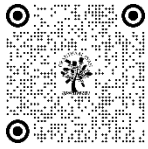


# A STUDY OF COLONIAL RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN SOUTHERN ASSAM

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## ABSTRACT

This article studies the impact of an extractive colonial economy on the local ecology especially timber resources in Cachar, located in present-day southern Assam. It engages with untamed colonial exploitation of the huge forest reserves, thereby depleting the region of its critical resources. Reports of various colonial official surveys created an appetite for the British Raj to develop an interest in the natural resources of Cachar. Equipped with information about navigable rivers, the colonial rulers began to see the commercial prospects of exploiting the natural resources, especially timber. When the Assam Forest Department was established, the exploitation of this wood in Cachar and elsewhere in Assam became more systematic and streamlined. This is evident with the construction of the Assam-Bengal railway in 1898 in opening up Cachar to an extractive colonial economy.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Timber, Colonial Economy, Forest Resources

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent works had contributed to our understanding of use of the forest resources during the British colonial rule. Mahesh Rangarajan argues that the colonial state in India had adopted certain policies for controlling forest utilisation. Imperial policies and intervention brought about the ecological changes in colonial India.<sup>i</sup> In the case of Assam, Arupjyoti Saikia narrated the history of exploitation of the forest resources by colonial state, including timber.<sup>ii</sup> The history of timber exploitation by the British colonial state in southern Assam reveals a trajectory marked by economic interests. Initially, the British East India Company exploited the region's rich agrarian resources to meet the growing demand for revenue. The establishment of Assam Forest Department centralized control over these resources, prioritizing commercial exploitation. This led to significant deforestation and ecological changes.

### Timber trade in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century

Cachar in southern Assam became a 'protectorate' of British East India Company (EIC) in 1824. This was the region where the British Company troops clashes with the invading Burmese forces. During the course of first Anglo-Burmese war, the British East India Company came to encounter a complex topography of the dense forests of Cachar. The defeat of Burma led to the withdrawal of its troops and the entry of British EIC expansion onto Cachar. Arupjyoti Saikia states that military personnel or Company engineers remained the keen observers of the potential of the forest resources of Assam when colonial state expanded.<sup>iii</sup>

Even when Cachar was a protectorate state between 1824-32, the company officials began to investigate and recorded on the forests resources of this small principality. After the Burmese war, the Cachar raja Govind Chandra had continued controlling the monopoly of the trade including forest resources. Cachar remained well connected with Sylhet and Bengal. The Barak river in Cachar valley divided into Surma and Khushiara on the Sylhet border and later confluence with river Meghna. The Barak was also joined by river like the Dhaleswari, the Jiree, the Sonai, the Katakhal and the Jatinga which connected the hill Cachar. As it was estimated that timber to the value of fifty thousand or forty thousand rupees might in case the channel were cleared, be drawn in the first year, confining the felling to those trees on the immediate banks of the river. He described that the most useful timber was the *jarul* and goes on give the list of the other types of timbers found in the region.<sup>iv</sup> When Pemberton was on a survey duty, he described the forests of southern Cachar when he produced his report on the India's north-eastern frontier in 1835. Pemberton wrote forests of Cachar had always proved a very valuable acquisition to the inhabitants and the localities from which timber was obtained. He writes in his report that timbers were cut in the forest and were conveyed to Sylhet through the channel of Surma.<sup>v</sup>

In 1829, Sylhet's Commissioner, Charles Tucker complaint against the ruler of Cachar Govind Chandra to the higher authorities at Calcutta.<sup>vi</sup> The raja had imposed restrictions on the transit of other articles, such as wax, ivory, silk and cotton between Cachar and Sylhet. This act of raja had also affected the British subjects who were engaged in the timber trade. This was seen as an unfriendly attitude towards the Company Government who had been providing protection to raja.

Additionally, the Commissioner of Sylhet also reported that the price of timber had doubled by Govind Chandra and that in the year 1829 there had been scarcely any importation of timber. This was a serious matter for the East India Company (EIC) since Cachar inexhaustible supply of valuable timbers for the purposes of boat building. The Company Government ordered David Scott, who was the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East frontier into this matter and report back to Calcutta.<sup>vii</sup> Contrary to the matter reported by the Commissioner of Sylhet, the Company Government came to the conclusion and clarify that with the terms of the treaty of 1824 signed between East India Company and Cachar, the Company did not have the legitimate right to insist on the abolition of monopoly by the raja. The terms of the treaty clearly acknowledge that the Company cannot interfere in the internal affairs of Cachar as long as the there was any evidence of misrule to their subjects or affect the tranquillity to their territory. The Company Government hold that in this kind of act by the raja of Cachar, they are only resorted to advice the raja.<sup>viii</sup> Scott wrote to the higher authorities, that the Company do not have any right to interfere as it is from such sources that the chief part of the raja's revenue had always been obtained. However, when the Cachar raja died in 1830 without leaving any legitimate heir, this existing network of timber trade went into the control of British EIC.

