilling that was deemed as national importance.[92]

Apart from conversion of forest land into oil drilling spaces, some of the forest land was converted into saw mills. For instance, in the Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh, where 4.30 hectares of Namsang Reserved forest was granted for saw-cum veneer mill.[93] Another converted use of forest land was for settlement of tribal jhumia in Tripura. This was done under the provision Section 2 of Forest Conservation Act 1980 in the Udaypur Forest Division. There were 50 tribal jhumias who were settled in the reserved forest after a careful examination by the Advisory Committee. These families were already in possession of the forest land for fifteen years and had taken to paddy cultivation and had abandoned the age-old shifting cultivation. The forest land of 27.40 hectares was given on long lease for a period of 15 years.[94]

In the process of de-reservation and conversion of reserved forests and protected forests into developmental projects, be it in terms of power generation, fuel exploration and infrastructural development, it is important to dwell upon how the status of these forests were settled in the post-colonial developmental mission. It is to be noted that oil exploration was perceived as an important economic activity that was taken up as one of the Five Year Plans by a post-colonial nation state. Regardless of the importance given to these projects, it was decided by the

[89] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 4.00 ha. Of forest land in Dibrugarh district for exploration of oil by carrying out drilling operation by the Oil India Ltd., Duliajan., No.407/84, September 1984.

[90] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 9.860 ha. of forest land in Dibrugarh district for laying of pipe line by Indian Oil Corporation, No. 8-600, November 1984.

[91] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 3.881 ha. of forest land for exploration activity by ONGC in North Eastern Zone in West Tripura district, No. 8-438.

[92] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 6.04 ha. of forest land in Tirap district for drilling oil, No. 8-359, September 1983.

[93] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 4.30 ha. of forest land in Tirap district for establishment of Saw cum Veneer Mills, No. 8-398, September 1983.

[94] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 67.70 ha. of RF land for settlement of tribal Jhumias in South District-Tripura State, No.8-177,April 1983.

Ministry of Agriculture that the legal status of the forest land will remain unchanged. When the forest land is no longer required by the companies, in the case of oil exploration and drilling, it will revert to the forest department.[95] In almost all these forest conversions, compensatory plantations were also required to be done over an equivalent area at the cost of the project authorities.

It is evident from the conversions of forest lands into industrial sites during the postcolonial period that nation building in the form of industrialisation was given more importance than forestry. In this process, the government forest spaces in postcolonial Assam was transformed into oil drilling sites and refineries. The conversion of government forest sites was not confined to postcolonial Assam but it also covered the postcolonial states of Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. In short, it can be said that while there were 50 tribal jhummias who were settled in the reserved forest of Tripura, the post-independence goal of rapid industrialisation remained its first priority. The reserved forests of Assam known for its rich forest resources was side-lined to make way for industrial needs of the country in the form of oil. In this way, the reserved forests that were managed and regulated under stringent laws under colonial Assam against felling and trespassing were opened up for developmental projects and oil explorations during the post-colonial period.

4.11.3 Post-colonial timber ban

One of the regulations relating to protection and conservation of forests in postcolonial India is the timber ban of 1996. The judgement was given on the 12th December 1996 by the Supreme Court of India in response to the petition filed by T.N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad. In accordance with the Forest Conservation Act 1980, this regulation prohibited any forest activity in any forest in any state throughout the country. The activities include running of saw-mills of any kind including veneer or ply-wood mill and mining, which is a non-forest activity without the authorisation of the government. A complete ban on the movement of cut trees and timber from any of the North-Eastern states by rail, road or waterways was imposed by this

[95] National Archives of India, Ministry of Agriculture, Release of 2.50 ha. of forest land in Dibrugarh district for exploration of oil by carrying out drilling operation by the oil India Ltd, Duliajan, No. 8-405, September, 1984.

ban. However, the movement of certified timber for defence and other government purpose has been exempted from this ban.[96]

As this particular regulation on timber prohibits establishment of saw-mills of any kind without approval from the government, this reflects the colonial imprint of forest regulation that seeks to promote only government-sponsored business enterprises.[97] The passing of this piece of legislation came after the enactment of Indian Forest Act of 1988 that emphasised the importance of stable environmental and ecological balance. This act also prioritised industrial needs of the nation, which were treated as a national need. As a result, timber from NEI was completely restricted for transportation to other parts of India with the exception of certified timber for defence and other government purposes. Considering the nature of the act and the point that it was enacted after the passing of Indian Forest Act of 1988, it implies two things. Firstly, it implies the ongoing pressure of the need to maintain environmental stability on the forest-dependent communities .In this way the forest rights of the people dependent on forests such as the woodcutters have been side-lined. Studies such as Nongbri (1999) finds that the livelihood of the tribes have been impacted, particularly the woodcutters, whose main source of livelihood is derived from forests are directly affected by this regulation along with the owners of the saw-mills. This ban also led to shortage in timber supply in the country (Ghosh and Sinha, 2016). Secondly, the passing of this act prominently establishes the continuation with state monopoly over timber and the assertion of importance of national needs such as defence and other purposes. This postcolonial restriction imposed on the movement of timber reflects priority given to cater to national needs such as defence at the expense of the livelihood of forest dependent communities. Its impacts on forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest and related stereotyping is discussed in Section 5.7.6.

4.12 Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006

With the backdrop of historical injustice meted out to the traditional forest dwellers and forest-dependent communities, the Scheduled Tribes and Traditional Forest Dwellers Act (commonly known as the Forest Rights Act) sought to undo the historical injustice brought upon the forest

[96] Supreme Court of India, T.N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad vs Union of India and Ors, 12th Dec, 1996, https://indiankanoon.org/doc/298957/
[97] Ibid.

dwelling communities. It was enacted in 2006 with an aim to recognise the rights of the forest dwelling communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources and ensure land tenure, livelihood and food security to forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes (ST) and other traditional forest dwellers. It also aims to strengthen the conservation regime of the forests by including the responsibilities and authority on Forest Rights holders that will lead to sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance (MoTA, 2006).

As the Forest Rights Act aims to provide individual and community rights to the forest dwellers, it has provisions securing their claims over land and forests, cultural spaces of importance and livelihood for the traditional forest dwellers. Apart from providing right to hold and live in the forest land under the individual or common occupation for habitation or self-cultivation, it provides the right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce which has been traditionally collected by the forest dwellers. It provides the rights of conversion of pattas or leases or grants issued by any local authority or state government on forest lands to titles. It provides community rights of uses or entitlements such as fish and other products of water bodies, grazing and traditional seasonal resource access of nomadic or pastoralist communities. It also gives right to protect, regenerate or conserve or manage any community forest resource which traditional forest dwellers have been traditionally protecting (MoTA, 2006).

4.13 Conclusion

This chapter analysed the establishment of scientific forestry in the North-Eastern frontier region of India. It reveals that forest policies were enacted systematically to cater to the geographic distinctiveness of the region. These regulations included Assam River Rules and Drift Timber Rules. A regulation called Inner Line Permit that did not come under forest department had a great role in managing and controlling forest activities. From the analysis of colonial forest policies, it can be said that the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 that was specifically drafted by taking into consideration the geographical features of colonial Assam could not meet the all the needs of the region. In administering the Garo Hills district, the Indian Civil Servants were met with confusion in the application of Assam Forest Regulation that composed of two geographic features namely, the hills and the plains. Another narrative arising from this analysis is in regards to the regulation of Inner Line in the Dibrugarh Frontier Tract. While it is a widely established narrative that the Inner Line regulation is a protectionist

regulation meant to protect the indigenous tribes from the exploitation of the outsiders, the narrative of inner line in terms of colonial forestry provides a contrast narrative. In the pursuit of colonial forestry, the inner line acts as a protective barrier for the British against the raids of the indigenous tribes instead of it protecting the indigenous tribes from the exploitation of the outsiders. This chapter also highlighted the ongoing imprints of colonial forest policies in the postcolonial forest policies in terms of state monopoly over forests and added environmental conservation pressure on the forest-dependent communities. As such, forest policies were aimed at fulfilling colonial ambitions of revenue generation during the colonial period and fulfilment of industrial expansion and catering to environmental concerns during the post-colonial period, these policies were resisted by the forest-dependent communities. The coloniality and hybridity of forest spaces and various means of resistance to these forest policies are discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 5
Tribal Places in Forestry Spaces

5.1 Introduction

By 1900, 20% of India's land was under the control of the forest department that affected almost every village and hamlet of the entire country. One of the impacts of colonial forest control was in terms of redefining property rights that came into friction with indigenous systems of resource use and control (Guha, 1989). The creation of reserved forests affected people's livelihoods particularly, those of hunter-gatherer communities (Guha and Gadgil, 1989). The indigenous petty commodity producers were also deprived of access to natural resources as it limited their right to practise jhum cultivation under the system of annual leases introduced during the establishment of reserved forests was limited (Saikia, 2008). The recent intervention by the Supreme Court by its 1996 verdict prohibiting the movement of timber from this region has impacted the livelihoods of the forest-dependent communities. The affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court of India reveals that 5,396 persons were enaged in wood-based industries in the state. However, the number of affected people were estimated to be 2,31,980 persons by the ex-Forest Minister of Meghalaya (Nongbri, 2001). To undo historical injustices to forest dependent and forest dweller communities, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 sought to recognise the rights of traditional forest dwellers.

This chapter seeks to unpack the rationalities of forest governance in constructing forest-based identities of the forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest, known as Scheduled Tribes. It also includes a discussion on forest-based practices and the impacts of the 1996 timber ban of 1996 and reveals ongoing perceptions by the post-colonial forest authorities of forest dwellers as 'destructors'. This chapter seeks to reveal that forest villagers have always been decolonising colonial and post-colonial forest spaces through their place-making or making sense of the place, forest practices and interweaving of pre-colonial animist Songsarek practices with Christian beliefs following the arrival of Christian Missionaries in the 1920s. Decolonisation in this study differs from Hindu nationalists' view of describing demolition of architecture, historical monument, laws and anything foreign as decolonial (Tundawala and Salmoli, 2023). It builds on Latin American thinking about decolonisation. More specifically, the idea of decolonial forest perceptions and practices is derived from Mignolo's (2017) take on

decoloniality. He perceives any practice that denounces the European way of being as decolonial. In the same manner, this chapter perceives any forest practices and beliefs that are not part of the prescribed rules for the Village Forests as 'decolonial'.

5.2 Geographies of Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest

This section introduces the four Village Forest of Baghmara Reserved Forest namely, Meata, Rangasora, Bobanipur and Bilkuna and their geographical, economic and cultural features of the village. Since village-level maps are not available at the forest department of Baghmara, maps were drawn manually featuring micro-level geographical features and cultural aspects of the Village Forests.

5.2.1 Meata

When one visits the four Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest, Meata is the first Village Forest one comes across. This village has the most favourable location as it has access to both water and road transport to commute to the commercial town of Baghmara, which is also headquarter of the South Garo Hills district. It has 37 households in total. The mighty Simsang river, which is also known as Someswari in Bangladesh flows by the village making it navigable via water from Baghmara town. Baghmara town is located on the other side of the river, which makes it easy to commute to the town via boats. There is a boat that provides a daily service to the forest villagers to commute to the market across the river.[98] Figure 5.2 shows the boat carrying passengers from Meata to Baghmara town.

[98] Fieldwork report on Meata village, 20th June 2020.

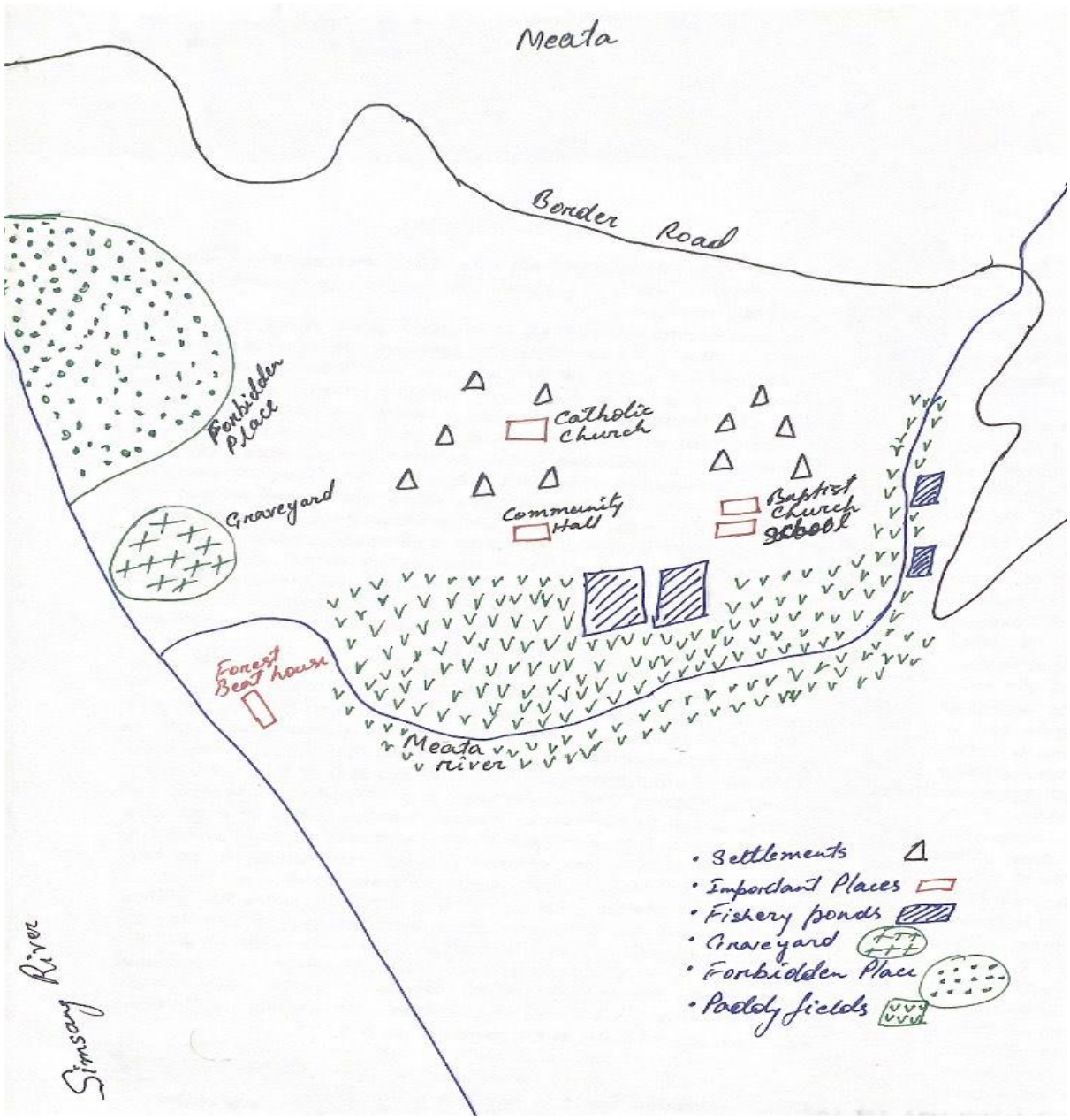


Figure 5.1: Sketch Map of Meata Village

This strategic location of the village makes it a gateway to other Village Forests. Because of its strategic location, a forest sub-beat is also constructed here to keep vigilance on potential illegal transport of timber by water.[99] The Simsang river and Forest Beat house are shown in the map (Figure 5.1). The connectedness of the village to the navigable river as evident from the map makes it prone to timber smuggling from the neighbouring country due to which the forest department has set up a forest beat house to keep the activities of the people under

[99] Ibid.

surveillance. The plains where the Forest Beat House and agricultural lands are placed is prone to flooding during the monsoon season. The reserved forest is prone to the smugglers during the monsoon months as it is easier for them to transport products. They drift the timber from the surrounding forests downstream to Bangladesh. It is believed that there is a division of roles among the smugglers. There are people who are responsible for cutting down trees and those who transport them via river Simsang.

The village has ideal geographical features for settlements and for paddy cultivation. The settlements are located on the hill slopes. The houses are built on dug out terraces and as such staircases are constructed to link to one house to another. Figure 5.3 gives an idea of the general landscape of the village. The staircases have been repaired into cemented ones. As the houses are located on the hill slopes, it is not possible to drive vehicles in close proximity to the settlements. Most of the houses here are constructed with walls made out of bamboo and tin is used as roofs. Timber from trees that are usually considered hard are used as pillars of the houses and the floors are usually cemented. There are a few houses, which are constructed fully with locally available materials with the exception of the roof that is covered with tin. In such cases, the floors of the houses are levelled with mud and the walls are constructed with bamboo. The Village Forest has designated forested sites preserved by the villages. This is called *a·si raka* in the local dialect. Such sites are believed to be abode of deities that was designated as a 'forbidden' site at the time when the forest villagers were animist Songsareks and remain free from anthropogenic contact. The advent of Christian Missionaries to the Garo Hills region converted them into Christians that consist of Roman Catholic and Protestant sects. Even today, the villagers adhere to beliefs associated with forbidden forest site and integrate animistic beliefs with Christian beliefs. Church buildings belonging to both the sects have been constructed in this village.

Figure 5.2: An image of the villagers on the daily boat service to the weekly market located on the other side of the Simsang river.

Figure 5.3: An image showing the landscape of Meata with the settlements on the hill slopes

As it is evident from Figure 5.1, the stream, which is called Meata passes through the plains and makes them suitable for paddy cultivation. However, during the time of my fieldwork, these paddy fields were found to be barren and seemed more like wastelands. The villagers informed me that these agricultural fields had been lying as wastelands for some years. Instead of paddy cultivation, fishery ponds were seen in these agricultural sites. The villagers are aware of the fishery schemes that they can access. They applied for fishery schemes from the Fishery Department of Meghalaya and these schemes have been one of the contributors to their livelihood. Other means of livelihood includes plantation of cash crops such as areca nut. Some of the previously farmed lands have been turned into areca nut plantations. The villagers are also engaged in fishing from the river Simsang, which they sell in the market. Due to the village's proximity to Baghmara town, unskilled villagers are engaged in unskilled jobs in the town. They are engaged as construction workers and daily wage labourers in Baghmara town.

5.2.2 Rangasora

Rangasora is the largest Village Forest in Baghmara Reserved Forest in terms of household numbers and the amount of geographical area occupied by the village. It has five hamlets which are called Silki A·ding, Rong·magri, Ranggui, Taribari and Badimbari.[100]

[100] Field work report on Rangasora village, 22th June, 2020.

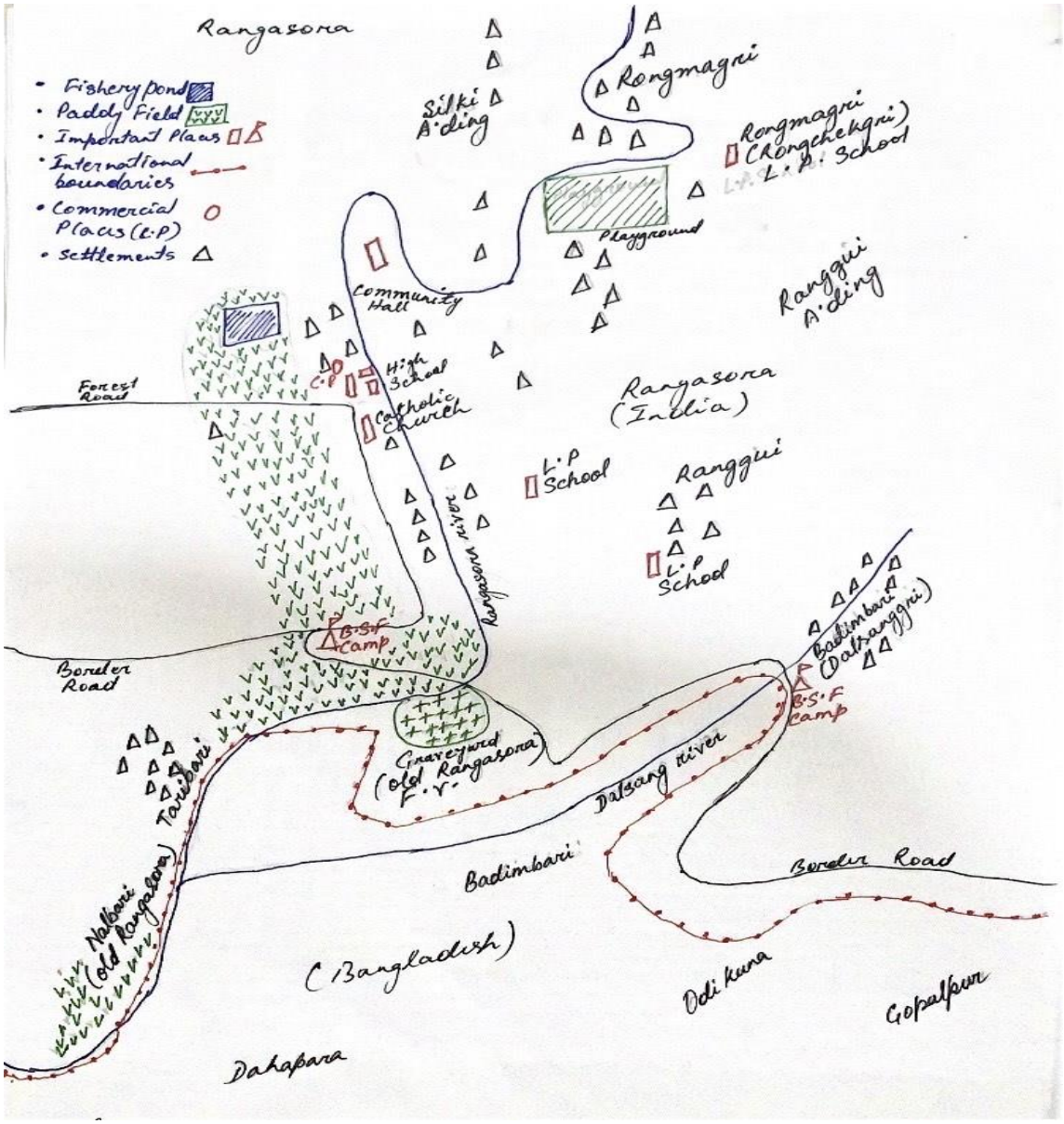


Figure 5.4: Sketch Map of Rangasora Village

The village is composed of two broad physical features, namely, the hills and the valleys. The hilly-forested tracts traverse down to fertile valleys. The hilly-forested tracts are suitable for shifting cultivation and the valleys are suited settled paddy farming that constitute the main livelihood for the villagers. There are two streams that flow through the village that are sources of irrigation and fishing sites for the villages. One is called Rangasora from which the village Rangasora comes. It flows through much of the settlement and its agricultural sites. The other is called Dalsang river and flows in proximity to Badimbari hamlet. The paddy fields are well irrigated by canals that are manually dug out. Rangasora stream is the source of irrigation for

the paddy fields. Using plough animals for farming is still prevalent in this village. There are some households who can afford power tillers for farming; a few of which rent out power tillers on an hourly rate to those who cannot afford to buy their own.[101]

Figure 5.5: A dugout canal that supplies water to the paddy fields

[101] Ibid.

Figure 5.6: Roman Catholic Church at Rangasora

As it is visible from Figure 5.4, the settlements and agricultural sites are clearly demarcated from one another. The villagers inhabit the hilly tracts whereas the valleys are used for farming. Public amenities such as a Lower Primary (L.P) schools, high school, community hall and Catholic Church are located in the plains. This village has comparatively more infrastructural facilities than the other Village Forests. The villagers here belong to the Roman Catholic faith as their ancestors were converted during the evangelisation of the Roman Catholic Church. The other Village Forests are composed of both Roman Catholic and Protestant sects of Christianity. Figure 5.6 shows the Roman Catholic Church of Rangasora village. The forest roads constructed by the forest villagers and the border roads used by the Border Security Force (BSF) intersect each other.[102]

[102] Fieldwork Report on Rangasora village, 6th July 2021.

The first forest villagers in the village depended on agriculture for their livelihoods. However, after Partition, most of the paddy fields were placed outside the international border. Currently, the villagers farm these lands but their crops are subjected to theft every year. Other activities include cash cropping of cashew nuts and areca nuts. These activities are taken up on a small scale in areas devoid of trees. The selling of the produce from these plantations has become a source of livelihood for some household during the period of their produce.[103] These plantations are seen in proximity to settlements in the hill slopes. Apart from agriculture and cash cropping, the villagers rear cattle and goats for additional resilience. Villagers who have access to financial capital by saving returns from their cash crop yields send their children to bigger towns for education. These children are often the ones who are successful in finding government jobs as teachers of lower and upper primary schools, as police personnel and as Lower Divisional Assistants (LDA) and clerks in the government departments.

5.2.3 Bobanipur

Bobanipur has 26 of households and is the smallest of the four Village Forests. As in the other forest villages, the settlements of Bobanipur are located on the hill slopes. Bobanipur's settlements are situated closer to the border fencing than the other Village Forest settlements. The houses and other settlements are located in the vicinity of the border fencing. Figure 5.7 shows the tea-stall at Bobanipur village that is located next to the border fencing. The hills here are steeper than other villages, making the settlements scattered. There are three streams that flow through the villages, namely, So·re, Kiruri and Dokgleka as can be seen from Figure 5.8. the streams flows in proximity to the tea-stall is work mentioning. This area is sensitive in terms of security concerns as there is no fencing over the stream. Timber smugglers use it as a gateway to India and as such, there is a heavy presence of BSF along this stretch.

[103] Fieldwork report on Rangsasora village, 24th June, 2020.

Figure 5.7: A tea-stall at Bobanipur village, located at a vicinity of the border fencing

The nature of the terrain characterised by steepness and unevenness makes the roads located in this part of the village non-motorable during the monsoon season. There is no bridge over the Kiruri stream and vehicles cannot navigate through the strong currents that follow heavy rainfall. When there is no rain, this stream is accessible by vehicles. Figure 5. 9 shows the path that leads to the stream. This passage way was washed away during the heavy monsoon rains of 2020 and had to be repaired for vehicles to pass through the stream. During most parts of the rainy season, the villagers of Bobanipur, Bilkuna and Rangasora have to walk on foot to Meata to get to the commercial town of Baghmara to buy their supplies.[104]

[104] Fieldwork report on Bobanipur village, 28th July 2020.

