CHAPTER 1: ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS IN STATE PERIPHERIES

1.1 INTRODUCTION: SOCIOLOGY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

Conflict over resources, such as minerals, water and territory is traditional source of violent contests. Recent scholarship, particularly in the study of conflicts in post-colonial contexts, have made claims to the effect that environmental degradation will increase resource scarcity and in turn lead contribute to an increase in armed conflicts. Taking the cue from such here, it becomes all the more relevant to analyse the politics in peripheral spaces of modern states – places that have experienced the steady intrusion of new forms of resource and land use – where pre-colonial societies continue to negotiate with state policies and developmental processes that they claim have been detrimental to their existence. In determining what trajectories such environmental conflicts can take, the institutional framework (within which they occur), the role of state and non-state actors and the possibility of looking at mitigating the impacts of these conflicts have assumed as much importance as the conflicts themselves.

There is a basic causal chain in the broader debate on environmental conflicts that assume that population growth leads to high resource consumption, which further causes deterioration in the environmental conditions, increasing harsher forms of competition over resources and eventually paving the way for conflict (Gleditsch 1998). This causal chain pre-supposes the institutional setting within which such conflicts may offer and this is an aspect that will be referred to in greater detail in section 1.2 where the terms and contexts
of the study are defined in greater detail. Needless to add, the environment – as referred to in such studies – are more than an aggregate of physical descriptions of the geography of a region. Since the emergence of environmental issues in the international political agenda in the early 1970s, there has been increasing concern that environmental disruption is likely to increase the number of disputes originating from the competition for scarce resources (Rønnfeldt 1997: 473-482). The prime resource in the reconstructed view of the environment that is worth fighting over is obviously territory, as in the conflict-filled expansion of European settlers in North America, or the border conflicts between China and its neighbours (Gleditsch 1998). Other resources, such as water, sources of energy and food together constitute the social and political field within which conflicts may arise. In the following sections, one shall elaborate on how these political fields of environmental conflict are constituted in settings like Assam.

Politics in Assam has been characterised by extreme levels of violence for the last two decades. This violence has articulated itself in myriad forms and very rarely has it been addressed under the environmental conflict prism. It has appeared as an outright conflict of interests between ethnic groups and the state; within ethnic groups and at times for or against notions of development. Significantly, resources and identity remain the first, and often last explanatory comment on the expressions of violence. On one hand, armed groups professing allegiance to certain ethnic groups in the state have been involved in militant political activities, directed mainly towards the preservation of their resources and identity. In some cases, this struggle has involved alliances across ethnic boundaries, subverting officially sanctioned definitions of the problems as one of migrants versus locals. On the other hand, the response of the state apparatus has been to restrain, regulate and repress
these demands at various points of time. The study compares the situation in two representative districts where similar issues are at stake but the administrative structures and responses are different. Although the conflict in the districts of Nagaon and Karbi Anglong have repeatedly escalated to the level of armed violence involving rebel groups, civilians (both settlers and indigenous) and security forces, they have not received much media or scientific attention. The investigation starts with tracing the local histories of conflict between indigenous communities and settlers in the two districts. As at each stage in these histories, relationships between the contending parties will not only have included conflictive, but also cooperative elements, the study takes a special interest in identifying instances of the latter and the conditions that gave rise to them.

If one considers the formal structure of state politics, Assam’s position within the Indian federation has been an uneasy one. From the precarious politics that defined the eventual merger of the colonial province to the union of India in the mid-twentieth century, to the present crisis involving violent ethnic and nationalist armed movements, the position of the state (of Assam) within the union is still an asymmetric one in terms of economic, social and political indices. Table 1 puts in perspective the ratio of populations in India and the state of Assam. Both sets of figures show a predominantly rural society, with an unfavourable sex ratio. Though the similarities between the union and the whole are consistent, in the course of the thesis, it will be argued that the rural-urban divide and the population figures in Assam have different stories to tell. While India’s population growth, sex ratio and rural-urban divide have been debated widely (Rao 1993: 25), the implications of the same in Assam have been seminal in the political discourse of the state, where it is
believed that insurgents are members of the dispossessed and disenchanted peasantry (Misra 2000).

Table 1: India/ Assam Population Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population (Total)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1027015247</td>
<td>531277078</td>
<td>495738169</td>
<td>741660293</td>
<td>285345945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>26638407</td>
<td>13787799</td>
<td>12850608</td>
<td>23248994</td>
<td>3398413</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The first district, Nagaon, is home to many ethnic groups, with the ethnic Assamese being the most dominant. The district extends between 25.45' to 26.45' North Latitude and 92.33'-6'' East. It is bounded by Sonitpur district and the Luit (Brahmaputra) river in the north, Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills to the south, Karbi Anglong and Golaghat district to the east and Morigaon district to the west. The major rivers in the district are Luit (Brahmaputra), Kolong, Sonai, Naini, Jamuna, Kopili and Barapani. The geographical area of the district, according to the 1991 census is estimated at 4002 square kilometres and has the second highest population density. Agriculture remains the mainstay of the economy, even though there are as many as 24 tea estates, occupying 7780 hectares of land. The district has been crucial in the formation of an ‘Asomiya’ national identity. The district has witnessed the sustained inflow of populations from outside the region since the nineteenth century. This inflow coincides with the development of the plantation complex that demanded a pliant indentured labour force. This continued well into the post 1947


2 Asomiya is a word that is increasingly being used by social scientists to denote the Assamese speaking indigenous community. The anglicized “Assamese” does not capture the nuances of identity formation in Assam. “Asomiya” on the other hand, denotes both a language speaking groups as well as a historically constituted collective. However, since it would mean complicating the legal issues around indigenous-ness, they are referred to as “native Assamese” in this study.
period, when the politics of Assam’s merger with the Indian union was made contingent on the immigration issue. The undivided district also witnessed large-scale violence against immigrants in the 1980s and the subsequent growth of the clandestine armed movement for secession (of Assam) from India.

The second district is Karbi Anglong, which is a designated ‘autonomous tribal district’ within Assam. It extends between 25.30’ and 26.41’ north and 92.7’ and 93.52’ east. To the north, it borders Nagaon and Golaghat districts; North Cachar Hills and the state of Nagaland to the south; the state of Meghalaya to the west and Golaghat and Nagaland to the west. According to the 1991 census, it occupies 10,434 square kilometres of land, which is roughly about 13.3% of the total area of Assam. The district has two sub-divisions, Hamren and Diphu, four revenue circles (Phulani, Diphu, Silanijan and Dongkamukam) and developmental blocks. The major rivers in Karbi Anglong are the Kopili and the Dhanseri. The Kopili dissects the two subdivisions. There are many secondary rivers that flow into both major rivers. The Barapani, Umiam, Amreng, Kolong and Jamuna flow into the Kopili while Kâl ani, Nambor, Deopani and Doigrung flow into the Dhansiri. Its constitutional status is a mixture of old colonial laws meant to seclude the hill people from the plains and administrative attempts by the post-colonial state to devolve powers to local elite. The ethnic Karbi people in the district have been demanding a separate state with more powers for the indigenous people. At the root of this demand is the fact that many indigenous Karbi farmers have lost their land to Hindi-speaking settlers. The state has responded to these conflicts by increasing the military presence (to reassure the settlers) and by pushing for changes in the land-use patterns in order to drive an economic wedge in the Karbi community. Central to this study are the
contrasting efforts of the State and civil society in their approach to addressing the issue of environmental conflicts that broke out between corporate interests and local peasantries and between newcomers and natives with different ethnic backgrounds. Historical analysis bears out that these conflicts have their roots in the agrarian policies of the colonial and postcolonial Indian state. These policies created a fundamental contradiction in the resource allocation/resource utilisation patterns. Crucially, the study shall attempt to analyse the discourses embraced, the forms and relative success of civil society strategies to de-escalate ethnic tensions as opposed to the forms and practices that exacerbate ethnic conflict.

