



FROM WASTELAND TO DEFORESTED LAND: THE HISTORY OF NAMBOR RESERVE FOREST, ASSAM

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Abstract: Nambor Reserve Forest situated in Dhansiri subdivision of Golaghat district was constituted in the year 1878. The forest was a treasure trove of biodiversity. However, about 91 % of total area of 27,240 hectares has been encroached as per the forest data of 2006. The reserve forest has a chequered history that need to be analysed by emphasizing on colonial administrative policies. Interestingly, the forest was a wasteland grant allotted to a British planter. Later on, it was converted to a reserve forest by the Britishers to fulfil timber requirement of colonial industries. Geographical proximity with the Northeastern state of Nagaland is a significant factor contributing towards strategical importance of the forest. The encroachment and human settlement in the area can be grasped from the perspective of it's geographical location in a disputed frontier. The paper makes an attempt to look into the colonial history of Nambor Reserve Forest by tracing its development from wasteland to reserved forest. The process of encroachment and the different factors at play which contributed towards deforestation has also been analysed.

Keywords: Deforestation, Wasteland, Border, Encroachment, Northeast India

Introduction:

Golaghat district is situated in the state of Assam, sharing borders with Jorhat district on the east, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong district on the west, river Brahmaputra on the North and Karbi Anglong and the state of Nagaland on the South. Earlier, Golaghat formed a subdivision of erstwhile Sivasagar district. It attained district status only in the year 1987 (History, 2022). Since time immemorial, the region has been a repository of diverse flora and fauna. UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kaziranga, known for one-horned Rhinoceros is located in Golaghat district (District at a Glance) . Apart from that, Nambor-Doigrung Wildlife Sanctuary, famous for Hoolock Gibbon is located in the region. Golaghat district shares inter-state border with Nagaland on the South. Assam-Nagaland border adjoining Golaghat district is covered by four reserve forests, namely, Doyang, Rengma, Diphu and Nambor South (Jeyaseelan, 2008) . It is to be noted that all these reserve forests were colonial creation. However, the present forest department reports show that the reserve forests have been converted into spaces of human settlement. It is noteworthy that during initial years of colonial penetration into Northeast India,

Nambor region laid waste, devoid of human habitation, or any other phenomenon that could accrue revenue to the colonial power. The periodical records of encroachment data provided by the office of Divisional Forest Officer, Golaghat shows that at present, about 91 percent of the total area of Nambor Reserve Forest have been encroached. There are numerous factors at work that led to deforestation and encroachment of Nambor reserve forest, which shall be analysed in the research paper. Apart from deforestation, the history of the reserved forest is critical to a comprehensive understanding of Assam-Nagaland border dispute.

The crux of the paper is to analyse about deforestation of Nambor Reserved Forest from a historical perspective. It has already been mentioned that the region has witnessed human encroachment in recent decades. However, colonial reports point out that the process of deforestation was initiated since the last decade of 19th century. The region was designated as reserved forests to fulfil commercial requirements of British government. The forest, being rich in timber resources was planned and worked out so that commercially valuable trees can be used in industries, thereby accruing revenue to the British government. Situated in the disputed Assam-Nagaland border, human settlement is often used as machinery by the state to claim its territoriality. Therefore, while considering the history of deforestation in Nambor Reserved forest, it cannot be limited within the narrow discourse of encroachment. The process of deforestation began since colonial period, magnified by human settlement in recent decades.

Review of Literature:

There is scanty number of sources on specifically Nambor Reserve Forest. However, due to its location in the disputed border region, a number of works on colonial penetration and post-independent developments have frequently referred to Nambor forest. Existing literature on Nambor Reserve forest can be categorised into various themes, as the topic can be understood from the perspective of different discourses. Firstly, the designation of reserve forest being attributed to Nambor can be understood from the perspective of colonial forest policy. In the discourse of environmental history of India, colonial forest policy has been the focal point of discussion. Among the works related to colonial forest policy, mention can be made of Ribbentrop's *Forestry in British India*, *This Fissured Land* by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, *Environmental Issues in India* by Mahesh Rangarajan. In the context of Assam, mention can be made of *British Forest Policy in Assam* by Rajib Handique and *Forests and Ecological history of Assam* by Arupjyoti Saikia. Both are pioneering works in the discipline of environmental history of Assam.