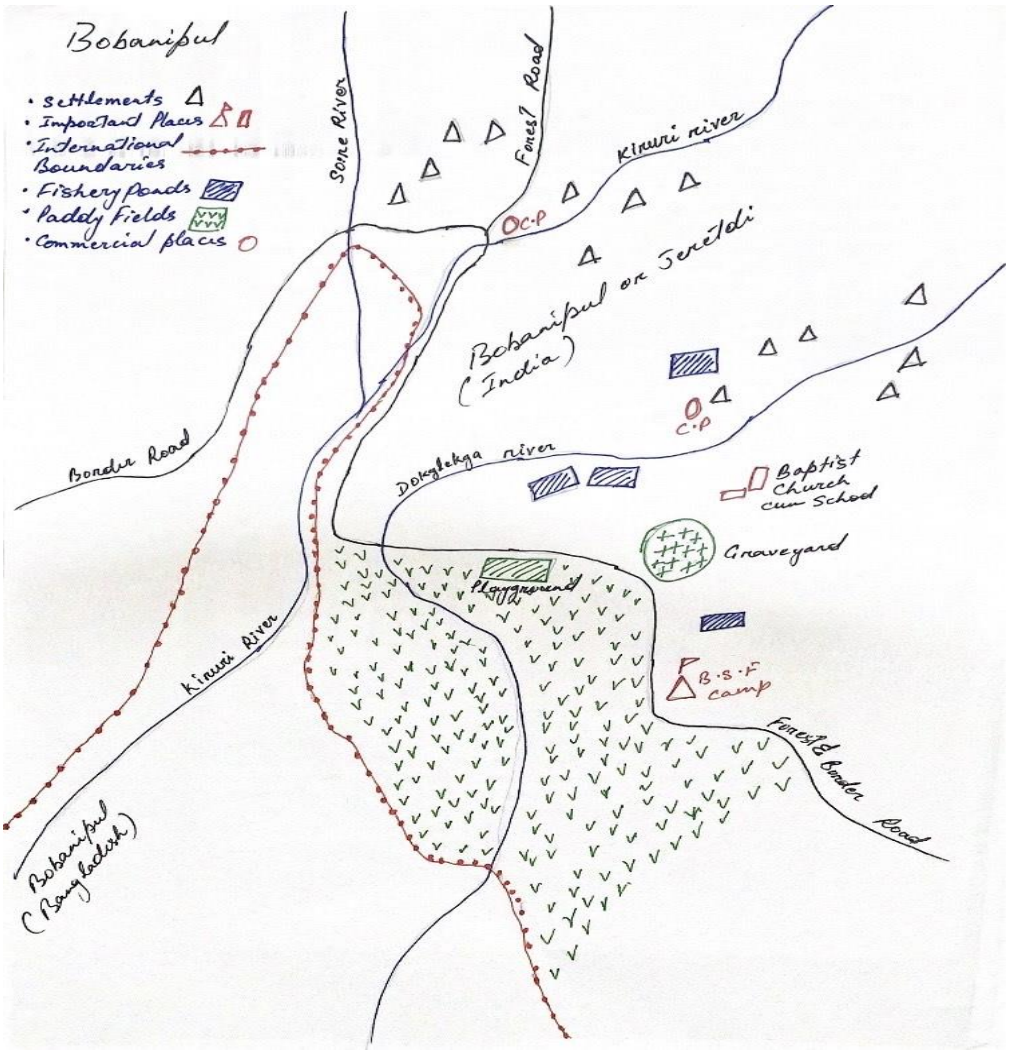


Figure 5.8: Sketch Map of Bobanipul, now written as Bhawanipur

The villagers of Bobanipur partially rely on agriculture for their livelihood. However, due to the Partition of India, most of their agricultural lands were placed outside the international fencing. Due to cases of theft, they can only rely partially on agriculture. In addition to agriculture, the villagers also seek support from the Fishery Department for fishery ponds that adds to their source of living.

Figure 5.9: The remains of a road that leads to a stream that was washed away by a flash flood in August 2020

Unlike in Rangasora and Meatda, the villagers of Bobanipur belong to a Protestant sect of Christianity. A school building located on the plains is being used as a place of worship. A proper church building is being constructed on the hilltop that will cease the function of the school building as a place of worship.

5.2.4 Bilkuna

Bilkuna has 28 households and its terrain is gentler compared to Bobanipur village which makes construction of houses easier as the villagers do not have to dig out terraces as is the case in Meata and Bobanipur villages. A stream called Jambu drains into swamps that are locally called '*beel*' and which contain a variety of fish species. These beels are formed as a

result of the inundation of flood-prone lands. These lands trap the flood waters even when the floods recede. In the sketch map of Bilkuna (Figure 5.10), the presence of swamps or wetlands in the village can be seen.[105]

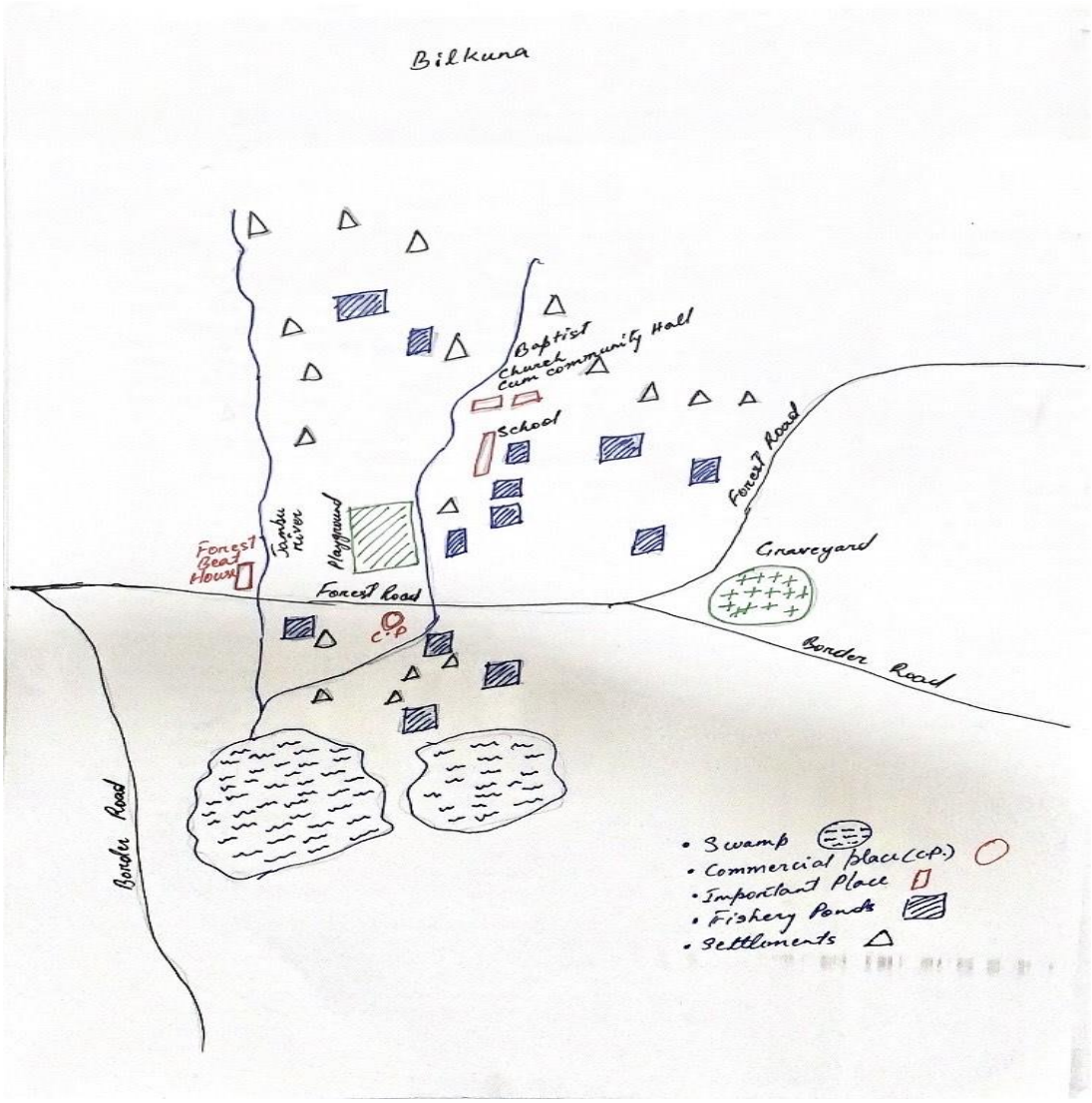


Figure 5.10: Sketch Map of Bilkuna Village

The houses are distant from one another in Bilkuna and are mostly *pucca*[106] although a few are constructed out of locally available resources. Figure 5.11 shows an example of a house constructed out of locally available forest materials such as palm leaves for the roof, bamboo for the construction of walls and timber as pillars. In most households, the cow sheds and

[105] Fieldwork report on Bilkuna village, 7th August 2020.

[106] Pucca houses is a term applied to housing in South Asia built of substantial material such as stone, brick, cement, concrete or timber. The term pucca means solid and permanent in Hindi.

poultry houses are made of locally available forest-based materials. In some households, the kitchens are built using such materials. Bilkuna has an L.P School that is situated in the middle of the village. It is currently being used as a community hall. The commercial place marked as 'CP' on the map is a small shop located close to the forest road. This shop caters to basic needs such as rice, cooking oil and vegetables.

Figure 5.11: Fishery ponds at Bilkuna

The village is strikingly different to the other three Village Forests in terms of presence of many ponds (Figure 5.11). The villagers have taken subsidies issued by the Fishery Department of Meghalaya to dig ponds to rear fish and these fishery ponds have become the main source of income for the villagers of Bilkuna. The villagers have not been farming the agricultural lands for years now and have been undertaking fish farming. In addition, the swamps or beel contain a variety of fish that are sold in the weekly market at Baghmara town and provide an important source of livelihood for the villagers.

Figure 5.12: A hut constructed by using locally available materials

In terms of religion, the villagers here belong to the Protestant sect of Christianity. This reflects the influence of the evangelisation of American Baptist Missionaries in NEI. A Baptist Church was built many years ago and it is located near the school building.

5.3 A Pre-colonial Village to Colonial Villages

By 1937, a large number of Village Forests were formed in the reserved forests of Assam (Handique, 2004), out of which Baghmara Reserved Forest is one such example. The creation of Village Forests in colonial Assam required huge labour supply that was met through the introduction of the *'taungya'* system (Sonowal, 2007). Prior to the establishment of Baghmara Reserved Forest, the Village Forests were under the control of *a·king nokmas*[107]. They practised *Songsarek,* which is the indigenous Garo belief system of worshipping nature. The establishment of Village Forests was also accompanied by evangelisation by the Christian

[107] A village headman in Garo Hills region who manages land and forests under his land.

Missionaries from Europe. This section seeks to bring out history of establishment of Village Forests characterised by adsorption of villagers from surrounding villages and later intersected by the advent of Christian missionaries.

The villagers are predominantly Garo and trace their lineage and decent through their biological mother. The village of Rangasora belonged to the Rongma clan and the nokma would be the spouse of a Rongma woman. In the same way, Bobanipur was a *nokma a·king* that belonged to *Rechil* clan. The villages of Bilkuna and Meata did not exist during the pre- colonial period. Most of the settlements of Bobanipur village were situated outside the present Indo-Bangla international fencing during the pre-colonial period. The creation of Village Forests gave birth to new colonial Village Forests.[108]

The arrival of the British to this *nokma a·king*, brought about relocation and migration of tribal indigenous people, particularly in Rangasora. According to one interviewee, the British used this forested tract to disguise themselves and the lands were known as 'camouflage forests'.The arrival of British soldiers in the village brought about intense subjugation and harassment, due to which forest dwellers had to flee from the village. One forest villager recounted with grief:

> "When British soldiers came to these villages, these forests were kept as camouflage forests and it seems the village were full of British soldiers… the British started to make the villagers work for them daily like **slaves**[109]… apparently they made them fetch water, build houses and other works as well without any pay… if they refused to do so, they were beaten it seems…the Rong·ma clan then fled to Dambuk as they could not tolerate such **harassment**… the Dandali fled to the present day East Bengal, to Mymensingh, The Nokrek and Te·gitde clans also fled to East Bengal".[110]

The archival resources also point at a relocation of the indigenous population with the establishment of reserved forests. When the establishment of Baghmara Reserved Forest in present day Meghalaya was proposed, there were pre-existing villages inside the proposed

[108] Interview with the former Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villager's Association, 12th July 2022.
[109] The typographical emphasis on the quotes extracted from the interviews that are italicised and bolded implies that these word were spoken in English language during the interview.
[110] Interview with the former Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villager's Association, 12th July 2022.

reserve. These were Bagmara, presently written as Baghmara, Hamphangdhangiri that is now written as Ampanggri and Dasangiri, which is now called as Badimbari by the natives. The British administrators found that containing these villages in the reserve was impracticable as the natives here changed their cultivation sites, which the British perceived to be wasteful and cause exhaustion to the timbered tract.[111] The alternative of demarcating certain areas to contain the villagers would mean restricting the area of the proposed reserve. Shifting the villagers to a different location was not considered an issue to the colonial administrators due to the availability of ample land outside the proposed boundaries. As compensation, a pair of plough, an oxen and a plot of rice land given free of rent for three years were granted to the villages who would be occupying the place opposite the village of Baghmara. It is to be noted here that relocation of the concerned villagers to another place meant that they would be subjected to payment of cultivable land tax after three years of free rent.[112]

In the pursuit of timber trade and continuous demand for a supply of timber, there was a need to maintain the supply for this demand. The oral history of these villages suggest that to cater to the needs of the timber trade, people were absorbed from surrounding villages. The grandson of one who to migrated to Rangasora as a forest villager tells about the first forest villagers:

> "The former nokma Poni Dandali told us that when this area was declared as reserved forest, people were brought from Badimbari, Parangpara and Dahapara villages to settle here… These people were Toman nokma who was Poni's father was called from Badimbari village… Another was Omol Arengh who was called from Rong·sep… Likewise, due to the need of more labour to do **plantation** in the Village Forests, Dippin Chambugong was also called from Parangpara village by the British, whose wife's name was Ajai Te·gitde… The first forest villagers were Te·gitde, Nokrek and Dandali clans. The present villagers all are the grandchildren of these people".

In Bobanipur Village Forest, the villagers in close proximity to the reserved forest were absorbed because of the labour needs of the British. Small temporary settlements in the form of huts were built when they first migrated to the colonial space whereby they could perform

[111] British Library, Home Department Proceedings, Baghmara Forest Reserve, No.6. June 1886.
[112] Ibid.

both jhum on the hill slopes and paddy cultivation in the plains. A woman who is now eighty seven years witnessed the relocation of their homes to the present space. She narrated:

> "When this place came under the Forest Department, we stayed here and build small houses or 'jerat' to cultivate paddy in these fields... The British let us cultivate on jhum and in those jhum lands we had to plant sal saplings on those lands".[113]

The respondent is referring to the taungya system of farming where the British allowed cultivation on hill slopes and paddy fields. To meet the labour needs of the colonial forest exploitation, people from surrounding villagers were absorbed, thereby making them forest labourers. In the taungya system, there was no payment for forest labour (Ghosh and Ghosal, 2019). The Village Forest of Baghmara Reserved Forest also followed the same mode of settlement without payment for forest labour as discussed in separate section. The creation of Village Forests entailed mobility of villagers from their previous settlements and was done on the condition that they were allowed to jhum and also to farm the paddy fields. At the outset of the establishment of the Village Forest, they initially constructed small houses called *'jerats'*.

Colonial Assam saw the arrival of missionaries from America and Australia from the first half of the 20th century with Catholic missions being established across Garo Hills (Maaker, 2007). The Village Forests of Baghmara also witnessed the evangelisation of Christian missionaries from Europe. It witnessed the coming of the Catholic missionaries who toured the villages surrounding Baghmara in the 1920s. The first Salesian missionary to tour Garo Hills was Fr Gill in 1923. The first Garo Catholics were baptised by the Holy Cross Fathers in Baghmara in the South Garo Hills district.[114] The villagers prior to the advent of the Christian Missionaries practised Songsarek, which is the practice of worshipping the naturally occurring forces. This is referred to as animistic religious practice. The forest villagers came under the influence of the Christian missions. This led to conversions in the Village Forests. This is evident from the presence of churches in the Village Forests. The coming of the missionaries was instrumental in spreading education. As a result, young forest villagers became educated in the Christian mission schools and convents.

[113] Interview with an aged 87 year old woman of Bobanipur Village, 9th July 2021.
[114] Diocese of Tura, History of Diocese of Tura, Accessed on 15th November 2022, https://www.turadiocese.org/.

Today, the Village Forests of Baghmara have various institutions such as primary schools, high schools and Anganwadi centres. The villages also partake in the beneficiary schemes of the post-colonial state such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Rajiv Gandhi Rural Electrification Scheme, Below Poverty Line cards. The administration of the villages remains under the forest department but the village headmen play an important role in communicating the villagers' requirements to forest authorities.

5.4 Colonial and Post-colonial Construction of Forest-based Identities and Activities

Forestry in colonial Assam and postcolonial NEI can be understood through Said's (1978) theorisation of Orientalism. Orientalism can be described as a discourse that contains geographical distinctions of land familiar and unfamiliar to a group of people while talking about relationships between knowledge and geography. This in turn results in a mental formation of unfamiliar territory and mentality being different from familiar territory. As such superstitions, associations and fictions become implicated in the unfamiliar space outside their territory. This concept is useful in understanding the framing of forest-related cultural practices of colonial Assam. This colonial framing can be seen in the post-colonial nation state's categorisation of forest-based identities. This western way of framing and construction is seen as a discourse that feeds into Jazeel's (2019) way of understanding orientalism as a discourse. This vast style of thought, a product of human imagination, writing, analysing and describing is based upon ontological and epistemological differences perceived between the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'. This distinction became the basis for writing about the Orient that includes its people, customs, and so on by poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators. Such distinctions resulted in stereotyping of forest-based activities in colonial Assam as discussed below.

5.4.1 Notion of traditional rights, claims, privileges and recorded rights

As the colonial regime in India started to use legal provisions to reserve more than a fifth of India's land area for timber production, the customary rights of the people were sidelined by appropriating land from customary users through what is called a 'settlement' process. This process involved the creation of 'reserves' in forests containing high timber value where customary rights of the local people were varying from one reserve to another. In forest tracts where the trees were of less value, 'protected' forests were established where local people's

rights were restricted (Springate-Baginski *et al.,* 2013). These protected forests were later classed as 'unclassed state forests' where home consumption permits were granted to access to forests for basic needs. In acquisition of ancestral lands by the British, the customary rights of the native people were put under scrutiny by the British, which needs a brief articulation in this study. As the reservation of forests was done in a systematic manner, the colonial government received varied forest settlement cases by which people's claims to their customary rights were made. These forest establishments were declared in the Assam Gazette[115] that was published on a weekly basis.[116] Traditional forest users who understood the working of the law made their needs and grievances known in the form of petitions during the settlement process (Chapter 6).

The assertion of colonial power over the forests of colonial Assam was pursued in an extensive way towards the end of the 19th century when the forested lands were declared as government forests under Section 34 of the Indian Forest Act 1878.[117] During the settlement process, there were many terms that were in use by the colonial administrators in referring to forest rights and privileges granted to traditional forest users. For instance, in forest survey reports of reserved forests, terms such as 'claim', 'privilege' and 'rights' were widely used.With the extensive colonial control of forests, the access to forests and its resources by the forest users was prescribed by the colonial government. This resulted in the colonial construction of forest rights that determine their conduct in the forested spaces. The rights associated with forests can be perceived in three ways. These are traditional rights, claimed rights and recorded rights. In the settlement of proposed forest reserves, the traditional forest users were allowed to claim their traditional rights. The rights that they had been enjoying since time immemorial such as jhumming, grazing and gathering are referred to as traditional rights. Such claims made by the forest-dependent communities were in the hands of the forest officials to recognise or deny. Such claims considered by the forest officials were recorded in the registers maintained by the forest officials. The claims recognised by the forest settlement officers became 'recorded' rights and the ones denied remained as claims. These recorded customary claims were referred to as forest rights.[118] Reluctance to record the claimed rights were evident during the settlement

[115] Assam Gazette is a public journal of the Government of Assam published weekly. It was founded in the year 1874. The gazette is printed by the Government of Assam Press.

[116] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department Proceedings, Forest Settlement in Assam, From the Secretary to the Government of India, To the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.8, 15th October 1886.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

process. The Chief Commissioner of Assam also decided to record publicly the absence of these rights in the forest registers in view of increasing population. This step would legally put the future claims of rights on check, as there could be possible claims of rights to forest use in the future.[119]

In the establishment of Kaliani Reserved Forest, traditional forest users addressed their needs of jhumming, grazing, fishing, and access to bamboo as claims that were granted as rights. These people were the Nagas of Rengma Hills who proposed for granting of jhuming rights during the settlement of Kaliani Reserved Forest in 1887. It is to be noted that the areas proposed for reserved forests constituted about 45,838 square miles in the hilly region inhabited by tribes who practised jhum cultivation. About 6,400 square miles are in Naga Hills.[120] They jhumed on the forested lands that was proposed as a 'reserve' and claimed their rights over the proposed forest. However, they were denied of jhuming rights as it was not considered reasonable to give them a right over vast tracts of valuable forests. The Assistant Commissioner of Golaghat viewed shifting cultivation as an activity that was causing destruction to all the forests in proximity to them. He refused to regard shifting cultivation as a right and rather viewed it as a mere 'practice'.[121] The other claims of rights to fishing, grazing and accessing bamboo from the reserve were considered as reasonable claims. However, the Assistant Commissioner showed reluctance in recording any grazing or fishing rights as existing in the reserve as these activities were not considered adverse to the Government. Instead, the local Forest Officers were given responsibility for issuing these rights to forest users. This included order permitting villagers to graze their cattle, which was to be done under the distinct instructions of the local forest officers.[122] This explains why there was absence of record keeping due to reluctance of the administrators of the forest rights that were granted to the local users as being 'ancestrally accessible rights' enjoyed by the forest users since times immemorial. This opened up space for unwritten and unsung histories of ancestral forest rights in the colonial archives. The absence of record keeping of forest rights became problematic during the consolidation of forests in the country, thereby depriving many tribes in the country of forest rights (Springate-Baginski *et al.*, 2009).

[119] Ibid.
[120] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department (Forests), Assam Forest Administration Report, 1885-86, No. 1678, June 1887.
[121] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Procedure to be followed in Forest Settlement Cases, No. 29, June 1887.
[122] British Library, Revenue and Agricultural Proceedings, Kaliani Reserved Forest, No.24, August 1887.

In the settlement process of a reserve where there were no claims made from the forest users of the concerned forest under settlement, the legal right granted to the forest users was called a 'privilege'. There were cases where no objections to the proposed reserved forests were filed or addressed even after notices were issued to them, particularly by the hill tribes. In such cases, local enquiries were made by the Sub-Deputy Collector in the presence of the Sub-Assistannt-Conservator of Forests.[123] In the reservation of Kholahat Reserved Forest in Nowgong, there was no objection from the villagers in close proximity to the reserve. However, they made their needs known to the officers in charge about grazing and obtaining firewood and timber from unreserved trees. According to the Conservator of Forests, the villagers in question had no legal right to forest resources but access was granted to them by the forest department on home consumption permits that was referred to by the colonial administrators as 'privileges'. These 'privileges' were granted by the colonial administrators when they considered that the traditional users had no legal rights to the resources. These privileges in the name of home consumption permits was initially issued for twenty years and were subjected to renewal thereafter and were recorded in the register of reserved forests.[124] Under these circumstances, it can be understood that the privileges enjoyed by traditional forest users in the form of home consumption units was a 'temporary arrangement' as it had to be renewed after twenty years.

Another aspect in the settlement of the reserved forest involved the settlement of private estates within the reserved forest. Whilst the ancestral forest practices of traditional forest users were restricted and recorded inconsistently in the reserved forest register, the rights of private estates in reserves were duly maintained. The rights of the Assam Company in the tea gardens of Hatigarh and Terap situated within the boundary of Abhaypore Forest were not reserved.[125] This meant that the rights of private estate and the surrounding population were recorded in the registers of reserved forests in District Divisional Offices. Although the Conservator of Forest in Assam did not see the need to publish the existing rights of the private estates within a reserve, he also did not see any harm in publishing it in the Assam Gazette.[126]

[123] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Proceedings of the chief Commissioner of Assam, Reservation of the second addition to the Kholahat Reserved Forest in Nowgong, No. 1-2, December 1887.
[124] Ibid.
[125] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Reservation of the Derai and Abhaypur Forests, From the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No. 35, December 1881.
[126] British Library, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Reservation of the Derai and Abhaypur Forests, From the Conservator of Forests Assam to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No.38, April 1882.

5.4.2 Forest villagers as forest labour

As the establishment of Village Forests was closely connected to efforts to solve labour crises (Handique, 2004), to fulfil the requirements of living in the village forests, forest villagers had to render free labour to the forest department. According to the Act of 1891, each adult forest villager should render 20 days labour in a year at a local wage rate.[127] The jhummias were admitted into these reserved forests on a negotiation that they sow seeds of timber-yielding trees along with their crops but they also were to render 20 days labour (Handique, 2004). While the practice of free labour in Village Forests popularly known as *begar* or unpaid labour during colonial period is known (Sharma and Sarma, 2014), the kind of domination and suppression in a micro-geographical context of Baghmara Village Forests needs a discussion. Among the forest villagers interviewed, there were some village elders whose parents had experienced the rendering of free labour during the colonial period to the forest department and the respondents themselves during the post-colonial period who helped me unpack the exploitative nature of free labour in the Village Forests during the colonial and post-colonial period.

The practice of rendering of 20 days free labour during the colonial period was mandatory for forest villagers. During the post-colonial period (after the taungya system had ceased), forest villagers were made to labour for 10 days in a year. During the colonial period, the particular days when they were supposed to work were scheduled in advance. They were made to work in the presence of the foresters and forest guards. A typical day of labour constituted calling out of names from the register prior to the start of the work. The kinds of work undertaken included plantation, weeding and repair of forest roads. While the villagers performed their duties, they were put under the surveillance of armed foresters during working hours. From 9:00 AM in the morning to 4:00 PM in the evening, they were allowed to rest only for an hour at 12:00 noon. This disciplining of the forest villagers was for the duration of 10 days during the post-colonial period.[128]

The archive-based narrative regarding the establishment of Village Forests by the colonial forest department points to the need for labour in expanding commercial forestry (Handique,

[127] Assam State Archives, The Assam Forest Manual, Vol. 1, Rules for the Establishment and Control of Village Forests, No. 4631 R, 6th December, 1930.
[128] Interview with the Secretary of the All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association, 12th July 2021.

2004; Saikia, 2008). In the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest, the agreement between the forest villagers and the forest officials were made on the condition that jhum cultivation could be performed and in return, trees would be planted on the jhummed lands, a colonial practice known as taungya cultivation (Sonowal, 2007). Regarding the circumstances under which they were required to work during the colonial period, the extract below indicates that they had to work in group in the presence of the forest personnel.

