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State, peasants and land reclamation: The predicament of forest conservation in Assam, 1850s–1980s

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The present work examines the changing notion of wastelands and contested rights over it in Assam in the last 200 years. As the East India Company gradually became aware of this region, they expressed their serious interest in the wastelands. The initial intervention took place with the discovery of tea plants in Assam, and the Company administration began to lease out such lands to the European planters. During the 1830s and 1870s, a significant amount of such lands was transferred to the planters. It was from the 1870s that the newly established provincial forest department began to affirm its right over the forest resources of the province. Though the forest department asserted its sole right over the forested land, the planters also began to reaffirm their distinctive right over it. While these two components of the colonial state struggled for their respective share of the wastelands, the peasant society also articulated their claim over these lands. In the late twentieth century, as the forests came under the increasing control of human intervention and there was agricultural activity, the conflict between the two frontiers of agrarian and forest boundaries became prominent.

Competing claims over forested lands by both the state and peasants in northeastern India have been a matter of little historical enquiry in spite of several recent works focusing on the natural resources of this region.¹ This became true in the wake of

¹ Several recent works have focused exclusively on the significance of forests in the making of statecraft and peasant livelihood. See, for example, Ludden, 'Investing in Nature around Sylhet: An Excursion into Geographical History'.

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some recent, powerful peasant struggles that occupied the centrestage of political happenings in Assam. In one such instance, since June 2002, peasants in Tengani, located in the Nambor Reserved Forests of Golaghat district in central Assam, have placed themselves firmly on a path of political hostility vis-à-vis the state government.² Adjoining these forest patches are other Reserved Forests, including the Doyang Reserved Forests, as well as the inter-state boundary with Nagaland. Both Doyang and Nambor share similar bio-geographical resources and are located in analogous ecological settings. The Tengani movement, as it came to be known, began when the Assam forest department carried out an intensive eviction in June 2002.³ One of the factors that led to such a sudden eviction drive was partially in response to a Supreme Court directive of December 1996.⁴ The ruling directed the states, including Assam, to stop further encroachment into Reserved Forests. Its implementation was followed by repeated interventions by the Supreme Court and the High Courts, as well as the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests. As a sequel, on 8 February 2002, the Supreme Court directed the chief secretary of Assam and of another nine states to submit a list of measures taken by them to prevent further encroachment of forest land, particularly in the hilly terrain, and national parks and sanctuaries. Though it prompted the Assam government to adopt quick eviction measures in the Reserved Forests, the greatest contributing factor to this eviction was the newly implemented Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme. While the national policy for the JFM began in 1990, the Assam government notified the programme in November 1998.⁵ The Forest Department argued that apart from community participation in the management of forests, its primary goal would be the 'plantation of short rotation crops like cane and bamboo', which would be carried out through a series of afforestation programmes. The Forest Department began to plan intensively for its implementation from 2002. Forests in Golaghat were also chosen for this programme and deforested areas in

² The ecology of Nambor continues to attract attention in recent works, which discuss the conservation status and related aspects in Nambor. See Sindhu et al., 'Distribution and Conservation of *Nycticebus bengalensis* in Northeastern India', pp. 971–82; Choudhury, 'Human-Elephant Conflicts in Northeast India', pp. 261–70.

³ For further elaboration on this movement, see Saikia, 'Land, Forest Management, and Environment: Peasant Struggles in Assam, 2002–2007'.

⁴ For a comprehensive idea of judicial activism on matters of forest conservation in India leading to and after the 1996 Supreme court ruling, see Dutta and Yadav, eds, *Supreme Court on Forest Conservation*. Also see <http://www.forestcaseindia.org> for the brief Supreme Court ruling on these matters. It must be mentioned that before this strong indictment in Dec. 1996, the state made hardly any serious attempt to clear its position with regard to deforestation in the province.

⁵ The Assam Gazette Extraordinary, 20 Feb. 1999; For a critical discussion on the origin and growth of JFM policy in India, see Sundar et al., *Branching Out: Joint Forest Management*.

Nambor became the natural choice for it. Accordingly, eviction began in June 2002, coinciding with the World Environment Day, and was aimed at afforestation.⁶

While the competing claims on forests and their resources remained an unresolved predicament, the present movement again brought to the surface the complexities involved in forest conservation and agrarian expansion. These competing claims over the region's forests and wastelands were laid down in a form that was qualitatively different from that of pre-colonial practices since the nineteenth century, and they remained in the forefront since then. Through this movement, by demanding permanent tenurial security in lands inside forest reserves, which they had reclaimed for agricultural expansion, they brought into focus a crucial question of whose land this was. Though there is no dearth of historical enquiries about the colonial impact on rural societies or the natural resources of northeastern India, these works largely ignore the issue of forests as an agrarian landscape. Agricultural practices in the region often helped to blur the line separating agrarian and forest lands. Many in the colonial administration failed to understand this complex interdependence of peasant society on natural resources, particularly the forests. This inevitably led to conflict between two otherwise interdependent spaces.

This article explores the historical dimension of this competition in Assam since colonial times. The first part examines the motives of early conservation in Assam, indicating these complex dilemmas and the emerging confrontation between the frontiers. As this conflict continued unabated, the article then examines how the state, both in the colonial and postcolonial period, explored the possibilities of opening out forest lands to various stakeholders, including marginalised peasants. The article further narrates how, since the later part of the 1960s, these newly settled peasants had to struggle to withstand various odds in the absence of any tenurial insecurity. Added to these insecurities were the ways in which various forces became instrumental in making the new rural society an unstable one.

Protecting the Nambor Forests: Redefining the Agrarian Frontier

Prior to the nineteenth century, the Ahom rulers often used to clear these dense forests during their military engagement with the Nagas, leading to partial habitation. To make its claim more meaningful in diplomatic relations with their frontier states, the Ahom rulers often attempted to settle populous villages in these crucial areas. In the course of time, when the Ahom state partially withdrew from these areas, space was created for the Kachari rulers. The latter had found these areas suitable for settled agriculture, and encouraged peasants to settle there. Continual

⁶ On 18 Feb. 2002, the Supreme Court of India gave a ruling for the constitution of the Central Empowered Committee for implementation of court's orders to oversee removal of encroachment, compensatory afforestation, plantations apart from other conservation issues. See Dutta and Yadav, p. 244.

wars among various tribal states discouraged people from choosing these areas to settle permanently. These clearances never stood long and the terrain gave way to dense forests.⁷ Though there is no detailed evidence about the exact nature of the advance and retreat of the 'frontier' between settlement and waste, it is generally argued that in pre-colonial times, the Ahom state retained its authority over forest cover while the population had their privilege over the forest produce.⁸ Unlike the evidence from western India, where Maratha chiefs and rulers appropriated natural resources for their own needs,⁹ the Ahoms continuously encouraged the expansion of the agrarian frontier. It also encouraged wet-rice cultivation as a more effective means of agrarian productivity.¹⁰ The Ahoms also vigorously pursued the establishment of settled villages rather than shifting agricultural practices. The socio-religious reformation movement of the sixteenth century also centred around the practices of settled villages, and further strengthened the foundations of the state. It is pertinent to mention here that the Ahoms, confronted with a sparse population, had no other option but to continuously practice a policy of agricultural expansion in the plains in preference to the hills. High rainfall also helped wet-rice cultivation without the support of any artificial irrigation.¹¹

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when the East India Company began an initial exploration of these areas, they found that while there was no significant human population, the areas were extremely rich in timber.¹² Along with Nambor, other areas, particularly the districts of Lakhimpur, Nowgaon and Sibsagar, which were rich in forest cover, also came under gradual inspection. The presence of hard trees like Jarul (*Lagerstroemia Reginoe*), Nahor (*Mesua ferrea*), Sam (*Artocarpus Chaplasha*), Paroli (*Stereospermum Chelonoides*), Gunserai

⁷ Early in the twentieth century, personnel from the provincial agricultural department, who investigated the possibility of peasant cultivation in these forests, noticed traces of pre-colonial settlement in these areas.

⁸ See Bhuyan, 'Anglo-Assamese Relation', p. 126.

⁹ This point has been elaborated and explained in a recent essay by Sumit Guha. See 'Control of Grass and Fodder Resources'. For a detailed elaboration of this dimension, see his earlier work, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991*.

¹⁰ For more on this point, see Guha, 'The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam'.

¹¹ Historians differed on the origin and nature of promotion of wet-rice cultivation by the Ahoms. To follow the debates, see Lahiri 'The Pre-Ahom Roots of Medieval Assam'; A. Guha, 'The Ahom Political System', and 'The Medieval Economy of Assam', in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (ed.) *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Volume 1*, by, Hyderabad, 1984, pp. 478–509.

¹² The East India Company came to occupy Assam after the Yandaboo treaty was signed following the Anglo-Burmese war in 1826. Since the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the region had already relapsed into a series of civil wars with the gradual decline of the pre-colonial authorities. The Burmese retained their political authority in several parts of Assam till 1826. Soon the Company began the process of introducing a new judicial and revenue administration. For a critical insight into the aspects of this period, see Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relation*.

(*Cinnamomum glanduliferum*) and Uriam (*Bischoffia Javanica*),¹³ all commercially viable vis-à-vis the increasing needs of the Company, made the administration and control of forests in Nambor a lucrative one. Revenue earned from selling of elephants and minerals like coal had already convinced the Assam administration about the colonial investment in Assam.

Villages were soon established by settling peasants in parts of these forests.¹⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, the Public Works Department (PWD), as the major consumer of forest wealth in Assam, needed timber both as a fuel and for its rapidly growing construction works. In upper Assam, the department was supplied with timber from the forests of Nambor. The department soon faced a recurrent fuel crisis and scarcity of construction materials. Several attempts were made to discover the causes behind the growing scarcity of timber, and these enquiries convinced the administration that it was the existing practice of opium cultivation that largely contributed to the destruction of trees.¹⁵ As tall trees destroy the poppy at its flowering stage, preventing it from ripening, cultivators, finding it difficult to grow opium, slash trees at regular intervals. The felled trees were never used as firewood or in other ways. It was also found that neighbouring rich peasants were taking up land near Nambor. The Company considered such reclamation to be of a speculative nature, and an important factor restricting the availability of timber for their use. As most of the forests were not located in the hills, peasants close to the forests had traditionally practised shifting cultivation. Mustard was the most important crop, apart from sugarcane. It must be noted here that a sizeable section of the people living in the neighbourhood of these forests practised elephant catching, apart from collecting forest produce. Few used trees to make canoes needed for to navigate the local river.¹⁶

These 'reckless' practices of clearing of trees in Nambor became a matter of serious concern for the administration. Lieutenant Colonel D. Reid, an executive engineer in the public works department of the upper Assam division, had already written to the colonial establishment in Bengal about the difficulty faced in procuring timber for his department. Though destroying forests for opium cultivation

¹³ A.M. Long, Report on the Nambor and adjacent Reserved Forests, Assistant Conservator of Forests, Sibsagar Division, 17 June 1893, no. 114, in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A, Dec. 1896 (Asia and Africa Collection, British Library).

¹⁴ One such early attempt began in 1838. I have not come across any archival paper on it. A crucial aspect that strikes one is the way the next generation of villagers in these early revenue villages asserted their claim over forest resources inside the reserved forest. They did not hesitate to cut down any trees to meet their need.

