



Altered Terrain: Colonial Encroachment and Environmental Changes in Cachar, Assam

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Abstract— The beginning of colonial policy in the area was signaled by the British annexation of the Cachar district in southern Assam in 1832. The region became an alluring investment opportunity for Europeans after British rule over Cachar, especially after the accidental discovery of wild tea in 1855. Within this historical context, this study explores three major stages that characterize the evolution of nature. First, it examines the distribution and growth of tea plantations, examining their size and rate of expansion. The second aspect of the study examines the consequences of land concessions, which led to the initial loss of native forests. Finally, the study investigates the increased strain on forests caused by migrant workers' demands. It also highlights the crucial role that the Forest Department plays in protecting these natural habitats from the invasion of tea planters. This study aims to analyze the intricate relationship between colonialism and the altered landscape of Cachar, Assam, by means of a thorough investigation, shedding light on the environmental, economic, and societal aspects of this historical transformation.

Keywords— Cachar, Colonial policies, Forest Department, Land grants, Tea plantation

I. INTRODUCTION

During Lord William Bentinck's presidency, Cachar was quietly incorporated into the dominions of the East India Company, a subtle addition that went largely unnoticed. Following its liberation from Burmese rule and the reinstatement of its king in 1824, after the Badarpur treaty, Cachar, a small area on the northeastern border of Bengal, faced a significant turn of events. After the Badarpur treaty Cachar came under the indirect rule of British East India company. The demise of Govind Chandra in 1830 without any legitimate heirs, consequently resulted in the annexation of the plain area of Cachar in 1832 by Lord William Bentinck. This relatively overlooked region within the expansive empire gained commercial

significance through the application of British resources and initiative to its development [1].

1.1 Forest Transformations across Eras

Since the late nineteenth century, the forested regions of Assam have experienced a gradual depletion, primarily attributed to colonial endeavors focused on resource extraction. Notably, initiatives involving the extraction of tea, rubber, timber, coal, and other materials, including petroleum, have contributed to this decline [2]. The transformation accelerated when the notion of relocating wild tea trees from the forest to the uplands was entertained. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, company officials began envisioning organized rows of tea, signifying a substantial reorientation of Cachar's landscape. Since

1855, extensive areas have been cleared, driven by laws encouraging Europeans to acquire substantial land for tea cultivation and the virtually unrestrained appropriation of forest resources within and beyond the tea land concessions. The initiation of tea plantations further escalated clearances, driven by the belief that the cleared forest areas held optimal potential for tea production. Concurrently, the continuous influx of over a million laborers employed in these plantations from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s heightened activity in the adjacent forests, contributing to the gradual degradation of these wooded areas [3]. As we delve into the extent and repercussions of these forest clearances, several pertinent questions arise.

- How did prospective planters navigate the often-impenetrable expanse of wild vegetation in Cachar?
- What transformations occurred in the local population's dependence on natural resources due to the cultivation of tea, and how did these changes manifest in the immediate landscape?

1.2 Objectives of the study

- Assess the allocation and expansion of tea plantations in Cachar, focusing on the size and number of plantations.
- Explore the consequences of land grants in the region and their role in the depletion of the natural forest.
- Investigate the influence of immigrant laborers on the heightened pressure exerted on forests, analyzing how their demands contributed to changes in the natural landscape.
- Identify and analyze patterns in the transformation of the natural landscape across the three stages, aiming to discern trends and understand the interconnectedness of these processes.

The prevailing European worldview post-Enlightenment, which celebrated human intervention for imposing order on nature, provided insight into the emergence of meticulously controlled and modified tea plantations [4]. Historian Donald Worster, in analyzing eighteenth-century European intellectual discourse, elucidated how this perspective influenced colonization, imperial control of colonial resources, and similar imperial attitudes [5]. Lynn White's 1860 essay attributed the rise of the belief in human superiority over natural resources to the industrial revolution and prevalent religious ideas of the time, giving Europe a competitive edge [6].

Landscapes were viewed as symbolic reflections of specific political, cultural, or social virtues [7]. Thomas Keith observed that anthropocentrism pervaded the broader concept of environmental protection [8]. Consequently, a pattern of natural appropriation and control was evident throughout Britain's colonies in America, Africa, and India.

