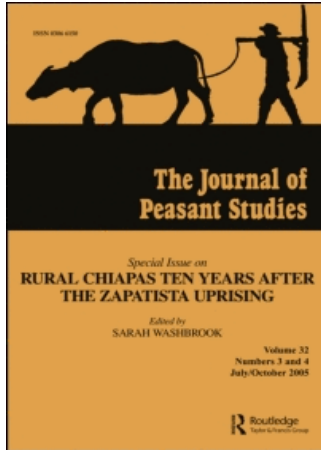


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Forest Land and Peasant Struggles in Assam, 2002–2007

ARUPJYOTI SAIKIA

Historically, and currently, agrarian mobilisation in Assam is – and has been – informed by a desire on the part of poor peasants in Tengani for security of tenure on forest land that they have occupied and cultivated in the course of successive historical waves of migration. The result was the emergence of a peasant movement, a process informed by and in turn structuring not just competing claims to nature, particularly as this involved a conflict between forest conservation and cultivation. This problem was compounded by the different class positions of those who subsequently became involved in the struggle: traders, moneylenders, poor peasants, better-off producers, NGOs, bureaucrats and government. These contradictions underwrote what became distinctions between the BTUSS and the DMSS, or the development of what in effect were two movements.

INTRODUCTION

From June 2002 onwards, peasants in Tengani – an upper Assam village in north-eastern India (see map) – have been engaged in political hostilities with the state government. When they took to the streets in 2002, in the wake of evictions carried out by the forest department, they had only one goal, and this they thought would be difficult to achieve. They demanded permanent tenurial security to land in forest reserves which they had reclaimed. Two years on, neighbouring petty commodity producers, who also wanted their grievances addressed, joined these peasants their struggle.

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forest conservation. Even the attempt by the Indian state to grant rights to forest land by means of the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 has met with opposition from the Doyang–Tengani peasant movement.

OWNING NATURE, COMPETING CLAIMS

Although the Doyang–Tengani movement – as it came to be known – began as a struggle by poor peasants demanding land rights inside the forests, within a short time it had extended its reach, addressing wider political questions concerning ecology and the environment. In doing this, the movement necessarily grappled with the complex problem of natural resource ownership, an issue that had its origin in the colonial era. Competing claims to ‘own’ nature in the present day can be traced back to the East India Company: among the economic resources over which it asserted property rights were the vast forest territories of Assam, in the process dislodging the population dependent on them. Despite being effected without the consent of the latter, this colonial appropriation was sanctified by legislation in the years that followed.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the pattern of land tenure was consolidated: although the government remained the absolute owner of land, it nevertheless granted petty commodity producers legal usufruct rights to their smallholdings. Security of tenure included the right of peasants to sell, inherit, transfer ownership or rent out land. Two kinds of usufruct right co-existed: an annual and a permanent form of lease.¹ By the early twentieth century, approximately a fifth of the total area was devoted to agricultural cultivation.²

The majority of peasants farmed small plots, the average size being less than twenty bighas, or a smallholding area of some 3 hectares.³ Land revenue, the amount government levied for usufruct rights, was renegotiated once the lease came to an end.

From the outset of British occupation, the fate of land resources in the province of Assam was determined by lucrative investment in the tea economy. By means of various legal enactments, most areas of forest were leased out to British tea planters [Guha, 1993]. The latter rapidly became the legal owners of vast forested tracts converted to the profitable cultivation of the tea crop. Immigrant workers recruited from other parts of India met a correspondingly enhanced need for labour-power to work on these tea plantations [Bhowmik, 1981; Siddique, 1990]. However, in local popular imagination the forest remained part of the agrarian frontier, notwithstanding the changed landscape. Assamese literary works did not hesitate to identify such areas as an extension of the wild.⁴

Scientific forest conservation policy inaugurated during the middle of the nineteenth century masked the fact that a commercial motive was the primary objective of such management. By the end of that century a sizeable amount of forested area was under the regime of colonial forest conservation.⁵ A combined effect of the expanding tea plantation economy and the forest conservation programme was that indigenous petty commodity producers were deprived of access to natural resources, since each of the former restricted the shifting cultivation widely practised by the latter under the system of annual leases. This did not go unchallenged, however, as peasants contested both the curtailment of their traditional rights and the enhanced levels of revenue, many of them abandoning their smallholdings. During the twentieth century, the agrarian structure underwent substantial change, and local landlords were targeted by peasant agency [Saikia, 2002].

As elsewhere in the world, the integration of science and commerce became a significant aspect of the history of forests in Assam. By contributing to the development of the mono-crop plantation, scientific management transformed the forests from an area of rich biodiversity into just one more source of commodities. More crucially, the state had no compunction in redefining the boundaries of the 'conserved' forests whenever planters needed it. This conflict over the use of natural resources, who is entitled to do this and why, is not specific to Assam. The same kind of contradiction, between development planners (for whom the agrarian frontier is a resource to be consumed) and conservationists (for whom the agrarian frontier is resource to be preserved), and smallholding peasants (for whom the forest is a traditional source of livelihood), has surfaced elsewhere in India.

