CHAPTER THREE
THE FIELD SETTING: SOPALOGA AND GAMANI FOREST VILLAGES

This chapter presents a detailed profile of the two FVs, namely Sopaloga and Gamani which are simultaneously located in the Balipara RF as well as in the West buffer areas of the NTR. It historicises the migration of landless indigenous communities into these forest areas during the colonial period and the formation of human settlement in the area. The Chapter also throws light into the sources of livelihood, dependence on forests, and day-to-day subsistence of the forest dwelling communities. It further examines the nature of the increasing conflict between the forest villagers and the FD over the issue of land and access to forest resources.

1. Topography of the Area
1.1 Geographic Location

Despite some differences in the nature of the forest landscape, NNP and Balipara RF are part of a contiguous territory. Characterised by a hilly terrain, tropical evergreen, semi evergreen and moist deciduous forests, Nameri is located about 35 km northeast of Tezpur, the district headquarters of the Sonitpur District of Assam. Present day NNP was carved out of the Naduar RF on the East and the Balipara RF on the West. Balipara was constituted as a RF in 1874. The Naduar Reserve was gazatted in 1876. Balipara RF was the eastern most natural sal forest patch of India. The boundary of these two RFs was subsequently notified with necessary modifications in 1878.

Nameri was declared as a WLS in 1985 with an area of 137.07 sq. km covering parts of the erstwhile Naduar RF. In July 1996, an additional area of 75.32 sq. km was added to the Nameri WLS. It was elevated to the status of a NP in 13 August 1998 with an area of 200 sq. km. The Government of Assam constituted and notified the NTR with an area of 344 sq. km. on 1 March 2000. The NTR has the NNP as the core area (200 sq. km of area) and a buffer area of 144 sq. km. The NTR (See Appendix 2) shares continuous forests with the Pakhui (or Pakke) Tiger Reserve of Arunachal Pradesh on the north and both together constitute an area of over 1000 sq. km. which is one of the largest and most ideal habitats of many wild animals (Management Plan of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08). The buffer area, as mentioned in Chapter One, is
constituted by the east and west buffer areas each consisting of several FVs (Appendix 3). These villages in the east buffer area come under the Naduar RF while those in the west buffer come under the Balipara RF. There is no human settlement inside the core area, unlike other PAs of the country.

The area has its own characteristic climate which can be divided into three, namely-- summer (March-May), rainy (June-September) and winter (November-February). The level of precipitation is heavy from May to September and low from November to March every year. During the rainy season the water courses of the NNP becomes turbulent with running water coming down from the hilly catchment areas of Arunachal Pradesh. The subtropical monsoon climate of the region is characterised by heavy rainfall with an annual average of 3,500 mm. As such humidity is comparatively higher in the summer and minimal in the winter. The relative humidity is high, and varies between 65 per cent and 90 per cent or more. The average temperature in the area varies from a low of 5°C in winter to a high of 37°C in summer (Management Plan of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

The geo-morphological features of the area illustrate the history of the process of soil formation thousands of years ago. The low outer hills along the northern edge of the NNP are made up of red and sedimentary rocks. These foothills are supposed to have formed from the deposition of sediments laid down thousands of years ago which had risen up from the movement of the tectonic plates into the sea bed. However, rest of the NNP and the RFs in the area is composed of alluvial soil which covers a wide area. Mostly the soil is composed of clay loam with fine sand. Changing of the course by the Jia Bhoroli River and other tributaries in the core area forms river island or sand bars (locally called ‘Chaporis’ or ‘Char’) (Management Plan of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

The entire area is intersected by numerous streams running from north towards the south-west direction and meets the Jia Bhoroli River (also called Jia Bhereilli) which joins the mighty Brahmaputtra River in the further south. During the rainy season the Jia Bhoroli and its tributaries become full to the bank and flood the NNP and its adjoining areas. The Jia Bhoroli River flows along the park’s western and southern boundaries and the Bor Dikrai River forms the eastern boundary. The upper stretch of the Jia Bhoroli is known as River Kameng that falls in Arunachal
Pradesh. The terrain is undulating, with lower areas at 80–100 m along the Jia Bhoroli and its tributaries, and higher areas at 200–225 m in the central and northern parts of the park. Numerous small rivers and perennial streams originating in Arunachal Pradesh run through the park and feed into the Jia Bhoroli. Many rivers shift their course during the rainy season and form dry river beds during the winter. The average altitude of the area ranges from 340 m above the mean sea-level at Bhalukpong near Assam-Arunachal border to 80 m near the confluence of the Bor Dikarai and Jia-Bhoroli Rivers. The area mostly encompasses plains except along the northern boundary where the terrain is undulating as the outer Himalayas are protruding with hillocks (Management Plan of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

The NNP is one of the ideal habitats for the Asiatic Elephants, Tiger, Gaur (*Bos gaurus*), Binturong, White Winged Wood Duck, Great Hornbill, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Weathered Hornbill, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Assam Roofed Turtle (*Kachuga sylhetensis*), etc. The River Jia Bhoroli is a breeding place of a number of fishes like the Golden Mahsheer, Silgharia (*Labeo pangusia*), etc. The PA is one of the richest habitats for both residents and terrestrial avifauna and also is a breeding place for the endangered avian species White Winged Wood Duck (Management Plan of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

With high densities of prey species located within the forest, Nameri is regarded as one of the key tiger conservation site in Assam which, it is estimated, could potentially support a population of around 30 adult tigers. However, at present the estimated tiger population of the park is less than half of this number. Since its notification as a Tiger Reserve in the year 2000, a number of NGOs (mainly Aaranyak) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) have been engaged in conservation efforts to protect the tigers of Nameri and their habitat. Unfortunately, the recent years have witnessed heavy biotic pressure in and around the park which has been attributed by its management and by conservationists to the increasing population and the illegal encroachments in the forest areas. Its forest villagers being historically dependent on settled agriculture for their livelihood, the ‘land’ question in the Nameri area has become a much challenging and contested issue in recent times.
2. A Brief History of the Forest Reserve in the Area

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, there is no dearth of historical records about the evolution of the colonial forest administration in Assam and its various activities. We find vivid accounts of the landscape of Assam in the writings of the colonial foresters such as Major John Butler, Gustav Mann, Dietrich Brandis, and others. These accounts give wide-ranging details about the unique ecological landscape, climate and the inhabitants of the area. Further, the extensive evergreen tracts of forest covers gave the colonial foresters a clear picture of commercial potentialities of the region’s forests and the future revenue prospects.