1.3 Methodology

The research adopts a historical approach to analyze the transformation of nature in the Cachar district of southern Assam during the colonial period. It employs a descriptive research design to document and analyze the allocation and expansion of tea plantations, consequences of land grants, and the impact of immigrant laborers on forests. Data collection for this study involves gathering primary sources such as historical records, official documents, government reports, and colonial archives, which detail land allocation, plantation establishment, and forest management policies. Additionally, secondary data comprising existing literature and research studies on colonialism, environmental history, and tea plantations in Cachar, Assam are reviewed to provide further insights.

II. DISCUSSION

2.1 Granting Wastelands: A Catalyst for Deforestation

In the mid-19th century, tea and coffee cultivation in Assam, Cachar, and Darjeeling not only provided a lucrative field for European business but also offered employment for local hill tribes. Discovered naturally in Cachar in 1855, tea cultivation attracted entrepreneurs like Mr. Williamson and Dr. Barry. In Cachar, tea cultivation areas primarily consisted of small hills rising abruptly from the plains. Dr. R. B. Davidson, experienced in managing tea gardens, described these areas as having a flat top with a surface tilt ranging from 5° to 40° or 50°. Tea was also cultivated on plateaus and flat tops north of the district, where slopes were often steep and stony. Initially covered by a dense tree forest, bamboo, and various grasses, the first step in establishing tea gardens involved clearing this space [9]. An imprecise government statement approximated around 200,000 acres of land suitable for tea growth in Cachar in 1859–1860 [10]. Mr. G. Williamson, the first petitioner, received a rent-free grant of 742 acres for sixteen years. By August 1862, under the Old Assam

Rules, a total of 181 grants covering approximately 388,561 acres had been issued; marking a significant portion of the total area granted under the Old Rules across the entire province [11]. The table presented below displayed the acreage of tea grants along with the names of the proprietors in the early months of 1858 [12].

Table 1.1: First Batch Land Allocations: Proprietor Names and Acreage Grants

Sl. No	Name of the Proprietor	Grant in Acres
1	Bengal Tea Company	10,510
2	Silchar Tea Company	13,102
3	Cachar Company	27,000
4.	Assam Company	7,464
5.	Equitable Tea Company	2,817
6.	Messrs. Borrodaile and Co.	9,549
7.	Mr. Foley	4,809
8.	Messrs. Wyse and Co.	3,708
9.	Messrs. Moran and Co.	3,031
10.	Messrs. Pogose and Thomas	1,500
11.	Mr. Francis Tydd	2,836
12.	Mr. R. Wright	500
13.	Mr. G: Williamson	742
14.	Mr. Parker	139
Total Grant of land in Acre.		87,707

Figure 1.1 illustrated the number of gardens and their corresponding land areas allocated to Europeans for tea plantation during the period from 1861 to 1928. The consistent allocations for tea cultivation were progressively augmented until 1928. Notably, these plantations were established by converting natural forests into agricultural land. The European landowners, recipients of government grants, did not fully exploit their allocated properties. By the year 1911, tea plantations accounted for 17% of the total cultivated land area [13].

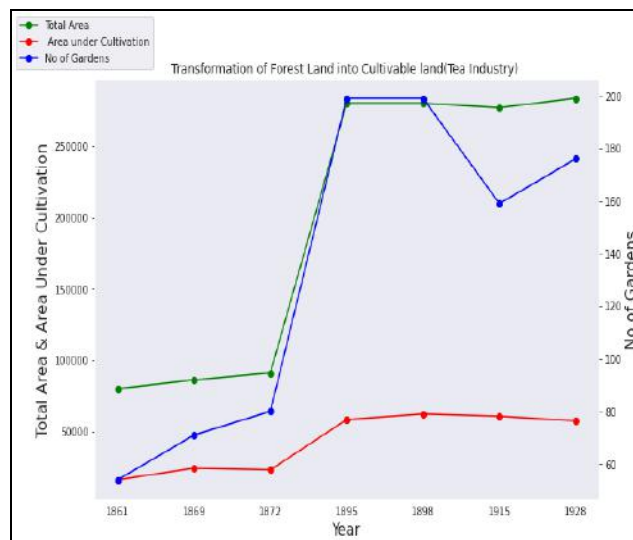


Fig 1.1: Comprehensive Data on Tea Plantation: Total Grant Area, Cultivated Land Area, and Number of Gardens [14].