Thus, for example, Chhatre and Saberwal [2006] show how the resources of the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh are subject to competing and similarly incompatible visions of nature. As in the case of Assam, therefore, conservation in Himachal Pradesh is defined by a vision of scientific practice that is reconcilable neither with a local understanding of nature nor with longstanding usufruct rights exercise by rural communities to the economic resources involved. Such antinomy raises two additional issues. First, that there may indeed be a lack of fit between national objectives (= economic growth, planning and development) and local ones (= conservation linked to traditional usufruct rights/practices). Both correspond to a democratic will/mandate, but one that operates at different levels of the social formation. And second, state-sponsored conservation itself clashes with local views about the same objective, to the detriment of the latter.

This political contradiction is perhaps nowhere more evident currently than in the new social movements, composed for the most part of

underprivileged peasant farmers from Third World countries. It is they, above all, who have challenged notions of development, arguing for a return to ecologically sustainable forms of agriculture that have fewer environmental costs. Chhatre and Sabewral argue that this is because rural communities who are marginal and at the fringe of mainstream politics, have successfully asserted 'a cultural identity that entails "way of being" in the world'. As will be seen below, this formulation is relevant to an understanding not just of the peasant movement in Assam but also to similar struggles elsewhere.

FORESTS AND PEASANTS IN NAMBOR: THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Tengani is a village inhabited by cultivators located within the North Nambor Reserved Forests in Golaghat district of central Assam. Situated alongside this area are the Doyang Reserved Forests and the Indian state of Nagaland. Belonging to an analogous ecological setting, both Doyang and Nambor share similar bio-geographical resources. Despite its remoteness from the urban centres of Assam state, the region has remained in the forefront of politics, due mainly to the inter-state boundary dispute with Nagaland. Separation of the district of Nagaland of Assam into an Indian state in 1963 led to intense politicking in these areas, in particular the Doyang Reserved Forests, which were rich in forest resources. From that time onwards, both states of the Indian union have laid claim to the disputed areas.⁶

The Colonial Legacy

Prior to British colonisation in the nineteenth century, the Ahom rulers used to clear these dense forests in the course of their military engagement with the Naga tribes. Although these forests were inhabited, such clearance never lasted long, and the terrain soon reverted to dense forests. When the East India Company began initial exploration of these areas in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, they were found to contain extremely rich timber resources.⁷ As part of the conservation programme inaugurated by the colonial state, in 1859 Nambor and adjoining forests were officially declared to be Reserved Forests.⁸ Initially the responsibility for this newly reserved forests was entrusted to the Public Works department, but in 1874 they were transferred to the Assam Forest Department, and in 1878 Nambor was legislatively designated a Reserved Forest under the Bengal Forest Act.

As soon as it became apparent that some portions of land under direct supervision of forest department were not commercially viable, such areas were once again made available for peasant cultivation. Over the following decades the colonial state began to encourage landless Assamese peasants to take up land in these Reserved Forests. Lacking any commercially valuable

timber resources, these areas were partially cleared in an officially sanctioned deforestation programme. The major share of portion of cleared land went to the tea-gardens, but some was also made available to local petty commodity producers. It was at that very point that competing claims to the forests and wastelands of region came into being, ever since when they have remained unresolved.

Officially described as peasant colonisation scheme, Tengani was one of a number of villages established in Nambor during 1890.⁹ Since then, these forests have witnessed three different phases of immigration by cultivators in search of land. The first arrived in the early twentieth century as part of the colonisation scheme, while the second wave dates from the 1950s, a period marked by intense activity on the part of left-led peasant organisations that encouraged the landless to occupy tea plantation and forest department property.

Peasant migration in Assam

Pressurised by these movements, the Congress Party-led Assam government, primarily driven by a populist political agenda, encouraged landless rural families to settle on forest land. The third phase of immigration took place during 1970 and 1980s, when landless peasants arrived without either the support or the encouragement from the government. The sole exception to this pattern of spontaneous settlement were the forest or *taungya* villages, established by the forest department.¹⁰ These *taungya* villagers were given land to cultivate inside the forests, and occupied of vast tracts of land in return for work they undertook for the forest department.

Most of the immigrants were petty commodity producers who came from the upper Assam districts, where they had lost their smallholdings as a result either of river erosion or of debts owed to trader/moneylenders. Other immigrants were composed of tea plantation workers whose employment contract had come to an end, and also began to reclaim forest land for the purposes of cultivation. With active encouragement from planters, these labourers had initially occupied fallow land in the tea gardens, and later they also entered sharecropping arrangements with Assamese landowners. When such forms of access to smallholdings ceased, as existing tenancies filled up, erstwhile plantation workers began to seek out forest land.

More recently, yet another group of smallholders has begun to search for vacant spaces in these forest areas, albeit in far less numbers than previous waves of immigration. These are the poor peasants who moved to Assam from East-Bengal in the last quarter of the colonial rule, and settled in the lower Assam districts.¹¹ Gradually, these different waves of migrants have resulted in what amounts to a process of 'peasantisation' of forest land.¹² A recent estimate suggests that some 2640 families have occupied approximately

10,000 hectares of forested land in Tengani, which indicates clearly that a pattern of smallholding is the principal feature of the area.¹³ This closely resembles the provincial agrarian structure, and indeed is a rural picture which differs little from that of the early twentieth century.¹⁴ According to a conservative estimate by the 2001 Census of India, at the end of the twentieth century 53 per cent of the total workforce in the state, on 34 per cent of its area, continued to practise agriculture as their primary occupation.¹⁵