The colonial foresters saw the future commercial potential of the forests in the Namleri area and created Balipara and Naduar RFs and Charduar Rubber Plantation Reserve. These areas contained rich and dense sal (*Shorea Robusta*) forests. *Sal* was one of the most commercially viable timbers with high revenue potentials. The entire area including Balipara and Naduar were brought under reservation with a view to gaining monopoly control over these forests. As mentioned above, the Balipara RF was the eastern most natural *sal* forest patch of India. In the year 1906-07 the first working plan for *sal* forests of then Darrang Division was introduced by E.M. Coventry. The Charduar in the northern part of Darrang (now Sonitpur District) were extensively used for Rubber Plantations¹⁰. Later, on due to the discovery of ‘Para’ Rubber and its large-scale plantations in Malaysia, Sri Lanka (Ceylone) and South India, the Rubber Plantations in this area faced market crisis and had to be abandoned (Management of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

In 1925, colonial FD introduced operation of timber to meet the requirements of the Local Board and the tea gardens. In 1928, the *sal* forests of Balipara RF were operated departmentally. In 1933, the construction of the Rongiya-Rangapara section of the Eastern Bengal Railway was completed. With this, there was a significant increase in the extraction of timber from the Balipara forests. After the expiry of Coventry’s Plan for *sal* forests in 1915-16, the first Working

¹⁰ Discussions with some of the elderly villagers in Sopaloga and Gamani revealed that the colonial administration had encouraged migration of the Garo tribal population from Tura in present day Meghalaya to work in the Charduar Rubber Plantations during the early part of the twentieth century. Today, FVs such as Sotai and Phuloguri in the Nameri area are inhabited by the descendents of the early Garo settlers.
Scheme of all the reserves of Darrang Division was introduced in 1935 under the supervision of Dr. Bor. Working Plan by Jacob (1941-42 to 1950-51) was done with proper survey of the area. Plans for the regeneration of economically viable forests were also laid down. In this Working Plan, working circles were divided into different categories of forests:

(a) *Sal* bearing areas of Balipara RF and other forests of Darrang District,

(b) The soft wood forests of Naduar and Balipara RFs,

(c) Forests comprising of mixed evergreen and deciduous varieties,

(d) Mekahi-Amari Working Circle: The forested tracts between Potasali and Bhalukpung extending to Jia Bhoroli of Balipara RF were under this circle. The Silviculture was also practiced in order to re-generate the forests for timber extractions (Management of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

The present NNP was a part of the erstwhile Naduar RF. Earlier most part of the present PA was used as a firing Range by the defense personnel for which a large part of the area remained unsurveyed by the Working Plans. Prior to the constitution of Nameri WLS in 1985, the area was exploited for timber and NTFPs, mainly cane. Boulders were also extracted from the river beds of Jia Bhoroli and Bordikarai Rivers for construction and developmental works. Earlier, the present fringe areas around NNP were full of forests. Now, due to heavy anthropogenic pressures, these areas are devoid of any forest covers. Most of the areas of the Balipara RF have been now converted to agricultural fields and human habitations.

3. Administrative Set-up: Forest and Wildlife Divisions

The NNP and the Balipara RF come under the Chariduar (also known as Charduar during the colonial period) Revenue circle, in Western Sub-Division of Sonitpur District in the state of Assam. It is under the jurisdiction of Rangapara Police Station. The District Administration which consists of both civil and police administrations looks after the matters relating to law and order, checking of illegal activities, and so on in the park area. Close coordination is generally maintained between the District and the Forest Administrations (Management Plan of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).
The core area of the NTR, that is NNP, is under the administrative control of the Western Wildlife Division of the state FD. The Namiri Wildlife Range office is situated in the West buffer at Potasali which looks after the NNP. The anti-poaching camps are maintained at various places inside the core area of the Tiger Reserve for effective management and protection. These camps perform protection, anti-poaching duties and other developmental works in the PA. These camps are located at places stretching from Bhalukpong to Rangajan along the bank of Jia Bhoroli River and from Seijosa to Dikarai along the bank of the Dikarai River. There are 18 anti-poaching camps in the core area of NTR (Management Plan of Namiri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

The Balipara RF is under the supervision of the Range Office (Territorial Division of the Forest Administration) at Chariduar. Thus, the West buffer of the NTR including the FVs comes under the administration of the Range Officer at Chariduar. He keeps records and looks after the needs of the forest villagers in this area. This Range Office coordinates and takes the charge of all JFM activities in the FVs.

The Forest Administration looks after the protection, preservation and growth of the forest resources including all flora and fauna. The forest villagers pay their annual land revenue (Khajana) to the FD at the rate of Rs.3/- per bigha. The tasks of raising new plantations, checking of illegal encroachments and illicit felling of trees by timber traders, monitor and control trespass through the forest areas, looking after the needs of the forest villagers, etc are managed by the Sonitpur West Division of the Territorial Wing of the state FD of which the headquarter is located at Tezpur.11 The Divisional Forest Officer of the West Sonitpur Territorial Division is assisted in the tasks by a Range Officer whose office is situated at Chariduar. The Beats and the camps in west buffer of the NTR (Balipara RF) under Chariduar Range are:

(i) Bhalukpong Beat
(ii) Sotai camp
(iii) Gamani Sub-Beat
(iv) Tarajan Sub-Beat
(v) Dharikati camp

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11 Discussion with A.K. Deb Choudhury, Ranger, Chariduar Range Office (Territorial Division)
The Forest Protection Force personnel who are posted in several Camps and Beats located in the NNP area are mainly responsible for tasks relating to forest protection.

4. Structure of the NTR and the Balipara Reserve

The extent of the NTR (both core and buffer) is from Balipara-Bhalukpong Railway line within Balipara RF on the West to the Ghiladhari River (Eastern boundary of the Naduar RF) on the East. Thus, part of the Balipara RF and the entire Naduar RF fall under the buffer of the Tiger Reserve. The forest area of the Tiger Reserve is contiguous with the adjoining forest area of Chariduar reserve on the West, Bishwanath RF on the East and Pakhui WLS, Papum RF and Doimara RF of Arunachal Pradesh on the North. The core area consisting of 200 sq. km. includes the NNP excluding the area marked for tourism zone of the PA. The objective of core zone is to protect habitat, key areas and wildlife from human disturbances. It is to be mentioned that there are no human settlements inside the core area. The human settlements are located in the buffer areas of the PA (Management Plan of Nameri Tiger Reserve 2003-04 to 2007-08).

The total areas under the NTR are:

- **Core Area**: 200 Sq. Km. (Consists of the NNP)
- **Buffer Area**:
  - East Buffer: 80 Sq. Km. (Remaining part of Naduar RF)
  - West Buffer: 64 Sq. Km. (Part of Balipara RF)
  - South Buffer: 44.70 Sq. Km.

5. Formation of Human Settlement during the Colonial Period

The history of peasant migration to the area and the beginning of the formation of the villages therein dates back to the early twentieth century. The early settlers of the present FVs migrated from the nearby areas of Balipara and Chariduar who had lost their small landholdings on
account of either river erosion or shortage of land owing to population increase\textsuperscript{12}. The coming up of a number of tea plantations in the area also critically affected the local peasants’ access to new land. The arrival of more such peasants subsequently resulted in the growth of villages and clearance of more forest land facilitating agricultural expansion (for detail on the formation of FVs in Assam, see Sarma 2012a).

Like other RFs of the state, in this area too, the British administration driven by its colonial economic interests allowed the peasants to settle in the vicinities of the forests in the form of temporary settlements. Later on, these temporary settlements were converted into FVs. The erstwhile colonial FD created these FVs inside the notified areas to meet the demands of regular supply of man-power to work in various forestry programmes. The villagers, thus settled were landless and flood affected local peasants. At the same time, the department encouraged more agrarian expansion into the forest areas by settling these poor peasants. The villagers were given cleared up patches of forest lands for agricultural activities in return of their physical works rendered to the colonial FD and a small amount of revenue (\textit{khajana}\textsuperscript{13}). Accordingly, each adult forest villager was required to render 20 days of manual labour annually to the FD at the prevailing rate of wage. Like other forest villagers, in the FVs of Balipara RF too, it was fixed for 20 days in a year. Locally, this system was known as \textit{begari} (\textit{begar services or unpaid labour}). However, the villagers were allowed to collect firewood, bamboo, cane and thatch from forests free of cost. They were also allowed to remove sufficient building materials to maintain their dwelling units. In the erstwhile Balipara Reserve, the villagers provided their services free of cost to the FD\textsuperscript{14}. In return for their services, they were given the above mentioned necessities and not cash. While in other such FVs, the villagers were paid the prevailing ordinary wages in return for their services (Saikia 2011, 102 ; Handique 2004, 76).