In 1832, the price of timbers that was prevailing in Cachar was published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. It mentioned that the timbers sold in Cachar were divided into three kinds called *gundah*, *dhum* and *kari*. Gundah timbers consisted only of *jarul* which were used in Sylhet for boat building and were sold at two rates depending on their size. The author also listed various kinds of timbers and their prices which were used for posts, beams and small boats. The author concluded by saying that since the forests of Cachar have never been thoroughly examined by any European, there were still many valuable productions which had been remained ignorant by the Company.<sup>ix</sup> Saikia argues that this information suggested how primarily three kinds of timber, namely, *gundah*, *dhum* and *kari* had a potential market were in Cachar. These timbers were sailed through the excellent river networks to be marketed in the timber markets of Calcutta<sup>x</sup>. After a decade, the revenue potential of forests as a commercial commodity became viable in Cachar. In the 1860s, the revenue of Cachar was derived by establishing a custom ghat on the river at which rafts being floated down had to pay duty for each piece of timber. The annual amount produced was supposed to be 5000-6000 *maunds*<sup>xi</sup>. Thus, timber trade became vibrant in Cachar during the East India Company days or before the establishment of the formal Forest Department.

## 2. COLONIAL FOREST POLICIES AND TIMBER TRADE

The quest for timbers and the timber trade continues even after the coming of Forest Department in 1864. Initially part of the Bengal Forest Department, Assam's Forest Department was established in 1868, with Bengal Rules of 1865 applicable in the province. As the load of work increases, several provinces were too large to remain in charge of one conservator, the government therefore proposed for establishment of a separate division other provinces. Thus, Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874.<sup>xii</sup> This newly established Forest Department in Assam began affirming its right over forest resources throughout the province. In the case of Cachar, the forests of this region were initially under the direct control of Deputy-Commissioner of Cachar who had collected all the information. It only came under the purview of a

forest officer on 1 April, 1876 after Mr. W. Shakespear arrived in Cachar on February, 1876. In the year 1875-1876, the Deputy Commissioner of the district reported that 14,894 logs and 395 pieces timbers were cut<sup>xiii</sup>.

Gustav Mann, the Deputy-Conservator of Forests in Assam reported that the total receipts from the forests in the Cachar province have increased during the year 1875-76, by Rs 41, 352, even exclusive of the revenue from Soom forests, which he says that it was by mistake credited in the Civil Account Department to Land Revenue. Mann reports that much of the forest produce in Cachar was removed from the forests without payment. The ryots were permitted to take what they needed from the Government forests at no charge, with the exception of reserved areas. This included grass, timber, bamboos, firewood, and virtually all other resources, except almost everything except for tax-paying timber, of which there are twenty-nine kinds. As a result, even items intended for trade were removed without any payment. This forest produce were also allowed to consumed in Cachar for free, with exception of a fee of one rupee paid by every woodcutter for six months and one rupee per annum for every elephant dragging timber. During this period, the communities and traders, have greatly benefited from the Cachar forests. However, the Deputy-Conservator noted that these valuable yet depleted forests require the management of forest officers. Most of the valuable sal forests in the valley districts were nearly fully exploited before conservation efforts began, and they will need many years of rest and care before logging can resume. Currently, the demand for other reserved tree species is very limited and restricted to the province. As an immediate measure, Mann finds that clearing all the artificial boundary-lines out of the government forests and erecting boundary-mounds to be the most necessary in Cachar district. It was also to do the same with regard to all the existing cultivation areas within or adjoining the Government forests and a complete record to be prepared of such lands in accordance with the orders of British India Government. Finally, Mann also reported that a substantial hut for the use of the toll-collector and other establishments was to be built at the Sealtak toll-station and also to commence an enquiry into the felling of timber in the North Cachar Hills<sup>xiv</sup>. Therefore, we see a transitional point from this period from the company rule. Efficiency in extraction became to be seen. By trying to bring more forests tract under the reserves, the colonial state was expanding the source of timber in Cachar. The idea making of setting up more toll station suggests us that the timber trade was increasing and the government was earning more revenue.

