

Demographic Transition of Tribal People in Forest Villages of Assam

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ABSTRACT The creation of forest villages in India was a part of forest management under the Colonial Government in the early part of the last century. The need for a regular supply of labourers in forest exploitation was met through the introduction of 'taungya' system where the labourers were given some amount of land to cultivate in lieu of their physical labour in forestry works. These settlements or colonies of labourers established by the Forest Department for maintenance of assured supply of labour required in forestry works done departmentally were known as forest villages. The terms and conditions laid down by the forest department while establishing forest villages were very exploitative in nature. There is a general perception that the forest villages have been inhabited predominantly by the tribal people over the period of time. But the present study reveals that the tribal populations living in forest villages in the state of Assam have been numerically outnumbered by the other communities. This situation is likely to create a strategic dilemma in implementing the new policy on tribal people and forest in the country.

INTRODUCTION

Forest and Tribal People: In India any discourse on forest and forestry programme reminds the interrelation between forest and the tribal population. The traditional symbiotic relationship between traditional tribal societies and forest has been revealed in almost all the studies conducted by social scientists among the tribal groups. The traditional practice of the tribals in utilizing the forest resources has been a two way process. The forest dwellers created a culture where forests were treated as a renewable means of subsistence. It has also been revealed that (Fernandes, 1988) the forest areas in the country are largely inhabited by the tribals. As individuals of forests, the forest dwellers are inevitably dependent on the forest for their livelihood. They are dependent on forest for various products even when they practice settled cultivation. The most prominent use of forest land by the tribal people is the practice of shifting cultivation. Observations also reveal that a lot of Indian tribals practicing settled cultivation too depend on forest for food collection. These facts are also established by the studies of Hoffman (1950), Elwin (1954), and Basu (1987). Forest has got importance among the tribals as it provides medicinal plants and herbs for their traditional way of treatment. Numerous instances have been

found among the different tribal people of the country who use forest as a source of fodder and also a means of earning by collecting economically valuable things (Ray Burman, 1988 Hembram, 1988). They also indicate that there is a strong tie between the social system of the tribals and the forests. These scholars also reveal that the tribal culture protects and regenerate the surrounding forests by means of their traditional socio-cultural processes like imposing taboo, planting certain varieties of plants etc. Thus the traditional practices of the tribal forest dwellers were constructive towards forest management.

Forest Village Defined: The creation of forest villages was a part of forest management in the early part of the last century. The British government had to meet the supply of raw material for railway expansion and revenue to support the British Imperial Government. The need for exploitation of forest resources required maintaining a regular supply of labour. In the early phase of forest exploitation this need was met through the introduction of 'taungya' system as was earlier practised in Burma and Malaysia.

As far back as 1856, Mr. Brandis conceived the idea of pressing the shifting cultivation, as practised by the Karens, into the service of arboricultural by interpreting the crops with teak. This process consists of the cutting down and the forest growth, firing it when dry and sowing

the areas thus prepared with field crops. When these have been reaped and, as the case may be, after two or three year's use, the area is deserted, and a new piece of forest is clear felled. This goes on till a forest growth sufficient to give a good blaze and plenty of ashes have grown upon the area first attacked. The rotation occupied from ten to thirty years. In Burma these clearings are called taungya. The inclusion of local tribal people into the scheme of taungya was fruitful for forest departments. The population had become accustomed to the employment thus offered, which gave them a regular incomes, in addition to the crops which they were able to raise just as in former times; and it became possible to work over large areas, and at the same time to command better average results.

In India the practice was followed mainly in the areas where the local people refused to lend their labour for government silvicultural programmes. Initially, the forest labourers were treated as serfs by the government as they were forced to render free service for forest work for a number of days in a year as earmarked. Later, the situation changed slightly as the migrant labourers were provided homesteads and one hector of land in lieu of services rendered by them to the forest department. These settlements came to be known as forest villages. *Thus, by definition, forest villages does not mean the villages located in the forest, but means such villages or colony of colliers or labourers established by the Forest Department for maintenance of assured supply of labour required in forest works done departmentally* (Sinha, 1987). Either existing habitations in the forest were declared as forest villages or people were brought from outside to establish forest villages. The report of the Committee on Forestry Programmes for Alleviation of Poverty, GOI (1984), shows that there are five thousand forest villages where two lakhs scheduled tribe families reside who are still in the category of 'unreachable' from the planning process.

Individuals in forest villages were permitted to construct small temporary huts and also raise some food crops to supplement their earnings. The land thus utilized legally continues to remain 'reserved' forest and the villages were expected to be shifted when there was no forest work. There are also evidences especially from Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat (Prasad and Jahagirdar, 1993) that some revenue villages were transferred to

forest department to form forest villages. These types of forest villages are technically or administratively known as 'Revenue Forest Village'. The typical forest villages are on the other hand the ones where the labour camps have been transformed into semi-permanent or permanent settlements.

FOREST VILLAGES IN ASSAM

Assam is one of the seven states of North-east India. The state is surrounded by all six states along with Bhutan, West Bengal and Bangla Desh. The surface area of the state is 78,438 sq. Kilometer. Its population according to the 2001 census is 2,66,38,407. The state has 23 administrative districts, 93 census towns, 21,995 inhabited villages with 714 gram panchayats and 135 Community Development Blocks. Assam remains famous for its extensive forest cover over the time. Evergreen as well as deciduous forests are common in the whole length and breadth of the state. But in recent years deforestation occurred due to illegal cutting of trees for fire wood as well as to feed the plywood factories, to meet the railway extension and other commercial purposes. In hilly areas the effect of shifting cultivation, the process of merging corporate and community forest in to government's holding etc sufficiently accelerated the rate of deforestation. Illegal encroachment by people especially after political upheavals in nearby Countries pushed forward lot of people into the forest land. In Assam, according to a recent survey about 11% of total recorded forest area is under encroachment.

