

# North-Eastern Frontier of India

*Structural Imperatives*

and Aspects of Change

A.C. SINHA

# NORTH-EASTERN FRONTIER OF INDIA

Structural Imperatives and Aspects of Change



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INDUS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
NEW DELHI

Call No. 303.4095416

Acc. No. 3820

© 1994 Indus Publishing Company

First published in 1994 by  
Indus Publishing Company  
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi

ISBN 81-7387 009-8

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Published by M.L. Gidwani, Indus Publishing Company  
FS-5, Tagore Garden, New Delhi 110027, and printed at  
Efficient Offset Printers, Shahzada Bagh, New Delhi 110035

## *Preface*

A series of titles on the aspects of land and people of the region appear regularly. At times one feels that there is too much rush for the print media to come out with publications on the region. To the extent that old ethnography, reports and monographs have been reprinted, rather shabbily, under different titles. Then a series of quickies, and mostly from the journalists on occasional assignments to the region, are in the publication market. We find the ex-soldiers penning down thier sojourns on the strategic issues of their charge. The various Christian churches have their theological, missionic and occasional academic exercises in publication. Lastly, the different academic institutions have their theses, anthologies, text-books, research reports, seminar proceedings, etc, published on the region. In short, if it is not a spate, at least it is a good shower of publications on the region.

I gave a serious thought to this before I decided to go for this publication. I have done, a year before, two books on two important themes—urbanization and environment respectively—of the North East region, besides my books on Sikkim and Bhutan. They were well received by the critics as well as the readers.

I weighed my occasional writings on the region and found that most of them were either on the social structural aspects or on the social dynamism and rapid regional transformation. I felt the need to put some of them together. Some of them were updated, revised and edited for the purpose. I added the *Prologue* and the *Epilogue* for introducing the various themes and summing them up at the end. The volume is of a modest size on the regional aspects of continuity and change and I hope the readers will find it relevant for understanding the region in a better way.

As a tribute to the fast changing regional scenario, one of the senior academics of the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

with whom I have a privilege to work for years as a colleague, was elected as the first tribal from the region to be the Vice-Chancellor of a Central University in India. As a token to celebrate such a choice he gracefully accepted my dedication of this volume to him, for which I feel gratified. Before the raw idea of publication took a distinct shape, a number of my colleagues—Prof. Imdad Hussain, Dr. David R. Syiemlieh, Prof. P.K. Mishra, Prof. R. Gopal Krishnan, Dr. P.M. Chacko, Dr. I. Lanu Aier to mention just a few—helped me in various ways to clarify the issues through occasional discussions. And for that I am obliged to them and ‘others’ whose names do not appear in the print. The secretarial assistants of the Department of Sociology, M/s R. Dutta, A. Dkhar, N.P. Sharma and A. Rahman, did the typing and related rigmarole as usual, for which they deserve my special appreciation. Lastly, I am thankful to Mr. M.L. Gidwani, my publisher, not only for attractive and quick publication of the book, but also for his various professional advices.

A.C. SINHA

## *Acknowledgements*

We thankfully acknowledge the kind permission for inclusion in the present anthology granted to us by the organizers of the 'International Conference on Environment and History in South and South East Asia' at the National Institute of Science, Technology and Developmental Studies, New Delhi for the paper on 'Forests of British Assam'; the Director, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla for the paper on 'the American Baptist Mission Among the Nagas' presented in the Seminar on 'Continuity and Change'; and 'the Nepalese Immigration' from N.K. Rustomji and C. Ramble (eds) *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, published by Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla; the Member Secretary ICSSR for 'Inequality and Stratification in the Hill States' based on the 'Trend Report on Tribal Studies', Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi.

B.L. Abbi (ed) *North East Region: Problem and Prospects of Development*, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, for chapter five; M.N. Karna (ed) *Peasant and Peasant Protest*, Intellectual Publishing House, New Delhi, for 'Peasant and Peasant Conflict in Nagaland'; the Editor, *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, Vol. 27(1), for 'Tipaimukh Hydel Electric Project and the Hmar Apprehensions'; the Director, ISRO, Ahmedabad, for chapter ten from the Research Project Reports on 'Video Penetration in North East India' and 'Rural Messaging Needs in Meghalaya', and NEHU publication for 'Structural Imperatives of the Indian Core and North East Region' from B. Pakem (ed) *Regionalism in India*, Har Anand Publishers, New Delhi.

## *Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	7
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	9
<i>Prologue</i>	13

### PART I: STRUCTURAL IMPERATIVES

1. Natural Resources and Pre-Colonial Economy	23
2. Forests in British Assam	46
3. The American Baptist Mission Among the Nagas	69
4. Inequality and Stratification in the Hill States	90
5. Managing the Social Consequences of Smallness	117
6. The Nepalese Immigration	132

### PART II: ASPECTS OF CHANGE

7. Peasant and Peasant-Conflict in Nagaland	159
8. The Character of Urbanization in the Hill States	169
9. Tipaimukh Hydel Electric Project and the Hmar Apprehensions	186
10. Communication and Development	209
11. Structural Imperatives of the Indian Core and the North-Eastern Region	229
<i>Epilogue</i>	242
<i>Author Index</i>	249
<i>Subject Index</i>	252

## *Prologue*

The North-Eastern Frontier Region of India, the ancient Pragjyotisa and historical Kamrupa and the British province of Assam, consisting of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, has a distinct identity. This landlocked territory representing as much as 7.97 per cent of the Indian geographical area has Bhutan, Bangladesh, Burma and Tibet region of China as her immediate neighbours and a tenuous link to India in the West. Topographically, the entire region as the encatchment area of the Brahmaputra river system is the part of the Eastern Himalayan Extension. Historically, it had strong links with the Gangetic plains, though its natural orientation was towards North to Tibet and East to the South East Asia. Ethnologically, though there have been distinct Caucasoid and Austroloid strains in its population, the main ethnic stream belongs to the larger Mangloid stock and their legends of ethnic migration link them to the North and the East. Same is the situation in terms of linguistic affiliation. The region has a variety of social formations from the highly complex state systems such as the Ahoms to the small, isolated, nomadic band organizations. As an Indian territory its destiny is intimately linked with the larger Indian Union. However, its regional characteristics are so pronounced that the scholars find it convenient to emphasize its closeness to the South East Asian Communities.

It goes without saying that animism was the most prevalent faith among the various communities before they came in contact with the great religions of the world such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Meiteis, Ahoms, Kochs and Tripuris among others were the earliest communities to come within in the Hindu fold. However, under the influence of the Vaishnav movement and Swami Shanker Deb the Hinduism in the region has been free from the various caste disabilities prevalent elsewhere. Islam



entered the region during the Mughal period of the Indian history and got assimilated within the regional dominant cultural contour. In this context, Azam Fakir's *Zakir* and *Zikir* are the precious ingredients of the regional folk cultural commonwealth. The Hinayan Buddhism of Chakma, Magh, Nocte and Singphos and the Mahayan faith of the Monpas and Sherdukpens add further to the religious mozaic of the region. By the middle of the 19th century A.D. a number of Christian missionaries came to the region with their evangelical, medical and educational expertise and they could establish various denominations among Ao, Angami, Garo, Lhota, Mizo, Khasi, Tangkhul, Kuki and other communities. It is a fact that by the time the colonial rule came to an end in India, Christianity turned out to be the most dominant faith among the hill communities of the region south of river Brahmaputra and it could open a modern, westernized and technologically superior window for them. The various buffer and bridge communities of the past, adopted new names for themselves; collated to form larger identities such as the Adi, Naga, Chakhesang, Mizo, etc. and some of them fragmented to new formations such as Hmar from the earliest larger communities.