### 1.2. Framing Environmental Conflict within Ethnic, Indigenous and Class Paradigms

Ethnicity, indigenousness and class are seen as alternative and in fact antithetical principles of organizing collectives for political action (van den Berghe 1976:249). The appeal to ethnic ties in the pursuit of a common agenda evokes myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity between the putative members of an *ethnie* (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:6f). Where social movements profess class as their main organizing principle, they point to a shared situation of exploitation on account of the dominant class’ appropriation of the surplus produced by the movements’ constituencies. Ethnic protest discourses usually focus around the charge of collective discrimination on the basis of race and/or culture, whereas class-based protest usually involves calls for a redistribution of societal wealth for the benefit of an economically disadvantaged class or alliance of classes. Most important, however, in distinguishing ethnic from class collectives is the fact that the former – both in theory and practice – cut across class lines.
with the promise to uplift both the poor and the privileged from the same ethnic background. Class movements, on their turn, often encounter insurmountable barriers when they try to rally members from different ethnic backgrounds to their call (Smith 1981; van den Berghe 1976).

Both organizational principles are available to indigenous communities under frontier conditions, and both of them have been embraced by a great number of them at different times and places in trying to hold onto their land and enhance their chances of physical and cultural survival. Both of them offer the indigenous communities in question different alliance options and thus make available different resources for waging the struggle.

Ethnic and class discourse have traditionally been of unequal appeal to indigenous communities – in India as elsewhere. Class-based organizations often display ethnic and racial prejudice when organizing among indigenous communities, which may lead them to promoting unwelcome changes in native lifestyles and social relations (Geiger and Blum 1994). Ideological rigidity and cultural biases on the part of the revolutionaries often impede the transfer of emancipatory ideas across the ethnic boundary (Lan 1985, Moody 1988). Indigenous alliances with peasant movements and communist cadre organizations are fraught with difficulties, as the latter’s analyses of class oppression often are ill-fitted to the realities of the frontier interior (Brown and Fernandez 1991), and they often prove unwilling to incorporate indigenous individuals on equal terms (Geiger and Blum ibid.). Where indigenous groups compete with settlers

---

1 See Barbora (2003-12-13) for a detailed discussion of the nature and implications of these alliance options.
for land, communist insurgents have often been found to favour the settlers in disputes. In a broader sense, class-based organizations are unable to address the settler problem as they are intent to bring about class unity between the “different sectors of the rural proletariat” (Moody ibid.).

This study is centrally concerned with isolating the factors that made a substantial number of Karbis – overtly or covertly – become embroiled in an insurgency movement that advocates the eviction of settlers in the name of ethnically-defined preferential rights for the sons-of-the-soil of Karbi Anglong, and conversely, what moved sections of native Assamese society to join or support an insurgency that postulates that land conflict caused by migration is but a part of a larger problem that must be resolved by means of class struggle and the revolutionary restructuring of the political economy of Assam. These are just preliminary observations of how a strategy that has been used over time in similar locations to take different forms in different sites. Class and ethnicity, therefore are but mobilising principles in a repertoire that is largely determined by the social conditions on the ground. The legal and constitutional language within which such mobilisation takes place is also important in framing the contours of class and ethnic politics. Mr. Holiram Terang, a founding member of the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC), Karbi Anglong and an import political leader of the region states:

"... (The) constitution of India only recognises individuals as citizens and that will not help solve the crisis of representation and identity. There has to be some provision for the recognition of peoples.”5

4 The reasons for the insurgents’ partiality are obvious. The latter are being privileged not only because they usually belong to the same ethnic group (or cluster of ethnic groups) as the guerras but they also form the movement’s main social base.

This sums up the dilemmas of identity in a region where political representation, citizenship and contests over resources are enmeshed.

Once class or ethnicity has become espoused by actors in an environmental conflict as principles of political solidarity and mobilization, they add new layers to the conflict and increase its complexity, reducing the possibility of managing and ultimately transforming it (Suliman 1997:1). In conflicts over material resources, social, ethnic, cultural and religious solidarities – developed in the course of the conflict in order to wage it more successfully – seem to undergo a transformation over time from abstract ideological categories into concrete social forces. Where the state intervenes in a repressive rather than an arbitrating function, it may become an additional target for agitation and violence, adding yet another strand to the conflict bundle that the contest actually represents in the actors’ eyes (Calic 1997:168f.). Analytically, it may become impossible to separate causes from effects, and whimsical to label the conflicts environmental, ethnic or class (Peluso and Watts 2001; Hartmann 2001).

Contemporary scholarship has drawn one’s attention to increasing scarcities produced through resource enclosures or appropriation by state authorities, private firms or social elite leading thereafter to struggles along gender, class or ethnic lines (Robbins 2004). Such studies, collectively classified under the ‘environmental identity and social movement thesis’, state that changes in environmental management regimes and conditions have created opportunities for local groups to secure themselves politically. In a setting where actors are implicated in each others’ strategies, it is useful to secure a context within which decision making and strategies occur. Citing Vayda’s ‘progressive
contextualisation chain of explanation’, Robbins elucidates the levels, processes and strategies employed by actors involved in a political struggle over the environment. The following diagrammatic representation seeks to elucidate the nature of the relationship between the different actors at different levels:

![Diagram](image)

Figure 1: Vayda’s Chain (Robbins ibid: 74).

---

6 The chart has been reproduced with modifications from Robbins’ representation of Vayda's progressive contextualization explanation of the politics of environmental management regimes.
When seen in this light, the problems of the relationship between the landscape and modern institutions (like trans-national finance and the nation-state) are made explicit. Trans-national finance- in the form of international institutions and trans-national firms- has a relationship of strategic concerns with nation-states, where the former are predisposed to open markets, integrate production processing and ensure stable currencies. The nation-state is the only modern principle of organisation that can ensure all the three concerns of trans-national finance. While international institutions invest in and control trans-national firms, the latter are directly implicated in a relationship with the nation-state. The overall strategy- for the ‘family’ that constitutes trans-national finance- therefore is to ensure that the nation-state restructures its policies. Often, the state is forced into this relationship when it has to repay its debt to trans-national financial institutions. The nation-state therefore has to facilitate this change within local and regional institutions that challenge the changes imposed by the state (acting under strategic compulsion). The local/ regional institutions are in turn pressed upon to integrate and organise direct producers and communities who hand in their surplus to the former. It is here that the relationship has to interrogate notions of collective rights and aspirations of direct producers and communities, whose survival depends on the reduction of risks and always reserve the right to chose time-tested ways of engaging with the ecological system. Hence, one sees that the potential for conflict exists at almost every level and that the strategic compulsions of the actors are driven against the immediate level with which they interact. However, once there is an explicit ideological underpinning to the ecological conflicts, the perceptions of actors often
undergo a change, especially in regard to the identification of enemies and allies (Robbins ibid: 15).

Suliman (1997) has drawn our attention to the tendency of conflict perceptions to mutate into conflict causes in the course of time, a phenomenon which he labels conflict inversion. Conflict inversion has the effect that once discord over material resources is clothed in the symbolism of ethnic survival and class struggle and fuelled by the revenge cycle of civil war, it can simmer on long after the initial resource dispute has been settled (ibid: 3). Both Nagaon and Karbi Anglong are instances of conflict inversion where the initial grievance of the indigenous parties to the conflict – massive in-migration by settlers – become overshadowed by the wounds of repression suffered at the hands of the state, and the channels of nationality and ethnicity become the insurgents’ main concern. The religious conflict between the ethnic Assamese and the Bengali-speaking settlers in Nagaon were blurred in the latter part of the 1980s, while the language conflict was obliterated altogether (Darnell and Parikh 1988). What was emphasized in their place was the notion of class oppression that saw an alliance between different ethnic groups against the state, with the effect that settlers were no longer singled out as targets of violence. Central to this process is the fact that both the colonial and post-colonial state invests in indigenous leaders to be native leaders or clients by grafting statist administrative concerns onto existing indigenous political institutions (Giersch 2001: 67-94). In regions like Assam, settlers and demographic change are a matter of infinite concern in political discourse. Historically, administrations and states have used settlers to colonise and clear ‘wildernesses’. However, when the institutional political process do not keep pace with lived experiences on the ground, the lines between allies and enemies
in the frontiers does not take long to shift. My case study provides a unique opportunity to investigate in detail the processes of conflict inversion, which are increasingly recognized as crucial for applied research on conflict transformation.