> "The villagers to work in the presence of forest guards and foresters… they work in the midst of their surveillance…the foresters used to carry kukri[129] and a gun with them… they could rest only once for a lunch break and had to carry their own lunch.. they did not provide any refreshments as such… the lunch break was usually between 12:00-1:00 PM… the foresters were there during the entire working hours and made us work… it was like slavery if we think about it…".

Apart from planting timber-yielding trees, I was interested in unpacking more information regarding other forest-related works during the colonial period that could be site-specific. An interview with the former secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villagers' Association provides information regarding the nature of the work involved. In addition to planting of sal trees, the villagers had to maintain village roads that included clearing and digging of roads for official forest vehicles to pass through and weeding them thereafter. With pride and confidence, he said:

> "The road from Baghmara to Rangasora via Soil Department office, the road from Rangasora to Nolbari were all **maintained** by the forest villagers without any receipt of payment from the department… Forest roads you see in the villages were all part of **free labour**… Apart from this, forest villagers were also responsible of building wooden bridges for the forest department personnel to **patrol** the reserved forest".[130]

It is evident from the above extract that the forest villagers were responsible for the maintenance of forest roads. The roads which are now in use to commute from the Village

[129] A sword commonly used by hunters and foresters
[130] Interview with the former Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villager's Association, 12th July 2022.

Forests to Baghmara were used by the colonial officials to patrol the forested tracts. The road in Figure 5.13 is the road that leads to the Village Forests of Rangasora, Bilkuna, Meata and Bobanipur that was maintained by forest villagers during the colonial forest administration. After partition, this road has become an important state and national asset as this road acquired the status of a border and state road. This road is now under the responsibility of the state government of Meghalaya.

Figure 5.13: Image of the road from Baghmara town to the Village Forests

During the post-colonial period, the labour the forest villagers had to undertake included plantation works and weeding of trees. Following the Independence of India, the forest roads are maintained by the central government as these are taken up by the Border Security Force (BSF). This indicates that the villagers did not have to render labour for the maintenance of forest roads. However, other laws prescribed under reserved forests have to be observed by the forest villagers that dictate their everyday activities. The small pathways that are used by the villagers are maintained under the MGNREGS, which is a scheme under the central government. Figure 5.14 is the view of a forest road that was maintained under free labour and

at present, it is also a border road that is maintained by the central government. Forest roads were maintained by the forest villagers for the facilitation of patrolling and survey work by forest department officials are also now under the maintenance of central government. The BSF of India along with the forest department make constant use of this road. After the attainment of border road status, it was developed into a metalled road.

Figure 5.14: A road in Rangasora village that is now a border road

Currently, free labour is not in operation in the Village Forests. According to the interview sources, it was abolished in 1993 after the forest villagers' mass movement for its abolition. The resistance for its abolition is discussed in Chapter 6. The forest villagers are presently involved in forest-related works such as plantations but the labour is done for payment of wages. The following is an extract from the interview with the DFO of South Garo Hills division who explained the nature of current plantation work in reserved forests:

> "These days plantation work is being conducted by the forest villagers… the forest department personnel are present during plantation drives but only to give guidance and demonstration…actually forest department personnel do not do plantation themselves…the forest villagers work for wages…For some period of time it becomes a source of livelihood for them if not for the entire year…".[131]

The above statement provides the ongoing scenario of plantation works being conducted in reserved forests. It says that forest villagers are still active participators in plantation drives. However, unlike the unpaid and free labour during the colonial and early independence period, it is presently conducted with payment. The mode of operation is more or less the same with the presence of forest personnel. The forest villagers' involvement in plantation works is justified in the fact that they are not working for free but rather for wages that provides financial support seasonally. In short, forest villagers played a key role and are still active participators in plantation work both during the colonial, post-independence and contemporary periods.

5.4.3 Nokmaship in Village Forests

During British rule, *nokma* were given administrative responsibilities such as collecting taxes from the respective villages (Karlsson, 2011). As such, they were held responsible for the allocation of land to each and every household in the village for jhumming. A nokma is often described as the husband of the main lady of the founder clan or Ma'chong of the community My ethnographic work in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forests and discussions with five nokmas of the villages provoked me to theorise about 'nokmaship' in Village Forests. The first kind of nokmaship prevails in *nokma a·king* where nokma is often referred to as '*a·king goreni nokgipa'* or the owner of lands belonging to particular clan. This is the system of land and forest governance that forest villagers interpret as ideal. The second kind of nokmaship prevails in Village Forests, where a nokma is considered functional only when he is approved by the forest department. The following is an extract from the interview with a village headman.

[131] Interview with the DFO, South Garo Hills division, 13th July 2021.

> "Yes, that is true, the headmen here are approved by the forest department… and the approved headmen cannot be replaced without the department's knowledge and approval… Even if the villagers have appointed another person as the headman, the former remains the headman in the eyes of the department until the new person is approved".[132]

The nokmaship approved by the forest department in reserved forests works as the intermediary between the forest villagers and the forest department. In addition, in forest cases, a nokma acts as a negotiating agent between the two parties. The present headman of Meatda village articulated to the best of his knowledge and experience his responsibilities as a headman:

> *"If something happens in the village, be it related to forests or other issues, the police and foresters come to the headmen first. For example if a villager has been found felling a tree, the headman will also be* ***summoned*** *by the police… even in dismissing cases, the headmen play a crucial role in negotiating between the forest department and the accused villager".*[133]

The above extract implies that a nokma in Village Forests has an important function in the working of postcolonial forestry. He is clearly a representative of the forest department and has an accountability to illegalities and crimes in the village. In short, a nokma has an accountability towards post-independence forestry in the space of colonial reserved forests. Nokmas of Village Forests have no power in terms of decisions related to land and forests, in allotting lands for agricultural purposes as the a·king nokmas. Their function is thus limited to working as a subordinate of the Forest Department.

5.5 Situating Baghmara Reserved Forest

Baghmara Reserved Forest, which was exploited under colonial Assam was made into Village Forests as other reserved forests of colonial Assam. However, there are certain geographical aspects of Village Forests in Baghmara Reserved Forest that makes them distinct in their demographic and socio-cultural composition. Unlike many Village Forests in Assam where non-tribal villagers have outnumbered tribal inhabitants (Sonowal, 2007; Sharma and Sarma,

[132] Extract from an interview with the headman of Meata village, 4th January 2021.
[133] Ibid, 4th January 2021.

2014) all the inhabitants of Baghmara Reserved Forest comprise of\ Garos who are recognised as Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution.

Socio-cultural practices in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest are also distinct. The Garos that inhabit the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest practise a matrilineal system of tracing their lineage. The three main characteristics of a matrilineal system in Meghalaya include descent traced through the mother, existence of a matrilocal residence system or and the inheritance of ancestral property by daughters (Narzary and Sharma, 2013). This existing practice of lineage, inheritance and matrilocal residence distinct to matriliny does not mean that the society is ruled by women. Men have no inheritance rights but they are the members of the village council and village courts (Nongbri, 2000; Bhutia and Liarakou, 2018). The Village Forests of Baghmara despite its colonial subjectivity and categorisation of identity by the postcolonial nation state, follow a matrilineal system of tracing their lineage through mothers, inheritance of properties by daughters and matrilocal residence. It is usually the youngest daughter who inherits the ancestral properties of the family and looks after the parents. They are called *nokkrom* in the local dialect. In the contemporary period, inheriting of ancestral properties depend on the choice of the parents. Households having more than one daughter set up nuclear families of their own.

While forest villagers uphold the cultural practice of daughters setting up nuclear families, there are cases where the sons are matrilocal. A number of households in Rangasora village were found to be matrilocal after marriage. Even in cases of sons who are matrilocal, the children trace their lineage through their mothers. In Village Forests, the land is owned by the forest department and hence, cannot be owned by the forest villagers. The daughters in the Village Forests cannot inherit the land but they inherit the house and the right to cultivate in the agricultural lands of the Village Forest.

In non-Village Forests, members of the village council and village courts consist of male members (Nongbri, 2000; Bhutia and Liarakou, 2018) but Village Forests do not have a village court or a village council. The nokma or the headmen of the Village Forests are all males. As women in non-Village Forests do not have decision-making power in village councils, the women in the Village Forests also do not have that power as women are not usually appointed as village headmen of the Village Forests. Women takes charge of domestic works in the

Village Forests. As they are directly dependent on forests for their everyday life, the responsibility of collecting firewood and vegetables from the forests fall on women.

Figure 5.15: Women of Rangasora on their way to the forests to collect firewood carrying the traditional basket called 'kokcheng'

Figure 5.15 shows women carrying traditional baskets on their backs to collect firewood from the forests. The villagers have a consensus on restricting animals grazing in the open forests during certain period, particularly during the agricultural season from June to November. During the off-grazing period, the responsibility of women increases as they fetch fodder from the forests for the cattle. Men usually take up the task of tilling the paddy fields but sowing and reaping of rice are done by women. The discussion of gender roles in matrilineal Village Forests sheds light onto key roles undertaken by men and women which are not very different from those in the non-Village Forests. At the same time, the prevailing gender roles in Village Forests reveal that women tend to bear the brunt of forest laws pertaining to the Village Forests.

One such example is their exposure to the surveillance of the forest personnel while collecting fodder and firewood in the forest.

5.6 Approaching Tribe or Forest Users

Tribe is perceived to be in a contrasting relationship with colonialism (Kar, 2016). The task of decolonising forests in the NEI will include decolonising forest-based identity of the tribe, their definition of land, forest users as active political agents, and forest users having their own practice. The process of decolonising geographical knowledges requires placing of diverse knowledges and bringing together knowledge from different settings and juxtaposing them with one another (Connell, 2007). The idea of being 'indigenous' in India is highly contested as Indian Anthropologists view the concept as being an 'indigenous or an 'original settler' is irrelevant (Singh, 1995). Based on the existing history of migration of the tribes in NEI from different places, no one is indigenous in India. While the decolonial approach requires going beyond the Eurocentric and provincial horizons and production of knowledge that shifts from strict disciplinary norms (Maldonaldo-Torres, 2016; Radcliffe, 2017), decolonising forest making in NEI in itself is a complex process of unlearning, reframing, reflecting, rediscovering of ones' knowledge as a researcher and of deconstructing the hegemonic epistemic identity of the forest users. In this study, I choose to perceive the forest users not merely as group of people who have distinct culture, language and sense of belongingness to one another within a group. I incorporate the idea of being 'indigenous' by Shaw *et al.* (2006), as having ancestral and spiritual ties to their land and ancestors who took charge of their lands since pre-colonial times. In materialising a decolonial approach in this study, tribal indigenous ways of interpreting and comprehending their history, land and forests are given prime importance.

For the postcolonial analysis, the Garo forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest of Meghalaya are taken into account. These forest villagers have been living in the reserved forest since its establishment and prior to that their ancestors lived in close association with forests that was refected in the practice of shifting cultivation. They agreed to settle in the Village Forests on the condition that they were allowed to jhum on the hill slopes and cultivate on paddy fields. Their place-making reveals that Garo forest villagers have a distinct connection with their lands and forests as discussed in the following sections.

5.7 Decolonising Forest-based Narratives and Practices

This section of analysis seeks to deconstruct the existing narrative of reserved forests by bringing into light the tribal system of land governance called nokmaship. It also seeks to unpack colonial construction of forest-based identities in micro-geographical settings and discuss existing nuanced forms of forest conservation activities and knowledge in a state-imposed hybridised forest space. As it is clear from the section on forest-based colonial categorisation and identity construction, this analysis aims to unpack the perspectives of the forest villagers in establishing that forest villagers have always been keeping their culture and traditional ways of conservation intact. The state assigned category of 'Scheduled Tribe' qualifies the forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest for the FRA that was promulgated in the year 2006. The views of the forest villagers on the FRA that was designed to undo the injustice brought upon the forest dwelling communities are revealed in this section. Such conservation attempts of the forest villagers such as interweaving of tribal indigenous beliefs in forbidden forests with the Christian beliefs can be seen as decolonising forest practices.

5.7.1 Knowing beyond reserved forest (*Nokmaship* and *A·king*)

During the settlement process of reserved forests, the survey reports often describe the acquired forest tracts as having been the ancestral lands of forest users once upon a time. In Baghmara Reserved Forest, the forest villagers connect to periods when their lands were not part of the colonial landscape to narrate stories of their connections and dependence on land and forests. Through my ethnographic study of five Village Forests in Baghmara Reserved Forest, I try to reconstruct the relationship of the forest villagers to their land. As oral histories are crucial in constructing indigenous histories, in depth interviews and conservations with the village elders have been useful in revealing such relationships.

Prior to the establishment of local forests as a colonial landscape, they were under the autonomous management of village headmen, known as *a·king nokma* in the local dialect. The forested tracts that encompassed the villages of Baghmara, Rangasora, Bobanipur, Bilkuna, and Badimbari belonged to different clans.[134] A·king refers to land under the management of a nokma or headman. Whilst a·king is managed by an a·king nokma, their control and

[134] Interview with the former Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villagers' Association, 12 July. 2012

management is confined only to their territorial boundaries which are often marked by stones. In these Village Forests, there are nokmas but not a·king nokmas that opens up a discussion about the concept of nokmaship and nokma a·king.

5.7.1 (i) A Land Where We Belong and Feel Safe: The Concept of A·king

Prior to the discussion about nokmaship, I draw upon the concept of a·king. In cultural and historical studies of the Garos, it is a common thing for researchers encountering the concept of a·king and its stewardship. Rightly so, it has been used in the work of Karlsson's (2011) anthropological work on nature and politics in Meghalaya. While he used the term 'a·king', he described it as a mere 'village land'. I choose to disagree with this common interpretation of a·king as merely an ordinary plot of village land and bring out varied dimensions on this concept. As unsettling the translation is in English language, it emanates a whole different level of connotation about land and its connectedness to the indigenous people. The word *a·king* is often used in relation to nokma or the village headman (as they are commonly referred to by scholars in cultural studies) who is responsible for the overall management and control of land within his respective area. Looking at the etymology of the word a·king, 'a' is the short version of 'a·a' or land and 'king' signifies something that has a protective shell or canopy that offers protection and shelter. Going by the literary meaning, when nokma a·king is used, it refers to the a·king that has to do with nokma and has a sense of safety and security.[135] The following perception of a·king is distinct to the Songsarek animists who regard a·king more than merely being a piece of land.

In the words of an elderly Garo man (who practises tribal indigenous religious belief and did not convert to Christianity):

> "In A·king, the word 'king, can be thought of as something that has a protection. For instance, nokking, which means a roof of a house offers protection and safety. In the same way, a·king also offers that safety from any danger… it is basically a land where we belong and we feel safe".[136]

[135] Interview with a an elderly non-convert Garo, 1st February 2022
[136] Ibid, 1st February 2022.

The above statement reveals that the concept of a·king denotes more than a village land that has an embedded protective connotation to the term. A such, nokma denotes more than a male leaders of the village as projected by Lahiri and Das (2012). In cultural studies, nokmas are seen only as male leaders of the village and their relation to the land they control and manage are often out of focus and discussion. In addition, a nokma is perceived as male representative of the village (Nakane, 1967) with no vested political and economic advantages (Burling, 1963). The qualifiers used in defining an indigenous leader who takes important decisions in relation to land and forests are limited to being 'representatives', 'managers' and 'custodians' of land. These qualifiers reveal the existing perception of the elements of tribal governance through the lens of capitalism and philosophy of democracy thereby, limiting and diluting the very fabric and essence of nokmaship and nokma a·kingship.

In decolonising forests, it is crucial to intervene as to who are the nokmas in relation to land and forests during the colonial and postcolonial period. During my conversations with the nokmas of the Village Forests, they often said that their power in the village is not like in the nokma a·king and is often limited to checking and reporting of illegalities and crimes in the village to the forest department. Inhabiting an a'king where land and forests are under the stewardship of the nokmas means that villagers have no restrictions in accessing and utilising the resources attached to land allotted to them. In contrast to Village Forestrs, villagers of nokma a'king land are entitled to land titles or pattas. The ideal way of life to the forest villagers is to live in a nokma a·king, as the former headman of Rangasora puts it:

> "Life is hard here. It is not like in nokma a·king, where we can perform agricultural and cash crops freely. Here in these villages, there is no freedom. If this village was under nokma a·king, the lives here would be different and people would have excelled and prosper…"[137]

Looking at the etymology of the word, nokma itself consists of two words in which 'nok' means household and 'ma' refers to mother. This implicates that nokmaship has to do with mother since Garos are matrilineal. However, the responsibility of nokmaship is taken up by a husband under a matrilineal setting. Hence, in contemporary Garo discourse and literature, nokma usually refers to the male leader. In day-to-day conversations, nokma is usually summed up in

[137] An extract from the fieldwork diary, In conversation with the former headman of Rangasora Village, 18th July 2020.

a phrase '*a·king goreni nokgipa*'[138] which is the most used phrase used to describe the function and existence of *nokma and nokmaship,* meaning owner of a·king. The word 'gore' in the phrase is derived from two words '*Gokre-Gokse'*, where *Gokre* refers to land and *Gokse* to water bodies of the earth.[139] By the hegemonic translation and articulation of nokma, the phrase *'*a·king goreni nokgipa' roughly translates as owner of a·king gore, where nokmaship even extends to water bodies. The male nokma holds the title to nokma a·king on behalf of his wife and her matrikin including both land and water bodies in his territorial domain. However, the translation of indigenous words and phrases, the interpretation of earth and water entities of indigenous world is problematic as this requires a perspective that is parallel to western ways of knowing and interpreting things. Translating nokma as owners of a·king gore emanates possession and ownership but nokmaship is not only confined to ownership and possession but he is also the head of religious rituals and sacrifices as cited in the work of Karlsson (2011). Doing away with mere narrative of nokma as managers and custodians of a·king, nokma can be regarded as owner of a·king gore who intervenes between humans and the spiritual entities. This translation scheme may still reproduce capitalistic narrative of nokma and nokmaship thereby, diluting the exactness of the meaning this indigenous system embodies. With the establishment of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in India, there have been many changes in the functioning and responsibilities of the indigenous governing institutions of which, nokmaship is one such institution.

5.7.2 Place-making after partition

The lived experiences of the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest have been intersected by the partition of West Bengal and East Pakistan in 1947. The demand for separate homeland for Muslim populations entailed dividing India into West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). These two divisions required the authorities to draw new boundaries to divide the land based on categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' (Jones, 2021). This has placed these Village Forests as borderlands. Thereafter, in 1971 Bangladesh was granted a separate nation that established these frontier areas as borderlands (Sen, 2021). The 1947 partition divided the tribal groups and placed them into newly created territory of East Pakistan and independent India. This was particularly true for

[138] An extract from the fieldwork diary as recorded on 20th July 2020.
[139] An extract from the telephone interview with a non-convert Garo, 1st February, 2022.

the Garos of colonial Assam, which the colonial administrators failed to take into account. Geopolitics of these villages as borderlands has a great role to play in their everyday belongingness. It can be reviewed in two prospects, namely before partition and after partition belongingness and identity. During the colonial pre-partition period, the everyday life and place-making of the indigenous people here in the forested tracts was different from what it is at present. With unrestrained everyday movement without the presence of international border fences and surveillance of border security forces, they could perform their agricultural activities and maintain community bonds. The agricultural lands in the valleys and forested tracts were within their reach, free of colonial and post-colonial impositions.

With the achievement of Indian independence, colonial partitioning and the division of India into India and Pakistan created separation of people from their lands and ancestral settlements. In the eastern part of India, Bengal was granted a full-fledged nation known as East Pakistan then (Jones, 2021). The areas located in close proximity to the borders are called as 'enclaves' by Cons (2012). Such enclaves are referred to as pieces of India inside Bangladesh and vice-versa and are situated along the northern part of the Indo-Bangladesh border. These enclaves are often represented as symbols of incomple partition. The Village Forests of Rangasora, Bobanipur, Bilkuna and Meata can be understood as enclaves. During partition, the villages of Rangasora and the hamlet of Badimbari and Bobanipur chose to be with the newly created postcolonial India. In that process, their agricultural and ancestral lands were mapped inside the territory of present day Bangladesh while some of them lay outside the fencing, which is called no man's land. All these colonial and post-colonial processes including partitioning led to the creation of overlapping post-colonial territories.

The politics of partitioning led to the construction of border fencing in these Village Forests. Territorial fencing by the post-colonial nation state has been implicated in the daily lives of the forest villagers. The construction of border fencing led to separation from their agricultural fields as most of the villagers' lands have been placed in the exterior of the fencing. Although technically, they are the citizens of independent India, they are bound to go beyond the border fencing and farm in these lands. This shows the complex sense of place-making with the Indian territory and the agricultural lands outside the fencing. This daily movement in and out of Indian territory involves negotiations with the Border Security Force (BSF) of India. The daily movement of the forest villagers that takes place during daylight sheds lights on their negotiation with the post-colonial security forces in these enclaves. Thus, the implications of

partitioning and resultant border fencing have ushered in complexities of living that are often accompanied with insecurity due to theft of their crops from the neighbouring country.

In these enclaves characterised with daily movement to the cultural spaces of farming beyond the borders, there is a distinct way of re-creating their places of belonging. The ethnographic work in these Village Forests reveals carrying of the place name of their former area of settlement. The quote below gives an indication of indigenous ways of place-making in the process of relocation to the post-colonial space. Although it was only by a mere action of carrying the name of the place where they had previously lived, it portrays their desire as a community to be known as residents of 'Bobanipur even in a new place of living. The names of places have embedded cultural meanings in them and upon investigation of why the name Bobanipur, an elderly woman replied:

> "Actually, the village Bobanipur was located on the other side but when we moved here, it has been called Bobanipur since then".[140]

The ancestors of the present villagers were absorbed from the village of Bobanipur. The Village Forest created as a part of colonial forestry was also named 'Bobanipur'. Their place of origin was absorbed into Bangladesh after the partition. From casual conversations during the ethnographic work, a longing for their 'undivided' village was revealed. The establishment of Village Forests did not restrict their movement to their former village but the creation of a border has deprived them of visiting their relatives who now live in present day Bangladesh.

As names carry varied cultural meanings and practices, one of my questions during the interview was about the name of the village 'Bobanipur'. When asked whether the village name has any local history, an elderly woman of the village replied:

> "From the hearsay, I can tell that in the previous village where we live before moving here, there was a woman who could not talk… she used to grow flower bearing plants and used to beautify the village. Hence, it was called 'Bobanipur' where 'boba' means dumb and 'pul' means flower… it's actually 'Bobanipul' but now it is being written as 'Bobanipur'… they don't really get the correct **spelling**

[140] Ibid, 9th July 2021.

you know… and in official works it is now written and pronounced as 'Bhawanipur'… they don't know the whole concept you know…".[141]

This statement also reveals the unhappiness of the woman over the portrayal of the place name. The forest villagers perceive the cultural legacy that they carried with them and its present distortion in recording and name-calling as misunderstanding by the postcolonial audience in reading indigenous place-making and its differently represented native name of their place. The postcolonial name 'Bhawanipur' presents a completely different meaning to the postcolonial audience with no relation at all to the indigenous origin as the term 'bhawan' means big houses and buildings and 'pur' indicates a town or a settlement in Sanskrit. This clearly indicates the irrelevance of the present name widely used in official works and recolonising of the place name in the postcolonial period.

The present narrative of these Garo Village Forests is different from the hegemonic national narrative of partition. The existing works on partition dwells on the division of two religious groups namely Muslims and Christians (Scehndel, 2004; Cons, 2012; Jones. 2021). This place-making of these forest villagers after partition adds to understanding of subaltern uncomfortable histories backed by establishment of colonial forestry.

5.7.3 Verbal claims to reserved trees

As opposed to colonial references to the hill tribes as destructive in terms of their practice of jhum cultivation, this section aims to bring out the narratives from the perspective of the hill tribes regarding ownership of forest resources. As evident from the archival and ethnographic sources, the need for labour to plant timber yielding trees was materialised by setting up of Village Forests. In the Village Forests of Rangasora, Bilkuna, Bobanipur and Meatda, there are dense forest lands of sal trees. Although theoretically, these sal dominated forests are reserved forests, the sal trees, most of which were planted during the colonial and early post-independence period have their own claimants who are none other than the forest villagers themselves. During one of the interviews, a narrative by the former village headman on villagers' cooperation in conservation of trees provoked my understanding of people's claims on the trees of the reserved forests. He says:

[141] [141] Interview with the former Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villager's Association, 12th July 2022.

> "The trees that we see here today were all planted during the time of **free labour**…all these trees were planted by our forefathers and even ourselves when we were young after the jhum lands were cleared for cultivation.. Not even a single tree was planted by the department".[142]

The above narrative by the former headman of Rangasora village sheds light on existing nuanced form of verbal claims of the trees in the reserved forests. Although the colonial administrators had acquired these forested tracts and established these tracts as reserved forests and village forests eventually in what could be termed legal acquisition by way of signed agreements and negotiations, the forest villagers' view hints at prevailing declaration of who is who in the reserved forests. The dense sal forests were planted by the forest villagers themselves during the time when free labour was imposed on the forest villagers. The above statement points at a nuanced form of claim by the forest villagers that the trees in the reserved forests are planted by the villagers themselves. The statement in an implicit way, implies that the forest department itself has not been directly engaged in planting of trees. From the scratch that includes picking of sal seeds to transferring them onto the ground with the help of traditional digging sticks known as *matta* in the local dialect was done by the forest villagers.

In most of the interviews conducted, the question of conservation by the forest villagers resurfaces repeatedly, particularly in terms of selecting a particular site or forests for the purpose of conservation. In this regard, the following extract gives an overall scenario of the question of conservation in the Village Forests. An elderly man in his interview produced a contrasting statement quoted above. He said:

> "Even though we could conserve forests as a village, we cannot **claim** it as ours. If there is a jackfruit tree in my backyard, I cannot **claim** it as mine… and if I plant teak trees in my backyard, the department will record it on their register that there are two standing teak trees in my backyard…".[143]

As far as timber-yielding trees such as teak are concerned, the forest department records the existing number of trees in every household, due to which they cannot make use of these trees when they are in need of them. In this environment, the option for forest villagers to trade

[142] Interview with the former Village Headman of one of Rangasora village, 18th July 2020.
[143] Interview with one of the forest villager of Rangasora, aged 60, 18th July 2020

timber for their livelihood does not exist in the reserved forest.[144] The use of trees for the construction of houses by the forest villagers are thus left at the mercy of the forest rangers and DFOs.

