

Forest Villages in Assam

Continued Ghettoisation

Chandra Jyoti Sonowal

In spite of the centre's directive to regularise them as revenue villages, forest villages continue to be exploited by the forest department, depriving their inhabitants of basic welfare services.

THE symbiotic relationship between tribal societies and forest has been revealed in almost all the studies conducted among the tribal groups. The traditional tribal practice of utilising the forest resources was a two-way process. The forest dwellers created a culture where forests were treated as a renewable means of subsistence. Besides the forest dwellers, who are largely tribal [Fernandes 1988] and inevitably dependent on the forest for their livelihood, numerous other Indian tribes practising settled cultivation too depend on forest for food collection. Tribals utilise forest as a source of food, raw materials for housing, medicinal plants, fuel wood, fodder, economically viable minor forest products. Forest is also used for recreational purposes. One of the most prominent uses of forest land by the tribals is the practice of shifting cultivation. Fernandes (1990) informs at least 25 per cent of the tribals practise shifting cultivation in India. Shifting cultivation is usually complemented by extensive food collection from the forests. Moreover, there is a strong tie between the social system of the tribals and the forests. The tribal culture protects and regenerates the surrounding forests by means of their traditional socio-cultural processes like imposing taboo, planting certain varieties of plants, etc. Thus, the traditional practices of the tribal forest dwellers are constructive towards forest management. However, the administrators' view is somewhat different. The report of the National Commission on Agriculture (1976) holds the tribals responsible for destruction of forest.

Though India has a rich tradition of forest management, the present forest policies are, by and large, based on the command law of the state which was introduced by the British ignoring the customary rights of different forest dwelling communities and the corporate ownership over forest land [Roy Burman 1993]. The tribal interest was made subservient to the 'national' interest in pre-independent as well as post-independent government development policies.

FOREST VILLAGES

The creation of forest villages was a part of forest management in the early part of the present century. The forest department (FD) had to meet the required demand of raw materials for railway expansion and had to raise a revenue to support the British imperial government. Moreover, the FD had to make

itself a self-supporting department. For this, the exploitation of forest resources required a regular supply of labour. In the beginning this need was met through the introduction of 'taungiya' system as was earlier practised in Burma and Malaysia. This system involved the engagement of outside labourers and granting of cultivable rights over patches of forests cleared in coupes through clear felling for three to four years. As new plantations were taken up on these coupes the labourers were shifted to new clear felled coupes. The migrant labourers were treated as serfs by the government as they were forced to render free service for specific days earmarked in a year, though later they were provided homesteads and one hectare of land in lieu of their services to the FD. These settlements came to be known as 'forest villages'. Thus, 'forest villages' do not mean villages located in the forest, but colonies of coolies established by the FD for assured supply of labour [Sinha 1987]. According to the report of the committee on forestry programmes for alleviation of poverty, GOI (1984), there are 5,000 forest villages in India inhabited by two lakh scheduled tribe families, untouched by the planning process.

Initially, the residents of forest villages were permitted to construct temporary huts and also raise few food crops to supplement their earnings. The land thus utilised, legally continues to remain 'reserved' forest, and the villages were expected to be shifted when there was no forest work. There are also evidences from Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat [Prasad and Jahagirdar 1993] to show that some revenue villages were transferred to the FD to form forest villages. Such forest villages are technically known as 'revenue forest villages'. In a forest village the tribals do not have right to the land they cultivate. Importantly, even in 'revenue forest villages', people lose their rights over the lands the moment they are handed over to the FD for administration. In other words, all land of such villages is treated as government land.

With the enforcement of the constitution, 'begar' and other forms of forced labour stood prohibited and punishable in accordance with the law. But begar system continues in many pockets of the country (e.g., lower Assam). Likewise, though this system was declared unconstitutional in a government resolution circulated by the ministry of forest and environment in 1990, the forest villages still find a place in the new forest policy. Nevertheless, the ministry

of agriculture (letter no 11-39/83-FRY (Cons) dated March 23, 1984) advised the state to confer long-term heritable but inalienable right to land to tribals of the forest villages. But its implementation was uneven, and never done in the existing 'taungiyas'.

FOREST VILLAGES IN DIBRUGARH

In response to the recommendation of the ministry of agriculture in 1984, several forest villages were converted to revenue villages in the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Bihar. But the situation in Assam and Orissa remained unchanged.

