COLONISING THE HILL FORESTS OF BRITISH ASSAM : A CASE STUDY OF KHASI HILLS

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to understand the mechanisms of control engaged by the British government to administer the natural resources in the hill forests of British Assam. The focus is on Khasi Hills where the application of colonial governance was more intense compared to other hill areas of the region. The paper endeavours to comprehend the strategies applied by the colonial government to establish authority over the natural landscape of the region under various pretexts. It also aims to show that apart from exercising colonial control over lands and forests through the establishment of formal Colonial Forest Department in various parts of India, the British government dominated the indigenous lands under various ploys especially in the areas where establishing

control over indigenous natural resources through the Colonial Forest Department appeared as a difficult proposition.
Keywords: Forests, Tribes, Natural Resources, British, Khasi.

Introduction

Establishing state control over the natural resources of India was one of the imperative devices of the British government to impose supremacy over the colonised territory. It was a common imperialistic expedient applied over colonised regions to hasten and fortify the process of colonial state intrusion and establish control over the heartland of subjugated colonies. The process began after the colonial administration established its foothold strongly over the colonised region and the process was accompanied by concomitant developments like state regulation of indigenous forests, interference and deprivation of indigenous forest rights, commoditization of natural products, establishment of plantations, implementation of Scientific Forestry practices with denial of customary rights and traditional land ownership leading to land fragmentation. Alfred Crosby has aptly described the process as 'ecological imperialism'.[1].

The Imperial Forest Department came up in India under Sir Dietrich Brandis; the Inspector General of Forests in 1864 after the public announcement made by Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India in 1855 for an organised department to conserve the forests of India.[2]. The concept of Scientific Forestry was a German import adopted by the British for establishing administration over forests, to manipulate and control the Indian natural landscape according to colonial imperialistic needs. The implementation of forest acts like the Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 further strengthened the phenomenon. Although the formal department to manage forests came up in the 1860s, the process of colonial control over Indian forests predates the establishment of an organised Forest Department in the country. The forests of Bombay, Madras and the United Provinces were the preliminary regions to have Conservators of Forests in 1847, 1856 and 1857 respectively. In 1860 forest conservation was established in the North Western Provinces under the Commissioner of the region which was subsequently handed over to a Conservator in 1868. Between 1860 and 1868

separate forest departments were established in most parts of India with the Central Provinces in 1860, Oudh in 1861, the Punjab, Coorg and Bengal in 1864, Berar in 1865 and Assam in 1868.[3]

Thus Assam was the last state to be brought under the fold of British forest administration. It was a huge state during the late 19th century that incorporated the plains districts of Brahmaputra valley, Cachar and Sylhet districts of Surma valley along with the neighbouring hill districts which were attached to the region at different points of time. Initially the forests of Assam were administered as part of Bengal forests under the Bengal Forest Department operated under the Bengal forest rules of 1865.But soon it was realised that it was difficult to exercise jurisdiction over the forests of such a large expanse by a single Department. In 1868, the Forest Department of Assam was formed with Mr Gustav Mann as the Assistant Conservator of forests who was also entrusted with the task of acquiring information about the forests of the region[4]. The plain areas of Assam were under the direct control of the Imperial Forest Department while in the hills, the colonial government administered with the assistance of Political Officers. The mode of operation in the hill areas often varied from one another depending on the natural resources, location and geography of the region.

Objectives and Methodology

The paper is an attempt to understand the mode of colonial administration in the hill forests of British Assam with specific emphasis on Khasi Hills, the area inhabited by the Khasi people inthe present day state of Meghalaya situated in the north eastern corner of India. The study endeavours to comprehend the schemes and ploys of the British government to establish colonial control over the natural landscape and intends to study the modes of colonial control and forest management practices in hill forests of Khasi Hills with attempts to understand the consequences of such actions over the region. The work is based on gazetteers, scholarly works by British administrators, census Reports and anthropological researches[5] (Mackenzie, 1884; Shakespear, 1912; Allen, 1906, Gurdon reprint 1987). The secondary literature by scholars includes [6] Baruah 1970, Choudhury 1978, Mathur 1979, Dutta 1982, Sen 1985, Bareh 1997, Giri 1998 and Shanpliang 2010.