5.7.4 Certain forested tracts designated as 'abode of deities'

In the forested village of Meata, there is a forested tract that is kept away from human interference. These tracts remain untouched and unexplored as they are believed to be the dwelling place of the 'deities' that own the forests. It is believed that the 'deities' that reside in these forested tracts prohibit felling of trees from these place and restrictions affect other forest products as well as trees. Such places are kept away from human interference and even during the time when jhumming was allowed, it was not practised in such places. Such restricted places that are avoided even by animals are called 'a·si raka' in the local dialect. These spirits inhabiting them are different from the spirits of dead people and can be referred to as 'owners' of the forests. In the local dialect, it is referred to as 'mitde'.

As such sites are forbidden, I asked about the consequences if people venture out into these sites unknowingly. The village headman replied:

> "If unknowingly people enter these places, they are sure to fall ill…some die eventually out of illness…the consequences of their deeds are often revealed through dreams through their family members or relatives… these dreams containing warnings and curses is called jumang sia".[145]

Dreams that reveal dislikes and curses are believed to be messages from the deities themselves and illnesses are cured using local medicine prepared from traditionally identified plants and other organic substances known as *'A·chik sam'*. This site in Meata is a home to cane or *so·ka* which is scientifically known as *Calamus Viminalis*. These are consumed by the locals as vegetables and the stems are used for furniture making. As per the local belief, as these places are believed to be 'sacred', they are not supposed to pluck and fell forest products within these

[144] Ibid, 18th July 2020.
[145] Follow-up telephone interview with the Village Headman of Meata, 20th June, 2022.

designated tracts. These cane-laden tracts are thus avoided by the forest villagers due to this existing belief.

Such groves that have religious and spiritual significance to the local communities that run through several generations are referred to as 'Sacred' groves in the ecological literature (Gokhale *et al.,* 2001; Borthakur, 2013). These are known to have cultural and ecological significance. The preserved and untouched forested tracts in Meata village can be called 'Sacred' groves as they are associated with the existence of 'deities' and 'spirits'. As per the existing literature on Sacred groves, human restrictions differ from one place to another (Borthakur, 2013). In some forests, dry leaves and foliage are not allowed to be touched whereas in some, dead wood and foliage can be collected.

In the forbidden forested site in Meata, even setting foot in these forests is not allowed, which signifies the strictness and sacredness of this site. The ancestors of the present forest villagers were converted into Christianity during the evangelisation work brought in by the American Baptist Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Mission in the 19th century. The current forest villagers of Meata belong to Roman Catholic and Protestant sects of Christianity. The diffusion of Christianity was meant to influence moral reforms among the subjects and in turn lead to partial creation of appropriate form of colonial subjectivity (Bhabha, 1994). However, the mission failed to create that ideal form of colonial subjectivity as it is evident from the interwoven Songsarek animist and Christian beliefs believe in the site that is considered forbidden and sacred. The villagers still obey rules that were observed by their animistic ancestors.

5.7.5 Perspectives on conservation

This section is crucial in terms of decolonising forests, as it will unpack perspectives on forest villagers' involvement in conservation of forests by the forest villagers themselves and forest department personnel. While the colonial and mainstream narrative of forest dwellers and frontier tribes of NEI mainly revolves around them being destructive to forests and ignorant about their importance, this section deconstructs this common narrative. This kind of stereotyping is still prevalent among the forest officials in the post-colonial period. One of the semi-structured interview questions for the forest officials focused on the contribution of the

forest villagers to conservation of forests. The following is an extract from the interview conducted with the Assistant Conservator of Forest:

> **"Their contribution to the conservation of forest is zero.** They rather think that they live in the Nokma a·king lands and illegally fell trees".[146]

The above comment by the Assistant Conservator of Forest reveals the continuity of stereotyping the forest-dependent community by the forest officials. The official belongs to the same ethnic group as the forest villagers but his perception of them reveals the prevalence of colonial perceptions that underpinned the forest-dependent communities as 'destructive'.

In contrast to the opinion of the forest official, the perception of the forest villagers reveal that they have knowledge about conservation and contribute immensely to the conservation of forests in the Village Forests. The first kind of narrative is bringing people's knowledge about the importance of forests into this study. The following extract by the ex-village headman provides an understanding of forest villager's knowledge about conservation.

> "Even though, I am not highly educated, I can tell that the gas that the trees exhale is beneficial for humans. We also heard it from the learned people which is why, we conserve forests. If there is wildfire in the forests, we forest villagers together put off the fires. We do not conserve forests because it belongs to the Forest department, but we do it because it is important to conserve them, which is why during wildfires we put off the fire".[147]

The above extract gives rather a scientific knowledge that he acquired from learned educated people about forests and its importance to human life in general. He is influence by the mainstream knowledge about the importance of forests. He is aware of the fact that forests are beneficial for human existence although he has no experience in higher education. In addition, this extract reveals another narrative concerning forest villagers as active agents in conservation of forests. It exemplifies their efforts in forest conservation particularly in dealing with forest fires and their involvement in putting off forest fires whenever they forests undergo this natural occurrence. The extract is interesting in itself as it gives rather a strong explanation

[146] Interview with the Assistant Conservator of Forest, 8th July 2021.
[147] Interview with the former Village Headman of one of Rangasora village, 18th July 2020.

that they conserve trees not because the forests belong to the forest department but because it is important on conservation grounds.

Another perspective on forest conservation by a woman forest villager is rather specific. She said:

> "We should conserve trees and forests because without trees, the streams and rivers will not sustain. Forest is our pride. I personally tell people not to cut down trees if I happen to witness neighbouring villagers do it because there are people who cut down trees lavishly. If we can see giant trees standing in and around our villages, that is where we can take pride in. I do cut down trees for houses but not for unreasonable purposes".[148]

This extract like the previous one reveals forest conservation as important on many scientific grounds such as sustenance of streams and rivers. In addition, she sees forests as assets which the villagers can pride in. She romanticises forests and upholds that availability of giant trees in the village brings pride and laurels to a village. The testimony of her personal conservation efforts is about being vocal about the importance of forests. In this approach, she personally spreads awareness to the neighbouring villagers not to cut down trees unless it is for domestic purposes. This view also highlights the role of gender in conservation. A woman is seen actively participating in forest conservation. This feeds into existing studies of women's participation in conservation of forests (Bhutia and Liarakou, 2018; Gabriel *et al.*, 2020). Thus, as opposed to the narratives of the colonial and post-colonial administrators about forest dwellers as destructive to forests, this section reveals that forest villagers are environmentally inclined and are rather, active participants in forest conservation.

The perspectives of forest department officials stand in opposition to forest villagers' narratives. The tone and direction of their narratives embodies the perspectives of the colonial forest officials and administrators on forest dwellers' attitude towards forests. An interview with the DFO of South Garo Hills Division reveals that his opinion about forest villagers aligns with the colonial narrative. In conversation about forest villagers' contribution towards forest conversation, he opined:

[148] Interview with a mother of two from Rangasora village, aged 53 years, 19th July 2020.

> "Their livelihood is mainly based on **smuggling** timber… I can say there is no **contribution** at all from their end… they actually is in constant look out for the forest staff's movement and whereabouts and take that opportunity to extract timber".[149]

The above opinion by the DFO clearly disregards forest villagers' contribution towards forest conservation and rather suggest that there is absence of contribution from the villagers. He portrays forest villagers' livelihood to be dependent on illegal extraction of trees and trading them. The hegemonic kind of narrative of hill tribes' attitude towards forests resurfaced in the DFO's narrative about the forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest. To add to this colonial-oriented narrative is the extract from an interview with the Assistant Conservator of Forest in the South Garo Hills division. He says:

> "In my opinion, they live in the reserved forest as though they are living in nokma a·king lands… they do not consider that they are the villagers of reserved forest and there is no **contribution** from them… in fact they work against us".[150]

The above statement by the Assistant Conservator of Forests reiterates the opinion of the DFO that there is no contribution from the forest villagers in conserving forests. The way of life of the villagers rather portray the kind of life led in *nokma a·king* where villagers can own trees and access forest resources. If there are community or village reserves, the villagers can usually access it when it is open for certain period of time for domestic needs. Thus, it can be concluded from the narratives of the forest officers that theirs embody the colonial narratives on hill tribes' attitude towards forests and the contribution of the forest villagers towards forest conservations are overlooked and side-lined under colonial way of viewing the forest dwellers.

5.7.6 Timber ban and related narratives and impacts

Studies related to timber ban, which is the piece of legislation imposed by the Supreme Court of India prohibiting transport of timber to areas outside North-East India are conducted in relation to its impacts on livelihood and gender (Nongbri, 2001). This section unpacks narratives about forest-dependent communities, particularly forest villagers that arose out of

[149] Interview with the DFO, South Garo Hills division, Government of Meghalaya, 13th July 2021.
[150] Interview with the Assistant Conservator of Forest, South Garo Hills division, 8th July 2021.

timber ban. Following the order by the Supreme Court of India, the West Garo Hills forest division seized the saw-mills in the district and also seized the illegal timber stock including their machinery in the plain belt area of the district. However, there has been no change in illegal extraction of timber from the forests. The aftermath of the ban rather resulted in rampant destruction of forests as people whose livelihoods depend on timber as have been contesting this verdict resulting in illegalities.[151] A detailed write-up on resistance against forest policies is discussed in Chapter-6.

Reserved forests were created to serve the purposes of the colonial government and after independence, it continued to serve the purpose of independent India. As such, its place in the context of the timber ban seems to be irrelevant. However, from the interviews with the forest officials, it is evident that the spaces of reserved forests are significant in the context of the timber ban. The following extract from the interview with the DFO of the West Garo Hills division explains the situatedness of reserved forests in the period of the timber ban. It says:

> "According to my observation, reserved forests constitute a small pocket and the remaining forests fall under the control of GHADC under the governance of a·king nokma…so beyond the reserved forests we do not have any **authority**. But the trees outside the reserved forests have exhausted due to which, the pressure for extraction of trees fall on reserved forests. The **mature** trees can only be found in reserved forests".[152]

The above statement from the DFO reveals that reserved forests are facing the brunt of the timber ban as catering to the needs for mature trees are met from reserved forests. As a result, there is a pressure on these forests to fulfil local demand for timber. The mature trees in non-reserved areas have been exhausted, due to which the reserved forests have become suppliers of mature trees for timber. Thus, the reserved forests that constitute only a pocket of forested area in the state of Meghalaya have to face the reality of illegal timber extraction.

[151] Interview with the DFO, West Garo Hills division, Tura, 28th October 2020.
[152] Ibid.

As forest villagers are technically the agents of the forest department, who are embodiments of forest protection as seen by the forest department, a question was asked if the forest villagers are active participants in checking such illegalities. A straightforward response from the DFO places the forest villagers as active participants in the act of illegality. She said:

> "If we look at forest villagers, they are the main people behind such **illegal** extraction of trees. The **department** has hope in them that they will look after the forests, which is why they were kept in the reserved forests but they themselves are the ones who encourage **illegality"**.[153]

The above remark by the DFO portrays a strong statement coming from the forest official who occupies the highest position in the district. She perceives forest villagers as active participants in illegal extraction of timber from the reserved forests. It should be noted that the DFO also belongs to the same ethnic groups as the forest villagers in the Garo Hills region. Her statements are reflective of typical perceptions of the forest villagers or the forest-dependent communities that prevailed during the colonial period.

An interview with the DFO of the South Garo Hills division adds to stereotyping of the forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest. The views of the DFO of the South Garo Hills division echoes the opinion of the DFO of the West Garo Hills. He also maintains forest villagers as partakers in illegal tree felling in the reserved forest. He commented:

> "There are people from outside the Village Forests who are involved in illegal extraction of timber from the reserved forests. But the forest villagers themselves are also involved in such activities. They have connections with the timber smuggling network and add to illegal activities".[154]

The above comment from the DFO reveals that forest villagers are seen as agents in illegal tree felling from the reserved forests. They are classed as being connected with the timber smuggling network who is responsible for illegal tree extraction from the reserved forest. Such narratives emanating from the forest officials reflect the villagers' possible contestation against the existing forest laws and stereotyping of forest villagers as illegal timber traders.

[153] Ibid.
[154] Interview with the DFO, South Garo Hills division, Baghmara, 9th July 2021.

Stereotyping of the forest dwelling communities as 'destructive' to forests is still prevalent among the forest officials in the contemporary period. The perspectives of the forest officials of Baghmara division is an example of the ongoing manifestation of colonial outlook in the perceptions of the contemporary forest officials.

5.7.7 Perspectives on Forest Rights Act

Another contemporary piece of legislation, the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 that seeks to undo the age-old deprivation of forest rights of the forest dwellers needs to be unpacked regarding its implementation in the state of Meghalaya, particularly in the Village Forests of Baghmara. While considering the paternalistic nature of the act, this is supposed to bring forth justice to traditional forest dwellers. This section aims to unpack the forest villagers' understanding and perspectives of the FRA. The act acknowledges individual and community claims of indigenous people of forest lands and brought about a paradigm shift in the way informal customary laws were perceived by the forest law and policy in India (Prasad and Menon, 2020) has been widely implemented in Central India but it has not been implemented in the state of Meghalaya. Since there is absence of tenurial security in the Village Forests, the implementation of FRA would provide them with land titles in the form of a document that would qualify them to avail funds from the state government in the form of bank loans. Currently, the forest villagers do not qualify for bank loans and other finances due to inability to provide land documents.

Since FRA has been implemented in central India such as Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh, the perspectives of the forest officials on FRA and future plans of implementation in the state of Meghalaya needs to be unpacked. The scope of its implementation in the state of Meghalaya however seems to be negative according to the forest officials' interviews. The DFO of South Garo Hills division clearly states in his interview:

> "This will not be implemented in the state of Meghalaya because it is not applicable here… the percentage of reserved forest in the state is roughly 5% against out of the total forest area in the state. If this is implemented in the state, the reserved forests would disappear. In other parts of India, the area under reserved forest is large such as Madhya Pradesh…even if they grant 2 bighas or 8 bighas, it will not

put pressure on the reserved forests. If there is no decision on state level, it will not be implemented… I think it is not applicable in the context of North-East India".[155]

The above statement by the DFO reveals that the possibility of the implementation of FRA 2006 in the state of Meghalaya is rather slim. He puts forward the proportion of reserved forest in Meghalaya which is 5 % out of the total forested area and claims that reserved forests will be wiped out from the state if land titles are granted to the forest villagers. The application of FRA according to the DFO, is not applicable because of its size and proportion whereas in other parts of India such as the states of Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand, the reserved forests are vast and accounts for 18.58% and 65.36% respectively. This is the reason, he provides for the FRA being implemented in these states as its implementation have no effect on reserved forests because of their vastness. On the other hand, in the context of NEI, its application will put pressure on the existing reserves. This opinion of the DFO hints at the state's absolute control over reserved forests even after the enactment of FRA to undo the age-old injustice done to the forest dwellers.

"The notification regarding FRA had come to our knowledge long time ago but it has not been **implemented** here in Meghalaya due to practical reasons… About 20 or 30 bighas were allotted to the Village Forests but its demarcation records are not available…even the forest villagers do not have any **knowledge** of this…so it is challenging for us to detect these areas…we do not know whether they are still residing in the allotted area or they have expanded their **boundary**…if FRA is **implemented** here, there is a possibility that their present settlement will be recorded and given a title".[156]

The above statement provides the practical challenges the department is presently encountering in the implementation of FRA particularly in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest. In the past, about 20 to 30 bighas of land were allotted to the forest villagers in this reserved forest but the department is facing demarcation issues due to unavailability of maps with demarcated boundaries for each household. This according to the Assistant Conservator of Forest, is a great challenge for the department in the implementation of FRA. If the state

[155] Interview with the DFO, South Garo Hills division, 13th July 2021.
[156] Interview with the Assistant Conservator of Forest, South Garo Hills division, 8th July 2021.

government decides to implement FRA in the state, the present settlements will be recorded and land titles will be issued depending on the existing settlements. As FRA by its provisions should recognise the customary rights of the individual and community claims over land and forests, Meghalaya is still in its decision-making stage for FRA implementation.

The views from the forest villagers reveal scepticism about the implementation of the FRA in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest. When enquiries were made about chances of FRA being implemented in the Village Forests, the former village headman of Rangasora village sceptically says:

> "The department has not given any land titles till date… if they grant land titles to the villagers, it would mean that the villagers would be able to own lands permanently…the department's policy is based on the idea that lands are not granted to the villagers even if they allow us to cultivate on the agricultural lands…".[157]

The above statement by the former villager headman reveals that there has not been any issue of land titles till date. Issuing of land titles in the name of forest villagers would mean that they will become legal owners of lands which the forest policy does not want. In other words, according to him the forest policy is against the recognition of forest villagers rights particularly in granting land titles. Cultivation on agricultural lands is allowed. There is no issue of land titles even on agricultural lands. Another interview extract also presents a sceptical opinion on FRA 2006. In a rather lengthy interview, a contractor who is also a forest villager reveals that FRA 2006 is not fulfilling its provisions to provide sufficient rights for the forest villagers to sustain their livelihood, he said:

> "The rights stated in the act are made for the government, the rights for the public is few… Most of the provisions are made for the government…the granting of 2 bighas of land to every household was there even in reserved forest… Other provisions that include electrification, road and communication, cattleshed, water

[157] Interview with the former Village Headman of one of Rangasora village, 18th July 2020.

> supply, education do not require any permission… these provisions are all for the government departments".[158]

The above statement points to the insufficient nature of protective act that was passed to give justice to the forest dwellers. All the provisions listed in the act was mainly for the government departments and their developmental works but the rights listed for the forest villagers are few. In this statement, the provision of two bighas land for each household in the FRA is not a new provision according to the forest villager. This entitlement was already there under the provision of village forests. In short, this act is no different to the entitlements provided under village forests under which construction of houses were permitted under the direction of the local forest officials.

In addition to the reluctance in the implementation of FRA, the department is more engaged in restricting the rights of the people as outlined in an extract from the interview with the DFO:

> "Forest villagers who have made their own nuclear family after the year 2005 are not considered as a separate household…this means that forest villagers who move out of their existing joint family to establish a new household are now considered encroachers. No one can shift to a better location to build a new house… even in Karawani village, there are about two new houses that have come to our notice recently… we went there and told them that they should stop the construction… they followed our order".[159]

From the above statement by the DFO it is clear that with there is an imposition of restrictive measures of confining the villagers to their existing settlement area. In the wake of FRA and its seemingly protective provisions to get titles to ancestral lands, this present order by the forest department shows the absolute control taken by the forest department over the settlement behaviour of the forest villagers. The scope of implementing FRA in the Village Forests of Meghalaya seems like a distant project with more restrictive measures prevailing in a micro-geographical setting that is in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest.

[158] Interview with one of the forest villagers, aged 60, 18th July 2020.
[159] Interview with the DFO, South Garo Hills division, 13th July 2021.

5.8 Summing up decolonising geographical narratives and practices

This chapter tries to situate forest dependent communities, particularly the hill tribes of Baghmara Reserved Forest in the colonial and post-colonial forest policies, who are known as Scheduled Tribes. In doing so, it discusses the intersectionality of colonial and post-colonial identities imposed by the colonial and post-colonial government upon Garos. By presenting the ethnography on Garos who are the inhabitants of Baghmara Village Forests, it seeks to decolonise forest-based narratives on forest-dependent communities, particularly the forest villagers of Baghmara. The attitude of stereotyping the forest-dependent communities is still prevalent during the post-colonial period. The chapter reveals stereotyping of the forest villagers by the forest officials at a divisional level. Due to the post-colonial timber ban in North-East India, more pressure has been added to the reserved forest in terms of meeting the demand for good-quality timber. This chapter adds to decolonising or perceiving the forest policies through the perspective of the forest users enabling plural production of knowledge. Despite the socio-cultural changes in terms of religious conversion, the traditionally forbidden sites in the reserved forest is maintained and preserved by the forest villagers. The participation of forest villagers in conservation is noteworthy in contrast to the stereo-typing of the forest officials during the post-colonial period. Another interesting revelation emanating from this chapter is continued denial of tenurial security to the forest villagers. It brings to light that FRA has not been implemented in the state of Meghalaya that has further led to ongoing injustice to the forest villagers. Current restriction sanctioned by the forest department to restrict the expansion of settlements in the Village Forests will bring further injustice to the forest villagers.

Chapter 6
Resistance and the Forest

6.1 Placing Forest Dwellers of North-East India (NEI)

Resistance against colonial forest policies is not a new discourse in the forest history of NEI. However, there is little literature on resistance against colonial forest policies that is focused on NEI. From the colonial to the postcolonial times, there has been contestation of rights over wastelands in NEI. With the establishment of a provincial forest department in Assam, the department started to affirm its right over the forest resources of the region. There were resistance from the peasants who claimed their rights over the proposed reserves and it resulted in the clash between the forest department and in the twentieth century (Saikia, 2008). It carried on during the post-colonial period as peasant movements that occurred during 2002-2007 against evictions carried out by the forest department are mentioned in another work by Saikia (2008). This was seen by Saikia as a collective reaction to the eviction drive and described the initial movement possessing a radical political character backed up by solidarity at a grassroot level. Another act of resistance that made headlines was a mass protest against the Government of Assam's attempt to evict the hill settlers that was joined by the peasant leader Akhil Gogoi (Mishra, 2011). The peasant leader and his organisation is perceived by many as a people's organisation that stands for people's rights and its entry into the movement is questioned by the author if it can transform the movement into a political platform. These acts of protests reveal that there were occurrences of resistance against colonial and post-colonial forest policies but their occurrences in the hill districts during the colonial period and post-colonial period need to be investigated.

It is to be noted that the River Valley Districts of Assam is described to be the area where injustice linked to colonial forest policies in colonial Assam was encountered in the most intense degree (Handique, 2004). The River Valley Districts of Assam with Brahmaputra as the main navigable river certainly proved to be favourable in the imposition of forest laws in these districts. The area in general is more accessible because as the name suggests, the river valley districts are composed of plains and river valleys. Although, the proportion of concentration of reserved and protected forest is the highest in the post-colonial state of Arunachal Pradesh with 51,540 sq. kms (FSI, 2021), there are few contemporary interventions

with respect to resistance in this state. This applies to other states such as Meghalaya and Tripura. This section seeks to unpack forest struggles and resistance of forest dwellers in colonial and post-colonial NEI. As such, it seeks to reconstruct forest struggles in NEI by viewing peasants and peasant resistance not merely as objects of history but as makers of their own history. This chapter reveals that the ryots of colonial Assam and forest villagers of postcolonial Meghalaya have been decolonising forest policies deploying various ways of defiance. In doing so, the section is divided into three types of resistance, namely, open forms of resistance, institutional means of resistance and subtle forms of resistance.

6.2 Forms of Domination during the Colonial and Post-colonial Period

The forms of domination that impacted the lives of the forest dependent communities in colonial Assam played out in the form of forest laws. These acted out in the dominating economic and cultural realms of the forest dependent communities and are often interlinked. Prior to the enactment of Assam Forest Regulation 1891, the prevalent categories of forests were protected forests and reserved forests that formed important spaces of forest administration. The forests of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts were subjected to the payment of revenues in 1877. In addition, there were reserved trees, which the villagers were prohibited from felling. The initial stage of forest administration in colonial Assam constituted declaration of reserves. This process involved demarcation of forest boundaries (Saikia, 2011). The first form of dominion can be thought of in terms of physical barriers imposed by the reserved and protected forests. While the task demarcation was achieved, this act of fencing acted as a physical barrier to the procurement of forest resources. Secondly, the boundary demarcation encroached into lands with landlords namely, the *nisfkhirajdars*[160] of Kamrup, Darrang and Sibsagar who contested the claims of the forest department. Thirdly, it brought upon hardship on the lives of the peasants in terms of tax imposed on cultivable lands inside the territorial boundary of reserved and protected forests. The declaration of protected forests was made on the arrangements that the district officers would manage these forests on trust and they would eventually be handed over to the forest department.

[160] The nisfkhirajdars were those settlement holders who farmed the nisfkhiraj or the half-revenue paying estates or lands.

The implementation of the Indian Forest Acts and the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 further brought further restrictions to the use of forest resources. It made specific rules with respect to reserved and unclassed state forests. Rules were particularly enforced to control burning of jhums that were in proximity to reserved forests only with the permission of the forest department. Extraction of timber was prohibited from the reserved forests.[161] From the unclassed state forests, 27 tree species valuable in terms of timber was prohibited from felling. In addition, dominion was manifested in the form of Drift Timber Rules that controlled the transportation of timber through waterways. Another regulation prescribed under the Assam Forest Regulation was Assam River Rules that made the forest dependent communities subjected to the checking of timber and other forest produce at the prescribed revenue stations.[162] These regulations that prevailed during the colonial period controlled the everyday activities of the forest dependent communities.

The post-colonial period characterised by establishment of democratic form of government backed by elected representatives both at state and central levels is different from the colonial period. With the provision of the Sixth Schedule, newly created states such as Meghalaya enjoyed autonomy with the creation of ADCs. Although, autonomy implies self-governing and self-regulating of their land and forests (Soreide, 2016), it needs to be noted that what was constituted as reserved forests during the colonial period continues to be a reserved forest during the post-colonial period. The ADCs do not have control over the reserved forests and as such the framing of the rules for reserved forests falls under the jurisdiction of central government.

6.3 Conceptualising Resistance and its Forms

Resistance is often perceived as an act of consciousness where a subject tries to do away with the configuration of power relations (Leblanc, 1999). In deploying acts of resistance, the presence of intention has been perceived as the marker of resistance (Creswell (a), 1996; Routledge, 1996; Jones, 2012; Hughes, 2020). The framework of classifications of forms of resistance in this study is incorporated from studies by Scott (1985; 1990), Duncan (2002; 2020) and De and Travers (2019). By incorporating the forms of contestations mentioned in

[161] Assam State Archives, Revenue-A, Rules prescribed by the Chief Commissioner under the Assam Forest Regulation, Assam Secretariat, Nos. 70-107, June 1896, p.1.
[162] Ibid.

these studies, the acts of resistance related to forests are classified into three broad forms, namely, subtle resistance, open resistance and institutional forms of resistance. Subtle modes of resistance will take into account everyday forms of contestation that are non-confrontational in nature as theorised by Scott (1985). Open resistance in this study refers to those modes of confrontation that include open insubordination against the people in authority that also include insurrections. The third form of resistance is institutional forms of resistance that comprises legal modes of opposition through petitions. This mode of contestation is perceived as an open form of resistance as it entails confrontation with the people in authority. However, this institutional form of resistance is approached as a different form of contestation that departs from open collective action of aggression against the authority.

