CHAPTER II: Settlement and Colonisation

2. Settlement and Colonisation of the two districts: Historical Events and Processes

In 1826, the King of Burma and the British East India Company signed the Treaty of Yandabu that effectively meant the handing over of the domains of the Ahom kings of Assam to the British, in exchange for the withdrawal of Burmese troops from the region. This domain included much of the Brahmaputra valley, including the adjoining hills (Gait 1963). The field study area- Nagaon and Karbi Anglong- are centrally located within the spatial limits of the territory that the British took control over. Nagaon is today seen to be the heartland of Assamese culture, with the presence of a large number of important Vaishnavite shrines, the most important of which is Borduwa- the birthplace of one of the founders of the Assamese national self- Srimanta Sankardeb. Karbi Anglong, on the other hand is one of the two autonomous hill districts in Assam. Its autonomous status is derived from colonial laws and post-colonial policies that were designed to keep the indigenous hill tribes away from the plantations in the lowlands and foothills and later, as tools for governing underdeveloped regions.

This is therefore a story of similarities and contrasts between the two cases. Both the areas have witnessed violent activities by indigenous groups and have also seen violent settler/ state responses. Yet, the trajectory of this violence and the institutional settings in the two areas are different. What actually seems to bind them in a comparative scheme is their experience of being frontier regions. The stories merge and converge, to reinforce the notion that frontiers are political constructs upon geographical landscapes.
where conflicts and reconciliation among peoples are part of the dynamics of the frontier itself.

In Nagaon, the pre-colonial social formation included various sections of caste-Hindu Assamese groups, indigenous tribes who were slowly assimilating with a benign version of *Vaishnavism* preached by the followers of Sankardeb and a few ethnic groups from the Gangetic plains, who having arrived as invading troops, stayed back to marry and merge with the local peoples of the area (Hazarika 1998). In the twentieth century, peasants in Nagaon were involved in celebrated struggles against colonial rule by bringing together subsistence farmers from diverse ethnic backgrounds in Phulogun (Saikia 2000: 105). A century later, in the village of Nellie in undivided Nagaon district, indigenous farmers conducted a pogrom that saw the massacre of thousands of settlers (Ahmed and Khan 1984). Neighbouring Karbi Anglong, or the Mikir Hills, formed a contiguous region of the valley, where populations moved to and fro during times of distress and scarcity as did many other peoples living in the eastern Himalayan region (Leach 1986).

It has to be mentioned, however, that the hills were domains where state-control was relatively weak even during the pre-colonial period. But then, it must also be said that state formation in the region was constructed upon not the typical feudal notion of control over territory, but more with what James Scott calls the control of labour both in the hills and the valley. The Ahom state, that predated the colonial one, was marked by

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29 In 1861, peasants in Nagaon district went on a protest when the colonial authorities banned the cultivation of poppy. Rumours of rising of agricultural taxes also brought the native peasants out to protest in the mart at Phuloguri. The protest turned violent due to the inept handling of affairs by an English police officer.

30 Sanjib Baruah makes the point that settled and shifting agriculture as "cultural" markers of identity is a fallacious and altogether weak argument for regions like the Assam-Arakan basin, where both forms are practiced by peoples living in the hills and valleys (Baruah 2001).

this dual relationship between the state and its subjects, one where the state was more interested in regulating the availability of labour. The state therefore frequently undertook a show of strength against peoples of the hills, who depended on the capture of persons from the plains (Devi 1992: 24-25). Today, the district comprises much of the old Mikir Hills and also some of the adjoining plains and foothills of neighbouring districts. Its indigenous polity have been campaigning for a separate state on the basis of earlier assurances laid out in the Indian Constitution. However, such an autonomous state has eluded the people of the district, who instead are embroiled in a war of attrition involving those perceived to be outsiders, armed ethno-national militia and the state agencies.

2.1. Deciphering Diversity in Nineteenth Century Nagaon and Karbi Anglong

In his report to the Secretary to the (colonial) Government of Bengal, the pioneering ethnographer-administrator, A. J. Moffatt-Mills in his capacity as the officiating Judge of the Mymensing32, enumerates on a wide range of subjects, including a very descriptive account of the land and its people. It remains one of the most authoritative descriptive accounts of the region even today. Drawing upon the surveys conducted by revenue officers of the undivided Nagaon (referred to as Nowgong in the colonial times), including the present day district of Karbi Anglong (then called the Mikir Hills), Moffatt-Mills states that though no census was taken, was capable of making guesses about the people who lived in the province. At that time, the colonial district was ringed by the river to the north and the hills to the south that were “peopled by the rude

32 Mymensing is currently a part of Bangladesh. The fact that Moffatt-Mill sent in an important administrative report about Assam, from what is now Bangladesh, is a significant historical marker of the relationship between the two regions. Their colonial links therefore cannot be understated.
tribes of Mikirs. Nagas, Kacharees, Kookees and Lalongs (sic)” (Moffatt-Mills 1984: 445-465). He further states that the Nagaon town area itself (then referred to as the Nowgong Mehal) was evenly populated and richly forested along the Kolong river. Interestingly, the report refers to the native Assamese as a distinct people who were cultivators and thereby paying their taxes regularly. They were quite distinct from the “rude tribes” who were beyond the ambit of the state’s revenue and taxation system. What is evident from the report is the fact that in 1853, or thereabouts, only parts of the districts were populated by the indigenous peoples. Much of the inhabited areas comprised villages and monasteries belonging to the Vaishnavites. Thereafter, the report mentions a series of caste groups like the Doms (fisherfolk) and brass-workers, who occupied the lower rungs of the Hindu groups. However, Nagaon, as mentioned earlier was also the birthplace of an enlightened form of Vaishnavite renaissance, where the saint Sankardeb and his followers preached the unity of god and a civic identity that appealed to people from various subaltern caste and non-caste groups. Incidentally, early colonial travellers in Assam failed to distinguish between the native Assamese and the Ahoms (Waddell 2000). They subsumed the former within the latter. The Ahoms were the ruling ethnic group who intermarried and fostered kinship relations with other ethnic groups in the Brahmaputra valley for the six-hundred odd years of their rule. Their myths of origin however are quite distinct from those native Assamese, notably the caste Hindu,

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33 The Karbi were derogatorily referred to as “Mikirs”. This term is objected by the present generation of Karbis in Assam and other parts of Northeast India, for its pejorative connotations. However, the term is still used for Karbis living in Bangladesh.

34 This lead an Assamese historian to state: ‘Anyone who could be taxed was an Assamese for the British’. Personal communication between Yasmin Saikia and the author; December 15, 2002.

35 As did the peripatetic medical officer Lawrence Waddell back in 1901. He professed a keen interest in Buddhism and Burma and as the assistant sanitary commissioner, he was appointed the medical officer of Darjeeling. Thereafter, he began his travels towards Burma and stumbled upon Assam and bemoaning the effects of progress, wrote his semi-academic book couched in the scientific racial anthropological tradition of the times.
who migrated from parts of South Asia. During the course of time, the Assamese ethnic formation incorporated the core of the Ahom kings’ domains as well as parts of the regions that were influenced by cultural contacts fostered by the Vaishnavite saints and Sufi preachers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This movement and sustained engagement affected those who were engaged in plough and settled agriculture. Those in the hills remained unaffected until such a time they began interacting to a greater degree with the societies in the valleys.

Hence, it is clear that both districts once formed a hill-valley continuum that was redrawn over time. As administrative policies prevailed upon economic and political necessity, the two became separate districts. Of course, the boundaries of the districts were again redrawn over time. The initial demarcation came with the founding of the tea plantations on the foothills of the Mikir Hills (Griffiths 1967). It has to be noted that a greater part of the undivided Nagaon district, especially as it was drawn in the nineteenth century, was not suitable for large scale tea plantations. Only the uplands and the foothills were free from the debilitating floods that visited the region (and continues to) during the monsoons. This is not the ideal condition for tea, which needs land where water logging never takes place and where drainage is almost a natural phenomenon. However, the fact that Nagaon is a district that has a surplus of rivers also means that it is one of the most fertile and resource rich areas. As noted by early British commentators, it was also richly wooded and had a fairly well watered reach for agriculture to flourish. Describing the districts assets and landscape, the colonial scholar-administrator W.W. Hunter, outlines a fertile area with valleys, hills, marshes and abundant rivers (Hunter 1982: 171-191).
The real administrative and cultural history of the frontier in the Northeast actually starts here, with the descriptions of the forests and allusions to tea and other resources. It is not known for sure if the British knew about all these resources when they intervened in the internecine intrigues between the Ahom nobility and their kin in Burma. However, when they did intervene in 1824, by declaring war against the Burmese who had occupied a part of Assam, the British were also quick to seize the opportunity and scan the land for economic enterprise and riches (Goswami 1999: 12). In 1826, Assam (or at any rate, parts of it that were governed by the Ahoms) was ceded to the British in the contentious Yandabu Treaty. Initially, the upper Assam region was placed under the titular authority of the Ahom king and the nobility. In 1833, the British signed a treaty with Purandhar Singha- the nominal Ahom King of Assam- that effectively allowed him control over the region east of the river Dhunseri and Bishwanath on the North Bank of the Brahmaputra. The treaty effectively handed over control to the British. Part of the treaty stipulated that the King was to pay an annual tribute to the British. When he failed to comply with this, the remaining domains of the Ahom monarchs were integrated to the British possessions in the region in 1838 and the King’s family pensioned off (Kumar 1994: 8). With the annexation of the Ahom territory, Brahmaputra valley had six British controlled districts- Goalpara, Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. The Mikir Hills (which includes much of present day Karbi Anglong) were actually the domain of the Dimasa King of Cachar, Raja Govinda Chandra Singh. In a separate treaty signed with him in 1824, the British and the Raja signed a treaty that allowed him to