Section 2 of the Bengal Forest Act, 1865 had recognised two classes of Government forests - open and reserved forests, which was seen proper for Assam<sup>xv</sup>. Saikia states that to escape the presence of increasing landlessness amongst the peasants continuing exert pressure on the forestlands in Surma valley; the best way was to create another category of forest, to be known as Open Forest. The Indian Forest Act of 1878 revised the classification of Open Forests as Protected Forests. This change empowered local governments to designate specific types of trees for protection. It also allowed the Forest Department to mark off areas of the forest where the collection of forest products and clearing of land for agricultural expansion would be prohibited.<sup>xvi</sup> In the Cachar district, the Forest Department could bring seven tracts aggregating approximately 745 square miles as reserved forests by 15 March, 1877 notified and issued in accordance with Section 2, Act VII of 1865 and Rule VIII of the Assam Forest Rules. These seven reserve forests were to be under the entire management and control of the Chief Forest officer<sup>xvii</sup>. After two years, in 1879, the forest officials reported that there had been no change in the area of the government reserved forests in Cachar which had remained 1,983 square miles. But, the gazetted protected forests showed an increase of 689 square miles in area of the former amounting to 1,714 and of the latter to 267 square miles. The increase in the "Protected Forests", as reported by the Forest Officers was due to the practise of jhumming by the hill tribes. As Cachar was left without a Forest Officer till 1876, the British officials felt the need for paying greater importance in checking the different tribes to prevent them from clearing the forests. Now efforts were made from the side of the government to remind these people not to enter the reserves and to adopt the mode of cultivation within the reserved forests. Further, the Deputy-Conservator reported that there was a want of a divisional forest officer to look after these operations since the superintendent of police, who has been in temporary charge of the Cachar Forest Office, although he moved about a great deal, had his own proper work to do, and could not give much of his time to forest demarcation.<sup>xviii</sup> The forest officials began to see jhumming as bigger threat for the department. This might have occurred to them as the jhummers might have cut down some timbers which had commercial value. By extending reserve forest, demarcating, erecting boundary and enforcing restrictions, the colonial authority try to solve this problem.

Clearing of the boundaries of private lands included or adjoining the Government reserved forests in the Cachar had continued even in 1879. The earlier demarcation of these private lands were found to be made in a defective manner as well as the ignorance of most of the owners, managers or assistants of such estates, regarding these boundaries. These private lands were in numerous and it had taken another season for the government to complete the demarcation. This demarcation was seen by the Government to be the most immediate issue in order to prevent encroachment by the

extensive of cultivation into the reserved forest from the private estates, the owners or managers. Except on maps, these people were often ignorant of the government demarcated boundaries and took little interest in the maintenance of the boundaries of these estates. Through this, they had possessed more land than they require for cultivation. However, the forest official feels that this would change very much as time goes on, and the limits of estates are approached by cultivation, and there is no doubt that the time will come when great complications must arise from the deficient demarcation of the such estates.<sup>xix</sup>

In spite of the problem of jhumming that the forest officials had to face, timber-trade had increase at the Sealtek forest revenue station and had also exceeded the income from forest produce under the old system of farming this ghat. The need for the rates to be paid for licences to cut or drag timber was not felt to be necessary as introducing a different system would affect the woodcutters and the timber-dealers who were well accustomed with the prevalent one. The very suspicious about any changes was evident when the government introduced a new system for farming of the forest revenue station at Sealtek for a while which had to be stopped and its management had to carry out by direct departmental agency again. The forest officials also observed that introducing any other system would require a very larger establishment and without improvement in conservancy, it will have to be regulated by the revenue derived from the Cachar forests. Thus, the rates of revenue collected at Sealtek remained the same. Since most of the Cachar forests were accessible mainly from the rivers on the banks of which they are situated, three boats were provided for the use of the forest-rangers and forests guards. The conservator also reported that the office at Sealtek was repaired and two new guard-houses constructed – one at Mankush and the other one at Haiura. In light of the steady increase in forest revenue in Cachar, the Deputy-Conservator proposed to the Chief Commissioner of Assam the establishment of an additional revenue station at Sonaimukh.<sup>xx</sup>

The Chief Commissioner of Assam informs the Secretary to the Government of India, in the Home, Revenue, and Agricultural Departments that, based on the recommendation of the Deputy Conservator of Forests, there is currently only one toll station in Cachar–Sealtek- responsible for collecting forest revenue on all timber and other forest products. But this station being situated at one extremity of the district all timber, grass, bamboos, etc that are used in the district escape untaxed and there is a consequent considerable loss of Government revenue. Therefore, the Chief Commissioner requested the Government for the approval of the establishment of two more stations. These were to be set up at Sonaimukh on the Barak river which was few miles above Silchar, and the other at Pafirband on the Katakhal river in Hailakandi. The Commissioner informs the Government that by opening these two new stations will cost no additional expense. He further holds the view that the Forest Rangers now in charge of the eastern and western sub-divisions of the district would be able to undertake the management of them in addition to their duties. In addition, the Chief Commissioner has proposed changes to the toll rates imposed on timber and other forest products at these three stations. These new rates, which will regulate the control of timber and other forest products in transit within the Cachar district, are prescribed under Sections 39 and 41 of the India Forest Act VII of 1878.<sup>xxi</sup>

