

A Preliminary Study of the Pre-Colonial Forest of Manipur and Burma

Ningthoujam Teresarani Devi¹ Dr. Meesala Ramakrishna²

¹Research Scholar
Department of History
Manipur University
Imphal, Manipur,India
Email: nteresaranidevi@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor
Department of History
Manipur University
Imphal, Manipur,India
Email: mramakrishnahcu@gmail.com

Abstract:*The relationship between man and the environment is one of the most discussed topics. Indeed, the significance of the forests of Manipur and Burma is a known fact. Forests in both regions were managed by the local communities in their own traditional ways. However, the British began to criticize these traditional ways. Accordingly, the British introduced the “scientific management of forests” in 1856 under Brandis. Hence, in the present scenario where a constant focus has been placed on the environment and the encroachment of people on forest land, it seems pertinent to discuss the relationship between people and forests during the pre-colonial period. Given this context, the paper attempts a thorough investigation of the said topic by using both primary and secondary sources. The paper also provides a brief overview of the management of forests by the British. By doing so, this paper will contribute to the growth of environmental history.*

Keywords: British, Burma , Colonial Empire, Forest, Manipur, Scientific Management etc.

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Introduction

Manipur can be broadly divided into two parts - the valley and the hills. During the pre-colonial period, only a small portion of the valley area of Manipur was fit for human habitation and agricultural activities as its major area was covered with forests of different

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types. James Johnstone described the capital Imphal as a large mass of village looking like a forest from the neighboring heights.¹ Mesmerized by the beauty of the forest of Manipur, Jamestone writes, “I know nothing more lovely in the world, than some of the forest scenery of Manipur with its solemn stillness.”² In Manipur, the forest occupied an important position such that the principality that had access to or control over the forest in the hills was considered to have a strong government and to be more advantageous than those that did not have access to the forest.³

The forests of Burma contained rich supplies of timber. Its exploitation began right after the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1826 and with the ceding of Arakan, Tenasserim, Assam and Manipur to the British. However, Burma came entirely under British rule in 1886. Hence, all of Burma’s forests came under British control only after the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885-86.

The whole picture of Manipur and Burma began to change with the coming of the British. It is a known fact that the ultimate aim of the colonial empires is to enrich their empires by using their colonies as their resource base. No wonder the British followed the policy of natural resource exploitation and cash crop production in India. Hence, it would be no exaggeration to say that large scale exploitation of natural resources in India and Burma started with the coming of the British. Forests came to be exploited for commercial purposes. The British realized the potential of the forest of North East India and Burma in the context of the expanding demand for timber in the international market. Thus, the coming of the British brought these regions under the economic and political framework of colonialism and also placed them under rigid boundaries. In the context of this and the ever-increasing concern about the environment, it seems appropriate to look into the way the forests and the environment was perceived in the pre-colonial period.

Historiography

There has been substantial works in United States and France which can be classified under ‘environmental history’ but Environmental History as a distinct field appeared in America in 1970s. In France the works of the Annales school can be put under this category. The writings of environmental history in India followed the American pattern – by focusing on European colonization and capitalism and also on the individuals and organizations who have

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challenged colonization and capitalism. Ramachandra Guha's "The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas" is a pioneering work in this field. The foundation for environmental history in South Asia however was laid by the collaborative work of Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil "This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India". It is worth mentioning that in India, it was the chipko movement and the series of countrywide protests by peasants and tribals in the 1970s which drew the attention of historians towards the role of forests. However, in North East India, this discipline has not been ventured much. Even the foundational work of Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil "*The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalayas*" which has sketched the long-term ecological history of the subcontinent has only a single mention of Manipur with respect to non-payment of compensation in case of clashes in national parks or wildlife sanctuary.

Arupjyoti Saikia's "*Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826-2000*" have made an extensive study of the forests of Assam. Arupjyoti Saikia pointed out that the environmental concerns of South or South-East Asian countries need to be addressed differently from the European contexts as these countries cannot ignore the colonial phase.⁴ No wonder study of environmental history in India is tilted towards the American pattern rather than the Annales school.