The reservation of forestland is a colonial phenomenon in Assam. In the interest of the forest management and forest resource exploitation forest villages were created in Assam. The Assam Forest Regulation, which was sanctioned in 1891, was entirely formulated on the line of the upper Burma Forest Regulation Act. The Taungya system, which was current in Burma, was also applied in Assam. Teak plantations were also established in the year 1901 in Longal Reserved Forest in Sylhet district, which is now in Bangladesh. The people were recruited on the basis of their adaptability in the hostile condition in terms of health aspects as the areas were full of mosquito an malaria was very much prevalent there. The Success story of these forest villages encouraged the forest

department to establish more such villages for the growing activities of forest management. Thus decision was taken to establish forest villages in land suitable for wet rice cultivation within the reserved forest. In the process, by the year 1902-03 as many as 15 forest villages came up and the number increased up to 145 in 1913-14. As a starting point three districts were selected for the functioning of forest villages. These were Cachar, Goalpara and Kamrup having 8, 15 and 12 forest villages respectively in each district.

Administrative Aspects of Forest Villages:

Three most important and significant terms and conditions laid down by the Forest Department for settling the people in the forest Villages determining the long-term economic interest of the settlers are:

- (a) The Forest Department and the contractors have the first claim to the labour of forest villages on payment of wages;
- (b) The villages will not accept any other employment without obtaining prior permission from the Forest Departments; and
- (c) They can be summarily evicted for non-compliance of the terms and conditions.

In forest village the tribals do not have right to the land, which they cultivate (GOI, 1982). Importantly, even in the 'Revenue Forest Villages' the people lose all their rights over their lands the moment they are handed over to the forest department for administration. In other words all the lands of such villages are treated as government land. With the enforcement of the Constitution on 26th January 1950 'begar' and other forms of bounded labour stood prohibited and punishable in accordance with law. But the condition did not change in many places. It was only in the year 1969 when such system was first challenged in Kerala and the Supreme Court of India had ordered to abolish the system of 'begar' in forest villages in the country. Later on it was advocated that the tribals living in forest villages should be given the right to inherit land but such land should be inalienable. The decision of the Ministry of Agriculture (1984) suggests that the State should confer long term heritable but inalienable right to tribals in forest villages.

Problems of Forest Villages: The specific problems of the forest villages as pointed out by a scholar like Jahagirdar (1993) are as follows:

- a) Inhabitants of the forest villages do not enjoy tenancy right on the land, which they cleared

once, and there is always fear of eviction by the forest department.

- b) Being the inhabitants of remote forest area and as untouched by revenue department they hardly come under the purview of the development administration of Block.
- c) Unable to get financial assistance from institutional sources as they have no recognised right on land and other properties.

Feature of Forest Villages in Assam: The record of forest department shows that besides tribal communities, there are several Scheduled Castes and other communities inhabited in the forest villages in Assam. The political history of the state shows that in several tribal dominated areas the forests were opened up for immigrants who were basically non-tribals coming mainly from present day Bangladesh, by the then administrative authorities. The imposition of Reserved Forest Act curtailed the power and authority of the tribal people on their traditional domains. Thus in Assam, heterogeneous population groups are found in the forest villages.

The record of forest department shows that till 31st March 1984, the forest department of Assam had the record of a total of 450 forest villages with definite number of household record and land holding under the department. It also shows another 49 settlements as taungya settlement in the state with no definite record of number of household and population. The forest villages were distributed in 22 forest divisions in the state. The highest number of forest villages were found under Kachugaon division (102) followed by Kamrup Division (60) and Silchar (57) and Karimganj division (43). Data show that there are 19222 families originally registered under the forest department settled in 450 forest villages excluding the Taungyas. The total population as recorded by the Forest department till March 1984 as 1,60,179. The population in forest villages comprised tribal communities, Scheduled Castes and other communities including caste Assamese and Muslim population. Contrary to general perception that forest villages are inhabited by tribals basically, in the state of Assam only 47 percent of the forest villagers are tribal communities. While nearly 13 percent of the forest villagers were Scheduled Caste communities the other communities represents the remaining 40 percent of the forest village population. Thus the tribal communities showed a marginally numerically dominated

group in forest villages of Assam till 1984. It has been stated elsewhere in this writing that a fixed amount of land was given to the forest villagers for homestead as well as for cultivation purpose. The data of the Forest department show that a total of 50682.52 hectares of land was given to the 19222 families (including land for common use) by the department initially. This gives an average of 2.63 hectares of land for every family in forest villages, but actual land holding ranges from 5 Bighas to 12 Bighas per family as was found against individual record. This is practically a

small amount of land holding in terms of agricultural production and subsistence. The Forest Division-wise distribution of forest villages along with the population and land allotment pattern has been presented in Table 1.

Table 2 shows the district-wise distribution of population in forest villages in Assam till the year 1994. This is worth mentioning that some of these districts have been restructured by now and accordingly the forest villages have been parted to different districts. The table reveals that Kokrajhar district has the highest number of