In August 1880, the Government of India sanctioned the Cachar River Rules, which allowed for the issuance of passess for all timber and other forest products transported via the Barak and Katakhal rivers, or any of their tributaries, within the district of Cachar. Passess could be obtained at the designated revenue stations: Sonaimukh on the Barak river; Sealtek on the Barak river, and Jafferbund on the Katakhal river, or at any other revenue stations that the Chief Commissioner may prescribed notifications in the Assam Gazette from time to time. Apart from forest act, it also prescribed the rates of royalty to be paid in the district of Cachar upon all forest produce, the property of Government, or which was produced on Government land, or lands belonging to or in the occupation of, private persons on which Government has the right to levy a royalty.<sup>xxii</sup> The coming of the river rules and more toll stations in Cachar suggests us that there was increasing revenue and evidence of timber extraction in increasing volume.

We can get different picture of timber trade in Cachar after the coming of the river rules in 1880. By 1889, the timber export in Assam increase as they attributed to the increased facility for the carriage of timber afforded by the Dacca-Mymensingh Railway. However, on the other hand, it was noticed that the outturn of timbers from the Government forests in Cachar was decreasing than the outturn of Sylhet. The decrease in the Cachar district was explained by the Divisional Officer to an overstocked market on account of the exceptionally large quantities worked out in 1886-87. He further supports this opinion that although less timber was brought out of the forests, the amount exported from the district was more by 1,077 logs than in the previous year, showing that the demand beyond the district at any rate has increased rather than decreased. The Divisional Officer also reports that timber traders do not come in such numbers to the Cachar district to make purchases as they used to do, but prefer to make purchases at the markets in Sylhet, which obliges the timber-cutters in Cachar to take their logs to the Sylhet markets instead of selling them in Cachar; this is no



doubt has also checked to some extent timber operations. On the hand, the Deputy-Commissioner of Cachar attributes a good deal of the stagnation in the timber trade in his district to unsuccessful speculation. According to the Deputy-Commissioner, the total outturn of timber in Cachar, was 49.7 per cent that came from Government forests, 13.4 per cent from foreign forests, and 36.9 per cent from private forests; whilst in Sylhet 5.03 per cent came from Government, 86.73 per cent from foreign, and 8.24 per cent from private forests. These proportions of outturn are ascribed to the fact that Government forests in Cachar are very extensive and in Sylhet very limited; and that **foreign timber** imported into Cachar from Manipur and the Lushai country pays duty, whilst that imported into Sylhet from Hill Tipperah does not; and that the forests in the latter country are very favourably situated on the banks of large rivers, whilst the Govt forests in Sylhet are somewhat inaccessible; and as to the private forests, these are also more accessible than Govt forests, and of considerable extent.<sup>xxiii</sup> Since railways became new consumer of timber, the outturn was completely different.

In the year 1895, the forest report on Assam stated that there was slight increase in the quantity of timber granted free of charge, but there was a decrease in the quantity removed by the Government agency and that removed by purchasers. The forest report stated the decreased in the quantity removed by the Government agency was due chiefly to less drift timber having come down the rivers in the Cachar division. The falling-off in the quantity removed by purchasers occurred chiefly in other areas of Assam like Kamrup and Lakhimpur divisions and was explained in the case of Kamrup, by the demand for timber for conversion into sleepers for the Assam-Bengal Railway having practically ceased, and in Lakhimpur by a reduction in the royalty assessed on timber standing on lands taken up for the cultivation of tea. However, the timber removed by purchasers increased in Cachar, which the report explains that it was due to the cessation of the demand for timber for railway sleepers and the falling-off in the royalty assessed on lands taken up for special cultivation<sup>xxiv</sup>. Again, in 1900, the Forest official reported that the marked increase in the outturn of forest produce, especially of timber and bamboos, from the Manipur forests had caused a decline in the demand on Government forests in Cachar<sup>xxv</sup>.

### 3. CONCLUSION

British annexation of Cachar in 1832 opened up not only a new political frontiers but also the ecological frontier. Early colonial survey reports painted a glowing picture of a bodreland waiting to be 'improved' by colonial enterprise. Although Cachar had fiscal difficulties following the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26), colonial officials stressed the prospects of land revenue owing to the fertility of soil in plains Cachar. As colonial rule wore on, the forest resources of Cachar began to receive the attention of colonial state due to increasing demand in timber. With the creation of Cachar's Forest Reserves in 1877, the exploitation of forest resources became more systematic and there was an increase in the volume of timber trade. The expansion of the timber frontier in an ecologically delicate hill area inevitably interferes with the livelihood of jhum cultivators. The existence of navigable waterways such as the Dhaleswari, the Barak, the Sonai and the Jatinga facilitated the extraction of forest produce. The construction of Assam-Bengal railway through Cachar in the late nineteenth century accelerated the process.

### CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

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