

Forests as safety nets in Sonitpur district of Assam in India

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Introduction

Development in the North-East of India has posed a serious challenge to the nation-building process in the country. Out of the seven states that comprise the Northeast of the country, Assam has special significance because it is the gateway to all other states of the region. The land area of Assam constitutes about 2.4% of the total land area of India and shelters about 3% of the country's population and 75.4% of the population of the northeastern region. Assam shares 30.8% of the Northeastern region's geographical area. By virtue of geographical location, Assam occupies a strategic position in the country as entire Northeastern region is connected with the main body of the country by a narrow corridor of 32 kms width.

Statement of the problem

Under development is clearly perceived in terms of per capita income and sectoral growth rate as shown below:

Per capita income in Assam was Rs7,335 as against Rs12,782 in the country in the year 1999-98. Agriculture, the main occupation of the people registered a growth rate of 1.2%. Manufacturing sector never contributes more than 5% to 7% of the state national product. Paradoxically, the backdrop of this phenomenon is rich and a fairly diversified resource base that comprises among others, a third of the country's hydel potential, the largest inland source of petroleum and extensive forest resources.

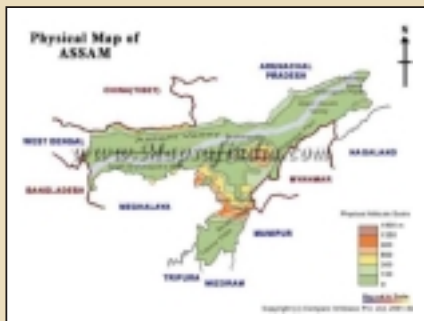
Resource Base of Assam

Forest Resources : Generally evergreen forests are found in the undivided districts of Cachar, Goalpara, Nagaon, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Darrang and the hill districts of the state. Most of the forests in the state are evergreen in character. In 1992-93, 355 number of reserved forests in the state occupied twenty-two percent of the total area of the state. Forests account for 39.11% of the total geographical area of the state. The highest concentration of forest occurs in the districts of Karbi-Anglong and North-Cachar hills, with 40.2% of the total area under forests of the state.

The share of forestry and logging to Net state domestic product in 1980-81 was 3.70% which declined to 2.03% in the year 1996-97.

Objectives of study

1. To study the existing resource base, its availability with specific reference to forestry resources.
2. To examine the type of utilization of forestry at present.
3. To examine the infrastructure, both physical and human, that exists at present for sustainable utilization of forestry.
4. To suggest strategies for sustainable development as may be derived from objectives (1) and (2)



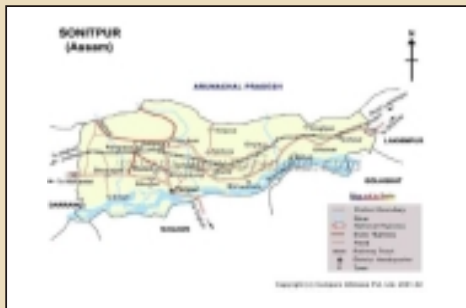
Hypothesis Testing

During the research work, the following hypothesis have been tested:

1. Development strategies in Assam followed so far overlooked the question of sustainability of resource-base
2. A dynamic inter-active link between the local communities and the state government of Assam for rational utilization and protection of forestry will ensure sustainable development for the state

Methodology

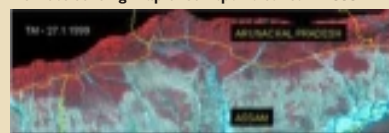
- Twelve forest villages have been selected, six each from Sonitpur East and West division. Ten percent of the households in each village were taken as the sample
- Questionnaires for the common people were specially designed with the parameters of sustainable development in mind
- Forest Department officers were also asked to fill up questionnaires specially designed for them
- Local level Non-Governmental Organizations were also interviewed



Remote sensing map of Sonitpur district in 1994



Remote sensing map of Sonitpur district in 1999



Remote sensing map of Sonitpur district in 2001



Deforestation in Mekahi Hill in Charduar reserved forest area



Findings

Forest land in Garo Miri Gaon has also been used as an orchard for growing oranges. Villagers have closely felt that the rapid deforestation in the region is going to ruin their prospects as forest villagers. The fertility of the arable land is gradually falling. Rainfall has become irregular and the amount has been declining. Temperatures have been increasing in the region.