Table 1: Division-wise distribution of forest village in Assam as on 31.3.84

| <i>Name of Division</i> | <i>No. of F. V.</i> | <i>Area in hectore</i> | <i>No. of Families</i> | <i>Total Population</i> | <i>S.C</i> | <i>S.T</i> | <i>Others</i> |
|-------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------|------------|---------------|
| Ai Valley | 12 | 2827.19 | 698 | 5999 | 129 | 2860 | 3010 |
| Dhubri | 14 | 731.00 | 304 | 3089 | 0 | 1544 | 1545 |
| Haltugaon | 24 | 3663.00 | 1342 | 13261 | 27 | 10224 | 3010 |
| Kacugaon | 102 | 16075.10 | 4706 | 39777 | 84 | 22172 | 17521 |
| Darrang East | 9 | 396.40 | 247 | 2606 | 95 | 1591 | 920 |
| Darrang West | 18 | 1572.01 | 736 | 5047 | 486 | 2655 | 1906 |
| Nagaon | 6 | 276.50 | 183 | 1093 | 266 | 705 | 122 |
| Nagaon South | 9 | 1402.50 | 641 | 4747 | 1621 | 1549 | 1577 |
| Lakhimpur | 9 | 738.93 | 421 | 2060 | 0 | 2054 | 6 |
| Kamrup East Divn | 1 | 61.52 | 41 | 273 | 0 | 273 | 0 |
| Kamrup West | 60 | 1590.92 | 1291 | 6796 | 5 | 6616 | 175 |
| North Kachar. | 2 | N. A | 42 | 1366 | 0 | 724 | 642 |
| Dibrugarh | 23 | 2177.44 | 787 | 7266 | 805 | 4883 | 1578 |
| Sibsagar | 21 | 1775.89 | 896 | 9081 | 308 | 4135 | 4638 |
| Doomdooma | 3 | 60.66 | 26 | 304 | 0 | 0 | 304 |
| Digboi | 16 | 4889.04 | 1545 | 13776 | 2128 | 3950 | 7718 |
| Golagnat | 11 | 1989.06 | 1018 | 9588 | 963 | 2174 | 6451 |
| K. A. East | 6 | 390.40 | 409 | 1963 | 1220 | 743 | 0 |
| N. C. Hills | 1 | 8.00 | 20 | 218 | 0 | 218 | 0 |
| Silchar | 57 | 7639.99 | 2476 | 21858 | 9476 | 4483 | 7899 |
| Karimganj | 43 | 2416.97 | 1393 | 10011 | 2946 | 1931 | 5134 |
| Tungiya village | 49 | 3233.15 | | | | | |
| ASSAM | 499 | 50682.52 | 19222 | 160179 | 20559 | 75464 | 64156 |
| Total | 499 | 53915.67 | | | | | |

Source: Office of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Assam

Table 2: District-wise distribution of population in forest villages of Assam, 1994

| <i>Name of District</i> | <i>No. of F.V.</i> | <i>No of Families</i> | <i>Total Population</i> | <i>SC</i> | <i>ST</i> | <i>Others</i> |
|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------|
| Kokrajhar | 155 | 7050 | 62126 | 240 | 36800 | 25086 |
| Sonitpur | 28 | 983 | 7653 | 581 | 4246 | 2826 |
| Nagaon | 15 | 824 | 5840 | 1887 | 2254 | 1699 |
| Lakhimpur | 9 | 421 | 2060 | 0 | 2054 | 6 |
| Dibrugarh | 42 | 2358 | 21346 | 2933 | 8813 | 9600 |
| Sibsagar | 21 | 896 | 9081 | 308 | 4135 | 4638 |
| Golaghat | 11 | 1018 | 9588 | 963 | 2174 | 6451 |
| Kamrup | 63 | 1374 | 8435 | 5 | 7613 | 817 |
| Karbi-Anglong | 6 | 429 | 2181 | 1220 | 961 | 0 |
| Cachar | 57 | 2476 | 21858 | 9476 | 4483 | 7899 |
| Karimganj | 43 | 1393 | 10011 | 2946 | 1931 | 5134 |
| Total | 450 | 19222 | 160179 | 20559 | 75464 | 64156 |

Source: Office of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Assam

forest villages (155) forming nearly 33 percent of the total forest villages in the state. It is followed by Kamrup, Cachar, Karimganj and Dibrugarh district. Kokrajhar district also has the highest percentage share of total population of forest villagers (39%) followed by Cachar (13.64%) and Dibrugarh (13.33%). Cachar district has harboured the maximum number of Scheduled Caste population (46%) followed by Karimganj, Dibrugarh and Nagaon district. Out of total tribal population inhabiting forest villages in the state nearly 49 percent lived in Kokrajhar district. Harboursing nearly 12 percent tribal forest villagers Dibrugarh district remained in second position while Kamrup district lagged behind marginally. Out of total 64156 people from other than ST and SC 39 percent resided in Kokrajhar district. While Dibrugarh district has 15 percent of other communities in forest villages Cachar district has 12.3 percent followed by Golaghat and Karimganj district.

Table 3 shows comparative details of the population of the forest villages recorded in 1984 forest department census and 2001 general census. The table shows that as against 450 forest villages in 1984 there are 564 forest villages recorded in 2001 census posting a 25 percent increase in 16 districts in the state. The table reveals a 242.88 percent increase of population in forest villages. The increase is 173 percent among the tribal, 110 percent among the Scheduled castes and 349 percent in other communities. There are 64 villages where tribal people inhabited in 1984 census but there is no trace of tribal people in those villages in 2001 census at all. The table clearly reveals the higher growth of other communities in the forest villages in the state of Assam.

The trend of population increase in forest villages once inhabited only by tribal people is very distressing in terms of relationship between tribes and forest. Table 4 was prepared by selecting the villages where tribal people were numerically dominant in 1984 Forest department census to show their population structure according to the 2001 general census report. The table shows demographic transition in tribal inhabited forest villages in eight selected districts in Assam. It shows that in half of the districts the tribal population growth shows a negative trend. These districts are Cachar, Sibsagar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. The highest percentage growth of tribal population is seen in