The historians inform us that there were various principalities before the Ahoms could establish themselves in the Brahmaputra valley. The way they organised their water managed economy through an intricate system of *pyke* on the basis of *Khel* and *Mel*, which was reminiscent of Witfoegel's *Oriental Dispotism* (Witfoegel, K.A., 1962). Though plains were ruled with a heavy hand, frontiers were secured through the payment of *posa* and institution of *Kakoti*. Many of these distant communities were loosely linked with the Ahom state and at times their services were requisitioned. There was a limited social intercourse and, at times, Ahom princes were married beyond their limits for the benefit of political alliance. Though there was an economic hierarchy, Ahom Hinduism was largely free from social disabilities experienced in other Hindu kingdoms in India. At the cultural level, early Assamese language was emerging as a lingua franca for the entire region.

At the formal political level, there were three dominant models available in the region: (i) Hindu and Hinduized kingdoms such as Meiteis, Ahoms, Jaintias, Kochs, Dimasas, Tripuris, etc.; (ii) Bud-

dhists like Chakmas, Khamtis, Bhutanese etc, and (iii) tribal polities such as Khasi Syiemships (Sinha, S.C., 1987). Then there were a number of incipient state formations such as Mizos (Lushais), Angamis, Konyak and others. The basically subsistence hill economy generated an extremely limited surplus, which was too insufficient for maintenance of a state structure. On the other hand, the region was on a difficult and agriculturally unsuitable locale, where possession of a plot of land was not preferred to an extensive topographical niche for hunting, grazing or transhumance. The basic character of a hill man is that of defiance and struggle against the natural obstacles and human intrigues (Lattimore, O., 1982). Thus, if a surplus was not generated locally, it was considered imperative to acquire such articles of necessity and luxury by force leading to raid, feud, invasion and even war.

After 1824-26 Anglo-Burmese War, Lakhimpur district, which touched all the geographical sub-regional variations to a great extent, was considered an ideal location for colonization of the white settlers. As luck would have smiled on them, a stray and insignificant vegetation of the region—tea—caught the imagination of the then technologically advanced British entrepreneurs. This resulted in an organised expansion of the tea plantation economy on an entirely technologically primitive base. The natural resources—land, forest, minerals and wild life—were considered inexhaustible. The key word was expansion through adventure, intrigue, greed, treaty and treachery. Among the *posa* articles offered to the Adis and the Mons tribesman bottles of rum, opium, tobacco, were the items gifted to the hillmen (Sinha, A.C., 1986). Still the hillmen were referred as barbarians, savage, uncivilized, wildmen, head-hunters and what not. In this way, while the valley land in the region was being transformed into one of the most progressive plantation economy in the world, the newly emerged formation was causing a havoc to already stagnant indigenous economy.

In case one may make very broad generalizations on the pre-British hill formations, the scenario presents relatively simpler contour. The hill communities possessed of extremely crude technology with their sparse population and abundance of natural vegetation, were engaged in hunting of the wild animals and collecting of the forest products for their subsistence. A second formation was

taking shape in the form of family/community-based subsistence farming through slash-and-burn type of rotational cultivation (*jhumming*) often described as the 'Asiatic mode of production'. Ethnographers have described this economy in which there were no roles for the specialists. A few of them were engaged in barter trade in wild products for exchanging them with salt, dried fish, threads, iron and other necessities. As their legends of migration indicate, hill areas witnessed incessant human movements leading to feuds, raids, reprisals and even wars. It appears by the middle of 19th century the entire hill tract was closely identified with various ethnic groups. Thus, there was hardly a patch of land in the region, which was 'no man's land'. However, the hills with their almost impregnable forests were no 'isolates'; in fact, there were trails across all the significant ranges.

It is a fact that the British did not directly administer the hill districts as they did in the case of the Brahmaputra valley. But over-all British control on the regional economy and inter-tribal relations led to the freezing of the tribal situation as if their natural process of growth was clipped off. A far reaching process was introduced in terms of capital and house taxes. Slowly and slowly, the entire hill region barring the upper ridges of Arunachal Pradesh was brought within the British capitalist economy. This was secured through introduction of cash economy, petty blue coat jobs, elementary education through the Christian churches and creation of administrative market and urban centres (Aier, L. 1986). What resulted in the process was the scenario in which subsistence farming tribes were exploitatively linked to the world metropolitan market in which they were reduced to suppliers of the marginal raw materials and consumers of the industrial goods. To the extent that even *Jhumias* were induced to cultivate some minor crops for cash transaction which were channelled through markets to the urban industrial centres. However, with the carving out of the *scheduled districts* in the hills the British appeared to be reluctant rulers to some of the native tribesmen. Though even their paternalistic caring for the tribesmen did not stop enroad of the private commercial establishments such as Rajasthani wholesalers, timber merchants etc. to tribal areas.

The present book is divided into two parts: the structural im-

peratives of the region and the various aspects of change. While the first part with its six chapters provides the geographical, historical, ethnic, religious and societal background of the region on the larger context, the second part delineates specificity of the transformation in terms of agrarian, urban, environmental and technological situations in the next five chapters. The first chapter introduces the region, its various natural sub-divisions, vegetations and related economic activities and the broad contours of the pre-colonial regional economy. The second chapter on the Forests in British Assam informs the readers how did the British introduce the 'Forest Reserves' on community land, encourage the cattle grazing by the Nepalese on the wasteland for the sake of revenue, get the captive labour from the newly settled 'forest villages', provide tea chests to the tea plantations at the cost of the forests, tackle the Garo movement for de-reservation of the forests and divert the revenue earned by the Forest Department to elsewhere at the cost of the ill-paid forest personnel.

The third chapter on 'The American Baptist Mission Among the Nagas' introduces a new dimension to the regional scenario. The missionaries were introduced to the region with the open support from the administration, they received support from the colonial rulers for their educational and medical activities and occasionally were hand in glove with the colonial masters in their efforts 'to civilize the savages' on the frontiers. There were many reasons for tribals' conversion to Christianity and Christianity has led to some new problems for the tribesmen. However, the Christianity has provided the tribal Christians with a new sense of identity, a window to the modern world and an affiliation to the larger Christian World religion. Chapter four on the tribal social stratification introduces a rather little known social fact that the tribal societies have not been necessarily equalitarian. After providing the ethnographic details of the traditional tribal stratification, the author describes the various processes through which the inequality has further increased after the creation of the tribal states in the region. With the emergence of private landed property in place of a flexible communal control, phenomenon of absentee landlordism, wage labour, share cropping, landless labour, agrarian tension, neo-rich contractor-politician elite have turned out to be the significant fixture in the regional

market oriented economy.

Chapter five reviews the basic character of the regional communities and the tribal states as necessarily that of 'small scale communities'. This chapter raises a number of issues than it answers them. The last chapter (six) of part one is on the Nepalese immigration to the region, which analyses its various aspects. This chapter may be seen in terms of the second chapter on the forest history, which reports the presence of herdsmen and graziers on the waste land and degraded forests. Broadly speaking among the Nepalese immigrants the chapter records the ex-soldiers resettled by the Government on certain strategic locations as 'soldiers' farm', the herdsmen and land hungry farmers and artisans and professionals. Many of the immigrants do not possess documents to establish their citizenship. However, the problems of the ethnic identity in the tribal states for the Indian Nepalese is very serious. The community has suffered hardships in the past and is presently confronted with making a hard choice in terms of reinforcing and re-evaluating the Nepalese identity in India rather than melting away among the various ethnic groups and sub-nationalities in India. In this way, part one identifies geography, history, religion, social structure, smallness of the communities and the immigration as unique structural imperatives, which demand proper understanding before a serious analysis of social transformation is undertaken.

Part two with its five chapters begins with emergence of the peasants on the substantive communal production systems, which was necessarily an aspect of subsistence economy of the past. With the land and economy intricately linked with the world-wide metropolitan marketing system, the past ethnic autonomy on their lands is replaced by co-existence of multi-ethnic communities, leading to occasional conflicts, as reported from the Medziphema Development Block in Nagaland. The chapter eight examines an entirely a new and different aspect of social scene in terms of the nature of urbanization in the tribal states in the region. After informing the readers that urbanization among the hill communities is hardly a hundred years old and a creation of the British 'administrative outposts' in the tribal heart-land, author examines the structure of hill cities, the nature of the urban political participation in the civic affairs and comes out with about half a dozen recommendations for

a meaningful urban management.