The outcome of the twin processes – immigration combined with peasantisation – that characterised twentieth century Nambor was a decline in the amount of forest cover. This was made all the more problematic by the fact that, although the government itself had been instrumental in encouraging settlement by petty commodity producers, it had omitted to provide them with legal rights to these lands. In short, the state left unasked – and thus unresolved – the issue of property rights, or who owned nature.¹⁶

TENGANI: THE CHANGING AGRARIAN STRUCTURE

Many of the early settlers who came to Assam through state initiatives acquired the status of rich landholders. Because of limited supervision by a weak forest department, supported by the planter class whose hold over the colonial state has been likened [*Guha, 1977*] to a *Planter Raj*, there was no opposition when early settlers extended their initial claim to forest land, substantially increasing thereby the size of the holdings under their control. These early settlers in effect carved out a domain within the Reserved Forests, in the process becoming rich peasant families with large landholdings.

The main obstacle to intensive agricultural production on such holdings remained the scarcity of labour, although economic activity was by no means absent. The clay soil proved suitable for horticulture, and the extensive cultivation of the betel-nut (*Areca catechu*) crop yielded good profits. Agricultural tasks on these holdings were carried out mainly by family labour, and hired workers were also recruited from distant locations.

As an agrarian class structure developed, these better-off landholders came to play a leading role in the political affairs of the area, and it was from these kind of settlers that later immigrants faced opposition.¹⁷ Despite not having sufficient land for their subsistence requirements, later immigrants to the area were unwilling to sell their labour-power to early settlers who possessed large uncultivated tracts. This refusal proved to be a source of antagonism between the two groups, not least because later immigrants were supported by a well organised left movement able to exert pressure on the state to intervene in these conflicts.

Tenancy, moneylending and debt

By contrast, 1970s immigrants who arrived in Assam found that the area of forest land available for cultivation had decreased. Better-off landholders accordingly leased these immigrants uncultivated plots of land on a sharecropping basis. Such tenants had also to work as agricultural labourers on the holdings of these early settlers, who continued to make a good living from the sale of timber on land they had acquired. The differentiation process was itself accentuated by the divergent quality of land claimed by early and later immigrant populations. Whereas those who came early settled land on the plains close to the river Doyang, those who arrived subsequently had to compete for higher and less fertile tracts. On the latter it was nevertheless possible to produce cash crops such as mustard seed and sugarcane.

The cultivation of cash crops attracted traders into these localities, and they encouraged landless cultivators to reclaim forest land for commercial production.¹⁸ Needing capital to undertake this kind of production, smallholders began to borrow from these trader/moneylenders, a requirement that generated a familiar dynamic: the forward buying of crops, leading to debt and consequent loss of land. Either independently, or through local rich landholders, therefore, traders advanced loans to these cultivators in return for crops at a fixed (low) rate after harvesting. Over the course of time, peasants were compelled to mortgage their holdings to trader/moneylenders from whom they had taken loans, a transaction known locally as *bandhak*. Failure to clear the debt resulted in the loss of land to the trader/moneylender.

As in many other parts of the subcontinent, therefore, an agrarian structure involving a combination of tenancy and debt relations emerged in this region of Assam. For the poor peasants of Tengani, the paramount issue became security of tenure to the small plots of land they cultivated. By contrast, the lowland areas in Doyang represent the class interests of longer-settled and better-off landholders and trader/moneylenders. For them the main concern was no longer the production relation but rather exchange relations with big merchants or state. This important class difference was to play a crucial role in shaping the ideology and politics of any struggle in the area.

BIRTH OF A PEASANT MOVEMENT

Although petty commodity producers resisted eviction, such protest did not acquire a politically organised form [*Saikia*, 2002]. A sole exception was during the period 1945–1952, when communist-led agrarian mobilisation surfaced and had an impact, albeit a brief one. No movement of note occurred until the start of this millennium, when peasants from Nambor-Tengani were

subject to a renewed and intensive round of evictions. The Tengani movement, as it came to be known, began as a collective reaction to evictions undertaken by the Assam forest department in June 2002.

The upsurge in evictions, and the peasant response to this, can be traced in part to the implementation of a 1996 Supreme Court of India directive.¹⁹ This ruling, an effect of a petition submitted by the World Wildlife Fund requesting protection of forest reserves, instructed the states – including Assam – to prevent further encroachment on such designated areas. In February 2002, the Supreme Court of India directed the Chief Secretary of Assam to submit a report on measures taken to prevent further encroachment on forest land, especially where in regard to hilly terrain, national parks and sanctuaries. Since the Indian judiciary enjoyed strong public support when it came to enforcing progressive legislation, the Assam government quickly embarked on a programme of eviction.

The most significant contributory factor, however, was the Joint Forest Management project undertaken by the Assam Forest Department.²⁰ In line with national policy, the Assam Forest Department announced that in 2002 its primary goal would be the ‘plantation of short rotation crops like cane and bamboo’, an objective realised by afforestation. This policy, it was argued, would benefit rural families living close to the forests, and among the locations chosen were Golaghat and the deforested areas in Nambor. As peasant smallholders refused to move away from villages where they had settled, the Forest Department commenced evicting them by force. This policy began on 5th June, 2002, coinciding with World Environment Day, and although conservationists welcomed it, the local media and intelligentsia took a dim view of peasant dispossession.²¹

The Tengani peasant movement

A well attended public meeting held Tengani during July to coordinate anti-eviction strategy – many of those present being poor peasants from the locality – led to the formation of the *Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti*, or BTUSS (literally, ‘Greater Tengani Revolutionary Organisation for Development’).²² Its object was to halt dispossession, in furtherance of which BTUSS insisted on a permanent patta – a document recognizing property rights – for all petty commodity producers residing in Tengani.²³ Over the succeeding days, BTUSS organised numerous village meetings and formed many local branches.