A number of developmental programmes have been said to be introduced in forest villages on the suggestions of the committee of forestry programmes for alleviation of poverty (1984) and also the ministry of environment and forest, GOI (1990). But studies of several social scientists find no satisfactory evidence to corroborate this. Assam is a forest rich area with nearly 40 per cent of its geographical area covered with forest, of which 56 per cent is reserved forest (NEC Report, 1992). But no systematic study has so far been done on forest villages in Assam. Hence, this article addresses some basic problems in the forest villages in Dibrugarh district of Upper Assam.

Historically, the Dibrugarh region belonged to tribal communities like the Sonowal Kacharis and the Mishings, who disliked associating with the FD and rendering labour to them. The government adopted a strategic move by bringing in the flood-affected people most of whom were dwelling nearby. Almost in all cases the forest villages were established under the rehabilitation programme for the flood-affected people by the devastating earthquake in Assam in 1950. Basically, the allotted land were abandoned coupes after clear felling and extracting the valuable trees by the FD during the colonial period. The department needed labour to regenerate the forest and the rehabilitation programme served the department in two ways. The newly settled forest villagers worked on new plantations, and also cleared trees and shrubs for the FD.

The department laid down some terms and conditions for the forest villagers, by and large similar to the rules prevalent in other forest villages of the country. The department allotted 10 bighas of culturable land to each of the families and two to five bighas of land as homestead and garden plot (Table 1). Though most of the forest villages in Dibrugarh were established only after 1950, the FD followed the rules laid down by the colonial government. In the existing taungiyas the people were recruited from different areas or nearby villages to work plantations, forest protection, nursery, etc, and they were allotted three bighas of land per individual to raise crops of their own on strictly temporary basis. No legal rights were provided to them. People from nearby villages availed of this opportunity to supplement their crop output. But later, they settled

permanently, shifting their families from their respective parent villages to new villages, taungiyas which lacked even the status of a forest village. Thus, they are unable to avail of any development activity from the panchayat or the revenue department or the forest department. In course of time they cultivated land more than what was given by the FD but the latter does not have any record of the amount of encroached land and also of the number of families inhabiting the taungiyas.

Forced labour system: The situation in the forest villages was slightly different. After establishment of the forest villages the settlers had to render compulsory begar which was fixed as minimum five days per adult member per year. The forest officials had the power and authority to increase the minimum days of free labour according to their own whims (see Table 2). There are instances of giving incentives to the forest villagers for rendering free labour on the plea of allotting more land in return. Presently, the forest villagers have stopped rendering free labour to the forest department. But the system has not been abolished from the departmental procedures. The forest officers still maintain the book to monitor the free labour due by the forest villagers. It has been reported that the forest villagers stopped rendering begar to the FD by 1980 and in some places paid extra revenue for the same. But there is no official order

to stop the begar system as such. There is also evidence that the forest guards and the beat officers often cheated forest villagers by taking money and other materials from them for the assurance of exempting them from begar. The FD officials say that they have not taken up any new plantation scheme for last one decade and hence are not in need of labour from the forest villagers. But they still expect that their labour can be utilised in future plans.

Village administration: The administration of the forest villages is basically in the hand of the FD. At the village level there are village heads recruited by the FD. There are no norms set for the selection of the headman. Usually, a thrifty person having good relations with the forest officials is selected by the FD. In the past the headman was exempted from providing begar and rendering other physical labour and by rule he was entitled to get 25 bighas of land. But in practice no headman could get the same. He never gets any salary like the 'gaon burha' of the revenue villages under SDOs. The duty of the headman is to act as a middleman between the forest officials and the villagers. He has to inform the beat officers of the problems in the village. Any dispute that arises in the village has to be immediately referred to the beat officer and then to the range officer. The police cannot directly

intervene into the disputes in forest villages.