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36 The Treaty of Yandabu only stated that the King of Ava (in present day Burma) renounced claims upon the territory of the Ahom Kings including those of the Jaintia and Dimasa kings. Following the Treaty, the British authorities handed back the domains of the Jaintia and Dimasa kings as they already had protection pacts with them. As there were no such pacts with the Ahoms, the British authorities took charge of the regions of upper Assam, including the district of Nagaon.
extend his powers to internally govern his kingdom, but also forced him to comply with the advice of the Governor-General. Following his death in 1830, the British carved out his kingdom and gave the plains portion (in the south) to their ally, the King of Manipur and left the hill portions of the present day North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong to Senapati Tularam, a Dimasa noble. In 1853, this region was also annexed by the British East India Company, thereby completing the annexation of present day Assam. Thus, a hitherto disparate region, welded together by kinship ties and histories of conflicts and cooperation was amalgamated into an administrative whole- the colonial province of Assam.

The annexation of Assam altered the administrative structures of the region. Several acts (mentioned below) found a foothold in introducing new regulations and restrictions in people’s movements and their ability to transcend designated landscapes. The whole province of Assam was entrusted to a Chief Commissioner, acting immediately on the orders of the government of India. The Commissioner had at his disposal an Assam Commission, composed of members of the Colonial Civil Service and officers deputed from the Indian army. He also had the Provincial Service that was a body of subordinate magistrates recruited from different parts of India and a subordinate civil service that dealt with land revenue and comprised mainly of native Assamese officials. Some of the important acts that were used to govern the region were: The Labour Immigration Act, 1882 (later superseded by the Act VI of 1901); Frontier Tracts Regulation II of 1880; Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1880; Assam Police Regulation IV of 1890; The Sylhet Jhum Regulation III of 1891 and the Assam Forest Regulation VII of 1891. All these acts were instrumental in changing the lives of people
who lived in both valley and hills in the region. As for land tenure, different systems were followed throughout the province. Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara, districts where feudal land relations were more pronounced followed a different system of land revenue than in other parts of Assam. Colonial observers saw the agricultural system of Assam as one marked by large areas of unsettled waste-lands, which were then earmarked for colonisation by European planters (Guha 1977: 11-15). The colonial observers also mentioned that another agricultural system, wherein the cultivator farmed a certain tract of land for two or three years and then moved to a different place, was also followed. In their evangelical urge to have a coherent system of land revenue based on understandable land use practices, the British introduced a system wherein decennial leases were offered to cultivators which could be relinquished after having given the officials due notice. The cultivators (known as ryots) were then expected to pay a poll tax on their homesteads, transplanted paddy land and other land. These land revenue rules were altered from time to time in order to make it more conducive for the tea industry to grow in the region. Favourable terms were engineered whereby European speculators and prospective planters could acquire prime highland/ upland tracts for ridiculously long and favourable leases (Barbora 1998).

2.2a. Creating administrative structures: Nagaon

Following the annexation, Nagaon came under the direct British rule. This effectively meant that the uncultivated land in the district was brought under the direct control of the administration. The deputy commissioner exercised the power of a sub-judge and his assistants had jurisdiction as munsifs. Appeals by subjects, both civil and
criminal were addressed to the Judge of the Assam Valley at Gauhati\textsuperscript{37}, but the chief appellate authority was the High Court in Calcutta (in Bengal). However, there were special rules for the Hills that fell within the fringes of the district. Here, the code of criminal procedure (followed in the rest of the British controlled areas) was not in force and the jurisdiction of the high court was barred. As in the rest of Assam, land revenue in the plains areas of Nagaon district was based on modifications of the old Ahom system. One significant difference was the abolition of forced labour—something that was essential to the maintenance of the pre-colonial social and economic structures. In the period 1903-04, the unsettled areas of the district were estimated at 3,417 square miles of which 142 square miles were designated to be reserved forests (Allen, Gait et al 1993: 564-571). In Nagaon as well the cultivators were required to engage in shifting cultivation. Allen, Gait et al mention that in the year 1903-04 alone more than 21,000 acres of land were resigned after giving notice to the authorities and 30,000 acres of new land taken up. Even during the colonial period, native politicians who were given legislative powers in Assam could not adequately challenge the writ of the planters and the European administration and much of the land continued to be held in perpetuation for plantations and for settlement of peasants from other parts of the sub-continent.

In the present day, Nagaon district has had its territory truncated after ceding some of its lands to the district of Karbi Anglong and later to the district of Morigaon. Following the transfer of power in 1947, Nagaon (as part of the province of Assam) continued to be administered under the provisional colonial Government of India Act of

\textsuperscript{37} Gauhati, the capital of Assam, is also spelt “Guwahati”. The latter is the current usage and the former is considered to be the Anglicized corruption of the latter. However, with regard to certain important institutions that were set up during the colonial period, the Anglicized variant of the city’s name is still used. Hence, when referring to the High Court or University, one speaks of “the Gauhati High Court” or the “Gauhati University”, while when referring to the city’s more modern institutions like the airport one invariably reverts back to “Guwahati”
1935 until India formally became a republic in 1950. Thereafter, several land related acts were enforced by the government of Assam. These acts were: (a) Assam Adhiars[^38] Protection and Regulation Act, 1948; (b) Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaris[^39] Act, 1951; (c) Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956; (d) Assam non-Agricultural Urban Tenancy Act, 1956; (e) Assam State Acquisition of Lands Belonging to Religious or Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959; (f) Assam Consolidation of Holdings Act, 1960; (g) Assam Graman[^40] Act, 1961; (h) Assam Tenancy Act, 1971 (Bora 1986: 53). The tea plantations still had favourable leases under the post-colonial regime. What was added was the state’s propensity to acquire lands for developmental projects. It is apparent that given Nagaon’s cultural and economic importance in Assam, the district’s political position in local governance and real-politics is very crucial. Nagaon sends two of the fourteen members of parliament from Assam to the national parliament in New Delhi[^41]. Similarly, the district sends as many as ten members to the Assam state legislative assembly that has a total of one hundred and twenty-six members.

### 2.2b. Creating administrative structures: Karbi Anglong (Mikir Hills)

[^38]: *"Adhiar" means sharecropper, usually one who takes half the share of the crops grown on other’s land where he has laboured.

[^39]: *"Zamindaris" were large feudal landholdings. The Zamindar was a landlord who rented out his estate to agriculturists, who in turn had to pay him exorbitant rents for using the land.

[^40]: *"Graman", quite literally means rural.

[^41]: In real terms, two members of parliament mean very little bargaining powers. India’s political structures are based on principles of majority representation, which further give credence to concepts like “big” states and “small” states. Therefore, Indian federalism actually depends on majority representation from the “big” states (with all their attendant social and political divisions) and nominal representation from the smaller states. Hence, the fourteen members of parliament from Assam (or the twenty four from the entire Northeast region) can scarcely conjure up a lobby in the face of stronger regional/state based lobbies. For example, the southern state of Karnataka alone accounts for twenty-eight members of parliament, which means four more than all the seven states in the Northeast (with their attendant divisions and different agendas).
When one considers the administrative history of Karbi Anglong, it is to be reiterated that parts of the district came under British control in 1838, while some sections that belonged to the Dimasa chiefs, were amalgamated in 1854. In 1880, the colonial government enacted the Frontier Tracts Act, wherein the present day districts of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills were included. Thereafter, the districts also came under the Backward Tracts Act, 1919; and the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas Act of 1936. These acts placed the administrative responsibility of the region in concern solely with the Governor, who could act without the counsel of his advisors and executive officers. In 1946, the Karbi and Dimasa leaders of the districts articulated a demand for functional autonomy that was later taken note of by the leaders of the Indian National Congress (Dutta 1993: 13). Colonial administration allowed the people of Karbi Anglong a semblance of self rule in matters related to domestic life, local disputes, criminal cases etc customary law was exalted and the law of the land (criminal procedure code) was held in abeyance. Colonial ethnographers wrote at length about the democratic social structure of the Karbi village (Lyall 1997: 5-6). These conditions formed the foundations for the post-colonial state’s constitutional efforts to govern the region. The Cabinet mission that formed an advisory committee on the Rights of Citizens, Minorities and Tribal and Excluded Areas also appointed a sub-committee, headed by the veteran Assamese politician Gopinath Bordoloi, which was known as the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas committee. This committee presented a report with several recommendations, the chief among them being the formation of local councils for judicial work, the creation of district councils for legislative purposes such as the use of lands, village forests, agriculture, village and town management and the administration of
local and tribal laws. The committee further recommended the setting up of regional
councils in autonomous districts for the tribes because they had "a distinctive culture and
civilisation of their own" (Trivedi 1995: xiv). Following the recommendations of the
commission, the constituent assembly bestowed the Sixth Schedule status upon the tribal
hill districts of Assam. Hence, Karbi Anglong was endowed with district and regional
councils. In 1976, the district hitherto known as Mikir Hills was renamed Karbi Anglong.
There are two divisions of the district- Diphu and Hamren. The district also has four
police thanas (i) Diphu, (ii) Baithalangso (iii) Howraghat and (iv) Bokajan. The
district's autonomous council is provided with some legislative, executive, financial and
judicial powers. There is an Executive Committee of the council with executive
members, principal secretary and secretaries and chief executive member- rather like a
replica of a state legislative assembly- albeit with limited powers. The executive
members are elected, with at least four being nominated by the governor while the
secretaries are civil servants appointed by the government of Assam. The district sends
one member to the national parliament in Delhi.