Chapter nine on the Tipaimukh Hydel Electric Project examines the social and environmental consequences of a large scale, high technology and multi-purpose river-valley project on a small community such as the Hmars. This chapter reports confusion among the Hmars, callousness of the state authorities and non-concern and mechanical approach of the technocrats. It rightly warns the authorities to examine all the implications before undertaking a Rs. 1400 crore ambitious project in an insurgency-prone frontiers. The chapter ten explicates a different scenario in which the roles played by electronic communication medium has been examined. This chapter reports the social and economic consequences of the availability of the video parlours on the tribal heartland and way it had affected the regional social fabrics. Similarly, it highlights the ground realities of relatively isolated tribal rural set-up, where satellite based telephonic and telegraphic devices are being set up. The process of sending a message is yet to be developed as a mechanical facility; rather it is seen as an occasion to re-establish face to face interaction among the individuals in the region. The last chapter (eleven) examines the conflicting national and the regional perceptions on the character of the social realities and the nature and extent of participation in the public affairs. The epilogue at the end summarizes the structural compulsions and direction of change undergoing in the region.

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# 1

## *Natural Resources and Pre-Colonial Economy*

The Himalayas—the abode of the snow—is the rampart and fosses of the giant ranges which wall off the Indian sub-continent from snow bound Central Asia. Its massive ranges extend from Gwador (south-western Arabian coast in Pakistan) in the west to the Mizo-Arakan ranges (on the Bangladesh south-eastern border) in the east measuring more than 5,500 kilometres. Of this the Western wing Baluchistan and trans-Sindhu (Indus) upto the syntaxial bend at Nanga Parbat in Kashmir is 1,500 kilometres. The eastern wing from Namcha-Barwa (on Arunachal-Kham border) to the Mizo Hills is 1,000 kilometres and the Central Himalayan arc is 2,500 kilometres (Bose, S.C.: 1972: 11). Though the width of the Himalayas varies from area to area, the great Himalayan arc between Nanga Parbat to Namcha-Barwa or between the Indus and the Brahmaputra bends has an average width of about 200 kilometres. Normally the Himalayas is divided into three major regions: Western Hills and ranges in the Indus encatchment area (now in Pakistan and Pakistan occupied Kashmir), the Central Himalayan arc of the Ganges, and the Eastern Himalayas drained out by the Brahmaputra and her tributaries. The Central Himalayan arc or the Great Himalayas has further been divided into three: the western, the central and the eastern. The central zone of the Great Himalayas extends from the Yamuna-Satluj-divide to the Koshi-Tista watershed in the east forming the eastern limits of Nepal.

The Great Himalayan arc is further divided into three distinct parallel systems from north to south on the basis of physiography: the Great Himalayan ranges, the Inner Himalayas, and the Lesser Himalayas,—*bhabar*, *terai*, *duars* or the foothills. While the greater Himalayas is snow bound northern tundra type topography above

the snow line, it covers all the world famous high Himalayan summits such as Nandadevi (26,645 ft.), Kemet (25,447 ft.), Everest (29,028 ft.), Kanchenjunga (28,146 ft.), Chomo Lhari (23,997 ft.), Namcha-Barwa (25,445 ft.) etc. There is little permanent human settlement in the virtual snow desert except occasional trans-humance herdsmanhip. However, the region is the last haven for adventure seeking mountaineers. It also abounds in varieties of rhododendrons and alpine co-niferous forests. Most of the snow-fed rivers originate in the region and there are passes to cross from north to south such as Niti, Chumbi etc.

The inner Himalayas is the real flat valley interposed between the mountain ranges and forested mountains. In between there are extensive valleys such as Kathmandu, Thimpu, Tongsa, etc. which are undulating pastureland thickly populated and known for ancient civilizations such as Newari in Kathmandu valley. There are rich alpine forests and all types of tropical and winter crops are grown in the valley and on the river banks. But the rivers are fast, meandering and unfordable. The bulk of the people are peasants but many of them subsist on grazing and trans-humance. The Garhwalis, Kumayunis, Gurkhas and the Bhotias have tradition of marshal race and are reputed soldiers. The topography of the region conditioned the residents in such a way that they developed fighters 'instinct' leading to establishment of numerous small principalities such as *Chaubis* (24 principalities) or *baisis* (22 principalities). Atleast three of them Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan could survive till 1975 and first and third among them have become independent nations, the only Hindu and the only Lamaist monarchies in the world. As bulk of population belongs to marginal farmers, who are polygamous with numerous children, the forests are turned into agricultural field. However, agricultural technology is primitive, plots are uneconomic and agricultural investment is next to nothing leading to large scale erosion of the top soil because of repeated cultivation. Consequently, the inner Himalayan region is ranked among the least developed and the poorest countries of the world.

The foothills are low ranges running from east to west-south of the Inner Himalayas consisting of boulders, moraine and sandy soil, on which evergreen tropical forests abound. It was known as "negative zone", because of its unhealthy climate. Moreover, the



evergreen forests abounded in ferocious wild animals, besides being hot, humid, and malarial (Sinha A.C.: 1987: 337; Karan, P.P.: 1963: 11). There was no permanent human settlement except some wild tribes such as Tharu, Koch, Mech, Toto etc. The hill principalities and tribes such as Gurkhas, Sikkimese, Durkpas, Nishing (Daflas), Adis (Abor) were in habit of raiding the settled Gangetic and Brahmaputra plains for capturing slaves to work in the inner Himalayan agricultural fields. All these came to an end with establishment of the British empire in India. It took the British roughly 75 years between Nepal war of 1813-14 to 1988, when Sikkim was finally turned into an Indian protectorate, to bring the Himalayan foothills from Murree (now in Pakistan) to Sadiya on Arunachal borders under an effective British control. The British did realise the economic significance of the regions. With the establishment of law and order, the jungles in the foothills were cleared first in Nepal terai by the land hungry agricultural communities from the Gangetic plains (Gaige, F.H.: 1975). There was a growing demand for *sal* timber for the railways. There were two significant developments effecting the Himalayan foothills. Firstly, the British felt the need of health resorts in the cool and rarified mountain air of the Himalayas. That is how Murree, Dolhousie, Dehradun, Simla, Mussoorie, Nainital, Ranikhet, Darjeeling, Kalimpong etc. were developed as summer hill stations on easy communication networks with plains for the British bureaucrats. Secondly, by the middle of the 19th century, it was realized that the Eastern Duars were ideal landscape for cultivation of tea plants. Thus, there was a mad rush from Lakhimpur, Darrang, Goalpara, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Dehradun to Kangra for clearance of the forests, which were settled as wastelands to the planters. Incidentally, the third quarters of the last century saw the introduction of forest reservation in India with a view to ensuring timber supply for the urban industrial purposes. In the process, precious forests in the region were reserved as the Government property.

