

a complex industrial set-up, such small ventures slowly dried up; by 1970, there were only 17 of them.

In the following decades, with the new initiative, lands in the foothills or other forested landscapes, often owned by the government or privately owned tiny pieces of land, usually assigned for producing non-paddy crops, became part of tea cultivation. Most of these clearances of forested lands were confined to the south banks of Upper Assam. A majority of the people here were familiar with the forests, plants and the agricultural world, but they had very little idea about highly industrialized tea cultivation. This did not deter them, and within a short period, they gained the required expertise. By the turn of the century, an estimated 38,000 such estates were spread over an almost equivalent number of hectares of land. They were 10 times more productive than the plantations of 40 years earlier.⁴⁹ Leaves plucked from these plantations were processed in established factories owned by larger estates or those outside the tea-plantation estates. The latter were known as bought leaf factories—numbering over 100, they produced about 38 million kg of tea in 2000, an estimated 8 per cent of Assam's total production.⁵⁰

The quest for increased tea cultivation spread into Assam's loosely governed border areas, primarily covered with forests that provided vital natural resources to the aspiring tribal population. This further intensified contested claims over forested landscapes lying between Assam and Nagaland. The tea cultivators, drawing on examples from their political environment, formed an umbrella organization in 1987, a year after the AGP came to power in the state.⁵¹ Intellectual and technological support came from the Assam Agricultural University, which had earlier played a leading role in developing high-yield variety of seeds suitable for Assam's environment. By 1987, an estimated 44 per cent of the plantations' tea bushes were over 50 years old, after which they became less productive.⁵² Coupled with this came the approval, in 1989, from the Tea Board of India, the highest decision-making body on matters of the tea industry, to provide institutional support to non-plantation tea cultivation.⁵³ More political and bureaucratic support soon followed, including incentives for public lenders to provide finance

and the facilitation of land acquisition for such enterprises.⁵⁴ The rapid proliferation of tea cultivation away from the plantation model was mainly owing to the new political and economic environment in which a strong sense of Assamese nationalism prevailed.

By 1993, approximately 92 per cent of the lands under small-scale tea cultivation were government-owned, and the rest comprised tiny plots of private agricultural land with varying degrees of lease rights.⁵⁵ In 2002–03, their average size was 0.81 hectares.⁵⁶ The economic space for this sudden expansion of tea production by petty producers was generally enabled by stagnating exports and profits in the global tea market as well as developments in the Indian market. The rising costs of production compelled some of the more prominent companies like the Tatas and the Hindustan Unilever Limited to slowly withdraw from plantations and diversify into the packaging and retailing of tea.⁵⁷ On the other hand, others like McLeod Russel increased their capacities. But the clash between the small tea growers, as they came to be called in official parlance, and the planters witnessed an epic rise, which would affect the growth of Assam's tea industry.

~

As political and economic turmoil engulfed Assam in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the state's flagship mega mammal, the great one-horned rhinoceros, became intertwined with the region's political and cultural agenda. The declaration of Kaziranga as a Reserved Forest in 1905 had been a major step in the protection of this species. The Assam Rhinoceros Preservation Act of 1954 was based on a similar Act passed in the Bengal province before Independence in 1932. Battling many challenges, Kaziranga National Park (KNP) became an exemplary instance of nature conservation in modern India. Once found across the Indus and the Gangetic floodplains, the rhinoceros, along with the lions in the Gir National Park, provided positive stories of the survival of near-extinct animals, largely due to state patronage. By the early 1970s, the rhinoceros was deeply embedded in Assam's sense of regional pride. Apart from a small number in West Bengal and

in Nepal, this species of rhinoceros was now unique to Assam. Behind the success story of rhinoceros conservation, several forces had been at play over the decades, including Assam's ecological volatilities, regional cultural aspirations, modern conservation science, state support and many shades of electoral politics.⁵⁸ The fluvial environment of the Brahmaputra and the expansive grasslands of the valley created a conducive environment; the collective leadership of early foresters, politicians and conservationists created the institutional framework; and an empathetic agrarian social milieu was equally at work to help the park become a success. KNP was not the lone sanctuary, but it had the highest rhino population.

The last two decades of the century saw the rise of a new kind of environmentalism around the rhinoceros, with the decision to translocate some rhinos from Assam to another suitable habitat in the country to safeguard the future of the species. In March 1984, as Assam's thick cloud of political disquiet slowly began to wane, five rhinos (aged between four and 23 years) from its forests were flown to the Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh.⁵⁹ The new habitat was not much different from their original home, being the swampy and often flooded terai grasslands of Uttar Pradesh. Flown in a large Russian cargo aeroplane, accompanied by veterinarians and wildlife conservationists, this extraordinary journey, now largely forgotten, deserves a special place in Assam's political and environmental history.

