

Rights and Restrictions in Notification and present status of Reserved Forest and Proposed Reserved Forests in Goalpara district of Assam, India

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Abstract

Forest is the world's largest natural ecosystem, having multi species and multi aged plants as dominant community. It covers about one third of the earth's land surface. Maintaining the good health of environment, it is essential to have minimum of 33 per cent of area to be under forest cover in a geographical unit. But the rapid depletion of forest cover has been inviting several environmental problems throughout the globe. India has also facing such problems due to rapid deforestation and encroachment of forest land. There are several constitutional provisions for protecting forest and wildlife in our country in the form of Reserved Forest, Propose Reserved Forest, National Park, Wildlife Sanctuary, etc. under the umbrella of Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change. But still the forest areas have become depleting continuously and losing its own characteristics in the midst of growing civilisation and expanding human population.

Goalpara district, situated in the western part of Assam having 55 Reserved Forest and 48 Proposed Reserved Forest covering 3,69,98.62 ha of forest lands about 20 per cent of the total geographical area of the district. But recent satellite survey reveals more deplorable condition of forest cover in the Reserved Forests and Proposed Reserved Forests of the district. In fact, some of the notified areas have lost identity as forest area. Shrinking forest areas and continuous loss of wildlife reveals that though there are constitutional and restrictions that have found to be insufficient or not properly executed. In this paper attempt has been made to study the restriction imposed in notification of each RF and PRF and present status of Reserved Forests and Proposed Reserved Forests in Goalpara district.

Key words : Goalpara, Reserved Forest, Proposed Reserved Forest, Forest Notification, deforestation.

Introduction

Forest represents a complex assemblage of biotic components in dynamic equilibrium with environmental parameters. It provides habitats for huge quantum of wildlife species diversity and home

of 50-90 per cent of earth's species (Anjaneyulu, 2004). It is the home of much of the world's biodiversity, endangered species and indigenous human cultures. Humans basic needs are depend upon plants, either directly or indirectly. But this valuable green cover of the globe comes under great threat today in the way of shrinking its area and losing its original characteristics leading to several adverse impacts on environment as well as humanity too.

Human being since its early civilization has been exploring the forest resources for variety of uses and pushes the valuable forests of the globe under continuous degradation. For most of man's history on the earth, his activities have tended to reduce the worlds forest cover (Haggett, 1975). Due to immense utility the forests are highly exploited in different ways by the human beings causing degradation of forest as well as diminishing the forest cover from the surface leads to destruction of habitat of wild biota. The act and activities of human beings have made to clear forest land through large scale timber exploitation for fuel wood, materials for construction, domestic as well as commercial uses, and the cleared land is being used for various purposes by the people. This process being accelerated due to excessive growth of population particularly during last two centuries intensifies the degradation of forest land.

However systematic attention about the forests is given very lately. After years of neglect, forest is acquiring international dimensions and discussed at different global plate form and Earth Summits under United Nations, as important part of environment. The role of forest in the environmental amelioration and human life assumed global significance after the 1972 Stockholm Summit and 1992 Rio Summit.

Since British period number of forest act and policies has been framed for protection and management of forest resources in our country. After Independence, the forests of Goalpara Division were consolidated and brought under Reserved Forests and Proposed Reserved Forest category only after acquisition of the same from Zamindars by the Government in late sixties and brought under the control of Forest Department, Govt. of Assam and the department has to maintain its status as per the Forest Management Act of India and State's Forest Rule. But the patches of forest areas of the district have been under continuous degradation and depletion. The status of the forest in Reserved Forests and Proposed Reserved Forests has become more vulnerable due to heavy degradation and illegal felling of trees, conversion of the forest areas into agricultural land, barren land, settlement area, and other use. Since 1981 about 1,050.96 hectare of forest land got encroached for human habitation, pasture and agricultural uses in Goalpara district measuring about half of the recorded forest area in the district.

