



Forest Conservation without Conservancy: A Study on the Cachar Reserve Forest and its Disforestation

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Abstract: *The British began forest conservation in Cachar in 1870 with the goal of protecting the forest from free felling. Some forests were designated as reserve forests as part of this procedure. The goal of this research is to look at how forest conservation was utilized by the British in colonial Cachar to help them manage the region's economy. It focuses on the reserve forest policy in the region, as well as agricultural expansion and plantation strategy. Reserve forest was the term given to a portion of forest land that was separated from the district's wasteland. The purpose of this paper is to trace the history of forest management prior to the implementation of reserve forest policy. It seeks to figure out why colonial forest administration was maintained to a bare minimum in Cachar, and how the growth of agriculture hampered forest protection in the region. The paper attempt to exemplify how forest area in Cachar is being converted to culturable land. The aim of this paper is to show how the Reserve Forest was introduced as one of the mechanisms to help tea planters in the region. In addition, the paper attempts to reveal the demographic changes which resulted to the disforestation of the District reserve forests.*

Keywords: *Cachar, Reserve Forests, Demography, Tea Labourer, Wasteland, Transformation, Disforestation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The preservation and management of a specific forest area with the purpose of preventing spoliation is commonly referred to as forest conservation. It does not, however, imply that natural resources are not used at all; rather, it reflects resource use that is both efficient and sustainable [1]. The Governor General of India, Lord Dalhousie, released the 'Charter of the Indian Forests,' which established a map of forest conservation throughout the country, giving credibility to the initiative after nearly fifty years. Sir Dietrich Brandis was appointed as the first Inspector General of Forests in 1864, when India established an organised Forest



Department. As part of the process, forest laws were enacted, forest resources were examined, and forest reserves were established.

India's first forest regulation, the Indian Forest Act of 1865, designated commercially valuable timber species and imposed restrictions on their public use. Trees that suited the requirements of railways were set aside. As a result, the first step toward colonial control of Indian lands was taken [2]. Certain factors influenced how the forest was managed in Cachar. Until 1868, the Bengal Forest Department was in charge of the forests, which included the Cachar and Sylhet, also known as Surma Valley. When Assam was legally separated from Bengal in 1874, the Surma Valley was declared one of the Chief Commissioner's domain's regions. [3]

Forest conservation in Assam was carried out under several pretexts. In the hills, shifting tribal cultivation and alleged environmental degradation were cited as compelling reasons for forest preservation, whereas in the plains, indiscriminate timber felling by indigenous timber traders, agriculturist intrusion over forests, and forest occupation by colonial enterprises such as the Revenue and Public Works Departments, among others, were cited as compelling reasons for forest preservation. The Forest Department in Cachar wanted to set aside forests as a deterrent to tea plantations being built under the British Government's Wasteland Grants. [4]. As common arguments for placing indigenous forest in the highlands under conservation plans, colonial rulers cited climate degradation caused by shifting agricultural and alleged indigenous mismanagement of natural resources [5]. These exterior demands to control indigenous forest bolstered colonial dominance over Cachar forests, as well as other districts of Assam. In Cachar, however, the application and implementation of colonial forest protection by demarcating a portion of the forest area as reserve forest which had a distinct significance. Forest preservation was crucial not just for the British Empire's economic demands, but also for the colonial state's political and strategic objectives. Because of the province's geographical and demographic variety, forest conservation was also used for strategic and political purposes. In 1878, the Cachar district of Assam and the Lushai Hills agreed to share 509 square kilometres of forest area. The people of both the plains and the hills were anticipated to be protected by such a strategy [6].

Study Area

This study is focused on the Cachar Reserve forest region. Cachar is a region in Assam that is surrounded by Manipur and Mizoram and contains the present-day districts of North Cachar, Cachar, and Hailakandi. A map of Cachar's several reserve forest regions is shown in Figure1.