The strategies of resistance deployed by the traditional forest users and forest villagers are perceived as 'decolonial' in this chapter. The actors are traditional forest users and dwellers that are present in the colonial archives as 'ryots', 'hillsmen', 'hill dwellers' or 'frontier tribes'. By engaging in resistance against forest policies, the chapter argues that that traditional forest users have been manoeuvering their way by resisting openly, institutionally and subtly. It seeks to do away with narrative of colonialism and the contemporary developmental turn of the post-colonial nation state as successful forms of domination.

6.4 Open Resistance

Open forms of resistance in this study includes the confrontational acts of the forest-dependent communities to contest colonial and post-colonial forest policies. Discussed here are those acts of resistance in which the message and the messenger are openly shown can and are brought to direct confrontation with authority (Scott, 1990) that can even take the form of a rebellion. As opposed to petitions that are confrontational in nature and follows a formal procedure, these acts of open defiance are informal.

6.4.1 Attack on Captain John Butler in Naga Hills District in 1875

With the establishment of a separate province, the survey work constituted an important task for the extension of colonial forestry in Assam in the 1870s. This case is an example of violent resistance that took place in the Naga Hills district in 1875. Captain Butler along with Lieutenant Woodthorpe led the survey party on the 17th December and arrived Wokha on the

29th December. They left Wokha on the 23rd December and camped on the Doyang below Sanigaon. After crossing a place called Lakhuti they came across a village. The headman of the village warned the survey party of a possible attack at a place called Pangti. The guide who were accompanying them also tried to induce Captain Butler to return to that village and remain for the day and talk to the village council and the elders before continuing their journey. The warnings from the village headman and the guide hinted at possible aggression from the villagers concerned, to which the survey party did not give attention.[163]

The physical features of the Naga Hills district are such that they had to go through uneven terrain where they had to cross ravines, rivers and steep hills covered with forests. The villages took advantage of their familiarity to the geographical features of the place. When they crossed the Chebi river, they were in sight of Pangti village. When they ascended to the village, they came across the first ravine and it was at this point the guide suddenly disappeared into the jungle before he could be stopped by the sepoys. At this point, Captain Butler alerted everyone as he thought it to be a sign of a possible attack. As such, they had never been attacked by the Nagas from a distance. They calculated that if they were to be attacked by them, they would do so at the top of the hill.[164]

When they proceeded to march on the path, it started to descend steeply into another ravine. It then led to a stream, which they crossed and began to ascend steeply again. The hills on both sides were covered with shrubs, thick trees and long grass. Upon crossing the stream one of the sepoys spotted a Naga villager up the stream behind a rock. This was a sign that their movement was put under the surveillance of the attackers. Captain Butler was alarmed by the situation and suggested that they should be searching the stream. They waited for the coolies to cross the stream safely and it was at that time that a spear was thrown at the survey party that struck Captain Butler before they could make a retreat. The sepoys fired at the Nagas but the they came charging down at the survey party disappearing and appearing to and fro through the narrow outlets. The survey party realised that it was too late to make necessary arrangement to proceed against the village because of Captain Butler's grave injury. Colonel Tulloch decided to encamp close by in a good open spot where they could easily defend themselves. They sent

[163] National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Political A, Resolution- By the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Letter from Lieutenant Woodthorpe, R.E Assistant Superintendent, Topographical Survey, To the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 147, 15th June, 1876.
[164] Ibid.

three constables to Golaghat to bring up Captain Butler's brother and a European surgeon. The night passed without any further disturbance. Instead, in response to the attack on the survey party, Colonel Tulloch along with a small force burned the entire village. The villagers escaped as they retreated before the destruction by fire. Captain Butler succumbed to the injury on the 7th of January 1876.[165]

This report about the survey operation in the Naga Hills district can be seen as an archival source that not only contains information about the loss of life of the survey team but about the local people's use of geographical knowledge against the people in authority. This incident involving tribal opposition to the survey work at Pangti village points at the initial oppositions to the establishment of forestry in the district. From the ambush that led to the death of Captain Butler it can be understood that the Nagas made use of their geographical knowledge in their act of insurrection. The survey party later discovered that the Nagas had cut a labyrinth of path parallel to and about five or six yards from the main path to facilitate moving about in the jungle. They also learned that the ambush had evidently been planned prior to the survey as there were signs of Nagas encamping there.

This case of open resistance adds to Mrovlje and Kirkpatrick's (2020) view on open resistance that resistance consists of grey zones in which pluralistic actors are guided by their embeddedness within the same conditions of oppression. This rebellion against the survey party reveals grey zones present in this attack. The disappearance of the guide who accompanied the survey party upon reaching Pangti village reveals the ambiguity of this uprising. The guide who was a Naga held the responsibility of guiding the survey party and experienced the same exposure to surveying and measuring of their lands as the other Naga villagers. The Naga guide by retreating into the jungle shows that he learned of the forecoming attack. His inaction of not alarming the survey party in subtle ways reveals his attachment with the resisting party who did not wiah their lands to be surveyed by people unfamiliar to them.

6.4.2 Collective violent resistance in Garo Hills in 1993

An incident that shook the Garo Hills' region took place in the Village Forest of Dainadubi Reserved Forest located miles away from the site of my fieldwork in the year 1993. This

[165] Ibid.

incident always became a point of reference whenever I engaged in a conversation about the forest department's relationship with the forest villagers. The forest villagers of Dainadubi rose in violent insurrection against the eviction drive planned by the forest department personnel. The first time I came across this incident was during the course of conversation with the village headman of one of the Village Forests. An elaborate account of the incident was obtained from the Secretary of the All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association. He explained:

> "The forest department destroyed the houses of the villagers using police force and excavators…the department accused the forest villagers of **encroachment** on government reserved forest in Dainadubi… the **public** all supported the encroachers and came together and beat up the DFO C. P. Marak… the land belongs to the people and the government cannot claim the land without **payment** or any **compensation.** The villagers did not move even after the eviction and until date they are settled there. Even the **politicians** and **general public** from other places also supported the people whose houses were destroyed".[166]

This story of a rebellion in a distant village of Garo Hills is a widely discussed and romanticised topic among the forest villagers of Baghmara. The manner in which this incident was discussed that involved excitement shows their interest in the particular incident. This was also the way of showing solidarity to the villagers of Dainadubi as they share common space of living in the reserved forest.

It is clear from the statement given by the Secretary of the All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association that the uprising of the people at Dainadubi was against the forest department's eviction drive on accusation of encroachment upon government lands. It is evident that other people also joined hands in the uproar to show that they were against the move of the government to destroy the villagers houses. The Secretary of the Forest Villagers association is also of the opinion that since the reserved forest once belonged to the people, the government cannot claim these lands as they lands were acquired for free, without any payment or compensation. This uprising against the forest department that led to an attack on the DFO reveals that they were prepared to protect their houses from destruction, their weapon being violent confrontation with the authorities.

[166] Telephone Conversation with the Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association, 24th April 2022.

More information about this incident was acquired from the Assistant Conservator of Forest at Baghmara. I interviewed him about his experiences and encounters in dealing with forest evictions and other illegalities. He was a part of the eviction team who had gone to Dainadubi to carry out eviction orders. He explained:

> "Yes that incident when the DFO was beaten up by the villagers. That happened on 30th April 1993… I received an order and we were there to carry out eviction orders. We evicted the people who had encroached on government reserved forest and we were on our way, when villagers surrounded us and beat up our DFO… Carrying out eviction order is problematic these days…evicting people from government lands is getting more difficult".[167]

From the extract taken from the interview with the Assistant Conservator of Forest at Baghmara Division, it is clear that the narration of the Assistant Conservator of Forest resonates with the description by the Secretary of the NGO. The angry and helpless villagers had come collectively and had beaten up the DFO because of eviction drive carried out at Dainadubi in Garo Hills. It happened on the 30th of April, 1993. The extract also reveals the difficulty of conducting eviction drives in government lands because of people's uprisings and use of violent means to resist government's steps to evict people from their space of residence. One could only imagine the emotion and uproar that prevailed during the time of destruction and their helplessness that resulted in spontaneous physical violence.

Other than the incident's importance in unpacking people's sense of belonging to their place of resistance, this incident is crucial from the perspective of the forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest. This is because this story of resistance against the forest officials in a distant Village Forest has occupied an important space in the minds of these forest villagers. For instance, when I was having a casual conversation with a woman from Rangasora village about the relationship between the forest villagers and the forest department, she said:

[167] Interview with the Assistant Conservator of Forest, Baghmara Division, 8th July 2021.

> "It is not like the past now… things have changed… I heard that in the past, when my parents were young, they could not even cause scratches to the tree barks… the foresters and rangers were very strict… but now the foresters and rangers are quite lenient… when they become too strict it could lead to the incident that happened in Dainadubi.. .you must have heard about it about the villagers beating up the DFO…".[168]

It is clear that the woman was aware of the incident that took place at Dainadubi that led to physical violence against the DFO. This quote is also important in terms of understanding villagers' reactions to such resistance. Although, the woman admits that their relationship with the forest personnel is good, she simultaneously hints at possible counter strategies applied by forest villagers in tackling strictness and inconsiderate measures by the department. By bringing this incident into a conversation about relationships with forest department personnel suggests that this act of resistance is not only looked upon as the story of resistance but also as a story of heroism and bravery in the eyes of the forest villagers.

The failed eviction attempt by the forest department was a result of the violent assault inflicted on the forest personnel. The main motive of protecting their houses from demolition yielded a successful result. Following the incident, the forest villagers also gained support from the local politicians. This resulted in cancellation of the official order for eviction.

6.5 Institutional Forms of Resistance

Forest-related resistance in this section of analysis takes into account institutional resistance in the form of written petitions. These petitions constitute petitions from archival and oral histories gathered during the ethnographic work in Baghmara Reserved Forest. According to Scott (1985), structural or institutional forms of resistance are characterised by their formal and overt nature. It includes individual and collective petitions written against the forest policies. As petitions from individuals are less studied (Bear, 2007; Davis, 1987), this section contributes to understanding the rhetoric of individual petitions against the forest policies. Many petitions were submitted to the colonial administration, particularly from the Brahmaputra valley districts that will be discussed in this section. Petitions also came from the

[168] Diary Records, Conversation with the woman forest villager of Rangasora, 16th July 2020.

hill districts that addressed their grievances. This was possible due to the establishment of homogenised colonial law courts in colonial India. This led to a petitionary culture in early modern South Asia characterised by petitions from merchants, communities and by peasants (De and Travers, 2019). This was evident in the case of colonial Assam where petitions related to forests were written to the colonial authorities, some as a request and some to assert their rights over the concerned forests and related resources. Such petitions for instance, were imminent during the nineteenth century when large tracts of forest lands were proposed to be colonial forests.

The culture of petitioning during the colonial period reveals that petitions came from diverse ethnic communities belonging to different social strata in undivided Assam. The petitioners included the ryots, the native rulers and private land-holders who depended directly and indirectly on forests. Petitions were written in a range of tones ranging from pleading to persuasive ones. Most of the petitions, of which the translations are available and petitions originally written in English were in a pleading and abject tone. A petition from Baidya Nath Deb from Jaintia parganas for instance, pleaded for the same privileges enjoyed by the ryots of Assam Valley. The privileges included getting home-consumption permits for forest-produce free of charge from the forest department. The petition features supplication of their economic grievances brought about by imposition of forest restrictions, claims for restoration and easing of forest rules and a 'humble prayer' to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to grant home-consumption permits free of charge. It typically ends with concluding words of faith and confidence in the authority to gain favour in the eyes of the authority.

6.5.1 Disagreement to reservation of forest in the Assam Valley Districts in the nineteenth century

While large tracts of forested land in Assam had been reserved by the end of the 19th century, a considerable number remained unreserved in spite of the colonial government's interest in those forested tracts. During the settlement process of the proposed reserved forests, the traditional forest users addressed their grievances to the Forest Settlement Officers. The people who had knowledge of forest settlement system availed the legal platform granted by the colonial government. One such example of this petition was from the villagers who were affected by the proposed establishment of Solah forests in the Sibsagar district as a reserve. The affected villagers wrote a petition to the Forest Settlement Officer in the year 1880 during

the settlement of these forests. The petition is not presented in detail in the proceeding and only includes brief summary of the decision taken by the Forest Settlement Officer. The villagers expressed their grievances towards the proposed reserved forest of Solah in the Assam valley. The proposed reserve posed as an obstruction to the passage of cattle, elephants and carts. This was because the passageways namely, Deghbari Road and Hokangaon Ali that were required for the villagers for the passage of cattle, elephants and carts ran through the middle of the proposed reserve. The petitioners were Siboram Ahom, Mohiram Muharrir and Boga Nora who wrote about the encroachment of reserved forest on the existing pathways that passed through the proposed reserved forest. The villagers' request to grant them right of way was considered by the Forest Settlement Officer as roads were deemed necessary for the passage of animals.[169] Thus, the villagers' plea for allowing the passage of animals were granted. This is an example of a successful petition in which the petitioners' request was granted.

Other petitions related to the establishment of a reserve were filed in the year 1882. The petitioners were against the reservation of the proposed forest of Hahsara in the Assam Valley. There were 34 petitions in total and they were addressed to the Forest Settlement Officer. However, these petitions are not described in detail in the proceeding like the above-discussed case. The first category of petitions claimed that the petitioners were in possession of uncleared *jungles*[170] or timber-bearing lands. The court of the Forest Settlement Officer was of the opinion that their claims did not have grounds on which their claimed lands could be compensated. This case was disposed of based on the grounds that timber tax had not been paid and their labour was not used in the cultivation of the forest produce in the claimed lands, which did not entitle the petitioners to any claim.[171] The second category of petition was from the ryots who reared silkworms on Samoni lands. The colonial forest officers considered this case interesting. Being inconsiderate to their claim would mean destruction of their rights to rear silkworm that would in turn be injurious to the silk trade in the neighbourhood of the proposed reserve. [172] This was the reason it was not considered judicious to take up this land as

[169] British Library, Home Department Proceedings, From Colonel A.E. Campbell, Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, No. 2030, 15th December 1881.
[170] A jungle is an area of land overgrown with dense forest, typically in the tropics.
[171] British Library, Home Department Proceedings, Memo. By W.E. Ward, Esq., Commissioner of the Assam valley District, No. 257, 27th February 1882.
[172] British Library, Home Department Proceedings, Memo. By W.E. Ward, Esq., Commissioner of the Assam valley District, No. 257, 27th February 1882.

a reserved forest. [173] Thus, this petition was successful and this land was not taken up as a reserved forest.

These two petitions related to establishment of reserved forests in Assam written towards the end of the 19th century can be contextualised in relation to the existing way of documentation in the colonial records. It is to be noted that these petitions were written by the villagers who were impacted by the establishment of reserves in the area. However, there is no availability of detailed documentation of these petitions and related translations. Rather, the decisions taken by the concerned authority were summarised in the colonial proceedings. Scott (1985) has discussed similar occurrences in the colonial archives points and how these archives can reveal only those precise moments when peasantry poses a hindrance to the state's exercise of power. The incomplete state of documentation of cases of resistance states that peasants appear anonymously in such records if the authorities do not consider them as a threat. This is true of the above two cases of structured resistance. Although, the names of the petitioners are mentioned, the archives do not provide detailed accounts of the pleas of the concerned villagers. This existing state of documentation of colonial archives reveals that these villagers were not treated as threats by the concerned forest authorities.

6.5.2 U Rawan and U Madon against reservation of private forest in 1880

Another petition from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district was directed against the colonial government's extension of rights to forests owned by private owners. The petitioners were identified as U Rawan and U Madon and it was filed in the year 1880 against the reservation of the portion of Maokolang forests as government reserves. The petition was aimed at securing their individual rights over the forests that were partially controlled by the government and not in the interests of the entire village as a whole. In other words, this petition was inspired by individual interests rather than the interests of the entire villagers whose lands were also included in the establishment of the community forest. This is an example of a petition belonging to a wealthier section of the tribal society. They were residents of the Nonglewai village but at the time of petition, they were no longer residents of the village. Their land had become a part of Maokalang Forest reserved by the government at the time of the petition. The

[173] British Library, Home Department Proceedings, From B.G.Geidt, Personal Assistant to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of Assam Valley District, No. 251 T, 21st March 1882.

colonial assessment of the forests that belonged to U Rawan and U Madon was that they were not government reserves that were reserved for public purposes but were a different kind of reserve that was supposed to serve the interests of the people.

A notable part of the colonial assessment was that the administrators acknowledged that the claimed portion of the government forest was indeed a private property. The forest was reserved in consultation with the *Lyngdoh* of the three villages of Nonglewai, Laitsohoom and Ilaka. The Lyngdoh was a resident authority of these villages and there was no *siem*. The Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district was in favour of handing out the portion of the concerned reserve as private property with the remaining portion to be declared a community forest with the assent of the owners of the forests. However, on the other side, the *Sirdar* of Nongliwai protested against handing out these forests to private owners for cultivation. The act of recognition of U Rawan and U Madon's claim over the portion of the reserved forest by the colonial government would mean losing their privileges to use of timber for construction of government bridges and buildings. According to the Sirdar, the petitioners who were then no longer residents of Nongliwai village would care less about the villagers' convenience and would deprive them of timber for building purposes. The Sirdar also claimed that the villagers of Nongliwai were against granting of lands to the owners this would result in indiscriminate felling of trees.[174]

From the petition of U Rawan and U Madon, it is clear of the colonial government's exercise of power over the forests that were under partial control of the colonial government. The recognition of claims of U Rawan and U Madon was encountered with conflict from the Sirdar and the villagers of Nongliwai, to which the colonial government did not pay attention. In what were apparently categorised as forests meant to serve the interests of the people, it is evident from the petition that the decision of granting the lands to the rightful owners for cultivation was in the hands of the colonial administrators rather than the *Lyngdoh*, who was the resident authority of the three villages. The granting of forest land to the private claimants speaks volumes about the colonial government's use of power over partially owned lands and side-lining the resident authority of the three villages. It can also be stated that the individual

[174] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, From Lieutt. Coll. W.S. Clarke, Deputy Commissioner, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 580, 6th May 1880.

claimants belonging to the wealthier strata found favour in the eyes of the colonial administrators as compared to the poor peasants as can be seen from this petition.

6.5.3 Grievances against Drift Timber Rules and reserved trees in Golaghat in 1886

During the nineteenth century, Assam witnessed expansion of the colonial forests in Assam, the imposition of forest rules such as Drift Timber Rules and rules encompassing reserved forests which placed restrictions to the people's access to the forest resources. The rules of reserved forest prevented the use of high quality timber such as sal and teak. With the imposition of Drift Timber Rules and River Rules in Assam, royalty fees for the movement of timber from one revenue station to another were initiated. This led the people of Golaghat to petition collectively in 1886 in an appeal addressed to the Viceroy and Governor General of India.[175] The petition was written by the President of the Sabha who prayed for the alleviations of the alleged hardships issued by the Chief Commissioner of Assam under the Indian Forest Act. This petition by the sabha suggests that petitions are a source to understand collective resistance by the ryots of Golaghat in Assam.

This petition, similar to other colonial petitions in Assam, features invoking of the past to advance their claims to related to forests. It clearly states that prior to the establishment of Assam as a separate province, there were no restrictions on the access to and use of forest resources. This petitionary tradition of referring to the past was not distinct to the colonial petitions from Assam. It was prevalent in the supplication of petitions in colonial Bombay that were designed with an objective to draw contrasts between the past and present (Kidambi, 2019).

The culture of petitioning that was adopted in rural Assam created a space for coming together of people that was addressed in the petition as 'ryots'. These ryots depended directly on timber for their livelihood that was prohibited from them with the application of the Indian Forest Act 1865 that allowed reservation of trees and forests. As such, these ryots could be traders, wood-cutters and boat-builders. Referred to as 'Assamese' in the petition, the petitionary activity

[175] National Archives of India, Home Department Proceedings (Forests), From G. Bezbaroa, President of the Hitasadhini Sabha of Golaghat, Assam to the Viceroy and Governor General of India, March 1886.

became a space for the building of new community that was in reluctance to accept the forest rules prohibiting felling of reserved trees.

The geographical setting of Golaghat is such that it is situated on the banks of Dhansiri river which is one of the tributaries of Brahmaputra river. Due to the enactment of Drift Timber Rules, the *ryots* living on the banks and in the neighbourhood of the Dayang and Dhansiri rivers in Golaghat were denied the use and enjoyment of drift timber in these rivers free of payment. This sabha stated that the deprivation of timber would result in great hardship for the *ryots* who had been depending on drift timber for firewood and building materials and were not required to pay for drift items. It was available free of cost for those who were able to catch it as it drifted down the rivers.[176]

Another point made by the sabha was in regard to reservation of particular species of trees under the Indian Forest Act. The colonial administration had reserved valuable timber-yielding trees such as *sal* and teak with the passing of Assam Forest Regulation. According to the sabha, almost all the trees in the Government protected forests that were required for construction purposes had been declared reserved. The president of the sabha wrote in the petition:

> *"Almost all the trees in the Government forests that are essentially necessary for building purposes or are otherwise useful have been declared to be reserved, as would be evident from the names of trees included in the list of reserved trees: and the ryots who have from time immemorial been used to depend upon the first class or reserved trees in the Government forests for building materials are now precluded from the use and appropriation of the same without payment of royalty".*[177]

Such trees were reserved not for the use of the general public but for the use of the government that would contribute to revenue generation. Their reservation would result in great hardship to poor people in Assam who could not afford to pay the prescribed royalty fees. In addition,

[176] National Archives of India, Home Department proceedings, Petition from the Hitasadhini Sabha of Golaghat, appealing against the Forest Rules and Regulations in Assam, Nos. 4 to 9, August 1886.
[177] National Archives of India, Home Department Proceedings (Forests), From G. Bezbaroa, President of the Hitasadhini Sabha of Golaghat, Assam to the Viceroy and Governor General of India, March 1886.

the president of the sabha expressed his discontentment against the proximity of reserved forests to their villages. He wrote:

> *"Large tracts of forest-land or waste-land, which are situated near, around, and in the neighbourhood of thickly populated villages in the Sub-division of Golaghat, and on which the ryots mainly depend for timber or other forest produce or pasture, have been or are to be constituted into reserve forests under the Indian Forest Act. Reservation of such forests and non-formation of Village-Forests under the said act, would subject the ryots to hardship and inconvenience".*[178]

These forested tracts and wastelands were storehouses of timber, other forest produce and pastures for the ryots and their reservation made such resources unavailable and meant that the *ryots* had to collect them from distant forests in non-reserved areas.

The demands and grievances of the Hitasadhini Sabha of Golaghat division were tackled with references to the clauses and provisions laid under the colonial forest rules. Regarding restrictions on the use of drift timber, the Chief Commissioner justified that there was no restriction on the use of inferior drift timber brought down by Dhansiri and Doyang rivers. As such, the villagers could still make use of this inferior timber. The source of high quality timber was chiefly from reserved forests and when the villagers collected such drift timber, they were usually seized by the Forest Ranger until the claimant paid salvage on such items. The payment of salvage on the seized items, which was a prevalent practice during that time was not opposed by the villagers. The villagers were perceived to be rather acquiescing in it, which the colonial administrators declared as an acceptance on the part of the villagers.[179] This implies that the request of the sabha to alleviate their hardship did not produce desirable outcome.

In respect to the reservation of forested tracts following which, they would be deprived of timber and pastures, it was assured by the Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam that particular care would be taken not to deprive the neighbouring villages of their access to forest resources by defining the reserved tracts cautiously. The forested tract that was

[178] Ibid

[179] National Archives of India, Home Department Proceedings (Forests), From E. Stack, Esq., Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, To The Secretary to the Government of India, No. 8, 11th June 1886.

proposed to be reserved was located at a distance from the populated parts of the district and was not intended to be put into reservation without local enquiry into any private claimants. As far as reservation of particular tree species was concerned, justification was produced based on the period of observation over a period of nine years during which the colonial administrators assessed the impact of reserved trees on the livelihood of the people. The Officiating Secretary justified that the list of reserved trees did not entail any hardship upon the *ryots* of Assam.[180] Rather, the statements provided by the petitioners that the list was restricted to use of trees for building purposes was deemed false as fuel and wood needed for building purposes could be obtained free of charge from District Forests. Thus, with all these clarifications, the petitioners' request to alleviate them did not turn into a complete success. However, in respect to the hardship brought upon surrounding villagers in terms of access to forest produce and pastures, the assurance was given not to deprive the neighbouring villagers of their access.

6.5.4 Princely State of Tippera against levy of pass fees in 1887

Another petition belonging to the hill region is from the Maharaja of Hill Tippera against the levy of pass fees on timber imported from his territory into Sylhet in the year 1887. It is to be noted here that Hill Tippera was a princely state in India ruled by the Maharaja. Taxes were imposed on timber and forest produce floated down the rivers into Sylhet by Sylhet authorities. According to the Sylhet River Rules, no fees was supposed to be levied on timber and other forest produce brought from private lands in British India. The petition was directed against taxes imposed on timber transported from the princely State of Tippera.[181] From the letter of the Officer in charge of the Maharaja, it is clear that a petition had been submitted earlier about the grievances of the farmers in the princely state but it was rejected. He states:

> "*An agent of the izara-holder[182] of Thal and Juri Ghat acting under the impression that he would obtain redress of his grievances from the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, petitioned him, but that petition was rejected by an order, dated the 10th August 1886. A clamour has in consequence been already raised by the farmers*

[180] National Archives of India, Home Department Proceedings (Forests), From E. Stack, Esq., Officiating Secretary to the Commissioner of Assam, To The Secretary of the Government of India, No. 7, 4th May 1886.

[181] National Archives of India, Foreign Department Proceedings,Complaint of levy of pass fees on timber, &c., imported into Sylhet, External-A, From Banga Chandra Bhattacharja, Officer in charge of His Highness the Maharaja's English Office to the Officer in Charge, Political Agency, Agartola, No. 38, 20th August 1887.

[182] Izarah is a method of revenue assessment and collection that became popular in the 18th century. When peasants lacked the means to cultivate their lands due to calamity, the lands were farmed out on izarah to a third party.

and exporters, and if early steps be not taken by the British government to discontinue the tax, the farmers, it is feared, will give up their farms, causing thereby a very heavy loss to the State".

The above extract from the letter written to the Officer-in-Charge of the Political Agency in Agartala reveals impacts on farmers of the princely state due to taxing the forest produce transported by rivers. The petition further highlighted the distinct rule promulgated by the Government of India that the Sovereign Princely state should allow free passage of British merchandise, the same should be applied to the movement of timber and forest produce belonging to the Princely state. According to the petition, there had been complaints from the farmers and exporters and if early steps were not taken by the British Government to discontinue the tax, the farmers would give up farming that would cause heavy loss of revenue to the State.

