

CHAPTER – VII

REACTION OF THE INHABITANTS OF FOREST IN DARJEELING AND JALPAIGURI

(The Policy of Forest Reservation of the British in India disturbed the age-old system of the village communities either in hills or in plains. Before that, they had control over the means of production over the resources needed to reproduce itself. But the forest reservation and management struck at the very root of traditional social and economic organizations of the forest-dwellers. The forest management operated on radically different principles from the customary use of forests by surrounding villages.) This underlying conflict manifested itself in a variety of forms in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, except forest movements and open revolt as are found in other parts of India. The root cause of this was 'the struggle for existence between the villagers and the Forest Department; the former to live, the latter to show a surplus and what the department looks on as efficient forest management.'²

The major aim of apparently unlawful activities of the forest-inhabitants was to undo the restrictions on customary model of the use imposed by so-called scientific forestry. Initially, they could not accept that their ancient rights in relation to the forest were to be set aside with one scratch of the pen. The takeover of the Darjeeling hill forests and Terai from the Raja of Sikkim, and Kalimpong, Western and Eastern Duars from the Government of Bhutan and their subsequent management on purely commercial lines were at once a denial of the earlier traditional obligations met by the Sikkim and Bhutan Governments, and a threat to the subsistence dilemma of the forest-peasantry (Since the Lepchas, Meches and Garos of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri were illiterate and were not united and as there was no leadership grew among them and no outsider came to help them, they could not put any resistance to British move. Even they could not draw the attention of the higher authorities to their pitiful condition, leave the name of 'deputation'. But that was not the case in western part of the Lower Provinces of Bengal.)

Singbhum was in Chhotanagpur Division under Lower Provinces, Bengal. The forest operations of the Government generated quite an amount of unrest and discontent in Sarendapir and Porahat Parganas of Singbhum. The people who had always enjoyed absolute liberty resented much the curtailment of what they considered their ancestral rights, and the restraints imposed by the rules of the Forest Department were extremely distasteful to them. The

government gave Porahat forest the status of Government Forest and planned to demarcate its area. The Porahat people refused to allow the demarcation of their forest to be proceeded with.³ In Saranda demarcation was completed and matters cooled down for the time being, but in Porahat irritation continued and Major Garbett of Singbhum had to arrive in order to overcome opposition.⁴ “During 1893–94 the ownership of all the village wastelands which was vested in the Government were constituted into ‘protected forest’ under the Indian Forest Act of 1878, subject to ryots’ existing rights. Forest Settlement operations were also started in Porahat which lay in Singbhum as well as in Palamow and Manbhum and measures were adopted to prepare a record of forest rights.”⁵ The background revealed the general causes of the discontent. “With their gradual socialisation, the Mundas began to clear the forest and reclaim what lands they pleased for their homestead and their farmstead. After mastering the art of cultivation the Mundas collected liberal supply of wood for construction of ploughs, carts and other articles of husbandry. They depended on the forests also for fodder. No wonder therefore that popular imagination should draw these people as forest-dwellers. Forests in short formed the home and provided the livelihood of the Mundas and their very existence was dependent on it.”⁶ In this perspective Jeta Manki of Gudri, Rasha Manki and Moni Manki of Durkapir submitted petitions to the authorities claiming resumption of what they called were their old rights meaning free fuel, grazing etc. They claimed this since formerly they were the proprietors of the soil. Also Birsa took part in such a forest movement under Gidiun of piring in Porahat and led a number of ryots of Singrida village to Chaibasa to present a petition for remission of forest dues.⁷

Similar resentment was expressed by the ryots of Chandwa and Manka villages which lay on the route to Daltongunj. They sent a deputation to the Commissioner which objected to the demarcation line drawn for the protected forest areas and resented the posting of forest guards who would deprive them of their means of subsistence. When the Daltongunj ryots made similar complaints the Deputy Commissioner of Hazaribagh punished Mr. Sunder, the Settlement Officer and said that the Officer had exceeded his limits when he drew belts. The Deputy Commissioner on the eve of declaring protected forests in this area pointed out to the Government that in the Government estates of the region mild discontent was to grow when the village forests were declared protected. As he now received the deputation and found that the Mundas were full of complaints about their means of existing he felt that some of the rules would hard hit the ryots and so the Government could think in terms of some modification and relaxation.

When the British made the forest-inhabitants of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri to leave the reserved forests such type of resentment was not shown by them. In some cases they had a fit of

puke, others made arrangements with the British to live outside the government forest and some others left these forests for Garo hills in Assam or Bhutan. The major causes of the 'peaceful' arrangement, inter alia, were two. First, population of forest-dwellers in this region was insignificant in comparison to other areas of government forests. Second, there was abundance of uncultivated land outside the reserves for their rehabilitation. If there would have been leadership from among the Lepchas, Garos and Meches they could show resentment against the British since they were not accustomed to live in such an environment, and, at least, they could profitably bargain with the British authorities. I wonder, why did not the enlightened outsiders come to their help? The period of forest reservation coincided with the period of Bengal Renaissance. The Renaissance-men fought for social justices and uplift of the downtrodden. They were not unaware of the unenviable condition of the coolies of tea gardens. About 1880 Indian Association of Calcutta deputed Mr. Dwarakanath Ganguly, Assistant Secretary of the Association for investigation into the condition of the coolies. After an on-the-spot investigation in Assam, Mr. Ganguly contributed a series of articles in *The Bengalee* vividly exposing the wretched condition of the tea garden labourers.⁸ But such attempt was not taken by any Calcutta-based association or individual to take stock of the situation connected with the forest-dwellers of this region. Even they did not care to understand the impact of the proclamation of Dalhousie in 1849, Charter of Indian Forestry in 1855, Indian Forest Act of 1865, Forest Act of 1878 and Forest Policy of 1894 on the forest villagers and peasants. They did not play any role in any form to mould public opinion against these oppressive Acts executed all over the sub continent. And to be frank, the Calcutta-based intelligentsia like 'Young Bengal' and their sympathizers only had a swaggering walk in college street.