In the Balipara RF, except these rights and privileges, the FD exercised its monopoly control over the forest villagers. Though the villagers were permitted to settle in forest land, they were not given any tenurial security. The FD allotted 10 \textit{bighas}\textsuperscript{15} of cultivable land (\textit{rupit mati}) and 5 \textit{bighas} of homestead land (\textit{bari mati}) to each family in the village. The ‘revenue’ on these

\textsuperscript{12} Discussions with the villagers in Gamani and Sopaloga.
\textsuperscript{13} Rent on land.
\textsuperscript{14} Discussions with some of the elderly villagers in Gamani and Sopaloga.
\textsuperscript{15} One Bigha = 0.13387 Hectare and 0.33058 Acres
officially allotted lands was fixed at Rs.5/- (that is, 6 annas per bigha) on each family per annum. The department maintained its strict control over the forest villagers. The forest officers maintained records to monitor the work of the forest villagers. Any outsiders coming to the village had to first take permission to enter, at the office of the Assistant Political Officer (APO)\textsuperscript{16}, Chariduar. During one of the discussions, one of the villagers in Sopaloga shared some of his views thus,

> The rules laid down during the ‘political days’\textsuperscript{17} were stringent but far better than today. The administration was such that no outsiders were allowed to enter the forest area including the FVs without permission. Visitors to our village had to make entry at the main gate located at Chariduar. Hence, nobody was allowed inside the forest and the village without the consent of the Political Sahab. This strict vigilance discouraged indiscriminate deforestation by outsiders. Even the forest villagers had to take permission from the forest officer, for timbers collection for building or repairing of dwelling units.\textsuperscript{18}

It is pertinent to mention that the nature of \textit{bega}r services rendered by the villagers/local communities varied from region to region. In the Western Himalayan region, Tucker observes,

> We must not overlook the composition of the workforce for the timber harvest: which groups were recruited for the labour, and how the relatively highly differentiated tasks of felling, dressing, and transporting the timber functioned. Through the nineteenth century, labour for timber operations was primarily local in origin. Peasants who owned their land, as well as the landless service castes, the Doms, traditionally were required to provide \textit{bega}r, or unpaid labour for transport and trail maintenance. They were the primary wage labour available for timber operations, and anyone who owned land would resist timber work at crucial times in the agricultural cycle. (2012: 83)

Further, Tucker is of the view that,

> \textit{Bega}r was the north Indian term for corvee labour, which had been required of all landowning peasants in lieu of money taxes. In the Kumaon hills a vast majority of the male population were landowning small peasants, living in a rather more egalitarian society than in the plains below. In a region where there were almost no motorable or all-weather roads, \textit{bega}r was demanded by the British to meet the needs of both government officials and private travelers on tour…Villagers were required to provide unpaid \textit{bega}r whenever it was demanded, regardless of the point in the annual agricultural cycle”.

\textsuperscript{16} In 1914, the British brought the present day Arunachal Pradesh under the jurisdiction of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) which was divided into three Frontier Tracts (FT), namely, Sadiya, Balipara and Lakhimpur. Each FT was placed under the jurisdiction of a Political Officer (PO). The PO was responsible for maintenance of law and order, assessment and collection of revenue and other administrative matters. The office of PO continued well beyond independence. Later on, to assist the PO, Assistant Political Officers (APOs) were also appointed. An APO was posted in Chariduar which also looked after the forest administration of the area.

\textsuperscript{17} The local people refer to the PO as ‘Political Sahab’ and the period of his rule as ‘political days’.

\textsuperscript{18} Mukheswar Deka of Sopaloga FV.
Thus, the FD officials used the coolies, both on official tour and on holiday. (2012: 99-100)

However, by 1915 the Nationalist leaders of the Kumaon began to question the prevailing begar services. It was called forced labour and demanded the end of the ‘feudal’ system. In 1916 an organisation was founded in the hills which established teams of coolies to work for set wages. By 1919 the first Congress political spokesmen in Nainital and Almora joined the struggle to abolish begar. Govind Ballabh Pant was one of the spokesman who later became the first Chief Minister of U.P. after independence. The provincial government responded quickly, organising a new system of paid coolie labour in 1921 (Tucker 2012, 100).

Gradually, the situation in the FVs of the Balipara RF changed with the villagers learning to negotiate their interest with the forest officials resulting in the reduction of the fixed 20 days of annual begar service to 10 days and then to 5 days. Finally, a new consciousness gained ground among the villagers that since they were already paying ‘revenue’ to the FD, the continuation of begar service was an exploitative practice. Thus, the villagers gradually stopped the begar service to the FD with the effect that the system does not exist today. Interestingly, the FD also made no attempt to enforce the system.

It is relevant here to mention that, like Sopaloga and Gamani, there are a number of FVs in the surrounding areas inhabited by both tribal and non-tribal peasantry for years now. However, even after independence, the forest villagers have remained deprived of their tenurial rights over their land and this issue started assuming serious anxiety among the villagers in the present times. This background has to be kept in mind in order to understand the history of formation of FVs in the Balipara RF.

6. Gamani and Sopaloga Forest Villages

Although the early settlers had migrated into the area during 1920s-30s, in official records, the villages were mentioned much later in the year 1962. It is already mentioned that Sopaloga and Gamani are non-tribal FVs located in the west buffer zone of the NTR. Sopaloga consists of 98 households with a population just above 500. It has an area of 99.33 hectares of land. Gamani on the other hand, consists of a population of 721 with 132 households. It has an area of 133.333 hectares of land. All the villagers of Sopaloga and Gamani belong to the Koch community, an
Assamese peasant caste recognised as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by the Indian Constitution. Almost all the families in both the villages are entirely dependent on agriculture though a few families in the villages also have other sources of income besides agriculture. There are also variations in the amount of landholdings among the villagers.

The present villagers do not exactly remember the dates when their forefathers had migrated to these areas in search of agricultural land. However, the elderly villagers can relate to some important events in the past such as the World Wars, Indian independence in 1947 or the Indo-China war in 1962 when they had already settled here. They further point out that their predecessors (mostly fathers and uncles) came to settle in the area. In the absence of any historical records about human settlement here, I have had to depend mainly on the narratives of the villagers. However, I have found receipts of *khajana* payments of the years 1941, 1942, 1951-1952 in Sopaloga and 1937-1938 and 1946 in the contiguous village of Gamani in the possession of some families. Other documents also have been found which state that the human settlements in these villages started around 1920s. In a petition addressed to the President of the erstwhile Darrang District Lok Samiti in 1975, the villagers of Eraliloga, Sopaloga and Gamani mentioned their ancestors settled there in 1920. The past narratives of the elderly villagers also reveal enough evidences to show the period of migration of their predecessors during mentioned period. An elderly villager states that when he had come to this area during the British rule in 1947, peasant villagers were already settled here, but in small numbers. However, the population in the village grew with the passage of time. He was the first to start a primary school in 1947 in Eraliloga. During the fieldwork, I spoke to many of his students (now villagers) who are now in the age group of 55 to 65. All these villagers belong to the third generation of settlers.

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19 The present residents of the village mostly belong to their third generation; while very few of them are also from the second generation.