A major target of the movement was the district administration, which had supported the eviction programme carried out by the Forest Department. To this end, BTUSS organised a demonstration in Golgihat town during August 2002, when some 20,000 peasants from eviction-affected areas took part in a rally. As a result of this direct action, the deputy commissioner agreed that all

future evictions would be carried out only after prior consultation with the BTUSS.²⁴ Somewhat surprisingly, the protesters and their organisation claimed this 'concession' as a victory.

At a meeting held after the demonstration, it was decided to issue a programme composed of four demands: a complete halt to ongoing evictions; payment of compensation to evicted families; a halt to the process of afforestation; and all peasants in Tengani to receive *patta* (= official) recognition. By issuing these demands, the movement announced that its intention was not just to challenge government over the eviction process, but also to gain recognition for property rights inside the forest areas.

In the months that followed, BTUSS consolidated its position in the political affairs of Tengani. It extended its influence throughout the area, conducted numerous meetings, and acted as mediator in village disputes. Many poor peasants turned to BTUSS for assistance: although what was sought was justice, they nevertheless wanted BTUSS to solve their problems within the existing framework of local custom. In other words, intervention by an ostensibly radical peasant movement was not required to depart from longstanding traditional ideology and practice. Among the many political issues taken up by BTUSS was local corruption involving appropriation of public funds.²⁵

Class divisions resurface

Perhaps because of support from the radical intelligentsia, BTUSS was soon compelled to confront the thorny political issue of class differences at village level.²⁶ Since land acquired by rich settlers had been occupied in the course of the struggle, and redistributed among the rural poor, many of the better-off elements felt threatened by the direction the movement was taking. Questions raised included whether the BTUSS ought to represent only peasants, whether it should incorporate also the interests of small traders, shopkeepers, and school teachers, and whether agricultural labourers should be represented in a future political programme?

The consensus was that BTUSS should be inclusive, a position reflected both in its publication *Tenganir Katha* and in the new constitution adopted during November 2004. To this end, the peasant movement engaged with two thorny political issues. First, it focused its hostility on the illegal timber trade, not least because public opinion blamed it on petty commodity producers. By condemning this kind of illicit economic activity, BTUSS hoped to avoid such censure in the future. And second, it addressed the concerns about the Nambor forests raised by the environmental lobby.²⁷

On the latter point, BTUSS championed a conservation programme, but one that coexisted with peasant economy. It rejected the application of the label 'encroachers' to Tengani villagers who cultivated land within the

forests, arguing this had been done with government approval. The theme of coexistence was embodied not just in a new slogan – *Nambor Bachak, Tengani Bachak*, or ‘Let Tengani survive along with Nambor’ – but also in the proposal that every peasant family should receive a minimum of ten bighas of forest land, a total of thirteen hectares each, a policy much supported at village level. In short, BTUSS undertook to participate in the conservation effort, but only on its own terms.

This alternative framework, the movement argued, would enable poor peasant families to meet their subsistence requirements within the wider context of a forest conservation scheme. That the state had failed to consider the needs of petty commodity producers was evident, BTUSS maintained, from the way in which land legislation was framed. Under the Indian Forest Conservation Act (1980), therefore, smallholders had to provide written proof of forest land occupancy prior to 1980 in order to qualify for property rights. BTUSS pointed out that this was an unreasonable condition to impose on a largely illiterate village population.

BTUSS also won a small victory over the state government when in October 2003 the Forest and Environment Minister of Assam agreed that henceforth no evictions would take place in areas where the existing movement was active.²⁸ However, the proposed rehabilitation package via the Joint Forest Management scheme also offered by the minister excluded the granting of property rights. In meetings held with BTUSS at Tengani during January 2004, he argued further that – as eviction *per se* would not prevent deforestation – conservation was the responsibility of government and peasant alike. The subsequent refusal by BTUSS to cooperate with the Joint Forest Management programme was regarded by the movement as a victory of sorts.

THE DOYANG–TENGANI MOVEMENT

A sudden deterioration in the border dispute in the Doyang–Merapani region during early 2004 altered significant aspects of the agrarian struggle. One important outcome of this changed situation was the formation by peasant militants in March that year of the *Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti* (DMSS), the main demand of which was that rural livelihoods in the uncertain political milieu of border villages necessitated permanent land rights. This new rural organisation sought not only secure tenure of forest land, like the BTUSS, but also a solution to the Assam–Nagaland border dispute. Under the combined leadership of the BTUSS and the DMSS, a mass demonstration by the Doyang–Tengani movement took place in June 2004, when peasants entered the office of the district commissioner and demanded land rights in the forests. This time,

however, the state responded with violence, as a result of which many demonstrators were injured.²⁹

Following this confrontation, many urban inhabitants came to regard the movement as a 'social nuisance', not least local members of the Indian National Congress who experienced a decline in their own popularity and social base. The latter were not slow to blame the Doyang–Tengani movement for the violence, arguing that the leadership of the BTUSS and DMSS had provoked this in order to enhance their own positions.