If we take it for granted that they were far away from this zone, the silence of the enlightened men of Cooch Behar, Rangpur and Rajshahi about these forest-inhabitants cannot be excused on any pretext. It is written in so many words that the Brahmos established Brahma Sabha and Samaj in Cooch Behar, Rangpur and Rajshahi and they were highly enlightened and they were patronized by the enlightened Maharaja of Cooch Behar and zamindars of Rangpur and Rajshahi. If they were really enlightened they should have been aware of the British injustice against the Meches and Garos who lived adjacent to their places of activities in this area. If they failed to do anything directly for these unlucky masses against the British imperialist policy of forest reservation, at least, they could write articles like Dwarakanath Ganguly who did something for the cause of the tea labourers by focusing on the pathetic condition of the coolies. But it is beyond rational explanation why the intelligentsia of Cooch Behar, Rangpur and Rajshahi did not know the existence of the forest-dwellers, let alone, the plight of these people who were deprived of their traditional rights on the forest produce which

was their means of existence. The intelligentsia of Calcutta, Cooch Behar, Rangpur and Rajshahi during the era of the Renaissance were quite unaware about what was going on in the forests of Bengal. If we are allowed to go back, we find that Krishnakanta Basu and famous Rammohan Roy went to Bhutan in 1815 as *Vakils* of the Magistrate of Rangpur through the forest area of Bijnee and Sidlee (Eastern Duars)⁹, but they did not gather any information of the major inhabitants of this region. This shows their lack of curiosity of the people of this zone which is unusual in the case of the Europeans. Thus we have missed a possibility of collecting a lot of valuable information of this people between the First and Second Anglo-Bhutan Wars.

The forest-inhabitants of this region, however, never thought of any God-sent man to come over here to save them from the British imperialists. They in their own pragmatic ways began to express their resentment against the British Forest Policy. The Zaminders of Bijni and Sidli took a way, and the Lepchas, Garos and Meches took other ways to ventilate their discontent.

The problems of Forest Reservation became acute in Eastern Duars and the British could not move in full sail. The wealthy Kings or Jotedars of this area claimed the ownership of certain forest tracts. W. Stenhouse in his Progress Report of 1868–69 reported, “In the Eastern Dooars there are several claimants to large areas of country. Of these the principal are the Rajas of Sidlee and Bijnee. The claims made by the former, if recognized, will curtail the limits of the large forest tract proposed for reservation in the Sidlee Dooar, and demarcated for that purpose by the Revenue Survey Department.” No source materials are available about the course of settlement with the Rajas of Bijni and Sidli. But it is evident that the Raja of Bijni preferred to rule independent of the Bhutan and British Governments. The earliest to any portion of British territory raised by the Bhutan Government was to a portion of the Zamindari of Baikunthapur, including the mahals of Ain Falakata and Jalpesh. In 1787 claims were also raised to the mahal of Holaghat on behalf of the Bijni Raja, and to the mahal of Goomah on behalf of the Zamindar of Beddragong; but the respective owners of these mahals repudiated the claims, and they were dropped.¹⁰ It appears that in relation to the British the Rajas of Bijni and Sidli also wanted to remain independent, and they were not even ready to cede their forest tracts to the British Government. Ultimately what actually happened is not clear since relevant documents are wanting. It seems that following negotiations the British entered into an agreement with the Rajas of Bijni and Sidli under which the British Government obtained a perpetual lease of the forest tracts they desired to bring under reserves. A specimen of such type of document is, however, available when the British came to an understanding with the Zamindar of Jeerung in Khasi hills. The translation of the document runs as follows:-

“I, Chootoo Sadoo Sing, Rajah, Zeminder of Jeerung ilaqua, execute this agreement, that at the wish of the Government I willingly lease all the forest and waste lands pertaining to the Jeerung ilaqua (by the clearing of which no damage will arise to the ryots of the ilaqua), and also all minerals that may be discovered hereafter, to the British Government in perpetuity. I agree that from henceforth, the said Government may, at their pleasure, receive revenue from those lands, causing them to be brought under cultivation, or settling them under ryots, and that neither I nor any of my heirs or representatives will have power to raise any objection to the present agreement. All disputes about such lands will henceforth be adjudicated by the Government without my interference. This is on understanding that my heirs shall receive from Government half the rents derived from such lands; and that should no rent accrue, no claims on my part for rent shall be accepted.

“Without the permission of the British Government, neither I nor my heirs will have the power of transferring any lands in the said ilaqua either to Englishmen or Bengalees.

“In case of my doing so, the lands will be liable to seizure by the Government.

“*Dated 15th September 1859.*”

“P.S. — The agreement and the timber forest for that ilaqua, which was given by me, will also remain in force.