Education: The forest villages being basically under the jurisdiction of FD, the panchayat has no role in them. The onus of all the civic amenities therefore lies on the FD. But it is appalling that the FD hardly takes any note of this and the settlements have thus remained in extremely primitive state. This becomes apparent from the fact that there is not a single school in the 27 forest villages established by the FD, nor has it given grants for maintenance. Though, a lower primary school was established in Medela forest beat in Dihingmukh reserved forest, it was destroyed in due course of time due to the negligence of the FD. One of the major problems in establishing a school or any other public seminary is the refusal of the FD to allot land for these purposes. The forest villagers are unable to get land for school from the department. Thus, the primary schools which are running at present are on private lands. There are, however, instances of the forest villagers stealthily running schools in their settlements. Mention may be made of Telpani and Joriguri forest villages where the people have established secondary schools in their settlements with funds accrued from the government by falsely

TABLE 1: LAND ALLOTMENT PATTERN IN THE FOREST VILLAGES IN DIBRUGARH DISTRICT BY THE FOREST DEPARTMENT

Forest Range	Reserved Forest	Name of Villages	No of Families	Homestead Land	(in Bighas)		
					Cultivable Land	Total	
Dibrugarh	Dihingmukh	Barogharia Miri	12	24	120	144	
		Nepali forest	31	156	790	946	
		Maharani forest village	6	27	140	167	
		Paraliguri forest village	26	122	660	782	
		Modhupur Deori forest	55	275	803	1078	
		Thekera Pukhuri Miri	33	165	920	1085	
		Tinsukia forest village	28	130	800	930	
		Jokai	Jokai Kumar Gaon	31	61	303	364
		Jokai Kachari Gaon	20	40	200	240	
		36 gharia Kaibartta Gaon	36	70	358	428	
	27 gharia Kaibartta Gaon	28	54	278	332		
	9 gharia Kaibartta Gaon	9	18	90	108		
	Borbam Tangiya	20	-	-	-		
	Telpani	No 1 Telpani Bon Gaon	14	70	140	210	
	No 2 Telpani Bon Gaon	24	48	240	288		
	No 3 Telpani Bon Gaon	13	26	260	286		
	Moran	Namdang	Joriguri forest village	17	85	160	245
			Kuchbam forest village	18	90	180	270
			Bhogalipathar forest	22	110	220	330
			Majbam forest village	22	110	220	330
Borbil forest village			13	65	130	195	
Borhola forest village			9	45	90	135	
Pandhua forest village			16	80	160	240	
Natun Bharali forest			22	00	220	220	
Bharalibari Tangiya			15	-	-	-	
Hatigarh Nepali Tangiya			12	-	-	-	
Meshlow Bharali Tangiya	17	-	-	-			
Balijan Tangiya	34	-	-	-			
Jaipur	Panichukia	Panichukia forest village	23	115	230	345	
Total		29*	626	1,986	7,712	9,698	

Notes: * Telpani forest village was recorded as a single village in official record. But in the year 1981 this village was washed out by flood of the Burhidihing. The people were rehabilitated in three different adjacent places under forest department land and thus unofficially known as three different villages along with three different inhabitant communities.

** Land allotment excludes the Taungiyas which are explained.

TABLE 2: FREE LABOUR (BEGAR) DUE BY THE FOREST VILLAGERS TO THE FOREST DEPARTMENT AS RECORDED UP TO THE YEAR 1995

Village			
Bhogalipathar Forest Village under Namdang R/F		Jokai Kumar Gaon under Jokai R/F	
Household No as Recorded Officially	Balance Free Labour (in Days)	Household No as Recorded Officially	Balance Free Labour (in Days)
1	115	1	00
2	152	2	00
3	202	3	147
4	167	4	75
5	125	5	365
6	203	6	83
7	138	7	430
8	129	8	64
9	222	9	340
10	138	10	339
11	188	11	241
12	168	12	317
13	244	13	323
14	130	14	80
15	255	15	77
16	121	16	71
17	130	17	115
18	160	18	200
19	234	19	430
20	144	20	268
21	144	21	296
22	130	22	225
		23	115
		24	85
		25	165
		26	232
		27	75
		28	174
		29	208
		30	451
		31	80

indicating their locations on revenue lands.

Health-care facilities: The FD does not provide health care facilities to the forest villagers. There is only one health sub-centre in Medela forest beat established by the public health department, that too through irregular channels. The health workers, in most of the cases, cannot reach the forest villages as the FD declines to give permission to carry such services within the forest jurisdiction.