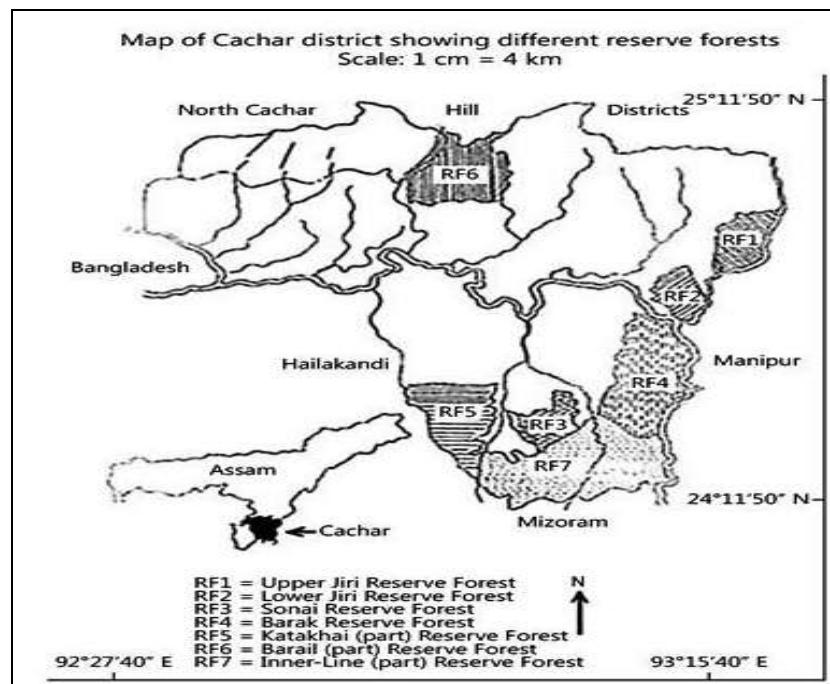


Fig1: Map showing location of the 7 reserve forests in Cachar district. [7]

Objective and Methodology

The key work for this paper is:

1. Conservation of forest by forest department
 - a) Formation of Reserve forest
 - b) To study the establishment of Forest policy by Colonial Government.
2. To study demographic changes due to Land Grants
3. To encounter the deforestation on Cachar Reserve Forest

Primary and secondary sources were used to study the forest management and evolution of the timber trade and forest policy in Cachar from 1832 to 1947 (Colonial period). Progress reports from the Forest Administration, Asiatic society journals, and Administrative Reports of Assam are among the primary sources. The study relies on secondary sources such as books and articles.

Literature Review

The author Bhattacharjee [8], in his book sheds some information on the expansion of tea in Cachar and the import of coolies from various regions of India. The author also [9] tries to figure out how British political administration in colonial Assam was aided by forest protection. It focuses on the Inner Line Forest Reserve, which is located in the Lushai Hills' border region and the province's Cachar district, and was formed primarily to safeguard Cachar's tea estates from Lushai incursions rather than for forest conservation. Gangopadhyay [10] in his book discusses about the waste land grants for tea plantation in Assam. Roy et al [11], in their study focuses on the economic importance of the tea industry in the development and raising of Cachar's revenue. Tucker [12] focused on how planters and peasants pushed pressure on Assam's forest in his article, where the author subject region is primarily the Brahmaputra valley.



Rajib Handique,[13] in his book, narrated a comprehensive account of the transformation of Assam's forests and ecology from early- nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, particularly elaborate only the Brahmaputra valley. In another article of the author [14] describes how tea plantations and colonial forestry changed the pre-colonial landscape of Assam beyond recognition.

Saikia [15] delineates how forest resources in Assam were mapped and integrated with merchant capitalism since the early nineteenth century. However, none of the authors have mapped or incorporated anything about the forest resources of Cachar.

