

British Forest Policy in the Lushai Hills, 1896-1951

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This paper deals with the nature of British colonialism concerning the Lushai hill people and its cultural geography. It argues that through several policies (especially the inner line regulations), British rule caused damage to forest resources and the local population. Imperial regulations, divided peoples and resources of the hills and plains along imaginary lines, thereby curtailing their contacts and exchanges that used to thrive in the past. An earlier study deals with the interaction between the British colonizers and the Mizos in the frontier areas of Lushai Hills.¹ A recent study focused on the strategic aspect of the Inner Line in colonial Assam while another study deals with the legal genealogy of tribal subjects in the context of British expeditions in Chin- Lushai Hills in the late nineteenth century.² The present study moves its framework beyond the colonial conflict angle and strategic aspect. It attempts to trace the evolution of British colonial forest policy in Lushai hills and evaluates its ecological impact.

British Annexation of the Lushai Hills

The hill peoples were never located beyond the scale of imperial expansion and consolidation. As Lalruatkima notes, 'Raids—the linear frontier's version of movement by hill peoples—into British-claimed territory met with punitive campaigns against the offending hill community.'³ When the British expanded their territory to the Chittagong Hill Tracts they found the Lushais. The contact between the British and Lushai occurred as the later organized frequent 'raids' on the British frontier during the period from 1826 up to the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁴ For searching the land for plantations British administration took the expansionist policy through which they reached the hills. As the hill

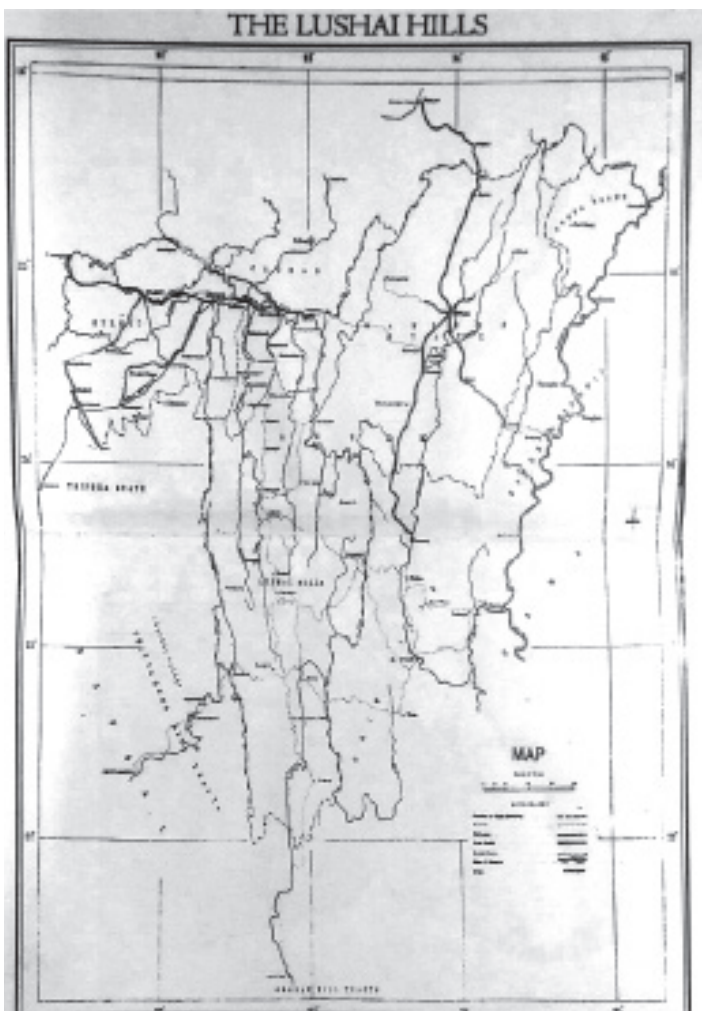
tribes resisted the plantation activities which encroached on their own land, they were considered a political and administrative problem.⁵ The 'pacification' strategy of the British in the Assam Hills was extended up to the northeastern frontier in the last decade of the nineteenth century. They also augmented their administrative control to a large extent in the Lushai Hills.⁶ At that time the region was described on the maps as 'undefined' and 'unsprayed'.⁷ During the time of Lushai Expedition Colonel A. S. Reid identified the tribe as "...the wild tribes which had been in the habit of raiding North Eastern Frontier, were generally spoken of as 'Kukis' –a Bengali word meaning hill-men or highlanders."⁸