The struggle continues

Notwithstanding BTUSS and DMSS claims to be radical, the struggle conducted by them jointly was more strongly informed by ecological concerns than had been the case earlier. As well as accepting that environmental issues were now paramount, they also became more involved with questions of national 'belonging'. Not only did the Doyang–Tengani movement adopt an exclusionary policy towards those peasants who – as 'illegal' immigrants from Bangladesh – now lived and worked in the forests of Assam, barring them from membership, but in 2005 its joint leadership appealed to the Chief Minister of Assam not to proceed with the formation of Greater Nagalim.³⁰

Potential splits arising from class differences also surfaced at this juncture, particularly over the kind of agriculture that would follow the award of property rights. Within some villages of Tengani there were tensions relating to entitlement, or the cut-off point for occupancy of forest land, and whether this should include those who settled before 1980. Similarly problematic was the desire of better-off peasants in Tengani to open small tea gardens in parts of the forest. This was opposed by BTUSS on the grounds that establishing small tea gardens would undermine the struggle conducted by the movement for land rights in the forest areas, not least because popular discourse linked commercial agriculture to deforestation.

In an attempt to broaden their support yet further, both the BTUSS and the DMSS embarked on another protest, this time in the form of a bicycle procession across the state by two hundred activists. Consciousness raising was the object: that is, to 'alert the people and build a *Maha Gana Mancha* [= Great Forum of the People] for collective action to assert rights through action on issues causing a denial of rights'. The protest ended up at Tezpur, where it culminated in the formation of yet another rural grassroots NGO, the 'Revolutionary Forum for Peasant Liberation' (*Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti*, or KMSS), but this time with the task of spreading the peasant struggle beyond the confines of property rights and agrarian issues simply about land titles.

Emphasizing the close link between land erosion, silting rivers, floods, and deforestation in Assam, the KMSS advocated urgent flood prevention measures.³¹ In keeping with political concerns about national 'belonging', this NGO also warned that the Assam-Nagaland border dispute was a threat to the people of Doyang–Tengani, on the basis of which it opposed the inclusion within Nagaland of territory that had long been Assamese. Most significantly, however, the KMSS took the fight onto the industrial front, and pressured the Oil and Natural Gas Commission to compensate smallholders whose land had been drilled in the search for oil and gas deposits.³² This NGO also took issue with and organised mass protests against the insensitivity of Oil India Limited towards the bio-diversity of the region.

Conservation versus land rights

It was now clear that ecological concerns were moving centre stage in the struggle over the management of forest land in Assam. While pro-conservation environmentalist groups agitated for measures ensuring well-being of the forest, the BTUSS and DMSS led Doyang–Tengani movement, by contrast, openly criticised government policy for downplaying issues that were of central importance to smallholding peasants.³³ Accordingly, both the DMSS and BTUSS continued exercising pressure on government to recognise rights to land claimed by petty commodity producers.

The Assam Forest Policy, which had been introduced in the winter 2004 session of the state assembly, was passed without any opposition in 2005.³⁴ With the pressure from the peasantry increasing, the forest minister declared in the assembly that government would like to grant land titles to those who had settled in the forest before 1980.³⁵ In March 2005, Tarun Gogoi, the state Chief Minister, wrote to Central Minister of Environment and Forest expressing his government's intention to convert forest villages into revenue villages, thereby recognizing the property rights of the inhabitants. This proposal, however, met with opposition from the forest department, whose position was now backed by pro-environmentalist lobbies.

As BTUSS moved closer to the broader political agenda pursued by the KMSS, many of the grassroots membership belonging to the former began to express their resentment. Among them were poor peasants, who feared that the pursuit of a broader political struggle risked losing what for them was the primary objective: rights to forest land. By the end of 2006 the tension between BTUSS and the KMSS emerged into the open, as peasant activists from the former made clear their dissatisfaction with downplaying their struggle for permanent land rights. Following a mass demonstration in Guwahati, many grassroots members of BTUSS expressed a similar discontent with the move towards a broader political programme.

These diverging paths revealed what was now a split in the movement: between peasant farmers who saw the forests as places where they could cultivate land, and NGOs for which forests were places to be preserved. The latter approach, based as it was on the primacy of forest conservation, was an idea that the rural grassroots in Assam questioned. The irony here is that the claim by village communities to natural resources is partially conceded by the Indian state, which has indicated a willingness to scale down its absolute ownership rights, and share them with those at the grassroots. Whilst BTUSS shifted its position early in 2007 to one of negotiation with the local state over property rights, the KMSS-led movement has proceeded with its larger goal of forest conservation. In the meantime, peasants from Tengani still await titles to the land they have occupied.

A (POOR PEASANT) MOVEMENT MARGINALISED?

When compared with Doyang, one of the striking aspects of the initial mobilisation in Tengani was its radical political character accompanied by an evident grassroots solidarity. Among the reasons for both the latter is the presence in Tengani of large numbers of poor peasants with everything to lose from an eviction programme, and it was this as much as anything which drove their radical politics. Security of tenure was for them a main concern, and a number of poor peasant became BTUSS office-holders.