Apart from colonial forest policy, colonial cartography has shaped the border of Golaghat adjoining Nagaland, of which Nambor forms a part. In the discourse of colonial cartography, mention can be made of *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India* by Mathew Edney, *Mapping India* by Manosi Lahiri. Colonial ethnographical reports such as *North-East Frontier of India- Topographical, Political and Military Report* by John F. Mitchell, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam, 1883-1941* by Robert Reid, *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North-Eastern Frontier* by L. W. Shakespeare. *The Northeast Frontier of India* by Alexander Mackenzie provide an insight into colonial map-making and drawing frontiers. Dolly Kikon in her book, *Living with Oil and Coal : Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India* has written about resource exploitation in Assam –Nagaland border. Resource exploitation in the border area is another issue which need to be considered for a comprehensive understanding of Assam-Nagaland border dispute.

Though, existing literature on Assam-Nagaland border has dealt with cartography and border dispute, a vacuum can be witnessed in terms of historical analysis of the border, specifically

Nambor reserve forest. The research paper is an attempt to study the border region of Nambor reserve forest from a historical perspective by taking into consideration the discourse of border studies, environmental history, and territoriality claimed by different states which has shaped the border.

Research Methodology:

The study applies historical methodology by making critical use of a range of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources mainly include contemporary official records, manuals and proceedings of the various departments housed in the State and National Archives. Field study has been conducted to gather first-hand knowledge of the area. The secondary source materials are mainly used to supplement the primary sources wherever necessary and includes the relevant published and unpublished written material on the issues related to the study.

Objectives:

The research paper aims to:

- i. Analyze the history of Nambor Reserve Forest since colonial period and
- ii. Analyze the various factors which have led to deforestation of the area

Discussion:

Since time immemorial, civilizations have developed nearby water bodies, as water is crucial for human survival and agricultural growth. Doyang-Dhansiri valley, situated in Golaghat district of Assam and South-western part of Nagaland was a cradle of civilisation in the distant past. River Dhansiri, originating from Laisang peak of Nagaland flows through Golaghat district of Assam and Chumukedima and Dimapur district of Nagaland ((RRC), 2019). Doyang is the longest river of Nagaland, which flows through Kohima, Phek and Zunheboto district. After passing through the border district of Wokha in Nagaland, the river meets Dhansiri. At the confluence of two rivers, it forms the left bank tributary of river Brahmaputra (Lkr, 2020). Nambor is a tributary of River Dhansiri which flows through lush green forests. The forest acquired its name from the river, which has sustained its growth (Nambor Wildlife Sanctuary) . However, in the present context, the protected region of Nambor has been categorised into three genres. They are:

- i. Nambor Doigrung Wildlife Sanctuary
- ii. Nambor North Reserve Forest and
- iii. Nambor South Reserve Forest.

There is a difference between reserve forest and wildlife sanctuary. To understand the classifications, we should acquaint ourselves with the forest policies which have coined the terminologies in the generic category of forests of India.

It is a well known fact that the treaty of Yandaboo was a milestone in the history of Assam as well as Northeast India. British penetration into North-eastern region of India can be traced to the treaty of Yandaboo of 1826. From 18th century onwards, the process of downfall of Ahom rule started. While Moamaria rebellion ended with the formation of an independent state of *Matak*, another grave situation arose which is reminisced for centuries as '*Maanor din*'. *Maanor Din* refers to the days of Burmese invasion of Assam between 1817 and 1826 that witnessed so much brutality and massacre that it is remembered with horror till recent decades (Baruah, 1985) . Eventually, the ruling family of Ahoms had to ask for help of the British East India Company. It resulted in the beginning of first Anglo-Burmese war and the defeat of Burmese forces. Burmese king signed the treaty of Yandaboo with East India Company on 24th February, 1826. By the

terms of the treaty, the Burmese king had to renounce all claims upon Manipur, the principality of Assam and its dependencies. As Assam was annexed by Burmese, the clauses of the treaty signified that Assam shall become a part of British East India Company (Goswami, 2012). It would be pertinent to draw attention to the fact that though the treaty of Yandaboo mark the beginning of British rule in Assam, the territories of present North-East India was not engulfed by colonialism all at once. The invention of tea in Assam provided the necessary impetus to British imperialistic envisions. Soon, European planters penetrated into the nook and corners of Assam by opening tea estate.