¹⁵ For a general history of opium cultivation in Assam, see Guha, *Society, Polity and Economy*, pp. 280–96.

¹⁶ It was a common practice for Bengal boat builders to come to Assam in search of better timber for boat-making. They used to take away timber during the rainy season on rafts down the Brahmaputra river, and early colonial writers considered it a highly lucrative trade. The Assamese also used various boats for a variety of needs. See Saikia, *Social and Economic History of Assam*.

was a familiar state of affairs in upper Assam, Reid was convinced that the tea-planters,¹⁷ too, were not far behind in damaging the forests, as planters removed trees because too much shade hampered the growth of tea plants. They needed the trees for firewood, and for making tea-boxes. Though he reprimanded the planter community for their role in damaging the forest cover, Reid nonetheless offered a few practical propositions for the potential growth of the industry. The tea industry was already becoming a financial success.¹⁸ Expressing anxiety over the grim situation of forests in Assam, Reid asserted that 20 years hence, good timber would not be found anywhere in Assam plains if opium continued to be cultivated at the current rate, and if tea cultivators did not keep a large proportion of their land in forest. In fact, each planter looking to the future would have to keep in reserve some land in order to supply timber for chests, charcoal, building purposes, etc.

The best alternative, Reid thought, was to mark forest lands in Nambor as reserved areas so that 'any quantity of timber' could be procured according to the department's need. Many colonial officers were not yet thinking about the natural regeneration of forests, and this worried them more.¹⁹ Accordingly, in 1859, Reid wrote to Captain Jenkins, commissioner of Assam, submitting a proposal to place the Nambor forest at the disposal of the PWD.²⁰ Till then Assam did not have any guidelines in matters of forest conservation. However, the Burma experiment in forest conservation was a great help. Many in the Assam administration admitted the similarities of the Southeast Asian climate with that of Assam, and there was no doubt that the rules that were in place in Lower Burma could be easily applied to Assam too. Accordingly, Reid prepared a draft rule embodying exclusive guidelines for the conservation of Nambor. The proposed reserved tract would be under the charge of the executive engineer of the upper Assam division, with extensive rights over the forests of Nambor. Reid asserted that the very purpose of this reservation was to preserve and encourage the growth of valuable timber for 'governmental purposes and also working the coal beds and limestone quarries'. Optimistic about the forest wealth of Nambor under a controlled regime, Reid also

¹⁷ Tea-plantations began in Assam in the 1830s, and the first batch of Assam tea was sold in London in 1838. It did not take a long time to get Assam integrated with the name Tea. For a general history of tea plantation in Assam, see Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*; Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of Company*; and Antrobus, *A History of Assam Tea Company*. A recent work explains the relationship between science and the making of Assam tea; see Sarma, 'British science, Chinese skill and Assam tea'.

¹⁸ For a substantial part of colonial rule in Assam, tea became the major interest of the state. For the economics of the tea industry, see Guha, 'The Big Push Without Take Off'.

¹⁹ It was many years before the forest department realised the importance of natural regeneration in this place, considering its high rainfall and soil character. Only in the last few years of the nineteenth century did the forest department began a natural regeneration of Sal after a long period of encouraging the artificial regeneration of various species.

²⁰ Jenkins was Agent to the Governor General in the Northeast Frontier and Commissioner of Assam.

anticipated a sawmill in Nambor catering to the needs of the PWD in the near future. Reid did not doubt that the reservation of Nambor would be a great step towards the effective management of the forest resources of Assam. He also admitted that the success of the reservation would depend on the strict vigilance of the superintendent, and on his means of exercising supervision. He suggested that attention be paid to seed collection, and to creating nurseries to urgently fill the spaces that had been created by the deforestation. Captain Jenkins, though sceptical of Reid's proposal, forwarded it to the Bengal government.

Another aspect which quickly drew the attention of the colonial establishment were the rich flora and fauna of Nambor.²¹ That the Ahoms used to draw on the rich brine ores in the hills of Nagaland for a significant part of their salt requirement was not unknown either. The possibility of coal deposits in the higher hills was already known. Preliminary explorations in the nineteenth century brought more certainty to existing conjectures, further reinforcing the claim of the state over forest resources. Meanwhile, P.J. Hannay, a professional geologist touring Assam looking for mineral wealth, strongly opposed any move to hand over the land of the Nambor forests to any company. His exploration made the likelihood of discovering more mineral resources in Nambor brighter. During 1859–60, there was further enquiry into the geological as well as botanical wealth of the vicinity surrounding Nambor. He advised the Assam administration on the immediate need for the conservation of forest resources in Nambor. An extensive list of geological and botanical specimens were submitted to Captain Jenkins, convincing him of the importance of Nambor.

The Nambor forests soon came under some form of conservation.²² Persuaded by the Assam administration's proposal and foreseeing the needs of the PWD, the Bengal government handed over these tracts on the banks of the *Dhanseeree* and *Dyang* rivers in Nowgong and Golaghat to the PWD in 1859.²³ Forest tracts between a straight line running east and west and cutting the public road one mile north of the river Nambor and Dimapur were taken up by the PWD. The proclamation for reservation restricted the right to cut timber between the *Dooigurrung* and *Dayang* rivers. There would be clear boundary marks to distinguish the reserve. It was also stipulated that the common people would be able to purchase timber to a limited extent at a rate to be fixed by the executive engineer according to the value of the timber required. However, the payment was to be made before delivery. Masters, in charge of the post of forest ranger, was entrusted with the responsibility

²¹ An elaborate account of the flora and fauna of these forests can be found in a report prepared by E.S. Carr, Assistant Conservator .

²² This account is based on File no. 428, Bengal Government Proceedings, Assam State Archive (hereafter ASA).

²³ From E.J. Trevor, Secretary to the Board of Revenue, Bengal, to the Commissioner of Revenue for the Division of Assam, Fort William 16 Aug. 1859, File no. 428 AC (ASA).

of selecting and recommending tracts for reservation, but the recommendation of the commissioner was necessary for the reservation of any tract greater than 10 acres. Moreover, as the colonial state was still not convinced of its possible rights over the forests,²⁴ the villagers were allowed to collect timber with a permit from the executive engineer or the magistrate of Golaghat. However, they were prohibited from using the felled trees to make canoes to sell; thereby preventing any growth of commercial interest on the part of local villagers.

After two years' experience and the subsequent establishment of a separate forest department, the superintendent of the Nambor Reserved Forest, describing the condition of the post-reserved Nambor in 1863, categorically stated that there had been no destruction of timber in the Nambor Reserved Forest during these past few years.²⁵ He declared that apart from the normal responsibility of watching the forests and seeing that the needs of the PWD had been properly protected, his small establishment was also entrusted with the duty of raising nurseries of valuable trees. After the initial success of the Nambor experiment, the Assam administration asked their deputy commissioners to select more such forest tracts in the state. Many in administration commented that the better forestlands would be highly suited for tea cultivation.²⁶ This created a problem in deciding which classes of forestlands might be sold or leased out for this purpose, and which retained by the state for future needs. The peasants, however, depended on the forests for their agricultural economy. Shifting cultivation or *jhum* created a continually fluctuating forest boundary. Though it never succeeded in removing a substantial amount of forest cover, it was not difficult to foresee the increasing pressure on forested lands for any agricultural expansion. Even the colonial state, while considering the needs of future revenue generation, found it difficult to deny the peasants' push into the now demarcated forest boundary.

The Nambor experiment was chiefly motivated by a need to preserve its timber, which was only worthwhile for the PWD. However, it was not long before the administration found the management of these forests difficult. And thus, though begun as an example of forest 'conservation', the increasing pressure from peasants and the as yet invisible financial results of the experiment turned Nambor into a critical site where many complex issues, like villagers rights, managing a large boundary, and the growing needs of tea planters had to be addressed.

²⁴ The villages inside the forests, which were declared Reserved Forests, were caught in the conflict between the revenue authorities and a future forest department about whether they would have any rights inside the forests. A separate forest department was established in 1863, but under the jurisdiction of the Bengal government. Assam was formed as a separate province only in 1874.

²⁵ J. Thronton, Superintendent of the Nambor Forests, to the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong, No. 50, 7 Apr. 1863, File No. 428 AC (ASA).

²⁶ For a detailed discussion on the making of early forest reserves in Assam, including Nambor, see Saikia, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife*.

Deforesting Nambor: Peasants and Land Reclamation since 1896

As the East India Company gradually became comfortable with administering Assam, they began to take a serious interest in the wastelands. With the discovery of tea plants in Assam, these wastelands became the most lucrative areas of revenue generation. The Company leased out these wastelands, including forests, to European tea planters. A series of wasteland rules were framed to deal with the settlement of such wastelands. This further facilitated the grant of wastelands to various private companies, who took up land indiscriminately. Between the 1830s and 1870s, that is, before the forest department began its supervision, a significant amount of such lands was given over to tea plantation.²⁷ In the early twentieth century, William Hunter noticed how, in Sibsagar, the district where Nambor was placed in the official map of British Assam, 'much of highland in the centre and south' of the district 'was originally covered with tree forest, but this has largely been taken up by the tea planters'.²⁸ Hunter also noticed that these forests were being replaced by 'neat bungalows and trim tea gardens', which formed a conspicuous part of the landscape. Many of them never used the land for plantation. Till the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the colonial state defined all uncultivated land, including jungles, as wastelands. But with the gradual beginning of forest conservation and their declaration as either Reserved Forest or Protected Forests, lands beyond the direct authority of the forest department came to be categorised as wastelands. Gradually, any patch of land without any timber came to be identified as wastelands. It was from the 1870s that the newly established provincial forest department began to affirm its sole right over the provincial forest resources. Many doubted that tea planters, by destroying the timber, were threatening the revenue of the forest department. By the 1890s the Assam forest department had brought under its administration large patches of forests. Taken aback by this position of the forest department, the tea planters began to reassert their right over the lands, often leading to acrimony. In the meantime, peasants also laid down their claim over the wastelands. A growing number of middle-class families soon realised the speculative character of their land, and a few among them began to reclaim forest lands for future agricultural expansion. Hunter did not hesitate to admit that in the plains of Sibsagar, there was no land available for peasant settlement.

The issue of conflict between the agrarian and forest frontier had already become part of colonial statecraft when the creation of Reserved Forests restricted the existing practices of peasant cultivation in large areas of the Brahmaputra valley. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the government had also offered

²⁷ For a perspective on the role played by tea planters in removing the forest cover from the region, see Tucker, 'The Depletion of India's Forest under British Imperialism: Planters, Foresters and Peasants in Assam and Kerala'.

²⁸ Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 22, 1908, p. 345.

the peasants permanent patta in lieu of their sedentary agricultural practices. Peasants kept changing their cultivated patches of land, another variation of the shifting cultivation practised in the hills. Peasants used to clear the high and average lands normally suitable for both wet-rice and winter crops. Such lands were not covered by dense hard trees, but by shrubs or reeds. It was not only easier to clear such forests with the limited labour available, but the soft soil also made ploughing easier. However, the arrival of the forest regime and the government's agenda to bring peasants under a more fixed tenure of land settlement placed enormous pressure on the peasant society. Peasants tried to escape such measures by relinquishing land at their own will, which remained a matter of great concern for the colonial state.²⁹ The nineteenth century witnessed several measures on the part of the colonial state to reconfigure existing land settlement practices.³⁰ Most of the land in the province came under the ryotwari settlement, except for the two districts of Goalpara and Cachar in British Assam. After decades of experimentation, the Revenue Department crafted an arrangement whereby land was settled with peasants for either a year, known as *ekchania* or annual patta, or 10 years—*myadi*. The first category, though discouraged by the administration, was most sought after by the peasants, as they could relinquish such land in their search for better lands.