The region's experiences as a frontier could perhaps date back to the colonial period
with the establishment of the plantation complex. This meant the breaking up of some of
the traditional land grants allotted to the Vaishnavite monasteries, the reorganisation of
lands wherein farmers were encouraged to take up decennial leases, and also the
regulation of grazing and forest lands. In the early part of the twentieth century, following

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42 Thana literally means police station. The word comes from Mughal times, when thanas were actually semi-military,
semi-administrative garrisons. During the colonial period the concept remained with the added function of policing.
Essentially, today's thanas are police stations that have policing jurisdiction over a given area.
the division of the province of Bengal, the administration also encouraged a policy of resettling farmers from the densely populated districts of Bengal to the floodplains of central Assam, including Nagaon district. This process reached a peak during the fractious political rivalry between the Muslim League and the Congress in the subcontinent that also spilled over into Assam. Indeed, the colonial economy opened the floodgates of migration to the Assam—mainly to the Brahmaputra valley. Peasants from East Bengal, mainly from the impoverished district of Mymensingh migrated to the so-called wastelands, thereby “increasing the quantum of colonial revenue and agricultural production” (Hussain 1993: 45). This migration was not only encouraged by the colonial authorities, but it also added a cultural dimension of work ethic, still popular in academic discourse to migration itself. This discourse pitted the hardworking settlers against lazy natives and extolled the progress brought about by the settlers. An example of the rootedness of this discourse is seen in Goswami’s observation wherein he states—“...one welcome result of the influx of these farm settlers is the improvement of farming practices... (They) developed the whole agricultural system in Assam, helped improve the health of the countryside by clearing the jungles and marshes and converted the wild areas in populous agricultural regions. The introduction of jute, vegetables etc. as commercial crops in Assam, have largely been due to the immigrants” (Goswami 1988: 29). In addition to the peasants, who competed with the native Assamese for agricultural land, there was also the structured and systematised inflow of indentured labour from the

41 Colonial Assam’s size was made larger with the addition of the district of Sylhet, originally a part of the Bengal province, to it. This, along with the colonial policy of looking at the Brahmaputra valley and its surrounding hills as a part of the administrative landscape that included East Bengal, contributed to the Bengali-Assamese competition that reached its zenith in the twentieth century and continued well into the post colonial period.

44 Wastelands were forest areas that were occasionally cultivated by nomadic peasants. The agricultural practices of the indigenous peasants necessitated the presence of large tracts of land, which were often forested and cleared during lean seasons. The colonial administration saw this as an aberration of rational tenure laws and sought to change this, first by encouraging settlement of wasteland and then by offering long-term leases for peasants (Baruah 2001).
tribal belts of central and east-central India and the sizeable inflow of people—mainly pastoralists—from the Himalayan foothills. In Nagaon, the establishment of communications meant the expansion of the bureaucracy, drawing with it educated Bengalis. In essence, Nagaon was the classic frontier, where the state’s presence was at a bare minimum and state control was limited to the occasional show of strength against potential troublemakers, and both the state and settlers saw their mission as being that of taming wild nature. However, by the middle of the century, this process was supposed to have slowed down due to natural causes. Nagaon, being part of the Brahmaputra valley, has the highest land-man ratio in the region. By the 1950s this fact was obvious, though the resettling and opening out of lands continued in this period as well. However, there are indications that Nagaon may now be considered to be an old frontier, where land is no longer freely available and where the presence of the state seems obvious. All the actors involved, be they indigenous or settlers or the state, are aware that certain practices are harmful and in a sense, there is a greater degree of shared responsibility over resources—something that defies the “frontier” logic—although there are still some indications that the conflicts occur within political and administrative structures that are deeply marked by the frontier paradigm.

2.3(h) Reassessing Karbi Anglong (Mikir Hills) as an administrative unit of the frontier

42 Here, I draw selectively from the defining characteristics of “frontiers” as outlined by D. Geiger (2002).
42 By “frontier” logic, I mean one of primitive accumulation and acquisition of land. Under such conditions, settlers are seen to be destructive users of land and their practices are supposedly in marked contrast to more environmentally conscious indigenous usages.
42 Here, I refer to the large-scale presence of security personnel in the district. This deployment has little relation to the quality of security enjoyed by citizens. Most ethnic groups are organized along military lines as if micro-level insecurities of small groups could only be safeguarded by bearing arms.
Karbi Anglong (or the colonial Mikir Hills) in that sense, underwent another kind of frontier experience. Since it was declared as a backward tract and a partially excluded area, the development of social and economic relations between peoples of the district were “arrested” during a greater part of the colonial period. This meant that movement into the district was restricted. The large forests and grazing tracts were left untouched because there were no pressures on the land. The existing population could engage in shifting cultivation and not feel the pressure of territorial limits to the kind of agricultural practices their resources allowed them. As the notation excluded area suggests, the district was somehow set apart from the established administrative regime and continued as a “protected wilderness” that nevertheless was inhabited by (to use Moffatt-Mills’ politically incorrect expression) “rude” tribes. With the transfer of power in 1947, it did not seem that things would change much, except for the fact that the post-colonial state raised the colonial policy to the exalted realms of constitutional provisions of the new republic. The problems associated with republicanism’s ideal of citizenship and a protective regime that is built on colonial notions of wilderness is best manifested in the Karbi assertion for self-rule and the changes that it underwent from the birth of the Indian republic. Ironically, it is with the extension of republican ideals like adult franchise, justice, universal education etc. that one finds the district reverting into a classical frontier, where land is there to be grabbed, whose rules are not quite clear and where indigenous settler conflicts take on more than just mere identity and resource based ideologies. In Karbi Anglong, the conflicts themselves bring out a serious interrogation of the nature of nation-building of post-colonial India and the place allocated to indigenous
peoples who inhabit the frontiers of the nation's imagination. The following section deals with the mapping of wastelands and formulation of policy for protecting and/or colonising the province of Assam (and the two districts in question).

2.4. Forests, Frontiers and Land-use: Geography and Politics of the Times

Recent scholarship on environmental history in the sub-continent has sensitised scientists to the manner in which notions of landscape have undergone change due to colonial intervention (Guha 2002). The ideas and ideological issues that shaped colonial forest conservation were effectively shaped in the nineteenth century in India (Agarwal 2001: 9-40). These changes severely restricted indigenous practices. In the eastern Himalayas, the forests were seen as the extension of the mountain ranges, where practices such as elephant catching influenced colonial interventions that restricted the use of forests by natives (Nongbri 2003: 3189-3199). In describing the formation of the geo-body of neighbouring Siam (Thailand), Thongchai Winichakul, sees a similar occurrence in the mapping of Siam in the nineteenth century (1996). This complex understanding of political geography as part of everyday culture involves a spatial principle where proximate ethnicity, tradition etc are no longer considered belonging to the nation and identify where one nation (or zone of control) begins and where it ends. Colonial policy of mapping often glossed over the cosmographical representation of land, where the

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48 Nongbri opines that elephant catching was a part of the political economy of pre-colonial warfare in the Northeast. For the British, kheddah (elephant hunting) was considered a sport. Over time, she says, nineteenth century sport was transformed into a regulatory policy framework wherein imperial interests in game preservation coalesced in the accretion of state monopoly over elephants. By the late nineteenth century, the administration had invested its resources to reservation of elephant hunting for itself, thereby excluding local population. This exclusion was carried out by re-ordering forest space in a manner that was entirely new to local inhabitants.