Welfare measures: As a rule the development projects which are meant for the forest villagers must be approved by the forest department. This is one of the reasons why the ITDP's projects are also excluding the tribal villages in the forest areas. More importantly, these villages are excluded from the jurisdiction of the gram panchayat, and as a sequel, from the national development plans. The FD installed a few pucca wells in several villages during their establishment. But since then there is hardly any evidence of granting hand pumps, maintenance of ponds and other basic necessities to the forest villagers. Long ago the FD did distribute a few items like handloom machines, be-hive boxes, and silk cocoons to a few families, but most of these proved useless due to their poor quality.

In recent years, however, some developmental work has been initiated. Roads were constructed under NREP scheme, soil conservation schemes were introduced, and earthen bunds and embankments were

constructed in a few villages by the FD.

On the other hand, people have no scope to increase their cultivable land so as to meet the needs of their growing population. As the ownership of land is vested in the hands of the FD, the people cannot mortgage it to get any loan from financial institutions and banks. Thus, opportunities offered by the government for economic development cannot be availed by the forest villagers. In Telpani forest village the economic condition of the villagers is pathetic as their cultivable lands were swept by the Burhidihing river in 1980 and the villagers have not been compensated by any alternative land. The revenue department takes no interest in the forest villages as they fall under the jurisdiction of the FD. In the Dihingmukh reserved forest where several forest villages are situated at the junction of three big rivers, namely, the Brahmaputra, the Burhidihing and the Sessa, there is no embankment since the FD refused permission to the flood control authorities for construction, arguing that this would violate the 1980 Forest Conservation Act. This has created a serious problem for the forest villagers as the flood waters directly enter their unprotected villages. As a result there is huge crop damage with their granaries remaining empty almost throughout the year.

The foregoing delineation is a part picture of the miserable situation of the forest villages in Assam which have gone completely unnoticed, not only by the social scientists

but also by the development workers and politicians. Even the disgruntled youth who have taken recourse to armed struggle in Assam have failed to provide any redressal. The situation is all the more intriguing as to how the system of forest village can persist in Assam when the centre long back took a decision to regularise the forest villages as revenue villages. When the nation is heading toward the 21st century with a hope of better life, the people in forest villages of Assam are still floundering in unimaginably pathetic conditions.

References

- Fernandes, W (1988): 'Shifting Cultivation, Deforestation and Technical Change' (seminar paper).
- (1990): 'Forest Policy: A Solution to Tribal Deprivation', *Indian Journal of Social Work*, January.
Prasad, R R and M P Jahagirdar (1993): *Tribal Situation in Forest Villages: Changing Subsistence Strategies and Adaptation*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi.
Roy Burman, B K (1993): 'Tribal Population: Interface of Historical Ecology and Political Economy' in M Miri (ed), *Continuity and Change in Tribal Society*, IIAS, Shimla.
Sinha, S P (1987): 'Forest Villages in Bihar: An Analysis of Their Present Status' in *Tribals and Forest*, (ed) Government of Bihar, Welfare Department, BTWRI, Ranchi, p 297.

Agricultural Economics from Oxford

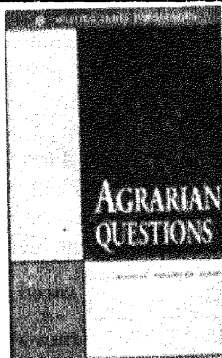
Agrarian Questions

Edited by Kaushik Basu

(Themes in Economics Series)

0 19 564192 2 1997 215 x 140 mm

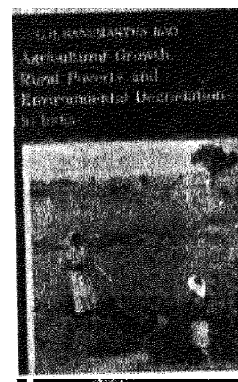
(Oxford India Paperbacks) 260 pp. Rs 95



Agricultural Growth, Rural Poverty and Environmental Degradation in India

C.H. Hanumantha Rao

0 19 563343 1 290 pp. Rs 340



Selected Writings

Raj Krishna

Edited by Vijay Krishna

0 19 563433 0 1997 498 pp. Rs 650



OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

DELHI 2/11 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002

MUMBAI Oxford House, Apollo Bunder, Bombay 400001 ♦ Lucknow ♦ Bangalore ♦ Pune

CALCUTTA 5 Lala Lajpat Rai Sarani, Calcutta 700020 ♦ Patna ♦ Hyderabad ♦ Guwahati

CHENNAI Oxford House, 219 Anna Salai, Madras 600006