2.2 Analyzing the Impact of Cultivated Area Proportion on Total Grants Allocation

In Figure 1.2, the illustration depicts the proportion of cultivated land relative to the total grants received during various periods. It is noteworthy that while the land was consistently cleared for plantation purposes, only a fraction of the total area was actually cultivated.

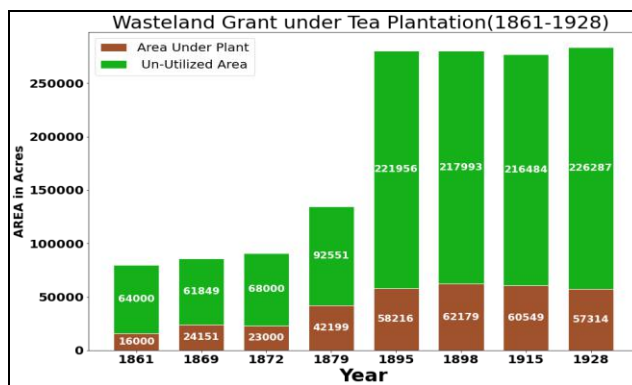


Fig 1.2: Cultivated Area Proportion in Relation to Total Grants (1861-1928) [15].

The Cachar tea plantations stand as symbolic manifestations of a foreign-dominated plantation economy that dictated land use patterns, heavily influenced by global markets in the industrialized world. Following the enactment of the East India Company's new charter in 1833, allowing foreigners to possess rural land in India, European tea plantations swiftly acquired vast tracts of hill property in Cachar. A significant

number of these plantations emerged through the conversion of natural forests on properties obtained from the British Indian government, some obtained from village commons, or acquired from private landowners. By 1872, tea planters held 91,000 acres in Cachar, with 23,000 acres already under cultivation. This acreage expanded to 283,601 acres by 1928, including 57,314 acres in active tea cultivation. In 1895, tea growers controlled 280,172 acres, of which 58,216 acres were devoted to tea cultivation. In the early years, the growth of the tea industry was gradual, and the indigenous populations showed reluctance to work for wages as long as they had ample uncultivated land. Consequently, labor had to be imported from outside the district, leading to a significant influx of labor, as evident from various census reports. In 1872, there were 80 active tea plantations yielding 5,000,000 pounds of tea. By 1895, the number increased to 199 estates, producing 20,169,133 pounds, and by 1928, there were 176 active farms yielding 26,731,490 pounds.

Table1.2: Population Dynamics over Time

Year	Population	Growth Rate	Year	Population	Growth Rate
1855 [16]	85,000	3.5%	1901	414781	1.28%
1865 [17]	152,000	7.88%	1911	499475	2.04%
1872	2,0,5027	4.9%	1921	529301	0.59%
1881	2,93,728	4.8%	1931	570531	0.78%
1891	367542	2.5%	1941	641181	1.235

(Source: Census Report (1881-1941))

2.3 Mapping Population Changes Throughout the period

Due to local farmers and tribal members rejecting the plantation's stringent standards, the workforce primarily consisted of non-local individuals. In instances where Bengalees were unavailable, hill labor was employed, with the initial influx of 400 laborers from Benares, Ghazipur, Chota Nagpur, and Behar arriving in Cachar in 1858–1859. Although not documented in the subsequent year's reports, the district had an estimated 5,000 laborers by 1860–1861, exhibiting a notably high

mortality rate. By this period, the local labor force had largely transitioned to small-scale landownership, resulting in a decline in their numbers. In addition to the 14,076 workers recorded in the returns, there were approximately 15,000 imported workers, whose contracts concluded by the end of 1868, bringing the total to around 30,000 [18].