To boost the state power in the countryside, the Colonial authority followed the way of deforestation and other kinds of environmental changes. There is thus a strong interlinked between environment and resistance with tribe/forest situation. David Arnold notes, 'the colonial authorities begun to distinguish between India's ecological zones, identifying certain types of landscapes and associated forms of vegetation, wildlife and disease with certain kinds of human inhabitants, their ways of life and cultural characteristics.' By the 1780s the uncultivated 'wastes' (or 'jungle') became synonymous with lawlessness and primitiveness. With the development of this mentality among the Indian middle class and colonial authorities on the 'wilderness', tribes and forests became separate entities. It helps to take administrative actions and create a utopian vision to subdue, include and reformulate the tribal society. However, 'tribals' were poeticized and preserved as primitive. The colonial authority, thus, recognized that India's forests, hill tracts and 'tribal' people were ecologically distinct from the settled 'civilized' people of cultivated plains.⁹ Enlightenment thinkers sought to perceive savagery or wildness in terms of climate and the physical environment and regarded it as the main issue for cultural differences.

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With the third Anglo-Burmese War (1885-1886), the British entered the hill country of the Zo¹⁰ people. In the late 1880s through the three military expeditions from Bengal, Burma and Assam the British annexed and categorized them into three sections such as Chin Hills, South Lushai Hills and North Lushai Hills. With a view to the talk about the future administrative set-up of the newly acquired hills, the Chin –Lushai Conference was held in 1892 at Fort Williams. As they failed to take a unanimous decision, the Chin Hills were kept with Burma. After the second Chin-Lushai Conference held in 1896, South Lushai Hills and North Lushai Hills were associated with Assam and received the status of a district.¹¹ Thus, the Lushai country (Map1) came under the charge of the administration of Assam on 1st April 1898. It was under the charge of an officer who was known as the ‘Superintendent of Lushai Hills’. Though, absolutely non-interference was laid in principle and not applied in all cases. The Lushai chiefs were reduced to a subordinate position and required to recognize British supremacy.¹²

Map 1



Development of Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Husbandry as a Civilizing Process

By the late nineteenth century, the advancement of agriculture deserved an important place in European expansion. In 1910, expressing a similar view to Kyd, Bruce writes that the main aim of the agricultural practice was the ‘struggle of nations of the northern temperate zone for the control of the tropics.’¹³ It had both theoretical and practical necessity for the survival of the ‘New imperialism’. As agriculture became his core ideology, Chamberlin did not like the saying ‘undeveloped estates’ by chance.¹⁴ In the pre-colonial period, the hill regions were outside the power axis of the Indian empires. When the colonial state expressed its necessity of wood it started to extract forest resources. The colonial state also sought to introduce wet rice cultivation in the region where shifting cultivation prevailed. In India, the British also wanted to introduce commercial agriculture to extract more revenues and surplus production for the international market. Exotic plant species, commercially profitable for the market, were introduced and crop productivity was also greater than before.¹⁵ The British believed that the tribal were not efficient in cultivation and they were described as ‘wild, roaming and ignorant’.¹⁶ As the hill tribes practised shifting cultivation they were treated as lazy people because they had small contributions in the production process and failed to meet the revenue demand of the state.¹⁷ As Major John Shakespeare comments: ‘Even on the low ground of economy, this is wise, for all progress towards civilization means reduced expenditure on garrisons, and the longer a good man is left in the district the quicker will be the progress.’¹⁸ Thomas Lewin was interested in transforming the Lushai farmers into sedentary cultivators.¹⁹ To transform mobile Lushai women and men cultivators from ‘the forest to the field’ wet-rice cultivation was introduced in Champai and Vanlaiphai.²⁰ In 1904, Major John Shakespeare wrote to the Chief Commissioner of Assam regarding the experimentation of wet-rice cultivation on the eastern, riverside plain (*phai*) of Champhai in the district.²¹ Major Shakespeare tried to do the task not with the Lushai, but with the Santal and Nepali cultivators who were imported for this purpose. As the Angami Nagas had expertise in terrace cultivation and the experiments of it in the Khasi hills were successful they were invited to teach the Lushai cultivators in the Lushai Hills.²² In the year 1916-1917, terrace cultivation was also introduced at Aizawland Lungleh under the supervision of Angami Nagas.²³