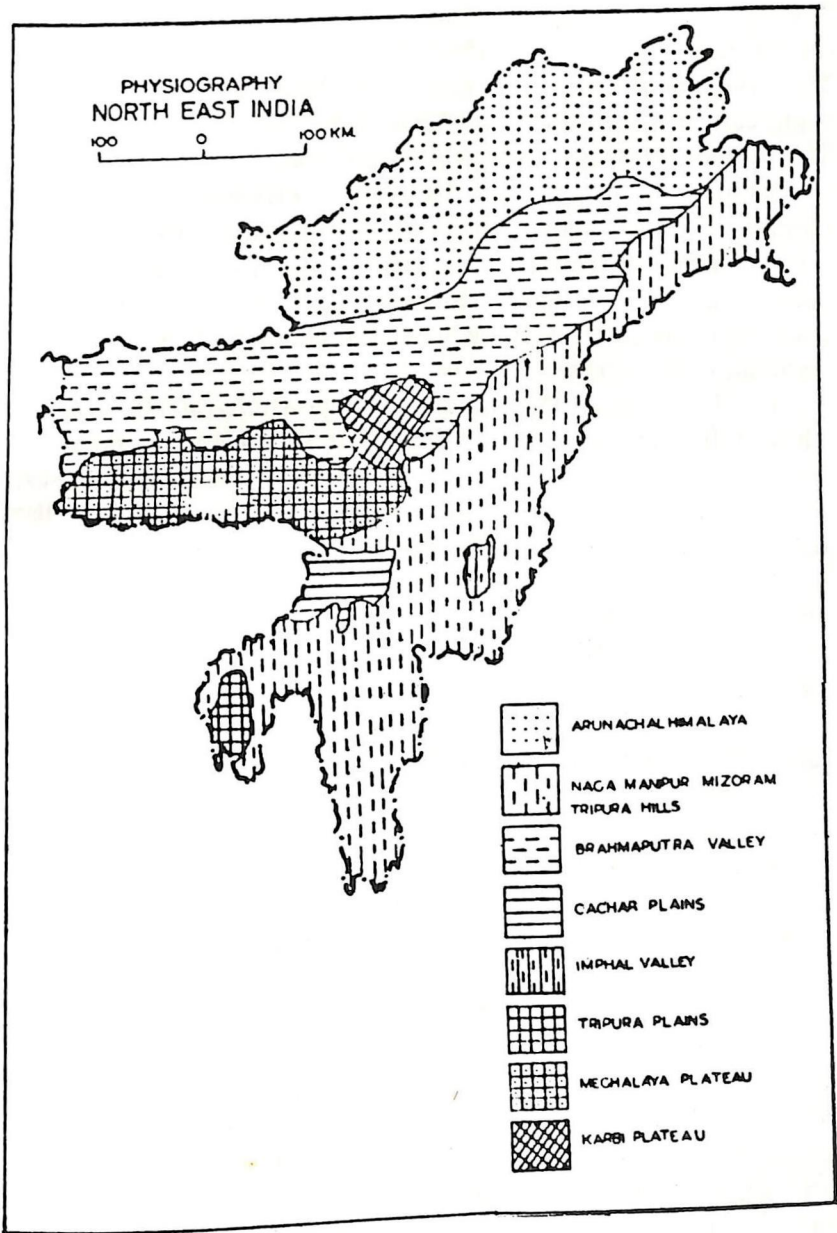
From another angle the Himalayas may be examined. There are four significant cultural processes operating in the Himalayas. Firstly, all along the northern Himalayas, Lamaist Buddhism developed in Tibet is prevalent from Arunachal Preadesh to Ladakh on the southern fringe of the Tibetan plateau. Secondly, Hindu ethos

and social intercourse is evident from Kashmir valley to Bhutan Duars on the southern slope of the Himalayas inclusive of Himachal, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal in the Inner Himalayan zones. Thirdly, flow of culture from the west in the form of Muslim-Pertian character is dominant in the Kashmir valley. The Sindhu-Ganges watershed remains in a way its eastern limit. Fourthly, a basically animistic tribalism prevails predominantly in Arunachal Pradesh, which progressively decreases westward and is found mainly upto Limbuan i.e. eastern Nepal (Sinha, A.C.: 1983 A: XXIII). In a way, these four cultural processes broadly coincide with that of the northern, southern, western and eastern Himalayan zones respectively.

#### A. THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

Between 86°E and 88°E, the general character of the Himalayas changes so much that a new region of the Eastern Himalayas is warranted. Moreover, the Himalayan region just north of the Gangetic delta between the Rajmahal Hills and Shillong plateau is exposed to the direct impact of the monsoon causing high and dense rainfall and wet tropic evergreen jungle. The intensity of rainfall increases eastward upto the tri-junction of the eastern limit of the Himalayan arc, Patkai ranges and the Brahmaputra valley and so intense is the vegetation. Compared to its Western and Central counterparts, the Eastern Himalayas is less high. Similarly, because of high precipitation, the snow line is higher upto 14,000 in the Himalayas in the east. The region may be broadly divided into: (i) the eastern part of the Great Himalayan arc, (ii) the eastern hill ranges comprising Patkai-Manipur-Mizo-Arakan-Chittagong Hills, (iii) Shillong-Mikir plateau and (iv) the plains of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys (see Map 1).

(1) The Eastern Himalayan Arc: This sub-region extends all along the Great Himalayan-ranges in the north from Singalila ridge to Donkhya range (15,000-17,000 ft.), to Chumbi valley to Chomolhari (23,930 ft.), to Kulakanari (24,749 ft.) to Kangto (23,255 ft.) to Gorichen (21,445 ft.) upto Namcha Barwa (25,450 ft.) in the farthest north-east bend and then to the Duars in the south from Darjeeling to Tirap-Lakhimpur. Again it may be divided into Tista



encatchment area (Sikkim and Darjeeling), Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. So far Sikkim and Bhutan part of the sub-region is concerned, Karan (Karan, P.P.: 1963: 1967) has made a detailed study. The syntaxial bend of the Himalayan chain may be seen in the south-east in Lohit district and Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. The altitude decreases north-east-ward from Tawang in Kameng district to Siang in south-east. The average elevation in the Greater Himalayan zone is above 21,000 ft. above sea-level, while in Siang district in the south-east the average elevation is about 17,000 ft. above sea level. In such a situation, while the Great Himalayan zone has coniferous forest, the inner and the foothills have compact deciduous and evergreen forests.

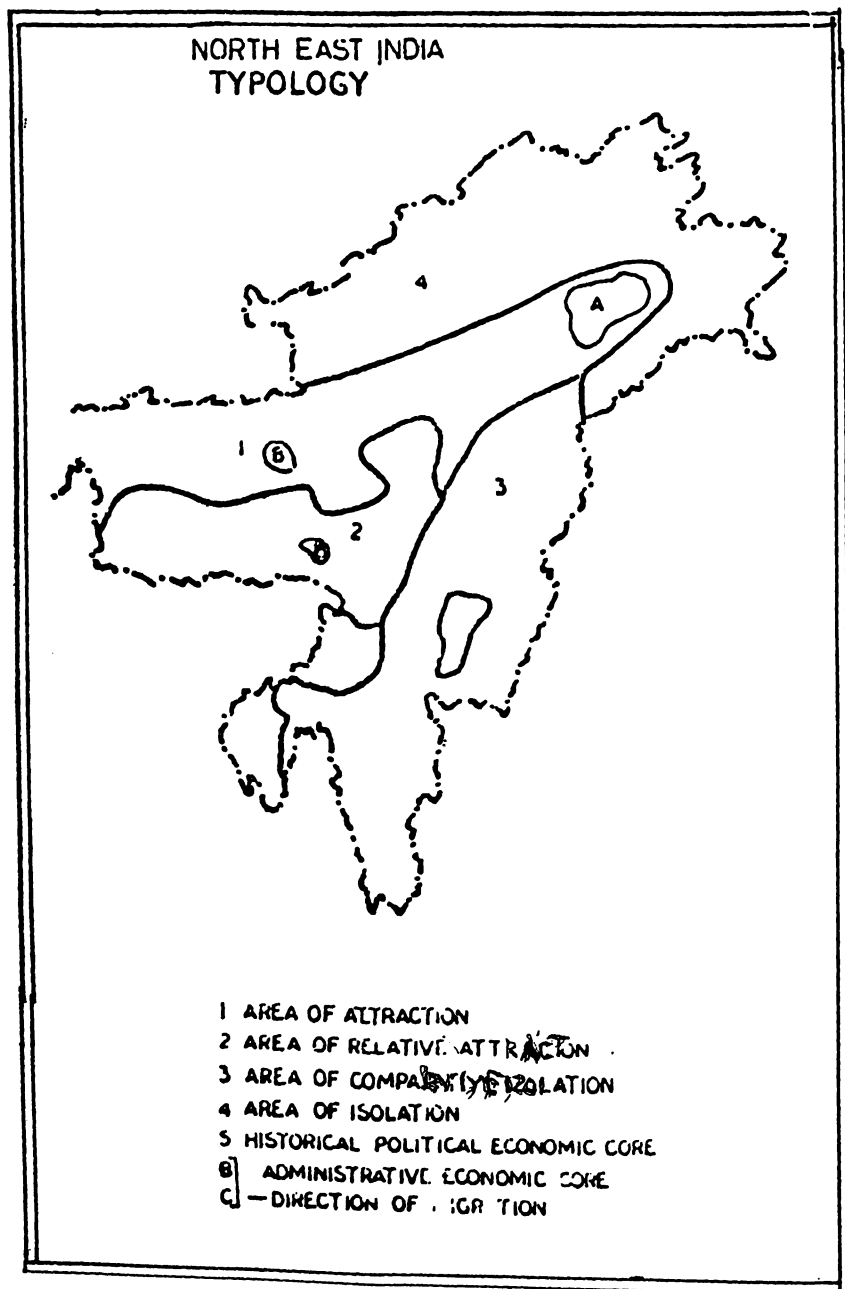
(2) The Eastern Hill Ranges or Indo-Burmese Hill Ranges: These hills start from the Dihing-Lohit knot between Siang and Burhi-Dihang rivers, from where the ranges appear to radiate westwards. While the Namkin mountains turn east, the southern ranges from the knot are known as the Patkai (ai—meaning resting place), forming the Indo-Burmese border. The Patkai ranges are of lower elevation along the Brahmaputra water-front and their elevation increases eastwards upto the international boundary. The Barail range enters the state of Nagaland at the south-west corner and proceeds upto Kohima before turning eastward to Manipur. This range divides the state into north-eastern and south-western halves. While the north-western part of the state is dissected by Dikhu, Janji, Disoi and Dhansiri rivers, the south-western part cuts intermontane tract. The Patkai ranges have Saramati (12,500 ft.) peak on the international border and Japvo near Kohima is the highest peak in the state. The Barail range turns westwards to North Cachar.