49 Thongchai Winichakul states that modern scholars have denied the essentialism of national identity, inasmuch as it (nationhood) was "formed by the demarcation of its body, the territory of a nation" (1996: 67).
representation itself can be understood by knowing its specific grammar related to forests, myths, traditional practices and notions of boundaries. The boundaries created by colonial administration were instrumental maps, where borders were defined as the boundary of sovereignty, where authority does not trespass and practices (such as use of forests) were sought to be controlled (Thongchai Ibid: 77). In Assam too, tensions were the order of the day, when different discourses of boundaries confronted one another. For the colonial administration, rationality and laws of international politics defined demarcation, while for peasants and other subsistence agriculturists in Assam; it was the old tradition of local practices (Saikia 2005). Several acts (mentioned below) found a foothold in introducing new regulations and restrictions in people’s movements and their ability to transcend designated landscapes. The whole province of Assam was entrusted to a Chief Commissioner, acting immediately under the orders of the government of India. The Commissioner had at his disposal an Assam Commission, composed of members of the Colonial Civil Service and officers deputed from the Indian army. He also had the Provincial Service that was a body of subordinate magistrates recruited from different parts of India and a subordinate civil service that dealt with land revenue and comprised mainly of native Assamese officials. Some of the important acts that were used to govern the region were: The Labour Immigration Act, 1882 (later superseded by the Act VI of 1901); Frontier Tracts Regulation II of 1880; Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1880; Assam Police Regulation IV of 1890; The Sylhet Jhum Regulation III of 1891 and the Assam Forest Regulation VII of 1891. All these acts were instrumental in changing the lives of people who lived in both valley and hills in the region. As for land tenure, different systems were followed throughout the province. Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara,
districts where feudal land relations were more pronounced followed a different system of land revenue than in other parts of Assam. Colonial observers saw the agricultural system of Assam as one marked by large areas of "unsettled waste-lands", which were then earmarked for colonisation by European planters (Guha 1977: 11-15). The colonial observers also mentioned that another agricultural system, wherein the cultivator farmed a certain tract of land for two or three years and then moved to a different place, was also followed. In their evangelical urge to have a coherent system of land revenue based on understandable land use practices, the British introduced a system wherein decennial leases were offered to cultivators which could be relinquished after having given the officials due notice. The cultivators (known as ryots) were then expected to pay a poll tax on their homesteads, transplanted paddy land and other land. These land revenue rules were altered from time to time in order to make it more conducive for the tea industry to grow in the region. Favourable terms were engineered whereby European speculators and prospective planters could acquire prime highland/upland tracts for ridiculously long and favourable leases (Barbora 1998).

The development of the tea industry in Assam drastically changed the land-use patterns in Assam. It also led to an inflow of indentured workers from other parts of the Indian sub-continent. Land acquisition policies, involving the corralling of hundreds of acres of uncultivated land were enacted to favour the tea planters (Misra 1986: 3). With a primary aim to clear the 'wastelands', the planters and the government began to use ex-tea plantation labourers for clearing and settling the forests (Dasgupta 1990: 35-50). The

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60 Indentured workers came from the present day Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orrisa, Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and some from the tribal districts of West Bengal (mainly 24°-80°). They usually belonged to the Adivasi (indigenous) communities, who were outside the caste hierarchies of Hindu society. Lower caste Hindu persons were also grafted into indentured servitude in the plantations of Assam and North Bengal (Bhowmick 1981).
planters, on one hand needed larger areas to be cleared but were unwilling to supply existing labourers for the effort. In the late nineteenth century therefore, they (the planter lobby) petitioned the government regarding the possibility of labourers being enticed by the policy of wasteland development and called for the introduction of “independent immigration” from other parts of densely populated South Asia (Dasgupta Ibid. 40). The planters feared that if the time-expired labourers—were encouraged to cultivate, they would find the soil and availability of land in Assam as sure inducements to leave the plantation. During the period extending between 1868 and 1930, the recruitment of indentured labour continued unabated in the tea-growing districts of Assam (Sharma 1990: 233-253). Once their contracts were completed, most preferred to settle in the wastelands, benefiting both the planters and the government and bringing in more area of the province under agricultural production.

The time-expired labour however had a new immigrant to deal with. By the 1930s, Muslim peasants from neighbouring Bengal were a serious force in electoral politics in the province of Assam (Bordoloi 1999: 120-148). As early as 1905, the partition of Bengal left deep rooted cultural wounds that were actually exploited over the years by the colonial powers. These were further accentuated by the economic exploitation of Muslim peasants in East Bengal. A sense of cultural superiority and relative advantage gave the middle-class and landed native gentry in feudal regions of the sub-continent, the opportunity to exploit and appropriate the lands of their serfs with impunity (Chatterji 1995: 15-17). In addition, the fact that the gentry were close to

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51 “Time-expired” labourers were those who finished working out their formal contracts with the planters. These contracts were highly exploitative and even after having worked out the period, the worker was in no position to revert back to being a peasant as she or he was far away from her or his place of birth. This meant that they often had to sign on for a longer contract to work in the plantation.
colonial powers because they had access to western education and were trained in the art of administration, also allowed them to dispossess huge numbers of people from their lands. The dispossessed formed what Baruah calls the "(economic) forces that gave further impetus to immigration and turned the colonial vision of Assam as a land frontier into a reality" (Baruah 1999: 64). The indentured labour and peasant populations that entered Nagaon in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a part of this human movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This movement of population had several ramifications within the local politics of Assam. While the valleys were being populated by people from other parts of the subcontinent, certain sections of the hills were seen to be in danger of being overrun by settlers. Concerned by the spate of unauthorised occupation of reserved land, the colonial administration introduced a Line system in Nagaon and Kamrup districts, wherein a line was drawn on a village map and no occupation of land by the immigrants was allowed beyond that line. The system had three categories of villages: (a) Open, where immigrants might freely settle; (b) Closed, where they were not allowed to settle and (c) Mixed where only certain areas could be settled. The system was a colossal failure, as tribal land continued to be encroached upon. A Line System Committee was constituted to look into the irregularities of the Line System. It recommended that instead of making a village the unit of the Line system, a larger unit like a block ought to be taken. It further stated that the colonisation scheme should continue with the view to regulating the inflow of immigrants to certain localities (Bordoloi 1999: 6). In November 1939, the Congress-

\[52\] Baruah was referring to the introduction of the plantations in Assam in his analysis of the transformation of the political economy of the region and the inevitability of immigration in pre and post colonial Assam. Here I wish to expand the issue beyond the immediate Assam-centered concerns to partially explain the drive away for large sections of Assam's settler community.
coalition government headed by Gopinath Bordoloi, adopted a resolution that went along with the proposal to allow for settlement into units larger than villages. While this could be called a protective measure of sorts, it merely helped consolidate the tribals into "prohibited" or "protected" areas, with little or no way to evaluate its implementation. The lack of agency for the tribal populace is further accentuated by the fact that there were no mechanisms to ensure that illegal encroachment did not take place. Moreover, with a change in local government, this policy was reversed and so-called wastelands were further divided into blocks and allotted to different communities including immigrants. The genesis of the Line system meant that Muslim immigrants were required to settle in certain valley districts (and Nagaon was among the preferred ones), where the division of classes- not based on any fixed principles- for villages was seen as the most rational manner to deal with the problems of unabated influx of cultivators. In the twentieth century, when it became apparent that the hills had been suitably controlled, British policy with a keen eye to create a land buffer with French Indo-China and China, left tracts of under-populated hill territory, even though the overt logic was to preserve the way of life in the hills. The 1931 census report painted a doomsday scenario where indigenous people would most likely be swamped by settlers in a matter of decades (Mullan 1992: 49- 52).

Thus, the mapping of forests and wastelands acquired a critical dimension involving the introduction of large populations by policy and subterfuge that was to affect the lives of both settlers and indigenous peoples alike. Saikia (2005) points out that even though there was a overt emphasis on clearing of forests for plantation and commercial use of timber in nineteenth century, it was equally true that modern conservation acquired
a renewed energy during that period. The role of forest officials (an entirely new category of state officers), land records staff etc. in the nineteenth century, heralded a bureaucratisation of space that marked the limits (or lack thereof) of the manner in which land could be utilised. In doing so, indigenous agriculturalists like the Karbis were forced to occupy reduced areas of land and excluded from important forest resources. The rights of peasants were in direct conflict with the laws that protected plantations, forests and government lands from 'encroachment', reducing therefore the access to cultivable and grazing land. The system that emerged, created what Li terms as essentialist identities of hills and plains, marked by a cultural relationship of paternalist and pejorative ties and where quasi-traditional authorities began to exercise a different kind of power than they were allowed during pre-colonial times (Li 2001, 41-66).

It is in this contested terrain that one sees also a conflict of claims for the use of land. Here, the trajectories of political discourse and history of the two districts, diverge on the basis of the main settler groups and their subsequent ability to engage with the state. These trajectories also show the relative strength of isolation (of the Karbi) in terms of retaining some control over resources while they also point towards the kind of negotiations that went on between dominant (and minority) settler groups; what strategies were adopted and who they sought to engage with, in order to establish their rights over land. It is for this reason that the settlement histories of both districts are taken up separately in the following section.