Since concepts such as tribes, peasants and ethnic identity appear throughout the course of the study, it would be useful to lay out the conceptual framework within which these terms are being used. As post-colonial Assam has witnessed tribal political mobilisation against Assamese hegemony, it is self-evident that the tribals see themselves as a separate entity from the caste-Hindu/ Muslim Assamese speaking populations. Assamese, after all, has been classified as a part of the Indo-Aryan family of languages that has certain Tibeto-Burman elements (Varma 1973: 570- 578). On linguistic grounds therefore, the Assamese would not qualify as being indigenous in a region where Tibeto-Burman and Mon-Khmer language speakers are considered to have predated the arrival of the caste-Hindu Assamese speaking population.

Politics in colonial and post-colonial Assam has drawn heavily on notions of imagined homelands and indigenous-ness is increasingly finding its way into the politics of self-identification. Kingsbury states that the term ‘indigenous’ has been used in international politics to denote a “range of groups whose shared interests and concerns have been recognised (internationally as) warranting special investigation and action” (Kingsbury 1995: 16). Acknowledging that the definitional problems of finding a working category that incorporated historical differences of experiences of ‘tribal’ and ‘indigenous’ peoples, he outlines certain essential requirements for a people to be classified as indigenous. They are (a) self identification; (b) historical experience of, or contingent vulnerability to, severe disruption, dislocation or exploitation; (c) long
connection with the region and (d) wish to detain a distinct identity with relevant indicators being a group’s (or groups’) (i) non-dominance in the national/ regional society, (ii) close cultural affinity with a particular area of land or territories, (iii) historical continuity by descent with prior occupants of the land in the region, (iv) socio-economic and socio-cultural differences from the ambient population, (v) distinct objective characteristics and (vi) regarded as indigenous by the ambient population or treated as such in legal and administrative arrangements (ibid. 33-34).

India sidestepped the seminal debates on who constitute indigenous people in the ILO Convention 107 (1957) and Convention 169 (1989) as it felt its national legal and policy arrangements already incorporated such groups. In India, colonial ethnography made a case for differentiating tribal communities from dominant Hindu and Muslim groups on the basis of their mores and habitat. ‘Backward tribes’ were thought to reside in peripheral hills. Following the framing of the republican constitution in 1951, a government instituted committee made special provisions for “backward tribes” who lived in the hills of the Northeast. The government of India used standards that did not reflect the realities of indigenous groups, thereby perpetuating the dominant Hindu society’s lack of awareness about people who were at its cultural and geographical margins (Pachuau 2000). Despite such problems, it was accepted that “scheduled tribes” (as they were defined in Constitutional language) were different from mainstream society and in principle, were protected from losing their cultural identity (See appendix 1 for list of Scheduled Tribes in Assam).

To this end, the Karbi and other groups classified (in the Indian Constitution) as “scheduled tribes” in Karbi Anglong, have legitimate grievances regarding the disparity
between the provisions in domestic law and political realities, as encapsulated in Kingsbury's indices for recognising people as indigenous in international law. So, 'scheduled tribe' does not reflect the power asymmetries within Assam as they are not adequately represented in the regional political structure where the Assamese dominate. For them, the Assamese elite that govern from Dispur constitute a hegemonic group. Assamese peasants might locally be seen as associates of local elite (by Karbi activists). Hence, throughout the course of this paper, the administrative category of 'scheduled tribes' used in Assam, will be referred to as indigenous people (or indigenous Karbi, where situations demand their differentiation from other scheduled tribes in the district), as this best reflects the political contours of a political debate within which ethnic mobilisation occurs in Karbi Anglong.

Yet, indigenous grievances against the dominant ethnic groups are only part of the complex political history in Assam. Since the early twentieth century the Assamese have seen themselves as the aggrieved natives of a colonised land. During the colonial period, Assamese political opinion emerged against a sub-continental axis between the Congress and the Muslim League. The Assamese political community saw itself as the representatives of a culturally diverse but compact region. The rural peasant was idealised and romanticised as the epitome of Assamese-ness. Yet, Assamese politics— as carried out within legislative and oppositional practice in the early part of the twentieth century— did not have place for the peasant as an agent of change. This changed fundamentally with the growth of the armed movement for self-determination in the latter part of the twentieth century, as for the first time a movement had organised itself around the rural peasantry (Mishra 1991). Exponents of the armed movement though steeped in
the political ideology of civic nationalism, nevertheless employ indigenous political discourse strategically to highlight the colonial experiences of the Assamese as an exploited people (ULFA 1996: 151-155). Despite the strategic usage of indigenous-ness to denote a political community, it would be erroneous to apply the term to the Assamese peasants, as one would have to concede that they constitute a politically and economically dominant group within the state. However, since much of the subsequent descriptions of the history of political conflict in Nagaon revolves around a core constituency which is rural and identifies itself as (a) victims of historical events like colonisation and (b) agents of change with differing political goals and ideals, the term 'native Assamese' will be used to refer to this group, i.e. the Aşomiyə peasants of Nagaon. Politically, radical Assamese nationalists would also like to include sections of the settlers, who came during the colonial period in this category. Such a project is still contested by those who frame the issue in the dominant state discourse of citizenship, which in turn is closely tied to religious identity – which was the basis of division of the British Indian empire – as being the main difference between the different groups that claim Assamese as their "mother-tongue" (in the census). Chapter 4 deals with this issue in further detail and for the sake of broadening the scope of the discussion, Muslim Assamese have been enumerated separately (as "Assamese Muslim), as they are perceived to be the "other" in parts of Nagaon.

These are, at best, broad definitions that allude to the political and economic location of certain populations within a national territory. The peasant developed as an
agent of political change within a radical left discourse, especially Maoism. In Assam, 
the anti-colonial campaigns of the early twentieth century made little attempt to formally 
organise the peasantry, but its revolutionary potential was always cited as the driving 
force for change in the region (Baruah 1991). However, cultural differences prevented an 
all-out mobilisation of the peasantry. The peasant (in Assam) had always expressed a 
political difficulty in accepting the leap of faith required to overcome ethnic loyalties, as 
the following chapter will elucidate. On the other hand, the native Assamese peasant 
might locally be seen as an interloper and associate of a local elite ethnic group (by 
Karbi, Boro or Tiwa activists), civic and political groups seeking to represent them often 
use the international legal term. Given the fact that native Assamese politics in the 
colonial and post-colonial period has drawn heavily on notions of imagined homelands 
and created a genealogy of belonging, indigenous-ness is increasingly finding its way 
into the politics of self-identification, creating more than one cleavage for political action 
and social analysis. If one were to look for an administrative language of categorisation. 
the various tribal communities that constitute a sizeable percentage of the Assamese 
speaking populace in the valley, would resent caste Hindu and Muslim Assamese 
speakers being labelled as tribal. However, middle class Assamese speaking people of 
caste Hindu origin, also insist they have a long, unbroken association with the region and 
are under threat of losing their collective identity due to massive immigration 
(Chattopadhayay 1990: 164-174).

