



Changing Patterns of Natural Resource Use: A Case Study from North Eastern India

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ABSTRACT Northeastern India is a veritable laboratory for understanding the transformations that relatively autonomous, subsistence based small scale societies undergo as they develop links with the larger scale, market oriented society. This paper, focussing on Gangtes of Manipur, presents a case study of the time course of such changes through the three phases of autonomy till the end of nineteenth century, of pacification during the British rule in the first half of the twentieth century and of commodification following independence in 1947. This last phase has been characterised by a process of sequential exploitation of forest resources. Only a small fraction of the profits realised in this process reaches the ordinary people, a somewhat larger fraction reaches the village Chiefs, while the bulk goes to the contractors with an understanding of markets and trade. This process of exhaustion of forest resources goes hand in hand with the privatization of control over land and tree resources, and a breakdown of the community based social organization. The Gangtes offer specific suggestions for averting this process of forest degradation reaching out into the areas as yet remote from roads and markets. These suggestions include more secure community land rights, and financial rewards to encourage more sustainable patterns of resource use and continued protection to undisturbed patches of forest.

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