In this context, mention can be made of wasteland grant, introduced in the year 1838. As already discussed, *Maanor din* or Burmese invasion brought a catastrophic situation in Assam and there were hundreds of residents who left their homes and took shelter in the forests. Apart from homicide, people fleeing to forests resulted in vast extent of land lying fallow. Some of these lands turned into jungles. The British were contemplating to convert these lands into revenue recurring lands. With this aim in perspective, Wasteland Grant Rules of 1838 was introduced (Handique, 2009-2010). The term wasteland refers to those tracts of land which were uncultivated, unsettled and therefore, accruing no revenue to the imperial government. Wasteland thus included the forest and highland having extensive high reed and grass, and grasslands. As per the clauses of the act, incentives were given to the grantees on the condition of bringing the wastelands under cultivation. Under the rules, one fourth of the land was to be brought under cultivation by the fifth year of possession. Another one-fourth of the land was to be considered as revenue-free lands. For the next twenty years of possession, the grantees were levied no fees if kept as a forest, and nominal fees to be paid as tax afterwards. The wasteland grants were particularly profitable for the European tea planters. Soon, applications for such grants flooded the colonial administration. There are instances of applications being made for granting 1500 or several acres of lands as wasteland grants (Handique, British Forest Policy in Assam, 2004). The Annual report of 1862-63 of British Government of India points out the extensive scale of growth of tea plantations across Brahmaputra valley. Grants of wastelands are taken principally for tea cultivation, as the report points out. Referring to Sivasagar¹, the report mentioned that “it may safely be said that at least 6000 acres were cleared and planted during the year, showing satisfactorily at how rapid a rate the cultivation of tea is progressing” (Bandopadhyay, 2009)

It is noteworthy that Nambor Reserved Forest situated in the border was a wasteland grant before being converted into a reserve forest. In the colonial reports, Nambor grant is described as grant no. 9 in Morongee (presently, Marangi) mouza, situated on the west bank of Dhansiri river. The application for Nambor grant was made to the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong on 26th January, 1859 by a British planter named R. Spears. A *pottah* in the name of the applicant was granted on 24th December, 1863 (Mr. Kingsley's Application, 1871-73). The area of the grant was approximately 942 acres (the report also mentioned that the area would probably prove to be much larger on measurement). As the report identified the location of the grant near Nambor forest, it can be assumed that a portion of the present Nambor forest area was granted as wasteland to private planters. However, just after a few years, in 1871, an application for a fresh grant was made by one Mr. Kingsley, who was identified as the partner of original grant-holder Mr. Spears. However, the proposal was not accepted as the authority

(History, 2022)¹ Seesagar, or Sibsagar is a former district of colonial Assam. Earlier, Golaghat formed a subdivision of Sibsagar district. In 1987, Golaghat attained a independent district status, curving out from former Sibsagar district.

considered that the grant should never have been made as it consists of valuable timber (File No. 95/195, 1871-73).