Historical Background of The Reserve Forest in Colonial Cachar

The Bengal Forest Department included the Surma Valley in its reach until Assam's foresters formed a separate cadre in the early 1870s, when provincial forest departments were established throughout British India. [16]. According to information provided by the then district's Deputy Commissioner, all government forests in Cachar were open to the public for free wood and timber cutting, as well as to hill tribes for temporary cultivation involving forest clearance, but a tax was levied at the Sealtek ghat on forest produce exported from Cachar [17].

The Deputy Commissioner further stated that no attempt at forest conservation had been made before 1868, and that not only had there been no conservancy, but that enormous trees had been taken down, as well as indiscriminate killing of young trees. At the same time, the Deputy Commissioner emphasized the worth of the trees, stating that the Collector of Sylhet used them to build a fleet of seagoing ships a century ago[18].With the Gazette notification under Act VII. Of 1865, and the Bengal Forest Rules published in February, 1871; the following rules were introduced: -

(1) Reserve forests gazetted, demarcated, and managed by the Forest Department.

- Reserves within revenue limits, managed exclusively by the Forest Department under Act VII. of 1865, and the Forest Rules of 1871
- Reserves beyond revenue limits, managed under administrative arrangements by the Political Agent, Naga Hills, and the Forest Department conjointly.

(2) Open forests, gazetted and managed by the Forest Department under Act VII. of 1865, and the Forest Rules of 1871.

(3) Undefined forests, managed under administrative arrangements by the Deputy Commissioners [19]. The forests of Cachar, constituting formerly the Dacca forest division, were added to Assam at the time it was separated from Bengal [20].

The District Officers' control over all other unreserved forests in their charge, which had not been gazetted on the 1st of April, 1874, was very deficient at the time; no restrictions on forest clearance existed, and, although revenue was nominally collected on twenty-nine kinds of trees, there were no definite rules for District Officers to be guided by in the collection of forest revenue, and, as regards the conservation of those forests which had no revenue, there were no definite rules for District Officer. Forest establishments, on the other hand, were kept so weak because of the small receipts that only very slow progress in forest management was possible. Vast quantities of trees not included in the twenty-nine reserved kinds, as well as minor forest produce, were used, and all timber standing on land allotted for cultivation was made over free [21].



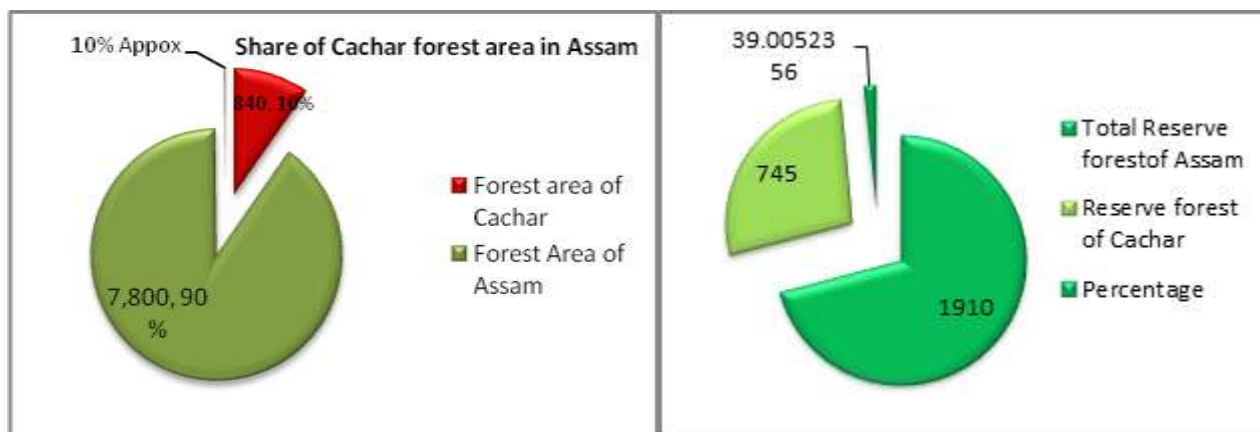
Because neither reserved nor open forests had been recognised or gazetted, and the collection of forest revenue at the Sealtek toll-station was sold annually to the highest bidder at a public auction, the situation in Cachar was even worse than in the Brahmaputra valley areas. The toll-collector or ghat farmer was supposed to collect information on forest produce exports; however, because the collector wanted to show as little as possible, the statements of quantities exported were judged inaccurate. While it is understandable that the purpose was to promote forest renewal, it is strange to believe that while efforts were made to keep lone trees from falling, nothing was done to prevent the horrible devastation of several square kilometres of forest each year due to jhuming. The first and most important purpose of forest conservation under the above circumstances was to identify all protected forest as early as possible. Due to a lack of competent officers and necessary subordinates, important forests were gazetted as open, which are now known as protected forests, and placed under special care of ordinary fiscal officials, with the purpose of excluding at least jhuming from them. Accordingly, the main goal of the then Deputy Conservator, was to choose all of the best sites to be permanently retained as woods by the end of 1878-79, and to permanently demarcate the majority of them. There were increases to the present area of forest selected for permanent care as Government reserved forest for many years to come, but due to revenue constraints, it was unlikely to exceed 3,000 square miles [23].

