



COLONIAL FORESTRY AND THE SHIFTING CULTIVATION ON THE GARO HILL IN SECOND HALF 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The terms 'environment history' and 'ecological history' are often used as same meaning. The term 'ecology' is defined that 'the science of the relations of leaving organisms to the external world, which may call 'nature' or none human world; the world we have not in any primary sense created. natural environment is directly or indirectly creator of human history. Social-structure, economic organization and belief system have been based on the specific region's 'environment'. In these sense, the region of present study I.e .the Garo Hill in colonial India is no exception. On the other hand, Conservation of forest for the purpose of commercial value for future exploitation that is clear to have exterminated of indigenous community. As a result, a subsistence economic activity such as 'shifting cultivation' was felt in great troubles. Shifting cultivation was the Characteristics form of agriculture over large part of north-eastern India, hilly and forested tracts where plough agriculture was not feasible. Therefore, my research agenda to enquire the relationship between shifting cultivation and scientific forestry, and was this relationship reciprocal? or not. In this context, it will be discuss how much impact it on the environment of this region.

KEY WORDS: environment-history, ecological-history, belief-system, indigenous , subsistence, shifting cultivation, plough-agriculture,

INTRODUCTION

The historiography of environmental history has recently established phenomenon in south-East Asia. Although, it has paid adequate attention in the Europe as a well established field within the subject of history. The terms 'environment history' and ' ecological history' are often used as same meaning. The term 'ecology' is defined that 'the science of the relations of leaving organisms to the external world, which may call 'nature' or none human world; the world we have not in any primary sense created. ¹. Simultaneously, climate, topography, vegetation , soil ,forest, rivers and other elements of natural environment have influenced on the origin and growth of human civilization. So, natural environment is directly or indirectly creator of human history. Social-structure, economic organization and belief system have been based on the specific region's 'environment'². In these sense, the region of present study I.e .the Garo Hill in colonial India is no exception. On the other hand, Conservation of forest for the purpose of commercial value for future exploitation that is clear to have exterminated of indigenous community. As a result, a subsistence economic activity such as 'shifting cultivation' was felt in great troubles. Shifting cultivation was the Characteristics form of agriculture over large part of north-eastern India, hilly and forested tracts where plough agriculture was not feasible. Therefore, my research agenda to enquire the relationship between shifting cultivation and scientific forestry , and was this relationship reciprocal? or not. In this context, it will be discuss how much impact it on the environment of this region.

The 'name' Garo Hill is derived from the tribe of Garo, who were inhabiting in this hill since before the Christ era.the Garo, was the hill district of colonial Assam, now it is the district of Meghalaya. It is situated between latitude 25^o9' to 26^o1' N, and longitude 89^o49' to 91^o2' E. It has covered the area of 3140 sq miles and average 2500 ft above sea level. It is

surrounded on the north by Goalpara, on the east by the Khasi Hills, on the south by Mymensing (Bangladesh), on the west by the part of Rongpur (Bangladesh) and Goalpara. The region was enriched with the high mountain ranges (the Nockrek), dense forest, and large number of rivers. the abundance of long trees, high hills and humidity of the soil added a new dimension to the climatic characteristics of the Garo Hills. The Garo tribes who call themselves a autochthonous tribe, as their no migratory history. The country of their origin is referred to as the country of 'garu', but always called themselves 'Achikmande' (hill men). the word Achik means hill and 'mande' is men.³ Their name is hill-men that proved by their demographic profile, as per the census report of Assam in 1891. It displayed that the total population of Garo was 120,473, but unexpectedly, 100,954 populations were inhabited on the Garo hill range⁴.

Before reflecting on the various aspect of shifting cultivation or Jhum cultivation, i would to like to discuss in regards to 'scientific forestry' of colonial power. Basically, scientific forestry based on the policy of 'conservation' and 'environmentalism'. colonial foresters tried to endeavour to exploit the natural resources and to exterminate forest tribal dweller's, which was familiar to them 'forest land' or 'waste land' that was tax free zone, as well as this property was common. But, colonial officials try to alter their 'privileged right' in the name of 'state control', and they symbolize it regeneration of 'environmentalism'. The popular historian like as Guha and Gadgil (this fissured land) recalled it the 'watershed' moment of environmental history in south Asia. Guha and Gadgil seems to have depicted it 'scientific forestry'.⁵ Mahesh Rangarajan, who has raised the questions on traditional land use would have been more effective than the company.⁶ To understand the dynamics of colonial forest policy at first we need to track down the rhetoric term 'colonial science'. It has often been used as 'regenerative



forestry' and the other words 'Technology of power' by the colonial officials. Clearly, it is said that colonial science was the body of knowledge and that was the symbol of modernization.⁷ The use of scientific knowledge rather than human and animal muscle power in food production, hydroelectricity, nuclear power and easy accessible of technological knowledge etc these are all depicted as 'progress'. Modernity and technology can be located in the various format such as social organization and its productivity, which derived from post-industrial technology. These were a modern artefact which distinct from any other. In point of fact, modernization is refers to a new mode of social organization, a new social order and a discontinuity in history. So, according to this school of thought Jhum agronomy was primitive or conventional, and needs to be an alternative system of agriculture. In this context, I also seem to have accelerated to the degradation of Garo hill 'Jungle' or natural forest. 139 sq miles altered to regarded as Ireserved forest, which was eighteen, out of the total cover area of 3140 sq miles.⁸ As a result, the Garo Jhum have been cultivated consecutively in the rest of the area, which pressurized on the crude land. After the some years, hilly tract has to bare in this processes.