CHOOTOO SING *Rajah.*”¹¹

In this way the Jeerung forests were acquired by the British. But there is no record of anything having been done with the forest until 1863, when it was leased to a Mr. Bainbridge for five years at a yearly rent of Rs. 100.

Be that as it may, this was a thrust of *Pax Britannica*. The colonial rulers and their collaborators sought to build up a new sensibility as to the justness of their claim over the forests in various parts of India. The ruling classes had to be demonstrated not only as legitimate but almighty as well.¹² Similarly the Colonial Government’s claim over the forest had to be displayed as just and legitimate. It was imperative to project the ruling class as well as the government as powerful, invincible and paramount. At this backdrop it may be assumed that Chootoo Sing Rajah’s document was prepared under duress. It seems that such compulsion made the Rajas of Bijni and Sidli to cede the forest tracts to the British as was also done in the case of the Raja of Sikkim in granting Darjeeling or British Sikkim in the name of ‘gift’ to the British. In fact, these episodes were a form of resentment. Initially the owners of the forest tracts

refuse to comply with the British wishes to occupy certain forest tracts for their policy of commercialization of forests, but ultimately the owners give in and are pressured to come to an agreement of perpetual lease with the British who move with the ulterior motive of annexing the area permanently to the British empire on any pretext. The cases of Bijni and Sidli, it seems, were no exception to this policy of the British. The independence of Bijni and Sidli was sacrificed at the altar of British Paramountcy whose glaring examples were treatments with Chootoo Sing Raja of Jeerung and Raja of Sikkim.

Forest-inhabitants were affected in another way. Framing of a set of British laws connected with forest reservation caused inconvenience to the forest-dwellers. They were accustomed to forest life but were brought out of forests. The theme of British Paramountcy brought to the fore the fundamental conflict between the traditional perceptions and socio-cultural patterns and the new or comparatively strange codes of social, moral, economic and legal values. The forest was one of the venues where the two divergent systems clashed. In the latter part of the 19th century the vast forests of India turned into a business centre of the British and to have that as a monopoly, they gave demonstration of colonial power. While asserting formal rights of ownership over forest resources, the colonial government brought to bear on its management a highly developed legal and administrative infrastructure. In course of the 19th century the British Government restricted access to the forests. This new legal and administrative framework thrust upon the forest-dwellers was geared to generate a new sensibility as to what would be crime, what would be property, what would be justice, what would be injustice, what would be legitimate and what would be illegitimate, what would be order and what would be disorder.¹³ The whole conception of this law was alien to the forest-people of India. But, for the sake of truth it should be said that these laws were not so cruel like *'The Waltham Black Act'* or simply *The Black Act* of 1723 introduced in Windsor Forest in England which possessed a criminal code with so many capital provisions for minor offences.¹⁴ In a single stroke in India, still the Government's claim over the forest became legitimate, and forest-dwellers' traditional rights of hunting, food gathering, jhuming, grazing and cutting of woods from any Government Reserved Forest for domestic purposes became illegitimate. The British laws and Acts created a whole new legal category of forest crimes. The new way of managing the Indian forests appeared to be strange, alien and unintelligible in the eyes of those who had been using the forest from time immemorial.¹⁵ The forest-people wholly depended on forest for their livelihood. State reservation of forests sharply affected the subsistence activities of this community. Some of the groups of this community remained unreconciled to the colonial forest policy, and refused to recognize the validity of the government's claim. They found contradictions in British laws. The forest hunters who went out hunting wild animals for food

were treated by alien law as 'poachers' or criminals, whereas the Europeans, native Maharajas and local Rajas's hunting (*Shikar*) for sport was a show of strength and was highly appreciated. One small-scale slaughter of animals was a crime and illegal, another large-scale slaughter of animals was a demonstration of might and legal. The forest-inhabitants looked at the British in silent wonder and took their way of life by violating British laws — they became criminals in the eye of new laws. Some of the groups of this community, however, over looked this inherent contradictions of British laws and made adjustment with the British, and went out of the reserved forests and rehabilitated themselves in some patches of land allotted to them. Others left the forests for a place of shelter not known to them. It was a journey from known to unknown.

First reaction against the British forest policy, in our area of study, was shown by the Lepchas of Darjeeling (British Sikkim). To trace their origin Suniti Kumar Chatterjee told us that they were a mixture of Tibeto-Chinese and Tibeto-Burman people.¹⁶ Charu Chandra Sanyal in his compilation of table from S. K. Chatterjee's book 'Kirata Jana Kriti' agreed that the Lepchas were of Tibeto-Chinese and Tibeto-Burman origin.¹⁷ They were the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim. They did not enter Sikkim from across the Himalayas or from Tibet, but are supposed to have come from the East along the foothills from the direction of Assam and Upper Burma.¹⁸