The petition from the Maharaja took a persuasive path to find favour in the eyes of the British authority, a characteristic found in colonial petitions (Kidambi, 2019). The petition constituted the reason as to why the forest produce from the princely state should be allowed free passage. The letter further states:

"The rivers in question are all public thoroughfares, and as such no transit duty should be levied for passage through them. Again, if a duty like the present is to be levied upon timber and other forest produce, simply for passage, all other articles similarly be taxed, and I make no doubt that such an imposition would be objected to on principle by all civilized Government".[183]

It is evident from the extract of the letter that the Officer-in-Charge of the Maharaja claimed that the rivers in question were all public thoroughfares because of which no transit duty should be levied for passage through them. It also made a critical intervention on the biased imposition of taxes only on timber. In addition, the rivers in South Sylhet did not pass through any of the forests except the ones in the Tripura State, the tax levied in the British territory of Sylhet was technically on the articles grown in the forests within the jurisdiction of the State. This evidently was inflicting injustice upon the farmers as it was being doubly taxed, by both the

[183] Ibid.

princely state and the British India. The community strongly felt that the British Government should have thought of rendering free passage to all forest produce from the State under the administration of the Native Rulers to the adjoining British districts.[184]

The farmers in the Hill Tippera, however did not achieve their wish of removing the tax imposed on timber and other forest produce. The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam clarified that the fees that the Maharaja complained about were not a duty imposed under Chapter VII of the Indian Forest Act 1878 but a pass levied with the sanction of the Government of India under Chapter VIII for the control of timber and other forest produce in transit. The clarification on the imposition of pass fees was justified with the citation of the objective of the British Government in issuing the pass-fees. The colonial government clarified that the objective of imposing such pass-fees on produce from British territories and from Tippera was not to increase revenue but to provide for the expenses of the functioning of control stations. The rivers in Sylhet such as Juri, Thal, Manu and Kwahi besides the Langai and Singla were brought under the River Rules where passes were to be issued for the passage of timber and other forest produce. Further, clarification was also made on the basis of proximity of forests in Tippera State to the adjoining reserved forests in British territory. The clarification issued by the British Government states that Hill Tippera forests in the banks of the mentioned rivers are located in close proximity to the forest-clad tracts in British territory, which consisted of both reserved and protected forests. The colonial government gave the impression that the imposition of pass-fees was necessary for the protection of the revenue derived by the Government from these forests by checking and examining the forest produce in the process of transit.

Thus, the colonial government did not consider it desirable to suspend the levy of pass-fees from farmers belonging to Hill Tipperah as was the case with the timber from private forest from British territory. As it was stated in the proceeding from the Under-Secretary to the Government of India, the Maharaja in this regard should not expect more liberal treatment with timber from his territory.[185]

[184] Ibid.

[185] National Archives of India, Foreign Department proceedings, From W.J. Cunningham, Under-Secretary to the Government of India, To the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Complaint of levy of pass fees on timber, imported into Sylhet, No. 43, 24th May 1888.

6.5.5 Ryots of Lakhimpur against imposition of grazing dues in 1892

The establishment of reserved forests in the Assam Valley districts became a hindrance to the livelihood of the ryots. The reservation of forests became hard on those ryots who grazed their animals on colonial administered wastelands. The ryots of Dibrugarh in Lakhimpur district encountered hardship on these grounds and made a petition in the year 1892 to the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur district praying to be exempted from paying grazing dues to the colonial government for their buffaloes. The petition was collectively written by Salim and others from the Assam Valley who were were ryots but simultaneously kept cattle and made a living. The Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur carefully assessed the petition and could not ascertain as to why a ryot who cultivated a little land and was also a herdsman should be exempted from grazing dues.

Upon careful assessment, the Chief Commissioner decided not to levy the tax on the agriculturalists. The concerned people, though agriculturalists also traded in buffaloes and some animals were also kept for their own use. Instead, keeping of one cow to each household without payment of tax was granted to the villagers. Plough animals were allotted to the petitioners but they were subjected to pay for the excess plough animals kept by them.[186]

Thus, it is clear from the decision of the colonial government that the levy of the grazing dues for grazing on their wastelands was partially removed on the grounds that the ryots were also traders in cattle. According to the colonial assessment, these cattle were kept solely for the purpose of trade. As such, one man owned as many as one hundred and one buffaloes and the total number owned by the twelve petitioners came to three hundred and twenty seven. Out of these, only two persons owned land for cultivation. Hence, each household was allowed to graze one cow, free of payment in the government wastelands. The petitioners namely Abdul and Jonabali who were allowed to graze three and five plough animals respectively were considered as traders in cattle.[187] The easing of tax payments and partial removal of tax would indirectly encourage cattle trade and would put less pressure on the reserved forests. The

[186] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue B (Forests), Petition of Certain ryats of Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, praying to be exempted from the payment of grazing dues on their buffaloes, Nos. 295-306, June 1892.

[187] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Copy of order passed by W.B. Brown, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, No.302, 16th May 1892.

exemption of grazing dues from the agriculturalists implies colonial encouragement to pursue settled paddy cultivation in contrast to jhum cultivation in the hills.

6.5.6 The Ryots of Jaintia Parganas against felling trees and using of Drift Timber in 1895

Another petition was from the people of Jaintia Hills that was written to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the year 1895. Through this petition, they made a request to remove certain restrictions from the government wastelands. This was addressed in the name of Baidya Nath Deb and made the grievances of the people of Jaintia Hills known to the Chief Commissioner of Assam. Unlike the earlier petition from individual claimants, the petition under discussion was a collective move against the restrictions imposed on their rights to access forest resources that would pose difficulties in the daily lives of the forest-dependent people of Jaintia Hills. The petition includes prayers belonging to 17 *parganas*[188] that earnestly requested the colonial government for modifications to their *pattas*[189] with the issue of rights to cut forest produce planted by them and their ancestors. Although the government had issued the right to transfer their lands, they had been prohibited from felling and selling trees that had been the main source of livelihood for them. The following quote shows their claims over the trees on their patta lands and by which they were entitled to fell them. It reads:

> *"The trees that stand on our patta lands were planted and grown by our ancestors in times beyond our recollection, and preserved them. We have the same rights over our lands, under the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, as the permanent settlement-holders have over theirs. Government have given us power to transfer our lands, but unfortunately for us, we have prohibited from felling or selling the trees growing on the land. Many people of our pargana earn their livelihood by selling wood".*[190]

[188] A pargana is a group of villages or a subdivision of a district in India.

[189] Patta is a type of land deed issued by the government to an individual or organisation. The term is used in India and certain other parts of South Asia.

[190] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, Translation of Petition, From Baidya Nath Deb and others of Jaintia , To the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 48, 2nd Oct 1896.

From the above extract from the translation of the petition, it can be clearly understood that the people of 17 Jaintia parganas asserted their rights over the trees standing on their lands. The trees were declared to have been planted and preserved by their ancestors and for this reason, they claimed that they should possess the right to cut them for sale.

Another request made was to modifiy their pattas to omit the prohibitory clause on their pattas restricting them from tree felling and use of timber. They were particularly against the issue of these prohibitory clauses on the old periodic pattas that were resettled during that time. Upon consultation with the Director of Land Records, they learned that the prohibitory clause was applicable in the newly granted pattas. As such, this clause would subject them to the oppression of the forest officers. Hence, they wanted the removal of this clause from their pattas. The requests of the people of Jaintia parganas were assessed by the colonial administrators. Their demands for the revision of prohibitory clause issued in their pattas of felling and selling of trees planted and grown by them and their ancestors was directed to be corrected by the Chief Commissioner of Assam. Following is the quote from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet. It reads:

> *"With reference to point (1), I am to say that it was never intended that royalty should be charged on trees planted by the lease-holder or by his predecessors in interest, but only on timber etc., removed for sale, which has not been planted by the lease-holder or by his predecessors in interest".*[191]

It can be said from the above statement from the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam that the intention of the government was not to charge royalty on the trees planted and grown by the petitioners and their ancestors but was imposed on the timber-yielding trees removed for sale. The decision of the colonial government was made in the favour of the petitioners in terms of removing the clause that restricted removal of timber planted by themselves from their lands.

[191] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, From the Offg. Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, To the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet, No. 53, 24th July 1897.

The free access to timber floated down by river was another request made by the people of Jaintia. In addition, issue of home consumption permits free of cost was another demand made by them as had been the case in the Assam Valley Districts where the ryots were granted free drift timber for home consumption. In the case of Sylhet district, under which Jaintia Hills was administered, revenue had to be paid for home consumption permits. However, home consumption permits were issued free in the Assam Valley districts but in Jaintia Hills one Rupee was charged for the same. They demanded for same privileges enjoyed by the ryots in the Assam Valley districts.[192] The petitioners' plea of issuing of home consumption permits free of charge was granted by the Chief Commissioner of Assam. This entails that earlier charges payable to the forest department for home consumption were exempted from payment.

The people of Jaintia parganas also made known to the Chief Commissioner of Assam about the excessive rates of land revenue, which they were finding difficult to pay. In this prevailing circumstance, they further expressed injustices associated with being prohibited from felling or removing of forest produce. The following is an extract from the translation of the petition that unpacks the deplorable condition of the Jaintia parganas.

> *"We cannot purchase chhan, bamboo or dried wood for our own use. It is very difficult to pay our revenue even. Our rentals for the last few years were paid by us by working at Railway lines in Cachar and Maulvi Bazar. We had even to borrow money with interest at 3 annas per rupee from Kayas and pawn the jewels of our females inorder to pay the revenue. We are very much frightened to see the increased rates of revenue assessed during the present settlement of our parganas. We know no way to pay this revenue. Over and above, we suffer under injustice on being prohibited from felling and removing for sale the forest-produce grown in our own village and locality".*[193]

The above extract further reveals the difficult economic state of the people of the Jaintia parganas owing to high revenue rates and prevailing restrictions to use of forest produce. Due to the increased rate of revenue fixed during the prevailing settlement, it had exerted pressure on the livelihood of the people to the point of borrowing money with high interest rates and

[192] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, Translation of Petition, From Baidya Nath Deb and others of Jaintia, To the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 48, 2nd October 1896.
[193] Ibid

pawning jewellery. As such, the restrictions imposed on removal and felling of forest produce had added further burden to the people of Jaintia parganas. Hence, they earnestly requested the Chief Commissioner to order an enquiry to examine the classification and valuation of land for which they were charged high amount of revenue. This request to ease them from high revenue rates for forest produce was denied. According to the official letter from the Extra Assistant Commissioner of Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, the Jaintia parganas had no reserved trees in their area. Hence, the forest department had no say in the forest-related matters of the area. He further acknowledged that the department itself was not well acquainted to delineate government waste from a settled waste and such inefficiency would deprive the raiyats of their rights to forest resources.[194] The Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in his letter to the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet stated that the rates of revenue could not be amended as the rates were already settled.[195]

It is evident from the petition of the 17 parganas of Jaintia parganas that their requests to remove the prohibitory clause from their pattas and issuing home consumption permits free of payment were granted to the people. In other words, two of the demands made in the petition were granted in the favour of the people with the exception to the demand made with regard to revision of revenue rates.

6.5.7 Claims for half of royalties by Rabonsingh from Nongpoh forest in 1911

In the Khasi Hills district, Rabonsingh, who was the *Sirdar*[196] of Nongpoh claimed his right to half of royalties from Nongpoh forests in the form of a petition to the Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1911. This petition is distinct from other petitions as he represented the native authority of the Khasis. Nongpoh forests was not a reserved forest and through the petition, Rabonsingh claimed what his ancestors received from the colonial government in the past. His ancestors who were were U Lalitam Singh Siem, U Kumde Sing Siem, U Burom Sing Siem, Ram Sing Siem and Parboh Singh Siem were recipients of royalties from Nongpoh forests. Following is the quote from the petition of Rabonsingh, which explains his deprivation of royalties from the forests.

[194] Assam State Archives, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Note by Chandra Kanta Sen, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Sylhet, to the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, No. 52, 25th November 1895.
[195] Ibid.
[196] A Sirdar is a person of high rank such as a hereditary noble especially in India. As per the petition, a Sirdar is described as a government servant paid by commission.

"Since the time I have taken charge of the government service up to date, I have not got the income from the forest (the Royalty) from my state i.e. half of the income. As I have taken care since the death of my uncle of Shillong Siem, and I believe there is no other king who is more trouble than me, who carried in my head all the government work and that your Honour I believe knows well".[197]

From the above statement it is clear that U Rabon Singh was a native authority of Nongpoh, of which he had been taking the responsibility after the demise of his uncle. However, he had not been in receipt of the royalty from the forest since he worked under the colonial government unlike his ancestors. The items from which royalty was claimed were elephants, sal woods, Laram tree, Byllit tree, metal collection, Ka Larsi tree, bamboo and Dingai tree.[198] The assessment of this petition by the colonial administrators resulted in its rejection as the colonial administrators denied to recognise him as a *Siem.*[199] He was rather called as a self-styled Siem. This decision making was based on the account of Colonel Bivar's letter to the Assistant Secretary to the Chief Commissioner in June 1875 and Colonel Clarke's letter to the Seceretary to the Chief Commissioner in 1877. Based on these letters, prior to the British occupation of these lands, Nongpoh was included in the *syiemship*[200] of Nongshai that was reconfigured. The management of State was entrusted to the Lyngdoh of Sohiong according to the petition filed by U Shillong who was the Sirdar of Nongpoh. The colonial assessment of the petition also made reference to the history that further suggested that the concerned village was returned to Sohiong. Due to the reconfiguration of the syiemship that was placed under Sohiong at the time when the petition was written, the claims of Rabonsingh were found to be baseless and rather deemed him as a self-styled leader. Prior to writing this petition, he had sought for his siemship to be designated by the colonial government. However, his request was rejected by Colonel Bivar. There were also certain people who appealed to the Deputy Commissioner to acknowledge the Sirdar of Nongpoh as the Siem in 1877, whose requests were also rejected. The same request reappeared in the year 1905 but also rejected. The Sirdar of Nongpoh's claim to half the royalty of the forest produce was looked upon as a way to claim siemship of

[197] Assam State Archives, Political B, Letter from U Rabonsing to the Lieutenant Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, No.32, February 1912.

[198] Assam State Archives, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Political Department, Petition of U Rabon Sing, Sardar of Nongpoh claiming half the income from the Nongpoh Forest in the Khasi and jaintia Hills, No. 32-38, February 1912.

[199] An indigenous Khasi king or leader is called a Siem.

[200] It is derived from the word 'siem'. The system of governance and administration under the siem is called 'siemship'.

Nongpoh as recognising him as a Siem would qualify him to receive half the royalty of forest produce. His petition according to the colonial assessment based on an invitation he received to attend the Dacca *Durbar*[201]. The letter from the Deputy Commissioner further stated:

> *"His name is included in the durbar list of this district with the name of many other excellent but not very distinguished persons such as the sirdars of other British villages and the Dollois (Mauzadars) in the Jaintia Hills, all of whom were invited to Dacca. The Sirdar of Nongpoh seems to have thought that the issue of this invitation implied that the government regarded him with favour and would likely to accede to his representations. I have recently received a petition from certain persons in which they explicitly say that as the Siem Sardar was invited to Dacca, the title of Sirdar may be dropped and U Rabon Singh may be styled Siem. In other words, the petitioners asked that what was always been a British territory since our occupation of the hills should be now converted into a Khasi State. Such a proceeding would destroy all sense of stability in these hills".*[202]

This petition features invoking the past to support their claims. However, the motive behind U Rabonsingh's claim to his rights was clearly sidelined and was rather understood to be motivated by his invitation by the colonial government to attend the Dacca Durbar. In addition to U Rabonsingh's personal claims to forest produce, it is evident from the above statement that there had been petitions from certain people who desired him to be recognised as the *Siem* of Nongpoh that were also understood by the colonial government to be associated with Rabon Singh's invitation to Durbar. What is clear and evident from this petition is that Rabon Singh clearly wanted rights to half of the revenue from the forest produce of Nongpoh as his ancestors and predecessors who had also been *mauzadars*[203] in the plains and *sirdars* in the hills had rights to half of the royalty of forest produce. However, it is apparent that the colonial government was reluctant to recognise his claim as this could mean the conversion of British

[201] In British India, Durbar was specially attached to formal imperial assemblies called together to mark state occasions.

[202] Ibid, Political Department Proceedings Proceedings From B.C. Allen, Deputy Commissioner of Khasi and Jaintia Hills to the Commissioner of Surma Valley and Hill Districts, Petition of U Rabon Sing, Sardar of Nongpoh claiming half the income from the Nongpoh Forest in the Khasi and jaintia Hills, No. 32-38, February 1912

[203] A mauzadar was incharge of collecting revenue according to the land revenue Policy Resolution of 1870.

territory into a Khasi state. This would incur huge loss of revenue to the colonial government and his request to claim half the royalty of forest produce was considered inadmissible.[204]

6.5.8 Tales of resistance from oral histories

An important source of information for unpacking indigenous or colonised histories of minority groups is word of mouth or oral histories. While conducting my ethnographic research, I came across stories of resistance that are worth discussing here. A story of one particular historical figure resurfaced repeatedly during my fieldwork. His name is Dewansing Sangma and he is a prominent figure who contributed to discourse in Garo culture. He was among the first Garos to have received a Bachelor of Arts Degree. He was born on 25th December 1901 and received his Bachelors degree from Cotton College, Guwahati. His grandson, who I had the privilege of interviewing, mentioned that he was a well-read person and as much as he was passionate about reading, he was also a writer. Known for his work such as 'The Folk-Tales of the Garos' published in 1960, little is known about his resistance against the forest department. As there were stories circulating in the Village Forests about him and his fight with the British by way of writing petitions, I was extremely interested to know more about him and eventually managed to schedule an interview with his grandson. When I enquired about his petitions to the colonial government, he said:

> "My grandparents lived at Rangasora, their locality was called Nolbari before the partition… they owned vast stretches of agricultural land to themselves before. However, with the reservation of these forested lands into government forests and later with the establishment of Village Forests, their lands were distributed to the forest villagers who were brought in by the forest department into these forests. My late grandfather sued the forest department for this".[205]

It is clear from the above extract from the interview that Dewansing was a resident of the Rangasora who owned agricultural lands prior to the establishment of a Village Forest. Prior to establishment of this reserve as Village Forests, the paddy fields belonged to Dewansing and his family. The making of forest villagers led to distribution of their agricultural lands was

[204]Ibid.
[205] Interview with the grandson of Dewansing Sangma, 7th July 2021.

among the other forest villagers who were absorbed from the surrounding villages. This was done against his will following the declaration of this reserved forest as a Village Forest. As a result, he filed a case against the colonial forest department pleading for justice. However, he was defeated in the case and was granted land at Karawani, close to Baghmara as an alternative. This information was gathered from his grandson, which was in turn passed on from his parents to him. The petition files were lost in the relocation of their house. This shows the problematic nature of dealing with indigenous archives and the lack of institutional support in preserving them. This in turn poses difficulties in trying to construct indigenous tribal colonial histories and their resistance in the form of petitions.

Another source of information was gathered from the Secretary of the All Garo Hills Forest Villagers association. The narration of the incident is based on the information passed down by the secreatary's parents through word of mouth. He recalled:

> "When Baghmara Reserved Forest was declared a Village Forest, he was still a young man. He got married to a woman who was from Rangasora and he became a resident of this village. He sued the forest department against free labour that was made compulsory for the villagers. Another point was on grounds of taxing the villagers for agricultural land that was a huge sum of money for him and against the use of Assamese script in official letter. The case was registered at Calcutta High Court but he did not win the case and was thereafter evicted from the village. It seems elephants were used in the destruction of his house. Upon eviction, he moved to Baghmara and settled there".[206]

From the above statement from the Secretary of the NGO, it is clear that the prominent figure in Rangsaora, who was educated and had financial means to petition to the colonial court, filed a petition against the forest department for taxing the agricultural land. Another point of his petition was a demand for the abolition of free labour that was in operation since the establishment of Village Forests. In addition, he was also against the use of Assamese language as an official language of the region. However, his demands were not accepted and he was evicted from Rangasora village and his house was demolished using elephants. Thus, his

[206] Telephone Interview with the Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association, 24th April 2022.

demands remained unfulfilled and was forced to move out of the Village Forest to settle in Baghmara town.

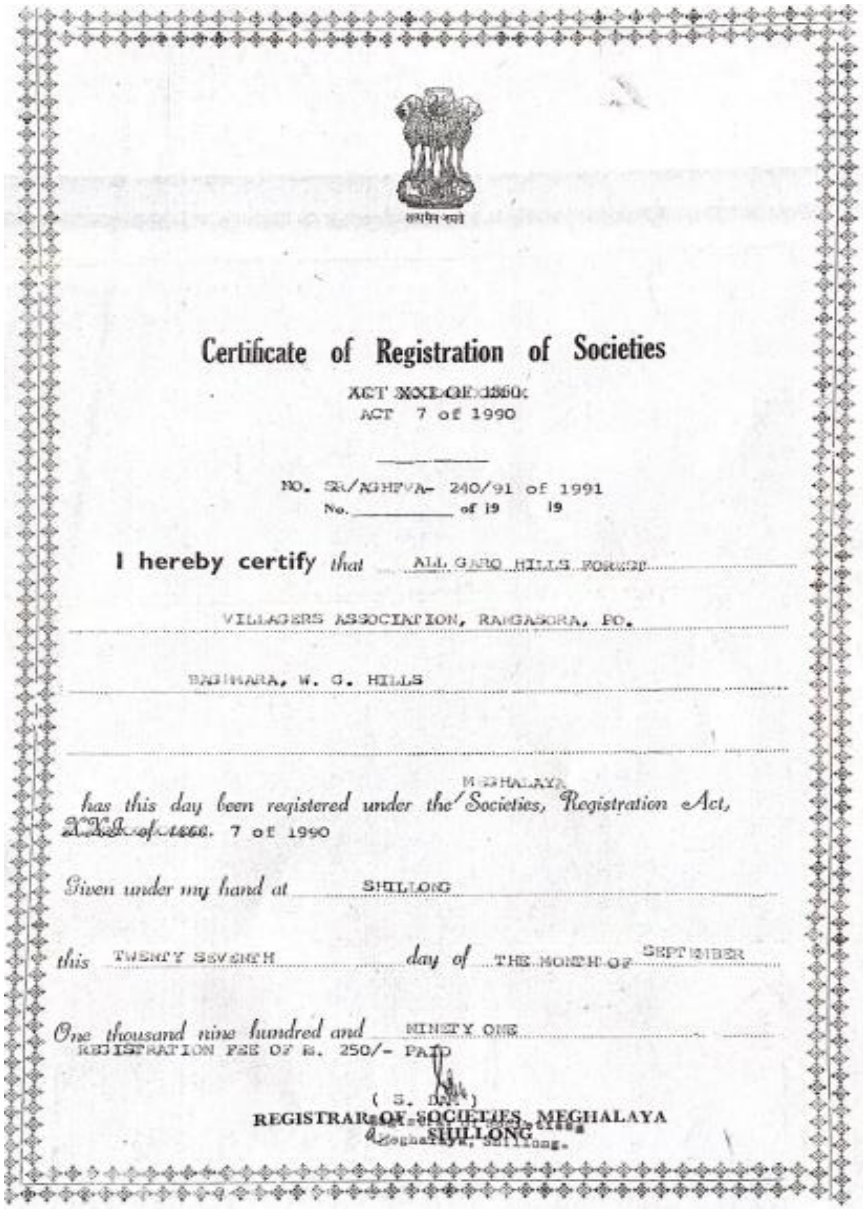
6.5.9 Postcolonial stand against colonial tradition of free labour in 1991

Rendering of free labour from the colonial time that lasted until 1993 brought about misery and ill treatment to the forest labourers. It prevailed in regimes of both colonial and independent India. Under this practice, 20 days of free manual work per year during the initial days of establishment of Village Forests was mandatory that reduced to 10 days after independence. This form of practice was defined by discipline and sincerity on the part of the forest villagers. It took the form of a 'slavery' as explained by the Secretary of the forest villagers' association due to free rendering of labour and the constitution of the nature of work. This practice of slavery was resisted by forest villagers in the form of a series ofs petition in 1991. The first petition was addressed to the Forest Minister of Meghalaya. The petition took the form of a collective petition in the name of an association that represented and carried their voice to the Government of Meghalaya. Formed in 1991, the association was named 'All Garo Hills Forest Villagers' Association' as seen in Figure 6.1. The mobilisation of forest villagers from different parts of the state was initiated in the year 1991. The association was registered under the Societies Registration Act 1990. The first meeting as an association took place in the year 1991 at Rangasora village, which is a Village Forest under Baghmara Reserved Forest and one of the ethnographic sites for this study.

A series of meetings followed this meeting where forest villagers of Garo Hills region came under one umbrella and a common cause, thereby, taking a political turn. In the same year, a meeting was held at Angratoli Reserved Forest in the South Garo Hills District that people from Baghmara and surrounding villages attended. Public gatherings were held at various Village Forests of Garo Hills such as Adokgri, Karkutta, Dainadubi, Rongjeng, Rongrenggre, Tura and other places.

Several petitions were sent to the Forest Minister of Meghalaya thereafter that demanded for the withdrawal of injustice from the imposition of free labour. Their mobilisation became impactful and they succeeded in gaining support from politicians belonging to tjeir respective constituencies. They particularly gained the support of Atul Ch. Marak, the Forest Minister of the state of Meghalaya in 1993 (The Meghalayan Bureau, 2022). The elements of ethnicity of

the forest villagers and the local politician are crucial in this resistance. The forest villagers and the Forest Minister belong to the same ethnic group and speak the same language. The influence of ethnicity and language can be seen as an influencing factor in the abolition of free labour. It was during his tenure as a Forest Minister that the unjust and suppressive free labour was withdrawn from the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest.[207]



Certificate of Registration of Societies

ACT XXI OF 1860
ACT 7 of 1990

NO. SR/AGHFVA- 240/91 of 1991
No. _____ of 19 19

I hereby certify that ALL GARO HILLS FOREST VILLAGERS ASSOCIATION, RANGASORA, PO. BAGHMARA, W. G. HILLS

has this day been registered under the MEGHALAYA Societies, Registration Act, XXI of 1860. 7 of 1990

Given under my hand at SHILLONG

this TWENTY SEVENTH day of THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER

One thousand nine hundred and NINETY ONE

REGISTRATION FEE OF Rs. 250/- PAID

(S. DAS)
REGISTRAR OF SOCIETIES, MEGHALAYA
SHILLONG

Figure 6.1 Certificate of registration of the All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association formed in 1991.

[207] Interview with the Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association, 12th July 2021.

