

Colonial Legacy and Environmental Crisis in Northeast Region

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“Prior to the advent of colonialism, most of the third world societies consisted of a mosaic of long settled and sophisticated agrarian cultures, which had a finely tuned, but delicately balanced relationship with their natural environment. Colonial and Post-Colonial capitalism had disrupted this relationship in many ways. While social disruptions of this disruption are widely documented, what is less observed are the devastating ecological consequences? In the absence of a ‘frontier’ such as was available to European colonists, even state-planned industrialization has to contend with a limited resource and rapid environmental degradation...Urban and industrial development, while not even successful on its own terms, has wrecked tremendous havoc on the country-side, pauperizing millions of people in the agrarian sectors and diminishing the stock of plants, water and soil resources at a terrifying rate” (Guha, Ram: 1989: 195-196). The readers may find that we have focused on the same historical process in which the non-monetized social system of the region was coerced to integrate itself to an urban-industrial-metropolitan economy of Britain to its disadvantage.

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The Colonial Legacy

We have shown elsewhere how the British colonial rulers fashioned the concept of wasteland on any unoccupied stretch of the land to allot it to the 'Tea Planters', who were invariably Europeans and then their attention turned to the high hills covered with trees, and created 'forest reserves' for timber farming and generating cash revenue for the state. Similarly, the tribal lands were taken away arbitrarily from the tribal jhumias and how severely the tribal hunters/animal trappers/root pickers in the reserves were punished. Moreover, they were forced to cut forest tracts, construct resting huts for visiting forest functionaries, and carry their luggage under duress as indentured labour. Their traditional pattern of life was totally altered with the creation of the forest reserves and stationing the alien forest functionaries. Moreover, the Government encouraged mono-cultural plantation of the forests: sal, simul, eucalyptus et cetera, where trees with commercial potentiality were preferred, which was not ideal for hunting and fruit/root collecting communities. In such a situation, the tribal community was not expected to welcome creation of forest reserves and naturally they turned hostile to this foreign imposition, which was not only against their traditions and felt experience, but they were also not taken in to confidence as to why were their forests being reserved. Moreover, forest villages were settled as captive labour reserves for clearing the forests, for logging, and cutting the forest roads. This provision was abused with the British connivance by Sir Saddulla's Muslim League Government to settle more forest villages on the plea of growing food during the Second War Period. The absence of clear and simple rights of the small and localized communities in the region over its natural resources in the pre-colonial setting was seen as ambiguous. This ambiguity relates to the fact that "the tribal people's knowledge of the forest and ability to manage it for their need is both old and enduring, even if it is now becoming increasingly more limited by a large population competing in scarcity. This very knowledge and capacity, however, seems to have eluded the planners and developers" (Anderson, R S & W Hueber: 1988: 126).

The North East region has one of the largest reserves of the tropical forests in India, one-seventh of the total forest cover. The regional forests plays host to a variety of birds and wild animals and rare species of plants. But the forest wealth of the region is disappearing in an alarming rate. Before the advent of the roads, railway lines and the planned 'development', the region was covered with lush-green forests. And the hill communities lived in harmony with the forests

around them and had evolved a form of agriculture that allowed them to cultivate even the steep slopes. Even today an estimated 1.6 million people are engaged in the same old method of cultivation, Jhumming, but a disharmony between the man and nature has emerged in the region for any body to see. The forest areas are decreasing, the quality of the forest is deteriorating, wildlife is being threatened, thin top soil is eroding alarmingly, and fertility of the forest land diminishing at an alarming rate. On the other hand, human habitation in and around the forest is on increase. In such a situation, once 'paradise of plentiful forests' are no more sustainable.