The Patkai ranges extend into state of Manipur enclosing Imphal valley and losing elevation while entering Burma. The area is dominated by deep gorges and steep slopes. The western offshoots of the Patkai enter Mizoram in the form of parallel north-south westwards to northern Tripura and Chittagong hills. One long arm of it stretches away south and south-eastwards into Arakan ranges, whose extreme northern hills are lost into Mizo hills. The western spurs of these hills are covered with forests of fine timber, but on the east, the bamboo is the principal growth. With a mon-

soon rainfall upto 100 inches, the hills have a heavy cover of forests, ranging from tropical evergreen which giant dipterocarps in the wetter and lower south, through monsoon deciduous forests, to some pine and even grass on the highest ridges. But these forests have been much affected by jhum cultivation resulting in very dense secondary scrub-jungle and vast stretches of bamboo (Spate, et al: 1972: 606-607).

(3) Shillong plateau or Meghalaya-Karbi plateau: It is the North-eastern extension of the Deccan peninsula separated by the Gangetic delta between the Rajmahal and Garo Hills and extended upto the Naga hills within an area of 10,590 square miles or 12% of the region. The Meghalaya—the abode of clouds—is normally divided into Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills—the tribal divisions—is in fact one compact geographical unit. It is almost a rectangular block of 150 by 60 miles with highest elevation at Shillong (6,432 ft.) and Nokrek (4,631 ft.) peaks in the Garo hills. The plateau rises abruptly to above 3,000 ft. from the delta plains in Bangladesh, loses its elevation to the Brahmaputra plains through a series of isolated hills and it is deeply dissected because of high precipitation. Its eastern extension is separated by Kopli gorge in the west and Dhansiri river system in Nagaland in the east turning it into a circular shape. Meghalayan plateau with its appropriate Sanskrit name (Chatterjee, S.P.: 1936) is reputed to be under heavy forest with pines on the higher sides but elsewhere it is covered with a mixture of woodland and secondary bushes because of repeated *jhumming*. It is reputed for its rhododendrons, orchids, a variety of flowering plants and bamboos, potato, chillies, orange and ginger are the chief cash crops, cultivation of which is leading to erosion of thin top soil.

(4) The plains of the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys: The river Brahmaputra—the mythological son of the creator-Brahma—the master-stream is claimed to be one of the most astonishing rivers in the world. It originates near Mansarowar lake in Tibet, flows as Tsangpo almost parallel to the eastward Himalayan arc upto Namcha-Barwa, turns south-west and then moves westerly almost parallel to its northern Tsangpo branch for better than 500 miles upto Dhubri and finally takes a southern bend to meet Ganges near Goalando in Bangladesh. At the higher altitude it receives



massive doze of snow melt water after its Dilhang-Dibang-Lohit confluence some 900 miles from the sea, it enters the land which receives the highest rainfall in the world. The valley named after it or Assam proper extends some 600 miles east to west and 60 miles north to south is, in fact, a gift of the river, as it is formed out of the alluvial soil. The river has as many as 125 tributaries. "Due to conditions of slopes, the north bank tributaries are very active and carry usually heavy load of boulders, pebbles and silt. This is added by heavy precipitation in the entire catchment area. Besides this, as the area lies within the seismic belt and with large scale deforestation, the erosion activity of these rivers has been further intensified. As a result, the alluvial fans are a common feature" (Gopal Krishna, R: 1991: 65-66). The extensive parts of such river banks are covered with sal forest and toll reed jungle in the swamps, which is inhabited by a rare animal species of one-horned rhinoceros.

The Barak or Surma valley covering 16 per cent of the region in its south-eastern portion is, in fact, an extension of the Gangetic delta. The river Barak itself rises in Senapati district of Manipur in the Barail ranges, takes a western course and then a big U-turn before entering Cachar plains on way to Sylhet in Bangladesh. The Barak has a sluggish meandering course with a number of ox-bow lakes and *bhils-swamps*. The vegetation is similar to the Brahmaputra valley, but on the thinner side with preponderance of bamboo and cane-brakes. The Imphal valley or the Manipur plains is a lacustrine area like Kashmir valley with numerous depressions, marshes and lakes. One of the unique features of the physiography of the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys is the development of the plantation industry within last 150 years. The tea bushes are spread over 400,000 acres or 162,000 hectares in about 800 tea estates on the higher terraces of plains hills producing over half of the Indian tea produce and employing more than 1,500,000 persons. The development of tea plantation in the region has a bearing on the environment in general and forests in particular.

Some broad generalisations may be made on the basis of above presentation. Firstly, a distinct North-Eastern Frontier Region of North East India excluding Sikkim, Darjeeling and Bhutan has emerged as significant geo-political entity in the Indian context.

Secondly, North-East India consisting of the Seven Sisters (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) has evolved its strategy of development in terms of its physical features and natural resources. With that the region has the following sub-divisions: (i) the area of attraction—the Brahmaputra and the Imphal valleys; (ii) the area of comparative isolation—Meghalaya-Mikir plateau; (iii) the area of comparative isolation—the Patkai and Barail ranges; (iv) the areas of isolation—Arunachal Pradesh and (v) the areas as the gateways—Goalpara, Cachar and Lakhimpur districts (see Map 2). Thirdly, the region as such has a strong cultural, linguistic, ethnic and vegetation links with both south-east Asia (Burlings, R.: 1965) and India (Chatterjee, S.K.: 1951) from the very beginning of the human history. And lastly, the region, as it remains today, has variously been organised and re-organised since 1826 to 1947, when it was better known as Assam plus princely states of Manipur and Tripura.

## **B. THE NATURAL VEGETATION**

The forests, the green gold of the nature and largely dependent on the physiography of the land, may be classified in a number of ways such as by composition, legal status, ownership, exploitation and functions. Among them, the first two, the classification by composition and legal status are the most significant and we shall examine the forests of the region from these two points of view.