Land Use Change: Colonial intervention in the tribal landscape did not just destroy the forest and wild animals it also changed the land use pattern. In 1894, all

wastelands and forests were declared as 'protected forests' while 'reserve forests' were created in 1925. As a result, land not available for cultivation came under the forest department. According to the Agriculture Statistics of the year 1916-1917, 11% area of the district was under current fallow.²⁴ In 1931, the area not available for cultivation was 24.6%, the area of cultivable/cultivable waste was 69.5%, the net sown area was 1.5%, the area under forest was 0.22% and the remaining 4.5% area consisted of under current fallows (Fig 1). In the year 1941, the area under forest was 0.22%, the area not available for cultivation was 24.60%, the area of cultivable/ cultivable waste was 68.28%, the net sown area was 1.48% and the remaining area of 4.55% consisted of current fallows (Fig 2). In 1951, the area of cultivable/ cultivable waste came under the forest department and the area under a forest covered increased up to 45.6%, cultivable waste decreased from 68.28% to 6.5%. During that time current fallow increased from 5.38% to 17.7%, the net sown area increased from 1.48% to 2.24% and the area not available for cultivation increased to 27.96 % (Fig 3).²⁵ To create a permanent forest, part of the Lushai Hills was surveyed during the years 1950-1951. In the forest policy of the Assam Government, it was reported that forests in the hills and mountain areas were inadequate and it would be 1/3 forest cover of their area.²⁶

Forest conservancy

To control the unregulated deforestation from *laissez-faire* policies the Governor General of India James Ramsay, Earl of Dalhousie (1848-56) created "the administrative and legal structures that became the Indian Forest Department and the model of forestry for the empire". To easily operate the state function, Dalhousie who as a self declared utilitarian and imperialist looked the forest as totally commercial. The most enduring effect of Dalhousie's initiative were the Forest Act of 1865 and the creation of "for the first time in India, a centrally organized and policed forest system" under the guidance of German foresters like Dietrich Brandis and Berthold Ribbentropp.²⁷

Scientific forestry in colonial India was developed, as Ramachandra Guha argues, in response to the revenue and strategic needs of the empire.²⁸ He further notes that 'the large scale destruction of accessible forest in the early years of railway expansion led to the hasty creation of a forest department, set up with the help of German experts in 1864'.²⁹ Due to the increase in prices of both timber and fuel the British authority felt that forest conservancy measures would be taken to mitigate over-exploitation of forests. In 1862, Dr Deitrich Brandis was invited to visit and prepare a report on the forests of Bengal. He

made a tour of some parts of the forests and he talked about the future forest policy with Dr T. Anderson, the Superintendent of, Botanical Garden in Calcutta. Dr Brandis submitted his proposal on 18th December 1862. The Government of India asked the Bengal Government to undertake forest conservancy in 1863 and the Bengal Government assigned the responsibility to Dr T. Anderson to examine the forests.³⁰ Forest service emerged in India with the appointment of Dr Deitrich Brandis(1824-1907) as an Inspector General of Forest of India in October 1864. He tried to organize forestry in India and Burma based on three principles of German forestry. Thus the attitude to nature adopted by the Indian forester in the second half of the nineteenth century was 'clearly conservationist in character'. Ravi Rajan writes '...by the end of the nineteenth century this utilitarian conservation sentiment became a developmental ideology in its own right'.³¹ In various parts of an ecologically and socially heterogeneous subcontinent, the imposition of the new regime of control had different consequences. As Mahesh Rangarajan writes, '...the specific ecological milieu both in terms of forest types and agrarian regimes (land ownership patterns and production system) will build up a better understanding of contrasts between and within different regions'.