20 The petition requested the President of the erstwhile Darrang District Lok Samiti for allotment of more land to the forest villagers. They mentioned that their ancestors came to the area in 1920 who had been engaged in agriculture in the forest land. They provided begar service of 10 days to the FD and got an annual *kheraji* (revenue) *patta*. In 1955-56, this system was changed, land was newly surveyed and the FD took over most of these lands after giving only 10-15 bighas of land according to the size of the families which created serious problems for the forest dwellers later on as their family size was increasing. The petition also mentioned about the assurance of the state minister of forest regarding allotment of more land to the villagers when on 28 August 1970 the villagers met him. However, they complained that this distribution of land did not take place till the writing of the petition.

21 Rajani Bhuyan, a 95 years old villager from Sopaloga.

22 Eraliloga is a tribal forest village adjoining Sopaloga. Both the villages are connected by a single parallel road.
Further, Rajani Bhuyan and other elderly persons in the village narrated interesting histories on the relations between the hills tribes with the forest villagers. Sopaloga and Gamani FVs lie on the border of the Assam valley and Arunachal Pradesh. These villages constitute the foothills. The Daflas (now called the Nyishis) and Akas (now called the Hrussos) used to come down once or twice in a year, during the winter to the villages on the foothills with their hill products to exchange or collect essential items from the villagers. They had to depend on the villagers (or people in the plains) for their various necessities. They used to come down through the duars. The Chariduar or four duars were held mainly by these tribes to enter the foothills for trade. These fours duars or trades routes were: Bhalukpong (north), Gormora, Bogijuli (west), Lakara (previously called Lokra) (east) and Balipara (south).

The hill tribes came down with products such as ganja (marijuana), gomphu-guri, ginger, chilly powder, chillies, zabarang, kosu (arum), bamboo shoot, turmeric, etc. and carried up cloths, blankets, utensils, rice, dried fish, salt, and the like. Often, they used to sell their products in the weekly haats at Amaribari, Phulbari, Bindukuri, Lakara, and khelmati. During winter season, the Daflas descended from the hills along with their Gaums (the Chieftain) to the foothills of Nameri area and used to live with the local villagers in an atmosphere of cordiality and called each other mitir-kutum (friends and kins). Some also made their temporary rest camp near the Sonai Nadi (or the Sonai River) flowing along the border of Gamani FV. In the process, the hillmen had developed close relations with the villagers in Sopaloga, Gamani and other nearby FVs.

Historian H.K. Barpujari also writes in this regard, “(T)here had been regular traffic between the people of the plains and the hills. The hillmen had to depend by and large on the neighbouring plainsmen for their requirements of foodstuff and other necessaries” (Barpujari 1992, 113). He further mentions that the duars or the passes acted as the trade routes for the hill tribes. The duars along the northern boundaries of Assam with Bhutan and the hills of the present day

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23 Periodic markets, usually weekly or bi-weekly
24 Along the frontier with Bhutan contained seven duars, five in Kamrup and two in Darrang at the time when British occupied Assam. The Kamrup duars were Bijni, Chapakhamar, Chapaguri, Baska and Ghorkala and the two duars in Darrang were Buriguma and Kalling.
Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile NEFA) had been operating since the days of the Ahom rule and they served as transit points for trade and commerce as well as cultural exchange between the peoples of hills and the valley. But the Daflas and other hill tribes often used to disturb peace in the foothill villages by engaging themselves in raids and plunders. As a result, such relationships sometimes turned hostile leading to clashes between the Daflas and the plains. However, throughout the Ahom period, the rulers’ main concern was to contain the frontier tribes in their hills and forests. As such, the Ahom policy of conciliation is best exemplified by its relations with the Daflas. Later on, in order to obtain enduring peace in the foothills and to subjugate the hill tribes, the Ahoms formally granted a *posa* right to the Daflas and certain small hill tribes. In fact, it was regularised with a condition that they shall show allegiance and pay tribute to the king. Thus, the system of *posa* entailed compensation to the hill tribes in lieu of the dues they were entitled to in the conquered territories (Sharma 2009).

However, the advent of the colonial administration in the region marked significant changes in the interactions between the hill and the plain people. The British imposed restrictions on their entry into the *duars* to collect *posa* from the foothill villages. Apparently, this was done with a view to securing peace and stability in the foothills, in fact, its primary objective was to bring the foothill regions under the colonial control by putting limit to the traditional area of movement of the hill tribes and making them dependent on the British (Sharma 2009). The Daflas were forced to forgo their practice of collecting the *posa* and instead to receive their articles from a single revenue officer. In 1952, the Daflas had to surrender their rights of collecting *posa* in lieu of a fixed payment in cash (Barpujari 1992, 245). The almost dependence of these hillmen upon the *duars* made them extremely vulnerable to that form of coercion. The Daflas of Chariduar were entitled to visit the plains every year and levy on every household *posa* consisting of 1 seer of salt, 5 seer of rice, and cash of 1 anna and in addition a village ‘tax’ of 7 rupees and 10 annas on every 22 houses. The *posa*, and the *duar* tribute were least satisfactory of David Scott’s

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25 The Ahoms ruled in Assam for six hundred years from 1228 till the year 1826, when the government of the kingdom passed into the hands of the East India Company by the Treaty of Yandaboo. The territory occupied by them consisted of considerable part of the Brahmaputra Valley, though the territorial limit kept fluctuating.

26 Its literal meaning is a tribute, or a contribution, either in cash or kind or both. The *posa* system played a most vital role in the politics of the Ahom administration, especially in the relationship of the Ahoms with their neighbouring hill tribes.

27 David Scott was the Governor General’s Agent in Assam from 1826 to 1828. In 1828, he was appointed as the Commissioner of Assam, subordinate to the Governor of Bengal.
arrangements (Barpujari 1992, 140). Eventually, the British introduced the ‘Inner Line’ in 1873
to demarcate the boundary of its territory with that of the hill areas outside its jurisdiction. The
inner line put serious restrictions to the traditional hill-plains relationships.

7. Administration of Forest Villages

The administration of the FVs is, however, in the hands of the FD. The villagers are under the
strict control and vigilance of the FD. They are given sufficient amount of homestead and
agricultural lands for survival in the vicinities of the forest areas. Since the land belongs to the
FD, the villagers are not given tenurial rights on land (patta). In the recent times, the issue of
land rights has been a cause for much insecurity among them. The issue of patta is also central to
the socio-economic as well as political dynamics of the interactions between the forest villagers
and the forest. The lack of tenurial security on land has been responsible for many problem for
the poor villagers. According to them, their greatest difficulty is to obtain government or banking
loans since they do not possess any official land documents (pattas). Because they are under the
control of the FD, they cannot mortgage or sell their land even in times of emergencies.
However, it is seen that needy villagers do mortgage their land to the fellow villagers informally
for cash without the knowledge of the FD. This also speaks of internal economic differentiation
within the village.

The FD enjoys the sole proprietary rights over the land. Each family in the FVs are officially
allotted fixed amount of homestead and cultivable lands. They are not allowed to encroach upon
forest lands over and above the stipulated official limits which is 15 bighas per family as
mentioned above. Any member found doing so is considered punishable offence by forest laws.
Generally, it is observed that now most villagers own agricultural lands over and above this fixed
official limit. The present household landholding pattern of the villagers in Sopaloga and Gamani
are shown in the table 2.