It is a paradoxical situation in the region; most of the hill states, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, have evolved their land laws in which non-locals cannot possess landed property. Still there has been considerable alienation of land and other resources. All these states do not have an appreciable percentage of reserve forests under direct control of the state government. In fact, the bulk of the forests are under community control either through the District Councils, or within the control of the clan, tribe or village. Because of the guarantees provided to the customary laws of the communities in these states under the Indian Constitution, even their own state governments cannot enact laws affecting the forests. Departments of Forests in these states have a small patches of forest reserves and do not possess land of their own to afforest or extend their extension activities. Unlike elsewhere in the country, the forests are under the community control legally, still the forest resources are depleting alarmingly, trees are being cut on unprecedented scale and wildlife is wantonly destroyed. In such a situation, the much acknowledged panacea of 'community control over forest resources against the much maligned forest departments of the government' does not appear to hold good. In fact, the community control over the forest resources has completely failed to safe-guard the forests and its denizens. The pertinent questions arise: Is the community control on the forests in itself a guarantee to safe-guard the forests, when the community itself is under tremendous cultural transformation? Who controls the forest resources in the name of community control and how effectively? Are the traditional customary practices affecting the forests sufficiently or resilient enough to introduce scientific inputs of silviculture, culling of the old trees, planting of the environmentally and communally appropriate species of trees, stopping of poaching and ensuring continued growth and communal utilization of the forests under their charge?

Community Control over the Forest Resources and Environmental Crisis

Anil Agrawal in his *Vikram Sarabhai Memorial Lecture* reminded the audience to the consequences of the government control over the forests: "...the Government has decided to control the forest resources itself, leaving little or no control in the hands of the forest dwellers. The Government control over the forests has definitely meant a reallocation of forest resources away from the needs of local communities and in to the hands of urban and industrial India. The net result is both, increased social conflict and increased destruction of the ecological resources itself" (Agrawal, A: 1984:11). But the above scenario is largely not applicable to the tribal states of the northeast region. The conflict between the tribal forest users and the urban- industrial interests does not exist in the region, because of the fact that neither industrial enterprise exists in an appreciable manner to pose a problem, nor there has been a good size of urban centres in the region as potential consumer. In fact, it is the newly emerged tribal elite in the form of contractor-politician, who is able to subvert the local interests, are more resourceful and well-connected to supply timber from the community forests to outside their states. A telling instance is the failure of the Meghalaya Government to enforce a law enacted by the State Assembly in 1981 to establish state timber depots with a monopoly on timber trade within the state. What we feel that the dichotomous conflict between state control and community control is not the real issue. In the absence of traditional community consciousness and solidarity in the changed circumstances, we feel that community control over forest resources continues to be subverted to the disadvantage of the forests and the community at large by a segment of the same people for whom the community control was envisaged.

It is a paradox to the visitors to these hill states, which pride themselves on their constitutionally guaranteed customary control of the community resources, how of late their precious timbers are being axed in an alarming way. The Jhum cycle has been reduced drastically to the extent that its yields have turned out notional. Cash crops such as potato, ginger, turmeric, vegetables are being grown on thin top soil, leading to its erosion, when it rains; and it rains heavily in the North- East region. As education spreads, new generation looks more to white collar and blue coat professions outside their villages, leaving behind jhum fields to be attended by old, women, illiterate and other drop-outs. The old wisdom of the customary control is being replaced

by the educated absentee villagers, who maneuver the community control over forest resources, cut trees and supply them to the markets. The situation became so alarming by 1990's that the Supreme Court of India had to intervene and impose a rather harsh legal prohibition on felling of the trees from the forest and the local tribe's people reacted with anger to the extent that there were reports of cutting of the plantations in the West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya.

Apathy of the Hill Communities to the Forests

We have noted above that there are vigorous environmental forums engaged in the states of Assam and Manipur. Though there are some such moves in the hills states as well, but they are invariably reactive to some or other steps of the state for 'development'. For example, there are forums opposing extension of railways to Meghalaya since late 1970's. Similarly, a number of forums have emerged opposing or supporting uranium mining by Uranium Corporation of India (UCI) in the West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. But it is intriguing to observe that in spite of the preponderance of forests in the lives of the tribal communities, there are a few forums addressed to the critical plight of the regional environment. And for that, some possible explanations may be advanced. Firstly, the apparent conflict between the tribal forest users and urban-industrial consumers is not visible for the simple fact that the latter are largely not located in the region, and thus, they remain unseen and hidden from the critical gaze of the concerned public. Secondly, it is the newly emerged tribal elite in the form of contractor-politicians, who are more resourceful, articulate and enterprising to subvert the local interests for supplying timber and coal from the community forests to the industries away from their states. A telling instance is the failure of the Government of Meghalaya to enforce a law enacted by the State Legislative Assembly in 1981 to establish State Timber Depots with a monopoly on the timber trade within state.