Moreover, rule 21 of wasteland grant clearly stated that "Reserves of grazing and forest land, of land for growth of firewood near towns and stations, building sites, parks, recreation grounds, and the like, and of land required for other special purposes, are not to be sold, under these rules, without the express sanction of the Government. A list of these lands is under preparation by the Board of Revenue, and when it has been approved by the Government it will be published in the Gazette [24]. The table1 showing reserve forest of Assam which amounted to be 1910 Sq.mile. Among the total Reserve forest in Assam, most of the reserve forest lies in Cachar district

Table1: Reserve forest of Assam in 1877.

District	Area in Sq. Mile	Area of Reserved forest in Sq.mile	Percentage on total area of district
Goalpara	4433	348	8
Kamrup	3631	52	0.7
Nowgaong	3415		
Darang	3413	260	7
Naga Hill	5300	454	8
Khasi hill	6157	50	0.8
Cachar	5000	745	15

Fig2: a) Share of Cachar forest area b) Showing percentage of reserve forest of



As indicated in figure 2 a), the Cachar forest contributes 840 square miles out of Assam's total forest area of 7800 square miles, or roughly 10%. [26]. The reserve forest covered 1910 square miles at the end of 1877, accounting approximately 4% of Assam's entire land area (47,041 square mile). Cachar forest, on the other hand, contributes 745 square miles out of the 1910 square miles of reserve forest, or about 39%, as shown in figure 2 b [27]. With the demarcation and identification from the total forest area of Assam, the following are the reserve forest of Cachar as shown in the table below. Figure 3 depicts the various reserve forest areas of Cachar in square mile, as shown in table 2, where the overall reserve forest area of Cachar is 745 square miles.

Table2: Different reserve forest along with their area of Cachar in 1877 [28]

Name	Situation and Character of soil	Name of valuable timber trees	Area	
			Sq. Mile	Acre
Upper Jiri	Situated at the foot of the North Cachar hills. The Northern portion of the forest is hilly. The soil is a fairly light deposit of clay and sand	Jarul, Nagesvar, kurta, Rata, Ping, Cham, Gundroi, Poma &c.	24	15360
Katakhal	East of Hailakandi valley. Central portion low and marshy, elsewhere hilly. Soil deep sandy loam.	Jarul, Nagesvar, kurta, Rata, Ping, Cham, Gundroi, Poma, Jhoki, Jhalna &c.	80	51200
Lower Jiri	On the eastern border of the district. Hilly and in places quite rocky, with very little flat land. Soil sandy and deep red clay	-----Do-----	14	8960
Barak	Do	Jarul, Nagesvar, kurta, Rata, Ping, Cham, Gundroi, Poma, &c Betula and other higher altitude trees	67	42880
Inner Line	South of Cachar and north of Lushai Hills. Only a small portion of this enormous forest has been explored.	Jarul, Nageswar, Kurta, Rata, Ping, Cham, Gundroi, Poma, Sundi Jhalna, Karal, Jam Jhoki & C	509	325760
Sonai			18	11520
Dhaleswari			33	21120
Total			745	476,800