Amidst competing claims, many in the Revenue Department argued that deforestation of existing Reserved Forests would not only increase revenue earnings, but also relieve the administration of the responsibility of taking care of less-valued forests. Such ideas gained more ground due to the fact that even amongst forest officials, there was disagreement about the revenue-earning potential of various forests. J.C. Arbuthnott, deputy commissioner of Nowgong, for instance, argued that the useless plot of land 'should be deforested and turned into paddy fields'. Much later, expressing similar uneasiness over such patches of land, J.C. Gruning, the deputy commissioner of Nowgong in 1899, admitted that

Five-sixths of it is bhil land suitable for paddy cultivation but worthless to the forest department. It seems to me absurd to render so much land useless ... the scheme if carried out will benefit the country round by turning a stagnant bhil covered with reeds and jungle into paddy fields.³¹

Since the late nineteenth century, as the colonial government had been looking for more agrarian revenue and area under acreage, various Reserved Forests were brought under the deforestation scheme. Officially, the new arrangement came to

²⁹ This point has been further elaborated in Baruah, *Durable Disorder*, Ch. 4. The peasants' method of relinquishment has been extensively discussed in Guha, *Medieval Economy, Society, Polity*.

³⁰ For a careful analysis of this aspect, see Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*, 1977 Barpujari, H.K., *Assam in the Days of Company, 1826–1858*, 1963.

³¹ J.F. Gruning, Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong, to the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, 7 Dec. 1899, ASP No. 24–43, Revenue-A, June 1900 (ASA).

be known as 'deforestation', where patches of forest were cleared of timber and fully converted into either tea plantations, or used for other agricultural purpose by the local peasants. It was argued that as these forests did not have good timber that could be sold easily, the best option was to open it up to the cultivation of various cash crops, including tea. As ideas for deforesting forest reserves began to grow, the provincial government took care to make room for such future deforestation in the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891. In the new regulation deforestation was permitted with the sanction of the Government of India. Initially, lands without any commercially productive timber were deforested. The major beneficiaries of the deforestation were the Assam Bengal Railway Company and British tea planters, as well as individual landholders. The first two, by virtue of their close proximity to the colonial state, were privileged enough to share a higher portion of such deforested land. In one such instance, T. Henderson, superintendent of the *Salona Tea Company*, while requiring a 300-acre grant from the Reserved Forest on lease, wrote to the deputy commissioner of Nowgong that keeping such forested land would help them retain their labour supply, and could be taken up for cultivation or be used as grazing ground.³² As the deputy commissioner called for an enquiry to estimate the forest value of the proposed area, both civil authorities and the forest department agreed that these tracts of land could be handed over to the tea company.

However, the history of deforestation is a complex web of contesting rights and power to be wielded by various colonial agencies. The forest department frequently retained its right on the timber located in deforested lands. Arrangements were also made for the disposal of timber or their valuation to be paid by the lessee.³³ It was not that the forest department succumbed easily to the pressure from various quarters to open up the forestlands for deforestation.³⁴ Rather, on several occasions, the department successfully opposed the pressure from tea planters to open up land for tea grants. In 1899, in such an instance of uneasiness over deforestation, F.J. Monahan had written to the Government of India about the tough stand taken by the conservator of forests against an already sanctioned deforestation work in

³² T. Henderson, Superintendent, Salona Tea Company, to the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong, ASP, No. 24-43, Revenue-A, June 1900 (ASA).

³³ Letter from F.G. Sly, Under Secretary, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Simla, 19 Aug. 1896, ASP, No. 7-10, Revenue-A, Revenue and Agriculture, Sept. 1896 (ASA).

³⁴ In one such example of opposing interest between the forest and revenue departments, both H. Carter, conservator of Eastern Circle, and P.R.T. Gurdon, commissioner of the Assam valley districts, expressed differing opinions on the need for deforestation. Carter pointed out that 'with our small percentage of reserved forests', he was averse to deforesting any area unless it was useless. In fact, the parameters of utility of a forest area turned out to be a bone of contention. On the other hand, Gurdon insisted that it was expedient to deforest on grounds of the demands of the peasantry. Deforestation of the Bharalowa Reserve in Lakhimpur District, ASP, No. 25-31 Revenue-A, Revenue Department, Sept. 1912 (ASA).

the Inner Line reserve of Cachar.³⁵ For instance, in 1913, several tea companies like the *Jardine, Skinner and Company, Begg and Dunlop Company* and *Balmer and Lawrie Company* pressurised the provincial administration to open a large area of the Katakhal Reserved Forest in Cachar.³⁶ They argued that the specified area did not have any capability for future forest growth. However, W.F. Perree, the officiating conservator of the Eastern circle, strongly opposed such a proposal. He insisted that even if the area identified by the tea companies did not have any tree growth, it should not be opened up for tea cultivation. He was of the firm opinion that as the pressure from the peasantry was much higher in Surma valley, such lands should be opened up for agrarian purposes only. The provincial administration had no option but to accept the proposal of the conservator.

Significantly, by combining the existing category of protected areas and district forest into one category, the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 made an attempt to resolve the dilemma of agricultural expansion and management of Reserved Forests. Forest lands, which were included in the protected areas, were placed in the new category. The significance of this new category of un-classed state forest was that it worked as a mediator between the government, the planters, the forest department and the peasants. As a revenue generating agency, the colonial state had an ambiguous attitude to the vast unutilised forest area and agrarian economy—it was still concerned with the possibility of the future expansion of the agrarian frontier into these forests, which provided the logic for the continuation of a large tract of forest, though not directly under the benevolent supervision of the forest department.

Un-classed state forest land came to include all 'lands at the disposal of Government' as defined by Section 3(8) of the new Assam Forest Regulation.³⁷ Till 1895, this category also included various lands which were not necessarily forest areas, and which did not have any probability of forest produce. These areas comprised of roads, embankments, waterlogged areas, and other un-cultivable lands.³⁸ In 1893, the area of un-classed state forest stood at 7,140 square miles for the entire province of Assam, within which an area amounting to 787 square miles of forest in the Naga Hills, Garo Hills and Sylhet was also included.³⁹ By 1940 this had grown to 16,822 square miles.⁴⁰ However, an improper estimate of the actual forest coverage

³⁵ Deforestation of a portion of the Inner Line reserve in Cachar, F.J. Monahan, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, No. 145 Forests, 1791, R, 1 June 1899, ASP, No. 55–61, Revenue-A, July, 1899 (ASA).

³⁶ ASP, No. 33–44, Revenue-A, Revenue Department, Oct. 1913 (ASA).

³⁷ Section 3(8) of the Assam Forest Act 1891 explained that land at the disposal of the government meant land in respect of which no person has acquired a permanent, heritable and transferred right of use and occupancy under any law for the time being, and land in respect of which no person has acquired any right created by grant or lease made or continued by or on behalf of the British government.

³⁸ Annual Report on the Forest Administration in Assam (hereafter Annual Report), 1895–96, para 6.

³⁹ Annual Report, 1892–93, Calculated from Form no. 46.

⁴⁰ Annual Report, 1939–40, para 6.

under this class was a constant source of worry for the forest department. Very often it was told that the exact nature of forest land could not be estimated. In spite of this, the total area of un-classed state forest went spiralling upward as the years passed. This increase was caused by various reasons. Often a proposed reserve could not be settled as Reserved Forest, contributing to the increasing strength of the un-classed state forest category. Relinquished land, which was taken on lease mostly for tea plantations, also added to these areas. There was no uniform contribution of the areas brought under it from various causes. In 1897 the relinquished land from leased areas was as high as 2,05,066 acres.⁴¹

The total area under the un-classed state forest category began decreasing from the early decades of the twentieth century as more such land was opened up for peasant cultivation. Due to the encouragement of the provincial administration, the peasantry took up more land for cultivation. During 1915–17, an estimated 440 square miles of un-classed state forest was opened up for cultivation.⁴² Managing this widely spread out category was becoming cumbersome, leading to the realisation that the un-classed state forest was far too large for effective joint supervision of the forest and district administration. It was also realised that examining them in order to bring them under the Reserved Forest category would take years.⁴³ Apart from this, tracts containing timber were too scattered for their effective exploitation. Moreover, much of the un-classed state forest did not have good prospects for reservation. The assistant conservator of the forest of Lakhimpur reported that the erstwhile *Solaguri* protected forest hardly contained any forest coverage.⁴⁴ The forest land was either given as a grant to the Assam Company on a 30-year lease, or the local peasantry had opened it up for cultivation. One major problem faced was un-regulated shifting cultivation.⁴⁵ The urgency to preserve timber and fuel in parts of such forests was dealt with by the introduction of various rules, according to which the un-classed state forest was divided into three categories. Provision was made for its classification within the existing revenue category of mauza. These categories were formed with regard to the feasibility of leases according to different needs. In the first category, all lands which could be leased for all types of cultivation, including tea cultivation, was included. The second category was only available for ordinary cultivation. The third category prohibited squatting and leasing out, and was under strict supervision. This category was further divided into two groups: while the first group could be leased out by the deputy commissioner on the basis of a regular written petition, the chief commissioner's sanction was required for the second group.

⁴¹ Annual Report, 1897–98, para 3.

⁴² Annual Report, 1916–17, para 6.

⁴³ Annual Report, 1912–13, para 11.

⁴⁴ Assistant Conservator of Forest, Lakhimpur division, to the Conservator of Forest, No. 112A, 24 Dec., 1881, ASP No. 93–99, Revenue-A, Feb. 1898 (ASA).

⁴⁵ Annual Report, 1917–18, para 7.

By the end of the nineteenth century, when the mechanism of deforestation was being used to resolve these dilemmas, the Assam revenue department came under increasing pressure to bring more areas under agricultural expansion. It was estimated that till then, only one-tenth of cultivable land, not inclusive of forest land under the forest department, was under cultivation. Though the deforestation of various forest reserves was already underway, with the main beneficiaries being tea planters, it did not contribute to the expansion of cash crops other than tea. As deforested Reserved Forests were leased out to tea planters, the whole idea of generating more revenue from these areas was defeated by such deforestation.

It must be mentioned here that the forest department retained its right to the timber located in the deforested land. Arrangements were also required for the disposal of timber or their valuation, to be paid by the lessee. It was not that the forest department succumbed easily to pressure from various quarters to open up forest lands for deforestation. Rather, on several occasions, the department had successfully opposed the pressure from tea planters to open up land for tea grants. A distinctive character of the deforestation was that while in the Surma valley land was opened up for ordinary cultivation, in the Brahmaputra valley it was the various tea companies or railway companies who were the major beneficiaries. The pressure levied by the peasantry in Surma valley was so high, that even before the actual deforestation began, peasants had squatted and brought forest lands under settlement in anticipation of the deforestation.