On 15th March 1877, according to the order of Major J. Shakespear, the Inner Line Reserve (comprised an area of 1317.8 sq km) was created in Lushai Hills under Revenue Department as a part of the Cachar Forest Division. It was extended in the north up to the Tipaimukh-Chattuchera line and in the south up to the line of Lushai Hills. The superintendent of Lushai Hills restricted the *jhum* cultivation (shifting cultivation) in the region from 1897. In 1902 special forest rules were proposed to implement in this region to protect the Lushai from the plainsman. So the Assam Forest Regulation would not be applicable in the area. This proposal came into effect with the notification and creation of Inner Line Reserve in 1904 under the jurisdiction of Superintendent, Lushai Hills. Thus the forest department came under the superintendent of general administration and the management of the forest was also consolidated.³²

The British implemented Inner Line Regulations in 1873 intending to control the movements of the plain land people of Assam and the hill tribes who frequently engaged in confrontation.³³ The concept of the Inner Line can be traced to the notion that categorized the hills and plains as separate and distinct economic and cultural formations. According to this concept, there would be not any scope for socio-economic dealings between the hills and plains. A line was drawn along the northern and eastern foothills of Assam and the hills were viewed as inside the inner line. The social formation inside the

line was perceived as beyond modern-state intervention. "While apparently", as Arupiyoti Saikia notes "primacy was accorded to the community notion of political evolution the line was ostensibly aimed at 'establishment of clear and defensible property rights' that had emerged under the new imperial regime and tea plantation." This notion grew up as a stable feature of socio-political separation between people and resources in the regions of plains and hills.³⁴ This inner line measures limited the travels from the plains to the hills and increased the differences between the two. Earlier modes of exchanging commodities and contacts gradually vanished. As the revenue collections from the hills were very low the colonial government took the basic administration. But the responsibilities to health, education and general welfare were vested in the Christian Missionaries.³⁵ The Inner Line was formed for identifying the British subject and to secure the tea planters in the Assam Valley. The British also sought to monopolize the trade items such as pottery, salt and rubber.³⁶

In the non-regulation provinces (like Western Frontier Districts of Bengal), civil and criminal laws had not been applied like other areas. Even the colonial administration sought to implement the special tenancy law to prevent land alienation from the tribal people to non-tribals. In these provinces, the district officers exercised enormous discretion as local specialists who act as 'man dominant machine' to administer 'localities or races having peculiarities, especially those reputed backward, such for instance the western frontier districts of Bengal'.³⁷

In the year 1913, 1914 and 1915 Mr. A. R. Thomas, EAC, an expert forest officer visited the Lushai Hills forests. Due to the war effort, like the other administrative efforts were being made to strengthen the control over forest extraction and exploitation. With the establishment of Baraharina Revenue Station, the deputation of a forest officer was appointed to examine the Lushai Hills Forests. Mr Thomas observed that Inner Line Reserve was only being worked through the restriction of Jhuming, cultivating or settling unless only bamboo reserve only. He indicated two important points, namely, i) systematizing future forest working within the Reserves, ii) protection of forests along river banks of navigable rivers. In the first case, jhuming would be stopped through natural boundaries not by arbitrary boundaries. If the village would fall within the bamboo areas, these would be turned out of the reserve. Reservation was required if the timber would exist in the high ridges. For another case, the systemization of forest in working leased areas and the supervision of actual tree felling were required. Along the Dhaleswari as far as Sairang, the Pakwa, Tut and Barak and portions of the Tuivai and Sonai valuable forest existed. To carry out the

