



# British Forest Policy and Its Impact on the Indigenous Communities in Northeast India

**Dipankar Mohan**

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Nowgong Girls' College

**Abstract:** The British forest policy in Northeast India, implemented during the colonial period, significantly impacted indigenous communities by disrupting their traditional livelihoods and altering their relationship with the land. The policy prioritized commercial exploitation of forest resources, leading to the restriction of indigenous practices such as shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering. This resulted in the erosion of customary rights, forced displacement, and marginalization of indigenous peoples. The introduction of reserved forests and the imposition of stringent regulations further alienated communities from their ancestral lands, contributing to social and economic dislocation, and fostering resistance movements against colonial authority. This article explores the historical context of British forest policies, their implementation, and the profound impacts they had on the indigenous communities of Northeast India.

**Keywords:** Forest Policy, Shifting cultivation, displacement, indigenous communities, forest resource

## 1. Introduction

The British colonial administration in India implemented several policies that reshaped the socio-economic and ecological landscapes of the country. Among these, the forest policies had profound and lasting effects, particularly on the indigenous communities of Northeast India. The region, known for its rich biodiversity and vast forested areas, was inhabited by various indigenous groups who had traditionally relied on the forests for their livelihoods. The British forest policy, driven by economic and strategic interests, altered the traditional relationship between these communities and the forests, leading to significant socio-economic and cultural changes.

## 2. Objectives:

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To highlight the British Forest policies in India
2. To assess the impact of British Forest Policies on indigenous communities in North East India

## 3. Methodology:

The approach of this study is analytical and historical in nature and sources used in preparing this article is based on secondary sources and these are collected from various books and articles.

#### 4. Historical Background: The Genesis of British Forest Policy

The British interest in India's forests grew in the early 19th century, spurred by the demand for timber to build ships, expand the railway network, and fuel other infrastructural projects. Initially, the colonial administration paid little attention to forest management. However, as the economic potential of the forests became evident, the British government began to formalize control over forest resources. The primary objectives of British forest policy in the region were:

- **Revenue Generation:** The commercialization of forest resources to maximize revenue for the colonial administration.
- **Resource Control:** Establishing state control over forests to regulate and optimize timber extraction.
- **Land Management:** Classifying and demarcating forest lands to prevent what the British perceived as destructive indigenous practices like shifting cultivation (jhum).

The first major legislative step was the Indian Forest Act of 1865. This Act enabled the colonial administration to declare any forest land as government property, effectively stripping local communities of their traditional rights. The Act was followed by the more comprehensive Indian Forest Act of 1878, which classified forests into three categories: reserved, protected, and village forests. Reserved forests, which were under strict government control, were intended primarily for commercial exploitation, with little regard for the needs and rights of local communities.

Northeast India, with its vast tracts of forests and diverse indigenous communities, became a focal point for British forest policy. The region's forests were seen as valuable sources of timber, particularly *teak* and *sal*, which were in high demand for construction and railways. The British administration, therefore, sought to bring these forests under state control.

One of the key pieces of legislation that affected Northeast India was the Assam Forest Regulation Act of 1891. This Act extended the provisions of the Indian Forest Act to the Assam region, allowing the government to declare large areas of forest as reserved or protected. This had a profound impact on the indigenous communities, particularly those engaged in shifting cultivation (jhum), hunting, and gathering.

The Assam Forest Regulation Act was instrumental in expanding reserved forests in the region. By the early 20th century, large tracts of forest in Assam had been brought under government control, leading to the displacement of indigenous communities and the curtailment of their traditional rights. The expansion of reserved forests also paved the way for the establishment of tea plantations, which further alienated the indigenous populations from their land.

#### 5. Impact on Indigenous Communities

The impact of British forest policies on indigenous communities in Northeast India was profound:

- **Loss of Traditional Rights:** Indigenous communities, who traditionally depended on forests for their livelihoods through practices such as shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering, found their access to forest lands severely restricted. The classification of large tracts of forest as reserved or protected forests meant that these communities could no longer freely use these lands.
- **Displacement and Alienation:** The creation of commercial plantations and the reservation of forest lands led to the displacement of indigenous communities from their ancestral territories. This displacement not only caused economic hardships but also led to the erosion of cultural and spiritual ties to the land.

- **Criminalization of Indigenous Practices:** Traditional practices like jhum cultivation were viewed by the British as harmful to forest conservation. These practices were criminalized, and indigenous people who continued them were often penalized, leading to a breakdown of traditional agricultural systems.
- **Introduction of Cash Crops:** The British encouraged the cultivation of cash crops such as tea and rubber, which required clearing large areas of forest. Indigenous communities were often forced to work on these plantations under exploitative conditions, further disrupting their traditional ways of life.

### Long-Term Consequences

The legacy of British forest policies in Northeast India continues to influence the region's socio-economic and environmental landscape. The centralization of forest management, initiated during the colonial period, persisted in the post-colonial era, often leading to conflicts over land rights and resource use between indigenous communities and the state. Additionally, the environmental degradation caused by the colonial exploitation of forests has had lasting effects, contributing to issues such as deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and climate change.

The marginalization of indigenous knowledge and practices during the colonial period also left a lasting impact. Despite the recognition of indigenous rights in modern legal frameworks, many communities in Northeast India continue to struggle for the recognition of their traditional land rights and the restoration of their access to forests.

### Environmental Consequences

The British forest policies also had significant environmental impacts:

- **Deforestation:** The large-scale extraction of timber and the establishment of plantations led to widespread deforestation in Northeast India. The loss of forest cover resulted in soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and changes in the local climate.
- **Alteration of Ecosystems:** The introduction of non-native species for commercial purposes altered the region's ecosystems, leading to a decline in the diversity of flora and fauna that were integral to the indigenous communities' way of life.

### Resistance and Resilience

Indigenous communities in Northeast India did not passively accept the imposition of British forest policies. Throughout the colonial period, there were numerous instances of resistance, ranging from non-compliance with forest laws to armed uprisings. The Khasi, Garo, and Naga communities, among others, actively resisted the encroachment on their lands and the restrictions placed on their traditional practices. However, these acts of resistance were often met with harsh repression by the colonial authorities, including the use of force, punitive taxes, and imprisonment.

### 6. Conclusion:

The British forest policy in Northeast India was a tool of colonial exploitation that had profound and lasting impacts on the region's indigenous communities. By prioritizing economic gain over the rights and livelihoods of local populations, the British administration disrupted traditional ways of life, leading to social, economic, and cultural dislocation. The legacy of these policies continues to shape the region's socio-political dynamics, with ongoing struggles for land rights, environmental justice, and cultural revival. Understanding this history is crucial for addressing the contemporary challenges faced by indigenous communities in Northeast India and for fostering a more equitable and sustainable future.

**References:**

1. Arnold, David. (1996) *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture, and European Expansion*. Oxford University Press.
2. Cederlöf, G. (1997). *Bonds Lost: Subordination, Conflict and Mobilisation in Rural South India*. Manohar Publishers.
3. Darlong, V. (2004). *Forest Policies in North-East India*. Journal of North East India Studies.
4. Gadgil, Madhav, and Ramachandra G. (1992) *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*. Oxford University Press.
5. Guha, R. (1983). *Forestry in British and Post-British India: A Historical Analysis*. Economic and Political Weekly.
6. Guha, Ramachandra. (1989) *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*. University of California Press.
7. Pathak, A. (1994). *Contested Domains: The State, Peasants and Forests in Contemporary India*. SAGE Publications.
8. Skaria, A. (1999). *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*. Oxford University Press.
9. Misra, Sanghamitra. (2013) *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India*. Routledge.