It was at this time that the Assam administration qualified their previous understanding of Nambor forests and admitted that these were of very recent origin. Concrete evidence of the settlement of villages in pre-colonial times also came to the notice of the Assam administration. Encounters with old peasant families convinced the administration that since the late nineteenth century, in the wake of weakening of Ahom rule, and more raids committed by neighbouring Naga tribes, peasants moved away from these areas and settled in more secured areas, which were comparatively free from any such raids.

After the non-realisation of its primary goal of distributing these forested lands to peasants, the Assam administration began to frame new policies whereby forest patches would be parcelled out for peasant cultivation, policies that came to affect the Nambor experiment too. The idea of deforestation and eventual peasantisation of Nambor had begun since 1893. The colonial government came out with various proposals to convert parts of Nambor into agricultural areas. It was in this year that A.J. Long, the assistant conservator of forests, 'examined and reported upon in some detail ... with reference to the desirability of throwing open portions of them to colonists'.⁴⁶ Long's idea of deforestation turned into a concrete proposal when the first ever proposal came from Assam's Chief Commissioner William

⁴⁶ Letter from F.J. Monahan, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 158, Forests, 3441 dated 25 July 1904, ASP, Revenue A, Oct. 1904.

Ward in 1896.⁴⁷ Ward's stated idea was to deforest parts of Nambor and transfer them to the intended tea planters, so that tracts across the Assam-Bengal Railway (ABR) track 'could improve its hygiene to a liveable condition'. Many employees of the ABR Company used to reside across the railway tract, and they frequently complained about the uninhabitable character of the forests. Ward asked the conservator of forests to submit a report on the possibility of deforesting Nambor. Accordingly, the latter submitted his report suggesting the suitability of the prospect. However, before any concrete proposal could be framed, Ward retired, making way for Henry Cotton to replace him.

Compared to his predecessor, Henry Cotton⁴⁸ was more than enthusiastic about bringing more areas of the Brahmaputra valley under peasant cultivation. At some point he even proposed to bring capitalist-minded families from northern India to take up cultivation in the region. His high optimism was only curbed by the higher authorities in the Indian revenue department. Cotton had begun to look into the forest patches lying towards the southeastern part of Nagaon for future peasantisation, and was also convinced that in various pockets of the Brahmaputra valley were peasant settlements—with *holdings being divided and subdivided to elaborate degree of minuteness*—which needed encouragement to migrate to forested areas.

Under pressure from various lobbies, the jute mills owners in Bengal in particular, Cotton laid a proposal before the Government of India for opening up approximately one-fifth of forests tracts in Nambor. Accordingly, in 1897, a proposal inviting peasants from the Surma valley to reclaim lands in parts of Nambor was placed before the GOI. Administrative arrangements were made for the smooth facilitation of peasants arriving in Nambor. The tracts intended for deforestation came to be declared as un-classed state forest,⁴⁹ marginalising the authority of the forest department. Cotton's suggested terms for intended applicants were that such lands would be revenue-free for an initial three years, after which land would be assessed at 8 annas per bigha. The chief commissioner, however, made it clear that no royalty would be charged on the timbers unless they were removed for sale. While the government had no problem with Cotton's terms and conditions, they objected to the proposal for deforestation on the grounds that it was not clear about the very character of the forests in Nambor. The Indian government maintained that unless the tracts consisted of a mixture of trees like *Nahor* or *Ajhar* with sure economic viability, the provincial administration could go ahead on its

⁴⁷ The following account is based on a careful reading of various communications related to the Nambor colonisation. See File Colonization of the Nambor Forest in the Sibsagar District, Notes Revenue-A, Feb. 1914, nos 1–14, Assam Secretariat Proceedings (ASA). Also A.M. Long, Report on the Nambor and adjacent Reserved Forests, Assistant Conservator of Forests, Sibsagar Division, 17 June 1893, no. 114, in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A, Dec. 1896 (Asia and Africa Collection, British Library).

⁴⁸ For an account of his career in Assam, see Cotton, Sir John H. Stedman, *Indian And Home Memories*, London, 1911.

⁴⁹ For the significance of un-classed state forests, see Saikia, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife*.

own with the opening of forest tracts. Commenting on the future deforestation of Nambor, the government maintained that while it did not foresee any difficulty in opening this tract, proper care should be taken to retain a good portion of this timber, as its value would increase in the days to come.

Justifying his proposal for deforestation, Cotton argued that the Nambor did not have enough valuable timber to could justify its remaining intact. He claimed that despite deforestation, certain trees could be retained. On the other hand, those at the helm of affairs, realising the problems the Nambor colonisation programme could create for the Brahmaputra valley, suggested bringing peasants only from the southern districts of the province, known as Surma valley. For the colonial administrators, the landlord and peasants conflict in Surma valley was a natural cause for the latter's migration in search of land. Cotton even proposed to offer lands inside Nambor on a 10-year renewable tenurial security. Though the proposal was widely publicised to elicit public attention, it did not generate any great interests from even the landless peasant families of Surma valley. However, landless peasants from neighbouring areas had already begun to reclaim land, and villages were soon established. As early as 1890, four such villages—Ahomoni, Tengani, Dubarani and Singimari—were established by a local mauzadar.⁵⁰ Amongst these new villages Barhola, Tengani and Dubarani, which were situated on the bank of the river Dhansiri, were already cultivated. Bureaucratic legitimacy was derived for the deforestation by taking these villages away from the jurisdiction of the forest department and ceding them to the revenue administration.⁵¹

In 1903 the new chief commissioner, Bampfylde Fuller, made a renewed and forceful attempt to make the Nambor colonisation programme a success.⁵² Fuller argued that the expediency of retaining the entire Nambor reserves was 'open to very serious doubt'.⁵³ He was convinced that the forests in Nambor were of very recent origin, and that it was 'indeed cultivated until comparatively modern times'. Departing from the conventional understanding that the areas west of these forests were agriculturally more productive, Fuller realised that large tracts close to the river Dhansiri, which crisscrossed these forests, were of 'much agricultural value'. He was convinced that

if good cultivable land is available in this locality, cultivation is likely to be far more profitable to the people and to the state than the maintenance of mixed

⁵⁰ Letter from Major D. Herbert, deputy commissioner, Sibsagar, to commissioner, Assam valley districts, no. 6T, Jorhat, 21 Dec. 1904, in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, Feb., 1905, no. 95–109 (ASA).

⁵¹ Note by B.C. Basu, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, Oct. 1904, no. 132–157 (ASA).

⁵² A complete account of this renewed effort was covered in the communications in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, Oct. 1904, no. 132–157 (ASA).

⁵³ Letter from Secretary to CC, Assam, to the Conservator of Assam, no. 34 Forests, 1625 R, Shillong, 14 Apr. 1903, in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, Oct. 1904, no. 132–157 (ASA).

forest of the ordinary Assam type, and that under the peculiar conditions of Assam, forest administration must be judged from a commercial standpoint more strictly than is the case in provinces where forests play a vital part in the economy of the country or are needed to conserve humidity in soil or atmosphere.⁵⁴

E.S. Carr, the then conservator of forests in Assam, however, suggested that several tracts in these forests had commercially viable timber. 'I give this opinion on the ground that the present and prospective value of the forest area is very great now that the Railways in Assam are using Nahor and Uriam for sleepers.'⁵⁵ However, Carr suggested that one expert from the agricultural department could inspect these areas and recommend tracts to be taken up for deforestation. Accordingly, Rai Bahadur B.C. Basu, assistant director at the department of land records and agriculture, surveyed these areas and submitted his report.⁵⁶ This report made a significant departure from the usual understanding of the nature of Nambor, character of the forest, and nature of the peasant settlement. Basu met several old people who had themselves lived in the forests, or had family members from previous generations who had. He found evidence that convinced him of the proximity of peasant settlements, estimating that these went back to approximately 100 years. These areas had only a weak Ahom rule in the late eighteenth century, and the subsequent imposition of taxes and frequent raids by people from the neighbouring Naga Hills led the villagers to retreat to more secure neighbourhoods. Basu argued,

the desertion of all pathars was caused by Naga raids. These head-hunting savages, once kept in check by the Assam Rajas, got out of control during the decadence of Ahom rule, and mercilessly pout the villager to death whenever they could. The raids continued to a recent period and were not finally stopped until the last Naga expedition in 1879.

Basu came across significant traces of a pre-colonial irrigation system in these localities, and stated that approximately 110 square miles of forested area could be deforested for future peasant cultivation.

⁵⁴ Letter from Secretary, Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Conservator of Forests, Assam, no. 133 Forests, 3075R, Shillong, 6 Aug. 1903, in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Oct., Revenue A, 1904 nos 132–157 (ASA). The Secretary mentioned that he was conveying the chief commissioner's viewpoint.

⁵⁵ Letter from E.S. Carr, Conservator of Forests, Assam, to the Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 51A, Shillong, 24 July 1903, in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, Oct. 1904, No. 133.

⁵⁶ Basu surveyed approximately 468 square miles of forests in Nambor. He spent 42 days and tried his best to physically y investigate the area. He relied on a number of people either practising elephant hunting, or collecting other forest produce.

The chief commissioner decided to throw open the tracts without formally declaring them deforested.⁵⁷ He thought a formal deforestation could take place after the actual land had been occupied by the peasants. By now it was clear that tea planters had already taken the best and most easily accessible forests for their plantations, as the forest lands that the government wanted to open out for cultivation were not suitable for tea. For the Assam administration, the best option left was to give it out to peasants.⁵⁸

In the next year, approximately 100 square miles of forest were thrown open for cultivation. Three new *mauzas*—revenue units comprising a number of villages, namely Kardaiguri, Naojan and Rengmapathar—were formed, and *mauzadars*—persons entrusted with the collection of revenue in a *mauza*—were appointed. Since then, to a limited extent, peasants from the neighbouring densely populated localities of Sibsagar district began to reclaim forest lands. Though in the next few years more peasants joined them, by 1912 it was clear that Nambor's attraction as an area of colonisation remained limited, with only 193 peasant families, mostly from neighbouring areas, taking up 3,320 bighas of land. Out of this only 2,448 bighas were actually cultivated. The provincial administration made its intention clear—they would discourage the reclamation and accumulation of land of more than 150 bighas per family. The administration was decidedly against the growth of sharecropping in the province, believing it to be against the whole spirit of ryotwari settlement.⁵⁹

After the repeated failure to open up these forest tracts for cultivation, the government began to blame the 'unhealthy character of the forests'. Attempts were made to improve the inaccessible character of the forest with gravel roads so as to facilitate the arrival of peasants. For the peasants, however, the dense forest and wild animals made reclaiming Nambor a uphill task. The patches which could have been brought under cultivation easily were also not contiguous. The conservator of forests even stated that peasants should be encouraged to occupy only non-uniform patches. The administration did not agree and went ahead with opening out contiguous patches of forests, making it unattractive for cultivation.

Meanwhile, in 1905, to tackle the regular shortage of labourers inside the forests, four forest villages were formed in the Doyang Reserved Forest adjacent to Nambor

⁵⁷ Letter from F.J. Monahan, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, no. 158 Forests, 3441, dated 25 July 1904, ASP, Revenue A, Oct. 1904.

⁵⁸ It was apparent by the early twentieth century that the tea planters were more interested in expanding their existing gardens and occupying land in those areas connected through a good transport system. By this time they had begun parleying with the colonial state regarding an efficient transport system from Assam.