### **Forest Composition in the Region**

Dietrich Brandis, the Inspector General of Forests in the British India, paid a visit to Assam in 1879 and wrote his famous "Suggestions regarding Forest Administration in Assam." He described seven types of forests in the Province: Savannahs, sal, sissu and Khair, mixed deciduous, evergreen, bamboo and cane-brakes. This was followed by his successor, B. Ribbentrop, in 1889, who filed a "Note on an Inspection of the Forests of Assam" (Ribbentrop, B.: 1889). In terms of classification of the forests, he retained the seven-fold divisions of the Province proposed by his predecessor and added an eighth one, the pine forests. Some five decades after Ribbentrop, M.C. Jacob, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Assam



prepared a report in 1940 (Jacob, M.M.C.: 1940) and revised the above typology in the following manner: Sal, evergreen, mixed deciduous, pine, riverine, highland savannah and lowland savannah.

(1) *Sal Forests*: Sal forests are found in the areas where the annual rainfall is below 80 inches, or if more and the sub-soil drainage is excellent. Such a situation is found in the Himalayan foothills of Goalpara and Kamrup districts and Shillong plateau extending from Mikir Hills to the western edge of Meghalaya. Sal forests have suffered greatly because of the practice of *jhumming* found among the hill tribes as an agricultural pattern. The areas, which were declared as the forests and the story of sal-reservation in the Garo hills and consequent agitation to declare them dereserved will be unfolded in the next chapter. A tram service was introduced after the first World War with a view to extracting sal timber in the Goalpara district for supplying them as the railway sleepers. Just before the second World War, about two million four thousand, c.f.t. of sal timber was exploited in Assam in 1937-38. At that time the province had 177,000 acres of *sal reserves, distributed* in seven forest divisions of lower Assam.

(2) *Evergreen Forests*: They are found in the hills where rainfall is upward of 80 inches and in the plains, where subsoil permits of the retention of water near the surface. The whole of Upper Assam with the exception of savannah and bamboo forests are covered with evergreen forests. Similarly such forests skirt the Himalayan ranges. These forests exhibit a great variety of character in vegetation. However, certain trees such as *Nahor* (*Mesua Ferrea*) are found in all evergreen forests. A large amount of *jhumming* takes place within these forests and fire does not spread because of the wet-evergreen vegetation. Jacob divides them into two: (a) highland evergreen and (b) lowland evergreen. The former are spread in Sadiya, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Sibsagar, Nowgong and Cachar divisions and abound in Hollock, Hollong, Cham, Amari, Gonsoeroi, Naher, Surjan, Spoas, and Sundim species of trees.

The lowland evergreen is found on the fringes of smaller streams, ravines, *bhils* and swamps. With the exception of Ajhar (Jarul), very few important timber trees are found among them. Unlike the sal forests, there are rarely 10 to 15 trees per acre of the

same species in these forests. However, certain significant timber trees such as Hollock, Hellong, Nahor, Bonsum etc., have been identified lying at the foothills in the Arunachal Pradesh and efforts have been made for their extraction for the saw mills. The eastern-most tip of India in Arunachal Pradesh abutting China and Burma, known as Namdhapa Wildlife National Park, is spread in Lohit and Changland districts. The Zoological Survey of India found in 1982 60 per cent of its birds and animals belonging to the most endangered species and proposed to the Government to declare it a biosphere reserve for the rare flora and fauna.

Indiscriminate felling of the trees and large-scale soil erosion because of heavy precipitation leading to water-scarcity at Cherrapunji have attracted worldwide attention. Cherrapunji highland evergreen forests have come to be known as the 'wet desert' because of the fact that the bare hillocks have already been washed away the limestone rich top soil at the rate of 300 tonnes per year. Alarmed with the barrenness of the world's wettest place, the local Government has proposed a project to 'regreen' Cherrapunji. The forest department of the State Government had identified eight species of trees including the Khasi pine planting in the bleached soil as part of the restoration of ecological balance to Cherrapunji.

(3) *Mixed Deciduous Forests*: These are found all over the region on the outer fringe of the evergreen forests on the drier ridges. Constant *jhumming* has transformed an extensive part of such forests into inferior bamboo and savannah grassland. The most common species in lower Assam are Makria (*Sachima wallichii*), Siola (*Lagerstroemia parviflora*), Akshi (*Dillenia perrottetiana*), Satian (*Alstonia scholaris*), Paroli (*Stereopermus chelonoides*), Simul (*Bombax mallabarium*), Bhelu (*Tetrameles nudiflora*), Haldu (*Adina cordifolia*). The timber from many of these trees are strong enough but they have not been tried as a substitute of the commercial timber such as sal. However, Simul and Bhelu are used for manufacture of tea chests.

(4) *Pine Forests*: Such forests are found above an elevation of 2,500 feet above the sea level in Meghalaya, Naga, Mikir, Mizo hills and Arunachal Pradesh. Constant *jhumming* and firing have destroyed good patch of some of these forests, where hill savannah bushes have grown. There has been limited reservation of the Kha-

sia pine forests around Shillong with a view to supply the local demands in timber and firewood. Though transportation of such timber to the plains was considered inexpensive at one time, tapping of resin was recommended, but it was soon realized that the pine forests were neither extensive nor old enough to make such an enterprise viable (Jacob M.C.: 1940: 4).

(5) *Alpine Forests*: Alpine forests are found in the high altitude in Arunachal Pradesh especially in the upper reaches of Kameng and Subansiri districts. Normally at such elevations, the vegetation is stunted gnarled and dwarf shrubs with roots (Gopal Krishnan, R.: 1971: 74)

### Legal Status of the Forests in the Region

With the introduction of the Forest Act, 1878 in Assam, the forests were examined from legal points of view. Before we analyse the legal status of the Assam forests, certain popular views pertaining to the forests need to be recorded. Firstly, there was a popular opinion that the vegetation grows very fast in the region because of heavy rain and humidity. It was figuratively said: "If you leave your walking stick after your evening walk outside your house in the open, it will turn into a plant next morning." Secondly, it was universally said in an industrially under-developed region such as Assam, there was no market for the timber. Moreover, the forests were located on the geographically inaccessible difficult terrain. On the other hand, the tea plantation in its early years tried to import tea chests from Britain, Norway and China. Thirdly, it was believed that there was an acute shortage of labour for timber extraction. Not for nothing that the forest administration in Assam began from north-western corner e.g. Goalpara sal forests which were closest to the industrial market of Calcutta, with labour supply and located on ideal waterways.

The forests in Assam came under effective administration from 1878 and within a few years sal forests were declared as *reserves*. By 1889, 2,333 square miles of forests came under Reserves and another 323 square miles were declared as the protected one (Ribbentrop, B.: 1889: 15). After five decades, 6,514 square miles came under the reserve in the province, which included 77,650 acres of Protected Forests in Sadiya. As against 20 per cent stipulated forest