When they settled themselves in Sikkim (*'Dejong'* in Lepcha term means the 'land of rice') they began to call themselves Rongpa or 'dwellers in the valley'. I cannot help quoting a passage from Claude White's book 'Sikkim and Bhutan' in respect of the character, mood, usage, religious belief and habitat of the Lepchas. "They are people of a mild, quiet and indolent disposition, loving solitude, and their homes are found in the inaccessible places, in the midst of forests if possible, and seldom above an elevation of 4000 feet. They are also very improvident, living from hand to mouth; with abundance when the crops are good, but once the supply is eaten up going often in the direst straits, picking up what they in the jungle till the next crops ripens. They are great nature lovers and good entomologists and botanists, and have their own names for every animal, insect and plant and are, I should think, unequalled anywhere as collectors." Claude White further tells us: "They now profess Buddhism and are generally very devotional, although they originally worshipped the spirits of the mountains, rivers, forests, a natural outcome of their surroundings. Leading solitary, isolated lives, everything would tend to foster such beliefs in a country where the mighty snows appear immortal, the raging torrents irresistible, as though impelled by some unseen avenging spirit, combined with the curious shapes taken by everything when veiled in gray mist and the ghostlike and awesome forms to be

met in the shadows of the damp dripping forests full of phosphorescent stumps old trees scattered round in strange contortions, with the accompaniment of the weird sound of the wind, as it moans round some projecting crag or through some giant tree, where even the melancholy cry of the birds is pitched in a minor key, all must encourage such beliefs and leave a deep impression on the character of the people who live amidst it.”¹⁹

In such a sylvan environment with such beliefs the Lepchas lived in Darjeeling. After Darjeeling forest being declared as reserved forest, according to British forest laws they had to leave that forest where they lived from time immemorial. What was their reaction, whether they refused to leave the forest, could not be known from British sources. When O’Malley prepared Darjeeling District Gazetteer in 1907 he had to suppress many facts, but he could not avoid contradictions in his presentation. He knew that the Lepchas were disappearing with the forests they loved, but to shirk responsibility for this he took imperialist stance which was as usual contradictory. Firstly, by census statistics of 1872 and 1901 he tried to prove that the number of the Lepchas increased. Secondly, he said that by intermarriage with the Limbus and Sikkim Bhotias the Lepchas were contributing to their self-effacement. Thirdly, he remarked on the basis of a contemporary unknown writer that when they first acquired the hill territory of Darjeeling, there were practically no Lepchas in the land because the Raja of Sikkim had forced 1,200 able-bodied Lepchas to fly from Darjeeling and its neighbourhood. Lastly, he concluded, “the Lepchas have at any rate not decreased under British rule, largely no doubt as a result of the establishment of a reserve for them in Kalimpong.”

If the number of the Lepchas increased under British rule why the question of self-effacement arose? Did this process of self-effacement mean that the Lepchas only gave birth to female children and they married their daughters to the boys of the Limbus and Sikkim Bhotias? Was it one-way move and no marriage matured in opposite direction? Moreover, he reported on the basis of an unknown writer that the Raja of Sikkim forced the Lepchas to leave Darjeeling but no cause was shown behind this oppressive attitude of the Raja. The fact seems to be that the British Government ordered the Lepchas to go away from the reserved forest of Darjeeling and an alternative arrangement was made for them in Kalimpong. After spending so many words O’Malley let the cat out of the bag. He wrote, “The tendency is for them to leave the unsuitable environment of Darjeeling and other parts of the district, and to settle in Kalimpong, where they can get land on low rents and where is still much forest left.” He did not yet tell us the whole truth. The responsibility for leaving Darjeeling should not be placed on the Lepchas because the ‘unsuitable environment’ in Darjeeling was the creation of the British who deforested the area for their own cause. The fact was that the British compelled them to leave Darjeeling for

Kalimpong and when Kalimpong was annexed to British empire from Bhutan the Lepchas under compulsion had to leave even that place and entered Bhutan²⁰ proper, and western Bhutan became their habitat where they found forests and suitable environment. They were driven from Darjeeling, and that was the whole truth, and they reacted by abandoning the area of the British.

How the Lepchas were treated by the British is known from D.F. Rennie's note referred to by Arabinda Deb in his book, 'India and Bhutan'. Mr. Rennie wrote in 1866 that the Lepchas in Darjeeling Terai fell victims to 'tea culture speculation'. "Their lands were bought up from their headmen and they were suddenly turned adrift to find new homes and distasteful employments where they could. Tea Plantations revolutionized their primitive state of society."²¹ This was a peculiar way of thinking which goes round profiteering. That was certainly not the way of thinking of the Lepchas. The long and short of it was that the British treatment towards the Lepchas made them discontent, but their nature prevented them from expressing it. They silently left the place with a disgruntled mind.

The Garos were not treated better. The Garos call themselves *achi mande* (achik=hill; mande=man) just as the Lushais (a hill tribe of Assam) call themselves Mizos (Mi=man; zo=hill).²² The original home of the Garos is not known. They themselves believe that their original homeland was in Tibet. A legend to this effect has persisted among the Garos, for generations. In his monograph on the Garos, Major Playfair points out certain linguistic resemblance between the Tibetan and the Garo tongues and also refers to the reverence which the Garos like the Tibetans have for gongs and the value they attach to the Yak's tail though the animal never inhabited these hills.²³ These features are not only applicable to the Garos of Assam Hills but also applicable to the Garos of the Western and Eastern Duars accepting a few local variations. But such scrappy pieces of evidence are not sufficient for establishing a historical connection of the Garos with Tibet. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee held that the Garos were of Tibeto-Chinese and Tibeto-Burman origin like the Lepchas and Meches, and the Garos had direct Bodo-Naga origin.²⁴ Mr. Pugh holds that certain features common to the Nagas and Garos in the performance of the funeral ceremonies (the practice of tethering a bull to a Y-shaped post before it is sacrificed) and other customs, especially the practice of head-hunting, point towards a link between Nagas and the Garos. Major Playfair surmises from these facts that the Garos probably inhabited originally some area near Dimapur and there, because of proximity, picked up some of the Naga customs and habits. All this leads to the supposition that the Garos moved into Assam, Mymensingh and Duars through the north-eastern route from China and Upper Burma. "This movement was part of a great Mongolian influx into this part of India in prehistoric times. It is not merely possible, but very probable, that the movement started