Table 3: Comparative details of forest villages in Assam between the year 1984 and 2001

| District | No of villages | | Villages inhabited by tribals in 1983 | No of Households in year | | Total population in year | | Tribal population in year | | SC population in year | | Others population in year | | Tribal extinct from villages | |
|---------------|----------------|------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------|--------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|-----------------------|-------|---------------------------|--------|------------------------------|------|
| | 1984 | 2001 | | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 |
| Cachar | 57 | 79 | 31 | 2476 | 3148 | 21858 | 46097 | 4483 | 3148 | 9476 | 9393 | 7899 | 33556 | 12 | |
| Hailakandi | 0 | 21 | 0 | 0 | 8468 | 0 | 47581 | 0 | 384 | 0 | 11218 | 0 | 38729 | 7 | |
| Dibrugarh | 42 | 24 | 26 | 2358 | 11564 | 21346 | 11382 | 8813 | 5972 | 2933 | 1855 | 9600 | 3555 | 2 | |
| Tinsukia | 0 | 19 | 0 | 0 | 4630 | 0 | 25205 | 0 | 7303 | 0 | 1915 | 0 | 15983 | 4 | |
| Kamrup | 63 | 70 | 63 | 1374 | 6324 | 8435 | 35897 | 7613 | 13716 | 5 | 894 | 817 | 21287 | 14 | |
| Karimganj | 43 | 48 | 13 | 1393 | 6078 | 10011 | 35298 | 1931 | 293 | 2946 | 9559 | 5134 | 26446 | 13 | |
| Kokrajhar | 155 | 164 | 118 | 7050 | 38843 | 62126 | 208016 | 36800 | 123363 | 240 | 1673 | 25086 | 82980 | 0 | |
| Nagaon | 15 | 32 | 6 | 824 | 5099 | 5840 | 27764 | 2254 | 4754 | 1887 | 4094 | 1699 | 18916 | 3 | |
| Sibsagar | 21 | 30 | 8 | 896 | 3687 | 9081 | 19624 | 4135 | 3097 | 308 | 999 | 4638 | 15528 | 2 | |
| Sonitpur | 28 | 39 | 18 | 983 | 11192 | 7653 | 59846 | 4246 | 29270 | 581 | 586 | 2826 | 29990 | 7 | |
| Lakhimpur | 9 | 5 | 9 | 421 | 183 | 2060 | 1519 | 2054 | 1499 | 0 | 12 | 6 | 8 | 0 | |
| Golaghat | 11 | 9 | 9 | 1018 | 2562 | 9588 | 14035 | 2174 | 2303 | 963 | 794 | 6451 | 10938 | 0 | |
| Morigaon | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 500 | 0 | 2145 | 0 | 472 | 0 | 81 | 0 | 1592 | 0 | |
| Bongaiaon | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1938 | 0 | 11009 | 0 | 8782 | 0 | 114 | 0 | 2113 | 0 | |
| Karbi Anglong | 6 | 17 | 3 | 429 | 530 | 2181 | 2783 | 961 | 1638 | 1220 | 6 | 0 | 1139 | 0 | |
| Total | 450 | 564 | 304 | 19222 | 99033 | 160179 | 548201 | 75464 | 205994 | 20559 | 43193 | 64156 | 286970 | 64 | |

Table 4: Demographic transition in forest villages having all tribal people in 1984

| District | Years | No of Villages | No of HH | Total Pop | Tribal pop | Others | Villages with no tribal in 2001 |
|------------|------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|----------|---------------------------------|
| Sonitpur | 1984 | 16 | 542 | 3130 | 3070 | 60 | 6 |
| | 2001 | | 2242 | 11755 | 4143 | 7612 | |
| | % increase | | 313.65 | 275.55 | 34.95 | 12586.66 | |
| Kokrajhar | 1984 | 46 | 1941 | 19423 | 19061 | 362 | 3 |
| | 2001 | | 7746 | 42696 | 40541 | 2155 | |
| | % increase | | 299.00 | 119.82 | 112.69 | 495.30 | |
| Kamrup | 1984 | 42 | 1005 | 5374 | 5369 | 5 | 11 |
| | 2001 | | 4983 | 28459 | 10198 | 18261 | |
| | % increase | | 396.0 | 430.0 | 89.00 | absolute | |
| Dibrugarh | 1984 | 11 | 348 | 3640 | 3623 | 17 | 1 |
| | 2001 | | 902 | 5940 | 5021 | 919 | |
| | % increase | | 159.0 | 63.0 | 38.6 | 5306.0 | |
| Karimganj | 1984 | 7 | 197 | 2021 | 1667 | 354 | 5 |
| | 2001 | | 1008 | 5840 | 293 | 4547 | |
| | Difference | | 412.0 | 189.0 | -82.0 | 1184.0 | |
| Hailakandi | 1984 | 4 | 145 | 632 | 587 | 65 | 2 |
| | 2001 | | 2358 | 13660 | 372 | 13388 | |
| | % increase | | 1526.20 | 2061.39 | -36.62 | absolute | |
| Sibsagar | 1984 | 7 | 397 | 4762 | 4111 | 651 | 2 |
| | 2001 | | 1065 | 6252 | 3000 | 3252 | |
| | % increase | | 168.26 | 31.28 | -27.00 | 399.53 | |
| Cachar | 1984 | 7 | 189 | 1606 | 1495 | 111 | 3 |
| | 2001 | | 1269 | 9654 | 854 | 8800 | |
| | % increase | | 571.42 | 494.89 | -42.87 | 7827.92 | |

Kokrajhar district (112.69%) followed by Kamrup district (89%) and Dibrugarh district (38.6%). From the point of number of total population the increase in Kokrajhar district remains important. Contrary to the negative and low growth trend of tribal people in forest villages, the growth trend of other communities are quite high. Districts like Kamrup, Hailakandi and Cachar where other communities were near to nil in 1984, a huge number of populations have been

flourished in these districts outnumbering the tribal population. The table also shows that tribal people have vanished from 33 forest villages of these districts.