In the period under observation, colonial Assam includes all those areas viz. Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh which are most natural prosperous regions. There were some hilly districts within Assam such as Lushai hill district, Naga hill district, Khasi - Jaintia hill district and Garo hill district. The entire region had a huge forest cover with over 80% of its are under forest.⁸ In the pre-colonial age, Common people have been used to forest and forest product freely during the Ahom rule. In that time, practically no proper forest laws and state control. Cultivable lands were occupied by peasant and not agricultural treat as waste land often regarded as communal property. Peasant could clear any part of the land for cultivation and did not have to pay any price for it.⁹ with the annexation Assam to the British Empire in 1826, the large forest tract passed under British protection and Assam was integrated as the part of Bengal. This vast forest region was administered by the Bengal Forest Department under the Indian Forest Act 1865. But soon it was realized that it was impossible to govern the huge region under the single conservat.¹⁰ The imperial forest department of Assam was working his journey and Gustav Mann was assigned the post of Assistant of Conservator of Assam in the year 1868. It was in 1873, Bengal forest department was proposed for the transfer of forest in Assam. In the following year, Assam had been separated a chief commissioner-ship in 1874 and Gustav Mann was the first chief commissioner. The chief commissioner sanctioned five forest division, these are Tezpur, Golaghat, Guwahati. Goalpara and Cachar in the same year. The Garo hill was included in to the Goalpara forest division.¹¹ Dietric Brandis, the Inspector General of Forest in India visited in Assam in 1879. This was ensured to reinforcement the timber exploitation as well as natural resources of Assam, as he suggested that both civil and forest administration should work together to feasible. He put up some aspirations in regard to Assam fores department, these are, forest department

was ensure a permanent supply of timber for the Bengal market, try to increase rubber plantation and try to symbolize as a catalyst for other colonial department. Brandis's have found echoes in the annual administration report of the forest and it was highlight on demarcation of forest land and exposed to the forest community, who have been grazing, hunting and cultivating since from century after century. Apart from these, the Jhum cultivation or shifting or slash-an-bun cultivation practised by the indigenous community mostly in the hilly areas was considered as greater danger to forest by British officials. The forest policy maker like Baden Powell were so antagonized by the system of Jhum agriculture that they presented it as anti modern as well as destructing components of forestry. Shifting cultivation was a primitive and inferior system of cultivation that needed be changed. Baden powell expressed his view in Allahabad in 1874 are:

"The fact is that the system is so wasteful that somehow or the other it must be put a stop to, Just like 'suttee' or any other great evil. It consists in destroying a large and valuable capital to produce a miserable and temporary return. To put a stop to it, is only to anticipate by a few years, the natural determination of the system which will happen if the system continues long enough, because there will be no more forest to cut down and burn. The way out is to reserve large areas and prohibit Jhum. Efforts should be made to change people to permanent agriculture".¹² In the latter years the criticism grew up to the new comer young officials. E.P. Stebbings had vehemently condemned shifting or Jhum cultivation, and remark, "The forest of these region had for centuries been devastated by the cutting and burning of the best timber to form ashes to fertilize their wretched fields of half wild grains".¹³ The future of jhum cultivation can be easily predicted from such a remark. According to colonial rulers a measure to curb the forest of this region from burning them to ashes was the urgent need of the hour. Under these circumstances, the British authorities considered the implementation of forest conservancy in Assam in a vital necessity. Naturally, it was clear to all that forest management policy of Assam was the big drain of economic exploitation.

To understand the different strata of the shifting cultivation of the Garos in the Garo hill, we need to broad explain to the Jhum cultivation, which was closely interlinked to environment in every steps. The Garos, in their hilly tract they used to cultivate known as Jhum. This method of cultivation was practiced by tribal groups in this hill as a subsistence economy. At first the Garo men selected the hilly land which were generally dense with jungle and the jungle cut down the cold seasons. In the hot season like as March to April, the trees and brush wood are burnt as these are dried up in this time. The soil is dug up little with the bamboo sticks, and rice crop is planted in the middle of April at the commencement of the rains. After few days, the seeds of vegetables, cotton, pepper and pulses are sown at the same land, and each crop is matured in rotation. In the next season Jhum is cleared. In this season begin with a multi crops such as yams, ginger, indigo, and turmeric. In the second year, only rice is grown. After two years, clear Jhum land is abandoned for about 5 to 10 years, until the dense jungle covered.¹⁴ In this context, I will try to locate the Jhuming cultivation is based on ecology. First of all, the Garo hill is situated in the



tropical climatic zone and temperature is comparable high 36⁰ to 38⁰ in summer and humidity is uncomfortable and rain fall is high in average 25.11'.¹⁵ In this climatic zone has been suited to cultivate rice crop. On the one hand, land selection, clearing the brush wood and their burning time seems to have carried great knowledge, on the hand, ginger, turmeric etc crops have been farmed in to the geologically rockery land. At last, The Garo Jhumias abandoned the clearing Jhum field after two years used this land and they have to wait to cultivate that land until jungle is covered, this was the deep knowledge about ecology, which performed the Garo.¹⁶ So, entire processes of shifting cultivation has been followed the ecology or environment.