originally from Tibet and other parts of western China.”²⁵ However, with the march of time the Garos were greatly influenced in their religious beliefs and social custom by the neighbouring Hinduised tribes of the plains. As in the Hindu pantheon the Garos have numerous deities such as protector of crops, the God of fertility, the God of strength, the Goddess of riches. Natural forces are also deified in the Hindu fashion. The sun, moon and stars are believed to be spirits placed in the heavens for ruling the seasons. Thunder, lightning, rain, wind, earthquakes have corresponding spirits controlling them, and they have to be propitiated with sacrifices of birds, animals etc. When there is a drought, the Rain-God is worshipped. On the other hand when there is too much rain the Sun-God is worshipped. In both the ceremonies a goat or a fowl is offered in sacrifice. Like the Hindus, the Garos also show great reverence for their ancestors, as is indicated by funeral observances such as offering of food to the departed souls. The Hindus did it without any overt effort at conversion, the characteristic feature of Hinduism having been throughout the ages assimilation rather than conversion. But after 1865 when the Duars region was brought under British control the Christian missionaries began to convert them to Christianity, and they were asked to give up their age-old jhumming method of cultivation.

The British had to deal with the Meches along with the Garos. They treated the Meches in the same vein as was done with the Garos but the result or the reaction of these two tribes were not the same. The Meches were also a Tibeto-Burman speaking Indo-Mongoloid tribe whom Grierson in his *Linguistic Survey of India* along with the Kacharis, Koch, Rabha and Garo brought under a single group called the Bodo. The Bodos like the other tribes migrated into India through Patkoi Hills between India and Burma and gradually spread themselves into the whole of undivided Assam, North Bengal and parts of East Bengal (Bangladesh). It is probable that they marched towards three directions. One part went south upto Kachar and were called Kacharis. The second part went along the river Brahmaputra and established themselves in the whole of undivided Assam upto Goalpara and parts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar under the name Bodo or Bara. They were further subdivided into four classes, namely, Mech, Koch, Rabha and Garo.²⁶ The Meches went towards the west along the foot of the Himalayas upto the river Mechi between India and Nepal and settled on the north bank of the said river as Mech or Mechia. They crossed the river and established themselves in the deep forests of Darjeeling Terai and Baikunthapur of Jalpaiguri. Again they marched eastwards, crossed the Tista and spread themselves in Duars, Jalpaiguri. They gradually moved further east crossed Sankosh and went towards Goalpara in Assam. All over these areas there were dots of Mech villages when the British occupied Terai and Duars from the Raja of Sikkim and the Deb Raja of Bhutan respectively. In addition to their traditional beliefs, religion and custom they were also influenced by Hinduism and worshipped many Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Mahakal (Siva),

Parvati, the consort of Siva, Kali, rivers like Tista, Torsha, Kaljani and Sankosh. Formerly there was no image worship; a lump of earth represented the deity. In course of time they began to worship clay images of Gods and Goddesses like the Hindus. The European missionaries began to convert them to Christianity after the annexation of Assam and North Bengal by the British. The Meches were accustomed to shifting cultivation which was distasteful to the British for bright outlook for trade in forest produce.

It has already been discussed in details in chapter III (Implementation of the Forest Acts and Policy in the area of study: Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri Districts) that the Government of Bengal on the basis of the Forest Laws and Policy of the Government of India formulated local laws prohibiting local people like the Garos and the Meches from indiscriminate felling of trees. At the same time some privileges were given to them to use specific trees and timber from the forests for their house-hold purposes. In fact, the Forest Department took three fold measures to save forests in Terai, Western and Eastern Duars. First, the Forest Department categorically named some species of trees which should not be cut down. Secondly, to fulfil the necessity of the local people some facilities of cutting down specific timber were allowed. The purpose of this was to keep the Garos and Meches in good humour whose habitat and movement in the region extended from Terai to Eastern Duars.²⁷ When the Government prohibited shifting cultivation in virgin sal forests²⁸ in and around Duars, as a reaction, a group of the Garos in a fit of pique left for dense forests towards the east and found their new habitat in Garo-hills in Assam.

But the Garos and Meches who remained in Terai and Duars entered into negotiations with the Government²⁹ and came out of the reserves to live in outside of the Reserved Forests but adjacent to the forests. They were allowed shifting cultivation in jungles consisted only of bushes, shrubs and stunted trees.³⁰ The Garos even left the reserves³¹ and settled outside the virgin sal forests and continued shifting cultivation in marked areas. But the Meches came out of the Reserved Forests on condition that they would be given adequate compensation.³²

The third policy of the Forest Department was to involve local people in protecting forests. They were given responsibility to protect forests from timber-thieves³³ and even some Meches were appointed as Forest Watchers to secure good will of the local inhabitants. In fact, the policy of the Forest Department was to get rid of the forest-enemies by setting one against another. But the forest officials did not know what else was to come next. The Forest Policy of the Government along with its method of implementation by the Forest Department of Bengal was gall and wormwood to the local people who reacted against this in crooked way. They

pretended to protect the forest property of the Government but secretly helped the timber-thieves to illegal timber-business by destroying the rich forests³⁴ for their personal profit at the cost of the public forests, and it is assumed that the Forest Watchers even got a share of the money thus collected. So, as a reaction against Government Forest Policy they allowed the destruction of forests, and thus the local people in uniform, due to forest rules, were made collaborators of the timber-thieves. In general, the forest-dwellers turned criminals as a result of the Government Policy, and mischief, deceit and depredations of forest-property against the forest rules were the peculiar way of reaction of the deprived forest-inhabitants.