Table 5 shows the population structure of forest villages of Assam that were enumerated both in 1984 forest department census and 2001 general census. The table shows that there are 387 such villages in the state. It shows that between 1984 and 2001 the number of house-

Table 5: Details of forest villages existed and enumerated in 1984 (Forest Department Census) and 2001 census

| District | No of villages | | No of Households | | Total population | | Tribal population | | SC population | | Others | |
|---------------|----------------|-------|------------------|--------|---------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|------------------|-------|--------------------|------|
| | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 | 1984 | 2001 |
| Cachar | 37 | 1307 | 5161 | 11960 | 31174 | 3948 | 2461 | 3768 | 8742 | 4244 | 19971 | |
| Hailakandi | 16 | 898 | 7349 | 7762 | 40998 | 1117 | 384 | 4578 | 10794 | 2067 | 29820 | |
| Dibrugarh | 21 | 638 | 1597 | 6291 | 9838 | 3713 | 5135 | 805 | 1459 | 1773 | 3244 | |
| Tinsukia | 16 | 1595 | 4151 | 14084 | 22550 | 4641 | 6811 | 2026 | 1717 | 7417 | 14022 | |
| Kamrup | 43 | 1046 | 5049 | 5647 | 28780 | 5369 | 10518 | 273 | 855 | 5 | 17407 | |
| Karimganj | 41 | 1302 | 5594 | 9777 | 32376 | 2061 | 305 | 2717 | 9169 | 4999 | 22902 | |
| Kokrajhar | 140 | 6627 | 29067 | 57819 | 156284 | 34594 | 92759 | 312 | 1013 | 22913 | 62512 | |
| Nagaon | 12 | 692 | 942 | 4945 | 5382 | 1632 | 669 | 1621 | 2499 | 1692 | 2214 | |
| Sibsagar | 19 | 790 | 2045 | 8280 | 11474 | 4135 | 3004 | 128 | 975 | 4017 | 7495 | |
| Sonitpur | 26 | 867 | 3438 | 6428 | 18478 | 3782 | 5301 | 451 | 577 | 2195 | 12600 | |
| Lakhimpur | 4 | 51 | 183 | 146 | 1519 | 145 | 1499 | 0 | 12 | 1 | 8 | |
| Golaghat | 8 | 919 | 2562 | 14035 | 8488 | 2006 | 2303 | 823 | 794 | 11206 | 5391 | |
| Karbi Anglong | 4 | 206 | 280 | 1283 | 1404 | 743 | 532 | 540 | 6 | 0 | 866 | |
| Total | 387 | 16938 | 67418 (350%) | 148457 | 368745 (148.39%) | 67886 | 131681 (94.0%) | 18042 | 38612 (114.0) | 62529 | 198452 (217.37) | |

holds popped-up by a number of 59480, a 350 percent increase. There may be two reasons for such a huge increase. First, there may be a huge number of new settlers settled in forest villages after 1984. Second, the forest department census does not record the number of descended families from the original one whose name has been registered in the original register of the department. Thus, while general census finds lots of descended families in a village the forest department records stick to its original number as a rule. From the table above the trend of population growth can also be assessed. The table reveals a total of 148.39 percent growth in the total population between these two census years. While tribal population growth records a 94 percent the Scheduled Caste posted a 114 percent increase and the other communities increased by 217.37 percent.

The table 6 shows the percentage growth of different population derived from previous table. There are six districts in the state where tribal population shows a negative growth in forest villages. These districts are Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Karbi Anglong. On the contrary, barring Golaghat district all other districts show substantial growth of other population (other than SC). Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sonitpur have recorded a modest growth of tribal population while Kokrajhar district shows 168 percent growth. Kamrup district shows 96 percent growth. From the point of actual number of population, Kokrajhar district has shown a good deal of increase in tribal population.

Table 7 shows the percentage share of tribal people and other communities (barring Scheduled castes) to the total population in 1984 and 2001 and percent difference between this time periods.

It becomes clear from the table that while tribal people in Kamrup district had a 95.07 percent share to its total population in 1984 it reduced to 36.54 percent in 2001 census registering a decrease of 58.53 percent decrease in percentage share. This is to be noted that Kamrup had the second largest number of tribal people in forest villages after Kokrajhar. On the other hand, other communities recorded a 60.40 percent increase in those forest villages.

The decrease in percentage share to total population has been recorded in nine districts out of 11 districts in the state. Kokrajhar district that harbors the highest number of tribals in forest villages also shows a 0.48 percent decrease in percentage share to total population as against 0.63 percent increase of other population. Barring Golaghat district in all other 10 districts the

Table 6: Extent of percentage increase/Decrease of population in forest villages between 1984 and 2001 (Forest villages that appeared both in 1984 (FD census) and 2001 census)

| District | No of villages 1984 | % Increase of Total population between 1984-2001 | % Increase among Tribal population between 1984-2001 |
|---------------|---------------------|--|--|
| Karimganj | 41 | 231.14 | -85.20 |
| Hailakandi | 16 | 428.18 | -65.62 |
| Nagaon | 12 | 0.8 | -59.00 |
| Cachar | 37 | 152.29 | -37.70 |
| Karbi Anglong | 4 | 231.14 | -28.40 |
| Sibsagar | 19 | 38.57 | -27.35 |
| Golaghat | 8 | 55.47 | 14.80 |
| Dibrugarh | 21 | 56.38 | 38.30 |
| Sonitpur | 26 | 187.46 | 40.16 |
| Tinsukia | 16 | 60.1 | 46.76 |
| Kamrup | 43 | 409.65 | 95.90 |
| Kokrajhar | 140 | 170.29 | 168.14 |
| Total | 387 | | |

Table 7: Percentage share of tribal and other population to total population in forest villages in Assam between 1984 and 2001

| District | % distribution of tribal to total population | | % difference | % distribution of Other population to total pop | | % difference |
|------------|--|-------|--------------|---|-------|--------------|
| | 1984 | 2001 | | 1984 | 2001 | |
| Golaghat | 14.29 | 27.13 | 12.84 | 79.84 | 63.51 | -16.33 |
| Dibrugarh | 12.79 | 14.83 | 2.04 | 28.18 | 32.97 | 4.79 |
| Kokrajhar | 59.83 | 51.35 | -0.48 | 39.63 | 40.00 | 0.63 |
| Tinsukia | 32.95 | 30.20 | -2.75 | 52.66 | 62.18 | 9.52 |
| Hailakandi | 14.40 | 0.93 | -13.32 | 26.63 | 72.74 | 46.11 |
| Karimganj | 21.08 | 0.94 | -20.14 | 51.13 | 70.74 | 19.61 |
| Nagaon | 33.60 | 12.43 | -20.77 | 34.22 | 41.13 | 6.91 |
| Sibsagar | 49.93 | 26.18 | -23.75 | 48.51 | 65.32 | 16.81 |
| Cachar | 33.00 | 7.89 | -25.11 | 35.48 | 64.00 | 28.52 |
| Sonitpur | 58.84 | 28.69 | -30.15 | 34.19 | 68.19 | 34.00 |
| Kamrup | 95.07 | 36.54 | -58.53 | 0.08 | 60.48 | 60.40 |

percentage share of other population to total population has increased – highest (60.40%) in Kamrup district to lowest (0.63%) in Kokrajhar. This shows that a large number of population other than the tribals have settled in forest villages outnumbering the tribal people in due course of time.