The FD undertakes different conservation programmes implemented at the village level. The
JFM scheme as well as the FD has initiated various afforestation programmes in all deforested
tracts in the fringe areas of forests. In the FVs, the gaonbura (headman) plays an important role
in representing the villagers’ needs to the authority. There are no set rules and norms for the
selection of the gaonbura, but he is selected by the villagers from among themselves. In case of
any dispute in the village or with another FV, the villagers resolve it through the instrumentality of the mel (assembly) of the villagers which is an Assamese traditional practice. However, in case of disputes between a Revenue Village and a FV, the Ranger has to be immediately informed as police cannot directly intervene in matters pertaining to forest villagers.

Today, Sopaloga and Gamani have schools, Primary Health Centres (PHCs), Anganwadis, electricity, Village Panchayat, community prayer hall (naamghar), village club and library, etc. The villagers also receive benefits of various government schemes/provisions such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarrantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Kalpataru Scheme, Rajiv Gandhi Rural Electrification Scheme, Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards, Public Distribution System (PDS), etc. Different government schemes have been implemented in the FVs in order to help the rural poor by giving them access to basic needs. Some programmes and camps are also organised by the FD from time to time for the villagers.

Looking at these FVs in Nameri, it is not possible to distinguish them from any ordinary village. In Assam, a typical feature of the FVs is that they do not imply human settlements established deep inside forests. Rather they are located in the fringe areas around forests. Sopaloga and Gamani are now full-fledged FVs with people having different occupational engagements (Appendix 4 and 5), different government schemes are operating at the village level, government offices (post office, health centres, anganwadi centres, panchayat office, etc.) and schools are also there in the villages (Appendix 6). The villagers do go out to work in search of decent livelihoods. This is seen mostly among the youths, though small in numbers.

In spite of all these, there are still insecurities among these villagers that they do not have land pattas. Initially, when the early settlers had migrated into the RF areas of Balipara, they did not even know that they had moved into a reserve. As already discussed, the loss of land due to

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28 Information received from discussions with the forest dwellers and the A. K. Dev Choudhury, Ranger, Range Office Chariduar (Territorial Division).
29 The Assam Government introduced this scheme in 2003-04 to provide direct self-employment to the unemployed youths from below poverty line (BPL). Under the scheme, a few unemployed youths of the FVs of Balipara received loan of Rs.7500/- to start small businesses - poultry, dairying, grocery shops, etc.
30 My field assistant, Nayanmoni Das’s younger brother, Nijan Das who is in his early 20s has gone out to work in Delhi. He is engaged as a security guard in a hotel. Like Nijan, there are some youths in Sopaloga and Gamani, who have gone out in search of livelihoods, since they know that back home they have no earning opportunities. They are mostly engaged in petty jobs like security guards, factory workers, and so on.
natural calamities (floods and erosion) and take over of large-scale land for tea gardens had compelled the people to move into any areas with secured land and livelihood. The colonial FD allowed the people to settle in this reserve, provided them land for cultivation in return for their begar services rendered for forestry operations. However, with the passage of time, the conditions of these villagers remained unchanged till now in the absence of tenurial and livelihood securities. Other than agriculture, they have no alternative means of livelihood. In such a situation, forests are bound to face increasing human pressures. Like Sopaloga and Gamani, other FVs in Assam show similar features.

8. Demographic Profile

8.1 The Communities

As mentioned above, Sopaloga and Gamani FVs consist of non-tribal population. These are exclusively non-tribal villages. These FVs have their own traditions of religion, culture and festivals. There are no marked hierarchies of castes or traditional occupations. Basically, it is understandable that the villages represent class based divisions in terms of their economic possessions, that is, land. There are variations in the amount of landholdings owned by the families in the villages as pointed out earlier. Moreover, the social structure of the tribals and the non-tribals mark similarities. It is also interesting to mention that particular elements of culture, especially occupations are same for both tribals and non-tribals in this area.

Gamani and Sopaloga are adjacent FVs connected by a single parallel road. Both the villages have same settlement structure and also the types of houses are similar. The structure of settlement is dense and houses are built close to each other. There are few villagers those who are little better-off, own more agricultural land and earn good income by selling rice and have concrete Assam-type houses. Whereas most families in these villages have traditional houses made of bamboo and mud rubbed walls, that are roofed with tin or thatch. The villagers revealed that, earlier timbers and thatch for house building were procured from the forest free of cost (that is, in return for their begar services). Now, the forests have nothing for them, except firewood. They buy bamboo, cane, thatch, timbers, etc from outside traders, because the forests have hardly any worthwhile NTFPs. A typical characteristic of a village house is that it has a big courtyard (sotal) in the front and a backyard (bari) where beetel nuts, beetel leaves, coconut trees
and vegetables are grown. A portion in the corner of the front courtyard is used for cattle-shed and a granary (*bhoral ghor*).

All the FVs, both tribal and non-tribal, in the buffer of the NTR share amicable relationships. There is no instance of inter-community feud and dispute. It is worth mentioning that the socio-economic systems of these tribal and the non-tribal FVs hardly present any significant difference. Agriculture is the dominant activity for the both tribals and non-tribals and dependence on forests is only supplementary. In contrast to the situation in the Namleri area, forest dwellers in other parts of India are basically gatherers who depend on the collection of a variety of NTFPs for their survival. In this context, Lele writes, “(S)ocially in India, the livelihoods of 100-250 million people are intertwined directly with the forests. These people live in close proximity to forests, and most of them have a long tradition of forest use, and therefore of a sense of customary rights and of how a forest should be…” (2011, 96).

8.2 Religion, culture and festivals

The non-tribal forest villagers of Sopaloga and Gamani are followers of Assamese Vaishnavism which in the village has two major divisions. They are:

(i) Shankar Sangha:- This group of people are the exclusive devotees of Srimanta Shankar Dev. The special occasions like *Bhaona*, and annual birth anniversary of Srimanta Shankar Dev are celebrated in the *naamghar*. This group is the staunch believer of Sankar Dev’s teachings. Celebration of any forms of puja (like Diwali and Durga puja) and entering temples are generally forbidden for them.

(ii) Sanatan Sangha:- Unlike, the above group, this section of people go to temples and celebrate annual festivals like Durga puja and Diwali.

31 Srimanta Shankar Dev (1449-1568) is the great Neo-Vaishnavite preacher and social reformer of medieval Assam.
32 Neo-Vaishnavite folk-popular drama tradition of Assam. It is a traditional form of entertainment with religious message which is prevalent in Assam. It is the creation of Mahapurusa Srimanta Shankar Dev. Men and Women play out different characters, generally using fictitious or mythological kings, queens, demons, gods, soldiers, etc. The entire drama is performed in the middle of the open space in the *naamghar*, surrounded in three sides by audience, having the sides toward *Manikut* kept open. The main drama is proceeded by a performance of *Gayan-Bayan*. It is musical, performed with traditional instrument, like khol, taal, doba, nagara, all created by Srimanta Shankar Deva.
33 Religious observance.
Despite the divisions, festivals like Bihu, community feast after harvest, annual *Bhaona* strengthen village solidarity. Bihu is celebrated by both tribal and non-tribal forest villagers. Besides, Bihu, other festivals like Holi, Raas, etc are also observed.

However, a typical characteristic feature of Sopaloga, Gamani and all other FVs (both tribal and non-tribal) in the area is that the practice of plant or animal worship is totally unknown to the communities. They do not have indigenous systems of propitiating forest deities and celebrating elaborate religious rituals associated with nature. Moreover, there are also no customs of maintaining and protecting sacred groves by the communities. A researcher mentions that these villagers neither have any history of cultural and religious ties with the forest nor do they possess any customary forest rights and traditional knowledge (Bose 2009) of forest management. This is a commentary which applies to all FVs in Assam.