⁵⁹ Various associations, like the Jorhat Sarvajanic Sabha and the Upper Assam Raiyat Association, protested vehemently against a move made by the Assam administration in 1897, disallowing any practice of sharecropping in the newly leased out land.

by settling peasant families.⁶⁰ What were the rights and privileges that the forest villagers were entitled to? Who would be settled within these villages? In deciding these issues, the department was not free from colonial bias. The habit of living within the forest was seen as a primary requirement for settlement.⁶¹ This was so because of the understanding the colonial government had about the cultural sociology of work. Once a person or family was settled, they were given annual *patta* land and revenue was fixed at a concession.⁶² Every adult villager was required to render 20 days of manual labour annually in return for ordinary wages. However, in actual practice, the department forced the villagers to work at highly reduced wages. Except for use to construct houses, no forest material was given out free of charge. Further, a family was entitled to 10 cartloads of fuel every year, but had to provide an additional 10 days of labour for it. Similar privileges were granted to the *jhumias* too. Apart from these controlled rights and privileges, forest villagers were not allowed to work for other departments. As days went by, more concessions poured in. With the increasing pressure on grazing inside the village forest, the department sanctioned grazing concessions in 1918. A.W. Blunt, conservator of the western Assam circle, stated that unless the villagers were not allowed to graze liberally, they might leave these villages. However, the department wanted some form of control over the grazing, and asked the district administration to levy a fee of 8 annas per head per annum.⁶³ Hence, in its anxiety for the labour required for the forest department, the latter ensured that it derived the maximum benefits from such concessions. The establishment of forest villages also made way for both the arrival of peasants and the subsequent expansion of the peasant villages. As there was no clear regulation restricting the expansion of their holding inside the forest tracts, many forest villagers began to accumulate lands. Limited reclamation continued as and when the villagers expanded their existing holdings. This afforded them the status of rich peasants in the subsequent period.

The slow growth of Nambor as a land for peasantisation continued to be a major setback for the Assam revenue department. In 1914, expressing his dismay, P.R.T. Gurdon, the Assam valley commissioner, wrote to the chief commissioner:

⁶⁰ For a discussion on the contingencies leading to the establishment of taungya village by the Assam forest department, see Saikia, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife*. The four forest villages were Merapani, Kachamari, Amguri, and Chaudang Pathar. It must be kept in mind that both the social background of taungya and forest villages are different. For a careful reading of the social and legal context of the both categories, see Saikia, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife*.

⁶¹ 'Rules for the Establishment and Control of Forest Villages', Notification no. 4631 R, 6 Dec. 1930, in *The Assam Forest Manual*, Vol. I.

⁶² Annual *patta* means that the department could reassert its rights over it whenever it desired.

⁶³ A.W. Blunt, Conservator to the Chief Secretary, no. 314, A, 20 Mar. 1917, ASP No. 48-49, Revenue-A, Revenue Department, Apr. 1917, and also ASP, No. 4-7, Forest-A, Financial Department, Apr. 1917, Assam Secretariat Proceedings (ASA).

I have come to the following conclusions, viz., that there is little chance of colonizing the culturable area in the Nambor for years to come: because of its unhealthiness, because of the trouble that would be inevitable in clearing the tree forest and jungle, and because there are better areas than the Nambor in the Assam valley easily available for colonisation.⁶⁴

Gurdon rightly appreciated the mood of the Brahmaputra and Surma valley peasants. Its wild animals and snakes made sure that Nambor soon became part of local folklore as a place to be cautious of. An early twentieth-century estimate suggests that in a single year, six persons and 990 cattle were killed by wild animals in these areas.⁶⁵ Though Gurdon's apprehension remained true until the middle of the century, Nambor nonetheless began to attract smaller batches of peasants arriving to reclaim lands.

Peasantism of Nambor: 1950s to 1980s

Nambor and its adjoining forests witnessed a major spurt in land reclamation only in the post-independence period. This was when the province's forest resources came under increasing pressure from peasants. One of the primary reasons for this sudden increase was the arrival on a large scale of peasants from East Bengal. While the drama of forest conservation was unfolding, the local agrarian economy underwent a tremendous transformation. As part of its colonisation programme, the colonial state since the early twentieth century had wanted to settle peasants in the wastelands for jute cultivation. It was since then that the East Bengal peasants came to play a vital role in the regional agrarian economy.⁶⁶ Since the second quarter of the twentieth century, peasants in Assam had to share their available resources with a growing number of peasants, leading finally to an increased pressure on forest resources.

The settlement of East Bengal peasants in the wastelands began in the late nineteenth century.⁶⁷ It has been estimated that between 1870 and 1950, over 700,000 hectares of dense forest and woodland were shifted to agriculture, of which the immigrant peasants shared a sizeable portion.⁶⁸ These settlements never became a great burden on local resources till the second quarter of the twentieth century. It must be mentioned here that in the nineteenth century, the colonial

⁶⁴ Letter from PRT Gurdon to the Second Secretary of CC, Assam, no. 89, Revenue, Gauhati, 9 Jan. 1914, in File Colonization of the Nambor Forest in the Sibsagar District, Notes Revenue-A, Feb. 1914, nos. 1-14 (ASA).

⁶⁵ Hunter, Imperial Gazetteer of India, p. 345.

⁶⁶ For a detailed discussion of various aspects of the immigration of East Bengal peasants, see Guha, *Planters Raj to Swaraj*.

⁶⁷ Khadria, 'Some Aspects of the Rural Economy of Assam', pp. 391-94.

⁶⁸ Richards and Hagen, 'A Century of Rural Expansion in Assam'.

state's attitude towards the wastelands was flexible. Such flexibility was possible because of the complex intervention of the tea planters, the forest department and the revenue department. However, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, political developments arising out of the immigration of East Bengal settlers forced the administration to bring in a more systematic intervention to the wasteland settlement policy.

Amidst the growing revenue demand in the late nineteenth century, the provincial administration began to express its desire to promote jute cultivation in the rich alluvial wastelands of Brahmaputra valley. Provincial revenue officials had already noticed with concern the local peasants' apathy with regard to jute cultivation. In 1873 J. Sheer, deputy commissioner of Nagaon, noticed a similar apathy among Assamese peasants.⁶⁹ He noted that the limited jute cultivation practised by indigenous peasants was never at the expense of paddy cultivation. In the last two years of the nineteenth century, the provincial administration became confident that the greater portion of the available cultivatable wasteland in the riverine areas of Brahmaputra was well adapted to jute cultivation. The official estimate indicated that ample land was available in the districts of Nagaon, Lakhimpur, the eastern Darrang, the eastern duars of Goalpara, and the BARPETA subdivision of Kamrup.⁷⁰ As the local peasant society was not sufficiently skill in jute cultivation, the Assam administration thought the best available alternative would be to bring peasants in from East Bengal. Peasant migration from these areas would help them in two ways: while on the one hand it would reduce the pressure on the already over-populated East Bengal districts, on the other would be the possibility of increasing the revenue from Assam. The zamindars of Goalpara had already invited peasants from the neighbouring districts of East Bengal to cultivate the char areas. A few of them came and reclaimed land for jute cultivation. However, these peasants who migrated did not move beyond their erstwhile socio-economic condition of tenants. They only contributed to the increasing wealth of the few zamindars in Goalpara. This limited migration failed to have any serious impact on the regional peasant economy.

In 1898, F.J. Monahan, assistant director in the department of Land Records and Agriculture of Assam, agreed in an exhaustive report on the possibility of jute production in the region that since Assamese peasants would not shift to jute cultivation, immigrant settlers from nearby East Bengal could be encouraged to take up land and cultivate jute.⁷¹ The Bengal Jute Factories also put pressure on the provincial administration to induce more East Bengal peasants to take up jute cultivation in the Brahmaputra valley. The Assam administration ceded to this pressure,

⁶⁹ Report of J. Sheer, Deputy Commissioner, Nowgong, 1873, Quoted in Jogendranath Bhuyan, *Unavimsa Satikar Assam Samvada*, Dibrugarh, 1990, pp. 84–94.

⁷⁰ F.J. Monahan, *Jute Cultivation in Assam*, No. 814, 7 Feb. 1898, Shillong (NAI).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*; 'Note on Jute Cultivation' by B.C Basu, Assistant Director to Land Records and Agriculture, Assam.

and in the course of the next two decades, large blocks of wastelands, including the professional and village grazing reserves, were thrown open to East Bengal peasants for cultivation.⁷² Muslim peasants formed the majority of these newcomers. The huge immigration quickly brought large areas under jute cultivation. The magnitude of this expansion can be understood from the fact that from an area of 4,947,237 acres in 1903, the acreage had increased to 5,640,616 in 1920. This agricultural expansion led to a large-scale production of jute, barring a natural expansion of the area under rice. The jute acreage had increased from a mere 3,85,68 acres in 1904 to 13,73,37 acres in 1920.⁷³

This wasteland settlement soon began to face opposition from various quarters, strongest of which came from the local peasants and Nepali grazers.⁷⁴ The areas that were reclaimed for cultivation were common resources for the local peasants serving not only as a grazing ground for the cattle but also supplied peasants with various produces. Soon the pressure mounted from local peasants for both better management of grazing reserves and effective control of immigrant settlers in their neighbouring localities.⁷⁵ The forest department contested the land settlement on the ground that the immigrant peasants very often encroached into the Reserved Forests. With the demand for forest produce for European markets increasing in the wake of World War I,⁷⁶ the advocates of forest conservation demanded a more effective preservation of forests. The tea planters, on the other hand, suggested the preservation of 'good lands' for the future expansion of the tea plantation.⁷⁷ It must be mentioned here that the continuous pressure from this lobby was successful in prohibiting immigration into the various upper Assam districts. Thus, apart from the need to extract more revenue, the colonial state had to deal with different interest groups to redefine its wasteland settlement policy.⁷⁸ To extricate itself from this tricky situation, the colonial state, in collaboration with provincial politics, evolved a mechanism to create a conducive environment for the settlement

⁷² Most of these peasants came from the districts of Mymensing and Sylhet in East Bengal. For a brief background of their economic and cultural condition in that area, see Bose, *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*.

⁷³ This estimate has been based on Statistical Abstract Relating to British India (relevant years) London, His Majesty's Stationery Office.

⁷⁴ W.A. Cosgrave, D.C Kamrup, felt that the local settlement officer should go through the past history of professional grazing reserves thoroughly, with the help of a competent clerk. See Revenue-A, Dec. 1930, Nos 395–464 (ASA), 'Colonization scheme for Barpeta subdivision in the Kamrup'.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* See the petition of Chandicharan Talukdar and 10 others, who represented before the Assam Finance Minister for keeping the Mani Simla reserve from immigrant settlers.

⁷⁶ Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, p. 5.

⁷⁷ Behal, 'Some Aspects of the Growth of the Plantation Labor Force and Labor Movements in Assam Valley districts, 1900–47', p. 153.