Strategies of colonial control over lands and forests in Khasi Hills

The initial interaction between the Khasis and the British took place in 1765 when the English East India Company acquired control over Sylhet in East Bengal under the Diwani of Bengal. The Khasis had trade relations with the Sylhet plains which brought them into contact with the colonial rulers. In course of time, the outbreak of the Burmese war and the forthcoming Burmese danger towards Jaintia Hills made the British realize the strategic importance of the region which if occupied by the Burmese would pose danger to Sylhet plains and eventually to the British. Consequently the colonial authorities apprehended the necessity to establish a postal service from Sylhet to Assam. David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General in Assam made a suggestion for the establishment of a road from Pandua in the foothills of Surma valley via the Khyrim territory in Khasi Hills to Assam. Thus Khasi Hills came under the purview of British administration for the first time. David Scott being greatly impressed by the cool and salubrious climate of the region planned to construct a sanatorium and a military cantonment in the area. In order to materialize his plans in the hills, Scott thought of granting lands in the plains to Khasi chiefs in exchange of hill lands from them which according to him would provide the British with hill lands on one hand while on the other make the hill chiefs more dependent and obedient to the Company [7]. The plans of Scott were fairly materialised with the establishment of Shillong as the capital of the Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam on 20th March 1874.With the new status being assigned to Shillong, Khasi Hills became the first hill district to be incorporated within Assam in 1874[8].

The British government was keen to establish control over the Khasi and Jaintia Hills for various reasons. The colonial authorities were not only impressed by the climate of the territory but were also captivated by the topography, fertile soil type, natural and mineral resources found in the region which they considered as similar to Europe's Scotland. The region became more popular to the Europeans when it was found that the soil type of Khasi and Jaintia Hills could produce European crops like potatoes, beets, carrots, cauliflowers, turnips and radishes that soon assumed the status of most profitable cash crops grown in the region. Cultivation of horticultural fruits like oranges and pineapples also achieved dimensions. Thus horticultural and agricultural farms that produced commercial crops came up. The cultivation of potatoes in Khasi hills reached such heights that within a short period it became the greatest commodity of export in the

neighbouring plains. According to the Administration Report of Khasi and Jaintia Hills 1858, the average quantities of potatoes exportedevery year to Surma Valley was about 50,000 maunds with the average selling price at Bholagunge, the great mart at the foot of the hills was about 2 rupees 8 annas. In this context W.J Allen had written, 'First introduced by David Scott in 1830, potato has been the greatest boon that the British ruler had conferred on the Cosseah people'[9].

The initial approach of the British government towards European penetration in Khasi Hills was minimisation of powers of the Khasi chiefs or Syiems who were the elected chiefs of the Khasi states (Hima). The Syiem was elected by an electoral body consisting of Lyngdohs (officials having secular and religious powers), Myntris (advisors of the syiem at the state level), Basans, Sirdars (elected headman of village) and the headmen of the leading clans. The position of the Syiem was similar to a king and was supposed to have a divine origin. He supervised the administration of his state and was considered as the authority of moral laws. He was assisted by the Durbar (the Khasi Assembly) consisting of officials and myntris in exercising their duties[10].

The intent of the British administration was materialised when the colonial authorities concluded agreements with the Khasi chiefs on provisions profitable to the colonial government. The Khasi chiefs were provided with sanads by which the Syiemship or Lyngdohship appeared more as 'gifts' conferred by the British government on them rather than their traditional customary right. The sanads further made the Khasi rulers surrender their rights over natural resources to the British government by which the latter was given the authority over natural products like lime, coal, minerals and trees[11]. The process accelerated and accentuated with the establishment of railways when forests producing timbers for railway sleepers were brought under colonial forest preservation policies. By the mid nineteenth century a number of treaties and agreements were concluded between the British government and the Khasi chiefs in 1856, 1858, 1859, 1866, 1867, and 1877 leading to transfer of Khasi lands under British protection. The Sirdar of Jeerang in Jaintia hills whose petty state contained one of the richest Sal forests was brought under colonial forest conservation as Sal timber was considered to be the best for manufacturing railway sleepers [12]. In an agreement concluded in 1856, the ruler of the Khasi state of Nungklow granted rent free lands to the British for the establishment of cantonments, military, civil sanatoria, construction of government roads and buildings within his area of

jurisdiction. The British government promised to share half of their profits over sale or lease on natural products with the Khasi chiefs [13].

The colonial ploy to exercise control over the natural landscape and resources of Khasi Hills could be noticed by the mid nineteenth century through government reports and legislations. Under clause IV of the Allen Report of 1858 the British government could minimize the powers of the Syiems to lease and transfer lands within their jurisdiction. Hence, the Syiem of the Mulliem state in Khasi hills could not lease lands to Europeans other than the British and Bengalis without the sanction of the British government[14]. This ensured British control over the region by preventing Europeans other than British from obtaining lands in Khasi hills.