2.5(a) Nagaland: Settlers, Policies and Strategies Adopted

53 Several "national parks" were established in the domains where the Karbi once roamed. Nambor, Kaziranga are but two that were marked out for exclusive use of wildlife and declared out of bounds for local users (Saikia 2005, 141-42)

54 Tam Murray-Li speaks of this process in relation to the histories of production of cultural differences in Indonesia's Sulawesi upland frontier. Her observations— with obvious modifications that concede the qualitative difference of Dutch and British colonial administration— are true for India's Northeastern frontier as well
Nagaon (earlier spelt ‘Nowgong’) was carved out as a separate district administrative unit in 1832. It was earlier known as ‘Khagarijan’. Its eastern, western and southern segments were once ruled by semi-feudal kings and their agents (Lahiri 1991: 94). The rule of petty chiefs called the Bara Bhuyans was imaginatively utilised by and reorganised by Momai Tamuli Borborooah, an officer who served the Ahom sovereign in the seventeenth century. Momai Tamuli organised a new village socio-administrative system, hence the name Na (new) gaon (village) (Gogoi 1986: 281). Many of the Assamese people of pre-colonial Nagaon were followers of the radical Vaishnavite sect started by Srimanta Šāṅkardeb, who was born approximately sixteen kilometres from the present town of Nagaon at Borduwa. The Vaishnavite movement saw the mushrooming of many monasteries (xāṭrā) dedicated to the seventeenth century saint, which in turn led many peasants bonded in military-administrative service to the Ahom monarch, to break away from their military obligations and join the monasteries (Kakoty 2003: 156). The Assamese were generally subjects of the Ahom king and in some cases. Many belonged to caste Hindu society, or to indigenous tribes who had acculturated into the Vaishnavite faith (Borah 2002: 152). Naushad Hazarika says that the populated parts of the district (mainly those surrounding the monasteries) were chosen as targets of violence during Burmese incursions into Assam in the early nineteenth century (Hazarika 1998).

Following the treaty of Yandabu, the district passed of into the hands of the British, who after experimenting with Puranigudam and P:\^z^agara, finally settled on the present

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55 The xāṭrās were viewed with a degree of suspicion by the Ahom monarchs. Religious reforms were but one aspect of cultural change induced by the followers of the Vaishnavite movement. They also questioned the sovereign’s right over peasants who were bonded to the state and other aspects of the agrarian economy. In many ways, they were akin to the Protestant reformers who encouraged the growth of what Weber calls the “spirit” of capitalism, inasmuch as they encouraged abstinence, adherence to community rather than the absolute monarch, tempering of consumption and the growth of an emerging category of people who were no longer bound by tradition to supply labour to the state (Goswami 1994: 270).
location on the banks of the river Kollong. The district is home to indigenous ethnic groups like the Tiwa, who still consider it to be the heartland of the Gobha kingdom. The Tiwa still pay annual obeisance and tribute to their titular king near the borders of Nagaon and Marigaon district, where the kingdom of Gobha was supposed to have been situated (Hussain 2004: 34-35).

Nagaon was strategically located as far as the British administrators were concerned and even the paramount paramilitary force in the region- Assam Rifles- was started by a colonial administrator from Nagaon by inducting migrating Nepali peasants and some local tribesmen from the area (Palit 1984: 15-22). The district was abound with rivers and beels (ox-bow lakes), forests and bordered the Mikir Hills, as the present day district of Karbi Anglong was known then. A few tea estates were also established by European planters around the foothills of the Mikir Hills. Some of the oldest reserve forests and wildlife parks were established along the banks where the district meets the river Luit (Brahmaputra). The forest resources of the district remained a source of revenue for the colonial administration, as wood and forest products like rubber found their way into the larger market (Saikia 2005). Besides planters, speculators and colonial officials, the district also attracted missionaries like Miles Bronson, who moved from Sibsagar and set up three stations of the Baptist church in Nagaon in 1843-45 (Barpujari 1986: xvii). Bronson and the American missionaries also set up the Nowgong Orphan Institution in 1843 in order to collect orphans and destitute children from all parts of the district and its adjoining areas and train them in the Christian tradition. He was soon joined by Lutheran missionaries and together they set up missions in other centres of Nagaon, such as Kaliabor. Bronson’s accounts speak of a heavily populated region,
where Tiwas, Karbis and other indigenous groups vied for control over local marts on the 
banks of the river Kollong. Significantly, his journals also mention the presence of large 
numbers of Bengali migrants, both Hindu and Muslim, who added to the diverse ethnic 
mix in the district (Barpujari Ibid. 86- 87). Incidentally, it was also in Nagaon that the 
early British colonisers learned of the Ahom system of governance, where the *paik* (male 
subject of the king who was either a soldier or a peasant, or both) system was still in 
existence. Scott, an agent to the governor general of Bengal and later the commissioner of 
Assam, also made a point to maintain a body of troops at Nagaon on account of the fact 
that its inhabitants were related in marriage to the Burmese (whom the British had just 
ousted in 1826) and therefore less inclined to accept the new masters (Barooah 1970: 84-
85).

It is evident from early colonial accounts that the district was evenly populated 
even before the massive immigration that took place in the early twentieth century. The 
presence of Bengali Hindu and Muslims in the cantonment area and markets of Nagaon, 
as testified by Bronson and other missionaries, were among the first accounts of a 
brewing political tension between the settlers and indigenous people. The early settlers, 
most likely followed the colonial administration to occupy low level jobs in the 
bureaucracy and work as labourers in and around the cantonment. As briefly stated 
earlier, it was with the partition of Bengal that the formulation of the wasteland 
development policies resulted in a rush for land in the province in general and Nagaon in 
particular. The census report of 1911 already spoke of the “peaceful invasion of Assam 
by the advancing hordes of Mymensinghia (residents of Mymensingh in present-day 
Bangladesh) army”, but the Assamese were apparently ignorant of its portents (Kar 1990:
The provincial government of Assam treated immigration as an economic and political necessity and proposed a consolidated set of rules of land settlement that empowered deputy commissioners to make settlements on an annual *patta* (title) basis, which conferred on the settler only the right of use and no right of inheritance and transfer (Kar ibid.). After a reasonable time, during which the cultivation took on a permanent nature, an annual title could be converted into a periodic one by the district commissioner. The Line System Enquiry Committee Report that was constituted to look into grievances voiced by Assamese associations in 1938, mentions that land was being passed on to immigrants by purchases from Assamese title owners and forcible occupation and at times the newcomers were forcing out the indigenous population by resorting to threats and violence. However, there were discrepancies in the story, as settlement was something that the settler, indigenous person and colonial authorities were implicated in, in equal measure. Firstly, the colonial government rendered ‘wastelands’ in the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley a free field for land-seeking immigrants while the Assamese were more interested in provisions for the future. The immigrant farmer was willing to reclaim and cultivate large tracts of land and was ready to accept any terms of settlement. Secondly, their urge for more land for immediate cultivation was greater than that of the Assamese peasant and they were willing to pay the land revenue to the government, which was something that the Assamese peasant was not too keen on. Thirdly, the Assamese also got high prices for their land and result of this freedom of transaction was that the immigrant could enter any part of the valley by rightful acquisition. There were also the ubiquitous members of the land revenue staff who were busy in the settlement of immigrants in wastelands, reserves and sometimes land that

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56 LSEC Report, Summary of Conclusions, Chapter 11, p.5.
simply belonged to others (Dev and Lahiri 1985: 24). In 1926, the commissioner of Assam valley forwarded the following statement of land transfers to migrants to the government.\textsuperscript{57}

Table 2. Land settled by immigrants in 1926.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Number of Titles</th>
<th>Area covered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>10,266 bighas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>1403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>4507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1329</td>
<td>17,010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this rather messy scheme, Nagaon appeared as the second favoured destination for immigrants. The preferred destination was Goalpara, a district adjoining the densely populated areas of Bengal, where the language and culture was similar to that in Bengal and therefore a natural area for the immigrant to gravitate towards. Since much of the immigration followed the river Luit upstream, it may seem a trifle surprising as to why districts like Kamrup, which falls between Nagaon and Goalpara were bypassed in favour of the former. Kamrup was one of the most densely populated areas of the valley and had little waste land to offer to the immigrant. According to Assam Gazette published in 1937, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts had the largest area under wasteland to offer to the immigrant. Though Sibsagar and Lakhimpur showed slightly larger area under waste land, it may be assumed that immigrants were not encouraged to settle there as these districts were prime tea growing areas and any uncultivated land therefore was earmarked for tea plantations. Peasants from East Bengal, mainly from the impoverished district of Mymensingh migrated to the so-called “wastelands”, thereby “increasing the quantum of colonial revenue and agricultural production” (Hussain 1993: 45). This

migration was not only encouraged by the colonial authorities, but it also added a cultural dimension of work ethic, still popular in academic discourse to migration itself. This discourse pitted the hardworking settlers against lazy natives and extolled the progress brought about by the settlers. An example of the rooted-ness of this discourse is seen in Goswami’s observation wherein he states—“...one welcome result of the influx of these farm settlers is the improvement of farming practices... (They) developed the whole agricultural system in Assam, helped improve the health of the countryside by clearing the jungles and marshes and converted the wild areas in populous agricultural regions. The introduction of jute, vegetables etc. as commercial crops in Assam, have largely been due to the immigrants” (Goswami 1988: 29). In order to facilitate further settlement of the areas, the provincial government of Assam introduced reduced premiums to be paid as revenue to officials. The existing premium at the rate of rupees twenty-five per bigha was found to be too high for the immigrants in Bfi^ * Thus the following table shows the prospects open for the government to settle immigrants in the different districts of Assam, including Nagaon58:

Table 3: Availability of Wasteland and area sown 1935.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Cultivable waste (other than fallow)</th>
<th>Net area sown</th>
<th>Net area available</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>4,18,050 acres</td>
<td>98,326 acres</td>
<td>3,19,724 acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>14,38,790</td>
<td>4,99,689</td>
<td>9,39,101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>7,18,890</td>
<td>5,54,231</td>
<td>1,64,659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>14,82,573</td>
<td>2,54,856</td>
<td>12,27,717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>14,85,599</td>
<td>5,03,442</td>
<td>9,83,157</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

58 Assam Gazette, Part VI A. 1937. p 871.
This table came against the backdrop of a plan mooted in 1916 in Nagaon. This plan, keeping in view the fact that Nagaon was fast becoming an area where settler immigrant tensions were bound to flare up, suggested that new immigrants should not be allowed to settle anywhere they liked but would be confined to certain areas in villages demarcated by lines. J.C. Higgins, the then deputy commissioner of Nagaon, in his order dated May 16, 1923, officially inaugurated the Line System though it had already been implemented and was in operation in 1920. Villages in the district were thereafter grouped under different categories such as Assamese villages, mixed villages, unsettled villages, those reserved for Assamese and unsettled villages reserved for Muslims.