Doyang–Merapani, by contrast, was socio-economically more differentiated, and the class structure correspondingly more developed, a fact reflected in the wish of the DMSS to address political issues beyond that of the property relation. These included the Assam–Nagaland boundary dispute and the presence of oil drilling operations in the area. Whilst in Doyang the leadership was composed of better-off producers, in Tengani the movement was initially headed by the poor peasantry. With the consolidation of the movement in Tengani, sharecroppers and poor peasants who had lost their small plots as a result of debts owed moneylenders approached BTUSS for land. The latter organisation in turn compelled better-off settlers to relinquish control over portions of their holdings.

By 2005, however, many leaders of the Doyang–Tengani movement were ‘outsiders’, those who no longer had close ties with petty commodity producers in either locale. Moreover, following the eviction programme carried out in Tengani, the leadership was joined by better-off producers who feared that they, too, might eventually be dispossessed.

There were also important ideological and organisational distinctions between the two movements. Thus BTUSS held regular political training camps, where cadres learned about strategy, tactics and the history of class struggle in India. It also drew on radical traditions of conflict: in the 1950s,

and also in the 1970s, when socialists were active in the occupation of forest lands while Congress took a conservationist stance.³⁶ Where party allegiance was concerned, BTUSS nevertheless adopted a non-aligned position.

Although BTUSS leaders professed leftist sympathies, in truth their relationship with the political left was an uneasy one. Thus, for example, when the *Nikhil Bharat Krishak Sabha* – the peasant organisation affiliated to the Communist Party of India – decided to organise a public meeting in Tengani during September 2004 to press for the award of property rights to smallholders, the BTUSS took offence and protested to the leader of the CPI in Assam.³⁷

Challenging the moneylender

In terms of agricultural policy, the BTUSS not only favoured and helped organise soft loans and cooperative arrangements but also determined crop prices. The twofold object of this particular strategy was both to assert claims to forest land and to reduce the dependence of cultivators on moneylenders.³⁸ Cooperative farming required the clearance of uncultivated forest land, some of which were already claimed by better-off peasants. Between 2002 and 2005 some fourteen such farm units were set up, capital funding being provided by a local government cooperative bank.³⁹ The harvested crop was distributed among the members, and any surplus was sold in the local market.

Moneylenders were excluded from the whole production process, with the result that petty commodity producers who participated in this arrangement obtained a higher return than would normally have been the case. Two consequences followed: such a strategy of intervention not only helped mobilise smallholder support, but it also generated the hostility of traders and moneylenders. As BTUSS pursued its plan of cooperative farming and fixing crop prices, therefore, so the elements of the local commercial petty bourgeoisie affected by this redoubled their opposition to the peasant movement.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

As in so many other peasant movements, in India and elsewhere, agrarian mobilisation in Assam is – and has been – informed both by one constant factor and also by a number of contradictory processes and objectives. The constant factor is the desire on the part of poor peasants in Tengani for security of tenure on forest land that they have occupied and cultivated in the course of successive historical waves of migration. Smallholders were encouraged by the state – colonial and Indian alike – to take up land, a process that to some degree resulted in deforestation.

Contradictions arise from two causes. First, the different class positions of those who subsequently became involved, and either joined in or were affected by the struggle: traders, moneylenders, poor peasants, better-off

producers, NGOs, bureaucrats and government. Many, if not most, of those in the latter categories possessed not just varying but in some instances incompatible economic and political interests. And second, a similar kind of antinomy that cropped up at various points in the struggle, between the aims of poor peasants (forest as land for cultivation) and conservationist discourse (forest as protected bio-diversity).

In Assam, these contradictions have deep roots, beginning in the colonial era with the requirement of tea plantations for a workforce, and how this subsequently generated a process of immigration into the area by those seeking land to cultivate. Later waves of migration gave rise to disputes over property in these reserved forests: after the 1950s peasants settled on land to which they had no legal rights, and those who arrived as settlers during the 1970s were leased small plots of land by those already there, and became *ipso facto* sharecroppers. Additionally, merchants and traders used cash advances to forward buy standing crops cultivated by sharecroppers. In short, an agrarian structure evolved combining tenancy and debt relations, a very familiar pattern in India.

The result was the emergence of a peasant movement, a process informed by and in turn structuring not just competing claims to nature, particularly as this involved a conflict between forest conservation and cultivation, but also the historical process of class formation that followed the different waves of migration. It was these contradictions that underwrote what became distinctions between the BTUSS and the DMSS, or the development of what in effect were two movements.

One was BTUSS in Tengani, which represented poor peasants who were more recent arrivals, for whom security of tenure to small plots of land was paramount. Rich peasants joined this movement only when they, too, were faced with eviction. In an attempt to break cultivator dependency on moneylenders, BTUSS encouraged cooperative farming so as to undermine the power exercised over petty commodity producers by moneylenders and traders.

The other was the DMSS in Doyang, which represented longer-settled better-off peasants, for whom the main concern was no longer production relations but rather exchange relations (with traders, large businesses, the state). With the emergence of the KMSS, an NGO, the focus shifted to include the dispute over the boundary involving Nagaland and Assam. Ostensibly about borders, this issue was actually about something different: the inclusion of Assam's land in Nagaland, or the loss of economic resources.