British control over Khasi lands was strengthened when plantations started coming up in the region under the initiative of the colonial authorities. During 1871-72, about 600 acres of land was leased by the government for the creation of timber plantation near Shillong [15].The lands unoccupied by villages, cultivation, and orchards were declared as wastelands the sale or lease of which were under British jurisdiction[16]. The establishment of colonial control over indigenous lands were often done through contracts with the Khasi chiefs under which the latter were made to hand over their lands in return of military protection by the British authorities[17]. The contracts and discussions mostly took place in Khasi Durbar, the popular assembly and a democratic body of the Khasis that exercised supreme authority from the state level to the lowest political unit or the clan. It dealt with aspects like disputes among the clan members, adultery, trespass, theft, damage to property within the clan known as 'Durbar Kur' presided over by the village headman (Rangbah) of the clan (Kur)[18]. Since the interactions took place in Khasi Durbar, it is likely that the common people were informed about them. Some references suggest that under such circumstance, the common people developed animosity against their chiefs for accepting the provisions imposed by the British[19]. But since the chiefs were divided amongst themselves, a united approach against the encroaching character of the British government was lacking among them[20].

The assigning of political importance to Shillong as the state head quarters of Assam could also be interpreted as a policy to implement colonial interests in Khasi Hills. On 20th March 1874, Shillong was declared as the capital of the Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam. The new seat of administration was a conglomeration of scattered Khasi villages of Laban, Mawkher, and

Laitumukhrah situated in the plateau of Pamnakraialong with certain areas of the Mylliemsyiemship ceded by the Syiem of Mylliem to the British .The new capital included four types of lands purchased by the British in the region They were- (1) lands purchased by government reserved for public purposes(2) lands purchased for the construction of government buildings(3) lands purchased for purposes like rent or sale for cultivation and other purposes and (4) lands containing the property of the original owners of the soil. Soon Shillong was converted into the seat of British administrative power in Assam and began to attract huge population from neighbouring Assam and East Bengal as personnel for the new bureaucratic setup. Colonel Keating, the first Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1874 under the advice of the Secretary of State observed that the subordinate administrative services should be confined to the inhabitants of the country while the superior posts should be limited to the English assisted mainly by other English educated Indians[21]. Consequently English educated nontribal population from neighbouring areas employed in British subordinate administrative services began to settle in Shillong thus contributing significantly in bringing demographic and environmental changes in the region.

Sequel of Events

The political and demographic developments brought about certain consequent changes. In order to accommodate the surplus population, tracts of forests lands and paddy fields were made over for the construction of houses and markets. In this context, the instance of the Rilbong area of Shillong can be cited which was a reserved forest under the military cantonment while Pynthumukrah was a green paddy field that was converted into the playgrounds of football, polo and horse races for the British officials [22]. The various lands purchased in Shillong by the colonial government were private lands (Ri Kynti), public lands (Ri Raid) or Ri Khurid lands (lands held by Khasi families by right of outright purchase and over which they exercise rights similar to a RiKynti owner belonging to the Khasis. The Ri Kynti lands included Laitumukhra, the European wards consisting of Police bazaar and Jail road, and the Cantonment areas of Shillong. The Ri Raid lands purchased by the British were the Municipal wards of Laban, Lumparing, Malki, Mawkher, South Mawkher, Rilbong and Kenches Trace while the Ri Khurid lands

comprised of the entire area of Mawprem in Shillong. The acquisition of the whole area was finalized in 1863-64 costing the British government a sum of Rs 8,433[23].

Establishment of colonial control further fast tracked the process of British ascendancy over the forest resources of the region. In Khasi Hills, the colonial government exercised control over the natural resources in two ways. Apart from entering into shared contracts with the Khasi Syiems on indigenous forests as discussed earlier, some forest areas around Shillong were converted into reserved forests under the notifications of the colonial Forest Department. Rait Laban and Shyrwat were constituted into reserved forest in1888, Upper Shillong and Laitkor were termed as Green Blocks (Protected forests) and RaitKhwam was converted into reserved forest in 1892. Sarpung and Narpuh reserved forests in Jaintia hills were established in 1878 and 1909 respectively[24]. The implementation of colonial legislations regulated the hunting practices of the indigenous people. Parts of forests within each Hima in Khasi Hills were converted into separate circles or mahals dedicated for catching elephants on rules of 1874-75 framed under the Chief Commissioner and approved by the government of India. One of these rules required that one half of the proceeds of the sale of each elephant caught would be paid over to the chief whose state formed the mahal and the other half was retained by the government. The hunting skills of the people were brought under effective use by declaring certain animals as vermin with rewards being paid for killing them. The reward for killing tigers was Rs 25 per head in 1860-70[25]. The government further ensured the Syiems that establishment of colonial control over Khasi lands would not impinge into the security of the sacred groves or the forests preserved under the religious beliefs of the Khasi people. In an agreement between the Khasi Syiem Mile Singh Raja and Lormiet Montang and Lt Col J.C Haughton, the Officiating Agent in Assam regarding sale of lands in Shillong, the colonial government promised for the preservation of sacred groves in the territory under the respective Khasi chiefs[26].