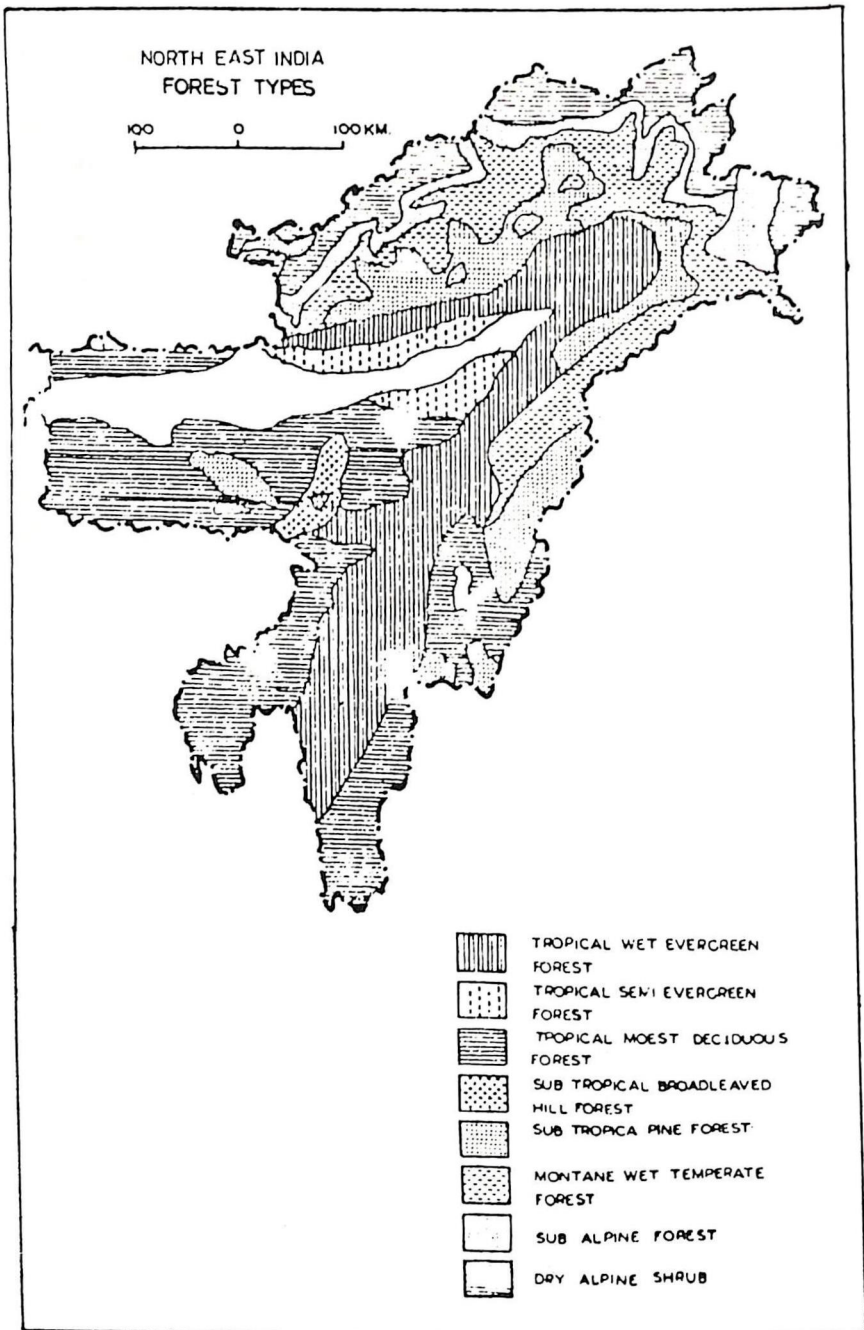


Table 1. Classification of N.E. region forests 1984-85

State	Year	Geographical area in sq km	Total forest area in sq km	Area by legal status (in '000 hec.)					Ownership		
				Reserved	Protected	Unclassified	Other forest	Forest Deptt.	Civil authority	Corporate bodies	Private individuals
Arunachal Pradesh	1984-85	83,740	5154.0	1337.0	0.8	3790.9	25.3	1323.1	3790.0	25.3	14.7
Assam	1984-85	78,523	3070.8	1727.7	337.3	1005.8	-	1745.9	138.9	1186.0	-
Manipur	1984-85	22,356	1515.4	137.7	417.7	960.6	-	1515.4	-	-	-
Meghalaya	1984-85	22,429	851.4	70.6	1.2	779.2	-	72.2	-	-	779.2
Mizoram	1984-85	21,087	1593.5	804.8	164.7	524.0	-	712.7	178.6	702.2	-
Nagaland	1984-85	16,531	862.5	100.4	-	7762.1	-	100.4	-	-	762.1
Tripura	1984-85	10,478	630.9	386.3	386.3	244.6	-	630.9	-	-	-

Source: Ministry of Forests and Environment, Govt. of India.

cover of a region at that time Assam had got only 9.7 per cent of its total area constituted as Reserve Forests (Jacob, M.C.: 1940: 1). There are three main categories of forests in Assam:

(1) *Reserved Forests*: These forests are managed by the trained staff of the Forest Department and scientific silvicultural working plans provisions are implemented under the guidance of the experts, who are the Government employees. Besides industrial, commercial and construction commitment for supplying of timber, they are maintained as protective forests to prevent soil erosion and regulate flood control. Before independence of the country, the Assam Reserved Forests were divided into 11 divisions: Sadiya, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Kamrup, Darrang, Cachar, Sylhet, Haltuagaon, Kochugaong and Garo Hills.

(2) *Unclass State Forests*: These are theoretically under the control of the State Forest Department, but they are governed by the customary laws prevalent in an unregulated state of Assam. In fact, these forests come under heavy *jhumming* inclusive of even those, which came into the District Councils after independence as they are governed under Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In March 1939, such forests were spread in an area of 14,557 square miles in Assam, but they were under heavy threat of deforestation. Even at that time the main factors responsible for continuous deforestation were identified as: (a) indiscriminate *jhumming*, (b) uncontrolled grazing, (c) indiscriminate felling of the trees by the settlers for household requirements and (d) unauthorised squatting.

(3) *Protected Forests*: Such forests are very limited and trees are granted limited protection. Even the forest officials have restricted authority to operate among them. Table 1 provides the present statistical status of the forests in the region. (see Map 3).

Two points need to be noted at the end of above presentation. Firstly, the forests are located on the geographically difficult terrain such as mountain crests or low-lying marshes. The technologically simple tribal communities have made such forests as their abode. In this way forests are located on the inter-state boundaries inhabited by the tribes men leading to inter-state conflicts and boundary disputes. Examples from the region are in plenty. The disputes between Manipur and Burma, Manipur and Assam on Cachar forests,

Meghalaya and Assam, Nagaland and Assam, Assam with Arunachal Pradesh and Assam with Mizoram may be cited. The worst example of such a dispute leading to armed clashes between Nagaland on one side and Assam on the other occurred in the Marapani forests on the Dhansiri river requiring the Central Government to station its own armed forces to defuse the situation. However, the inter-state boundary is yet to be settled. Meanwhile, both the states are reported to be hacking the *Reserved Forests* stealthily to settle their citizens with a view to buttressing their claims.

Secondly, armed insurgents chose forested and mountainous terrain as the areas of their operation from strategic point of view. As most of these insurgent and extreme political groups were recruited from the tribal/local communities, they were better acquainted with topography, vegetation, and overall logistics. The state armed forces, on the other hand, were relatively less sure of local logistics and topographical details. As a part of their counter insurgency operations, invariably they have caused destruction to forest cover. Examples of such actions may be cited from Nagaland and Mizoram in the past and of late Lakhimpur-Sadiya forests, where ULFA insurgents were reported to be running their regular camps. The issue from our point of view, in either of the cases—insurgency or counter-insurgency—is the forests, which suffer leading to ecological problems.

### C. THE PRE-COLONIAL ECONOMY OF THE NORTH EAST REGION

Broadly speaking from the economic consideration the region may be divided into two: (i) The Brahmaputra, Barak and Imphal valleys—relatively of intensive agricultural, settled and areas of water managed wet plantation economy and (ii) the hill communities resorting to dry slash-and-burn type of rotational cultivation regionally known as *jhumming* resorted to with an extremely simple technology. From ethnic, linguistic, cultural and technological points of view the two broad areas were not walled off from each other in the precolonial period. Human movements across the valleys and hills were normal activities inspite of serious communicational limitations. The navigable rivers and certain road ways

(*Alis*) in the plains were the highways extending even across the hills and mountains on certain trade routes. Even the most simple tribesmen resorted to some sort of trading in relatively lighter articles of significant domestic use or of status symbol. The British Governor General of India, Warren Hastings sent George Boggle in 1773 to Bhutan and Tibet with a view to having friendly relations after the Bhutanese Koch conflict of 1772 in which the British had intervened against the Bhutanese (Markham, C.: 1973). Within next 50 years, Sikkim, Jaintia, Cachar, Tripura and Manipur came in effective contact with the British. The Burmese invasion of Assam in 1817 culminated in the British declaration of war against the Burmese on March 5, 1824. Within less than two decades Jaintia, Khasi chiefs, Cachar, Manipur, besides entire Brahmaputra valley came under the British control. Within another fifty years, Garo hills, Naga hills, Mizo hills and parts of Arunachal Pradesh were brought within the British subjugation. Once the British got a foothold in an area they tried to introduce cash economy in place of the traditional subsistence. The entire revenue system was reorganised, land relations reoriented and all markable surplus was channelled to the British industrial estates. In fact, the subjugated areas were turned into suppliers of cheap raw materials for the British industries and the captive markets for the factory produced industrial goods. In the process, the local economy lost its autonomy and was tagged to the apron string of the British metropolitan economy resulting in deflation of regional resources such as forest and minerals. We propose to throw light on such processes in the next chapters. But it will be illuminating to identify the major contours of the pre-British economy of the region.

