CHAPTER-VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION
CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Khasi are a people who live in profound communion with nature. Their home, the Khasi Hills which is known as the ‘Meghalaya Plateau’ or the ‘central plateau’ is abounded in rich evergreen forests. Its topography with varied attitudes, temperate and semi-tropical nature of climate, characterised by abundant rainfall lasting almost half of the year have helped quick and luxuriant growth of wide varieties of trees and plants of extra-ordinary sizes and heights, shrubs and green vegetation all over the district. Trees like Khasi pine (*Pinus iusularis*) grow in abundance in major parts of central region while other non-conifer trees (broad leaved) like teak, sal, segun etc. grow in lower altitudes. Chir-pine (*Pinus voxburghi*) and Dewdar also grow in some areas. Khasi Hills produce many varieties of commercial timber like Titachampa (*Mechelia champaca*), Bonsum (*Phoebe goalparensis*), Gamari (*Gamelina arboria*), Bola (*Morus laevigate*), Nahar (*Mesua ferren*) etc. Besides
these, many other minor forests like bamboo, small timber, woodlot, thatch, broom grass occur extensively. Thus nature has, over the past many hundred years of maintenance, regeneration and balanced sustainability of eco-system, turned Khasi Hills into a veritable home for the Khasis to live in the midst of natural bounty.

The present work focuses on the traditional usages of forest and forest products amongst the Khasis thereby understanding the role of forest in Khasi livelihood and the emerging trend and transition that has taken place in the Khasi socio-economic scenario with regard to forest.

The primary findings of the present study can be summarised into the following three issues based on field data:

1) The forest continues to hold an important place in the life and culture of the Khasis.

2) There has been an infringement on the people's traditional rights over forest.

3) There is a gradual but inevitable shift in the Khasi economy from forest based livelihood to a diversified economy.
They are discussed as follows:

I. Forest continues to hold an important place in the life and culture of the Khasis

The forest occupies a central place in the socio-cultural and economic life of the Khasis. Conservation of natural resources is embedded in the ethos of Khasi life and culture. Ever since the time when they were hunter-cum-gatherers, they have maintained a deep symbiotic relationship with their natural environment, which have played a dominant role determining their way of life. The indelible mark that the forest had left on the Khasi thought, behaviour and attitude, can clearly be seen today in their culture, customs and religion. In many of these legends, folklores, songs and dances, this rapport with nature and environment comes out forcefully. For a Khasi, the forest, which is a well loved home, a game sanctuary and storehouse of everything he needs, has entered the sanctum-sanctorum of the Khasi religious rites and rituals including many social ceremonies. All these facts have been amply brought out in this work at Chapter-VI under the heading “Parameters of Forest Usage among the Khasis”.
The indigenous system of folk medicine made out of plants and herbs, which is prevalent among the Khasi society accounts for the rich ecological heritage of the Khasis over the centuries. The Khasis have developed an indigenous ethno-medical knowledge, which has served the Khasi community well even to this day. A study conducted by the North Eastern Biodiversity Research Cell of NEHU, Shillong, revealed that the total volume of medicinal plants or their products used or consumed per year was 80 to 120 tonnes, involving an amount of Rs.2.5 crore per annum within three districts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

The present work also brings into focus the unique system of traditional forest management among the Khasis. The study revealed three different types of traditional forests, viz. (i) Law Kyntang (Sacred Grove); (ii) Law Adong or Law Shnong (Protected or Village Forest) and (iii) Law Sumar (Private Forest) which are preserved, controlled and managed by the village authority, individual or clan, as the case may be. It exhibits a deep sense of eco-consciousness and the ecological wisdom of the Khasi forefathers about the value of forests for the general well being of the community as a whole. Scientists have appreciated that a forest cover influences climate and soil
conditions and increases underground storage of water. This fact seems to have been known to the Khasi ancestors who practised the system of maintaining forest around their villages. Blocks of dark and deep forests are visible even today in the outskirts of every village nearest to the source of water for drinking and washing clothes. The existence of these centuries old forests speaks of rich eco-heritage of the Khasis, and their close affinity with nature.

For a Khasi, ‘God’, ‘Man’ and ‘Nature’ form one single entity. This eco-theandric view also personifies natural objects like rivers, streams, hills and mountains as God. The Law Kyntang (Sacred Grove) is a forest dedicated to God, where the Khasi priests perform rituals, pay homage and offer sacrifices to appease the spirits. The sacred groves are looked upon as holy, venerable and scary and no one is allowed to enter into it and damage or cut any tree. Thus the forests signify a sense of eco-spirituality among the Khasis borne out of their innate love and respect for nature.