The colonial government considered jhumming or shifting cultivation as the greatest impediment to forests and thus forwarded it as the justification for colonial control over forest lands that would protect the latter from the destruction caused by jhumming. Consequently more emphasis was laid on the preservation of forests on climatic grounds. With this end in view, Riat Khwan area between Shillong and Gauhati was reserved in order to consolidate the steep

slopes through which the Gauhati road had passed. Another justification for governmental domination over Khasi lands was the preservation of forests from wasteful timber cutting undertaken in private lands by the timber traders. Accordingly the government entered into contracts and agreements with the private timber traders under which the traders were required to obtain permits of certain areas from the Deputy Commissioner of the region. The purchasers of timber had to select the trees to be felled with the consent of the forest official who would mark the tree for him. Thus the government kept a track on the trees being cut and could implement forest conservation in the region. The terms of the Assam Forest Regulation of 1891 were implemented in the region. Areas within forests with unrestricted timber felling were demarcated and brought under fire protection and conservation measures. In 1897 Shillong faced a devastating earthquake that created extensive demand for timber to rebuild the station and the demands had to be met from the adjoining forests around the area. This required heavy felling of forests in and around Shillong. Accordingly other forests were brought under forest conservation to protect them from further deforestation[27].

The establishment of British government in Khasi Hills minimised the powers of the indigenous Khasi chiefs, officials, Khasi Durbar and the Khasi state (Hima).The administrative powers of the office of Syiem, (the Khasi chief) Myntris (ministers) and Lyndohs (the Khasi priest) were curtailed to a considerable extent as the ultimate ruling authority with administrative and judicial powers were vested with the Deputy Commissioner. The popularity of the Khasi chiefs was further lowered down when the people realised that their lands were passed over to the British government under agreements signed between the Khasi chiefs and the colonial authorities. A popular protest was launched by issuing a memorandum to the British government where the people appealed that the Syeimhad no right to alienate the lands, forests and mineral resources of the people without their consent[28]. Since according to Khasi customs and land systems, the actual owner of lands and forests in the Khasi state (Hima) were the people and the Syiems were mere custodians, the latter had no right to part with indigenous lands without the consent of the people[29].The memorandum observed that the Syiem had no authority to share the profit arising out of the forest products and minerals in RiKynti and Ri Raid lands. The people also resented leasing of wastelands to the colonial government, establishment of

military cantonments and health resorts in Khasi Hills by the British authorities. The chiefs who accepted colonial supremacy functioned as puppets of the British government in their respective territories[30]. Further the accompanying developments like spread of Christianity and implementation of English education in Khasi Hills attempted to strengthen the hold of colonial domination over the region. By the late nineteenth century, indigenous protests to colonial efforts of religious conversion were noticed in Khasi Hills and institutions like 'Seng Khasi' came up in 1899 to protect the Khasi indigenous religious beliefs, culture and customs from the onslaughts of western and Christian influence. Clan based societies like the Ka Seng Kur Blah of Blah clan and the welfare society of the Kharkongor clan came up with the same aims and purposes[31].

Attempts to Govern the Natural Landscape

The extent of the British forest administration in Khasi Hills was confined to plantations and forest reserves in the nineteenth century. The colonial government emphasised on the establishment of plantations that could grow commercially important timber and exotic species and also for climatic purposes. Accordingly two plantations came up near Shillong that contained trees like PinusKasia, Juglansregia, Eucalyptus rostrata, and Pinus maritime etc. Another plantation came up in Umkra which was acquired in 1871-72 for the sake of experiments in agriculture. In the second plantation, several patches of forests were preserved to ensure permanent water supply in Shillong. The government also sowed PinusKasia, Quercus Griffithi, and Eucalyptus in some of the agricultural lands that belonged to the Khasis. A Cinchona plantation was started near Nongklao and Jirang by the Superintendent of Botanical Gardens, Calcutta in 1867. In 1874-75, the British Forest Department acquired control over it [32].