**TABLE 1**

*NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS, MALE-FEMALE POPULATIONS IN THE FOREST VILLAGES OF BALIPARA RESERVE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOREST VILLAGES</th>
<th>NO. OF HOUSEHOLDS</th>
<th>POPULATION</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MALE</td>
<td>FEMALE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sopaloga</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamani</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dharikati</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarajan</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eraliloga</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sotai</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>977</td>
<td>922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogijuli</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>2595</td>
<td>1839</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(SOURCE: Provisional Population Census 2011, Collected from the Circle Office at Chariduar)

**9. The Socio-Economic Life**

**9.1 The Economic Activities**
The economic dominant activities in Sopaloga and Gamani revolve round agriculture. Most villagers are either wholly or partly dependent upon agriculture in one or more than one of the following roles: landowner, sharecropper and labourer. The entire population in both villages can be divided into five major categories on the basis of landholdings:

A. The villagers who own more than 20 bighas or more of cultivable land. Some of them also lease out and lease in land for sharecropping (adhi). A few of these villagers also have government jobs while some others have small businesses (such as grocery shops, tea stalls, hair cutting salon, etc) within the village.

B. The villagers who own 15-20 bighas of cultivable land. Some of them are sharecroppers while some also supplement their income as wage labourers under various schemes of the government such as MGNREGS and the JFM schemes under the FD.

C. The villagers who own more than 7 bighas of cultivable land. They also work as wage labourers like those under B.

D. The villagers who own 7-1 bigha of cultivable land. These category of villagers also work as wage labourers as the categories B and C.

E. The landless villagers. Their livelihood mainly depends on daily wages that they earn within the village and occasionally under MGNREGS, JFM Scheme and any other works under the FD. As a landless villager recounts:

I own only half a bigha of homestead land (bari mati) where I grow potatoes. I take the potato seeds from a fellow villager and later on...share the produces with him. Since I have no bullocks, I cannot lease in agricultural land for sharecropping. I also work as a daily wage labourer in the village. At the time of sowing and harvesting of rice, I earn relatively better. This is how we make our living.\(^{34}\)

Landlessness in the villages can be attributed to a number of factors. Initially, the colonial FD had allotted 15 bighas of land to each peasant family. Some families, however, got lesser amount of land as the measurement was not very strict and sometimes even arbitrary. Nevertheless, that

\(^{34}\) Discussion with Mukuta Das of Sopaloga FV.
amount was enough to meet the livelihood requirements of the villagers. However, the expansion of families led to fragmentation and eventually the shortage of land. Hence, there is an increasing need for more cultivable land in the village. As a villager narrates:

Officially I own 10 bighas of land which is part of what was initially allotted to my grandfather during the political days. Now, 10 bighas of land cannot meet our needs as the size of our family has grown…That is why, we are forced to clear up patches of forests for more cultivable land. The FD collects khajana only on the official 10 bighas of land and not on the extra amount which we have encroached upon. However, such encroachment has become difficult now.35

The category of landless villagers mostly hires themselves as agricultural wage labourers in the villages. The system of sharecropping (adhi) is practiced by most of them. There are number of villagers who are only lessees of land. They pay the owners an agreed quantity of rice per bigha after harvest. The quantity might vary in each case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SERIAL NO.</th>
<th>LANDHOLDING (In Bigha) (Rupit and Bari Mati)</th>
<th>NO. OF HOUSEHOLDS IN SOPALOGA</th>
<th>NO. OF HOUSEHOLDS IN GAMANI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>15-20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>More than 07</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>07-01</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Landless Villagers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Indeed, for the forest villagers, encroachments into the forest land have now become difficult as the FD has demarcated forest land for specific conservation schemes. Any act of infringement would only invite reprimand from the FD which would result in loss of other privileges to get from the latter as forest villagers. Possibility of such punitive action, however, does not deter the new immigrant encroachers who do not have to lose such privileges.

The crucial economic activity of the villagers, the cultivation of rice, determines how most villagers spent their time during the year. The cultivation of rice is accompanied by considerable

35 Discussion with Bhadra Saikia of Sopaloga FV.
anxiety. Crop raids by wild elephants are regular occurrence in these villages and no villager can afford to take things easy till the harvest is over. In the buffer areas around the NTR, conflicts between man and elephants have intensified over the years. Incidences of elephant attacks on villagers are common. Earlier, cultivation of sali, a traditional late maturing variety of rice and sugarcane was practiced by the villagers. Regular elephant raids on crops have compelled the villagers to completely abandon sugarcane and sali cultivation. While the villagers are not anymore ready to risk sugarcane cultivation which involves much more hard labour and manpower, today almost all the villagers go for early maturing varieties of rice so that they can protect and harvest the crop together. When the crop is ready for harvesting, the fields are protected from elephant herds at nights continuously till harvesting is over. Male members from the families make groups and spend the nights in the tangi-ghars\textsuperscript{36} in the paddy fields. Throughout night they keep shouting, beating the drums and firing the crackers to chase away the elephant herds. These few months are extremely difficult and hectic when the villagers remain tied up with agricultural works.

The rice season starts from May to January or February. Most villagers have pushcarts in their houses and there are one or two tractors in the villages. Pushcarts are generally used to carry the heaps of grains from the fields after harvest. Most of the villagers use bullocks for ploughing the fields. Nevertheless, tractors are also hired by villagers at the rate of Rs. 350/- per hour in order to make their tasks easier. This is generally done by those villagers who can afford to pay for the tractor. Rice is sown in May, before the rain. Agricultural plots are prepared for transplantation of rice seedlings. Harvesting generally starts towards the end of October to November. Sometime in case of late maturing varieties of rice such as sali, harvesting is done till January.

\textsuperscript{36}A tangi ghar is a small temporary structure which can accommodate one or two persons built upright on the top of a tree or a wooden or bamboo platform in the midst of paddy field to chase away wild elephants.
1. Office of the Ranger (Wildlife Division), Potasali

2. Office of the Ranger (Territorial Division), Chariduar
3. A tea plantation in the Balipara area

4. Approach road to Sopaloga and Gamani from Chariduar

5. The passenger vans at Balipara centre which carry passengers to Chariduar
6. A traditional house in Gamani

7. The Frame of a Tangi Ghar

8. A traditional Granary (Bhoral Ghar)
9. The shades of the weekly *haat* at Chariduar

10. A grocery shop at Sopaloga

11. A Public Distribution Shop at Sopaloga
12. Standing crops in a paddy field in Gamani in the background is the Gui-Nejia hills under the Balipara Reserve

13. Women wage labourers in the village
14. A village prayer hall (*Naamgarh*)

15. A woman in her loom

16. The women folk of Gamani celebrating Bihu in a paddy field
17. School going kids in the village

18. Middle and High Schools, Gamani 19. Primary school, Sopaloga
The rice season is the rainy season, and it is only around harvest time that the peasants do not need rain. For these rice-growing villages, rains are essential at certain stages of the crop’s growth. Thus, the fields in the villages are watered by rain and natural streams flowing down from the surrounding hills. There is no system of canal irrigation. Since the land is naturally very fertile, people do not use chemical manures and fertilizers.

The major part of the income of the villagers is earned from the sell of grains. They sell coconuts, betel nuts, varieties of vegetables, and sometimes livestock in either the local haats or to the local/outside traders who buy the village products. Grains are sold to the local traders or at the weekly haats at Lakara and Chariduar on Saturdays and Wednesdays. However, the local traders give lesser price for the grains that varies between Rs. 350/- to Rs.450/- per 40 kgs (40 kgs is equal to one mound in vernacular term). Whereas the villagers get good price for the cleaned de-husked grains sold directly at the weekly haats that varies between Rs. 600/- to Rs. 800/- per 40 kgs. Joha variety of rice is high-priced ranging from Rs. 900/- to Rs. 1200/- per 40 kgs.