This move against free labour was also characterised by the solidarity shown by forest officials of the forest division based in Baghmara. The forest authorities at a divisional level in Baghmara, most of whom belonged to the same ethnic community, also recommended the removal of this unjust practice. The forest officials wrote letters addressed to the Chief Minister of the postcolonial state in favour of abolishment of this practice. This was one of the reasons that can be ascertained in respect to abolishment of free labour in the Village Forests of Baghmara.

The 'grey zones' of resistance can be traced in this institutional resistance. It reasonates with Hollander and Einwohner's (2004) view that resistance is not always pure. The first zone is petitions as means of collective resistance that requires some articulation. It is to be noted that this collective petition was backed by public meetings where expressions of discontent, speeches of mobilisation and drafting of petitions took place. As such, petition as the only form of this particular resistance is shaky, as public meetings leading to formation of forest villagers' association cannot be discarded. Public gatherings where unity and solidarity were shown are also sites of resistance that took a form of collective petition from Garo Hills region. The second 'grey zone' is in differentiating between the resisters and the institution they are resisting against. The participation of forest officials by sending recommendations for removal of free labour is noteworthy. In this case, a clear line cannot be drawn between the resistors and the people in power due to their participation in the cause. The forest officials can be seen as pluralistic actors who are both resisters and the agent of power, reiterating previous studies (Levi, 2015; Leebaw, 2011; Mihai, 2019).

This movement against free labour is an example of an institutional form of resistance in which the suffering of the forest villagers led to the formation of organised societies and associations. This movement against free labour is an example of an institutional form of resistance in which the suffering of the forest villagers led to the formation of organised societies and associations. This association that represented solidarity and unity among the forest villagers had undergone various stages that included widespread mobilisation, public meetings and gatherings and submission of petitions. The petitionary culture that prevailed during the colonial period in South Asia against the oppression of the colonial government could also be witnessed during the post-colonial period. It received the support of the forest villagers of other reserved forests in Meghalaya which helped make the petition a success. Hence, the colonial free labour system

that was in practice in Baghmara Village Forests during the post-colonial period was abolished in the year 1993.

6.6 Subtle Forms of Resistance

This section of resistance against the forest department unpacks subtle forms of resistance in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest. These are called subtle forms of resistance. These are called 'weapons of the weak' by Scott (1985) who theorises that such forms lack symbolic confrontation with the people in power. These forms of resistance that Scott also refers to as covert resistance because of their non-confrontational nature fail to take the shape of an organised movement due to lack discipline and leadership. One of the key characteristic that Scott identifies about everyday resistance is the pervasive use of disguise in which the identity is hidden or the act itself is hidden. This section of resistance takes into account the everyday actions of the indigenous people and families that unpacks the decolonising attempts of the forest villagers. Engaging in the daily actions of the indigenous people and families is an important step in the decolonising process (Hunt and Holmes, 2015). Through these subtle forms of resistance, I argue that the postcolonial state has been unsuccessful in its attempts to discipline forest villagers and has failed to create submissive forest villagers. By adopting various strategies, forest villagers have been redefining their socio-economic means and cultural practices to alleviate their suppression rooted in colonial practices that defined their terms and conditions of living as forest villagers. There is evidence of subtle forms of everyday resistance during the colonial period, which is presented below. However, such forms of resistant behaviour failed to occupy an important place in the colonial proceedings and reports as opposed to open violent forms of resistance. The Forest Administration Reports provide information on registered and unregistered cases of unauthorised felling and grazing activities that reveal that forest-dependent and traditional forest dwellers engaged in non-confrontational contesting activities during the colonial period.

The conceptualisation of resistance in this analysis is inspired by Johannson and Vinthagen (2015), in their study of everyday non-violent resistance by Palestinians inhabiting Gaza and the West Bank. The forms of resistance are conceptualised in three ways. Firstly, everyday resistance is viewed as a practice and not necessarily a consciousness that has evolved from the longstanding encounter with the prohibitive forest rules. Secondly, it is viewed as entangled with power and not independent and separated from power. Thirdly, it is perceived as

heterogenous and contingent. Resistance as contingent depicts that not all subtle methods of resistance takes shape on a daily basis and is subjected to their needs.

6.6.1 Subtle resistance from the Forest Administration Reports

The Progress Report of Forest Administration for Assam provides information on the occurrences of everyday from of resistance to fulfil grazing and needs for timber. The breaches of forest law during the colonial period was tabulated in the forest administration reports that gives information on three activities that constitute injury to forest by fire, unauthorised felling of trees and unauthorised grazing and provides accounts on the occurrences of other offences. In this section of analysis, breaches of forest laws from 1900-1901 (Table 6.1) and 1919-20 (Table 6.2) are given. 1902-05. The information on breaches of forest laws is provided for the period of 1902-03 (Appendix 1), 1904-05 (Appendix 2), 1912-15 (Appendix 3, 4 and 5) and 1917-1919 (Appendix 6 and 7). As the Assam Forest Regulation was perceived to be the most influential policy (Handique, 2004), I aim to present the breaches of laws after the imposition of these laws in 1892. The categories of forest offence include those that include cases taken into court, cases disposed of under section 2 of the Assam Forest Regulation 1891 and undetected cases.

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	8	-	6	14
Sylhet	-	94	-	5	99
Goalpara	3	9	-	8	20
Kamrup	5	12	-	3	20
Darrang	3	20	1	18	42
Nowgong	5	5	-	1	11
Sibsagar	-	49	1	44	54
Lakhimpur	-	47	-	7	54
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	3	1	-	-	4
Garo Hills	11	30	1	6	48

Table 6.1: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1900-1901[208]

From the tables it can be seen that the cases recorded under injury to forest by fire were fewer in number as compared to unauthorised felling whenever data is available. The data for unauthorised grazing were unavailable for most of the years. Data for authorised felling and for other offences was more consistent than the other variables. It is evident from the tables that unauthorised felling was high in occurrence in the forest division of Sylhet, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. For instance, during the period 1900 to 1901 (Table 6.1) and 1901 to 1902 (Table 6.2), Sylhet was recorded with the highest cases for illegal felling amounting to 94 and 62 cases respectively. The cases of illegal tree felling in Sylhet was recorded as high as 291 during 1919-1920. As data on unauthorised grazing from 1900-1905 were not consistently available, it was more prominent in the division of Sibsagar during the period 1912-14. During the period 1914-15 and 1917-18, the division of Goalpara had the highest number of unauthorised grazing cases

[208] Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1900-1901, By C.G. Dingwall-Fordyce, Esq., Conservator of Forests, Assam, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1901.

with 42 and 40 cases respectively. Goalpara and Khasi and Jaintia Hills were recorded to have the highest number of unauthorised grazing with 38 and 53 cases respectively during 1918-1919. During the period of 1919-1920, Darrang was recorded to have the highest forest offence foe unauthorised grazing with 31 cases.

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	19	2	36	57
Sylhet	-	291	7	60	358
Goalpara	1	12	25	9	47
Kamrup	2	29	6	40	77
Darrang	-	30	31	11	72
Nowgong	-	39	1	11	51
Sibsagar	-	60	25	20	105
Lakhimpur	-	35	6	15	56
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	1	5	9	11	26
Garo Hills	-	17	5	4	26
Lushai Hills	-	-	-	-	-
Sadiya	-	7	-	8	15

Table 6.2: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1919-1920.[209]

From the information provided for breaches of forest laws, the occurrence of everyday resistance such as pilfering of timber, illegal grazing of livestock and attempts to cause forest fires are evident. These were non-confrontational in nature, out of which some were detected

[209] Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1919-1920, By A.W. Blunt, Conservator of Forests, Assam, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1920.

and some were undetected. However, this form of resistance failed to make a headline in the progress report of forest administration as these cases are anonymous and provide no detail on their nature.

6.6.2 Resilient scattered cash crop cultivation

The Village Forests of Rangasora, Meatda, and Bilkuna with the exception of Bobanipur are characterised by the presence of cash crops such as cashew cut and areca nut plantation. In a reserved forest where felling of trees is prohibited, the villagers adapted to the prevailing stringent law and order in restrictive colonial forest spaces by planting cash crops. This activity of cash-cropping is not just an act but a practice aimed at alleviating their economic hardship. Since it is done not in direct confrontation with the people in authority, it can be called a subtle form of resistance. Another characteristic of this form is that it is performed from a safe distance. This is associated with safe responses given to the question of 'how' in respect to the cash-cropping activity. In a strict forest environment, spotting the plantation of cash crops during my fieldwork made me inquisitive about prevailing local livelihoods and resilient livelihood strategies. In respect to the existing plantation of cash crops, a woman from Rangasora village who owns a cashew nut plantation narrated about planting of cash crops in the Village Forests. She said:

> "Some clear the forests but they do it in scattered patches where there are no trees. Areas with sal and teak trees are avoided… there are places where there are only bushes. So we clear these bushes and grow our cash crops, even if it is in a small scale. Also, every year, there are forest fires, that burn the trees down and we grow on these lands.. we cannot do big scale plantation here".[210]

The above statement implies that cash crops are planted in the Village Forests but it is different from a conventional cash crop plantation in non-reserved areas that are done on a large-scale. The woman's statement reveals that she is accustomed to the forest laws and knows how to handle this tricky question. She clearly mentioned that crops are planted only in areas where there are no standing trees due to occurrences of natural calamities like forest fires and which are often covered with bushes thereafter. In other words, they plant their cash crops in lands

[210] Interview with a 56 year old mother, a forest villager of Rangasora,19th July 2020

that are devoid of trees. This response indicating that cash cropping in the Village Forests is done selectively in areas that have no natural vegetation can be understood as a strategically constructed response as this does not make them sound ‘illegal’ or as committing ‘forest offence’. Another interpretation of this can be derived from the literal meaning of the statement. The practice of cash-crop plantation in stretches bearing no trees indicate that villagers have been manoeuvering their activities in the Village Forests cautiously to avoid being caught by the authority.

Figure 6.2 Areca nut plantation in Meata village

Figure 6.3 Cashew nut plantation that was seized by the Forest Department upon investigation and released later after the court judgement

As they live in a restrictive Village Forest, I was interested to know about the procedures they had to undergo to take up these activities. The former village headman of one of the Village Forests in his interview narrated their experience of planting cash crops in a strict forest space. He said:

> "It was a long time ago… there was a ranger and we called him, cooked food for him and talked about the possibilities of planting cashew nuts saplings. He directed us not to cut down trees but to plant them in areas where there are no trees since there were no schemes from the Forest department. We did plant cashew nut saplings following his order".[211]

[211] Interview with the former village headman of one of the Village Forest, 17th July 2020.

According to the former village headman of one of the Village Forests, the forest villagers approached the forest authorities for their approval to undertake cash crop cultivation. The forest ranger considered their situation, as there are no available schemes from the department to support their livelihood. However, it was approved under the condition that these plantations were to be done in areas where there are no trees. The nature of approval that was sought by the villagers was rather a casual permission. The permission was also given in a verbal form as opposed to a formal office procedure that is usually recorded in a written or typed up document. Figure 6.2 and 6.3 are photographs of cashew nut and areca nut plantations respectively in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest.

It is to be noted that official procedures involving the forest department were undertaken by men. In this case, casual permission for cash-cropping was negotiated by men. Men can be seen as initiators of this economic activity that is not officially prohibited. Women, on the other hand worked collectively with their spouses in their selected plots when the saplings were planted. To get more information about the aftermath of such plantation venture, I interviewed another person who planted cash crops in such areas. From the conservation, it surfaced that they were served with a legal notice from the Forest Department. He recalled:

> "They seized it and cut down some of the planted cashew trees later. Now this ranger is already deceased, probably he received an order from the forest authority, which is why he had to investigate into the matter. There were 19 households who got notified thereafter. We were summoned before the Additional District Commissioner) and our statements were taken. According to the Additional District Commissioner, we were on the illegal side and we were instructed not to plant any more cashew nut saplings. However, we could still own those saplings already planted but new plantations were not allowed. Till present, we harvest from that plantation and sell it to the local dealers and there has been no notification from the Forest department since then".[212]

From the above statement, it is evident that the villager's attempt to embark on another source of livelihood apart from agriculture that is cash crop plantation had brought strong objection from the forest department. According to the speculation of the former village headman, the

[212] Ibid.

forest ranger on being ordered by the higher forest authority investigated the matter in which the forest personnel seized their planted crops and some were even uprooted and destroyed. The seized crops belonged to 19 households and were summoned before the Additional District Commissioner for their statement. Their new means of livelihood of planting cashew nut was pronounced as an 'illegal' activity by the court. However, the court gave the order to access the remaining cashew nut trees that the forest personnel could not uproot manually. The plantation of cash crops in new plots was prohibited.

6.6.3 Prioritisation of domestic needs over official procedures

The practice of placing their domestic needs for timber as the need of the hour and which can be termed as 'illegal felling' in the eyes of the forest department can be identified as a form of resistance against the forest department. This clearly falls within subtle form of resistance as it is non-confrontational in nature. This covert way of obtaining forest resources is directed towards fulfilment of their domestic needs. In a Village Forest, the forest villagers are required to take permission from the Forest Department to get access to use of trees and timber for domestic purposes. These office procedures can take up to a month depending on the availability of foresters and rangers in the department. The time consumption in the official procedure and the inconvenience associated with it often compel forest villagers to adopt alternative form of obtaining forest materials required for their needs. The pilfering of timber is done by men as they perform the tasks pertaining to repair and construction. The following statement from the woman from Rangasora village unpacks this alternative way of acquiring the needed resources. She explained:

> "In our village, majority of the villagers abide by the forest laws… We abide by the laws, which is why there are no issues with foresters. They are strict, no doubt but atleast they let us use the trees that have already been cut down and also tell us not to do it again. This is because sometimes it is like stealing when they catch us on the spot but if we go the office and as for their permission, there are many procedures. We cannot imagine the time it would take for the permission to be granted".[213]

[213] Interview with a 56 year old woman from Rangasora Village, 19th July 2020

The above statement brings attention to the prevalent way of life in Village Forests where acquisition of needed resources is not easy. The statement reveals that there are times when they had to resort to cut the trees down without prior permission from the Forest Department. This happened due to the time it would consume for the official procedure to complete which was beyond their waiting period. During times of urgency, they could not adhere to the official procedures but use the available resources according to their convenience. As such, the only way was to procure the necessary resources without the department's permission, as going to the department for their approval is not practical for them.

It is clear that the forest villagers are compelled to make use of the resources available to them in the reserved forest. They are bound to lead a resilient life in this restricting forest environment, which is termed 'illegal' by the forest department. For the construction of houses, the forest villagers belonging to the poorer strata heavily rely on the locally available forest resources for construction of houses. More information was obtained from the headman about the nature of their everyday life in a reserved forest.

> "Since we live in the reserved forest, for the construction of houses we use trees from the reserved forest itself… we do not always wait for their approval… when we have to build our houses we cannot wait for their approval…we have no choice but to use them when we are need of timber but we do not sell them as it is prohibited".[214]

It is evident from the statement of the village headman that as forest villagers, they have to make use of trees and timber from the reserved forest itself. In times when the forest villagers have to construct houses, they do not have any alternative but to make use of the trees in the reserved forest without the consent of the forest department. The most practicable decision they can take as forest villagers who need shelter is to use trees in the reserved forest rather than going to the forest office and seek their approval and permission in a written document. It is evident from Figure 6.4 that the materials used in building houses are bamboo and timber. The walls are made of bamboos and the pillars and roof support system are built of timber from the reserved forest. This kind of house needs to be repaired each year before the monsoon

[214] Interview with the village headman of one of the reserved forest, 24th June 2010

commences. Following is the statement from the forest villager of Rangasora. She narrated about the domestic need for bamboos and timber every year:

> "As we cannot afford to build pucca houses, we have to rely on resources from the reserved forest. This type of houses need a repair every year before the rain otherwise it will not survive the rainy season. When we repair, we have to make new walls and also change pillars that have been eaten away by ants and other insects. So every year we require these materials and it is difficult for us to wait for the procedures to complete because of the approaching rain and thunderstorms".[215]

It is clear from the interview transcript that the forest villagers who cannot afford resources to build pucca houses have to rely on resources from the reserved forest. Each year before the monsoon season arrives, they have to repair their houses to make it last throughout the rainy season. In such circumstances, they are compelled to make use of resources from the reserved forest as completion of repair work is crucial before the arrival of every monsoon. Thus, they are left only with an alternative of making use of available materials even without the prior permission.

Figure 6.4 Houses made of timber and bamboo in Meata village

[215] Interview with a 56 year old woman from Rangasora village, 19th July 2020.

This practice of obtaining timber and bamboos from the reserved forest that operates at a local village level. It is to be noted that it takes the involvement and coordination of various actors in the procurement of resources from the forest. For instance, in tribal villages in the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya, the task of repairing and building of houses typically engages other residents of the village. Through efficient communication and risk-taking, the forest villagers are able to create a chain of economic support within which they can facilitate construction and repair of houses without having to face 'delay' and 'extra costs' in obtaining of resources.

6.6.4 Maintaining friendly relationship with the forest authorities

One subtle method of everyday resistance constitutes maintaining a friendly relationship with the forest authorities. It involves inviting the forest authorities and cooking meals for them in anticipation that they will find favour in the eyes of the forest officials. This act of inter-personal relationship with the forest authorities is a conscious step on the part of the forest villagers in an attempt to build a connection with the people in power. One of the interviews indicated that being on friendly terms with the forest officials proves to be an advantage to them, particularly in getting official work done in an efficient manner. The following is an extract from an interview with the forest villager of Rangasora. He said:

> "In the matters related to Village Forest, we have to **consult** the forest department. The official works and related permissions to Village Forests depend on our **relationship** with the forest authorities. If we maintain good **connection** with them, our works are easily done".[216]

It is clear from the above extract that the interviewee is aware of the importance of maintaining a friendly relationship with forest authorities. He testifies that official works are processed more efficiently if they build prior connection with the forest authorities. Thus, whenever the forest villagers get an opportunity to show the forest authorities friendly gestures, the forest villagers take advantage of the opportunity. It is usually known in advance about the planned visits of the forest rangers to the forest villagers. In such cases, the forest villagers take note of the plans and invite the forest ranger to their homes for a meal. The invitations are casual and are often conveyed through the forest guards who are the from the Village Forests. It is to be

[216] Interview with the male forest villager of Meata, 4th January 2021.

noted that it is the wealthy forest villagers who pursue connection building in the form of invitation.

The extract from the interview gives an account of an invitation of the forest ranger to his home when he planned a visit to Rangasora village. He is a registered contractor in the Public Works Department (PWD) and hence has financial and social capital to build connections with forest department officials. The people belonging to poorer socio-economic groups cannot afford to invest in these social arrangements as their priority is earning their daily bread and butter. The following is an extract from the interview with the contractor:

> "There are number of times I invited the ranger to my house for meals. We can talk about our problems in such occasions. If we need to build a new house, we can make this known during these visits. These are times when we can talk about our needs. One thing is, if we keep this kind of relationship, they make the **official procedures** faster than the required duration of time".[217]

From the above extract, it is evident that the villager of Rangasora village invited the ranger to his home frequently. This act of inviting the ranger, who occupies an important position in the decision making of the forest authority is intentional. The forest villager in this case is aware of the importance of building relationships with the forest ranger who has the potential to help them in granting official letters in the villager's desired time. It is during these visits that the forest villagers can talk with the forest ranger about issues in the Village Forest. Thus, inviting the forest ranger and preparing meals provides opportunities for forest villagers to build relationship and discuss their needs related to construction of new houses.

The hierarchy occupied by the official concerned determines the invitation and preparation of meals. This means that the forest villagers' are selective in the choice of forest officials to be invited. Forest personnel such as foresters and forest guards who visit the Village Forests frequently do not get such invitations and special treatment. However, forest rangers whose position is higher than the forest guards and foresters receive special treatment from the villagers. Thus, this implies that the forest villagers' act of selective invitation of forest personnel to their homes is a reflection of their attempts to relieve themselves of the

[217] Interview with the registered contractor of Rangasora village, 18th July 2020.

suppression of forest laws. Inviting the forest rangers over meals opens up opportunities for relationship building and discussion of domestic concerns make the official procedures easier for them. The male head of the family takes charge of negotiating with the forest officials. Women are involved in cooking for them and are not in directly involved in the process.

From the interview with the forest villager from Rangasora village, it is clear that maintaining a good relationship with the forest personnel and authorities is crucial in getting out of forest offence like felling of trees. It can be identified as one of the tactics used by the forest villagers to be set free from their illegality. This in turn can be seen as a resistant behaviour although it is quite in contrast to the framework in which resistance is seen as opposed to power and authority. In this case, the marginalised or the forest villager is not in explicit opposition to the forest officials but rather is placed in a subordinate position when he is accountable to the forest authority. In such crucial times, the popular tactic of responding politely to the authority is the known alternative to be freed from charges without having the case registered against the offender.

6.6.5 Deploying tribal tactics

Another subtle form of resistance in the Village Forests is of deployment of indigenous ways of fulfilling needs for forest resources. These are everyday forms of resistance that are deployed at a familial and individual level. Through my daily conversation with the forest villagers, it came into light that the villagers have a way to acquire timber for their needs that cause the trees to die out. This a traditional method in which they carve out the bark of the trees from the stem with the use of traditional tool. In this way, the trees are left to die out slowly. This usually takes more than a month for the process to be completed. This tactic is used whenever they are in need of high quality timber for construction of houses. Trees yielding high quality timber are usually acquired in this way for house pillars. Known as *araa* in the local dialect, adopting this traditional method of causing the trees to die out is often practised in jhum cultivation. Huge trees that cannot be felled with traditional tools are left to wither by cutting the bark of the trees from the stem. Adopting this method is a way of avoiding getting caught from the direct felling of trees that would potentially lead to court cases and payment of royalties. When trees die following the application of this method, the forest villagers use these dead trees relying on the legal provision that provides for the use of dead trees - even species such as sal and teak.

A woman from Rangasora revealed another strategy of acquiring forest resources from the reserved forest. A mother of four, she came to settle in the Village Forest after marrying a man from the Village Forest. She has been in the Village Forest for 18 years and does not have an agricultural plot allotted to her. She and her family now lives in a small plot of land that accommodates the house they live in and few areca nut trees that are planted in their backyard. When asked how they acquired the timber to build their house and other needs, she responded:

> "There are timber smugglers who come to the reserved forest to cut trees. I collect the discarded wood that will be useful and let my children carry them home. They leave behind some trees that are of no use to them".[218]

Thus, they collect the discarded portion of the trees and they use them for their needs. This statement also suggests that she is familiar with the space in the forests where trees are being felled for the purpose of smuggling and where discarded trees are found. This is a conscious step on the part of the woman forest villager to meet her family's timber needs that drives the family to venture out into the forest space where discarded trees are found even if it means danger and risking their lives. The dangers that lurk in the reserved forest were discussed in the interview when I asked her about meeting their everyday domestic needs from the forest. She explained:

> "There are no restrictions on fishing from the streams and rivers and collecting vegetables from the reserved forest but it is risky to go to the interior of the forests for the fear of smugglers from Bangladesh and even wild animals. Going out alone is out of question whether it is for collecting firewood or to go hunting for vegetables and bamboo shoot".[219]

From the above statement, it is confirmed that going out alone into the forests is risky due to the dangers emanating from the timber smugglers from Bangladesh and wild animals. Thus, the mother of four along with her children are used to venturing into the forest with her children in full consciousness about the risk involved to acquire timber left behind by the timber smugglers. This form of subtle action operates at a household level with careful planning and

[218] Interview with the forest villager of Rangasora, 57 year old woman.
[219] Ibid

assessment of risks involved in the journey. This also takes familiarisation with the risky areas where the discarded tree branches can be easily found. This narrative is different from others as this alternative means to acquire forest resources indicates that for landless forest villagers who do not have enough resources to buy timber and to pay royalties after being caught, this is the only way to obtain timber from the reserved forest.

Another subtle and unconventional method of negotiating with the reality of forest environments is production of jhum crops in wastelands. The forest villagers were once jhum cultivators or 'jhummias' as used in the archival records. Their ancestors were brought into the reserved forest with the agreement that they would be allowed to undertake jhum cultivation and in return they would grow sal trees on those lands and cater to the labour needs of the forest department. This system is called taungya system. With the discontinuation of taungya in reserved forests, the jhum crops that were once staples for the forest villagers could not be obtained. Major crops include tapioca, yam, maize, rice, chillies, roselle and ginger. To fulfil the needs of these crops, scattered plots of crops are grown in wastelands, particularly in areas where paddy cultivation is no longer undertaken. Such sites are found at Meata and Bobanipur villages. In Figure 6.5, shows a cultivated plot at Meata village. Crops such as maize and yam can be seen in the image. Women play an important role in recreating the traditional practice of shifting cultivation in the villages by growing jhum crops. Although, these are small plots, the produce from these plots provides seasonal subsistence to the farmers.

Figure 6.5: Cultivated plot at Meata village

In addition to small, cultivated plots in wastelands, pineapples and bananas are seen to be grown in proximity to the houses. Such sites of cultivation are found in the Rangasora and Meatda villages. Figure 6.6 shows pineapple cultivation at Meatda village among the sal trees. It is evident from the figure that pineapples are grown on hill slopes and as such these slopes are free from water logging that is favourable for pineapples. Upon inquiry, the forest villager of Meatda mentioned that the produce is consumed at home with surplus sold in the local market. It is interesting to note that these crops are planted among sal trees in the existing space devoid of reserved trees. These cultivation practices that are subtle in nature can be viewed as a method of resistance as these are conscious practices of contestation using traditional know-how about cultivation. Being tied to the laws of the forests have led them pursuing such cultivation in areas that have space even though it is operated on a small scale.

Figure 6.6 Pineapple Cultivation among Sal trees on existing space at Meata

6.6.6 Moving out as an escape mechanism: beyond the Village Forest

This form of resistance is defined by moving out from the Village Forests for both higher education and in search of a job. This is a mode of resistance in which the objective of the villagers are achieved without any confrontation with the forest department authorities. These non-confrontational actions are taken to escape the hardship faced in the Village Forests to obtain education and secure jobs in government departments. One of the parents of children who have moved out of the village for higher education, clarified that he did not want his children to undergo the kind of life he lived in the Village Forest:

> "We have lived our lives here. I cannot imagine how we spent our lives here… the land is limited for cash crop cultivation and we cannot sustain in this kind of system with limited availability of resources. I don't want my children to live the same lives we led and this was possible only if they go out of this village and study… this is the only way they can escape from this livelihood".[220]

It is evident from the interview extract that some forest villagers moved out of the Village Forest for higher education in hope of a better life. From the interview it can be noted that these young people move out to the nearest educational hub in Tura, which is the second largest growing city in the state of Meghalaya. It is noteworthy that the forest villagers who have financial capital to fund their education are the ones who send their children to towns and cities that have good educational facilities. People from poor households do not have financial capacity to afford education in bigger towns and cities.