This crooked way of reaction of the deprived local people took a new form which caused breaches of laws framed for the forest management. This began in 1865–66 and is still continuing. Gustav Mann, Asst. Conservator of Forests, Sikkim reported in 1865–66 : “No better proof of the wanton destruction of timber, trees can be given than by the fact that within five to six miles of Darjeeling there is hardly any tree left fit to be cut up for timber.....”³⁵ He further informed the Government, “Another great evil was the indiscriminate cutting of valuable timber trees and worthless kinds of wood for firewood.” Before the reservation of forests the local inhabitants used to cut timber in a limited way only for the domestic purposes, but now it has become a dogged determination to undo the forest rules. The Asst. Conservator proposed for stricter rules to protect the forest from indiscriminate felling. The cases of breaches of law competed with the progress of forest administration.

Breach of Forest Rules has been recorded by the Conservator of Forests in 1873–74. The Conservator wrote that five prosecutions had been instituted during the year in Cooch Behar Division, and four convictions obtained. Four were cases of petty theft; the fifth was, however, an important case, namely the cutting and partly removing of 100 sal trees from the Sukna forest. But it was not the case of reaction of the local people — it was a case of robbery with an aim of profit committed by one timber contractor-cum-robber, Nakul Sing, a native of Nepal.³⁶

The Forest Department was elated at finding decrease in the number of offences in Buxa during the year 1882–83 compared with the former year; and the proportion of convictions to cases instituted, omitting cases withdrawn and pending was 86.3% against 86.8% for 1881-82. The Conservator wrote, “The system of compounding offences has been found to work well, and is preferred by the people, who generally apply to be allowed to pay money compensation when discovered in the act of breaking the rules, instead of being made to stand a trial before the Magistrate.”³⁷ The Conservator further added that in Buxa reserves the number of prosecutions under the head ‘Injury to forest by fire’ was three only, compared with nine in the previous year;

it was further reported that although forest fires had done more damage during the year under report than in 1881–82, there were fewer cases of willful damage from this cause.

Another form of reaction or protest, in addition to illegal felling, was the illegal grazing by ignoring the forest rules. In Darjeeling Division such cases had been found during the year 1882–83. The Conservator reported that 19 cases were instituted during the year, involving 27 persons in all of which convictions were obtained, with the exception of one case, which was withdrawn, as it entailed a question of boundary. Thirteen cases were for unauthorized felling and the remaining five for grazing without permission.

In the same year in Tista Division six cases were sent up for trial involving six persons in all of which convictions were obtained. Great difficulty was experienced by the Forest Department in cases of illicit grazing in bringing the offenders to justice. The Conservator reported, "Large parties come across the border from Sikkim with flocks and herds, and resist the guards who attempt to arrest them"; before assistance could be obtained they used to enter into Sikkim territory and the civil authorities did not have any power to cause their arrest when they left British territory.

In Kurseong Division there were ten cases of breach of Forest Law during the year, involving ten persons, of which two were for injury to the forest by fire, five for unauthorized felling, one for grazing in closed forests and two for breaking up land for cultivation. In Jalpaiguri Division three cases involving nine persons were pending from the previous year and five cases involving nine persons were instituted under the Forest Act during the year. In Buxa Division there was only one case instituted for injury to forest by fire which remained pending at the close of the year.

In 1895–96 the breaches of the forest law increased in number, those taken into count being more than doubled. This was to some extent explained by the creation of a new division; and as nearly 90 per cent of convictions were obtained. However, unnecessary prosecutions were not encouraged by the Government. The Government of India fully agreed with the Lieutenant-Governor as regards the importance of a correct and uniform classification of forest offences, and were pleased to see that this would "insisted upon in future."³⁸

In 1899–1900 nature of offences was shown compared with previous year as follows: This was the picture of peculiar form of reaction of the local people at the end of the century.³⁹

Nature of offence	Nature of offence			
	Number		Increase	Decrease
	1898 - 99	1899- 1900		In 1899 - 1900
1	2	3	4	5
Injury to forests by fire	19	50	31	—
Unauthorized felling etc.	204	200	—	4
Grazing without permission	18	21	3	—
Other offences	66	84	18	—
Total	307	355	52	4

But it should be kept in mind that all the cases of injury to forests by fire were not intentional — some were intentional no doubt, others natural. The following was the usual divisional details of offences during the years 1898–99 and 1899– 1900.⁴⁰

Division	1898-99	1899 - 1900			For each case			For each person		
	Number of offences	Number of offences	Number of persons	Total compensation received						
1	2	3	4	5	6			7		
				Rs.	Rs.	A.	P.	Rs.	A.	P.
Darjeeling	587	441	623	1,256	2	13	7	2	0	3
Tista	389	341	433	924	2	11	4	2	2	2
Kurseong	54	57	88	411	7	3	4	4	10	9
Jalpaiguri	50	110	252	1,598	14	8	5	6	5	6
Buxa	55	25	56	405	16	3	2	7	3	9
Total	1,135	974	1,452	4,594	43	11	2	22	11	1