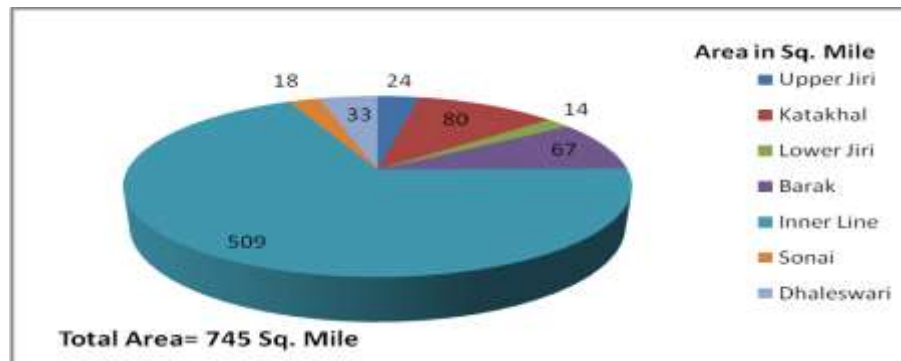


Fig3: Area of Reserve forest of Cachar in Square mile

Assam's dense forest belt including Cachar has been under siege since the early nineteenth century. By 1900 Assam's 55,156 square miles included 20,830 under government forest control, one of the highest percentages of any state in India [29].

Disforestation: Plantation, Immigrants And Expansion of Agriculture Plantation

As early as 1832, circulars were issued inviting settlers to Assam through respective collectors to populous districts of Bengal, viz., Dacca, Tipperah and Mymensing offering wastelands rent-free for a term of years after which, settlement would be made for the portion brought under cultivation.

As part of the colonial government's wasteland grants, the British government gave land for tea cultivation on extremely favourable terms, resulting in large-scale expropriation of forest land in Cachar. The British government offered land for tea planting on extremely favourable terms in order to encourage the growth and expansion of the tea business.

In the years 1856-1857, more than a dozen gardens were established, totalling over 3,000 acres of cultivation. Cachar had thirty-six tea gardens open in 1861, yielding 3,400 maunds of tea. During the year 1862, the thirty-six grants that had been started during the previous six seasons were greatly expanded, and thirty-five new grants were established. The labour that could be found in the District was insufficient to satisfy the current demands. The demand for imported labour created a class of men known as coolie contractors, who hired labourers in Calcutta and sent them up to work on the Cachar gardens, charging the planters a set amount for each coolie that left Calcutta. Of fact, these people's primary goals were to send up coolies for the least amount of money possible and to collect as much money as possible from the employers.

In 1865, 119 gardens are open to the public. The total area under tea plantation is approximately 27,787 acres. The number of foreign labourers working in Cachar's gardens is 19,906, with an additional 10,000 time-expired and local labourers [30]. By 1878, Cachar had given tea farmers 134750 acres of land. Planting was completed on 42199 acres, leaving 92551 acres unplanted [31].

Forest cover decreased in proportion as tea markets were strong enough to support the increase of plantation acreage. As the timber business grew, tea production also led to the commercialization of the remaining forests, either directly or indirectly. The acts of the Assam Forest Department, the planters' major European opponent for control of forest



resources [32], exemplify this trend. By the end of the year 1896, the total labour force in the district of Cachar was 122750. 20.8 % of the total Assam force [33].