The idea of translocating a few one-horned rhinoceroses from the jungles of Assam to a national park in another state had taken shape in the late 1970s. India, Bhutan and Nepal were the exclusive homes for this species of rhinoceros. Estimated to number around 1500 in total, two-thirds of them were to be found in KNP. By the late 1970s, the years of political turbulence in Assam had caused worries about the animal's future. The Wild Life (Protection) Act of 1972 gave the animal full protection, and an international convention prohibited trade in rhinoceros parts. Legal safeguards and state surveillance, however, could not save the animal from being poached as the state experienced political upheaval. According to official accounts, more than 90 rhinos were killed in 1983,⁶⁰ which led an angry Indira Gandhi to write to

Saikia, saying she was 'distressed' to learn of this increased poaching and asking him to 'take stern and immediate steps'.⁶¹ Samar Singh, a senior Indian official in the Ministry of Environment, described the situation as 'alarming' in early 1984.⁶²

Earlier, in 1979, a team of international conservationists under the banner of the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Survival Service Commission recommended that given the increasing chances of poaching, epidemic outbreak, shrinkage of living space and food shortage due to the fast spread of exotic invasive species such as water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) and climbing hempweed (*Mikania scandens*), efforts must be made to find an alternative home for the rhinoceros elsewhere in the country.⁶³ Action was taken on this quickly. In November 1979, the Indian Board for Wildlife agreed to the proposal and identified several such places within the country. R. Schenkel, a global name in rhinoceros conservation, concluded that Uttar Pradesh's Dudhwa was the 'most suitable' for such an exercise. In 1980, preliminary field trials were conducted. Rhinos were tranquilized and shifted to other similar places within Assam.

But Assam was not a cheerful donor. Public opposition to this translocation was clearly visible. Many feared that it was an attempt to deprive Assam of its exclusive position as the home for this animal; they dismissed any ecological arguments for it. When the decision was announced, firebrand Assamese student leaders threatened to 'sabotage the trucks carrying the rhinos', and a senior state forest official admitted that he and his colleagues 'were not happy about the translocation'.⁶⁴ In 1982, AASU wrote to Indira Gandhi protesting the idea of translocation. A year earlier, when the Parliament had proposed to amend the Wild Life (Protection) Act of 1972 to make room for translocation, a lawmaker from Assam had protested.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, support came from the Assam government, for which the Union government lauded Assam's chief minister, Hiteswar Saikia, for his 'wise and farsighted approach in a matter of national importance'.⁶⁶

The Government of India finally airlifted the rhinos, but by this time, Assam's forested landscapes had undergone a significant

transformation. From three game reserves in the 1910s, which were established with the intention to give partial (only hunting of female rhinos was prohibited) protection to the one-horned rhinoceros, Assam came to have several national parks and wildlife sanctuaries by the 1980s—amounting to 5 per cent of her total land. This was possible due to state patronage as well as the increasing role played by conservationists. Some of these flagship national parks came to be embedded in the complex social and cultural history of Assam and produced contested political histories. Manas National Park, situated across the floodplains and the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in Lower Assam, experienced a tumultuous political and ecological period in the late 1980s.⁶⁷ Distinct from the Kaziranga National Park in its ecological features, Manas had been formally declared a game sanctuary in 1907, being home to wild buffalo, rhinoceros, bison, tiger, elephant, golden langur, swamp deer, hog deer and barking deer, among other mammals, birds and reptiles.⁶⁸ In the late decades of the century, the area got enmeshed with the Bodo political movement.

In 1989, of the 64 million hectares of India's total forest cover, Assam's share was 4 per cent, with 33 per cent of her total geographical area—a fall from 38 per cent in 1971—under forest cover, which did not include the lush tea plantations.⁶⁹ Nine other states were ahead of Assam in terms of their share of India's forest cover, but Assam had the highest density of cover among them. As political turbulence engulfed the state, many saw an opportunity to acquire little patches of agricultural land from the government-owned forest lands. Such reclamation, part of peasant communities' relentless quest for cultivatable lands, resulted in a loss of approximately 1500 square kilometres of Assam's forested lands between 1989 and 1993.⁷⁰

Was there any connection between ethnic mobilization and settlements in forests? Soon after the AGP government came into power in 1986, government-owned forest lands re-emerged as one of the sites of contestation. The Assam government briefly pursued a programme of evicting settlers from such forests; many of the evictees belonged to Bodo tribes.⁷¹ Reclamation of government-owned forest lands for cultivation was viewed by peasant communities as a

symbol of the fulfilment of a promise of a larger political dream.⁷² The AGP government's failure to appreciate the ecological and cultural complexities involved in the process of forestland reclamation and settlements therein played a key role in shaping the political actions of Assam's ethnic tribal communities from the late 1980s. On the other hand, the decline of timberlands helped in awakening public awareness of the need for protection of the environment. Local campaigns against illegal timber logging became widespread.⁷³

~

The poor sections of Assam's peasants were constantly in search of new places to settle in as their lands fell victim to moneylenders, river erosion or silting. Unlike the early decades of the twentieth century, when most peasants preferred to annually lease the land they tilled, from the mid-'50s they began to favour permanent settlement (*myadi patta*). During 1960–61, an estimated 55 per cent of peasant-owned land was in the category of permanent settlement.⁷⁴ The share of land under annual lease continued to decline over the next few decades, and available land was scarce. This was an important indication of the crisis in available land for the peasant to cultivate. Each year, only a few thousand acres—during 1960–61, an estimated 45,000 acres—were freshly cleared for cultivation.⁷⁵ Between 1960–61 and 1997–98, the pace of increase in the net area sown in the plains of Assam had slowed down from 40.95 per cent to 32.88 per cent.⁷⁶ Much of the remaining land was not suitable for cultivation, either being swampland or government-designated forested land or simply land beyond the access of the peasants.