Intentional firing cases had been particularly recorded during the year 1900–1901. Under this head there were three categories. First, intentional firing in order to obtain new grass; second, intentional firing in order to turn out game or to reduce cover; and third, maliciously fired. In this year Buxa Reserve recorded six cases of first category by which 9,794 acres were burnt; ten fires were recorded to turn out game or to reduce cover, and for this 2,020 acres were burnt; two cases were recorded under the category ‘maliciously fired’ by which 81 acres were burnt. In Jalpaiguri Division three cases were recorded in second category by which 1,200 acres were burnt, one case in third category by which 3,099 acres were burnt. In Kurseong Division one case was recorded in second category and three acres were burnt, one was recorded in third category but burnt area was not mentioned. No cases were recorded under ‘intentional firing’ in Darjeeling and Tista Divisions during the year.⁴¹ But general nature of forest offences like unauthorized felling or grazing without permission increased during the year 1902–1903. The principal increases were 265 in the Tista and 172 in Darjeeling Divisions.⁴² In the next year the total number of forest offences reported was 2,923 against 3,556 in the previous year.

In 1904–1905 the number of forest offences reported was 3104 or 181 more than in the previous year and 94 more than the average of the three previous years. More than half the cases of the year occurred in the Darjeeling and Tista Divisions which show increases of 240 and 143 cases respectively. But in these Divisions cases were as usual, of a trivial nature, such as stealing head loads of wood or fodder without permission.⁴³ The Conservator knew that such type of offences were unavoidable since the labourers lived in close proximity to the forests. The Government also found that most of the forest offences were done in collusion with the forest staff, and the Government made the punishment fit the crime. In 1907–8 punishments included the dismissal of 12 Forest Guards, and the services of 3 Foresters, 1 Tashil Muharin, 1 Checking Muharrir and 14 Forest Guards were dispensed with; 4 Forest Guards were fined; 2 Forest Guards were reduced, whilst 2 Forest Guards were suspended at the end of the year.⁴⁴

In spite of this strong disciplinary punishment inflicted on the staff the forest offences were not checked, let alone stopped. The following statement compares the average annual number of forest offences during the five year period from 1914–15 to 1918–19 and that in the preceding five year⁴⁵ —

	1909 - 10 to 1913 - 14	1914 - 15 to 1918 - 19
Injury to forest by fire	24	51
Unauthorized felling	838	1,206
Unauthorized grazing	637	1,009
Other offences	119	394
Total	1,618	2,660

However, the Government felt satisfaction at the insignificant decrease of the forest offences during the year 1919-20. The number of forest offences reported during the year was 3,269 as against 3,694 in the preceding year. W.S. Hopkyns wrote, "The decrease is satisfactory, and is ascribed not only to more frequent resort to courts in 1918–19 but also to keener vigilance on the part of the subordinate staff and to the infliction of adequate punishment by courts in proved cases. The fact that the percentage of convictions was 94 shows that unnecessary prosecution were not undertaken."⁴⁶

Forest offences yet kept the Government under pressure. Clandestinely breaking the forest rules was a form of protest in this region against the British Policy of Reservation of Forests. They began the act of sabotage against the Government Policy. This is accepted even today as a form of protest or movement. The sabotage included intentional forest firing, unauthorized grazing and unauthorized felling or timber theft. It is found in stray references of the English officials that timber theft, as the years rolled along, became a profitable business of

the local people lived in adjacent to forest tracts. What did the timber-thieves do with the timber cannot be assessed properly. From the report of the forest officials, it seems, that there was a collusion between timber-thieves and the timber-merchants. The Government Officials described the merchants as 'unscrupulous' and they used to come from Dacca and other places. They preferred illegal trade to legal one. This money-making tendency of the locals marred everything. The failing morale of the local people destroyed the possibility of granulation of the movement. The area became a den of pilferers. This vile tradition is still continuing.

Notes and References

1. Ramachandra Guha : *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*, Ch. 8, P. 185. Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996.
2. Letter of Percy Wyndham quoted by Ramachandra Guha : *Ibid.*, P. 185.
3. Annual General Administrative Report, Chota Nagpore Division, 1881–82 referred to by Sivaji Koyal in his article. 'The Mundas and The Forest', Indian History Congress, Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Session, P.608, Annamalai University, 1984, Published in 1985.
4. Sivaji Koyal : *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, P. 603.
7. Suresh Singh : "Dust Storm and Hangina Mist" P. 37, referred to by Sivaji Koyal, *Ibid.*, P. 608.
8. Sukomal Sen : *Working Class of India : History of Emergence and Movement 1830–1970*. P.64, K.P. Bagchi & Company, Reprint 1979.
9. Surendranath Sen : '*Prachin Bangala Patra Sankalan*' (in Bengali), P. 48 (letter no 140 of Deb Raja of Bhutan). English synopsis of the book (collection of ancient Bengali letters) P. 64. Published by Calcutta University, Calcutta, 1942.
10. J. Claude White : *Sikkim and Bhutan*, PP 267-68. Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, Reprint, 1984.
11. Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal, for the year ending 1st April, 1871. Prepared by H.Leeds, Conservator of Forests, Bengal. Section 1. Office of the Conservator of Forests, Northern Circle, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. (Here after O.C.F.N.C., Jal., W.B.).