This thesis does not come to any conclusive judgement on the usage of the terms. 
They are important terms for organising along political and economic issues and have 
continued to open (or close) long-standing debates. At the same time, it is useful to
narrow down the repertoire of usages within a thesis. Throughout the thesis, the usage of the term 'tribal' has been coterminous with the administrative classification used by the government of India. The term indigenous has been used to define a political community that claims an identity which is separate from the national mainstream and one that claims a long cultural association with the land it inhabits. The terms class and peasant have been by and large coterminous with a Marxian theoretical framework that tries to incorporate some of the important debates within an emerging indigenous rights discourse.

The indigenous rights discourse is doubly articulated in the context of peripheral regions like Northeast India and Assam. Scholars have pointed out that even though indigenous-ness is a contested notion in India, it is still an effective strategy that groups from Northeast India seek, primarily because of their historical location within the peripheries of the nation-state and the international dimensions of the indigenous discourse (Karlsson 2003: 403-423). There are reasons why scholars are unwilling to accept the dominant indigenous rights discourse, especially when it is applied to the South Asian context, by saying that such concepts are impositions from entirely different contexts (Beteille 1998). However, such arguments need to be squared with the lived politics and remembered histories of the people of the region. The following section looks at the historical processes that have helped sharpen the identity-resource conflicts in the region and the two districts in question from a socio-historical perspective.

1.3. Constructing the Frontier: Colonial Policy, Nations/States and Peoples

---

1 The administrative usage has often pandered to base instincts like political and financial incentives. Therefore, it is not surprising to find entire communities being declared a Scheduled Tribe thereby changing the face of affirmative action projects immediately. When this happens, communities that already exist in the schedule resent the inclusion of other—usually more economically and politically dominant—groups in the schedule.
In the course of the last century, colonial rule was consolidated in the region by the British who were seeking new areas to construct a plantation complex (Guha 1977:34-37). In due course, the British also turned to using the non-plantation areas of the Luit (Brahmaputra) valley to attract cultivators from the populated regions of the Indian sub-continent. The inflow of labour produced a peculiar set of relationships between each new group of immigrants and the local populace.

Until this day, there exists a dual policy of governance and administration that has its roots in colonial administrative structures of excluded and partially excluded areas. In the post colonial administrative system, these areas were transformed into autonomous districts via a Constitutional edict (Sixth Schedule) that were meant to protect the culture and resources of ethnic groups who live in relative isolation in the hills. Karbi Anglong is administered under the Sixth Schedule and forms part of the two autonomous districts in Assam. Nagaon on the other hand is administered under the regular laws of the Constitution. In the Sixth Schedule areas, customary laws of the indigenous groups are supposed to take precedence over civil law (as outlined in the Constitution). In essence, they allow for some semblance of self-rule for the tribals. While various land-ceiling acts apply in the case of Nagaon, such acts are conspicuous in their absence in the Sixth Schedule areas where land is held in common by all members of local communities (engaged in agriculture) (Bakshi 1991).

A crucial factor in defining the course of the conflicts in Northeast India is the politics of the frontier. Frontiers are defined as moving zones of frontline contacts between

---

*Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas are part of colonial classification of lands that were not directly placed under a revenue and taxation system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The realities of exclusion included the physical monitoring of such areas, as well as the control of the narrative of belonging to a particular territory by peoples.*
(tribal) societies and expanding states (Bodley 1990), zones where the state or actors operating in consent with the state substantially influence local tribal societies, without exerting complete control over them (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992). Frontiers in this sense are unique political, cultural and geographical spaces where, among others, the rule of secular, civic law is still more fictional than elsewhere; economic relations between invading and autochthonous state subjects tend to be predatory; and the state cannot (or is unwilling to) assert its claim to the monopoly of violence. In frontier regions, the processes of state-building and territorial expansion and consolidation are crucial intervening factors in local-level conflict. They generate unique terms of contention and repertories of collective action, and these have to be taken into account in eventual efforts to prevent and transform resource use conflicts and design new institutions (ibid.). On account of the distinctive agenda of the state in frontier areas and the forms of contention it engenders, environmental conflicts in those settings often defy attempts at classification which are of analytical value elsewhere.

The institutional setting that governs the access to and management of natural resources is a vital structural dimension of environmental conflicts and an integral part of any conflict and mitigation analysis. However, both the practical relevance of positive law concerning the use of natural resources and the official perception of the legitimacy of local ownership and use rights over them tends to vary strongly within national territories. Areas which have long been under firm control by the political centre witness very different conflict dynamics and modes of conflict articulation from frontier zones where the state is still struggling to assert its supremacy and where communitarian – normally indigenous –
groups tend to retain their traditional political autonomy in significant measure (IP7 [NCCR North-South] 2001-3)

In frontier zones as areas where state-building is currently still underway, a mere analysis of state policy frameworks will not produce an adequate understanding of the rules that guide the encounter between competing actor groups. Frontiers are characterized by a lack of routine governmental control and a correspondingly stronger presence of private entrepreneurs who are free to construct a desirable political order and social and ethnic hierarchy out of the institutional vacuum (Kopytoff 1987:12) Laws promulgated by the remote political centre are either interpreted opportunistically or ignored by local power holders. Informal positions and relations of power are often more determinative of political processes at the frontier than formal ones (Bodley 1990; Fenster and Yiftachel 1997). In zones remote from the political centre, this study is concerned with the interface between national systems of governance and local power structures to be able to establish the particular institutional conditions, the way the state is run and its laws and principles of governance enacted. Positive law – on local and state governance, land, forestry and subsoil resources – as well as pragmatic techniques of rule in these so-called lawless areas have to be evaluated with regards to whether they contribute to mitigating or exacerbating ongoing environmental conflicts. Hence, even actions of government departments become forms of state intervention, with the

---

10 Governmental control is often confused with state control. Recent debates that construct the hills as "non-state spaces" have been instrumental in decoding the peculiar politics of counter insurgency in Northeast India (see Patnaik 2002). However, such counter has been criticised on the grounds it fails to locate the presence of modern institutions of the state apparatus in the administering of erstwhile "non-state spaces" (see Subba 2003). While both positions are tested in the course of the thesis, it needs to be reiterated that state control is often ephemeral in areas where modern borders and the technologies of control have only recently been set in place. Too often, this results in an overt show of presence in terms of a governmental apparatus.
formalisation and systematisation of social order. The colonial concept of ‘scientific forestry’ that sought to restrict indigenous practices, especially in the hill and sub-montane regions is a case at hand. Such process include the creation of new rules of what is permissible in the context of use of common resources; creates an organisational structure (often coercive) to enforce the rules and undermines indigenous alternatives (Agarwal 2001: 9-40). Administrative control and surveillance of indigenous practices therefore became hallmarks of colonial intervention and were instrumental in creating a physical space within which a political economy of resource based conflicts was carried out over time.

Anderson (1996: 2-3) says that frontiers are actually processes that have four important dimensions. They are (a) instruments of state policy, as governments attempt to change the location and functions of frontiers, where policy promotes sectarian interests (rather than a collective interest); (b) the exercise of enactment of de facto powers by a state, where the powers are meant to make the frontiers impermeable; (c) markers of (national) identity, often at odds with a dominant political identity of geo-body of the nation-state and (d) a term of discourse, whose usage in law, diplomacy and policy changes from time to time. Yet, the differences between locales situated within a bare 20 kilometres from one another in the frontiers could upset the definition outlined above. Indeed, Nagaon’s history of engagement with a centralised, modern power centre is much older and sustained than Karbi Anglong’s. Statistically, one would be hard pressed to prove that the state is absent, or that the district of Nagaon is impermeable. If anything, the land man ratio is very high and since the last decade, the presence of the state, in both its coercive and developmental capacity is obvious. Karbi Anglong is markedly different
in terms of the quality of its administrative framework and politics. To use Prescott’s formulation, Karbi Anglong could be termed as a primary settlement frontier, as the process of possessing territory by the state and ethnic groups is still ongoing there (Prescott 1987: 36 - 42). By the same yardstick, Nagaon could also have been a primary settlement frontier (as the following chapter tries to elucidate) but has since seen less settlement induced by state policy in the twentieth century. Today, it is a geographical zone where cultures that were once markedly different have been struggling to come to terms with one another and at times, going beyond the confines of a narrow definition of ethnicity. It appears as an old frontier—formerly a centre of export crop production and of intensive cultivation—now in a state of neglect as they do not have the capacity to generate the economic miracles promised by new frontiers (Amanor 1994: 26).