The system and situation of forest villages in Assam did not receive due attention in post-independent period from policy planners as well as from social scientists compared to some other states in the country such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh where several welfare measures for the uplift of the forest villagers have been implemented. It is a fact that the British Administration extended the Upper Burma Forest Regulation Act to the Assam region and thus there were categorical differences in the administration and management of forest in the state. The well-known Taungya system was very much prevalent in the state as it was present in Upper Burma inhabited by the Karens. These Taungyas ultimately gave rise to several of the present day forest villages in the state. The traditional practice of shifting cultivation which was prevalent among the tribal people as well as the other communities in the state prior to the colonial period, very truly, paved the way for a slightly different kind of forest settlements in the state. It was learnt that the tribal people in Assam used to go for new patches of land for cultivation, primarily on temporary basis, clearing the jungle. These newly cleared land areas were traditionally known as *pam*. During the Ahom's rule, such *pams*, in many cases, were administered by some officers for the interest of the Royal groups. In such cases each single administrative unit was called *khat*. Eventually, at present also there are several areas in the state, e.g., Na-pam, Gahori-pam, Tengakhath, Modarkhat, Na-khat etc. indicating the prevalence of the system in past years.

Though there is no record regarding people's capturing forest land during the period between the decline of the Ahom rule and the advent of the British Administration's Forest Regulation Act, it is very likely that people must have continued their traditional practices of extending land holding outside their parent village boundary and settling new villages or *pams*. Several such stories regarding the opening up of new forest land for cultivation etc. were heard from aged persons in every forest villages investigated.

One worth noting characteristic feature of the tribal people in Assam is that they hardly opt for wage labour as means of their livelihood. Thus their inclusion into forest village system was basically for a need of land for cultivation. This becomes factual point when we see the involvement of forest villagers in forestry work in Dibrugarh District. Besides rendering regular *begar* in every year, the people were hardly attracted for waged jobs offered by the forest department.

To highlight the situations in forest villages in the state of Assam some basic findings of a primary field investigation in Dibrugarh district have been presented here. The study was sponsored by the Board of Research Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, mainly to find out the problems youth in Forest villages in Dibrugarh district.

Four reserved Forest areas namely, Dihingmukh Reserved Forest, Jokai Reserved Forest Namdang Reserved Forest and Telpani Reserved Forest were studied for the purpose. Some of the important findings of the study have been placed in the following paragraphs to highlight the condition of forest villages in the state.

The forest villages in Dihingmukh Reserved forest were established around 1951. There were seven forest villages in the reserved forest. Records showed that each of the adult member registered with the forest department were given 10 bighas of land by the forest department. Being forest villagers, the people of the villages were deprived of many basic necessities of life. The most important among them was the lack of proper drinking water. The forest department provided one ring well to each of the village long back, around the year 1960 or so. But all those wells ceased to be functional as the area frequently came under the flood water flowing over these wells contaminating the water in it. As there was no functional village panchayat, the grants for tube-wells were not available to their requirements. The forest department once opened a lower Primary school for all those forest villages. But the school building collapsed within a few months of its construction. Compared to other forest villages the villages under Medela Beat were quite fortunate to have a health sub-centre with a visiting physician, a veterinary sub-centre and one High School run by general administration. All these came under special grants for the tribals under the influence of local

political leader through some irregular means. Like all other forest villagers the people of those forest villages also had to render free physical labour to the forest department every year. Surprisingly, even after the direction of Supreme Court of India the beggar system found its place in official records of the forest department. In all those Reserved Forest areas the Beat Officers used to keep the record of the amount of due free labour. The records showed that there were certain households whose due free labour was nearing thousand man-days by now. Besides these the people had the greatest threat of flood from the river Brahmaputra. In the area adjoining to the Medela Beat, the river had no embankment in its south bank leaving the forest villagers on the mercy of the mighty Brahmaputra. The people's plea for the construction of embankment so far went in vain as the forest department did not allow cutting forest and its land in connection with the new Conservation Act. There were other water bodies also that overflowed in rainy seasons and communication came to standstill. There were hardly any measures taken up by Forest Department to improve the condition of village roads so far. The hardship of forest villagers in Telpani reserved forest was also evident from the fact that the villagers were not granted land to establish a Middle school in their locality following the Conservation Act. The forest villagers had to show the documents of land transfer from revenue village nearby to the concerned authority to establish the school. In reality, the school was constructed in the forest land but in official record it was in revenue village premise only.

Though the Panchayat system was not functional in the forest villages a few items under development grants reached the villages by some irregular means from the ITDP and Community Development Block. But the practical gain was almost none. Only a few people had received hand pumps for drinking water though in revenue villages almost every family used to get the same. It was also reported that the students applying for scholarship had to suffer a lot owing to the extensive official procedures. To some extent the Block Development Officers used to issue the income certificates. But in terms of loan application it was virtually impossible to get an income certificate because the certificate must be issued by the S.D.C. concerned. Due to non-inclusion of the forest villages within the

jurisdiction of revenue department the youth, who were aspirant for developmental loan schemes did never get any benefit at all. Receiving institutional financial grants was almost impossible for all the forest villagers for such reasons.