Objectives

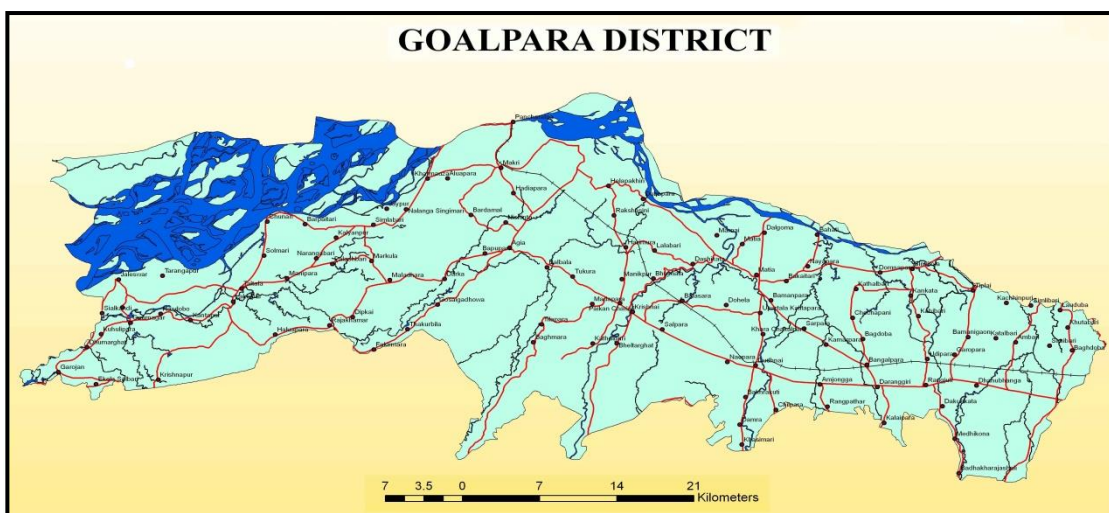
The present work has been carried out with the following objectives -

- (i) to study the rights and restrictions in notification of declaration of RF and PRF in Goalpara district.

- (ii) to analyse the present status of Reserved Forest and Proposed Reserved Forest and depletion of forest cover in Goalpara district.

Study area

Goalpara district, situated in westernmost part of Assam extending between $25^{\circ} 28' N$ and $26^{\circ} 15' N$ latitudes and $89^{\circ} 42' E$ and $90^{\circ} 15' E$ longitudes covering a geographical area of 1824 sq. km with a total population of 10,08,183 (as per 2011 Census). The district is bounded by river Brahmaputra in the north, foothills of Meghalaya plateau in the south, river Petabhokla in the east and flood plains in the west. Politically the district is bounded by Bongaigaon and Barpeta district to the north; Kamrup district to the east; Meghalaya state to the south and Dhubri district to the west. Physiographically, the whole district is covered with flat plain with scattered isolated hills and hillocks, which are part of Meghalaya plateau and scattered char-lands in the flood plains of river Brahmaputra. There are 55 Reserved Forest and 48 Proposed Reserved Forest under the Goalpara Forest Division covering a total forest area of about 36998.62 ha.



Database and Methodology

The study has been done with the help of both primary and secondary data. Necessary secondary data have been collected from books, journals and government sources such as the Statistical Handbook Assam, Census Reports, records and reports of office of the Divisional Forest Office, Goalpara, Forest Range offices etc. Forest cover change in the district has been observed from the from the image analysis of Landsat MSS of 1977, Landsat TM of 1997 and Landsat 8 of 2015 in GIS environment. Primary data have been collected from the selected Reserved Forest and Proposed Reserved Forest and through interview with forest personnel, aged people living nearby forest areas.

Results and Discussion

India is one of the pioneer countries in the world to undertake scientific management of forest in an organised and systematic module. Jammu and Kashmir and some princely states were promulgated to protect forests and regulate peoples' right as far back as 1883-1895 (Anonymous, 1961). During nineteenth century British were realise the enormous commercial value of the forest resources. But they have taken special attention only for trade and commerce. In British India for the first time the Forest Department was created during 1864 under the guidance of Sir Dietrich Brandis, a German National who was the first Inspector General of Forest in British India. Later in 1865 Indian Forest Act. 1865 enacted for settlement and protection of forests. In 1878 Indian Forest Act. was enacted with framing principle relating to management of forests and categorised forest into three types i.e. (i) Reserved Forest, (ii) Protected Forest and (iii) Village Forest. In 1893, Dr. Voelcker, another German expert has examined the role of forests and submitted a report on Indian agriculture and based on his report Government of India declared new Forest Policy in 19th October, 1894. Again in order to set things in right direction, the Indian Forest Act. 1927 was enacted.

On May 12, 1952 the Govt. of India proclaimed a new National Forest Policy (first forest policy of independent India) which was based on national needs. After three decades in the year 1988 New Forest Policy was declared. The Forest Policies that came into force in our country to protect the Reserved Forest, Propose Reserved Forest and other protected forest areas of our country, but even than the forest areas are under acute degradation and depletion. Illegal felling of timber, degradation and encroachment of forest by the human community for commercial as well as domestic purposes going on at an alarming rate affecting the forest resources as well as the wildlife.