Matters were further complicated in 1924, when the deputy commissioner of Nagaon issued an order substituting the term “Mymensinghias” in the official records, with “immigrant” and included in this categorisation all persons from any district in Bengal and Surma valley (in Assam) but excluded the indentured workers of the tea plantations. The year 1924 also witnessed a very lengthy debate on the question of control and transfer of land to immigrants. The most conflicting opinions were expressed by government officials, all of whom with a single exception were Europeans. D. K. Mukherjee, an assistant director of land recc. observed that the Assamese could not resist the temptation of the high prices of their land to immigrants. When one of them sold their land for a higher price, others soon followed. He felt that if steps were not taken soon, the short-sighted Assamese actions would cost future generations their land

| Total      | 55,44,902 | 19,10,544 | 36,34,358 |

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59 LSEC Report, p. 3
60 Ibid, p. 4.
and culture. He suggested that all land of the Assamese blocks should either continue to be settled on annual leases, or a clause be added to the periodic titles prohibiting transfer without the assent of the deputy commissioner. He further suggested that if an Assamese was found to have transferred land to an immigrant within the block, then his title would be cancelled and the immigrant evicted.\(^6\) The salient point of the debate was the fact that though it identified a part of the problem, namely that of Assamese title holders transferring their land to immigrants; it failed to distinguish between the categories and classes of title holders. Many of the Assamese titleholders were actually marginal, or subsistence cultivators, whose agricultural practices did not favour the possession of titles. In a sense, they were clearly burdened by the administration’s insistence on periodic land titles as it hampered their semi-swidden agricultural practices that were exaggerated as sloth and irrationality by the colonial authorities (Baruah 2001). Those who did have titles to cultivable land were members of an incipient land-owning class that had emerged towards the last part of Ahom rule. The biggest problems were however seen in the loss of indigenous control over the *pam kheti* areas. *Pam kheti* system was an important feature of the agricultural practices of the Assamese peasant and it involved the cultivation of riverine areas during the cold weather. Crops like mustard, pulse etc were grown and the Assamese peasant took up new lands yielded by the receding river every two or three years. This practice was affected by the immigrants who grew jute and therefore made more money than the Assamese peasants (Dev and Lahiri *Ibid.* 33- 34).

It is against this policy and practice that politics was carried on by anti-imperial nationalists, Assamese sub-nationalists and settlers alike. For the settlers, the promise of vast swathes of uncultivated land was literally a slogan. Hamid Khan, a member of the

Muslim League (a party that sought to mobilise the rights of Muslims as they were seen as an ethnically separate and marginalised constituency in the anti-colonial struggle) was purported to have coined the 'settler slogan', "Chal, c'kal, Darrang chal/ jangal bhanga abad kar/ patii mati dakhal kar" (Let us march to Darrang, clear the jungle and occupy the fallow land). Using census data, Sarmah shows the ground realities of the slogan in Assam. Reproducing her table, one can see the extent of how the ethnic structure of the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley changed from 1911 to 1931.

Table 4: Increase in the Proportion of Muslim Population in Assam (1901-1931).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1931</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>27.76</td>
<td>35.19</td>
<td>41.48</td>
<td>43.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>9.66</td>
<td>14.61</td>
<td>24.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>17.73</td>
<td>31.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>7.61</td>
<td>11.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar[63]</td>
<td>33.06</td>
<td>37.60</td>
<td>37.61</td>
<td>40.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam General</td>
<td>13.57</td>
<td>16.23</td>
<td>17.07</td>
<td>22.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sarmah, Alaka. 1999, p. 16.

This shows the context within which political lines were drawn between Assamese Hindu leaders and Muslims during the colonial period. While the next chapter deals with the political consequences of the settlement policies and sub-national concerns, it is illuminating that the debates generated by census reports were actually carried over to the post-colonial period as well. The 1961 census, long considered the basis for galvanising


\[63\] Cachar is the only district on the table that is not situated in the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley. The hill districts are not included as Muslim immigration to the hills was not seen to be a pre-colonial possibility due to the existence of strict control and inner-line regulations.
Assamese sub-national opposition against immigration had certain telling figures regarding the presence of migrants in Nagaon in particular and Assam in general.

Table 5: Nagaon, duration of migrants stay;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Migrants</th>
<th>Less than 1 yr</th>
<th>1-5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>11-15 years</th>
<th>More than 16 yrs</th>
<th>Not stated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>169,597</td>
<td>183,011</td>
<td>8204</td>
<td>11,231</td>
<td>45,970</td>
<td>3,718</td>
<td>27,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>162,403</td>
<td>186,589</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>10,299</td>
<td>38,988</td>
<td>3,377</td>
<td>22,786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>27194</td>
<td>16,422</td>
<td>2704</td>
<td>932</td>
<td>6982</td>
<td>4,044</td>
<td>4802</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, Vol. III (Part II-C), 1965.

The census data further showed that most of the migrants were from different villages within the district; some from other districts and that much of rural migration from outside the state were from Bihar and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Pakyntien 1965). By far, the post-colonial migration to Nagaon has been rural rather than urban. The small enterprises that offer some employment opportunity to migrants are all situated in and around urban areas. Another interesting pattern that emerges from the data is that of women's migration. The rural migrant, especially after the transfer of power in 1947, was typically a male who sought land and once settled, brought his family over to stay and help with chores. Hence, every five years, one sees a disproportionate sex ratio in the figures where on one count more males are seen to migrate, while in the next it is women who outnumber the males.

This little social digression aside, the census report of 1961 served to build the ground for a sub-national concern within Assamese civil and political society. Along with sundry newspaper reports about the forcible occupation of grazing reserves, leaders of the All Assam Students Union backed anti-foreigner movement of the 1980s, frequently cite
the census commissioner's statement wherein immigrants were said to be concealing their place of birth (Mahanta 1986: 77-111). The politics of identity was further taken up by social scientists, which were polarised in two camps. Some argued that the process of assimilation of the immigrants in Assam was near complete as they had embraced the language, and following the separation of the Muslim dominated district of Sylhet during partition, the Assamese were truly a dominant group with Assam and therefore claimed that the fears expressed by Assamese anti-foreigner agitators were unreal (Guha 1980: 1699-1978). Others, though expressing some ambivalence about the dominance of the Assamese following the event of the separation of Sylhet from Assam were of the opinion that the movement was indeed a manifestation of chauvinist tendencies and was directed against all non-Assamese (Gohain 1980: 418-420). There were also those who insisted that the fears of the movement were real, that they stemmed from the systematic dispossession of the Assamese peasantry and that it was not directed against non-Assamese people, per se, but towards a growing class of agrarian interlopers who had begun to control the fields and the markets (Misra 1980: 1357-64). As the political fallout of immigration and perceived land alienation will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, it bears repetition here that growth rates and migration have remained a critical issue in defining the political language of inclusion and exclusion in Nagaon even today. Much of the sentiments are derived from a notion of rural land alienation and the eventual loss of an agrarian milieu identified as the essence of Assamese identity (Sarmah 1999: 103-105).