Demography

Table3: Growth of population in Cachar

Year	Cachar Plains		Cachar Hills	
	Population	Percentage	Population	Percentage
1835	50,000			
1844	80,000			
1855	85,000			
1865	152,000			
1872	205,027		30,000	
1881	293,738	+43.3	20,120	
1891	367,542	+25.1	18,941	-5.8
1901	414,781	+12.9	40,812	+115.4
1911	499,475	+13.4		
1921	529,301	+6.4		
1931	570,531	+7.5		

Source: 1835[34], 1844[35] 1855, 1865[36], 1872-1931(Census Report)

Table 3 shows that the population of Cachar has been continuously increasing over time. It can be seen from the table that between 1835-1931, there was increased in population around fivefold. During colonial times, immigration continued, resulting in the expansion of tea plantation agriculture, which led in the removal of trees. The practise of importing labour for Cachar's tea estates continued until 1931. They settled in tea gardens and nearby vacant lands in the regions of Cachar since they did not return to their own villages.

According to the Forest Department, peasant aspirations for land that may be terraced for wet rice should usually take precedence in land allocation. The foresters would not formally disagree with the government's assessment from 1938, which claimed that without the assistance of immigrant settlers, indigenous peoples would be unable to utilise the province's vast wasteland resources in a timely manner [37][38]. There was a genuine demand for land in Cachar as the population grew rapidly. To meet this demand, many initiatives were made to free up a section of the forest reserves that cover so much of the district to cultivation.

Cachar's forests were under such strain from the conjoined interests of planters, imported labour, and immigrant farmers that the Forest Department was one of India's weakest. The Revenue Department of Assam has long argued that more land should be ploughed, as stated in the Government of India Circular of the Department of Revenue and Agriculture of 1894 where it was alleged that: "The claims of cultivation are stronger than the claims of forest preservation," and "wherever an effective demand for cultivable land exists, and can only be supplied from forest area, the land should ordinarily be relinquished without hesitation" [39].



Table4: Settlement of the time expired labourers on the land [40]

Year	Area in Acres.
1880	1467
1885	423
1890	7133
1895	11122
1896	11356

From the table 4. , it is being found that the Tea labourers turned 11,356 acres of forest land into established cultivation between 1880 to 1896.

Expansion of Agriculture

Surprisingly, British forest policy prioritised agriculture over forest resource protection. It was because the forests were considered as a hindrance to agriculture rather than a boon, and hence a hindrance to the Empire's expansion [41]. Agricultural expansion was extensively promoted by the colonial government as a means of supplementing land revenue. The trees were considered as a greater impediment to agriculture than anything else, and so to the empire's prosperity [42].

Disforestation

Assam's two succeeding chief commissioners, William Ward and Henry Cotton, highlighted concerns about agricultural expansion. Both commissioners agreed that the value of timber on wasteland concessions had been exorbitant, prohibiting peasants from acquiring land, and that the restricted tracts' areas may be adjusted in response to real needs from European tea plantations or common cultivators[43] .While considering a disforestation plan of 7641 acres in the Cachar district's Inner Line Reserve for extension of agriculture, Commissioner Cotton expressed the opinion that additional land needed to be opened for cultivation, noting that the operations carried out in direction were insufficient[44].

Whereas 6,080 acres in the Sonai reserve and 20,451 acres in the Dholeswari reserve have already been deforested. In addition, 4,236 acres of the Sonai reserve's deforested land were wrongly included in the reserve as a tea garden, and only 1,834 acres were genuinely made available for settlement.

Moreover, the original Dholeswari reserve deforestation recommendations only envisaged the exclusion of 9,188 acres of low land from the reserve, with the aim that the remaining half, which consists of timber-clad hills, should remain under Forest Department oversight. The Forest Department was initially opposed to deforestation in the reserve's lowlands because it would prevent access to timber in the hills.

Out of the whole area that has been deforested, only 1,824 acres in the Sonai reserve and 9,188 acres in the Dholeswari reserve are eligible for cultivation. According to the Deputy Commissioner, the Sonai reserve has already been settled on 1,615 acres. Before the demand for cultivable land can be met, the Chief Commissioner believes that a larger area of the district's forest should be excluded, and a more reasonable proportion formed between the settled area and the area set aside for tree growth.