⁷⁸ The Assam Land Revenue Administration Report mentions the occasional prohibition of grazers inside the reserve forests in order to avoid damages being done to young growth of forest. See, 'Notes on Colonization Scheme for Barpeta subdivision in the district of Kamrup' in Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue-A, Dec. 1930, Nos 395–465 (ASA).

of immigrant peasants. This mechanism, known as the Line System, also failed to check peasant discontent. The urgent necessity to raise agricultural revenue, compounded by a heavy fall in international tea prices, paved the way for a peasant-friendly land settlement policy. Many in the administration now agreed that cultivation and grazing could not be carried on simultaneously. They suggested that the areas reserved for professional grazing were probably too large for the requirements of local peasants or grazers. This could be thrown open for cultivation to immigrant peasants. To effectively control any pressure from the local peasants, the government took care to keep a limited number of these reserves from being cultivated. A new initiative to settle these peasants, officially called the colonisation programme, was adopted in 1928 to maintain a balance between the needs of various competing groups. However, the Indian Forest Act 1927 was more in favour of the forest department, and its rights over the Reserved Forests were reinforced. The Assam administration looked towards the un-classed state forests as prospective areas of agricultural expansion.

The colonisation scheme was evidently guided by a concern for revenue enhancement, and was a positive step towards raising the revenue of the provincial administration.⁷⁹ Between 1928 and 1935, the government alone earned Rs 4,43,717 as a premium received from the sale of wasteland under this scheme.⁸⁰ The rapid land reclamation changed the character of the regional agrarian economy and relations in various ways. Not only did the regional agriculture move quickly towards commercialisation, but it also placed tremendous pressure on the local resources. In the previous decades, commercialisation had had a limited impact on the local peasant society. Cash crops, even at the cost of the growing need for rice, were becoming popular among immigrant peasants. The area under jute cultivation also increased along with the expansion of the colonisation schemes particularly in the districts of Nowgaon and Kamrup. In 1933, the area under jute cultivation reached an all-time high of approximately 303,000 acres, only to gradually decline due to the adverse impact of the Depression on the jute market.⁸¹ This

⁷⁹ For a careful and detailed discussion, see Saikia, 'Agrarian Society, Economy and Peasant Unrest', Ch. 2.

⁸⁰ Prepared from Annual Land Revenue Administration Report, 1928–35.

⁸¹ Prepared from the Report on the Marketing and Transport of Jute in India, Indian Central Jute Committee, Calcutta, 1940, p. 66, Table 8.

Estimated Area under Jute Cultivation in Assam in thousand acres.

Year	Acreage	Year	Acreage
1928–29	149	1934–35	195
1929–30	118	1935–36	157
1930–31	157	1936–37	192
1931–32	219	1937–38	99
1932–33	303	1938–39	127
1933–34	281	1939–40	157

was an almost 45 per cent increase from 1920. The rapid expansion of acreage was also associated with increasing instances of money-lending and land-speculation. Moreover, rice production, which remained much the same, did not match the rapid population growth,⁸² substantially contributing to the rise in food prices after 1930.

Local peasants' access to land resources was restricted as they began to settle down in the lower Assam districts. And with the growing scarcity of agricultural land, peasants, mostly tribals, began to clear patches from various Reserved Forests. In the following decades the extreme land scarcity even compelled the new migrants, who preferred to settle in riverine areas suitable for jute cultivation, to reclaim land in the forest lands. Adding to this were those peasant families which had become virtually landless due to the impact of the Depression. The number of landless peasants also grew when various parts of upper Assam lost their land in the 1950 earthquake. By the middle of the twentieth century, the number of landless peasants had grown manifold,⁸³ and landlessness acquired a serious dimension in provincial politics.

It is important to note here that the idea of encroachment entered the administrative vocabulary approximately in the 1940s, when peasants from East Bengal cleared forest lands in contravention of the Revenue Department directive. These peasants were expected to clear land in riverine areas for agricultural needs. Bureaucratic facilities were created to encourage such land reclamation. However, once land resources became scarce, these peasants claimed and cleared lands from Reserved Forests. This was opposed by the Forest Department, and the peasants were declared encroachers.⁸⁴ While at this time the Assamese peasants were not part of such a classification, they soon joined the encroachers' ranks, as from the late 1940s, they, as part of the ongoing left-led peasant movement, forcibly occupied either lands from Reserved Forests or tea gardens.

Amidst the politicisation of the land problem, along with the growing pressure from landless peasants, the provincial government decided to deforest more tracts from Reserved Forests for these peasants in the early 1940s. This quickly increased the intensity of deforestation. The operational working of Nambor also helped in the removal of timber from these forests. The forest department did not take up

⁸² The winter rice produced in the Brahmaputra valley, excluding Lakhimpur, in 1924 amounted to 1,212,600 tons. This figure for 1931 was 11,294,00 tons which indicated only a slight marginal increase. Even on the eve of 1947, the amount remained static at 1,327,600 tons. Prepared from the Agricultural Statistics of Assam from relevant years.

⁸³ The various aspects of agrarian economy that led to increasing landlessness has been described in Saikia, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife*.

⁸⁴ This is in sharp contrast to what happened to similar encroachment in other parts of British India, Central India in particular. In Central India the adivasis, who were categorised as encroachers by the forest department, were people who were dependent on forest resources in the same area previous to the enactment of various forest regulations. They were pushed back from those areas after such enactments. For the best exposition of this aspect, see Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*, pp. 149–56.

any scheme for either artificial plantation or plantation with the help of natural regeneration. Thus, the extensive working and simultaneous absence of plantation for over seven decades led to a rapid decline in forest cover. A crucial factor working to restrain the government from carrying out any significant plantation here was the presence of oil deposits. Ever since the discovery and commercial production of oil in eastern Assam,⁸⁵ the Assam administration carefully asserted its rights intact, by not taking up in concrete plantation proposal, in large tracts of the southern bank of Brahmaputra in eastern Assam and also not taking up in concrete plantation proposal.⁸⁶ The areas north of Nambor had already shown signs of oil. The Assam government encouraged the opening of more industries based on soft timbers. While this resulted in both a large-scale 'legal and illegal' clearance of timber from forests,⁸⁷ it also helped in thinning out dense forest tracts—a task otherwise difficult for peasants.

As mentioned earlier, large-scale land reclamation in Nambor had taken place since the middle of the twentieth century, when large numbers of landless peasant families came to these forests in search of land. This was largely due to the intense peasant movements that the state was witness to between 1948 and 1952. Left peasant organisations mobilised peasants to crystallise the dissatisfaction of rural society into slogans like 'land to the tiller' and 'land for the landless peasants'. Since the 1940s, three non-Congress political groups—the Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), and Congress Socialist Party (CSP)—had some political presence in Assam. While their peasant fronts had successfully mobilised the countryside, the peasant movement, in spite of its scattered nature, had seriously weakened the newly formed Congress-led provincial government. Since 1948 sharecroppers in various parts of Assam had been giving only one-fourth of their produce to the landowners, and had virtually waged an undeclared war on the absentee landowners. In some places landless peasants occupied lands inside the Reserved Forests or in tea gardens. Both the CPI and CSP had had a strong presence in Golaghat since the 1940s. During 1950–51, the CSP mobilised many landless peasants from upper Assam districts and encouraged them to reclaim land in the Reserved Forest or tea grants in and around Nambor. One of the sites of such a struggle for land in a tea grant became well-known as the *Giladhari Satyagraha*.⁸⁸ The peasant movement lost its radical nature after 1952, mostly due to changes in the ideological moorings of the left

⁸⁵ For an understanding of the imperial interest in oil in India, see Jones, 'The State and Economic Development in India: 1894–1947: The Case of Oil'.

⁸⁶ For an elaborate discussion on the various plantation schemes taken up by the forest department in Assam during colonial times, see Saikia, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife*, Ch. 6.

⁸⁷ For a fuller understanding of the relationship between the forest and industries in Assam, see Saikia *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife*.

⁸⁸ For a detailed discussion on this movement, see Saikia, 'Agrarian Society, Economy and Peasant Unrest'.

parties. However, the movement continued with its land reclamation programme with active support from left parties in the 1950s. The increasing pressure from these parties to open more lands in the Reserved Forests compelled Congress politicians to seek the immediate intervention of the government in this regard. In a letter representing the mood of the congressmen Bimala Prasad Chaliha, president of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, asked the government to open forest lands to the landless peasants of the state. He informed the then revenue minister:

... the problem of landless agriculturalists is gradually assuming a great magnitude ... the reactionary forces will take full advantage of the situation and it will get out of our control before long. I am one who is against dereservation of forests reserves but ... since waste land is available I am obliged to suggest that land is provided to the landless people.⁸⁹

In a striking change in the mood of the forest department, the deputy conservator of forests in Sibsagar tried to argue that such deforestation would 'seriously effect the adaphic, climatic and flood conditions of the surrounding country'.⁹⁰ The forest officer's apprehension was not looked upon with favour by the Assam administration, and more lands were opened up subsequently. In 1958, the implementation of the Ceiling Act affected many tea gardens around Nambor and adjoining areas. Peasants, with support from the CSP, continued their forceful occupation of these lands.

The forest department also extended its effort to accommodate both shifting cultivation and forest plantations through an early twentieth-century practice known as *taungya* villages.⁹¹ In 1953 the department established several such villages in Tengani. The *taungya* villagers were provided with the free grant of a first class tree. They were required to plant seedlings for which cash payment was made according to the number and condition of the seedlings. *Taungya* cultivation never occupied a large area, remaining confined to a limited area of operation. It was primarily practised in places with an extensive practice of shifting cultivation with high demand for land. Moreover, certain Reserves, with recurring financial turn over, were also identified for the implementation of such practises.

The Nambor and Doyang Reserved Forests were exposed to new intricacies of land settlement from the early 1960s. The district of Nagaland in Assam was declared a state in 1963, creating immediate dispute over the provincial boundary.

⁸⁹ Letter from Bimalaprasad Chaliha, President, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, to Minister for Revenue, Government of Assam, 17 Apr., Delhi, 1954, in File AFR 222/54 (ASA).

⁹⁰ Confidential Memo, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Sibsagar Division, no. B/11321/34, 6 Nov. 1954, in File AFR 222/54 (ASA).

⁹¹ For a fuller account of these *taungya* villages, see Saikia, *Jungles, Reserves, Wildlife; and Mailk*, 'The problem of shifting cultivation', pp. 293–94. The etymological familiarity between *taungya* and Tengani is apparent. Three separate *taungya* villages came into being in 1950, 1958 and 1961, and were known as Tengani, Nimati Galai and Shabishgharia respectively. See Leaflet No.1, BTUSS, 2004.

The new state of Nagaland pushed forward an aggressive demand for a solution of the inter-state boundary problem. With the growing pressure from Nagaland, the general consensus amongst Assamese politicians was that the best way to retain control over the vast uninhabited border areas of Assam along Nagaland was to settle Assamese peasants in the forested tracts, thereby laying claim to the disputed boundary areas. Eventually a move was made by the Assam government to distribute lands amounting to 10 bighas to the peasants. The government began to encourage peasant settlement in the adjoining forest tracts of Nambor and Doyang. Officially known as 'half-a-mile settlement',⁹² landless peasants from neighbouring areas were settled within a distance of half a mile from the Nagaland boundary.