second recommendation, Mr. Thomas recommended that a Deputy Ranger and Forester would be in charge of each river system to ensure the marking of trees before felling and supervision of felling. Also, boatmen and boats would be supplied for the forest staff. Accordingly, forest headquarters would be established at Aijal or Kolasib.³⁸ In 1915, Superintendent, Lushai Hills agreed with these recommendations.³⁹ But the Conservator of Forests strongly opposed the above recommendations and decisions and proposed 'coupes' up the navigable rivers with control by Divisional Forest Officer, Cachar only regardless of the boundary. Due to a lack of supervision in the Lushai Hills, as the Conservator of Forests notes, forests were over-exploited. He challenged the wisdom of the district boundary at the time and stated that he was against a Forest Officer being posted to Aijal instead of at Silchar.⁴⁰ Later on, the Superintendent, of Lushai Hills made out a strong case for a forest officer at Aijal as he would also have work and supervise the Lungleh Forests and emphasized that such officers would be posted as Assistant to the Superintendent, Lushai Hills. The Conservator of Forests recommended the posting of an Imperial Service Officer to watch the Lushai Manipur and North Chachar Boundary Forests. Due to this conflict, the Government decided that proposal was still incomplete and further investigation was necessary. This controversy ended with the appointment of Via Lushai as Deputy Ranger.⁴¹ After completing his training at Forest Training School at Kurseong Via Lushai joined as a forester on 1st October 1916. In the Northern sub-division of the district, rubber trees were planted. The following rubber trees were reported alive. Thus the Forestry Department promoted the plantation of commercially viable trees rubber-like teak in the south and sal and pine in the north.

A Lushai trader was permitted to tap from rubber trees from certain localities. As a royalty one mound rubber and 170 rupees were realized.⁴² In the year 1916-17, revenues were collected Rs.-anna-paisa 654-8-0 from grazing payments of animals⁴³ Forester Via Lushai observed whether the timber traders were obeying the order of the Superintendent of Lushai Hills regarding the restriction of bamboo cutting from the Lushai Hills Forest. He also observed two villages namely, Mangliana and Saichang. Before that Mr. J. Hezlett warned them. The Forest Department signed an agreement with the timber traders on 19th July 1917. Accordingly, they would fall trees away from the river and not within forty feet of the high flood level of the river. They would regularly pay the usual rate of royalty. They would not fall any tree unless 6 feet in girth.⁴⁴ On 27th March 1917, Vaia Forester started his inspection of the forest. He found that some men damaged some rubber trees at Thelret-Kawn while at Thinkthelh and Hlim-en villages, rubber

trees were tapped not properly following the rules. But at Bilkhawthlir village rubber trees were properly tapped. When he found a wild tree was damaged near Archhuang village, he reminded the chiefs that no rubber trees would be felled, burnt or tapped in Lushai Hills without getting permission as Rule 12 of Lushai Hills.⁴⁵ In the year 1919-20, rubber trees were planted in many villages and no taping was done. However, minor forest produces like Beas was exported in small quantities under permit. The Forest department made a forest settlement this year. There were seven hamlets (3 meaning hamlet) consisting 234 houses of which 200 houses were assessed house tax at Anna 2/- per house.⁴⁶ Like other parts of India, the forest department was always concerned about revenue collection. The tribal people who resisted the forest regulations, according to the state's view, were regarded as 'criminals'.

Restriction of *jhuming* in the Inner Line Reserve

Dietrich Brandis thought that friction was inevitable when on the one hand timbers were conserved and shifting cultivation was not controlled. According to him, for the smooth reproduction of trees, it was necessary to impose strict control over the shifting cultivation.⁴⁷ The forest Officials of Lushai Hills provided necessary instruction to the tribals for limiting the shifting cultivation. In the Inner Line Reserve, there existed four main villages, such as Saihum, Mauchar, Tinghmun and Sakordai. In 1923, W. L. Scotts allowed forty houses in Saihum village. In 1933, as the Hmar Chief Mangliana possessed forty-three houses he was instructed to maintain the limit. Also, he was given a punishment of a hundred days of labour.⁴⁸ The extension of boundary and *jhum* cultivation was not allowed without the permission of the Forest Department.⁴⁹ According to Major Kenedy's order of 20th January 1912, the Chief Zalala of Mauchar was restricted to fifty-eight houses in the bamboo jungles. In 1932, he started a Khawper of eleven houses in the Zote Ram without permission. He was also ordered to recall all houses by Pawltlak 1933-34. According to Major Kennedy's order of 19th January 1912, chief Kaihleia of Tinghmun village was allowed to remain in forty-five houses. Similar restrictions were imposed as in Mauchar village. On 13th October 1912, Colonel Loch allowed the chief Sawla of Sakordai village to thirty *jhum* in the bamboo *jhum* areas. The Palsang village was not situated in the reserve forest but on some occasions, it performed *jhuming* in reserved areas. Though the Kawthruilian village was outside the reserve forest the *ram* included part of the forest. In 1932, as A.G. McCall notes, 'I would not allow *jhuming* either while the policy of Government is to preserve trees on the high hills even when not near the navigable