Frontiers are therefore constructed as a structural and historical space within post colonial nation-states. Colonial intervention in Assam’s fractured socio-political life in the nineteenth century saw the region slowly transform into a buffer zone between larger, more populated areas under colonial (or feudal) control. Willem van Schendel includes it in his reconstruction of a physical space concealed from dominant discourses on geographical realignment of area studies (in Asia) and political decision-making following the period of decolonisation of large parts of South and Southeast Asia (van Schendel 2002a). The region’s pre-colonial political and social landscape was a reflection of the multi-dimensional migrations into its hills and valleys. It comprised old kingdoms and chiefdoms as well as wide swaths of land where authority of the kings and chiefs were negligible. In the early nineteenth century, British entrepreneurs and soldiers of the East India Company travelled up the river Luit (Brahmaputra) to aid factions of the
Ahom nobility in their power struggle against members of the Burmese-aided monarchy in Assam. What expedited the colonisation of the region after that was the discovery of wild tea plants in parts of eastern Assam. Commercial interests, coupled with a keen eye on geopolitical balance of power led the British to “draw lines between hills and plains, to put barriers on trade between Bhutan and Assam and to treat Myanmar as a strategic frontier- British India’s buffer against French Indochina and China” (Baruah 2004: 5). During the course of the anti-colonial struggle in the twentieth century, notions about the region being a frontier were not challenged. If anything, in the emerging historiography of the region there was an attempt to restructure the relationship between the region and the national hinterland with an overriding emphasis on establishing a place in the national space of the emerging idea of India (Kar 2004).11 In the playing out of frontier politics in the region, issues related to land, identity and ethnicity became embroiled in a complex relationship of cooperation and competition. In a sense, this also produced a relation history difference between uplands and plains. Speaking of similar processes in Sulawesi (Indonesia), Li alludes to the fact that in being forced to occupy a reduced amount of land, excluded from forest resources and marshalled into debt bondage made people from the upland create alternate and essential identities (Li 2001: 41- 66). The reconfiguration of social relations occurred almost as a corollary to the process of dispossession (of the hill people) from lowland resource. This also lead to the ossification of relations between hills and plains as one marked by pejorative ties and ridicule, a view that was widely accepted by administrators in their subsequent call to isolate hill from valley. When

11 Kar, a historian, highlights the tensions between including subliminal spaces (and peoples) and the construction of a “national” self in the course of the anti-colonial struggle. He brings out the ambivalence of the emerging educated Assamese middle class to notions of modernity, culture and belonging and elucidates how heterogeneity was made to fit into the “procrustean bed of imperial/national identity” (pp 55)
considered along with the role of the state in consolidating its hold over the frontiers—especially hills—the importance of headmen and chiefs who come to embody both administration and tradition are therefore very important. As one tries to explicate below, the post-colonial reconfiguration of spaces in India relied on an acquired knowledge based on an understanding of the essentialist construction of identities and relations between uplands and lowlands.

The reconfiguration of post-colonial spaces in India's Northeast was not a very smooth one. By the end of World War II, regions like Assam had been converted into buffer zones. Chapman asserts that much of the empire building process and commerce that began with the Anglo-French rivalry and continued until World War II helped bound the imagination of "natural nations and peripheries" (Chapman 2000: 96-116). The war and the inevitability of the transfer of power to a native elite resulted in a flurry of plans for the carving of colonial territory. Plans sometimes competed with one another, as their merits and demerits were discussed by political leaders in metropolitan centres. The Coupland Plan of 1943, which envisaged the administrative break-up of the colonial territory based on a relational history of river basins and the adjoining hills was discussed but repudiated by Muslim and Hindu politicians (Ibid.: 165). The Yeatts Plan that envisaged a slow, inevitable dominance of civic identity favoured break-up which would allow hydroelectric power to be the main concern of future nation-states in South Asia. However, frontiers like Northeast India and the North Western Frontier Province, remained areas of concern for even within such grand visions: these regions had a political timbre that defied easy civic solutions. They were governed by a series of ad-
hoc, customary laws which often built on existing relations between the people of the
hills and the small kingdoms of the valleys (Dunbar 1984: 101).¹²

Frontier regions like the Northeast had become a theatre of confrontation between
natives and settlers and the colonial state. The decisions made in Delhi and at conclaves
were of great importance to local politics in Assam. Congress and Muslim League
ideologies defined, to a great extent, the matter of political discourse in Assam. Native
Assamese (Hindu) commentators were dismayed by the Congress’ working committee
agreeing (in principle) to the right for constituent units to secede from the future post-
colonial union (Barua 1944). By the mid-twentieth century, political discourse in Assam
was polarised enough for native Hindu Assamese to imagine that there was a plot afoot to
isolate Assam from the Indian union (Ibid: ii), and all efforts were made to keep Assam
within the Indian union.¹³ The reality of Indian self-governance was thereby transferred
into the arena of political tactics, where feasible and appropriate arrangements were being
discussed for the province of Assam by colonial authorities and nationalists alike. The
colonial government was disposed towards extending the policy of separate
constituencies to the tribes in the plains; allow maximum self-governance in the hills,
create intermediaries (by transforming the functions of traditional authorities) for

¹² The diary of George Dunbar, a colonial official who served in the Northeast before World War II, speak of a land steeped
in myth and romance. Dunbar as many administrators of his time, at once celebrated and deplored of the charmed
wilderness he was serving in. While he acknowledged the inevitability of the wild mountains coming under administrative
surveillance to keep the Chinese out and to ensure a British presence, Dunbar in his 1984-85, he frequently complained of
the elaborate system of appeasement of the hill tribes by the British administrators. He felt that the British were wrong in
carrying on with old Assam tradition of the payment of pava (monetary aid) to the warring people of the hills.

¹³ The fear that Muslims would begin to dictate the course of politics in Assam was so strong that even seemingly apolitical
people felt the need to voice their concerns. HN Barua, a professional advocate, was one such person whose avowed
distaste for political machinations did not prevent him from seeking a foreword from the premier of Assam Gopinath
Bordoloi for his reflections on partition of India and the possibility of Assam being gifted to Pakistan. Barua collapses
historical process and social realities to argue that Assam (sans the Bengali dominated districts of Darrang and Sylhet) had
always enjoyed an independent existence and was by a leap of historical imagination—part of the mythical golden Hindu
era located somewhere in 300 BC. Like other social commentators, Barua tries to draw tenuous links between the Koch
kingdom in western Assam and the other Hindu kingdoms celebrated by (Indian) nationalist historians.
governance and create a special cadre of Indian officers for governing the hills of the Northeast including the valley of Assam (Clow 1945: 8-15). Such contrasting pulls therefore necessitated immediate attention from the policy makers who took over the administration of the region.