According to Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, "the reserve was established at a time when crossing the Inner Line was restricted, and the entire area between that line and the district's southern boundary, totalling 325,760 acres, was declared a reserved forest without any



special inquiries, as cultivation was out of the question at the time." Despite its suitability for farming, the deforested area has been stripped of valuable timber due to uncontrolled logging, and over 30,000 people have already applied for settlement.

2. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Transformation of forest land to cultivable land

From the foregoing, it can be seen that after the acquisition of Cachar, agricultural expansion remained a major administrative priority for the British. As a result, between 1830 and 1900, forest area was converted to cultivable land. Figure 4 depicts the expansion of settled area with respect to revenue throughout time.

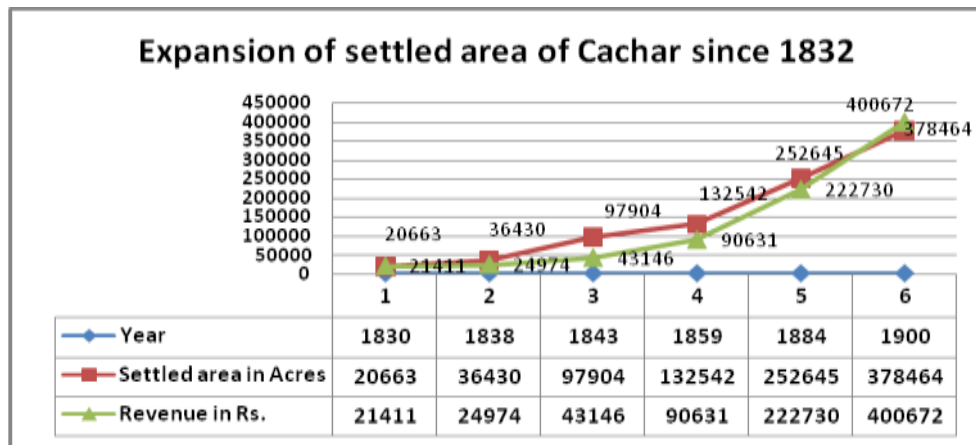


Fig 4: Increase of settled area as well rise of revenue in Cachar.

By 1900 acreage assessment was higher than earlier settlements, it was nearly identical to the one that had been in effect for more than 70 years. As the above fig 4 only shows territory that was under re-settlement at the time, the tremendous increase in populated area that has happened is hidden. Gifts that are tax-free, estates that are paid in fee simple, and leases that have not yet expired are all excluded. In 1830, the district's total settled area was 29,352 acres, but by 1902-03, it had increased to 607,466 acres [45].

Transformation of Reserve forest land to cultivable land

The British government has initiated forest conservation by introducing reserve forests, but the idea of conservation was not able to support the British administrator's idea of raising revenue. As a result, the concept of conservancy had to be abandoned, and many areas designated as reserve forests had to be deforested in order to accommodate immigrants and agricultural expansion. The fig 5 depicts the amount of cultivable land obtained by clearing the reserve forests.