Relevant to the Doyang–Tengani movement traced here is the recent analysis by Chhatre and Saberwal of an area within the Great Himalayan National Park, where a similar dispute over conservation and access to economic resources is occurring. They show how 'from below' mobilisation by indigenous inhabitants (differentiated in socio-economic terms) effectively

deploys a discourse about conservation so as to protect from development their resource base and the profits – not necessarily large – to be made from this.

The Assamese case study considered here is, however, somewhat different, in that smallholders who had occupied forest lands were in the end not advocates but victims of a discourse about the desirability of conservation measures. The same arguments that had been advanced *by* indigenous inhabitants of the Great Himalayan National Park were in the case of Tengani advanced *against* the villagers who wanted to cultivate forest land. What this suggests is the inherently contradictory use to which environmentalist arguments about ‘protecting nature’ can be put.

ACRONYMS AND VERNACULAR TERMS

APF	Assam Forest Policy
<i>Bandhak</i>	A form of debt bondage
<i>Bigha</i>	A measurement of land which is roughly equivalent to 0.13387 of an hectare
BTUSS	<i>Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti</i>
CPI	Communist Party of India
DFO	Divisional Forest Officer
DMSS	<i>Doyang Mukti Sangram Samiti</i>
Greater Nagalim	A political movement led by a few militant organisations of the Naga people in north eastern India, which claims independence for areas inhabited by Naga tribes
JFM	Joint Forest Management
KMSS	<i>Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti</i>
<i>Myadi</i>	‘Permanent’, a term used primarily to indicate the nature of land lease
<i>Nambor Bachouk</i>	‘Save Nambor’, a political slogan referring to a particular forest reserve
<i>Nikhil Bharat Krishak Sabha</i>	The national organisation of peasants belonging to the CPI
ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Commission
<i>Patta</i>	Official land document, outlining the rights and privileges of the owner
<i>Taungya</i>	Those who are allowed to cultivate alongside certain plants. Villages were established inside the forest reserve for <i>taungya</i> cultivation
<i>Tenganio-Bachak</i>	‘Let village Tengani also live’, a political slogan
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Assam

NOTES

- 1 In the annual system the lease was renewed on a yearly basis, whereas under a permanent lease – also known as *myadi* – usufruct right extended initially over a period of 10 years. Subsequently, the latter was extended to a 30-year lease. Compared to annual lease holders, permanent rights were not only better defined but also included an ability to inherit and sell the land.
- 2 Based on the *Statistical abstract relating to British India from 1894-1895 to 1903-1904*, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office 1905 for the year 1903–1904, cited in Allen [1905]. A low cultivated acreage can be explained by reference to the high mortality rate prevalent during those years, due to various epidemics like black fever.
- 3 The following table indicates the landholding pattern in the *ryotwari* settled districts of Assam during the middle of the twentieth century. Compiled from the 1951 Census of Assam, Volume 2, Part 3, Table No. 1-B, 'Indigenous Persons' Landholding'.

Districts	Less than one bigha	1–10 bighas	11–30 bighas	More than 31 bighas
Kamrup	27,534	61,417	63,272	11,098
Darrang	29,896	31,805	27,695	6,821
Nowgaon	36,153	22,313	22,654	7,113
Sibsagar	29,794	46,457	31,889	6,842
Lakhimpur	16,436	24,989	24,215	6,038

- 4 Such ideas have become more popular during the post-independence era, when the landscape created by the tea-gardens came to be seen by the Assamese middle class as a recreational space. The miseries of agricultural labourers employed in the tea gardens apart, the Assamese middle class refrained from taking a hostile attitude towards the tea economy. Members of this bourgeoisie looked upon the distant tea-plantation as a captive wilderness. For representative accounts in Assamese of such attitudes, see Birinchi Kumar Barua, *Seuji Pator Kahini* (Guwahati, 1986), and Jogesh Das, *Dawar Aru Nai* (Guwahati, 1986, 6th edition). Noted Assamese short story writer Mahim Bora depicts how people (= Assamese middle class) go out to the tea-gardens for their vacation. See his *Nisandeh* (in Assamese), and *Kumari Otobi* (in Assamese) in Mahim Bora, *Nirbachita Galpa Sankalan*, (Guwahati, 2004, 2nd edition), p. 51 and p. 282.
- 5 For a detail discussion, see Saikia [2005].
- 6 The Indian government formed a commission under Justice K.V. Sundaram to investigate the claims of both states. However, neither of them have been able to reach an agreement.
- 7 For a detailed account of the early history of the East India Company in Assam, see Barpujari [1963].
- 8 For an historical account of the colonial forest administration in these areas, see, Saikia [2005: Chapter 2].
- 9 Letter from Major D. Herbert, Deputy Commissioner (Sibsagar) to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, no.6T, Jorhat 21st December 1904, in the Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, February, 1905, no. 95-109 (Assam State Archive).
- 10 Forest villages were established by the forest department as a way of attracting workers, and thus resolving its labour supply crisis.
- 11 These peasants migrated to the sparsely populated districts of Assam partly because of schemes adopted by the colonial administration to expand acreage in the region through cash crop production, and partly also because of intense competition for holdings in landlord-dominated agrarian Bengal.
- 12 The concept 'peasantisation' refers to the process whereby poor peasants, who had become landless, became cultivators once again by entering sharecropping relations with settlers who had control over the land. Although in the Indian context the notion of 'de-peasantisation' has been well-explored, the more recent phenomenon of 'peasantisation' awaits thorough investigation. For an interesting analysis of the latter process, see Chaudhuri [1975].