In the days of Mughal, the whole of the North eastern frontier tract was directly govern by the Zemindar's who paying small tribute to Mughal for their independent. In those days, they paid what they did pay to as 'Sayer' (miscellaneous revenue) not Mal (Land revenue).¹⁷ The Choudries of kuraibari, kalumalupara and Mechpara in the part of Goalpara held all the lower part of the Garo hill to the Assam side and their principal duty was to protect the plain men from the uplands savage, wild tribe Garos incursion. Cotton was the staple internal trade that time and it came from hilly tract. As a result, they established weekly markets for Garo cotton, by which their revenue was absorbed in considerable for the

future. Huge number of adjacent districts peasants did have fulfil their cotton requirement and Bengali merchants were eager to buy Garo's agricultural crops that primely cotton oriented. Choudries levied from both seller and buyer that was lucrative for them. Owing to danger in every step and the difficulties to the journey of weekly markets from upland to plain and same in return, plain men will have to encourage them giving arrach (native liquor). It was a hazardous journey for four or five days. The Garors moved to markets in a group, not single. Men and women both carried their heavier loads within the bamboo basket. The basket may contain cotton, lac, pepper, rice, poultry, dried fish, pig and banana. Everything was priced in according to its value in cotton. Rev William Carrey explained his own experienced in the frontier market: "A mound of cotton(Eighty two pound) would buy five pound rice, or one of tobacco. It would also sometimes buy a bull. For one the 'Bacha' loads(twenty pound) a fowl could be purchased, perhaps even a small puppy".¹⁸ It seem to have shown that the Garo were intended to fraud by the plain men and as well as Choudries. As a result, the inhabitant of uplands became wild, ravage and bloodshed and they often invaded on plain men plunder with brutality. Huge number of common people have killed by the periodical incursion of Garos and I extracted here of the Garo raid in between 1807 to 1819.

Year	villages burnt	persons killed.
1807.....	3.....	27
1810.....	.....	2
1811.....	.....	8
1812.....	.....	5
1813.....	2.....	24
1814.....	.....	3
1815.....	2.....	15
1816.....	150.....	94
1818.....	.....	3.... ¹⁹

In 1816, Captain Scott as Government representative, visited the frontier Garo hill and sent proposal to Govt, the raids were the real fact and it will have to levy and 'Sayer' of all kinds, which were advance mode in cotton that imposed by Zemindars on Garo in a frequent way. Simultaneously, Scott proposed to separate all these tributary Garo from Zemindars to Govt, controlled and the frontier markets also brought under Govt, management. The Garos were to be permitted to trade there only entering in peaceful way.²⁰ Mr. Scott's suggestion in regards to the separation of territory have accepted by Govt, and passed by Governor General in Council (regulation 'X', on the 19th September, 1822). But, the Garo were made invasion on plain lands in constant. For example, Garo occurred their atrocious raid on plain common peoples in 1825,1836,1852,1856 and 1859.²¹ At last, the existent chronic irritant was permanently ended by the Lieutenant Governor Williamson in 1866 in peaceful manner.²²

Geologically the Garo hill has constructed rockery land and is situated in the tropical climatic zone and temperature is comparable high 36⁰ to 38⁰ in summer and humidity is uncomfortable and rain fall is high in average 25.11'. In this geological zone, the practice of shifting cultivation does great harm on the strip hilly region with unstable soil. This

agricultural practices have been bared the jungle due to slash-burn processes of Garo hill. As a result, temperature was increasing day to day and rain fall decreasing from the previous years comparatively, this is traced with the seminal book 'playing with nature' of Sajal Nag²³ In these circumstances, natural calamities was certain and it occurred periodically in almost every year. Such as, the earthquake of 14th July, 1885 was a great extent in Tura. No serious damage was done, but the Governmental record room was severely damaged, and the roofs of all Governmental buildings were strained. Again, on 12th June, 1897, the district did not escape from the earthquake, which was vibrated about 5pm on a Saturday afternoon. This natural calamity severely damaged in a great extent. The public residences and governmental offices were rendered uninhabitable, the floors buckled, and the roofs sagged. In 1900, another catastrophe appeared on the Garo hilly region, that was most violent tornado on the 18th April, a violent storm traversed from Bramhputra valley to Garo hill and finally disappeared into the latter district.²⁴ The path of the storm was only about a quarter of a mile in wide. But within this limited area, the strength of the hurricane was fatal. Thirty persons were killed in Goalpara and six person in Garo



hill. so, these natural calamities occurred due to the imbalance of natural ecology.

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