Forest Resource

Both in Manipur and Burma, forests provided for all the day-to-day needs of the people. The forest products of Manipur included honey, wax, wood oil, ivory, Indian rubber, timber and silk. Valuable trees such as teak, sandalwood, agar and sal were also found in the forests of Manipur. James Johnstone, one of the Political Agents of Manipur mentioned the presence of fine timber along with several varieties of oak and chestnut and many others unknown in England such as Woo-ningthou, an excellent timber said to resist the ravages of white ants.⁵

Wood and bamboo were used for the construction of houses both in the valley and the hills of Manipur. With regard to the valley people, R. Brown described that the houses of the better sort were made of wood and bamboo while for the poorer sections the framework of their houses was made of bamboo with their walls usually made of reeds plastered over with mud and cow-dung.⁶ Bamboos were also used to construct bridges and make baskets. Boats were made out of the wood found in the forests of Manipur. Boat race has been practiced in Manipur since time immemorial. In fact, Hiroi Lamgang village, near Sugnu was said to be

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named after the Loi population who were mostly engaged in producing boats by profession.⁷ In addition to these forest products, several jungle roots and plants were used as food by the hill men. Firewood was also extracted by the hill men and supplied to the valley. During the pre-colonial period, elephants caught from the forests, especially the Jiri forest, were one of the main exports.⁸

Although Manipur was blessed with a variety of trees and forest products, N. Ibobi Singh in his study of the Manipur administration for the period 1709-1907 pointed out that the inaccessible forests were little used. The exploitation of forest wealth began with the introduction of Political Agency in Manipur.⁹ Pemberton too writes: "I know no spot in India, in which the products of the forests are more varied and magnificent; but their utility is entirely local, as the nature of the country precludes the possibility of transporting them to foreign markets with any prospect of advantage"¹⁰

The one product that stood out among all the forest products of Burma was its teak, the finest timber in the world. It was used for ship building and also for railway carriages. The best example that demonstrates the superior quality of Burmese teak is the "Cutty Sark", one of the fastest and last tea clippers that was built of teak from Burma. Teak was widely used by the kings of Burma in palace building. Different types of wood were used in building rest houses, monasteries and houses.¹¹ Other than the use of teak for construction, it was also planted for shade and as ornamentation. John Crawford mentioned the presence of such teak at two places- Shwetaonga and Kyok-taran.¹² Other than teak, varieties of trees that were used as timber were found in the forests of Burma. The other forest products of Burma were cotton and firewood. These articles were extracted from the forests of Burma and sold in the markets of the town.

Another significant forest product of major importance in Burma was the elephant. Elephants were considered royal property. They were used by the wives, concubines, brothers and sons of the king and sometimes by the dignitaries of the King's government. Killing an elephant was punishable with a heavy fine.¹³ Lac, the secretion of a small sap-sucking insect used for insulating purposes and cutch, an extract from the sha tree (*Acacia catechu*), used for dyeing and preserving sail cloth and fishing nets were also obtained from the forests.¹⁴

The other forest product that was used in multiple ways by the people was the bamboo. People made their floors, roofs and walls with bamboo. Bamboo was also used to make baskets and even to carry chickens to market. People carried water in it too.¹⁵ It can be

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pointed out here that both in Manipur and Burma, an abundant supply of bamboo was present. As a result, bamboo was used in almost all spheres of life starting from their everyday needs to making luxurious and decorative items.

Belief and Practices

The claims to the forests and wastelands of Burma were made by the de facto ruler at the time. Yet, these forests and wastelands could be hacked and burnt at will although restrictions were placed on the cutting and burning of certain species of trees. For instance, teak trees were declared royal property by the Konbaung dynasty. Royalties were also levied on the extraction of teak.¹⁶ Hence, we can trace a certain notion of conservation of forests from the time of the kings of Burma. In fact, forest management began in the Konbaung period.

All the communities of Manipur believed in nature worship in one way or another. For instance, the Meetei community of Manipur has dedicated patches of forestland to deities since time immemorial. Meetei worshipped 'Umanglai', the Sylvan deities annually through the 'Lai Haraoba' celebration or the pleasing of God in their dwelling groves. Likewise, the Burmans believed in the presence of spirits which they referred to as Nat. The spirit of the forest was referred to as Hmin-Nat. When a traveler or hunter comes across a big tree, he offers flowers and rice at the foot of the tree. This practice was carried out with the belief that the Nat that resided on this tree would protect him and in case there was no Nat on this tree, the Nat of the forest would appreciate his deed and protect him.¹⁷

There were taboos on cutting down some trees and plants on specific days. For instance, in Manipur, it was a taboo to cut down bamboos on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays. All trees were not to be felled on Fridays. It was also forbidden to pluck any fruits or leaves at night.¹⁸ Indeed, these taboos exist to the present day. A similar practice among the Naga community of Manipur was the observation of genna. During the observation of genna, activities such as hunting, fishing, tree and grass cutting were forbidden.¹⁹ Such practices in a way gave time for the regeneration of the plants and trees.