In the 1960s, these peasants were joined by another group of peasants. The left and socialist leaders continued to defend the state's landless peasants. In the latter part of the 1960s, they renewed their movement amongst landless peasants, compelling the Bimala Prasad Chaliha-led Congress government to distribute lands to these peasants in the Reserved Forest. Since then, land reclamation in Nambor and Doyang has acquired a faster pace. Peasants came mostly from various central Assam villages. Most of them had lost their land in the river erosion caused by annual floods⁹³ in Majuli, the river island of Brahmaputra.⁹⁴ Tea garden labourers also migrated and reclaimed lands in these forests.⁹⁵ These labourers, who came to work in various tea gardens from central Indian villages in the nineteenth century, did not return to their original villages. After their work contract with the tea companies expired, they preferred to settle down and begin a new life as peasants. Many tea gardens even preferred such an arrangement, and often rented out their own fallow lands to these labourers on a sharecropping basis. However, in the middle of the twentieth century, the labourers could not find any cultivable land near their gardens, and went out to distant forests to reclaim land. Many of those who migrated encountered dense jungles. The difficulty in clearing jungles compelled them to remain smallholders.

The forest department failed to assert any agenda of forest conservation in the post-independence period. It continued with the ambiguities of forest conservation begun during colonial times. On the one hand, while it pushed ahead a forceful

⁹² It was as part of the provincial diplomatic move to control any further deterioration of the Assam-Nagaland border dispute that the government introduced this system. For an early account of the Assam-Nagaland border dispute, see Ghurye, *Whither India*, pp. 134–35; Bhattacharyya, *The Troubled Border: Some Facts about Boundary Disputes Between Assam-Nagaland, Assam-Arunachal; and Chaube, Hill Politics in Northeast India*.

⁹³ A survey conducted by BTUSS suggested that peasants from the Sibsagar district migrated here after several consecutive floods and river erosions.

⁹⁴ They began to call their new habitat Mukti-Majuli, the freed Majuli.

⁹⁵ BTUSS claimed that such labourers came from Sarupathar and Marangi localities to settle down. In fact, since the late nineteenth century, the tea gardens as well as a few Assamese landlords began to rent out lands to these labourers mostly on a sharecropping basis.

programme of timber-based industries, leading to the more workings of Reserved Forests, the provincial politics had to continue with its land settlement policies in forest lands. The state government had pursued its land settlement programme through the revenue department. The latter was accorded primacy over the forest department in deciding the affairs of the forest lands. Gradually the forest department ceased to assert its absolute right in Nambor and adjoining forest tracts. By 1970 the revenue administration became the *de facto* authority in these forested areas.⁹⁶ The revenue department aggressively pressurised the forest department to explore possibilities of deforestation for peasant cultivation,⁹⁷ and this encouraged landless peasants to continue migrating and reclaiming land till the 1980s.⁹⁸ Most of this migration occurred in times of floods or other such natural calamities. Those who became landless after mortgaging their land to money-lenders also migrated.⁹⁹ Few amongst those who migrated to Tengani were victims of development displacement.¹⁰⁰ The peasants who reclaimed land in these forests, however, never got any tenurial right on their lands. Their unsecured occupancy soon became a matter for concern.

Peasants in Nambor: Understanding the Agrarian Economy

The peasantisation of Nambor and the neighbouring Reserved Forests during the last 100 years accommodated mostly poor peasants. They reclaimed land from forests and began cultivation. After independence the government, partly because of their populist agenda, encouraged landless peasants to settle down on forest lands, but never addressed the basic question of land right. Peasants never acquired any right over the patches of land that they had reclaimed. Can we categorise these people as peasants when they did not acquire any legal right over their land? One might be tempted to say no. However, while they never received their legal tenurial right from the state, they created both the economic and cultural space of a peasant society in Nambor. Soon complexities emerged among the peasants.

As landless peasants began to arrive and reclaim various parts of the Nambor forests, more stratification took place. Those who arrived early, and primarily through

⁹⁶ It was during this time that revenue officials began to distribute land to the landless peasants.

⁹⁷ Letter of Additional Deputy Commissioner, Jorhat, to the Divisional Forest Officer, Golaghat, 31 Mar. 1987, No. JRS, 34/85/51.

⁹⁸ The DFO, in an official letter to the Conservator of Forest (Head Quarter), Assam, admitted that there were a number of villages which could be defined as encroached villages inside the Nambor forest reserves even after 1980. Letter from the DFO, Golaghat, to CF, 21 Jan. 2004, no. A/40/(C)–58–59. The DFO appended a list of villages that came into being after and before 1980.

⁹⁹ BTUSS claims that such peasants came mainly from Kamarbhandha, Forkating, Titabor, Borpathar, Sarupathar, Ghiladhari or Khumtai, all conveniently located close to these forest patches.

¹⁰⁰ Peasant families, like those which lost their lands due to the establishment of the Salekati Thermal Power station in Bongaigaon in western Assam and were officially rehabilitated in Tengani, was an example of such cases.

state initiative, like the forest or taungya villagers, emerged as rich landowners. As mentioned earlier, these villagers were given land to cultivate inside the forests, and occupied a vast amount of land in return for their labour services to the forest department. These villagers soon laid down a powerful claim over forest resources. Limited supervision by a weak forest department in the middle of the century provided them with ample opportunity to open up more patches inside the Reserved Forests. Peasants from neighbouring villages had also accumulated land in these forests. However, scarcity of agricultural labour restrained them from converting their holdings into agricultural fields.

The best option for escaping from these uncertainties of labour was provided by the soil. Clay soil proved extremely useful for making fisheries and horticultural gardens. This was particularly true for betel-nuts. This work was done both with their own labour and hired wage labourers brought from distant places. These home gardens, which surrounded the peasants' dwellings, provided them with a supply of cash for many years. In the process, they acquired wealth, which was supplemented with fisheries. Years of occupancy and wealth helped them to play a leading role in controlling the affairs of these areas over the next few decades. Thus was created the socio-cultural category of settled villages and peasantisation.

Peasants who had arrived in the 1960s faced opposition from these landowners.¹⁰¹ Even though these landowners lacked labourers to work their uncultivated lands, they realised that the newly arrived peasants would not fulfil their requirement. The later came to reclaim land in the Reserved Forest as independent peasants. Many of them knew that the forest department could not restrain them from clearing the forests. They used to get assurances from the revenue department of finding land for cultivation. As many of these peasants came with the support of a well-mobilised left movement, they could ask the government to intervene when they faced opposition from landowners upon their arrival.¹⁰²

However, as the state tried to temporarily resolve these contradictions, mostly through bureaucratic intervention, shortage of further cultivable lands led to increasing conflicts. The landless peasants who arrived from the 1970s had no alternative but to begin their lives as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. They occupied small patches to live in and construct their houses. Here, it is also important to mention the topography of Nambor. These vast tracts of forests were characterised by both plains and highlands. Those peasants who came early settled

¹⁰¹ Peasant like Rohicharan Narzary remembers that even during their arrival and subsequent reclamation of forest lands, they faced opposition from some local people.

¹⁰² Such approval came from one Gulendra Basumatary, the village headman, who took the government's permission as exemplified in an official letter to the Chief Conservator of Forest, Dec. 1966. Quoted in P. Daimari, pp. 29–31. It is generally believed that some 600 peasants migrated on that occasion. The other most talked about official proposal was the Doyang Settlement, through which the government initiated steps towards the settlement of peasants inside the forests.

down in the plains, close to a tributary river, Doyang. The later batches had to compete for highlands. These mixed highlands and plains in Tengani made it difficult to cultivate paddy. Like Doyang, it was extremely productive for vegetables and cash crops like sugarcane. They cultivated these cash crops, but had to buy their food crops from the markets.

It is not difficult to presume that many rich landowners played a crucial role in encouraging these landless peasants to clear small patches and work in their uncultivated lands. Landless families who arrived in the hope of land had to start their life with a little patch. The increasing supervision of the forest department, partially through the Assam-Nagaland border dispute, immensely contributed to the interests of rich landowners. In the meantime, the sale of timber from these forests continued, and the profit thus earned was captured by a few leading families. While the forest department claimed to be supervising the Reserved Forests and its resources, it never made any attempt to curb this lucrative timber trade.

The lands that the peasants had begun to cultivate did not require any irrigation, and sustained good cash crops.¹⁰³ With the gradual expansion in acreage, various market mechanisms made inroads into the new peasant society, adding to their troubles. A highly productive cultivation of vegetables, spice and sugarcane,¹⁰⁴ apart from a small share of paddy for home consumption, had attracted traders to these localities. Many traders encouraged landless cultivators to come and cultivate cash crops. In due course of time several hats were established, integrating the local economy with the regional economy. Peasants required cash for cultivation. In the absence of any secure property, it was difficult to get easy loans. The traders, either independently or through the local rich landowners, used to provide advance money to these cultivators in return for crops at a fixed rate after harvesting. A class of money-lenders emerged in the area.

The peasants brought their produce to the markets. Even their journey into markets, through muddy and slippery village paths, was a difficult one.¹⁰⁵ Peasants who had already entered into an agreement with traders sold off their produce at pre-determined rates. While a distant railway station, which had traversed through Nambor since colonial times, provided the traders with a means to carry away the products to neighbouring states, the margin left to peasants was very low, leaving almost nothing for them. The absence of tenurial security placed these cultivators in a tricky situation. The traders-cum-moneylenders had forced these peasants to place their landholdings in some form of mortgage, locally known as *bandhak*.

¹⁰³ Even in the early twentieth century, colonial administrators noticed the high growth of crops like betel nut, ginger, vegetables and sugarcane in various parts of Sibsagar.

¹⁰⁴ Peasants in Golaghat used to cultivate sugarcane in the highlands in large quantities even during colonial times. In 1904, approximately 7,000 acres of land was under sugarcane cultivation.

¹⁰⁵ To avoid difficulty in these newly reclaimed areas, peasants even remodelled their bicycles for easy riding.

Failure to return the money encouraged money-lenders to assert complete physical control over the peasants' land. Many peasants eventually relinquished their occupancy to the money-lenders. They had no choice but to remain poor, and their economic condition never improved.

Forest Department, Peasants and Competing Boundaries: 1960s to 1980s

As the peasants settled down in these forest areas, they began to face hostility from various quarters. The first challenge came from the tea companies in Nambor-Doyang in the latter half of the 1960s. They parleyed with the administration to evict the peasants who occupied their land. This led to some occasional conflict between the forest department and peasants in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The peasants' protest mostly took the form of negotiation with the district administration. Such eviction was not really supported by the Assam government, and hence never acquired a larger momentum. But peasants did not only seek governmental intervention, but also went on a path of political struggle. The first ever peasant struggle to secure their land rights began in 1968 in Doyang. They were organised by left and socialist elements. With demonstration that had 'thousands of peasants participating', they re-asserted their claim for control over lands that they had occupied from the tea companies.¹⁰⁶ While the tea companies challenged the peasants' reclamation of land in the 1960s, the latter succeeded in garnering strong support from the provincial Congress government. Peasants were not evicted from the tea garden lands.

Since the early 1970s, it was the forest department which again asserted its claim over forests. Nambor again became a site of this contest between the revenue and forest departments. In the wake of the new attitude that the forest department took, peasants inside forest lands increasingly came to be identified as encroachers. Repeated evictions were carried out during 1973–74. It would be a mistake to suggest that the forest department succeeded in its struggle with the revenue department. On the other hand, the Assam-Nagaland boundary dispute critically helped the forest department to regain a powerful position in these forests. It was during this time that the Assam government, by accepting the 1971 K.V.K. Sundaram commission's interim report on the Assam-Nagaland border dispute, agreed to de-populate these forest tracts.¹⁰⁷ The forest department was asked to carry out partial eviction.