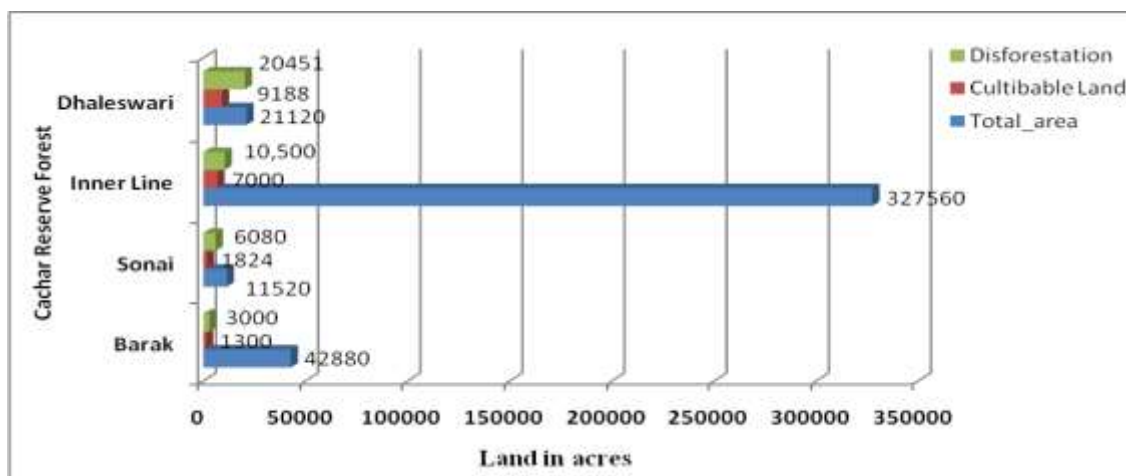


Fig5: Elucidating Cultivable land from Disforestation area of Reserve forest

The total plain area of Cachar in 1896-97 is 1,420,800 acres, and of this 454,292 acres, or nearly one-third, is included in forest reserves. In 1900, it was estimated that 84 percent of the land owned by ordinary villagers in Cachar was waste, while more than 70% of the land used for tea plantations was waste. Waste accounted up at least 51% of the district's population area. The Settlement Officer, on the other hand, believed that the vast majority of the waste land settled under ordinary lease was un-culturable and only suitable for grazing or fuel crop cultivation [46].The fig 6 below shows the distribution of land in percentage by different categories of land occupied accordingly.

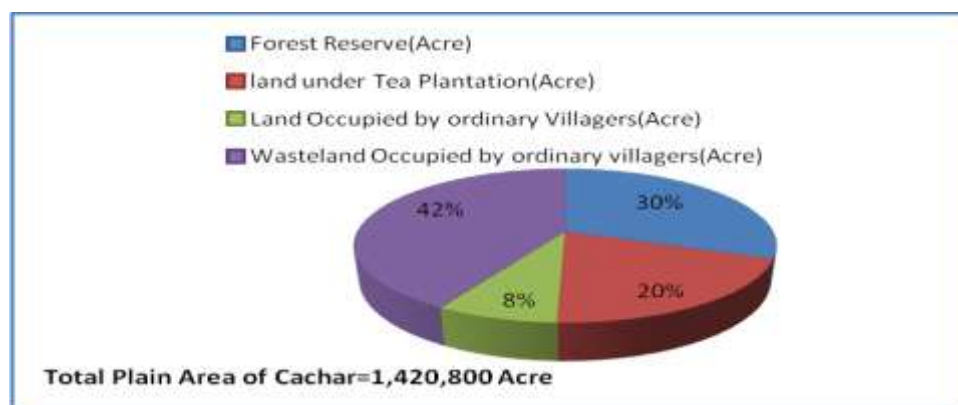


Fig6: Percentage Distribution of plain district of Cachar occupied in 1900[47] [48]

It is being found that out of the total area mentioned above 20% of the forest area were transformed into cultivable land (tea plantation), where as 42% of the total area were uncultivable.

3. CONCLUSION

The British formed the Forest Department with the primary goal of forest conservation in mind, and hence there was a need to develop forest policy for forest conservation. The colonial government's conservation actions in Cachar were meant to meet commercial



interests rather than protect forest resources. Because the foundation of British policy was to maximise revenue, land grants were increased as a result of this approach, and as a result, there was a major demographic shift due to immigration from other parts of the country. Following the expiration of the immigrants' contract, they were allowed to settle down by disforesting the reserve forest, which was effectively against Forest Department regulations. The colonial administrator was always of the opinion that revenue maximisation could be achieved without regard for the forest.

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