*The Pre-British Economy of the Brahmaputra Valley:* The Ahom rule in Assam was based on management of agricultural activities based on a type of serfdom, in which the occupational guilds (*khels*) of the individuals (*pykes*) played significant roles. It is claimed that the *khel* system was introduced by an Ahom officer, namely Momai Tamuli Borbarua in 1607 during the reign of king Pratap Singha (1603-41). The *khel* system envisaged that the entire male population of the country with the exception of men of rank, priests and their slaves to be divided into guilds according to the occupations such as *Khargharia* (gun powder makers), *Sonowals*



(the gold washers), *Kaathkatias* (the wood cutters), fishermen, etc. (Barpujari, H.K.: 1980: 24-25). Such guilds or *khels* were further divided into *gots*—units—of three individuals (the *pykes*) such as *mul* (first), the *dewal* (second), and the *tewal* (third). Every *pyke* was bound to serve the King either as a private or a public servant for one-third of the year or to supply certain quantity of his produce in lieu of his services. He was entitled to two *puras* (equivalent to 5877 square yards or  $3\frac{2}{3}$  Bengal *Beegha*) of *ropit* (wet paddy land) as body-land (*gamati*). During his period of service to the King, the *Dewal* and *Tewal* continued to cultivate their respective *ropit* land provided by the King. They believed each other at the regular intervals so as to ensure that the King had uninterrupted service. The *pykes* were supervised by the *Boras*, *Saikias* and *Hazarikas*, who again commanded by *Baruas*, *Rajkhowas* and *Phukans*, the higher civil and military functionaries.

The state officials were remunerated with a number of *pykes* to work on their rent-free grants. These officials had two types of land grants: *Nankars*—hereditary—and *manmati*—the one to be used only during the tenure of office. They could occupy free of cost tracts (*khats*) of waste land, where their own *pykes*, slave or attendants would work on. The state granted a number of rent-free tracts known as *Lakhiraj*. Of these the *debottar* was assigned to the maintenance of the temple and worship of deities; *brahmottar* was allotted to the Brahmins for religious services and in recognition of meritorious deeds; while *dharamottar* was set apart for the support of the *satras* (religious and charitable institutions) and persons attached thereto (Barpujari, H.K.: 1980: 26). Besides the personal services and articles of produce as the state collected revenue in terms of cash from surplus land rented out to the *pykes*, special professionals such as goldwashers, fishermen etc., markets (*haats*), customs duties (*chokis*), annual tributes from the vassals and defaulting *pykes*.

Apparently, the state and the ruler required limited amount of money to run the administration as payments to the functionaries was made in kind and services. When special occasions arose, the Kings raised cash taxation by imposing house tax and extra cess (*barangarni*) from the *shatras*, Hindu shrines, in upper Assam. Robinson wrote in 1841 that the Assamese cultivators, with their

imperfect agricultural instruments such as plough, either from insecurity through an imperfect police or from mere customs lived in large villages. They never thought of expanding their capital base because of uncertain land tenure. They were for the most part poor and oppressed people paying as much as one-fourth of their produce in rent besides other forms of extractions from the state officials (Robinson, W.: 1975: 217). It was a thinly populated, oppressed, demoralised and extremely poor country in terms of material resources.

*The Pre-British Economy of North Eastern Hill Region:* We have limited data from the hill communities in terms of economy as they were little exposed to the people in habit of writing on the social institutions and they themselves were in the pre-literate stage of their evolution. However, some broad contours of hill economy may be identified on the basis of the ethnographers' description, as the economy of the hill communities was not drastically altered by the British till 1910's. As a whole all the tribal communities may conveniently be divided into pastoralists, hunter-cum-collectors, *jhumias* and settled peasantry. In many cases, than one type of the above four were in practice in most the tribes. However, these were dominant economic activities. For example, there were only first three categories prevalent in Arunachal Pradesh, Monpa and Sherdukpens were the Buddhist pastoralists with limited *jhumming* and still less wet paddy cultivation on the river banks. The highlander Nishing, Paurik (Sulung), Hills Miris, Boris were excellent hunters, and Mishmis were root collectors. Apatanis and Khamtis were intensive paddy cultivators. Various Adi tribals were *Jhumias*. Singphos used to farm their fields with the help of slaves.

On the eastern hills we had all powerful Konyak, Sema and Lushai (Mizo) chiefs, who owned everything within their territories. There were clan based village economic communities among the Aos in the middle and terraced rice cultivation among the Angamis. Khasis, Tripuris, Dimasa-Kacharis and Jaintia had graduated to a level of economic surplus, which could support various forms of principalities. But in most of the cases, the land was communally owned and the individual enterprise was recognised at a dormant level. The Kings or chiefs were paid in kind and services. Though there were status differentials, there was little of eco-

nomic differentiation in the hills. Most of the hill men were Jhumias. As population was sparse and land plentiful with vigorous growth of vegetation, the *jhum* cycle was extended upto 20 years. Mountain peaks, hill ranges, rivers and streams, dense forests were identified as the frontiers between the village or tribal territorial limits. Many of the communities such as the Khasis had a tradition of preserving certain patch of trees as sacred groves. The Singphos were known to possess tea bushes and had a limited use for consumption. Mishmis, Khasis, Mizos, Hmars used to tap rubber juice. Garos supplied *sal* timber to their southern neighbours for cane building and Khasis and Jaintias traded lime, coal, iron, timber, betelnuts and leaves against clothes, dry fish, ornaments, etc.

To sum up, the pre-British hill economy was village based, informal, entirely dependent on the immediate environment such as land, forests, water bodies and animal lives. It was technologically a simple society with little surplus and specialization of duties. The main story of their life was on the *jhumming* in which they used to raise the crops for their consumption. Their needs appeared to be extremely limited, which were satisfied with the produce of their *jhum* fields. The forests played a very significant role in their lives because the forests provided a universe to them in which they resorted to *jhumming*, hunted their games; collected fruits, roots, herbs, tapped rubber juice; and caught wild animals for games, trade and exchange. The dominant mode of exchange in their economy was barter of the goods. Of course, coins were known to them, but not as common mode of exchange, but as ornaments and curios. As their economic needs were extremely limited, they were economically autonomous in their relative isolation.

In this chapter we have taken up three issues. Firstly, we have analysed the various aspects of physical features of the Eastern Himalayan region as part of the Himalayan physiography and as a unique entity in itself. Secondly, we have described the four physical sub-divisions of the region in terms of (i) The Eastern Himalayan arc, (ii) the eastern hill ranges, (iii) the Meghalaya plateau and (iv) the plains of the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys. Thirdly, we have endeavoured to report on the natural vegetation of the region on the basis of the physical features for common readers and not the specialists in sericulture and botany. Fourthly, we felt

the need to examine briefly the pre-colonial economic scene of the region, as the British metropolitan economy introduced certain distortion in the regional economy not only through revenue administration and altered land tenure, but it also introduced tea plantation economy and forest farming for timber export at the cost of the local dominant resources of forests. How was the forest policy evolved? How was the forest administration organised? What were the considerations in declaring the forest reserve in the region? What type of relations forest managers and tea planters had? Answers to some of the above questions will be provided in the next chapter on the British forest policy and forest administration.

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