With the dearth of historical materials from the period, folklores play an important role in the reconstruction of the history of this period. For instance, Hijan Hirao depicts the lamentation of the fall of a young tree by the tree's parents after he had been marked to be felled for boat making. Hijan hirao is sung at the end of the Lai Haraoba festival of Manipur. According to Ksh. Premchandra, the incorporation of the Hijan Hirao in the Lai haraoba put forward the value of nature accorded by the people and also the Manipuri people's notion of

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linking human feelings to plants and animals.²⁰ The close affinity between the people and the environment can be seen from Jamestone's description of the presence of a well-planted garden with a few forest trees around every house - "Every house was in the centre of its own well-planted garden, and every garden contained a few forest trees."²¹

A practice that was condemned by the British but was widely practiced in both Manipur and Burma is shifting cultivation, often referred to as slash and burn cultivation. In Manipur, it is known as "pam lou". Under this system, the forest dwellers felled a part of the forest, burnt it and sowed crops over the ashes. After some time, as the nutrient content of the soil decreased, they moved to another area. The colonial authorities viewed this method as primitive and environmentally destructive. Till the present day, this practice is cited as the reason for the loss of forest cover. Yet, Monica Moirangthem argued that apart from the environmental factors that led the hill people to opt for shifting cultivation, there are social and cultural roots associated with it. For instance, social festivals were celebrated at the same time as the different jhum cultivation operations. She also argued that it was the shortening of the Jhum cycle and the pressure on land that came to affect the environment negatively.

The Beginning of the Intervention by the British

Manipur had remained aloof economically, partly because of its self-sufficiency in food production and partly because the rulers wanted to do so as they did not want to be subservient politically.²² Although a major portion of the area of Manipur was covered with forests, its forest resources remained commercially unexploited till the 19th century. It was after the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 that the British began to manage the forest resources of Manipur. However, it is noteworthy that Manipur neither had a separate Forest Department nor Forest Policy till 1931. Until the setting up of a proper or separate Forest Department, Manipur was placed under the contract of the Assam Forest Department for its management. Manipur was placed under the influence of DFO, Cachar Division. Moreover, commercial extraction of the forest of Manipur started after 1898 under the DFO, Cachar Forest Division.²³

Even though Burma came entirely under British rule in 1886, the Treaty of Yandaboo had ceded the Tenasserim province to the British in 1826. It was from the ceding of this province to the British that we can trace the intervention of the British in the forests of Burma. What actually drew the attention of the British towards these forests was the

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important place occupied by the Burmese teak timber on account of the decreasing supplies from Malabar and Western India.²⁴ In 1827, the British deployed Dr. Wallich to examine the forest resources of Tenasserim. Wallich reported that the teak of this province was much superior to the teak of other territories occupied by the East India Company.²⁵ Steps were also taken up by the British government to regulate the forests in Pegu after its annexation in 1852. However, the appointment of Dr. Brandis in 1856 as superintendent of Pegu Forest is generally regarded as the beginning of scientific management of forests. It is worth noting that Brandis was the first forester to be appointed by the British. The officers appointed before his arrival were not trained foresters. Brandis had been named the “Father of Indian Forestry”. Thus, Brandis’ arrival is considered the beginning of a new era in forestry in Burma. Later, Brandis went on to become the first Inspector General of the Indian Forest Department. What actually distinguished Brandis’ “scientific forestry” from the earlier period was active state intervention.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it is clear that forests have played an important role in Manipur and Burma. Both regions possessed rich natural resources, were blessed with a variety of forest products and had a self-sufficient economy. The people of these regions depended on nature for their livelihood. Each community in Manipur managed the forests in their own traditional ways. Likewise, the people of Burma had their own beliefs and customs. Their beliefs and practices clearly reflect the values and significance they put on nature and the forest. However, the colonial authorities began to critique these beliefs, customs and practices of the indigenous people based on the claim of the “White Man’s burden”. With this, the British introduced the scientific management of forests in 1856 under Brandis. The heavy dependence on forests can be clearly seen from the extent of commercial extraction carried out by the British for railway construction. In fact, Ramchandra Guha pointed out in his “The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India” that the early years of railway expansion witnessed a savage assault on the forests of India.²⁶ Thus, the British’ consideration of ‘scientific forestry’ as superior to indigenous methods is characteristic of their paternalistic nature, if not racist.²⁷

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