One of the most disturbing phenomena faced by the youth of the villages was the problems of under employment and unemployment. The forest department no longer remained an agency to offer jobs to the forest villagers. Though the high school was nearby for the children of Dihingmukh forest villagers, the result in the High School Leaving Certificate Examination was never happened to be satisfactory. The number of passed out student never came above twenty percent. The reasons behind it were found to be the non-availability of quality teachers, no opportunity for private tuition, and their poor economic condition. The students hardly could attend any teacher in urban area as the place was remote and there was no proper means of communication. The condition of the female students was even worse. The youth who had passed out the HSLC examination got further problems in attending the colleges as they had either to stay at town or to continue from home. Bad roads and communication system played the most negative role for the second option whereas poor economic condition restrict them to opt the first option

The Situation in Jokai Reserved Forest was also not very different. There were six forest villages and one Taungya village in the reserved forest inhabited by three communities, namely, the Sonowal Kachari, the Kaibarta (fishermen) and the Kumars. The people were settled there at different points of time. As mentioned earlier, the people of these forest villages also had to render free physical labour as *bager* till few years back. As in the case of Dihingmuk Forest jurisdiction, the forest Beat officer, here too, kept the record of non-performing free physical labours by the forest villagers. Record till 1995 showed the amount of undue labour nearing hundreds of man days for each family. It was found that compared to other communities of the forest villages in this Reserved Forest, the economic condition of the Kumars were better of. The people were engaged in different kinds of economic activities including agriculture, small scale business of buying and selling of rice, carpentry work, pot making etc. The village was connected to a motorable road

by a *kachcha* road which helped them doing business etc. Though the youth in this village is better educated compared to other forest villages, they were unable to get any developmental grants from concerned authorities. Thus in the sphere of self-sufficiency they were still not in a satisfactory position. The young females were still disadvantaged lots owing to the unfavorable physical condition of the area. Problems in Bis Gharia Kachari Gaon were acute. The first and the foremost among them was the lack of road communication. The village was situated in the middle of the paddy fields of all the forest villages. It was a low lying area. The recently made *Kacha* road under the NREP scheme remained unusable during rainy season. There was a natural water body called *Chengeli jan*, flowing through the village which created problem during rainy season in terms of communication. The hard physical condition was one of the reasons of people's poor economic condition in the village.

Health care facility was not available in the area. Study revealed that people were very much depended on traditional medicines as the situation compelled them to do so. Otherwise, they have to travel a distance of 8 kilometer to see a doctor with uncertainty. The village did not even have a primary school. For high school standard they had to go to Jokai Kolioni High School which was situated at distance of about 6 km from the village. The students had to cross all the distance on foot. In rainy season it would virtually impossible to continue school. The study showed that the young people in the village were totally unsuccessful in their study life basically owing to the uncongenial situation. The same sort of situation was seen in case of Kaibartta villages.

The nature of assistance for economic development and its impact could be assessed from the following instances. In the Bis Gharia Forest Kachari Gaon people were in receipt of some kind of assistance in the name of economic development schemes ranging from agricultural implements to poultry items. But in terms of benefits the assistance provided was not at all satisfactory. One fine morning in 1985 the forest villagers came to know that they were going to get some valuables from the forest department. So, according to the requirement they took residential certificates from the Beat Officer and went to the city. There they were handed over few items like frame of handloom, bee-hive

boxes, wooden reeling machines etc. The females were given the handloom frames whereas the males were given bee-hive boxes and reeling machines. But when the people started to fix up the frames the next day they found that most of them were ill fitted and the quality of wood used was worst. The weaving machines were also very low in standard and had to be thrown away.

A comparative analysis of literacy rate between the people inhabiting forest villages and the revenue villages in the state was made using 2001 census data to assess the impact of settlement pattern in the state. A comparative table was prepared (Table 8) to show whether there was any marked difference in literacy status among the other communities (other than tribal and scheduled castes) inhabited in revenue villages and forest villages. It has been expected that for obvious reason forest village will show less literacy as compared to revenue villages. The table shows the outcome as follows:

The table shows that in Dibrugarh and Nagaon district literacy rate among males are more in forest villages compared to revenue villages. In other districts the literacy rate of males in forest villages is lesser than revenue villages. Kamrup district shows higher difference in literacy rate followed by Sonitpur, Cachar and Kokrajhar district. Among the females only Dibrugarh district shows more literacy rate in forest villages compared to revenue villages. Here again the females of other communities in Kamrup district are lagging far behind the revenue village counterparts followed by Sonitpur, Karimganj, Sibsagar and Kokrajhar district.

Table 9 shows the comparative literacy status of tribal people inhabiting forest village and revenue villages in the state. As many as 271 revenue villages inhabited by tribal people in rural areas were selected as sample village and 154 forest villages inhabited by tribal people were selected for the comparison. It shows that as generally believed the tribal people in forest villages are not always less literate than their counterparts in revenue villages. The table shows that in Sonitpur, Sibsagar and Nagaon district the male tribal people of forest villages more literate than their counterparts in revenue villages. But district like Kokrajhar, Cachar and Dibrugarh shows less literacy rate for male tribal in forest villages. In Sonitpur and Sibsagar district female tribal in forest villages show higher literacy rate compared to their revenue village

Table 8: Comparative analysis of literacy rate among the other communities in forest villages and revenue villages

| District | Male Literacy | | | Female Literacy | | |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| | Revenue village N=556898 | Forest Village N=71237 | Difference | Revenue village N=528429 | Forest village N=66432 | Difference |
| Dibrugarh | 32.0 | 36.9 | -4.9 | 21.7 | 28.2 | -6.5 |
| Nagaon | 20.2 | 22.2 | -2.0 | 14.7 | 11.7 | 3.0 |
| Karimganj | 28.6 | 27.6 | 1.0 | 18.7 | 11.5 | 7.2 |
| Sibsagar | 37.0 | 33.2 | 3.8 | 28.9 | 22.5 | 6.4 |
| Kokrajhar | 18.2 | 12.7 | 5.5 | 12.1 | 6.8 | 5.3 |
| Cachar | 32.4 | 26.0 | 6.4 | 23.6 | 19.1 | 4.5 |
| Sonitpur | 26.9 | 12.9 | 14.0 | 18.5 | 8.0 | 10.5 |
| Kamrup | 37.0 | 20.6 | 16.4 | 26.1 | 15.0 | 11.1 |