**TABLE 3**

**CROPS AND VEGETABLES GROWN IN DIFFERENT SEASONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SERIAL NO.</th>
<th>CROP SEASONS</th>
<th>CROPS GROWN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>End of May to Mid-September</td>
<td>Sowing of paddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>End of October to January</td>
<td>Harvesting of paddy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>November to February</td>
<td>Mustard, pulses, cabbage, cauliflower, spinach, potato, onion, ginger, garlic, turmeric, beans, raddish, eggplants, peas, carrot, potatoes, tomato, coriander, green pepper, pumpkins, gourd, cucumber, ladies finger, arum, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>March to May</td>
<td>Beans, eggplants, arum, tomato, green pepper, etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The villagers generally own different types of land, namely, low-lying agricultural land (*da-mati* or *rupit mati*) which is suitable for wet rice cultivation and upland (*baam mati*) where seasonal
vegetables such as chillies, potatoes, mustards, cucumbers, arum, eggplants, spinach, pumpkins, gourds, ginger, garlic, tomatoes, ladies fingers, radish, beans, coriander, lemon, onions, cabbages, cauliflowers, pulses, etc are grown. The cultivation of these crops is locally known as ‘baam kheti’. Some of the vegetables are also grown in the homestead land for domestic consumption.

Agriculture is not only a means of earning a livelihood but also a way of life. Though land is the most important source of wealth, the villagers supplement their incomes in varieties of ways that will be discussed later in the next section. Land is the most important object of acquisition for both tribal and non-tribal forest villagers. Now, there is an increasing pressure on land, since the populations in the FVs are multiplying. My discussions and interviews with the local people revealed the fact that villagers are more concerned with land rather than conserving forest resources. Being forest villagers, they have failed to develop their stake in forest conservation. This is because the state and its forest administration have not been able to provide these poor villagers any other alternative sources of livelihoods. Moreover, the state-initiated conservation measures implemented in the park do not include any benefits for them. Amazingly, that state is still seen to be indifferent towards making conservation approach more people-friendly. The Chapter Six provide examples from different PAs to show how livelihood benefits from forests enhance their participation in conservation.

9.2 The Supplementary Income

It is clear from the above discussion that the villagers of Sopaloga and Gamani are primarily agriculturists with minimal dependence on forest produces such as NTFPs. This also applies to the other forest villagers, tribal and non-tribal, in Assam. During the agricultural lean seasons the poor villagers in Gamani and Sopaloga are engaged as daily wage labourers (din hajira) under various government schemes (such as construction of village roads, renovation of schools and naamghar, etc) in the villages. Besides, they are also engaged in planting of new saplings (locally known as paleng), cleaning of the plantation areas, etc under the FD. Many poor villagers also work in the households of the better off villagers as daily wage labourers.

The MGNREGS was introduced in the FVs in the year 2008. Many villagers in Sopaloga and Gamani have received job cards under the scheme. However, at the same time, there are many who have not received the job card. The scheme ensures 100 days of work to the villagers. But
during my conversation with them, it was noticed that most of them have worked for only 7-14 days in a year. Various schemes under the same are approved by the gaon panchayat. Only one small road in Sopaloga village was constructed by the villagers under the scheme. The wage rate is Rs. 100/- per day. The landless villagers are earning their livelihood by engaging themselves as wage labour.

Nonetheless, the villagers also earn money by selling livestock such as hen, pigeon, goat, duck. Other homestead products such as coconuts, betel nuts, betel leaves, and few seasonal vegetables in small quantities are also sold either to the local traders or at the weekly haat. This way, the villagers make their living in a number of ways.

It is worth mentioning that the traditional caste-based division of labour is absent in both the villages. However, the villagers are engaged in different tasks as shown in the (Appendix 4 and 5) in order to earn a living. For example, in case of the village barbers, hair-cutting is not their traditional occupation. They have learned it in order to make their living. However, it is very interesting to note that there is one barber named Munindra Hazarika in Sopaloga who plays multiple roles. He is a barbar, gives tuition to the school going children in the village as well as he is a well trained xatriya dancer. He performs xatriya dance and sings in Bhaona celebration in the village. There are some who weave bamboo products in their pass times such as saloni, doli, dola, jakoi, paasi, etc which are mainly for useful for storing grains, de-husking, catching fish and so on. Likewise, the tasks of carpenter and the naamgharia are also not their traditional occupation. The duties of a naamgharia are assigned to a person who is older in age and possess a good understanding of the religious texts.

9.3 The Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

In Sopaloga and Gamani FVs, both men and women form their individual SHGs. Each SHG includes 10 to 15 members who deposit a fixed amount of money each month in the name of their group and for that matter to assist this potential business venture. A group has a President and a Secretary who coordinate tasks and they are selected from amongst the members.

37 The dance form that evolved within the xatras, the Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam.
It is interesting to mention that like men, the women are also actively engrossed with various activities of the group. For example, they engage themselves in weaving, work as daily wage labourers in the paddy fields at the time of harvest and transplantation of rice. By working in the paddy fields, they are helping the villagers in getting labourers while earning income. The profit they earn is deposited in group’s account. My interaction with the women in the villages revealed that they never sit idle. After doing the tiresome household works, they get engaged in activities like weaving at their homes. They mainly weave gamocha and other such traditional stuffs which are sold by the group.

Each and every SHG regularly hold meetings in their respective villages, where the members discuss future strategies and deposit their monthly amount. The monthly amount and the earnings made from different sources as mentioned are deposited in the group’s common bank account. These groups also earn substantial income by giving loans to the villagers at times of need. The interest rate is Rs. 3/- for the group members and Rs. 5/- to Rs. 10/- for other villagers.

### TABLE 4
WORKING SHGs IN SOPALOGA AND GAMANI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SERIAL NO.</th>
<th>SOPALOGA NAMES OF SHGs</th>
<th>GAMANI NAMES OF SHGs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Bonoshree</td>
<td>Milanjyoti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Sanghamitra</td>
<td>Prerona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Manikanchan</td>
<td>Parijat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Nameri Sikha Jyoti</td>
<td>Sagarika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Jeoti</td>
<td>Pragati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Arunodoy</td>
<td>Pratibha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Roopjyoti</td>
<td>Nabajyoti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Neelamjyoti</td>
<td>Jyotirupa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Asha</td>
<td>Nabaprabhat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Jyoti</td>
<td>Pranmoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Matriaat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gamani</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. Education

Most of the elderly villagers, especially women, in these two FVs are either illiterate or semi-literate. However, almost everybody below 40 years of age today is literate.