Thirdly, this middle class-neo-rich-elite combine has been instrumental in championing the cause of the local 'under-dogs' vis-à-vis 'non-locals' through various violent or non-violent movements firstly for the creation of the hill states and then other real or putative issues of significance. They are seen as the saviour of the local interests against the real or imagined outside exploiters during the aftermath of the statehood. Many of them really suffered politically and financially during the long drawn years of agitations. In fact armed insurgents, when they surrendered to the authorities with their arms, were

rehabilitated with grants in cash and employment. When they use community controlled forest resources to augment their private income in some way or other, it is justified and such transgressions are just ignored. Fourthly, in some way or other, there is a prevalent common belief that if the 'local tribal elite' do not use their resources and take advantage of them in their favour, it will be a matter of time that when the much resourceful and well-connected 'non-local (non-tribal)' will fleece them away of their resources such as forests.

Fifthly, unlike elsewhere such as in Bastar in Madhya Pradesh (Now Chhatisgarh) and Singhbhum in Bihar (Jharkhand), where local tribal communities and Dalits have suffered alike because of the excessive exploitation of the local resources by non-tribal upper castes, such a divide between suffering tribal communities and exploiter non-tribal upper castes had not been established in terms of the forest resources in the region. And lastly, in view of the fact that the middle class-neo-rich-contractor-politician combine has been able to focus on various 'ethnic demands' on behalf of their communities as a whole vis-à-vis the Indian Union, they have been able to divert the attention from the internal contradictions within the communities of the states. And thus, in spite of the depleting forests, we do not find noticeable awareness and grass-root movements to safe-guard their interests in the thriving forests in particular and a healthy environment in general.

Blurred Vision of the State and Forests in the Region

The forests located on inter-national and inter-state borders in the region are the areas, where armed insurgency has been flourishing for decades. The various shades of Naga insurgents, different forums of Manipuri rebels, Mizo National Front, United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Defence Force of Boroland (NDFB), Tripuri rebels, Khasi and Garo trouble shooters, Dimasha, Karbi and others station their hide-outs as a strategy in these 'impregnable forests'. No doubt, the Indian security forces operate in the same areas to encounter the insurgent and other anti-national elements. In fact, they have their camps in these dense forests. Naturally, no body expects the ill-armed, ill-trained and ill-paid forest staff to operate and perform their normal duties in *these* reserve forests. This is the area, which harbours precious reserve forests and provides shelter to a number of ethnic groups. Because of the disturbed conditions in the bush, as the forest dwelling ethnic groups cannot go inside the forests for livelihood, the only alternative left to them for their bare survival is to cutting the trees from these precious forests for fuel wood and supplying the same to the nearby *haats*, the local markets.

In many parts of the region, such as Nagaland, Karbi-Anglong, Manipur hills, northern Meghalaya and Mizoram, hunting certain wild games has been part of tribal rituals. For example, there has been an old practice of ritual hunting and sharing the meat of the *mithun*, which has stopped, as no mithun is available in the forests. Moreover, many of the communities, which used to go for ritual hunting in the forests, have abandoned those practices as heathen, as they got converted to Christianity. The entire northeast region, hills as well as the plains, is by tradition non-vegetarian. As they have hunted most of their wild games and birds in the bush, except that in Arunachal Pradesh, one does not find many birds in the forests. As wildlife has depleted considerably, the region is now forced to live on mutton, beef, fish, eggs, chickens, and even vegetables from distant states such as Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and elsewhere.

A visitor to the hill states of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland may find certain apathy among the citizens towards their cities. For example, these states were created on the plea that it is the democratic right of the hill peoples to manage their own affair as the plains men do in Assam or elsewhere in the country. But look at the City of Shillong, one of the premier cities of the region; it never held municipal elections ever since creation of the state of Meghalaya in 1972. The local scheduled tribe, the Khasis, who control all the levers of power in the state, do not want to share power with the citizens of Shillong, who may not belong to scheduled tribes, on the spacious plea that Meghalaya is a tribal state, only tribal must control the affairs of the town since it is capital of their state. The illogic of the stand, i. e. by doing so they are denying democratic rights of the non-tribes, does not appeal to their sense of fair play. This perception is partly based on the old notion that the cities like Shillong were non-tribal entities, imposed on the tribes by the non-tribes for subjugating them.