It is therefore all the more essential to locate the perceived changes from within a contemporary anthropological field. Some of the concerns of the sub-national leaders are
echoed in the sentiments of the people, especially those who had lost/ transferred their lands to new generations of immigrants. However, there are qualitative differences in the responses of individuals depending on their economic status, degree of association with students unions and other politico-civil groups. At the outset, the villages where ethnographic data was collected and their ethnic break-up in Nagaon district are:

Table 6: Village (Nagaon), Ethnic identity and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Native Assamese</th>
<th>Assamese Muslim</th>
<th>Nepali</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M F</td>
<td>M F</td>
<td>M F</td>
<td>M F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kacharigaon</td>
<td>5 10</td>
<td>16 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Srimala</td>
<td>5 10</td>
<td>11 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ethnic division of the two villages where qualitative data was collected are Kacharigaon and Srimala. The first village, Kacharigaon located near Juria, is an entirely made up of second and third generation immigrants, who now call themselves Assamese Muslims. A pitched road leads up to the village but during the rainy season, access is difficult by vehicles. Buses ply up to the town centre in Juria from where one has to either take a cycle rickshaw or some other private mode of transportation to reach the village. There are six-hundred households in the village, though they are spread over several clustered enclaves. There are four elementary schools and two primary schools in the village. Kacharigaon actually means “Kachari village” and presently it does not have a single tribal inhabitant. Both villages chosen are representative of a kind of settlement and land use pattern that evolved over the last century. In Kacharigaon, the

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Kachari was a term used for Boro-speaking ethnic groups in the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley, a term since laden with pejorative connotations for the indigenous tribes themselves. Many now refer to themselves either as “Boro”, “Dimasa”, “Sonowal” etc., and have attempted to be rid of the appellate Kachari. However, names of places and villages, dating back to the early part of the twentieth century, still bear the names of the ones who had cleared and settled the village first.
village headman is a tribal who resides in Nagacn town. This is one of the manifested outcomes of the line system rules that were enacted almost a hundred years ago. Kacharigaon located along the river Luit and is prime agricultural land. It is perilously close to the Laokhowa reserve park that has dwindled from being one of the first reserved forests for wildlife in the early 1900s to a few forlorn trees standing between villages and vast fields of paddy and jute. Kacharigaon would have just escaped becoming a part of the reserved forest many years ago. The headman, who tries to visit the village once a month, claims that the village was originally settled by his forefathers who left one by one, as they felt threatened by the presence of so many settlers. Be as it may, there is enough evidence to suggest that the transactions were not entirely based on duplicity and threat and that in many instances, titles changed hands voluntarily.

Srimala was settled after the clearing of forests in the 1950s when native Assamese families from a vulnerable village called Ghahi, moved in along with Nepali pastoralists and agriculturists. Currently there is 10 bighas of collective grazing land; 50 bighas of fisheries on a total revenue area of 265 bighas. The village also has a lower primary government school and a high school, started by private enterprise and run by the village collective. Most of the Assamese of the village belong to the scheduled caste, who was not the traditional landed gentry during the pre-colonial and colonial period. Srimala, is one enclave of a larger area on the south bank of the river Barapani and is situated near the hills, beside the confluence of three rivers. A rail head and road can take visitors up to nearby Chaparmukh junction, from where one has to walk along the river for about four
kilometres before crossing it to reach the Srimala enclave. The village is not easily accessible and the inhabitants there are therefore dependent on common means of communication for contact with the world outside. The villages, though within a multi-ethnic area, are remarkably closed in terms of where the people choose to reside. The area was settled, as mentioned earlier, in the early 1950s by Assamese and Nepali persons who were allowed to clear the forests but not disturb the Karbi and Garo tribal villages on the foothills. Since the 1950s other ethnic groups have joined the first settlers. In the 1950s Bengali Hindus and Muslims alike were allowed to settle in lands adjoining the river and along the foothills. This area was relatively unexplored (even in the populated Nagaon district) and immigration was more pronounced in the post-independence period.

Says Banik Sarkar, a sixty-year old egg seller from Dalimbari village near Gospara/Srimala:

"...I came from Sylhet with some relatives in 1956. It was very difficult to stay on there with the Muslims causing trouble for us. We first came to Shillong and stayed there for three years before we moved here. We were given land by the local Congress leaders and asked to settle near the foothills. They gave us each a few bighas of land..."^[68]

The fact that many of the settlers did not necessarily go back to what they were doing in their native homeland, shows us that immigration was markedly more complicated in the post-colonial period. While the colonial period saw peasants, agriculturists and

^[68] Banik Sarkar in an interview with author on October 14, 2003, while he was out selling eggs in the morning (Gospara/Srimala).
pastoralists (along with indentured workers) come around to resume their work in Assam, post-colonial immigrants had to improvise once they got here.

On the whole, immigration into Nagaon can be gauged from the census data. The 2001 census shows that the population density in Nagaon is between 500 to 999 persons per square kilometre. This is on the high side and the density of population in Nagaon is higher than other districts of Assam, barring a few (districts) in western Assam that border Bangladesh. Karbi Anglong on the other hand has a density of population of below 100 persons per square kilometres. While comparing the decadal growth of populations in the country, the census states that while the overall population density of Assam in 1991 was 286 persons per square kilometre, in 2001 it had increased to 340. In 2001, Assam ranked in at fifteen in the ranking of states with highest density of population. The census data also states that in terms of density of populations, the “eastern region has by far the highest density of population and the North Eastern region the lowest” (Registrar General and Census Commissioner 2001: 77).69

This brief introduction into the case study enclaves/villages in Nagaon was to prepare the ground for a discussion on the nature of contests over the environment and the role of the different actors involved. As evidenced from the account above, Nagaon’s colonisation was coterminous with the grafting of colonial the colonial state apparatus onto existing political institutions, some of which- like the *paik* system- were on the wane and others- like the emergence of a small, influential native land owners. This process resulted in the reordering of landscape in pretty much the present form that we see it

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69 The 2001 census came in for a lot of criticism in the press after the Registrar General announced the increase of the Muslim population, creating a media induced hysteria among Hindu politicians. The fact that census operations were not held in key states like Assam and Jammu & Kashmir in 1981 meant that the real statistical projections showed an overly flawed picture of growth rates. For more details see Fernandes, Walter, ‘Population and Communal Politics’ in *Assam Tribune*, Tuesday, September 21: Guwahati. Hyperlink http://www.assamtribune.com/archive/edit.html (Accessed September 22, 2004).
today. Conditions in the hills of Assam were markedly different from this social and political history and it bears comparison at this stage.

Karbi Anglong (or the colonial Mikir Hills) in that sense, underwent another kind of frontier experience. Since it was declared as a backward tract and a partially excluded area, the development of social and economic relations between peoples of the district were “arrested” during a greater part of the colonial period. This meant that movement into the district was restricted. The large forests and grazing tracts were left untouched because there were no pressures on the land. The existing population could engage in shifting cultivation and not feel the pressure of territorial limits to the kind of agricultural practices their resources allowed them. As the notation “excluded area” suggests, the district was somehow set apart from the established administrative regime and continued as a “protected wilderness” that nevertheless was inhabited by (to use Moffatt-Mills’ politically incorrect expression) “rude” tribes. With the transfer of power in 1947, it did not seem that things would change much, except for the fact that the post-colonial state raised the colonial policy to the exalted realms of constitutional provisions of the new republic. The problems associated with republicanism’s ideal of citizenship and a protective regime that is built on colonial notions of wilderness is best manifested in the Karbi assertion for self-rule and the changes that it underwent from the birth of the Indian republic. Ironically, it is with the extension of republican ideals like adult franchise, justice, universal education etc. that one finds the district reverting into a classical frontier, where land is there to be grabbed, where rules are not quite clear and where indigenous settler conflicts take on more than just mere identity and resource based
ideologies. In Karbi Anglong, the conflicts themselves bring out a serious interrogation of the nature of nation-building of post-colonial India and the place allocated to indigenous peoples who inhabit the “frontiers” of the nation’s imagination.

With regard to the early history of the district, it has been mentioned earlier that it formed a contiguous hills valley continuum with the adjoining plains areas. During the colonial period parts of the present-day district were demarcated as the Mikir Hill tract and designated by a government of India act as being a “backward tract” in 1919 (Agnihotri 1996: 58) and thereafter as an “excluded area” and “partially excluded” area in 1935. It has to be mentioned here that until 1884 there was no administrative boundary for the region and it was clubbed together with the valley districts of Nagaon and Sibsagar and also with the Cachar Hills districts, the latter being the domains of the Dimasa king who ceded powers to the British in the nineteenth century. As sections of the district were classified under both “excluded” and “partially excluded”, it needs to be specified as to what exactly were the differences of the classification. In the “excluded” areas, the governor could exercise his discretion over the administering of the region and in “partially excluded” areas; he had to seek the advice of the council of ministers (Athparia 1996: 209- 210). Not surprisingly, it was the interior hilly areas that were considered “excluded” and colonial administrative initiative left at a bare minimum that the governor could exercise unqualified control. In the areas that were more connected to so-called civilised areas, namely the foothills, where schools set up by missionaries had educated a generation of tribesmen and women, the governor was supposed to defer to local public pressures. The area, once predominantly inhabited by local indigenous tribes like the Karbi, Tiwa, Dimasa and Jaintia, also saw a small inflow of Bengali settlers who
manned the lower-level clerical jobs in the railways in the early twentieth century. Following the transfer of power in 1947 and the demarcation of the autonomous district in 1952, a steady inflow of cultivators occurred from neighbouring districts and states, notably Hindi-speaking persons from the Gangetic plains, who had already spent some time in districts like Nagaon and Golaghat.

The population of the present district during the colonial period would be difficult to compute given the fact that it was created only in 1952, as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule. However, in the recent past, the growth of the population in the district has been a concern for most political figures and citizens. This apparent unchecked growth of a local population is thereafter seen as the cause for conflict. The fact remains that the availability of land, forests and grazing areas makes the district a prime location for immigrants, even though the land transfer laws are substantively more complicated and subject to greater local level scrutiny. In this context, Olzak writes: "(As) newly arrived ethnic populations come to compete with established ones, attempts to exclude the new competitors will take place if jobs do not expand proportionately" (Olzak 1986: 19). Therefore, the loss of land is an issue that is taken very seriously in the political discourse in Karbi Anglong. Migration into Karbi Anglong has been relatively low until the post-1947 period. In 1961, when it was part of the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district, its migrant population numbered slightly more than one lakh. Most were rural migrant as the only urban centres in the twin districts were Diphu (the headquarters of present day Karbi Anglong) and Haflong (the district headquarters of present day North Cachar Hills).