The correspondence between Colonel W. Agnew, Officiating Commissioner of Assam to the Officiating Secretary to the Board of Revenue reads thus,

“I cannot recommend that Mr. Kingsley’s request, to be put in possession of the land in question, be complied with. The grant itself is one of those that ought never to have been made, as it contained valuable timber, much of which was cut down I believe and disposed of by Mr. Spears...”(File No. 95/195, 1871-73)

As per the terms of wasteland rule, a portion of total wastelands need to be converted into agricultural lands, or lands accruing revenue. The report points out that, due to miscommunication of Mr. Spears, no such initiatives of converting the wasteland to revenue incurring lands was taken. Thus, the British authority became apprehensive of grant holder’s intuition. Yet, the report mentioned that “if Mr. Kingsley can prove to the satisfaction of government that he did spend money on the garden, he might be allowed,...to reclaim from jungle the portion that was formerly cleared and planted; but he certainly, in my opinion, ought not to obtain the entire original grant, the area of which is said to be 942 acres...”² Due to lack of evidence which can justify Mr. Kingsley’s rights over the wasteland, his proposal was rejected. Later on, the British administration took over the wasteland and converted it to reserved forest.(File No. 95/195, Govt. Of Bengal, ASA)

Now, the question arise, was Nambor actually a wasteland? Archaeological excavations point out the existence of civilisation during medieval times. In Naojan, situated in Nambor reserve forest, a number of architectural remains have been found. Mention can be made of evidence of a brick structure in East-West alignment, parallel to a number of water tanks measuring 300m X 150 m. A number of tanks of varying size have been discovered in the forest. Among these, mention can be made of Rajapukhuri, a square tank measuring 150m X 150m. At a distance of 300m, another tank named Ranipukhuri has been found. It measures 30m X 30m. Apart from that, a pair of tanks measuring 45m X 35m, named Juriapukhuri has been found. Evidences point out that the Ahoms and the Kacharis might have excavated the tanks. Its timeline can be dated back to 1600 CE. Both the Kacharis and Ahoms were fond of excavating tanks, as can be witnessed in other centres where the dynasties exercised control (Dutta, 2021). These archaeological findings are a testimony to the fact that the forest was a habitation site during medieval times. It can be speculated that during the age of Burmese invasion, the place was abandoned. As the area was lying waste, British East India Company considered its conversion to revenue recurring lands. Therefore, British administration granted the huge plot measuring 942 acres to a planter named Mr. Spears. However, the total area under the forest during initial years of British rule was 62 square miles approximately, pointing out the fact that only a portion of the total area was granted as wasteland.

Undoubtedly, the after effects of wasteland grant rules can be observed in all over Assam. The idea of colonisation of wastelands in early decades of British rule rested on the idea of commercialisation of agriculture. In Assam, after the invention of tea and successful experimentation of tea, it became a commercial crop accruing revenue to the state. Migration of population from nearby overpopulated areas is a noteworthy after-effect of wasteland grant. Overpopulated province of Bengal which also witnessed famine considered the land of Assam with great prospect because of vast tracts of cultivated land lying fallow. A huge number of

Nepali graziers migrated to Assam when grazing tax was enhanced in Jalpaiguri. They settled in the districts of Lakhimpur and Sivasagar (Hilaly, 2016). Nepali population can also be witnessed in the frontier region of Assam-Nagaland border, including Nambor reserve.

It has already been mentioned that a portion of erstwhile Nambor forest has been designated as reserve forest. To understand the terminology of reserve forest, we must acquaint ourselves with British Forest Policy of 1878. The act provided for three classes of forest- reserved forests, protected forests and village forests. Reserved forests consisted of compact and valuable trees, well connected to towns, so that sustained supply of valuable timbers can be guaranteed. The act legalised total state control of valuable forests, putting an end to private rights. However, the Forest settlement Officer is empowered to consider the rights of any claimant and can even grant acquisition of land or compensation as per provisions of Land Acquisition Act, 1870. The claimants shall also be given the rights of pasture or forest resources. The act also empowered the government to levy tax on timber on all kinds of forests. All timber found adrift or sunk shall be considered the property of the government (Guha, 1992).