Undoubtedly, "the sites of the hill cities were selected mainly because of the locational, strategic, and administrative vantage in the heartland of the tribal territories. As the hill districts (of Khasi & Jaintia Hills, Garo Hills, Naga Hills and Lushai Hills) were the creation of the British, similarly, these administrative cities were all the more a British creation. In course of time, they played significant roles as trend setters in the life style of the communities among whom, they are located. Thus, Shillong with the Khasis, Jowai with the Jaintias, Tura with the Garos, Aizawl with the Mizos, Kohima with the Angamis, and Mokokchung with Aos got inseparable identities of the above communities...However, these dominant ethnic groups of these cities appear to have an ambivalent attitude to these cities. It seems

that in the ultimate analysis, they identify less with the cities and more with particular tribal traditions, in which urban experience is a new phenomenon. They are the masters of affairs on the exclusively ethnic platforms, but their own cities, which are decidedly ethnic plus, provide an arena beyond their past experience...The hill cities happened to be there; as if the citizens do not belong to them; the cities also do not belong to them; their relationship is marked by minimum level of interaction” (Sinha, A C: 1994: 212-214). Writing on the quasi-feudal lay-out of the colonial hill cities more than a hundred years back, B C Allen wrote: “The station (of Tura, headquarters of the Garo Hills District) contains the bungalows of the few resident officials and of missionaries, a small jail, the public offices, the lines of the military police, a market place and a few shops, but it is no more than a village in 1901 and a population of 1,370 souls...It is small, isolated and is generally thought to be unhealthy” (Allen, B C: 1980: 24). This was the image of most of the hill cities in the tribal heartland in the region up to the middle of the 20th century. One rarely saw the settled population of the local tribes within the perimeter of these cities in a pronounced way. In fact, they were the ‘non-tribal cities in the tribal lands’.

There is a coming crisis in the regional environment because there is a dissonance between the customary laws based on the unique regional tribal traditions and the Indian Constitutional laws, which guarantees their continuation. The problem is that the tribal elite themselves have changed because of education, Christianity, mass communication, and modern constitutional laws, but they insist to be governed under the customary laws, based on past traditions, which are largely no more in practice. For example, as per the tribal traditions, the forests were inseparable part of natural environment, in which the communities thrived and lived in contentment. For the tribal neo-elite in the changed circumstances, the forests are nothing, but store of trees bearing commercial timber for marketing on a price. That explains the wanton/rampant cutting of the trees for marketable timber from the community forests with or without community consent. In a way, the sullen attitude of the regional communities, when extensive forests were cleared for tea plantation and precious forests and hunting grounds were declared as the forest reserves by the colonial rulers in mid-19th century, has been transferred to the formal states in the region and the Indian Union. In this way, most of the ills of the British province of Assam for which the British colonial rule should be held responsible continue to bedevil the present regimes in the region. Take two

examples for illustration: encroachment on the forest reserves and encouragement to the Mymensinghia immigrants in the Province.

Why do the regional tribes at one go insist on their unique tribal traditions and at the same time transform themselves in dress, language, religion, music, and dance and over-all style of living? Why do these tribal neo-elite distance themselves with their own state, which they agitated for and now they control all levers of powers in the state as per constitutional provisions? One way to respond to the above query is in the tribal predicament to first identify themselves with uniquely tribal traditions and secondly, simultaneously look adequately modernized. In one way, there is nothing unique about it in the region. In fact, all traditional societies aspire to remain unique and at the same time, would like to appear as modern as possible. One may enumerate various shades of tribal assertion movements in autonomy agitation, regional political parties, boycotting of the formal state functions on national days or insurgencies in spite of the special political and financial arrangements made by the Indian state. A possible tentative answer may be found at two different levels. Firstly, tribes continue to see the creation of forest reserves on their jhum fields and hunting lands as assertion of an alien authority to disrupt their conventional life style; and that explains their hostility at least partly. And the secondly, the establishment of the hill cities as the district headquarters to begin with in the tribal heartland was considered as an imposition of a foreign authority and power on the existing tribal polity. Their regional states and the state of Indian Union, which continues to inherit the reserved forests and the hill cities as the headquarters of the districts and states respectively, are seen as the continuation of the same British formal state, to which their inherent hostility was far from over by the time the British left.

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