The most aggressive phase of eviction took place in 1973, in which one person died. This quickly helped to secure popular support for the evicted peasants, and also helped in the growth of an anti-eviction movement. It was during this crucial

¹⁰⁶ The following account is based on my fieldwork in Doyang-Tegani in 2007. I have been privileged to receive a first-hand view of various written accounts of the peasant organisations. I have met leaders and peasant families who have migrated to those places after 1950.

¹⁰⁷ This view is echoed in Phukan, Assam Nagaland Sima Samasya, p. 71.

period that, with the help of the experiences of leading popular civil movements, the All Assam Student Union (AASU) made its entry into the world of rural politics. In the weeks after the eviction, AASU played a significant role in mobilising the peasants. Stories of the eviction were reported in national dailies. The attention of a larger public was drawn towards the issue. Radical young intellectuals visited the locality. The eviction also attracted the attention of the ongoing Bengal Naxal movement. At the invitation of a few local youths, the CPI-ML leader Bhaskar Nandi visited the area along with his cadres, and attempted to mobilise the evicted peasants. They demanded *patta*—the official land document confirming the rights of a peasant over a particular patch of land—for these peasants. Nandi stayed in Doyang for weeks, listening to peasants' problems and trying to mobilise them.¹⁰⁸ Later on, Jehirul Hussain, a well-known Assamese short-story writer, recalled that the Naxal struggle could not make any progress in Nambor as they failed to appreciate the internal dynamics and relationship between peasants and forest lands in Doyang.¹⁰⁹ Hussain claimed that in this short period of time, like in other parts of the country, these activists were busy searching for the principal enemies of the peasants, wrongly identifying the rich peasant families as such. Even though the Naxalites failed to mobilise disgruntled peasants, politicians from CPI and CSP became instrumental in mobilising them to some extent. Despite this political mobilisation occasional eviction had continued. It is not difficult to presume that such evictions never actually forced peasants to relinquish their rights over forest lands. The explanation may be found in the very character of provincial politics. The state government was still not in favour of forest conservation as expected by the forest department. The provincial politics was marked by a strong pro-peasant orientation.

Couple of years of mobilisation of the evicted peasants brought the result. In the 1978 assembly elections, the peasants voted Soneswar Bora, a socialist leader, into the Assam legislature, and inducted him as agriculture minister in the new Janata government.¹¹⁰ Peasants celebrated *Doyang bijoy ustav* in 1978 as a symbolic mark of their rightful claim over these forests. The new government awarded peasants with various public amenities like roads, schools, etc. The peasants also gained concessions in terms of assurances from the district administration regarding staying the ongoing eviction programme. Along with the peasantisation of Nambor forests, various grassroots political instruments began to operate in these areas, helping to stabilise the settlement process. Members had been elected from the newly settled area to the village panchayat since 1979. In June 1978 Chief Minister Golap Borbora agreed to open the Doyang Reserved Forest to the peasants who had been settling there since post-independence. He admitted that peasantisation

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Hussain, 'Doyangor Andolan: Kichu Purani Katha'.

¹¹⁰ The election helped to return a good number of left MLAs to the assembly. The share of the left parties in the election also increased considerably.

had already taken place in parts of these forest reserves.¹¹¹ However, while the short-lived Janata government failed to deliver any permanent land right to these peasants, it nonetheless gave them a sense of security.

As the surge of eviction disappeared after 1978,¹¹² the movement gradually died out. The next two decades saw the rather peaceful¹¹³ reclamation of land in these forests. More peasants came in search of better cultivable land.¹¹⁴ Others, like their predecessors, arrived after losing their lands to river erosion. A few began to expand their existing holding by reclaiming more forests. Also, the growing inter-state border dispute between Assam and Nagaland become more complex, and acquired a violent turn when in 1979 a few Assamese villagers lost their lives.¹¹⁵ The hostility further increased in 1985, claiming more lives on either side.¹¹⁶ The state also came under President's rule in June 1981, after two years of the anti-foreigners movement led by the AASU. With greater central supervision over the affairs of the Assam administration, the massive deforestation in these areas had attracted the attention of the central forest ministry. The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, had significantly strengthened the scope of the forest department to effectively supervise forest resources. Eviction by the forest department began to take place after 1981. Between October 1981 and April 1999, according to a conservative estimate of the forest department, 13 evictions were carried out in these areas,¹¹⁷ most of which were arbitrarily carried out in different villages, though without any significant level of afforestation.

Peasants continued to raise their voices against these evictions, but these protests never acquired an organised political form. The peasants in Tengani continued to receive political support for land reclamation in Nambor.¹¹⁸ Peasant mobilisation

¹¹¹ Statement by Chief Minister Golap Borbora, Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, 17 June 1978.

¹¹² For a recent and brief account of the 1970s political situation in the state, see Hiren Gohain, 'Chronicles of Violence and Terror' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24 March 2007.

¹¹³ It is peaceful in the sense that the state deliberately stayed away from any massive programme, in spite of there being occasional evictions. We must remember that these evictions were carried out largely as a textbook application of various rules related to forest conservation.

¹¹⁴ At the end of the century forest department claimed that they were mere encroachers into the forest reserves.

¹¹⁵ The events of 1979 in a place called Merapani were widely reported in both national and international newspapers.

¹¹⁶ In June 1985, approximately 50 policemen lost their lives due to the clashes between Assam and the Nagaland police. See 'Border Dispute Draws Indian Troops to Area', *The New York Times*, 11 June 1985.

¹¹⁷ A note on Encroachment on Nambor North Reserved Forest, by Divisional Forest Officer, Golaghat, 2003.

¹¹⁸ A committee, known as the Doyang Krishak Santha, was formed in 1987 demanding pattas for the peasants, but this movement could not enthuse peasants to fight against their misery. A major initiative took place on 6 Apr. 1987, when peasants from Doyang Nambor, under the banner of the Doyang Krishak Sangha, came all the way to Guwahati to demonstrate. The demonstration was

and their struggle, along with tactical support from various political groups, helped evicted peasants to stay on inside the forest; however, they were never given any permanent rights to their occupied lands.¹¹⁹ These struggles which tried to push the agrarian frontier, were often short-lived, and died down amidst the competition between the revenue and forest department. Thus, while challenges to the peasants' settlement had been around since the 1960s, they acquired a greater political character from the beginning of the present century. With the end of the twentieth century, the peasants in Nambor-Tengani were exposed to the most crucial phase of eviction in the middle of 2002. Soon the struggle and contest over forests lands acquired a new dimension with the emergence of collective protests against the eviction. For the time being the forest department withdrew its conservation agenda. The antagonism between the peasants and forest department took primacy, leading to a spate of hostility. This came to be known in public discussions as the *Doyang-Tengani* struggle.

Conclusion

Peasant migration and the gradual reclamation of forested areas in Nambor in the twentieth century caused its dense forest coverage to thin down. As these forests came under increasing human intervention and with greater agricultural activity, the conflict between the two frontiers of agrarian and forest boundaries became prominent. However, the seeds of such competing claims over nature had been laid in the previous centuries. Anxious to control nature, the East India Company claimed its right over vast forest territories of Assam. This was aimed at staking a claim over economic resources. Soon more areas were brought under control. Such intervention not only changed the region's landscape forever, but also crucially dislodged the people dependent on them. Legal and social discourses provided legitimacy to the changing ideas of rights and the natural claimants over these resources. The tea planters, in the meanwhile, quickly became the legal owners of vast forested tracts, and began their lucrative production of the cash crop. The new landscape that they created came to be identified as an extended forest frontier. In course of time, Assamese literary works often identified such landscape as an extension of natural forests. Also, despite the commencement of the official forest conservation, the commercial motive remained the primary agenda. The question

supported by some members of the CPI–M, Congress–S and Congress–I, apart from the AGP, which was in power at that time This account is based on a small booklet issued by Doyang Andulonor Chamu Itihash, pp. 11–13.

¹¹⁹ Thus, in 1990, Nagen Saikia, the AGP MP in the Rajya Sabha, wrote to the Deputy Commissioner, Golaghat, asking him to not any such peasants; Demi-official Letter by N. Saikia, dated 26 Feb. 1990.

of preserving the region's biodiversity never came to the fore. More crucially, although the state did not hesitate to share and redefine the boundaries of the 'conserved' forests according to planters' requirements, they also seriously pursued a policy of shrinking the forest boundary. This was done to increase the revenue of the agricultural department. Over the years, as the local peasants lost their cultural right over land, the state further pushed them away from these resources, blaming their inability to become cash-crop producers. Peasant settlements came close to these forest reserves, but were not necessarily recognised by the forest department as revenue villages. In subsequent years they became identified with encroachers.

The state in independent India continued this agenda, which was interrupted often by an attempt at departure by the new managers of the forest department. More forest-based industries were established in Assam. Peasants continued to push their agrarian frontier against the state's will. The break came early in the last quarter of the previous century. Whether it was the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 or the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, the authority of the state over forests and their resources was reaffirmed. For a time being peasants, who had already cleared forested land for agriculture, also came to regard the Act of 1980 as some form of legal boundary that needed to be abided by. It is also true that the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, had begun to work as a mechanism that could bring marginal stability to the flexible boundary between agrarian territories and the forest, which had for so long been manipulated by various political parties. Political parties, now constrained by the various mechanisms in place to protect forests, had to express their willingness to support peasants' claim over natural resources, albeit reluctantly.

In spite of the state's ability to achieve their limited goal of conservation and protection of forests, competition over these resources never disappeared. We come across the most fundamental continuity between the colonial and postcolonial state when the Assam government pushed forward with its agenda for the expansion of small tea gardens in the early 1990s. Repeating a late nineteenth-century drama, patches of forest lands, primarily from un-classed forests, were opened out to prospective Assamese tea planters, who officially came to be known as 'small farmers'. Moreover, the colonial state's dilemma while implementing the scientific forestry—of whether to adopt natural or artificial regeneration of forests—was resolved by the immediate economic logic of the state. At the end of century, the state, despite its claim for participatory community share in the management of forests, had further pushed, essentially through the JFM programme, the agenda for the commercialisation of forest resources. Various forest policies not only collectively re-asserted the forest department's right over forested land, but also redefined peasants' rights in the forests. In spite of the practices of a more rigorous implementation of a regime of forest conservation based on a rigid enforcement of forest legislation, peasants also asserted claims over the forest and other natural resources,

leading to intense competition between the state and peasants.¹²⁰ At the end of the century these conflicts, a widely occurring phenomenon in various developing countries, began to seriously question the state-sponsored agenda of forest conservation. Many of these movements had come forward with contesting notions of development and conservation, where the coexistence of man and nature was more than possible. However, despite the proposition of an alternative form of conservation by the peasants and the inability of the state to accommodate this notion into practice, the conflict between the agrarian and forest frontiers in the 1980s remained an unresolved dilemma. This provided the peasants with ample political legitimacy to continue to lay claim over forested lands, often to the detriment of the forest cover. Moreover, the successful democratic struggle also empowered the peasants to negotiate better with the various organs of the state in their attempt to assert their claims to land.

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¹²⁰ As mentioned at the beginning of this article, an intense peasant movement had resurfaced in these areas. For a comprehensive discussion of this political movement, see Saikia, 'Land, Forest Management, and Environment: Peasant Struggles in Assam, 2002–2007' in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2008 (forthcoming).

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