Between January 1863 and January 1868, a total of 52,155 laborers were transported to Cachar, with 2,456 casualties during transit [19]. The unfortunate individuals who perished were exclusively low-caste and tribal workers subjected to deplorable working conditions upon arrival. In 1900, the population of the plain Cachar stood at 101,252, with 24% of the residents originating from outside the province [20]. By 1931, the tea garden laborer population in Cachar constituted between a third and a fourth of the entire population [21]. The population density in the Cachar plain showed a rising trend, starting at 99 persons per square kilometer in 1872 and progressing to 142 persons in 1881. Subsequently, it continued to climb, reaching 178 in 1891 and further escalating to 201 in 1901 [22]. As per Mr. Edgar's 1868 report [23], more than 15,000 laborers who opted to work in the district had firsthand experience in tea garden life and expressed a commitment to settle there. A considerable number of them arrived during childhood, maturing within the tea-house and plucking fields, evolving into devoted tea laborers. For these individuals, the significance of tea cultivation mirrors the centrality of rice cultivation for native Bengalees. This evolution has given rise to a skilled labor class heavily dependent on tea gardens for their livelihood, drawing a parallel to the reliance of Lancashire operatives on factories.

In 1901, the census identified 8,056 individuals in the village of Cachar who were born outside the district, leading to the expansion of settlements for these tea garden laborers. Despite being a relatively small district, Cachar accommodated numerous tea gardens, experiencing rapid population growth due to immigration from Sylhet and the settlement of time-expired coolies [24].

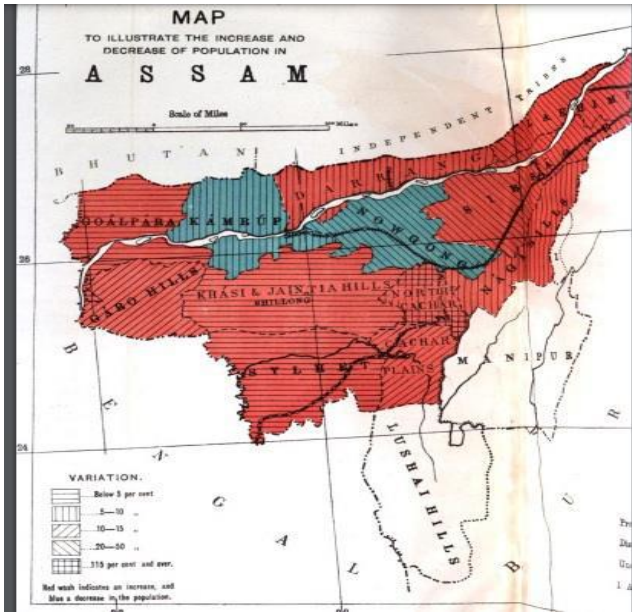


Fig 1.3: Demographic Shifts in Cachar: 1901 Statistics
(Source: Census of India, 1901, Vol-IV, Assam)

2.4 Deforestation of Reserved Forest

2.4.1 Reserved Forest of Cachar

In 1876–1877, a pivotal development in Assam's forest management occurred with the government's declaration of reserves or state forests in the Cachar district, in accordance with Section 2 of Act VII of 1865. These designated reserves, depicted in Figure 1.4, included the "Upper Jiri Reserve," the "Lower Jiri Reserve," the "Barak Reserve," the "Sonai Reserve," the "Katakhal Reserve," the "Dhaleswari Reserve," and the "Inner Line Reserve" [25]. This marked a significant step in shaping the management and conservation strategies for Assam's forests during that period.

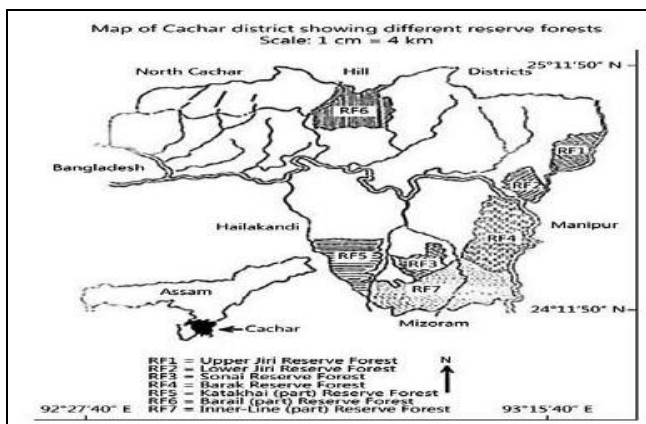


Fig 1.4: Spatial Layout: Locations of Cachar's Seven Reserve Forests [26]

For an extended period, tea planters wielded disproportionate financial and political influence in Assam, impeding significant opposition to the company's labor policies and thwarting the state forest department's bid for control over a substantial portion of the state's forests. The state's forest department struggled, as the strain on Assam's forest resources from plantation owners, foreign laborers, and immigrant farmers was formidable, rendering it one of the least successful in India [27].