In 1947, the Interim Government of India appointed a sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly, called the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-committee under the chairmanship of the Assamese political leader, Gopinath Bordoloi. Ostensibly, this came about, as the leaders of the anti-colonial struggle were sensitive to the need for adequate understanding of the situation in the Northeast, especially with regard to the growing aspirations of the tribal people. The sub-committee, also known as the Bordoloi Committee, sought to “...reconcile the aspirations of the hill people for political autonomy with the Assam government’s drive to integrate them with the plains” (Sarmah 2002: 91). The instrument of this integrative devolution of powers was embodied in the concept of the “Autonomous District Councils” designed by the committee. This instrument was thereafter passed by the Constituent Assembly with certain modifications and it now constitutes the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Originally, the Sixth Schedule was to apply to the tribal, essentially hill areas of Assam. On January 25, 1950, the Indian Constitution came into force. As would be expected from such an ambitious nation-building project, the Constitution tried to build in some safeguards for the marginalised and oppressed groups in the country. For the people of the Northeast frontier, this safeguard came in the form of the Sixth Schedule of

---

14 Sir Andrew Clow, the governor of Assam and a close friend of colonial India’s last British viceroy, Earl of Mountbatten, was especially keen not to upset Indian political figures by pressing for too much autonomy for the Northeast. Earlier, he had enthusiastically endorsed plans suggested by scholar-administrators like JPS Mills, who called for a Crown Colony in the region. Clow articulated a defense policy for India where the hills were seen as a natural boundary (for India) in the event of war (Clow 1945: 29-30)
the Constitution. The provisions in the Sixth Schedule dealt mainly with the issue of safeguarding the land and customs of the hill tribes of the region. It drew upon the erstwhile excluded and partially excluded areas legislation of the colonial state. In Assam, the problems of massive in-migration of people from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), created a polity that was fraught with fear of ethnic others. The state, as it operates in the frontiers, does not play a neutral role in managing ethnic tensions and seeking new ways to establish control over a fractious ethnic polity (Darnell and Parikh 1988). The concerns of the state, in terms of governing the region therefore had a managerial aspect that sometimes veered towards repetitious manipulation of ethnic politics in order to regain legitimacy, especially when its writ was challenged. Here it is important to seek the contiguities between the frontier in colonial times, when it was seen as a land waiting to be settled and its portrayal as a buffer zone, with special laws, security concerns and an ethnic composition that was different from the mainland. Practices of citizenship therefore also followed different paths. For indigenous communities living on both sides of the border, between India and its neighbours- Burma, Bangladesh, Bhutan and China- all of who shared some concerns of the post-colonial regimes of governance and administration.

The nineteenth century was in fact the era of expansion of capital to hitherto untrammelled landscapes such as Assam. This discovery precipitated a move towards a fundamentally different type of economy in Assam and other parts of the world, where the movement of populations became a condition for growth and colonisation (Hobsbawn 1995: 202-207). The process of creating frontiers became a condition

---

15 Today, scholars assert that far from being an untrammelled terra incognita, Assam was a vital link in the eastern silk route in medieval and ancient times Baruah (2004) speaks of the region’s importance in trade, commerce and communications up until the mid twentieth century
peculiar to the type of economy introduced. Hence, a complicated process of mapping the region within notions of centre-periphery was being undertaken. With it, there was visible move towards what Rumley and Minghi call the “consideration of border landscapes as a set of cultural, economic and political interactions and processes occurring in space” (Rumley and Minghi 1991: 4). Those inhabiting regions that were not immediately earmarked for expansion of capital and colonial administration were clearly subjected to a position of marginality precisely because they constituted a new periphery. For the post colonial state, the importance of underplaying marginality and nationalising territory became the single most important theme of economic and political policy. However, van Schendel believes that there are inherent problems with a citizenship regime that is placed over a history of trans-territorial movement rooted in colonial practice and laws—especially in the case of enclaves—because in the nationalist imagination, there cannot be a homeland that isn’t bounded. He further states that decolonisation of South/ Southeast Asia led “not only to the break up of a colonial state but also to fragmentation of Southasian historiography (where) it created a partitioned academic community engaged with new discourses regarding nation, citizenship and state” (van Schendel 2002b: 115-142). It is in the interplay between spaces and peoples that ethnicity becomes an important factor in defining citizens and subject in the post colonial order.

In trying to nationalize space (Baruah 2003) at their undeveloped peripheries, nation-states invariably try to bring about changes in traditional land-use systems and agricultural regimes. Under the British, shifting cultivation in the hills was rarely interfered with, whereas in the plains it had to make way for intensive and thus taxable

---

16 Baruah asserts that the current narrative of development appeals to an indigenous elite and aids in the re-mapping of frontiers (Baruah 2003).
forms of agriculture (Reid 1997). Significantly today, many analysts are diagnosing an agrarian crisis both for Assam’s plains and hill areas, due to the compounded effects of the introduction of plantation agriculture on subsistence economies, the move towards commercialized/intensive farming without adequate attention to the lack of markets and capital, and the incompatibility of traditional land use systems with the pressures of the market (Bordoloi 1991; Bora 1986). In the most fertile parts of the plains today, the carrying capacity of the land for smallholder wet rice production is exceeded; as landless settler groups – some of them former plantation labourers, others merely beneficiaries (or victims) of twentieth century movement of peasants from population dense areas to forested frontiers – pushed into the tribal-dominated hills and the more peripheral plains like Nagaon, violent land conflicts (which peaked in the 1980s) ensued. Over the last few decades, this conflict shifted to the adjoining hill district of Karbi Anglong, where despite the protective legislations of the Indian Constitution, land was more freely available. Crucially, the latter also was home to multiple forms of land-use, including swidden cultivation, with ample scope for settled and cash crop cultivation as well.

1.4. Attempts at a Partial Reading of Histories: Layout of the Study

As briefly mentioned at the outset, there are certain obvious reasons for a comparative study of Nagaon and Karbi Anglong. Both districts are neighbours geographically and the latter was actually carved into existence by incorporating parts of the former into the erstwhile United Mikir Hills. Following the transfer of power in 1947, the Interim Government of India appointed a sub-committee of the Constituent Assembly, called the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-committee under the chairmanship of the Assamese political leader, Gopinath Bordoloi. Ostensibly, this
came about, as the leaders of the anti-colonial struggle were sensitive to the need for adequate understanding of the situation in the Northeast, especially with regard to the growing aspirations of the tribal people. The sub-committee, also known as the Bordoloi Committee, sought to “...reconcile the aspirations of the hill people for political autonomy with the Assam government’s drive to integrate them with the plains”.\(^\text{17}\) The instrument of this integrative devolution of powers was embodied in the concept of the “Autonomous District Councils” designed by the committee. This instrument was thereafter passed by the Constituent Assembly with certain modifications and it now constitutes the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. Originally, the Sixth Schedule was to apply to the tribal areas of Assam. On January 25, 1950, the Indian Constitution came into force. As would be expected from such an ambitious nation-building project, the Constitution tried to build in some safeguards for the marginalised and oppressed groups in the country. For the people of the Northeast frontier, this safeguard came in the form of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The provisions in the Sixth Schedule dealt mainly with the issue of safeguarding the land and customs of the hill tribes of the region. The Karbi did get a semblance of a territory but the Sixth Schedule was not equipped to handle immigration. As other issues like, cultural and social hegemony of dominant ethnic groups, continued to eat away into the fabric of political discourse in Assam, the realities of the day seemed to lead the tribal people into yet another long series of confrontations with not just the state apparatus, but also with the dominant groups associated with the state.