Total village: Revenue village inhabited by other communities = 650
Forest villages inhabited by other communities = 177

Table 9: Comparative analysis of literacy rate among the tribal communities in forest villages and revenue villages

| District | Male Literacy | | | Female Literacy | | |
|-----------|----------------------------|---------------------------|------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| | Revenue village N=75988 | Forest Village N=61349 | Difference | Revenue village N=74622 | Forest village N=58659 | Difference |
| Kokrajhar | 33.66 | 22.50 | 11.60 | 24.38 | 14.20 | 10.18 |
| Cachar | 30.13 | 26.50 | 3.63 | 25.08 | 22.10 | 2.90 |
| Dibrugarh | 41.33 | 38.00 | 3.33 | 33.88 | 27.80 | 6.00 |
| Kamrup | 31.90 | 32.20 | -0.30 | 22.78 | 21.30 | 1.48 |
| Nagaon | 28.22 | 29.30 | -1.08 | 19.92 | 15.20 | 4.72 |
| Sibsagar | 31.08 | 38.20 | -6.40 | 21.65 | 25.20 | -3.55 |
| Sonitpur | 25.57 | 32.00 | -6.43 | 16.00 | 21.00 | -5.00 |

Revenue villages inhabited by Tribal people 271
Forest village inhabited by tribal communities 154

counterparts. But in other district the female forest villagers are lagging behind their counterparts in revenue villages. It has been seen that both male and female tribal people in the forest villages of Kokrajhar district are far behind their revenue village counterparts. It is worth noting that Kokrajhar district has the highest number of forest villages inhabited by tribal people followed by Kamrup district.

It was found that most of the rural and tribal areas situated within the jurisdiction of revenue departments also were not far better from that of the forest villages in terms of infrastructures like educational facilities, health care and services, communication facilities etc. We have seen in terms of education that some of the forest villagers were at par with the revenue villages. But such achievement would come from relatively harder involvement only.

The Declining Symbiotic Relations

It was found that forest villages in Dibrugarh district were homogeneous in terms of community structure. Unlike the forest villagers in other parts of the country there were hardly any known

forest co-operatives and other organizations among the forest villagers in Assam for collection and marketing of NTFP and for such other purposes. It was seen in most of the cases that the forest villagers who were settled in this area were mostly non-forest dwellers by the time they were settled as forest villagers. This was due to the fact that by the end of the colonial rule the forest cover in most of the areas surrounded by such villagers was decreasing at a great pace. The opening up of the huge tea gardens in the region was also an influencing factor in restricting the tribal people's traditional rights over the forest land. The most important barrier between tribal ethos and forest land was the imposition of state ownership and reservation of forest land ignoring the corporate right of the traditional communities on forest surrounding them. This created a feeling of alienation from the part of the tribal people with forest and as a consequence, especially in forest villages, the symbiotic relation hardly remained unchanged. Eventually, instead of being involved in traditional ways of forest regeneration and management, even the tribal people too, started using forest in a destructive manner. This shift in forest utilization was also

catalyzed by the fast growing monetary economy and commercialization of goods and services in the region.

The forest fringed tribal people had experienced a lot of changes in their relations with forest since these forests were declared as reserved forests. The people had witnessed that though they were utilizing the forest resources from remote past, the newcomer forest villagers had been given more opportunities in terms of utilization of forest resources. It was found that in Jokai Reserved Forest, prior to the settlement of the forest villagers, several patches of lands were utilised by the people of the nearby Konwar Gaon, Borbil, Thekarani and Harakpathar village. The tribal people of Bolai and Nawjan village, which are situated by the south-west boundary of the forest had deep attachment with the forest in terms of their socio-economic aspects. Likewise, the land occupied by the forest villagers in Namdang Reserved forest were, partly utilised by the people of Charaihabi, Raumari and Meshlow village. The patches of land now given to the Telpani forest villagers after the year 1983 were occupied by the people of nearby villagers and used to cultivate there.

These evidences showed how the tribal people's attitudes towards reserved forest were compelled to change in last few decades. Data collected from the field showed that it was not the forest villagers who are responsible for destruction of forest in illegal manner, rather it was the non-forest villagers living by the reserved forest or at the periphery of the forest who are involved in massive destruction of forests as they feel a total alienation themselves from the forest which was emotionally attached to them in past years.

CONCLUSION

It has been mentioned that the people accepted forest department's offer only for the want of cultivable land. It was also said that the forest villagers were promised to provide more land in future for their free physical labour rendered to the forest department. The people's quest for land in forest villages hardly proved to be prudent in terms of economic development. It was observed that in most of the cases entire village people did not migrate to the forest villages. People who stayed back in the parent villages are better off presently in terms of income generation and level of living standards. By the time they have

developed a better means of earning, they were included in the welfare schemes of government and other agencies. The most important aspect is that they were never in a state of total insecurity like the forest villagers. As the crisis for jobs, devaluation of traditional products, extinction of barter and exchange system and consequent emergence of commercialization of goods and services became apparent in the last two decades rapidly, the growing tension and problems in forest village also appeared in an appealing manner. As the people in forest villages were less equipped with infrastructure to cope with the newly emerging situations, they became the worst affected population in the state.

The delineation has also bearing in the wake of new Forest Bill coming up that recognizes rights of forest villagers on forest land and resources presuming that the forest villagers are predominantly the tribal people. But the data presented here shows a totally opposite picture. The increasing number of non-tribal population as forest villagers in the state might have a negative impact on rights of tribal people to forest resources in the forest villages. Thus, while the concerned authorities formulate plan about the betterment of the forest villagers as a whole, the tribal people must not lose their due rights and privileges the law of the country provides to them.

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