- 13 This estimate is based on a survey undertaken by the Department of Forest and Environment in Assam, and quoted in Hem Phukan, 'Tengani', *Dainik Janamat*, 19 May 2004.
- 14 The following table indicates the estimated number and area of operational holdings by size classes and types in Assam during 1995–1996. It is calculated from data contained in Government of Assam [2005: 44–45].

Size (hectares)	1 <	1–3	3–5	5–7.5	7.5–10	10–20	> 20
No. of families (000s)	621	1335	571	225	57	39	289

- 15 This account is based on Government of Assam [2005].
- 16 For further discussion about the process of peasant migration into these forests between the 1890s and 1980s, see Saikia [forthcoming].
- 17 Peasants interviewed recalled that on their arrival, when they embarked on the reclamation of forest lands, they faced some opposition from local inhabitants.
- 18 Peasants in Golaghat used to cultivate sugarcane on the high lands in large quantities, even during colonial times. In 1904, approximately 7000 acres of land was under sugar cane cultivation [Hunter, 1908].
- 19 For judicial activism on matters of forest conservation in India see, Dutta and Yadav [2005]. Also relevant in this regard is the ruling by Supreme Court of India on these matters, available at <http://www.forestcaseindia.org>. Thanks are due to S. Lele for drawing my attention to this book and the web link. Before this ruling was handed down in December 1996, the Assamese state has made little attempt to address the issue of deforestation in the province.
- 20 The Assam Gazette Extraordinary, 20 February, 1999. For a critical discussion of the JFM policy in India, see Lele *et al.* [2005], Lele [2007] and Sundar *et al.* [1996; 2001].
- 21 In February 2002, the Supreme Court of India handed down a judgement ordering the implementation of its rulings in respect of encroachment removals, compensatory afforestation, plantations and other conservation issues. On this, see Dutta and Yadav [2005: 244].
- 22 A steering committee was formed to coordinate the movement, and Hem Phukan – a college teacher in Golaghat who took a leading part in organising the meeting – became acting president of BTUSS.
- 23 A report of a public meeting held on 17 July 2002 at Khakanguri, Tengani. Amongst those attending was Debrata Sarma, who had been in forefront of the left movement in the state.
- 24 BTUSS, *Pustika*, 28 January 2004. This demonstration received much publicity in the local press.
- 25 In the course of an interview, the KMSS leader Akhil Gogoi admitted that a parallel administration began to work in parts of Tengani, giving a new direction to the agrarian struggle.
- 26 The term 'radical intelligentsia' encompasses left-leaning academics, journalists and writers in Assam who took up the cause of the evicted peasantry, and gave vocal and/or written support to the movement. Among them was Hiren Gohain, a Marxist social scientist.
- 27 Pamphlet distributed on behalf of the BTUSS, entitled *Namborak Bachuar Babe Uttam Pathi Graham Karu Ahak*.
- 28 Press Statement issued by BTUSS on 28 October, 2003.
- 29 During the demonstration the police assaulted a pregnant woman, and she lost her baby, an incident which came to redefine the nature of the mobilisation.
- 30 Memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner, Golaghat, 10 February, 2005.
- 31 Manifesto issued by *Sadou Asom Ban-Khahania Pratirodh Sangram Mancha* (All Assam Flood Erosion Protection Forum).
- 32 Memorandum submitted to the ONGC by the KMSS, 20 July, 2006.
- 33 Aranyak, a leading NGO working in the field of environmental conservation, was part of the seven-member team that helped draft the 2004 Assam Forest Policy. There was public support for the strict implementation of the AFP, as manifested in various newspaper reports. See, for example, Manamohan Das, 'Forest Scenario of Assam', *The Assam Tribune*, 9 December, 2005.
- 34 It was passed on 8th April. *Dainik Agradoot*, 9 April, 2005.

- 35 Statement by Pradyut Bordoloi, the Assam Forest and Environment Minister, *Proceedings of Assam Legislative Assembly*, 8 April 2005.
- 36 Accounts of earlier peasant struggles in adjacent parts of India are contained in *People for a New India* [1986] and Sinha [1989].
- 37 Akhil Gogoi, advisor to the BTUSS, wrote a long letter of complaint to Udhav Barman, Secretary, Assam Unit of *Nikhil Bharat Krishak Sabha*, the peasant wing of Communist Party of India.
- 38 This account is based both on a hand-written note by BTUSS, and also on an interview with Hem Phukan, acting President of BTUSS.
- 39 The Jamaguri branch of Lakhimi Gaonlia Bank, now renamed as Assam Gramin Bikash Bank, provided this fund. Disbursement of loans began in 2004, and by early 2005 some Rs. 114,000 had been borrowed from this bank by eleven such farms. To put into perspective, this amount was equivalent to the salary earned by an Indian university professor over a 4 month period, which suggests that the sum lent by the bank was not high. Statistics Quoted in *Tenganir Katha*.
- 40 In a meeting held on 19 February, 2004, BTUSS decided to fix the prices for mustard seed at Rs. 1100 per quintal, a much higher amount than was on offer from local traders.

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