Another objective of moving out from the Village Forests is in search of jobs as daily wage earners in the nearest town Baghmara. This element of 'moving out' is characterised by a daily commute to the nearby town. People belonging to poor households who do not have paddy fields or other physical capital are engaged in unskilled labour. Some work in the restaurants as cleaners and some in the shops as sales persons and physical labourers. The daily commute to work outside the reserved forest is an everyday form of resistance in order to cater to their economic needs. This act of having to 'move out' is a subtle way of showing their dependence

[220] Interview with the 58 year old male forest villager of Rangasora, 17th July 2020.

on non-reserved sources of livelihood such as farming, cash cropping and fishing from the rivers.

There are narratives of those who have moved out of the villages for further studies. For instance, the Secretary of the All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association moved to a new town for his higher secondary studies. After its completion, he moved to Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, which has renowned education institutions to pursue a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree. Upon completion of his BA degree, he secured a government job and settled down in Baghmara town.[221] The decision of 'moving out' was outlined as follows:

> "When I attained 18 years of age, I had to render free labour to the forest department. I knew I had to continue this if I stayed back in the village. I did not want to do this labour, which is why I made a decision to move out and study. I was lucky enough to secure a government job after the completion of my studies".[222]

It is clear from the above extract from the interview with the Secretary of the villagers association that his decision of 'moving out' was clearly an escape mechanism from the mandatory rendering of free labour to the forest department. This decision was taken by the leader of the villagers association out of consciousness that his 'moving out' could change the kind of life he had to live as a forest villager. This contemplation, which turned into a conscious decision, transformed the course of his life and turned him into a non-forest villager who has now become a resident of Baghmara town. Thus, the act of 'moving out' brought a change in the state assigned territory of a forest villager to a working class category particularly the wealthier villagers. In this way, a shift of livelihood is produced among the wealthy Village Forests from forest and agriculture dependent semi-skilled and skilled workers. People who do not have financial capital are usually confined to the Village Forest and are engaged in unskilled sectors.

[221] Interview with the Secretary of All Garo Hills Forest Villagers Association, 12th July 2021.
[222] Ibid

6.7 Concluding the Findings

It is clear that there are three broad forms of resistance have been discussed in this section. From the outcome of the three forms of resistance, it can be concluded that three forms of opposing the authority were instrumental in meeting local needs. Though some of the means failed to achieve their desired goals, forest-dependent communities resorted to all means of opposition to the point of inflicting violence when it was the only means left.

The open forms of contestation against the forest officials discussed in this study are few as compared to other forms. The reason for this could be the nature of the contestation itself as this method was deployed only when this was the only solution the people had. This form of insurrection seldom occurred during the colonial period.

The petitionary culture in South Asia, which is manifested in colonial Assam reveals decolonising attempts of the hill tribes that are rarely discussed in academia. However, from the colonial petitions, not every dimension of people's petitionary acts can be learned because of the methods of recording colonial proceedings. In many cases, there are no translated petitions available and we have to rely on summaries of the petitions from the colonial proceedings. While the colonialists view these native petitioners as 'humble supplicants' rather than seeing them as active political citizens (De and Travers, 2019), the petitions for the natives were means of expressing their hardship and grievances to the colonial government. Despite their shortcomings, colonial petitions are important sources of people's contestations against the forest laws of colonial government. It is to be noted that the petitions that were involved directly with timber and timber-bearing lands were not considered by the colonial authority. These included the move against the reservation of Hahsara Forest and their claim over the timber-bearing lands and the prayer of Hitasadhini of Golaghat against the reservation of valuable trees that deprived them of timber for construction purposes. However, the petitions that involved non-removal of major forest resources such as the easing of restrictions for rearing of silkworms for the production of silk was not established as a reserved forest.

The subtle forms of resistance in the Village Forests contribute to understanding the forest villagers' everyday contestation with forest laws. Although non-confrontational in nature, these covert tactics are instrumental in fulfilling everyday domestic and economic needs. The tactics deployed by the forest villagers in their everyday lives are covert; their manifestations are not

obvious and defined. By viewing resistance as a practice and as entangled with power that is ddeployed from the work of Jonhannson and Vinthagen (2015), these subtle acts are unpacked. Relying only on colonial archives for the production of knowledge on villagers' resistance would make these contestations hidden from post-colonial audiences. By deploying interviews, engagement in informed speculation is possible that reveals that this form of resistance took place during the colonial period in the Village Forests.

Chapter 7
Key Findings and Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This thesis has produced understanding of colonial and postcolonial forest policies through a decolonial lens. It contributes this understanding to the discipline of Geography and to the broader fields of Subaltern Studies and forest history of NEI. While making the coloniality of forest spaces visible by focussing on Village forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest, it also revealed the forest villagers' decolonial attempts and strategies in negotiating with the forest policies. The contribution to decolonial geography will be discussed in this section including the limitations and recommendations.

Important materials obtained from ethnographic work include oral histories of the Village Forests, histories of resistance and cultural practices of forest conservation that feed directly into tribal world views and concepts related to tribal forest practices. A key characteristic of these materials is that these are not recorded in texts but are orally transmitted alive from generation to generation. By recording the tribal forest practices in this doctoral thesis that have been in practice since times immemorial, this thesis has produced a textual record of tribal knowledge prevalent in a micro-geographical setting.

7.2 Key Findings

Organised into seven chapters, with three chapters focused onn analysing data collected from archival and ethnographic work, this thesis has three main findings. Firstly, it has added to the works of Handique (2004) and Saikia (2011) on forest establishments in NEI through its finding that colonial forest establishments in Assam followed a systematic approach. It has been found that strategies that constituted colonial forest pursued a path that is determined by the geographical distinctiveness of the region. It is revealed in the way forest policies such as Assam River Rules and Drift Timber Rules were manifested in the plains of Assam. The second finding is based on the lived experiences of the forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest. Against the backdrop of coloniality in terms of Christian beliefs and forest laws, interweaving of indigenous and Christian beliefs is dominant in the Village Forests. The references to a'king

are important. The a'king is more than a piece of land as it reasonates with security and protection that is contradictory to the concept of Village Forest, where land and forests are owned by the forest department. Thirdly, the study establishes that traditional forest users have been decolonising forest laws by resisting against these laws. These actions are manifested in the form of open, institutional and subtle resistance.

7.3 Contribution to Decolonial Geography

The act of decolonising in this study refers to attempts of forest dependent communities in decolonising forest policies and also the act of the researcher in undertaking the task of decolonising. These two schemes of decolonial acts contribute to decolonial geography. This study represents a geographically grounded approach to decolonising colonial and post-colonial forest policies in NEI. This study deploys methods that contribute to current understandings of decolonial approaches in the discipline of geography. As land is considered an important asset for indigenous people and as such it is core to indigenous people globally (Shaw *et al*., 2006), the engagement of this thesis in tribal land governance helps in understanding the relationship of people with their land. Practices that prevail in forest spaces such as forest-oriented indigenous tribal practices and indigenous land governance are important sources of non-western ways of knowing the world that add to the project of decolonial geography. These episteimologies are important from the perspective of delinking as it contributes to pluriversality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2017). The accounts of resistance that include open, institutional and subtle means of contesting colonial and post-colonial forest policies contribute to the decolonial understanding of forest experiences of the forest-dependent communities.

One of the ways of undoing western ways of knowing and imagining the world is engaging in critical analysis of the colonial matrix of power and acknowledging the heterogeneity and hybridity produced through power and knowledge (Radcliffe, 2022). By bringing forth the ways in which colonial construction of forest-based identities and governance were imposed upon the traditional forest users of Baghmara Reserved Forest, the thesis contributes to decolonial knowledge production by unpacking the hybridity of culture and ways of being present in Village Forests of Baghmara. The interweaving of Christian belief and Songsarek animist practice is prominent in forest conservation establishing that colonial matrix of power has produced hybridities in the villagers' ways of being. The manisfestation of the colonial

matrix of power is eminent in the continued stereotyping of the hill tribes with regard to forest practices during the contemporary time. As forest dwellers are still seen as destructors of forests during the contemporary period and reflects an orientalist view by the contemporary forest officials, the investigation into existing forest practices contribute to deconstructing these perceptions about the forest dwellers. As the daily actions of the indigenous people still do not typically form the basis of decolonial writing, the engagement with traditional forest users' daily lived subjectivities and resistance creates understanding of this less deployed approach towards decolonising the discipline. Discussion on resistance against forest policies brings to light the oppositions to forest policies proving that colonial and post-colonial forest governance failed to bring absolute dominion over forest practices of the forest-dependent people. The textual production of accounts on conservation-oriented forest practices resistance of the forest dependent communities and resistance to forest policies reveal that forest dependent communities have been decolonising forest policies.

7.4 Decolonial Forest Geography and Subaltern Studies

This contemporary study of colonial and postcolonial forest policies intersects with the ways in which subaltern studies initially engaged textually with the ways Indian History was being written. In other words, it is concerned with knowledge production by mainstream Indian historians. Motivated by discontent with writing of Indian elitist historiography that pointed at colonial archives' inability to record the utterances and contributions of illiterate peasant movements, the narratives of the Subaltern Studies Collective showed that subalterns were subjects in the making of their own history (Chaturvedi, 2000; Jazeel, 2019). Geographers in general have rarely engaged in the lives of the post-colonial marginal or absent voices (Legg, 2016). This current engagement with the Village Forests of Baghmara unveils the oppressive lives prevalent in the Village Forests that is silent in the colonial archives. The colonial struggles and experiences of the forest villagers are not included in mainstream Indian narratives of colonial experiences. The subtle ways of contesting forest policies that are absent in archives have been approached by ethnographic work revealing untold stories of contestation. Given this absence from mainstream narratives, this study contains the narratives of the much-needed subaltern and reveals that the tribal indigenous communities of Baghmara have been writing their own colonial forest history. It shows the forest villagers not as victims but as the resistors to colonial and post-colonial policies who have been resisting in their own capacities. In addition, the literature on forest history of NEI rarely engages with the forest

villagers who belong to the Scheduled Tribe category under the Indian constitution. As much has been focused on the experiences of the Assam Valley districts, this research with its focus on highly neglected spaces in the hills shifts the focus to the hill district of Meghalaya. Through this study, resistance against forest policies came into light.

7.5 Does this study reproduce coloniality? Is decolonising still a metaphor?

The action of decolonising is twofold in this thesis, which firstly refers to the forest dependent communities decolonising the colonial and secondly, decolonising by the researcher by using the language skills and perspectives of the region. During the course of writing this thesis, one question that lingered throughout the writing period was what makes this thesis a decolonial piece of writing. In other words, I have thought critically about whether this study contributes to decoloniality of knowledge or rather reproduces coloniality of knowledge. Reproduction of coloniality in decolonial projects is a major risk as there is a potentiality to create another mere discourse of ideas that shifts from indigenous and non-white scholarship and activism (Esson *et al.*, 2017). During a casual conversation with a fellow PhD scholar at the university, a straightforward but a relevant question influenced my thinking on decolonising forest policies in India. She asked casually, "How is decolonising or decolonial study relevant in the Indian context?"

India is a non-settler postcolonial nation state but colonial imprints can be still seen in postcolonial administration and policies. As coloniality is alive in structures, institutions and practice (Radcliffe, 2022), the seeds of coloniality is present in the forest policies of postcolonial India, which followed the same framework of governance and policing after independence. As the emphasis is the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest, which has a colonial foundation, the unveiling of perceptions and practices that are not in line with the prescriptions of the reserved forest helps in understanding decolonial ways present in non-settler countries. Thus, it establishes that decolonial ways are present in the non-settler pockets of South Asia.

Mignolo (2017) notes that a colonial matrix of power operates through the structure of management and control operated by human beings through specific institutions (Mignolo, 2017). This is true of Village Forests that have colonial roots and much of their operations are based on laws based during colonial period. The institution that operates this colonial matrix

of power is the forest department. The difference between the colonial and the post-colonial is in the composition of the controlling actors. Instead of the British, they are non-British and are composed of Garos, particularly at a divisional level. The framework of Village Forests built on colonial need continues to operate during the post-colonial period, making decolonising of the perceptions, practices and being all the more relevant.

The thesis notes the coloniality of identity and culture in the Village Forest and sheds light on perspectives on local people's relationship with land and forests. By doing this, it has produced an interesting worldview of forest dependent communities related to land and forests. The need to decolonise the discipline of Geography entails engagement with indigenous epistemologies (Shaw *et al.,* 2006). By bringing up the concept of nokmaship and akingship, this thesis reveals the forest villagers' references to these traditional systems of institutions.

Given these contributions, I do not claim that writing this thesis has brought about a completely decolonised approach to forestry in NEI. Neither do I suggest that this is the only way to decolonise forestry in NEI. However, with the reproduction of tribal concepts and worldviews related to forests, it has provided space for plural voices that are instrumental in understanding the relationship between tribal indigenous communities and forests. The act of decolonising or rather acts amounting to decolonialism as such is a never-ending process as noted by Legg (2017), to which I strongly agree.

Given my language skills, social networks and familiarity with the cultural setting, at a time when Geography is emphasising decolonial knowledge production, this is perhaps the best way to decolonise forest experiences of NEI in general and forest villagers of Baghmara Reserved Forest in particular. The role of language in the research cannot be underestimated as it provided opportunities for establishing rapport with the forest officials faster than the expected period of time. As I speak the same language as the forest villagers, it was helpful in communicating with and building connections with them. Mignolo (2002) strongly acknowledges that the colonised do not have epistemic advantages, which is true in terms of the hegemony of European categories of thought that contains both the ways of emancipation and seeds of oppression. As a part of the colonised world and being raised by tribal Christian parents, who hold Christian values more than the indigenous tribal beliefs, this research required decolonising of the mind and also led to the same simultaneously. The presence of churches in the forest villagers influenced the framing of questions during the interviews that

led to delayed enquiries about tribal indigenous forest practices. While opening up an opportunity for epistemic delinking in the forest history of NEI, it produces experiences and encounters of colonialism from the unexplored borderlands in contrast to myth.

What makes this study more relevant in the current time is the ongoing wave of misrepresentation of indigenous tribes in the mainstream media. The last months of the thesis-writing period happened to coincide with the festival of lights known as Diwali or Deepawali, which is celebrated by the Hindus, who comprise the majority of the population in India. On this occasion, an advertisement by Netflix India entitled 'Cherrapunji ki Diwali' caught the attention of social media users as it portrays the residents of Sohra who are Khasis celebrating Diwali. Many tribal and non-tribals alike took to social media as the content of the video misrepresented Cherrapunji or Sohra and its residents located in the state of Meghalaya, known for its heaviest rainfall count in the world. Sohra, a tourist town is a home to tribal Khasis who practise Christianity and tribal indigenous religious practice. It also shows Sohra to be raining throughout the year, both during winter and summer. This advertisement by Netflix India is one such example of the misrepresentation of tribes. There are several others that will need a different space altogether for articulation. The ongoing representations of tribes as Hindus celebrating Diwali opens up discussions on colonialism. As Xaxa (2016, p. 227) puts it, "Tribes had to face two forms of colonialism: one in the hands of the British and the other in the hands of the non-tribal Indian population". This is true and is still applicable in the current scenario, where the project of representation of tribes by the mainstream media could lead to further marginalisation of their identity and culture. As such this PhD thesis is all the more relevant by making possible the articulation of silenced voices and experiences.

7.6 Limitations and recommendations

There are certain dimensions of enquiries and perspectives that are not covered in this study. The first limitation is in terms of its temporal focus. Most of the case studies related to resistance are situated in the 1880's and 1890's. There are no accounts of archival case studies from the post-colonial period to add to the post-colonial resistance section. This provides scope for the future studies to include archival materials as a source of data along with ethnographic work. This will provide strong case studies for both colonial and post-colonial periods.

The dominant categories of 'tribe' or 'tribal' that are used in cultural and tribal studies that carry racist connotation is in use in this thesis. In cultural studies, tribe as a category of analysis is a stage that represents tribes as lacking positive attributes of the modern society (Xaxa, 1999). In such representations, tribes are termed as 'backward' and 'uncivilised', which is racist (Kar, 2016). A better and more appropriate term could not be used to denote the ethnic indigenous communities of NEI. Although by using this term I do not intend to imply their primitivism and backwardness, this could potentially imply these connotations to a post-colonial audience. In this way, this could lead to reproduction of stereotyping for the readers.

The third limitation is in terms of the exclusion of the non-reserved areas in the study. Inclusion of district forests in the study would generate knowledge and understanding on the state of forests managed under the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) under the governance of the nokmas. With the post-colonial establishment of environmental-centred projects in North-East India, it opens up space for researching post-colonial environmental projects. In the state of Meghalaya alone, there are seven post-colonial projects of this kind that includes wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves and national parks. The imposition of a timber ban in 1996 by the Supreme Court of India creates more avenues for research that will include analysis on the livelihood impacts and resistance in non-reserved areas. Future research related to forests in NEI also needs to be inquisitive about the establishment of these national parks and wildlife sanctuaries and the procedures of land acquisition from the lands under the management of the tribal chiefs and leaders.

Future concerns for the Village Forests of Baghmara concern the imposition of restraining forest rules that prohibit construction of new houses in new sites. This is a direct control imposed on the villages to contain their expansion and will possibly have negative impact on the forest cover of the reserved forest. Since it is likely that the FRA 2006 will not be implemented in the Village Forests of Baghmara, the imposition of a law that prohibits new settlements represents a rather bleak future for forest villagers. This will definitely lead to further injustice in terms of the denial of their rights. The aftermath of the imposition of this law could be a key point of enquiry in studying these forest villagers that will compel the forest villagers to negotiate with this law in their own ways.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1902-1903[223]

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	6	-	16	22
Sylhet	-	63	-	27	90
Goalpara	1	5	-	1	7
Kamrup	2	16	-	1	19
Darrang	1	11	-	2	14
Nowgong	1	13	-	-	14
Sibsagar	-	40	3	2	45
Lakhimpur	-	74	-	3	77
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	7	3	-	1	11
Garo Hills	4	30	7	4	45
Lushai Hills	-	-	-	1	1

Appendix 2: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1904-1905[224]

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	15	5	54	74
Sylhet	-	99	-	24	123
Goalpara	-	11	2	7	20
Kamrup	41	18	-	3	25
Darrang	2	14	-	1	17
Nowgong	-	4	-	2	6
Sibsagar	-	14	-	8	22
Lakhimpur	-	96	-	8	104
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	-	-	-	-	-
Garo Hills	-	27	3	-	30
Lushai Hills	-	-	-	-	-

[223] Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1902-1903, By E.S. Carr, Esq., Conservator of Forests, Assam, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1903.

[224] Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1902-1903, By C.E. Muriel, Offg. Conservator of Forests, Assam, Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1905.

Appendix 3: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1912-1913[225]

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	26	-	59	85
Sylhet	-	74	5	97	176
Goalpara	1	14	-	5	20
Kamrup	-	12	-	3	15
Darrang	-	10	-	2	12
Nowgong	3	37	2	6	48
Sibsagar	-	47	19	12	78
Lakhimpur	-	63	-	12	75
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	-	11	9	1	21
Garo Hills	1	44	3	4	52
Lushai Hills	-	3	-	-	3

Appendix 4: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1913-1914[226]

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	20	17	53	90
Sylhet	-	98	4	79	181
Goalpara	-	23	2	5	30
Kamrup	1	10	-	7	18
Darrang	1	15	1	3	20
Nowgong	10	20	-	6	36
Sibsagar	-	65	29	36	130
Lakhimpur	-	71	2	1	74
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	3	14	15	1	33
Garo Hills	2	42	-	-	44
Lushai Hills	-	-	-	-	-

[225] Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1912-1913, By W.F. Perree, Offg. Conservator of Forests, Assam, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1913.

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Appendix 5: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1914-1915[227]

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	14	6	55	75
Sylhet	-	157	13	110	280
Goalpara	1	21	42	6	70
Kamrup	-	25	5	8	38
Darrang	-	10	1	4	15
Nowgong	3	34	2	5	44
Sibsagar	-	104	28	18	130
Lakhimpur	-	95	9	10	114
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	3	22	10	1	36
Garo Hills	1	29	-	2	32
Lushai Hills	-	-	-	-	-

Appendix 6: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1917-1918[228]

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	7	8	28	86
Sylhet	-	211	5	50	266
Goalpara	1	19	40	13	73
Kamrup	-	40	4	12	56
Darrang	-	62	4	14	80
Nowgong	-	62	2	9	73
Sibsagar	-	86	11	19	116
Lakhimpur	-	62	24	10	96
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	-	10	16	2	28
Garo Hills	-	64	1	-	65
Lushai Hills	4	-	-	1	5

[227] Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1914-1915, By W.F.L. Tottenham, Conservator of Forests, Assam, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1915.

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Appendix 7: Register of Breaches of Forest Rules for 1918-1919[229]

Forest Division	Injury to forest by fire	Unauthorised Felling of wood and other minor forest produce	Grazing without permission or in tracts where grazing is not allowed	Other offences	Total new cases
Cachar	-	13	4	28	45
Sylhet	-	188	9	30	227
Goalpara	-	14	38	13	65
Kamrup	-	15	10	31	56
Darrang	2	26	11	11	50
Nowgong	-	31	7	2	40
Sibsagar	-	49	55	16	120
Lakhimpur	-	62	7	14	83
Khasi and Jaintia Hills	3	2	53	8	66
Garo Hills	-	26	6	1	33
Lushai Hills	-	-	-	-	-
Sadiya	-	45	1	9	55

Appendix 8: Interview Checklist for Forest-Based Interviews

a. How is the situation in the reserved forest related to access to forest and related resources? Is the access to these resources easy in this reserved forest?
b. What are the main sources of livelihood in the Village Forests?
c. If you can recollect, have there been changes in forest laws from the past until current time?
d. How do you find forest laws in these Village Forests? Are they difficult to adhere to?
e. What are your views on conservation of forests? Do you think conservation is important?
f. How are things related to granting of land titles in Village Forests? Do you think granting of these rights is important?

[229] Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1918-1919, By A.W. Blunt, Conservator of Forests, Assam, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1919.

Appendix 9: Interview Checklist for Interviews with Forest Officials

a. What are your views on forest villagers' contribution to conservation?
b. From your experience, do you think that forest villagers adhere to forest laws?
c. Have you come across cases of conflict between forest department and villagers?
d. What happens when forest villagers break forest rules?
e. Are there any schemes allotted to the Village Forests from the forest department?
f. What are the chances of implementation of FRA in the Village Forests of Baghmara Reserved Forest?

Appendix 10: Participant Consent Fom

University of Nottingham
School of Geography

Participant Consent Form

Decolonising or Recolonising Forests? A Colonial and Post-colonial Study of North-east India

In signing this consent form I confirm that:

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I have had the opportunity to ask questions.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw from the research project at any stage, without having to give any reason and withdrawing will not penalise or disadvantage me in any way.	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, any information I provide is confidential (with one exception – see below), and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. *[If other arrangements have been agreed in relation to identification of research participants (e.g. in a focus group) this point will require amendment to accurately reflect those arrangements]*	Yes ☐	No ☐
I agree that extracts from the interview may be anonymously quoted in any report or publication arising from the research *[Omit if quotes not being used]*	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that the interview will be recorded using audiotape/electronic voice recorder/video recorder *[Amend/delete as applicable]*	Yes ☐	No ☐
I understand that data will be securely stored	Yes ☐	No ☐

I understand that I may contact the researcher if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Officer of the School of Geography, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research. Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree to take part in the above research project. Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's name (BLOCK CAPITALS)	Participant's signature	Date
Researcher's name (BLOCK CAPITALS)	Researcher's signature	Date

[Include following if third party/independent witnesses required]

Third party's name (BLOCK CAPITALS)	Third party's signature	Date

Appendix 11: Participant Information Sheet

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Sengsilchi Marak. I am from Garo Hills, Meghalaya pursuing a PhD degree at the University of Nottingham in the School of Geography. My PhD work is entitled 'Decolonising Forests? Colonial and Postcolonial Study of North-east India'. This research is focussed on forest policies for the Northeast region of India during the British rule and the present day restrictions on forests in the form of Timber ban 1996 that restricts logging and at the same time granting of forest rights in the form of Forest Rights Act 2006.

My research involves the tribal community and their access and control of forest resources within the territorial boundary of Reserved Forests. Your opinions and perspectives would contribute to the understanding of urban people's perception on Reserved Forest in the context of timber ban by the Government of India and Forest Rights Act, which was introduced in 2006. Timber ban of 2006 suspended tree felling in all forests with the exception of the cases in which the working plans are produced by the state governments which are in turn approved by the central government. Forest Rights Act of 2006, on the other hand grants those dwelling in the Reserved Forests the rights of residing, granting of land Pattas, collection of non-timber minor forest produce, fishing and use of firewood.

In the given context, I am interested in hearing your opinion about:

- Forests and their importance to those dependent on forests for their daily life
- ~~Reserved~~ Forests and their importance
- Your understanding of forest rights such as rights of residing, issue of land titles or pattas, collection of food and non-timber minor forest produce, use of firewood to the forest dwellers
- Whether forest rights are a hindrance to conservation of forests
- Your thoughts on timber ban in all North-East States

1. **What will taking part in this research involve?**

Interviews: You will be asked to have a one-to-one conversation with me to talk about the issues that you feel is important only if you are willing to do so.

To be able to analyse all the information, I will record the things you say in various ways. Where possible – and only with your agreement - I will tape record conversations so that I can remember what has been said more accurately. Otherwise, I will make written notes during conversations. All recordings and notes made during the interview will be kept in a password protected computer/locked room.

2. **Do I have to take part?**

Please ask any questions you might have about this research before deciding whether or not to take part. You are free to choose whether you would like to participate. If you do agree, and then later change your mind, you may withdraw yourself and your data from the study without questions at any time. If you are happy to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign a consent form.

3. What happens to the research data provided?

The raw research data – recordings of interviews, conversations and so on - will be typed up into Word Documents on computer. This information can then be analysed to produce a thesis, which will be kept as a copy in the University of Nottingham library.

You will also be offered a copy of this report in paper copy, and it will be freely available via the University of Nottingham website.

I will make sure that all the information is kept anonymised. This means that I will not use your real name, or other details about you that could identify you – unless you expressly tell me that you want your own name to be used.

4. Who has reviewed this project?

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Nottingham Research Ethics Committee.

5. Contact details

Sengsilchi Marak, School of Geography, University of Nottingham.

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+447443345339