12. Ranjan Chakrabarti : 'Colonising the Forest, 1800–1900'. (Article), P. 32. 'The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies, Volume XXXVIII', October, 1998 to March 1999, Nos. 3 & 4.
13. Ibid., P.30.
14. E.P. Thompson : *Whigs and Hunters: the origin of the Black Act*. Preface and Introduction, Harmondsworth, London, 1975.
15. Ranjan Chakrabarti : op cit., P. 33.
16. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee : *Kirata Jana Kriti*, P. 15 Calcutta. 1951.
17. Charu Chandra Sanyal : *The Meches and the Totos : Two Sub-Himalayan Tribes of North Bengal*, P.14. Published by the North Bengal University, Darjeeling 1973.
18. J. Claude White : op cit., P. 7.
19. Ibid., PP 7-8.
20. LSS O' Malley : *Bengal District Gazetteers, Darjeeling*. P. 45. Logos Press, New Delhi Reprint 1985.
21. Quoted by Arabinda Deb in his book "*India and Bhutan*": *A Study in Frontier Political Relations (1772–1865)* P. 165. Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, 1976.
22. B. Pugh, Deputy Commissioner, Scheduled Caste and Tribes, article, titled 'The Garos', included in the book *Tribes of Assam* compiled by S. Barakataki, Chapter II P. 16. National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1968.
23. Referred to by B. Pugh Ibid.
24. Vide table published by Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in '*Kirata Jana Kriti*', P. 15, and table prepared by Charu Chandra Sanyal in *The Meches and the Totos* P. 14.
25. B. Pugh : op cit., PP 16–17.

26. Charu Chandra Sanyal : op cit., Ch. I, P.1.
27. W. Stenhouse : A short account of a tour of inspection through the Government Forests on the north east frontier of Bengal during the dry season of 1869/70 (Hand written manuscript). Para. 23 O.C.F.N.C, Jal., W.B.
28. Progress Report of Forest Administration in Bengal for the Year 1868–69. Prepared by W. Stenhouse, Offg. Conservator of Forests, Bengal, L.P. P.19. O.C.F.N.C., Jal., W.B.
29. Ibid., Para. 91, P. 19.
30. Ibid.
31. Letter from W.O. Reilly, Esq. Sub-Divisional Officer, Buxa, to the Deputy Commissioner, Jalpaigoree No. 454 G, dated Alipur, the 24th December, 1876. File no 11-12, Para 126, Collection No. 2, Revenue. State Archives West Bengal, Calcutta.
32. Ibid.
33. W. Stenhouse : A short account of a tour of inspection, op cit., (Hand written manuscript). Submitted, dated Darjeeling, 20th October 1870, Para 23. O.C.F.N.C. Jal., W.B.
34. Annual Forest Administration Report for the year ending 1st April, 1871, Para 167. Forwarding letter No. 234, dated 31st July 1871. From H. Leeds, Conservator of Forests, Bengal to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue Department, Fort William. O.C.F.N.C., Jal., W.B.
35. Report of the Assistant Conservator of Forests, British Sikkim, on the Forest operations undertaken in his Division during 1865–66. Prepared by Gustav Mann O.C.F.N.C., Jal., W.B.
36. Progress Report of Forest Administration in Bengal for the year 1873–74. Prepared By W. Schlich, Conservator of Forests, Bengal. P. 24, Para. 84, National Archives of India (Here after N.A.I) New Delhi.

37. Progress Report of Forest Administration in Bengal for 1882–83. Chapter III, Para 132. Prepared by A.L. Home, Conservator of Forests, Bengal. Home Dept. Forests, proceedings Nos. 29–32 (January, 1884). N.A.I, New Delhi.
38. Report from Denzil Ibbetson, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Revenue (Forest) Department. File No. 44 of 1897, Serial No. 2, B 43 P.R., N.A.I. New Delhi.
39. Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the year 1899–1900. Prepared by A.E. Wild, Conservator of Forests, Bengal. B 43 P.R., N.A.I., New Delhi.
40. Ibid.
41. Chart provided by the Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the year 1900–1901. Prepared by A. E. Wild, Conservator of Forests, Bengal, B 43 P.R., N.A.I., New Delhi.
42. Progress Report of Forest Administration in Lower Provinces of Bengal for the year 1902–1903. Prepared by A.L. McIntire, Offg. Conservator of Forests, Bengal. B 43 P.R., N.A.I., New Delhi.
43. Annual Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the year 1904–05. Prepared by A.L. McIntire, Conservator of Forests, Bengal. B 43 P.R., N.A.I., New Delhi.
44. Annual Progress Report on Forest Administration of the Lower Provinces of Bengal for the year 1907–08. Prepared by McIntire, Conservator of Forests, Bengal. B 43 P.R., N.A.I., New Delhi.
45. Annual Progress Report on Forest Administration in the Presidency of Bengal for the year 1918–19. Prepared by H.A. Farrington, Conservator of Forests, Bengal, Chapter VII. B 43 P.R., N.A.I., New Delhi.
46. Resolution No. 1801 For. Calcutta, the 5th March, 1921. By order of the Governor in Council, W.S. Hopkyns, Secretary to the Government of Bengal (Offg.). Government of Bengal, Revenue Department Forest Branch. [Kept within the Progress Report of 1919–20]. B 43 P.R., N.A.I., New Delhi.