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70 Assam Labor Enquiry Report, 1942, pp. 23.
71 One hundred thousand
Table 7: United Mikir and North Cachar Hills - Migrants Duration of stay (1961)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Migrants</th>
<th>Less than 1 yr</th>
<th>1-5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>11-15 years</th>
<th>More than 16 yrs</th>
<th>Not stated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6689</td>
<td>50862</td>
<td>5601</td>
<td>2514</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1066</td>
<td>13694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>6575</td>
<td>50144</td>
<td>5200</td>
<td>2491</td>
<td>19634</td>
<td>1585</td>
<td>13509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1314</td>
<td>838</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, Vol. III (Part II-C), 1961

Most migrants, as one can see from the table, had moved to the district after the transfer of power in 1947. A sizeable proportion who had been residents for more than sixteen years were from neighbouring districts and were members of different hill tribes like Hmar, Nagas and others who practised swidden cultivation. The post-1947 migrants were mainly from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and to a smaller extent, from Nepal. If the numbers were disaggregated, one would find a distinct difference in the location of Bengali-speaking migrants, who are more dominant in the North Cachar Hills, as the district has an extremely long connection with the Bengali-speakers dominated Cachar district in southern Assam. Railway and road construction was cited as the main occupation of the migrants, though those who had been staying longer (i.e. more than 11 years) had begun to identify themselves as farmers who had no other previous source of income (Pakyntien 1965).

The site chosen for field study in Karbi Anglong was to have been around Kheroni block, where grazing reserves were being brought under cash crop cultivation and where conflicts between ethnic Karbi Militia, settlers and government paramilitary had claimed many lives through 2000-2004. After brief attempts to establish local contacts in 2003-2004, this attempt was sidelined in favour of Iromari-Timung Gaon, situated a few kilometres from the district headquarters, Diphu and Hanlokrok in Hamren sub-division.

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72 The North East Times, July 1, 2000.
Hemari-Timung Gaon is therefore situated in the hilly tracts of the district and has a few pastoralist settlers, as well as many other ethnic groups whose claims to indigenousness are as valid as those of the Karbi inhabitants of the village. The village was created by order of the District Council in the 1960s but was settled much later. Of the current residents, many claimed that they had moved to the village in the last ten years. The road from Diphu to the village leads one as far as a residential Assamese-medium school run by the *Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram* (Forest-dwellers’ Development School/ Institution/ Refuge), an organisation affiliated to the right-wing Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Organisation). The school- Gita^73^ Ashram- dominates the social and cultural life of the village and its vicinity. There are also two other primary schools- one run by Christian missionaries and a private school- but it is the residential school that dominates the landscape. Gita Ashram’s employees are all educated Hindus from western Assam (Nalbari) and southern Assam (Cachar). The male employees belong to the upper castes and the single woman ‘animator’^74^ was a local Karbi woman, who insisted on identifying herself as a Hindu.

Such assertions have an explicit logic to them. Hemari-Timung Gaon is inhabited by Karbi villagers who support (or at least claim to) the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). The ASDC has an avowedly Marxist flavour and one of its factions is an electoral partner of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), ‘Liberation’. In political terms, the ASDC and patrons of Gita Ashram are on extreme ends of the spectrum. Local council elections are dominated by the ASDC and the Congress, each

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^73^ The allusion to Hindu texts of learning is not coincidental, as the school after all, seeks to impart Hindu education and way of life.

^74^ ‘Animators’ are grassroots organizers. The term is used by most voluntary organizations to denote potential leaders who can ‘animate’ the community and make them accept the organizations views and mission.
vying with the other to develop the infrastructure of villages around Diphu. This has not translated into anything concrete, as the village still lacks a paved road, water supply, banking institutions or dispensaries. There are twenty-five households in the village, comprising twenty Karbi and five Nepali households. The minimum wage in the area is low (Rs. 70/- per day) and most villagers are either subsistence cultivators or daily wage earners who sell timber from the nearby forests and vegetables. Significantly, even though all people own some land where they cultivate vegetables and rice, the villagers see themselves as daily wage earners and as peasants. The timber comes from “private” forests which were corralled off by connected persons from Diphu, ostensibly for growing rubber. The rubber trees exist as testimony to some attempt at clearing the forest, but since they have not received any sustained care, the area has now been overrun by shrub and jungle. Most of the Karbis are Hindu though there are five Christian families among them. It is only understandable, therefore that developmental activities and identity would constitute the first line of strategic political planning for Hindu nationalists in a Hindu majority, left-oriented underdeveloped Karbi village in an under-developed area where they have only a miniscule political presence.

Hanlokrok is situated on the banks of the Kopili River and is a large census village, which is actually a conglomeration of different distinct ethnic enclaves. The ethnic enclaves are rather confusingly referred to as distinct villages by inhabitants but for the sake of clarity, this study will refer to them as enclaves. A break-up of the ethnic enclaves and the dominant communities who live there are enumerated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enclave</th>
<th>Dominant ethnic group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patergaon</td>
<td>Karbi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

85
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bederagaon</td>
<td>Tiwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tissogaon</td>
<td>Karbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santhe Tissogaon</td>
<td>Karbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haripur</td>
<td>Dimasa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inglenggaon</td>
<td>Karbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dewagiri</td>
<td>Tiwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepali Basti</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirinku</td>
<td>Karbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longboi*</td>
<td>Boro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azhargaon*</td>
<td>Karbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longboi Saoragaon*</td>
<td>Saora (Adivasi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garogaon (Rupatchiti)</td>
<td>Garo and Assamese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Starred villages are part of the larger Hanlokrok voting constituency, though locals say they are not part of the larger village.

Hanlokrok is a mixed area and in some enclaves like Haripur, the local Dimasas have land titles, though in most cases, the land belongs to the Karbi people and other communities that live there have either leased out the land, or live there by virtue of ad-hoc tenures that allows them to cultivate land and also allows for transfer of tenures across generations.

The region was once heavily forested and sparsely inhabited, until other tribes (like the Dimasa) began clearing the forests and settling there in the 1960s. The first Dimasa settlers cleared land around Ludumai and used it for seasonal cultivation. In the mid-sixties, an abandoned Dimasa settlement was uprooted by local Karbis, who then settled their own people in the area. Unlike contemporary events, this settlement and
resettlement was not a violent one, and elders of both communities came to a mutual understanding on the extent of land that was to be used by both communities.75

Hanlokrok has traditionally voted for the Congress – something that caused a certain degree of friction between communities when the autonomous state demand movement was at its peak – and during the course of the study, the Congress retained the seat during the elections to the Assam assembly. In 2003, there was a politically charged atmosphere in Hanlokrok. The majority Karbi and their Dimasa (land-owning) neighbours eked out a living from paddy cultivation in a region that had seen better harvesting days. A serious conflict had arisen between the dominant Karbi and minority Kuki ethnic groups in the district76. In neighbouring North Cachar Hills, the conflict between Dimasas and the Hmar ethnic minority that took place in 2003 had affected Dimasa families in Hanlokrok as well77. During the first field trip to the area, relations between the Karbi and Dimasa were marked by mutual solidarity to each other’s losses. The area did not have Kukis or Hmars (groups that the Karbi and Dimasa militia were fighting with elsewhere). The nerve-centre of the Karbi-Kuki was further away in Singhason hills (in Diphu sub-division) and Hmar-Dimasa clashes were restricted to the neighbouring district. The geographical distance of the epicentres of the conflict in no way diluted the communitarian solidarities of the ethnic groups in the village. Thus, for example, Dimasa households in the village found ways to provide relief to Dimasa civic bodies in NC Hills, while Karbi households – regardless of political affiliations – were

75 Interview with Dimasa village elder whose name has been omitted on request. December 12, 2003; Haripur (Hanlokrok).
76 The ethnic clashes took place between October 2003 and March 2004 in Karbi Anglong. It is estimated that militants of the Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA) and the anti-talks faction of the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), together killed 85 persons during this period (Kumar 2004: 352-357).
77 The clashes between Hmar and Dimasa militia took place in the first quarter of 2003 and resulted in displacement and deaths of people from both communities in North Cachar Hills district. (The Telegraph, April 7, 2003).
also seen to be actively involved in relief and support work carried out by student associations and Karbi civic organisations.

**Conclusion**

The reason for explicating the details of the case-study areas has been two-fold. Firstly, descriptions of ethnic conflicts, especially if they are centred on land and identity, tend to get conflated within a security perspective that does not do justice to histories of settlement and interaction. In the course of this chapter, one has tried to highlight the process and events that fed into the settlement and colonisation of the two districts. In doing so, the links between political events and changes in resource-regimes have been brought to light.

Conflicts between ethnic groups and contests over resources has been an underlining theme in this chapter and this fact helps understand how colonial legacies feed into everyday relations, even though one may not see a clear difference between the conflicts and its roots in the past. One hopes to overcome that by further ethnographic analysis to determine how far radical projects of citizenship and people-hood play into every lives of people in the following chapter.