A study done by AGROMET center located in North East Institute of Land and Water Management, Tezpur in Sonitpur district has shown records, which is confirming what the villagers have said.

Sample structure

Sample population-795
Males-261,
Females-239,
Children-295
Literate-219

Forests are essential for life



Of the 111 households surveyed, 92.85% of the households use conventional mud-built stoves or chulhas to cook their food.

Linkage between Deforestation and Population

Family size	Households
Between 1-3	6
Between 4-6	47
Between 7-10	44
Above 11	14
Total	111

94.59% of the population in this sample has family size above 4.

52.25% of the households have family size above 7.

In the last two decades, only 8 households in 111 households migrated to forest villages. During this period rapid deforestation can be attributed to rapid increase in population of the existing families in the region.

Basic features of the economy of forest villages

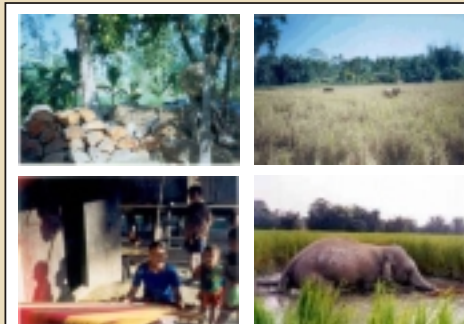
Subsistence Agriculture- All the households had Agriculture as the main occupation. Main crops grown are- rice, mustard, potatoes and vegetables. Bari-Households with above 10 big ha of land also maintained a bari or kitchen garden. In this garden they grow betel-nut, pan, elephant apple, Kamarenga and other trees which yield fruits.

Weaving- Handloom weaving is an integral part of both tribals and Assamese community residing in these villages. They prepare their own gamocha, mekhala, Chaddar and Dhakona, shawls and mufflers

Consequences of deforestation

In July and August 2001, about 20 elephants were poisoned in and around Nameri National Park. Forest villagers interviewed in Gamani, Chopaloga, Toraijan and Sottai near Nameri national park complained that the elephants often visited their paddy fields and destroyed the crops. Humans are destroying the elephant's home for agriculture. The destruction of crops is an obvious result of the human destruction of forests.

Presence of forests in the form of elephant habitats protect mankind and act as safety nets against elephant's destructive activities in the paddy fields



Backyard of a house in a Mekahi forest village
Paddy field in Toraijan during harvesting season
A young Miri girl weaving shawl
Man-animal conflict - Elephant moving through the paddy fields in Gamani village

Strategic intervention by the Government

Supreme court ordered a complete ban on tree felling except under government working plans. In December 1996 the apex court, further, directed nine states including Assam, to stop encroachments on reserved forest lands. There has been eviction drives by forest department in both east and west Sonitpur division this year. Joint Forest Management programmes have been introduced in Dharikati and Salkaiti in 2002. Villages in Gohpur Reserved Forest are waiting arrival of funds

Suggestions for a strategy of sustainable development

A. Management and protection of forest resources:

1. Well-defined property rights in terms of forests as common property resource.
2. Forest villagers are presently deprived of development programmes which easily reach a civil village. Deforestation is encouraged so that the village no longer remains a forest village and becomes eligible for the status of a civil village. Village Headmen and his team of village management body needs to be empowered.
3. Forest protection committees should be formed.

B. To improve the quality of life;

1. Power supply should be provided.
2. Hospital and health care centres should be established. Family planning incentives are also required.
3. Education Centres with the vision of creation of alternative job opportunities inside and outside the forest villages should be set up.

C. Consumption Pattern

1. Fuel-wood consumption can be reduced if bio-gas projects are encouraged. Agricultural wastes and cattle dung can also be used for preparation of fuel cakes.
2. Timber products should be highly taxed to discourage illegal felling of trees for the same

Conclusion:

Considering the rapid rate of deforestation in Sonitpur district, if forests disappear or are not available people will lose vital safety nets in the form of forests. They are mostly dependent on forest land for food, fuel and fodder. They do not have alternative source of income. Neither do they have any alternative risk management system. The state government has only recently become aware of the problem and the draft on State Forest Policy 2002 was submitted to the Chief-Minister Tarun Gogoi on 25th April, 2003. The committee for the policy preparation on forests is headed by Anil Goswami and a team of experts including Bibhab Taluqdar of WWF, Bagdora. The policy is aimed at encouraging sustainable development in the state through people's participation.