Rapid depletion of forest cover in Goalpara district has been observed from the remote sensing imager analysis during 1977 and 2015. 21.95 per cent of the total area of Goalpara district was under dense forest in 1977, which has been reduced to 17.18 per cent in 1997 and 5.84 per cent in 2015 (Table 1). The area under open forest experience slight increase during 1977 and 1997 from 30.47 per cent to 31.29 per cent but during 1997 and 2015 it has reduced to 10.24 per cent. On the other hand the area under scrub forest has increased from 4.68 per cent in 1977 to 5.02 per cent in 2015 (Table 1, Fig 1).

Table 1: Forest Cover Change in Goalpara District, 1977-2015

Forest Cover Types	1977		1997		2015	
	Area in km ²	Area in %	Area in km ²	Area in %	Area in km ²	Area in %
Dense Forest	442.91	21.95	346.53	17.18	117.89	5.84
Open Forest	614.75	30.47	631.29	31.29	206.52	10.24

Scrub Forest	4.68	0.23	56.81	2.82	101.19	5.02
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Source: Based on LANDSAT MSS of 1977, LANDSAT TM of 1997 and LANDSAT 8 of 2015.

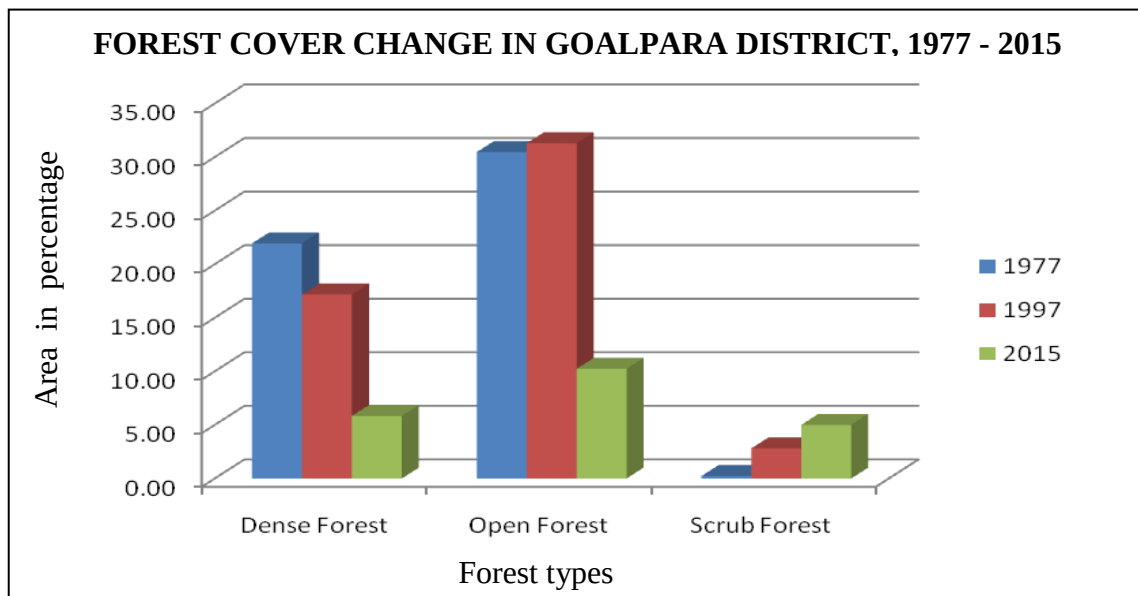


Fig. 2

The ground situation of deforestation is more deplorable in the district. The Reserved Forests and Proposed Reserved Forests are the notified area as per Assam Forest Regulation 1891, which restricts any kind of anthropogenic activity and intrusion inside the forest. In protection of forest in Assam the following Forest Policy/Acts are in force.

- National Forest Policy, 1988
- Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, (Amended) & Rule, 2003
- Forest Conservation Act, 1980
- Forest (Conservation) Rule, 2004
- National Environment Policy, 2006
- Assam Forest Policy, 2004
- Assam Forest Regulation, 1891 etc.

The forest patches in Goalpara district are demarcated as Reserved Forest and Proposed Reserved Forest and the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages of RF and PRF get only the following Rights and Privileges subject to control and restriction imposed by the Forest Department:

- Firewood Head load No limit
- Firewood Cart load Ten cart load per household per year.
- House post (Dia 6" undressed) 12 nos. per every three years per household
- Bamboo Any varieties 100 nos. per year per family
- Thatch Sun grass 100 standard bundles per year per family

- (vi) Nungal 3 nos. per year per household
- (vii) Cane 5 bundles per year per household
- (viii) Free collection of stones, gravels, sand for home consumption of limited quantity permitted by the DFO.