\(^{17}\) Cf. Bihupen Sarmah, 2002 “The Question of Autonomy for the Plains Tribes of Assam” in Social Change and Development (October), Omka Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development Guwahati pp 91. Sarmah’s assessment of the constitutional safeguards and the context in which they evolved are comprehensive but they do not deal with the dynamics of social movements within such regimes.
The proposition that so-called backward tribes reside in the hills shows the residues of colonial notions of which subjects are categorised as primitive. Nevertheless, even if one bestows the proverbial benefit-of-doubt to the committee for this, it still does not address the issue of who constitute tribal groups. Implicit in this problem is the issue of marginalisation and impoverishment, as well as the working through of a cultural dynamic in a region where identity is a matter of life, death and most importantly—livelihod. Hence, the persistence of a policy that originated in negating democratic notions of self by reconstituting the governed subject as something less than a citizen reveals the first discordant notes in the nation-building process in India. The effect that this has on political mobilisation is quite interesting. In numerous memoranda demanding separation from forced union, Karbi, Dimasa and Boro leaders have come up with images of a collective self that does not have a similar resonance in mainstream politics. Hence, in a petition to the Prime Minister of India in 1973, leaders of the Mikir and North Cachar hills stated:

"...there is an indisputable case for constitution a separate state for Mikir and North Cachar Hills together with the contiguous tribal areas. Only by this means they (we) will be able to exist unhindered, preserve and develop their (our) entities, languages, cultures and ways of life and at the same time be in tune with the mainstream of national life, to sail the wide ocean that is India and not be restricted to the backwaters of the Brahmaputra valley."18

This typifies the kind of intractable cultural and ethnic lines that are drawn in the territorial discourse in the region. Karbi Anglong is a case where autonomy demands are couched in an ethnic language, even as early as 1973. Despite regulations preventing the

---

18 The memorandum demanding a separate state comprising the Mikir Hills, North Cachar Hills and the Contiguous Tribal Areas in Assam, was signed by Mr. P.K. Gorlosa and Mr. S.R Thaosen, secretary and president respectively, of an action committee of the Mikir and North Cachar Hills Leaders' Conference in Hailong in June 1973. (see Dutta 1993).
large-scale alienation of tribal land in the district, the presence of Hindi-speaking agriculturalists has seen an upswing of ethnic violence. The political mobilisation for a separate state in the 1980s also facilitated a greater debate over indigenous claims to a homeland.

In Nagaon, the ethnic tensions became painfully apparent in the aftermath of the Nellie massacre of 1983. Undivided Nagaon received innumerable migrants in the course of the colonial reconstruction of the demographic and economic landscape of Assam. Although not considered to be the heartland of the tea-growing districts, Nagaon is still home to some of the oldest tea estates in the region. Indigenous groups who lived in the district were found habitating the catchments of the rivers Kolong, Kopili and Luit (Brahmaputra). They lived in the chapari areas of Raha and with the advent of large numbers of migrants saw a diminishing of their numbers due to disease and flight to higher grounds (District Gazetteer of Assam, Nowgong 1905: 81-82). By 1931, the description of the effects of large-scale migrations of peasants from the densely populated region of East Bengal had begun to sound shrill:

"...The increase in population is especially noticeable in Khatowal, Juria. Laokhowa, Dhing and Lahorighat mauzas when it is solely due to the large influx of immigrant settlers mainly from Mymensingh. They have opened up vast tracts of dense jungle along the south bank of the

\[\text{Juna is one of the mauzas where fieldwork was carried out in Nagaon.}\]

\[\text{Laokhowa is one of the oldest designated wildlife parks in the state. It sweeps along the Luit (Brahmaputra) river near the township of Juna. Today, there is very little wildlife remaining in the area with the park having dwindled to a few trees spread over several fields of lands that are cultivated by peasants.}\]

\[\text{Mymensingh is a district in the present day Bangladesh. In colonial times it was part of East Bengal but was always retained umbilical ties with the administration in Assam.}\]
Brahmaputra and have occupied nearly all the lands which are open for settlement in this tract".\textsuperscript{22}

During this period the friction between immigrants and the native populace was almost inevitable given the circumstances of their presence in the area. Unlike the indentured workers who lived in the regimented confines of the plantations, the peasants were perceived to be competitors for agricultural lands and had a better grasp of colonial law as their subsequent spread over the territory shows. The same census report states:

"...Their (Muslims) hunger for land was so great that in their eagerness to grasp as much as they could cultivate, they not infrequently encroached on government reserves and lands belonging to the local people from which they could be evicted only with great difficulties. In the beginning they had their own way and there was frequent friction with the indigenous population who did not like their dealings as neighbours."\textsuperscript{23}

In the description above the adversarial positions were already outlined as one between indigenous peoples and (Muslim) settlers. Although the main argument for settler indigenous conflict was framed in the context of loss of land of the indigenous people, in debates over land ownership, settlement and plans for its future, narrative was crucial. The power to narrate, or block other narratives from emerging was also important in the culture and conflict in the region and constituted one of the connection between them. Several decades down the line, after the massacre of hundred of Bengali-speaking settlers, it would seemingly be qualified to refer back to a colonial census that had already described the setting for such a conflict. However, that is not the end of the tale.

\textsuperscript{22} Cf Census of India 1931 49-52

\textsuperscript{23} Op cit. 51-52

34
In the last decades of the twentieth century, Nagaon was also witness to the visible growth of a radical Assamese nationalist demand for a sovereign Assam. Settlers fuelled the genesis of myths of national origin and belonging, a matrix of stories that justify not only settlement and the transformation of the settler into citizens of an important project that challenges nation-building. They were incorporated within a discourse that brought them closer to their indigenous counterparts in parts of the district. The land issue, migration and impoverishment all meshed into an amorphous project of national liberation that downplayed ethnic competition and turned foes into allies.

This is partly the reason why the comparison of the two settings becomes a compelling task. As one has tried to show above, the links to the themes that the study focuses on - (a) politics and economics of the frontier and (b) ethnicity and class: paradigms under consideration - are somewhat circuitous. They are, however, pertinent in adding to the already existing corpus of knowledge on the dimensions of identity and class-based conflicts in the region. What much of the literature leaves out is the empirical accounts of daily social negotiations that indigenous and settler populations engage in. In terms of research gaps, this stands out as the most obvious. By integrating the available secondary literature as well as elements from ongoing research, one hopes to overcome the obvious mono-causal pattern of drawing linear links to analyse conflicts.

It is particularly important to try and address the research gaps by focusing on empirical, village-based data in order to demonstrate the dynamics proposed in the objectives of this study. It is particularly important, in the case of environmental conflicts, to not reduce their logic and dynamics to fit sociological standards. A major
objective of this study (as stated below) is to find out why people use certain political discourses and organisational strategies in a specific way, and in using them, produce a practical sense of their neighbours, which in turn influences the dynamics of conflicts they may have been involved in or use it also for cooperation. The study seeks to analyse the interface between national systems of governance and local power structures, so as to establish the particular institutions, the way the state is run and its laws and principles of governance enacted, in zones remote from the political centre. State agency on all levels of the state edifice has to be scrutinized, including both positive law and pragmatic techniques of rule in the essentially lawless areas that make up the frontier. Moreover, the thesis seeks to analyse the local-level efforts to prevent/displace these conflicts by reconfiguring them in novel terms. In particular, it seeks to identify the conditions under which actors downplay or entirely negate ethnic differences, while at other times and under different circumstances they may choose to accentuate such boundaries. In the two areas chosen for fieldwork, one sees that both strategies have been (or continue to be) employed.

1.5. Methodology and Substance in Following Chapters

The study has been guided by two methodological principles. The first has relied on secondary literature and archival material. By doing so, one has relied on a diachronic reading of texts to create the foundations of the argument. The texts form a chronicle, a body of thought that when combined with archival inputs help unravel the politics of everyday politics in the region. The archive, as has been established, has offered not mere insights into the past but has also shown how authority has inscribed itself upon subjects (Said 1979). Archival sources on Assam have not necessarily answered crucial
questions about settlement patterns in the district in concern but they have added significant insights into the discursive practices around issues of land settlement and identity during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. In order to sift through archival data, which do not adequately reflect contemporary realities of frontier areas, one has attempted to draw upon ethno-histories of select communities that inhabit the area (Sundar 1997).