As per provisions of Indian forest Act of 1878, Nambor forest was reserved in the year 1878 itself. The area of forest as of 1905 was 62 square miles. However, within the forest, rights of three villages had to be considered. They are- Borholla, Tengani and Dubarani. The villagers of Borholla were assigned rights on timber, fuel and grazing sufficient for their domestic and agricultural requirements. There was a *pathar*, named Tengani which was opened for cultivation, provided that only land with no forest on it should be cleared. The village of Dubarani was abandoned by the forest department to the villagers. However, the colonial report laments the decision of forest department as it contained *nahor* trees. The working plan of Nambor reserve forest for the years 1904-1919 speculated that the forest has the potential to fulfil steady demand of *nahor* sleepers required for Assam-Bengal railways (Working Plan of Nambor Reserved Forest of Golaghat Range, Sibsagar, 1905). Apart from *nahor*, other first class trees found in the forest are:

- i. *Uriam*
- ii. *Sam*
- iii. *Ajhar*

Among these trees, *ajhar* and *uriam* is used for planks and scantlings of buildings. *Uriam* is also employed for small sleepers which is required on Jorhat railways. *Sam* is used for conversion into dugouts. Among the second class forests, *hoolock* and *jamu* was considered important both of which were used for building purposes. In the following table, gross revenue collected from the years 1893-1903 is mentioned:

Table 1: Gross Revenue collected from 1893-1903 as compiled in records of Range Office:

Year	Gross revenue Collected
1893-94	Rs. 1594
1894-95	Rs. 1157
1895-96	Rs. 1104
1896-97	Rs. 1450
1897-98	Rs. 2278
1898-99	Rs. 2075
1899-1900	Rs. 1943

1900-1901	Rs. 1875
1901-1902	Rs. 5465
1902-1903	Rs. 8594
Total	Rs. 27, 535

Source: Assam State Archives, File No. Lib/R028/S2/58

Another diagram enumerated the list of forest produce removed from Nambor reserve.

Table 2: List of Produce Removed from Nambor Reserve:

Year	Nahor	Ajhar	Uriam	Sam
1899-1900	18	61	105	1
1900-1901	41	116	Nil	21
1901-1902	1453	24	Nil	29
1902-1903	197	44	114	57

Source: Assam State Archives, File No. Lib/R028/S2/58

From the above findings, it can be observed that the process of deforestation was initiated from colonial times. In fact, the forest was reserved to fulfil timber requirement of railways and to increase revenue collection. Therefore, deforestation of Nambor reserve may not always imply encroachment. Sometimes, it implies an impinge on the rights of indigenous people, making way for commercial use and revenue maximisation of the state.

However, in the recent decades, human settlement has transformed the landscape of the reserve forests situated in Assam-Nagaland border, including Nambor reserve. In the following table, encroachment position of 2006 is listed:

Table 3: Encroachment Position in Reserved Forests under Golaghat Division, 2006

S. No.	Name of RF	Original Area (in hectare)	Encroachment Area	Encroach-Free Area(in Hectare)	Remarks
1	Doyang	24,635.77	23,717.18	918.59	Sector D
2	Rengma	13,921.49	7906.51	6014.98	Sector C
3	Nambor South	27,240.61	25,056.35	2184.26	Sector B
4	Diphu	18,363.00	18050	313	Sector A
5	Nambor North	9,918.00	9431.58	486.42	
6	Total	94,078.87	84,161.62	9,917.25	

Source: Office of Divisional Forest Officer, Golaghat

Table 4: Encroachment position of villages of Sector B, Nambor South is outlined below:

S. No	Name of Village	Total Area	Total Population
1	Janjuri	565 bigha	373
2	Dhormapur	470 bigha	314

3	Sankarpur	1023 bigha	753
4	Junakipathar	352 bigha	369
5	Haripur	586 bigha	310
6	New Jurdolong	607 bigha	578
7	Sonali Nagar	608 bigha	1072
8	No. 1 & 2 Jayapathar	1029 bigha	613
9	No 1 Rajapukhuri	605 bigha	392
10	Ranipukhuri	600 bigha	613

Source: Forest Range Office, Uriamghat

The researcher has interacted with the inhabitants of the above-mentioned villages of Assam-Nagaland border to understand as to why the encroachers have settled in the region.

Ranjit Nagesia is the village Headman of Chainpur village which falls under Nambor reserve. There are 125 households, out of which 18 households belong to Nepali community, and the rest belong to Adivasi community. He is originally from Tinsukia. His parents worked in tea garden of Tinsukia. As they did not have their land and they wished to change their profession rather than being tea garden labourer, they shifted to border areas and occupied land. Most of the villagers, including Nepali people earn their livelihood by cultivation (Nagesia, 2022).