2.4.2 Resettling Lives: Land Settlement for Time-Expired Laborers

Believing that relocating immigrant peasants to the hills could spur economic growth and address social and political concerns, Assam's Revenue Department consistently advocated for releasing additional land for farming. The Forest Department acknowledged the precedence of peasants' needs for land suitable for wet rice terracing when allocating land. This policy impacted the Cachar Forest, where the flourishing tea industry annually attracted a considerable number of coolies, necessitating the removal of large forest areas for housing. Over time, there was an increasing demand for land grants [28]. Figure 1.4 illustrates the land allocations intended for the settlement of laborers whose contract periods had expired.

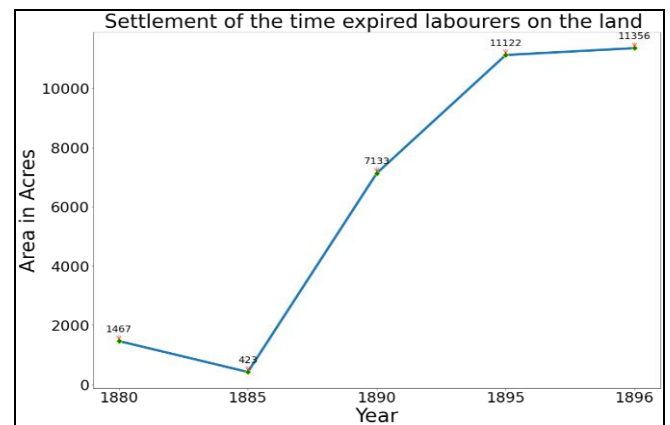


Fig 1.4: Land Settlement for Time-Expired Laborers [29]

In the rapidly expanding population of Cachar, the demand for land became significantly pronounced. To address this need, extensive initiatives were undertaken to open up portions of the district's forest reserves for cultivation. The collective interests of planters, foreign labor, and immigrant farmers exerted immense pressure on Cachar's forests, resulting in the

department responsible for their upkeep being notably weak compared to other regions in India. A Government of India Circular from the Department of Revenue and Agriculture in 1894 asserted that "the claims of cultivation outweigh those of forest preservation" and emphasized that, in cases where cultivable land is in high demand and can only be met by utilizing forest areas, such land should be readily relinquished. The Revenue Department of Assam consistently advocated for expanding cultivated land [30].

III. CONCLUSION

Tea plantations in Cachar significantly impacted the region's forests, extending into areas originally designated as public woods, village commons, or privately owned. The chosen terrain for tea cultivation mainly consisted of small hills with inclined sides ranging from 5° to 50°, presenting level surfaces at the top. These hills, known as tillahs, were often covered with dense jungle, including various vegetation like trees, bamboos, and grasses such as sunrema and bootan. In the north of the district, high plateaus were also utilized for tea production, featuring steep and stony sides with cultivated flat tops. The transformation involved clearing the jungle, typically conducted between November and February, followed by burning once the vegetation had dried. The natural landscapes of Cachar underwent significant alteration through the efforts of Europeans and immigrant laborers.

The tea industry gradually gained influence over neighboring forests, driven by the substantial demand for wood in constructing tea chests. Similar to colonial practices, the British, in expanding agriculture in India, diminished a historically more extensive forest cover than necessary for sustaining the human population. Even remote mountain and rainforest areas felt the impact of the global market economy, fueled by European legal systems and scientific progress that commodified forests. Evidently, tribal members and plantation laborers faced hardships, while plantation owners, traders, and landlords reaped benefits. While there may have been some advantages for peasants, these dynamics collectively contributed to the alternation of Cachar's natural forest landscape.

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