There are Primary schools in each of the villages, while Middle and High schools are situated at Hatigate\textsuperscript{38} near Gamani FV. One High school is also located at Sengelimari Centre where the medium of instruction is the Bodo language. The rest of the schools follow Assamese as the medium of instruction.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|l|}
\hline
SCHOOL / COLLEGE & LOCATION & DISTANCE FROM GAMANI (approx.) & DISTANCE FROM SOPALOGA (approx.) \\
\hline
Primary School & Sopaloga & 1.5 Km & 0 km \\
& Gamani & 0 Km & 1.5 Km \\
& Eraliloga & 2.5 Km & 1 Km \\
& Tarajan & 1.5 Km & 3 Km \\
& Paleng & 4.5 Km & 6 Km \\
& Gaon & & \\
& Sotai & 3 Km & 4.5 Km \\
& Garo Gaon & & \\
& Rihajuli & 2.5 Km & 4 Km \\
\hline
Middle Education School & Gamani & 0 Km & 1 \frac{1}{2} Km \\
& Sengelimari & 4.5 Km & 3 Km \\
& Sonai Miri & 6 Km & 7 Km \\
\hline
High School & Gamani & 0 Km and & 1 \frac{1}{2} Km \\
& Sengelimari & 4.5 Km & 3 Km \\
\hline
Higher Secondary School & Chariduar and Balipara & 10 Km and 15 Km & 08 Km and 13 Km \\
\hline
College & Rangapara and Tezpur & 30 Km & 28.5 Km \\
& & 35 Km & 33.5 Km \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{38} Hatigate is the main entrance to the Nameri National Park.
TABLE 6
EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION OF VILLAGERS IN SOPALOGA AND GAMANI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th>SOPALOGA FOREST VILLAGE</th>
<th>GAMANI FOREST VILLAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matriculates</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-Matriculates</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Secondary</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master Degree</td>
<td>____</td>
<td>01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are no higher secondary schools and colleges in and around the area. Students from all FVs and Revenue Villages, including Sopaloga, Gamani and Erailoga go to Chariduar, Balipara and Tezpur to pursue education. The locations and distances are shown in table 5. I came across families who send their children, both girls and boys to Higher Secondary schools in Balipara and Chariduar as well as to colleges in Tezpur and Rangapara.

Since agriculture is the primary occupation of the villagers, helping in agricultural tasks become more important for the children. By the time, the boys reach the age of around fourteen years, they are full-fledged agriculturalists doing practically every job on the field. The girls on the other hand, do household works, help their mothers in cooking, etc.

11. Women in the Forest Villages

Women in the FVs play significant social and economic role as providers of sustenance. As Sachchidananda writes:

a…women are the primary gatherers and regulators of biomass in poor rural households playing key roles not only in collecting but also in processing; ...(their) roles and responsibilities are pivotal not only to the management of natural resources but also to the management of the domestic economy. Researches have revealed that women spent longer hours at work, pool more of their income into the household budgets, regulate the day-to-day consumption and cash flow needs. In areas, where natural resources have been most degraded, male migration is typically high. Women are permanent residents whereas men are intermittent dwellers and the onus to carry on the business of living lies on them, even with the decline in support from the forest. (2004: 184)
Large numbers of forest dwellers residing in the Scheduled V Areas of India are dependent on gathering of minor forest products. This is largely done by the women and children. They collect edible roots, beat, fruits, pot herb, leaf and oil seeds for self consumption and sale. In Jharkhand, the women produce oil from oil seeds, gathered from the forests by locally developed indigenous devices. In Kurumgarh village in Jharkhand, the women do not have rights over immovable family property. They may keep the income earned from the sale of the minor forest products. These tribal women work hard and they do all the work in the house and outside. Sometimes they also sell forest collected materials to the weekly market and return home with goods of daily use. Brooms, cup-plate, rope, etc are also made by them from forest collected materials either in their own houses or under the supervision of some NGOs. They are also engaged as wage labourers in various afforestation schemes and other forestry operations of the FD such as, nursery development, sapling plantations and irrigation, tendu or kendu leaf collection, etc. Women also work in the fields, carry water from distant springs in the forests mostly during the lean season. They collect fuel wood from the forests and in fact headloading of fuel wood is done by them. This holds true particularly in all Scheduled V areas of the Indian states (Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh among others). In fact, women in these forest areas maintain a living link with the forests. They spend most of the leisure time in the forests, gathering for forest products to supplement their income. The tribal women resent any interference by the forest guards to protect their free access to forest. That is why, there is always a relationship of animosity between the tribal women and the forest guards (Sachchidananda 2004, 186-191).

The women in most of the PAs in India show a close interface with the forests. Unlike, the situation in other parts, however, women in the FVs under the present study or other PAs of Assam show somewhat different relationship with the forests. Their dependence on forests is only supplementary which is limited to the collection of firewood, done mainly by their male counter-parts. They do not have the customary rights of going to the forests in search of food, firewood and other such forest products. This is in contrast to most PAs in other parts of India as pointed out above where a majority of the forest produce collectors are women who often face the ire of the forest officials and harassment by the forest guards (Prasad 2008, 228).
However, the forest villagers in the Nameri area do not have a long tradition of forest use. Women in these villages are mainly engaged in a variety of day long and tiresome household chores such as cooking, cleaning, de-husking the grains, looking after the livestock, etc. The large size of the families makes the works of women all the more demanding in the domestic sphere. They get hardly any time for leisure. It is only during special occasions in the villages (example, Bihu, bhaona, and other religious activities in the naamghar) that they get sometime spare for leisure and enjoyment. Weaving, for most of the women is their favourite pastime. All of them have the traditional loom (taat saal) in their houses.

During the peak agricultural period of sowing and harvesting of paddy, the work load on the women members of the families is more than that of their male counterparts. Apart from their routine household tasks, they carry food for the men working in the paddy fields, they also go to the fields to harvest. Sowing and transplantation of paddy is mainly done by the women.

Most of the poor women do work as daily wage labourers in the plantations under the schemes of JFM and FD. This category of women villagers also earns good by engaging themselves as wage labourers during the agricultural season in the village. The villagers hire mainly women labourers for sowing, transplantation of paddy and de-husking of grains. The prevailing wage rate for women labour is Rs. 100/-. Earlier, the wage rate for women was less compared to men, since they cannot carry the heaps of grains from the fields after harvest. Now, it is equal for both men and women. Except ploughing, women virtually do everything in the field. But women from the economically better-off families never work as wage labourers in others’ fields. They do work in their own paddy fields, helping the men in agricultural tasks.

Moreover as mentioned earlier, women are also members of small local SHGs formed exclusively by them. These SHGs play very significant role in both the villages in helping the women to earn on their own. They do participate in their respective SHGs’ meetings regularly but they are not seen as active members in any of the meetings with the JFMC and the FD in the villages. The JFMCs and the Forest Rights Committees (FRCs)\(^{39}\) in both villages consist of two women members respectively, only in name. They neither have any significant role to play nor

\(^{39}\) The FRC was formed in all the tribal as well as non-tribal FVs in NNP under the provisions of the Forest Rights Act 2006.
do they are much aware of different conservation issues and activities of the Committees. They are rather passive actors. I attended a JFM meeting\textsuperscript{40} in Sopaloga where it was observed that three women members were present not to participate in the discussion but to provide snacks to the audience. This shows that they are least aware of any issues and concerns outside their domestic realm. It is their male counterparts who are active in these matters. My own conversations with the village women on issues of conservation and land rights brought to focus that they are mostly ignorant and reticent. Generally, it is seen that they leave these issues to the men in the households. However, I met a few aged women in these villages who are quite knowledgeable about the past history of the villages. They also showed concerns about the depletion of forest covers and wildlife from the area.

Moreover, some young women are now engaged in various activities of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA). Under the NRHM, a few of them work as Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) chosen by and accountable to the Panchayat – to act as the interface between the community and the public health system. A few other women also work in the Anganbadi centres, located in some other nearby villages, under the SSA.

\textsuperscript{40}The meeting was organised by the Ranger (Territorial Division) in Sopaloga FV on 8 November, 2010. People from three FVs, that is, Sopaloga, Gamani and Eraliloga were present, along with JFMC members and FD officials.