rivers.'⁵⁰ Some of the villages, such as Vaitin, Khawpuar, Vairengte were not actually within the forest reserve but were also accustomed to *jhum*. According to Mr. Parry's order of 1908-09, thirty-nine houses were sanctioned for Bilkhawthlir village but in 1930, the number increased to sixty. In Kolasib, though both bamboo and tree *jhuming* were allowed government was anxious about whether tree *jhuming* had been stopping or not. *Jhuming* were also restricted in Dairep, near Boirabi and Boilum villages.⁵¹

In 1933, the Conservator of Forests, Assam instructed to avoid *jhuming* near areas of the river banks.⁵² N. N. Das, Extra Assistant Conservator of Forests, observed the condition of forests in the Karnaphuli River: 'As most of the forests met with are very irregular nature, varying from entire areas under *jhum* cultivation without any tree growth, old *jhums* overgrown with almost pure bamboos, partly worked out forests, heavily worked out forests and forests fairly well stocked with tree growth.' There were vast forest resources in the Tullenpui Valley in the Lushai Hills. Though the forests in the Tullenpui Valley and elsewhere were proposed for reservation, the Superintendent, I/C Forest, Lushai Hills was interested to exploit the resources. The *jhuming* was confined to the bamboo areas only and the forest officer did not mark the trees through the silviculture method before they fell by wood-cutters.⁵³ The Conservator of Forests, Assam instructed to abolish the levy imposed on transit pass fees.⁵⁴ Two different drift and Sunken Timber Mahals were created for the exploitation of timber. The first one was for timber exclusively belonging to the Lushai Hills, especially in the areas of Karnaphuli and its tributaries which were situated between the areas on the eastern side of the mouth of the Tullenpui River and the areas up to the mouth of the Baraharina river. The second was the common Mahal for Bengal and Assam. It comprised the Thengakhal, the Baraharina, the Tullenpui and the portion of the Karnaphuli from the mouth of Tullenpui and down to the mouth of the Baraharina River.⁵⁵ In 1935, at Aijal establishment, there had neither Deputy Ranger nor Forester as Via Lushai was transferred to Goalpara in 1934. Though Hmrtawnphunga Sailo had joined in his place he was also transferred to Cachar Division in 1935.⁵⁶

In 1947, sealed tenders were invited to work out timber and bamboo for five years.⁵⁷ Those wood traders who had not renewed their permit for the disposal of timber were requested to do so.⁵⁸ In 1950-51, there were six villages consisting of 403 houses in the Lushai Hills Inner Line Reserve of which 392 houses were assessed for house tax. After the partition of India, the forest department reported illegal felling of trees and the department earned more revenue than the previous years through regular checks of forest produce removed to Pakistan.⁵⁹

Conclusion

With the implementation of the colonial forest policy the traditional forest management practices were diminished. There were two types of traditional forests, i.e. sacred protected forest and *ramak* (reserve forest for their use) between the village (*khua*) and *jhum* field (*zo lo*). Beyond the *jhum* field, there was free land or the land belonged to another group. The sacred protected forest acted as a safeguard from their *jhum* fire and also from the enemy.⁶⁰ As the British authorities thought that progress towards civilization indicated a reduction of expenditure on garrisons different measures were undertaken for economic dependence. The British colonizers' idea of modernity is deeply rooted in the notion of utilitarian governance and consolidation of colonial power. The British administration tried to regulate the rubber trade which was under the control of the hill tribes. From the forest, the colonial state extracted a large amount of revenue. Along with it and as a result introduction of agriculture and horticulture and timber extraction, the diverse biological species of the region were devastated. As the *jhuming* activities were confined to the bamboo forest areas, the rat population increased during bamboo flowering and the risk of the devastation of crops increased.

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Notes

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