Despite various measures being applied to secure control over Khasi Hills, procuring lands in the region was not an easy process for the British as expected by them. This was because land systems in Khasi Hills was based on traditional land structures of the Khasis according to which the lands belonged to the people and not to the Khasi chiefs with whom the British had entered into agreements[33]. Since the people had cultivating rights over the lands, establishment of colonial control over them at the initial phase had to be undertaken with some thoughtfulness. Therefore till the initial years of the twentieth century only Riat

Khwan was declared as reserve forest. The rest were either been purchased or leased in perpetuity. Around 1909 some 63 acres of land in Upper Shillong Block was brought under reservation. The Deputy Commissioner of the region ordered for more reservation of forest lands on other grounds. Accordingly Liatkor and Riat Laban were treated as game reserves[34] .

The colonial Forest Department in Hills had to restrict itself to minimum administrative activities such as establishment of plantations and implementation of fire protection in the areas where shifting cultivation was practiced. This was because the Department till the first decade of the twentieth century suffered from severe crunch of man power that consisted of only a Ranger, Deputy Ranger, a game keeper for the Liatkor and Riat Laban forest reserves and some forest guards. These officials had no training of forest administration and lacked the sense of responsibility for the work to be performed. Instances of tree felling within reserved areas were also there which the Department found difficult to control due to absence of proper infrastructure. In this regard E.M Coventry, the Deputy Conservator of Forests, Eastern Bengal and Assam observed, "The establishment at present exhibits a total absence of any sense of duty or knowledge of its responsibilities. Illicit felling and petty offences are everywhere prevalent, and quite as common in the neighbourhood of the guard's quarter. The trained ranger has recently joined, but is handicapped by inexperience and absence of technical training and control. There is no clerical establishment. The office work is carried on by executive staff'" [35]

Under such circumstances the colonial forest administration had little options but to engage the indigenous population for the works of forest management. As a measure to safeguard the sacred groves from jhumming, the British government made the Syiems and indigenous village officers accountable for their protection. It was believed that such measure would make the Khasis answerable for their own actions and thus would curb shifting cultivation to a considerable extent. By the twentieth century some protected forests were created[36].The colonial government under the agreements with the Syiems made arrangements to share the natural products in the indigenous forests and accordingly the Syiems were required on investiture to confirm the cession of the mines, minerals, elephants, forests and other natural products of their states to the British government on the condition of receiving half profits[37].The government also demanded a timber fee on certain trees felled in the Khasi indigenous forests for export to the districts of the plains. These receipts constituted the colonial income from Khasi forests[38].

These forests were brought under the category of shared forests.

Conclusion

Thus several factors attracted the British to establish colonial ascendency over Khasi Hills thus contributing in making the region the first hill district to be incorporated within British Assam. The preliminary step towards its realisation was acquisition of control over indigenous lands and forests which was materialised in an organised manner through application of various strategies and tactics. Political importance assigned to the region augmented the phenomenon that brought changes in demography, natural environment, culture and society of the province. The Khasis being trade minded also reciprocated and could grasp the commercial benefits of colonial ventures and thus horticultural farms came up in indigenous lands under joint initiatives of the Khasi and the British that ensured commercial success for both of them. However despite such measures, formal implementation of governmental mechanism over the forests of Khasi Hills remained a weak proposition for the British government that had to be restricted to few plantations and reserves. The infrastructure of the British forest department was mal nourished with poor work force and lack of proper administrative set up. Hence administering the natural landscape through indigenous chiefs was perhaps a necessity rather than an option. The acceptance of British supervision over their lands by the chiefs without the consent of the people brings forth the gap in political administration in the traditional state structure of the Khasis. Thus Khasi Hills could be cited as a region where colonial government exercised control over indigenous lands and forests more powerfully through application of land acquisition strategies rather than establishing control through the British Forest Department that was handicapped due to certain disadvantages and encumbrances.

Notes

Scientific Forestry: The enquiries into various facets of forestry such as its growth, cultivation, protection, utilisation and restoration on the basis of scientific methods and experiments was termed as 'Scientific Forestry' which aimed at providing sustained economic yield from forests. This concept originated in

eighteenth century Germany after the country was devastated by the impact of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The excellence of the Germans in forest management and their concept of Nachhaltigkeit [sustainability or providing for future generations] date long before the eighteenth century and visualising the forests as a commercial product emerged much later from this concept. This idea was adopted by the British as one of the manoeuvres for colonisation.

Maund: Indian unit of weight equivalent to about 37 kg.

Sanad: deeds granted by the British to the princely state rulers of India authorising their status in their states in return for acknowledging their allegiance.

Mahal: Mahals were partitions or territorial units within forests for the hunting elephants by means of Khedda or stockades. Mahals also existed for the extraction of timbers.

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