In the diachronic reading of events that shape social life in the present day, I have also relied on the extensive use of narratives and the ethnographic method of data collection. In Nagaon, ethnographic data was collected from ‘settler enclaves’ in the villages of Srimala/ Gospara (in Raha block) and Kacharigaon (in Juria block). A third village, Kaki (near Lanka) was identified in Nagaon district because of its importance in the Assamese nationalist attempts at starting collective farms in the 1980s and 1990s. The villages in Nagaon district were selected for their proximity to “protected areas” and unclassified areas (Kacharigaon), as well as the presence of large numbers of migrants. Moreover, these villages have been the centre of conflict in the not-too-distant past. Srimala

In Karbi Anglong too, a similar method was applied to identify villages. The villages in Karbi Anglong were selected firstly for the ethnic composition and the fact that they were affected by violence. Most members of the village had kin who were affected by the conflict and were therefore implicated some way or the other. Since the

24 In the national census, the village is included as an enclave of “Srimala Bd” within the rural sub-district Raha, within Nagaon.
25 In the national census, the village is included in the rural category of Rupahi sub-district within Nagaon.
26 Kaki is actually a conglomerate of different revenue villages (as mentioned) in the census. My study involved “Kaki No. 2” a ward of the Kaki area. Kaki No. 2 was home to kin and sympathizers of ULFA activists, many of whom had participated in the collectivization projects in the 1990s.
district has two administrative units – Diphu and Hamren – one village was selected. In Diphu sub-division, the village was Hemari-Timung Gaon, which is close to the district headquarter and is an ethnically homogenous village of Karbis. In Hamren, Hanlokrock village (real Baithalangso) was chosen because it is ethnically mixed and had also been affected by conflict in 2005. In the eight odd months spent in different parts of the field, it became apparent that actors struggled, despaired and rejoiced in equal measure to the question as to how to make life and everyday relations viable. My fieldwork was seriously challenged throughout the course of 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005 by events in Karbi Anglong and Nagaon. Ethnic conflict, natural calamities- like unprecedented flash-floods- left me ‘marooned’ in the unlikeliest villages with my official data collection matrix. Very often, this upset carefully constructed timelines where a certain volume of quantifiable data had to be collected. However, these impediments to movement also helped me redefine the theoretical considerations that I started out with. Settler and indigenous, at times became unwieldy categories that hampered political action and at other times, they made me sharply aware of how my personal preference for a civic nationalist/ republican hampered my understanding of the real, lived situation in the field. The extended and enforced period in the field may have hampered my time line and the ability to garner more data but allowed me to see the pitfalls of what Bourdieu criticises as the intellectualist reduction of ‘the (practical) logic of things’ into ‘things of logic’ (Bourdieu 1990: 36). That is to say, that the knowledge produced about social relations in everyday relations in Nagaon and Karbi Anglong, are not only about fulfilling sociological criteria like common economic status, class and ethnic alliances and so on. For the actors who produce this knowledge has a practical purpose that allows
them to act on policy, ideas and events. Settler and indigenous, therefore, are fluid categories when the question of resources and policy framework are brought into play.

Table: Case study areas and population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>ST</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi Anglong</td>
<td>Hemari-Timung</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hanlokrok</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>299</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>Kacharigaon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Srimala/ Gospara</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(enclave)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census 2001.

A brief description of the 2001 census data of the four villages where intensive ethnographic data was collected is in order at this stage. In Hemari-Timung Gaon, where all respondents are classified as “Scheduled Tribe”, Karbis are the only ethnic group. The village was set up relatively recently and is very close to the district headquarter, Diphu. Hanlokrok is closer to Nagaon and is situated in the foothills. The dominant indigenous community classified under “Scheduled Tribe” are the Karbis, though Dimasas, Tiwas, Garos and Boros also live in the area and have been enumerated as “Scheduled Tribes”. The “general” category comprises native Assamese, Nepalis, Bengali-speaking groups, Saoras27 (Adivasis) and Hindi-speaking groups. In Kacharigaon, all the inhabitants are Muslims and are therefore enumerated under the “general” category as well. In Srimala/ Gospara, there is one tribal household (Tiwa) and the rest are in the “general” category. Once disaggregated this category comprises native Assamese, Nepalis, Bengali-speaking groups (both Hindu and Muslim) and a small

27 The Saoras are not categorized as tribals in Assam, though they are considered so other states in India.
community of Hindi-speaking migrants from Bihar. It was possible to employ the participatory method only in certain enclaves of the larger villages.

During field interviews, it was possible (in Nagaon) to track the same individual over time. The harvesting season and political uncertainty made it difficult to locate many respondents in Karbi Anglong. Government officials, local political persons and other knowledgeable persons were easier to engage with over a period of time. Their opinions and views understandably changed according to the prevailing conditions, pointing out the transient nature of information on ethnic politics in the region. Efforts to track the evolution of development policy proved difficult. This was an avenue of research that took one from understaffed moffusil offices to private residences in order to elicit some views on ongoing developmental work in the region. The reticence of many of the respondents can be partially explained by the militarised milieu prevalent in Assam in the present day. Seemingly innocuous information suddenly seemed to assume the importance of ‘state secrets’ which often resulted in interviewees recanting their earlier statements and asking for assurances of anonymity. In places, the reconstruction of events and practices acquired the quality of a detective story, an altogether novel experience, which led one into a dominant framework where beyond basic facts, everything else was in doubt. Following Brass, such differing interpretations were identified and characterised as “being embedded in different contexts or narrative frameworks that constitute forms of explanation based upon differing perceptions of human motivations and relationships” (Brass 1998: 22).

Quantitative data was also collected in the form of focused group and individual schedules. Although the sample is small in Nagaon, it is still representative of the local
demographic distribution in the district as a whole. The sample in Karbi Anglong is a homogenous one and is representative of the garrisoned location of ethnic communities with the Sixth Schedule area, especially where land once reclaimed (by the administration) has been settled upon by members of a particular community. Throughout 2003-2005, it was difficult to have access to mixed villages (in Karbi Anglong)²⁸, or even isolated single-ethnic group villages due to the prevailing tensions in Karbi Anglong. When some visits were made, they were usually short stints as local contacts were concerned about security issues. During these short stints, government officials, local elders, teachers and knowledgeable persons were contacted.

Scrutiny of census data and archival work was also carried out at various institutions. Judicial documents on ethnic conflicts and ethnic relations were forthcoming from the office of the assistant sessions judge, Nagton; Gauhati High Court and from individual advocates and political figures. Archival work was especially needed in the case of unravelling aspects of the ecological history and environmental transformations of the two districts. This work was carried out at the offices and libraries in Shillong, the secretariat library in Dispur, range offices of reserved forests, national archives (Delhi) and the Nehru Memorial Library (Delhi).

The chapters reflect a chronological bias in terms of ordering the story of the frontiers. Chapter II deals with the history of colonisation of the two districts, especially in the last hundred years or so, and concentrates mainly on the political discourse around immigration and nation building in the frontier. In doing so, it look as the influences of a dominant concept of space- both national and regional- in the ordering of social

²⁸ Villages shared by members of different communities.
relations. Chapter III undertakes the analysis of the social relations themselves, both as they are constructed in political discourse and in everyday practice. It looks at the longitudinal changes and factors that inhibit or aid in the abetting of non-violent relations between groups. It also seeks to address the perceptions of actors—be it in conflict or in cooperation—in their dealings with the other. Chapter IV deals with the policy framework within which land use changes and land relations are embedded and the effect that it has on local politics in the districts and tried to link them to the dynamics inherent in Vayda’s chart that was described above. The subsequent chapter (chapter 5) dwells on the realms of action that local relations point to and the possibility of working towards a more conducive policy environment, where social and economic relations are influenced by a constructive political language of rights, reconciliation and justice.