We have seen that the benefits of India's Green Revolution largely escaped Assam. The net sown area remained stagnant till the 1980s,⁷⁷ but a large section of peasants moved to double cropping. The average landholding size dropped from an estimated 3.6 acres in 1970–71 to 3.4 acres in 1976–77.⁷⁸ Sharecropping still remained an integral part of the agrarian landscape. An estimate made in 1970–71 indicated that approximately 16 per cent area, i.e., one-fifth of the total net

transformation. From three game reserves in the 1910s, which were established with the intention to give partial (only hunting of female rhinos was prohibited) protection to the one-horned rhinoceros, Assam came to have several national parks and wildlife sanctuaries by the 1980s—amounting to 5 per cent of her total land. This was possible due to state patronage as well as the increasing role played by conservationists. Some of these flagship national parks came to be embedded in the complex social and cultural history of Assam and produced contested political histories. Manas National Park, situated across the floodplains and the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in Lower Assam, experienced a tumultuous political and ecological period in the late 1980s.⁶⁷ Distinct from the Kaziranga National Park in its ecological features, Manas had been formally declared a game sanctuary in 1907, being home to wild buffalo, rhinoceros, bison, tiger, elephant, golden langur, swamp deer, hog deer and barking deer, among other mammals, birds and reptiles.⁶⁸ In the late decades of the century, the area got enmeshed with the Bodo political movement.

In 1989, of the 64 million hectares of India's total forest cover, Assam's share was 4 per cent, with 33 per cent of her total geographical area—a fall from 38 per cent in 1971—under forest cover, which did not include the lush tea plantations.⁶⁹ Nine other states were ahead of Assam in terms of their share of India's forest cover, but Assam had the highest density of cover among them. As political turbulence engulfed the state, many saw an opportunity to acquire little patches of agricultural land from the government-owned forest lands. Such reclamation, part of peasant communities' relentless quest for cultivatable lands, resulted in a loss of approximately 1500 square kilometres of Assam's forested lands between 1989 and 1993.⁷⁰

Was there any connection between ethnic mobilization and settlements in forests? Soon after the AGP government came into power in 1986, government-owned forest lands re-emerged as one of the sites of contestation. The Assam government briefly pursued a programme of evicting settlers from such forests; many of the evictees belonged to Bodo tribes.⁷¹ Reclamation of government-owned forest lands for cultivation was viewed by peasant communities as

symbol of the fulfilment of a promise of a larger political dream.⁷² The AGP government's failure to appreciate the ecological and cultural complexities involved in the process of forestland reclamation and settlements therein played a key role in shaping the political actions of Assam's ethnic tribal communities from the late 1980s. On the other hand, the decline of timberlands helped in awakening public awareness of the need for protection of the environment. Local campaigns against illegal timber logging became widespread.⁷³

The poor sections of Assam's peasants were constantly in search of new places to settle in as their lands fell victim to moneylenders, river erosion or silting. Unlike the early decades of the twentieth century, when most peasants preferred to annually lease the land they tilled, from the mid-'50s they began to favour permanent settlement (*myadi patta*). During 1960–61, an estimated 55 per cent of peasant-owned land was in the category of permanent settlement.⁷⁴ The share of land under annual lease continued to decline over the next few decades, and available land was scarce. This was an important indication of the crisis in available land for the peasant to cultivate. Each year, only a few thousand acres—during 1960–61, an estimated 45,000 acres—were freshly cleared for cultivation.⁷⁵ Between 1960–61 and 1997–98, the pace of increase in the net area sown in the plains of Assam had slowed down from 40.95 per cent to 32.88 per cent.⁷⁶ Much of the remaining land was not suitable for cultivation, either being swampland or government-designated forested land or simply land beyond the access of the peasants.

We have seen that the benefits of India's Green Revolution largely escaped Assam. The net sown area remained stagnant till the 1980s,⁷⁷ but a large section of peasants moved to double cropping. The average landholding size dropped from an estimated 3.6 acres in 1970–71 to 3.4 acres in 1976–77.⁷⁸ Sharecropping still remained an integral part of the agrarian landscape. An estimate made in 1970–71 indicated that approximately 16 per cent area, i.e., one-fifth of the total net

THE QUEST FOR
**MODERN
ASSAM**

— *A History* —

1942-2000

ARUPJYOTI SAIKIA

SUPPORTED BY



An imprint of Penguin Random House