Kanto Karmakar is another resident of Chetia Gaon which falls under Nambor reserve forest. He too belongs to Adivasi community who were originally tea garden labourers of Amguri town, Sivasagar district. He informed that life is tough in the border. They somehow make their ends meet by cultivation. Many of the youths from his village work in Kerala and Chennai to earn their bread (Karmakar, 2022).

Another resident of Sector B remarked,

“Ami mati bari dhorim buli ahilu

Raije mati eman dhorise

Ami derikoi ahilu

Heikarone kom koi mati palu.”

“We came here to occupy land

The people have occupied so much land

We came late

Therefore we could acquire only a small portion of land.”

The above-mentioned narratives signify the flexibility of occupying lands in the margins of the state, adding to the complexity of existing border dispute between Assam and Nagaland.

The terminology ‘reserve forest’ attributed to the region is nothing but a myth. Field study in the region has revealed that human habitation and large scale encroachment of forest is a recent phenomenon that mostly began in 1960s. Human settlement in the region can be understood as a two-pronged phenomena. It has already been mentioned that the forest falls under disputed area and there are many instances of border clashes between Assam and Nagaland in the post-independent period. Both states have claimed that their land has been occupied by residents from

other side of the border. In such circumstances, Government of Assam devised a policy, known as 'half-mile settlement'. Through the policy, government of Assam made a strategy to secure the frontier by settling people of Assam within half a mile area of the border. In fact, field study has revealed that political leaders have advocated for the cause of peasants who have encroached the lands of reserve forests. People belonging to scheduled tribe category have received forest encroachment rights as per provisions of Forest Dwellers' Act, 2006 (Forest Rights Act) . However, field studies and interaction with forest officials of study area has revealed that just 12-30 percent of the villagers belong to Scheduled tribes, who live by cultivation and are not traditional forest-dwellers. An analysis of demographic composition has revealed that the encroachers belong to different social categories and do not fit into the provisions of Forest Dwellers' Act. Thus, their encroachment and settlement for decades nullifies the act itself.

Secondly, it is to be mentioned that the frontier, located at the margin of the state has provided a space to the marginalised people to thrive. Field study in the area has shown that a significant portion of the encroachers are victims of internal displacement. Considerable portion of the settlers belong to Adivasi community. Others belong to Bodo, Kachari, Garo, Nepali, Muslim and Ahoms. As the periphery is virtually stateless, these marginalised people have found their home in spite of lack of security. It is noteworthy that the settlers belonging to Scheduled Tribe have been granted encroachment rights by executing Forest Dwellers' Act of 2006. However, the clauses of the act cannot be applied in to in case of the border communities. Granting the people encroachment right after 2010 may also be an instrument used by the state to consolidate their hold over the disputed territory. Thus, encroachment of border regions is a consequence of multitude factors related to internal displacement, population explosion, diplomatic mechanisms of state etc.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, we can have an idea about the chequered history of Nambor and how it has been shaped by political and ecological factors. During the medieval age, the area might have been an important centre of Kacharis and Ahoms. Numerous archaeological findings and ancient tanks justify existence of a civilisation in the distant past. During the downfall of Ahom dynasty, like other parts of Assam, Nambor too was reduced to a dilapidated condition. To fulfil revenue requirement of British East India Company, a significant portion of the forest was assigned as wasteland grant to British planter. However, considering enrichment of forest resources, the region was later converted to reserve forest. Working plan of Nambor reserve forest for the years 1904-1919 is a testimony to the fact that the forest area was reserved to fulfil commercial requirement of British industries. Field study in the area has revealed that more than 90 percent of total area of the forest has been encroached. Often, encroachment is sponsored by the state considering its location in a disputed border area. Encroachment of the forest can also be understood from the perspective of claiming territoriality by Assam and Nagaland. In this way, the wasteland Nambor transformed into a deforested land.

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