Forest areas may be protected properly with the implementation of the forest policies in the district. But even though the above policies and acts are in force the present status of the RF and PRF is more vulnerable with acute depletion and degradation. There is great violation of the forest rules and laws imposed in the protection of reserved forest and proposed reserved forests. The restrictions imposed in the notification of RF and PRF has been totally ignored and people are used to degrading and encroaching the forest patches. Many portion of the forest patches have been encroached upon and come under non forest activities leading to severe negative impact towards forest biodiversity. All the 55 RF and 48 PRF in Goalpara district have been comes under deforestation and encroachment, out of which forest cover is totally wiped out from 6 PRF due to deforestation and encroached (Table 2). More than 80 per cent of the area has been encroaching of 3 RF and 1 PRF in the district.

Table 2: Area and Number of RF/PRF under Encroachment in Goalpara District, 2021

Percentage of area under encroachment	Number of RF	Number of PRF
Fully Encroached	-	6
> 80	3	1
60 - 80	2	3
40 - 60	8	8
20 - 40	10	9
< 20	32	21
Total	55	48

Source : Divisional Forest Office, Goalpara and field visit.

It has been observed from the field that the departmental activities are unsuccessful in protecting the RF and PRF and growing population has been continuously encroaching the forest land and use for different non forest activities. The protective guidelines given in the notification are totally failed to impose. As per the available information in the forest offices and field study in selected 10 RF and PRF in Goalpara district shows the actual scenario of the present status of RF and PRF (Table 3).

Table 3 : Present status of RF and PRF in Goalpara district

Description	Affect
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Human intrusion for habitation	60.00 %
Human intrusion for agriculture	55.00 %
Illegal felling & deforestation	All the selected RF & PRF
Exploitation of forest resources	12.00
Availability of Mother Sal tree	3.00
Habitat of major wildlife (Temporary)	11.37
Non forest activity (Encroachment)	63.14
Settlement	18.39
Agriculture	22.54
Rubber Plantation	11.83
Road construction	5.89
Market	2.38
Institutions	1.74
Allotment of land for social activity	0.37

Source : Field survey in selected RF and PRF and official record.

Major causes of losing status of RF and PRF :

The forest areas in Goalpara district has comes under prolong degradation and encroachment. Goalpara district was under the rule of Zamindary system since Independence and as such the forest areas area also under the Zamindary system. After Independence the land system slowly converted from the Zamindary system to existing system under the Rule of Govt. of Assam. The Govt. of Assam after Independence also occupy the forest areas and arranging surveys forest area are declare as Reserved Forest (RF) and Proposed Reserved Forests (PRF) and notification published for each RF and PRF with the application of rules and regulation for protection of the forest areas. Even after the existing forest rules I force and restrictions laid in the notification the forest areas (RF and PRFs) comes under large scale degradation and encroachment which has been accelerate in last few decades. There are many factors influences the degradation and encroachment of forest areas losing its original status. The following are the major causes for losing the status of RF and PRF extracted from the field study-

- ✓ Rapid population growth with immigration.
- ✓ Lack of identifiable boundary and boundary pillars of RF and PRF.
- ✓ Lack of scientific and planned management of RF/PRF.
- ✓ Lack of working plan for forest management to be prepared in time.
- ✓ Lack of planned utilisation of forest resources.
- ✓ Lack of protection of forest from illegal felling and encroachment restricting intrusion in forest areas.
- ✓ Lack of sufficient eviction drive.
- ✓ Lack of sufficient staff and amenities in the forest department.
- ✓ Sizes and location of RF and PRF
- ✓ Inadequate punishment to the encroachers and smuggler.
- ✓ Political interference.

- ✓ Inappropriate forest policy.
- ✓ Lack of sufficient plantation drive with sustainable measures.

Conclusion :

Depletion of forest lands is a continuous process which has been seriously affect in the environment and climatic condition at local and global levels. Different policies and protective measures have been framed for protection and management of forest resources in our country as well as in our state. But most of the rules and protective measures are lying in the files only without any practical utility. Even though some steps were taken up by the department but it not sustain due to lack of sustainable long term planning. More importantly there is a big gap of understanding of people and the value of forest resources. Forest provides immense support to human community if we utilize it in planned and balance manner. But human greed accelerates the exploration of forest resources which cause large scale depletion and encroachment of forest areas. In Goalpara district the green patches of sal forest comes under degradation since the British period and it accelerate during last four decades. All the RFs and PRFs are comes under severe degradation and encroachment. High population pressure and the pressure of immigration particularly from Bangladesh cause serious thread in the forest areas. Strict imposition of forest laws with proper scientific and planned protective measures urgently needed along with the awareness generation on value of forests among the local people. Due to the depletion of forest areas several incidences of conflict between man and wild elephant are become a regular matter in the district causing life of several innocent people.

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