Forest has ever played a vital role in Khasi economy. Shifting cultivation, which is locally called ‘Thang shyrti’, is a forest-based method of cultivation followed by the Khasis since time immemorial. Jhum cultivation with all its demerits and adverse opinions has come
to stay in Khasi society even to this day because of the fact that it is simple in practice, labour intensive and abound in socio-cultural ethos. In Lawbyrwa, a sample village of this study, 60 percent of the adult working population are found engaged in forest related activities, 23.89 percent in small industry like carpentry, cane and bamboo works etc. The land use pattern of the village shows that the major portion of 53.85 percent of the land is used for forest, 19.23 percent for jhum cultivation and a negligible 3.85 percent of the land used for settled cultivation. The study conducted in this village reveals that the economy of the village is largely based on forest with majority of men, women and children engaged in cutting firewood, making charcoal, collecting and selling wild vegetables, bamboo shoot, mushroom etc. Agriculture is the mainstay of the Khasis which is essentially based on agro-forestry. The land is communally owned and anyone is free to occupy and cultivate the land for which he need not pay any revenue. Thus the foregoing discussion presents to us a picture of very high dependency of the life, culture and economy on the natural resources and environment.

The village Madan Iing Syiem, though not a forested village as Lawbyrwa, represents a similar situation of dependency on forest
produces like timber, firewood, bamboo and thatch. Due to pressure of population, people have gradually drifted away from their traditional economic pursuit but socially and culturally they continue to make use of forest products in their daily life. The use of fuelwood as a source of household energy has been one of the major requirements of the people of this village. Data collected shows that out of a sample of 60 households, a total 100 per cent, i.e. all the households use firewood as a primary source of energy mainly for cooking, heating, drying and warming during winter. However the requirements of firewood and charcoal are met with from outside the village. They are therefore sold at a high price – each splitted piece of firewood weighing about 1kg costing Rs.3 and charcoal Rs.10 per kg. Thus Khasi tradition has its impact deep-rooted so as the rising prices not being able to dislodge it.

The existence of Village forest on the outskirt of the village Madan Iing Syiem and commonly held by four surrounding villages is yet another indication of the sense of expediency of the Khasis about the traditional usages of forest. Inspite of changes in the livelihood of the people and scarcity of land, the villagers still maintain the Village forest for the benefit of the community as a
whole. This fact goes to confirm the continuity of Khasi linkage with nature and environment which they have nurtured well till today.

It is important to note that though the advent of Christianity and the flow of Western culture have not affected the cultural fulcrum of the Khasi society as a whole, it has somehow alienated them from certain ritualistic aspects of forest usages. However ‘forest’ continues to be intimately connected to the life and economy of the Khasis till recent times and it has continued to play its multidimensional uses in their life.

II. There has been an infringement on people’s traditional rights over forest

The advent of the British colonial rule may be seen as a watershed in the ecological history of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The rights and privileges over the natural forest and environment enjoyed by the Khasis in the past centuries were not to be as such for long. The British, through the enactment of forest laws and regulations for the first time in the history of tribal land, introduced statutory interference on the traditional usage of the free gifts of nature. As pointed out by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, “Colonialism’s most tangible outcome some of whose effects persists
to this day is related to its global control of resources.” (Gadgil and Guha, 1992:116)

It is a well established fact that State control over forests has systematically eroded people’s traditional rights over natural resources thus posing a threat not only to their livelihood but also to the delicate balance between tribals and the forest.

In the present study, this situation has largely been the outcome of the following two factors:

- Forest for revenue
- Forest for development

**Forest for Revenue**

The British created State forests and scientifically organised them as a profit making enterprise. The Indian Forest Act 1865, sought to create a class of Government protected forest. Thereafter the Indian Forest Act 1878 was passed where two categories of state owned forests –‘Reserved Forest’ and ‘Protected Forest’ came into existence, with the prime intention of supplying timber to industrial sectors and to earn revenue for the State. Forests were since then seen as a revenue-yielding property, which could be commercially exploited. Obviously, the objectives of these Acts were to define the
legal status and extent of proprietary rights of the Government in the forest.

The Reserved Forests were not intended as popularly believed for producing timber for public use but for meeting the requirement of the state. The legal provisions created by the laws to restrict people’s usages were mainly designed on revenue earning motive rather than on social or environmental considerations. That the imperatives of colonial forestry were essentially commercial and not environmental was amply clarified when the most valuable timber ‘Teak’ grown in India was exported to England for use by the Royal Navy in ship building during Anglo-French War of early 19th century. The ‘Sal’ timber, another hard and durable variety of timber was extensively used for railway sleepers and factory purposes. As the railway expansion and establishment of tea gardens started growing, the increased demand for timber led to the enactment of the Indian Forest Act, 1878 which further strengthened the grip of the Government over the natural forest resources of entire Northeast regions. More and more areas of forested land came under Reserved and Protected forests resulting in increasing legal infringement on the traditional rights of the people over their natural resources. In 1927, Indian
Forest Act, XVI came into operation superceding all other existing laws and regulations which lasted as the supreme statutory provisions regulating all forest administrations for the rest of the British rule till Independence of India.

The statistics maintained by the Forest Department shows that from the very first year they earned a revenue of Rs.64, 749/-. Thereafter, as the years passed by the forest revenue shot up steadily to Rs. 3, 29,448/- in 1889-90 and Rs.5, 68,100/- in 1890-190 (A.C. Sinha, 1993:145). Large areas of forest coups comprising matured trees were systematically demarcated and auctioned out to timber contractors for operation and pale in the markets as per rules set for the purpose. With the expansion of tea plantation in the North East demand for timber grew up. A number of saw mills and subsidiary industries for producing plywood for making tea chests sprang up around forest reserves. Supply of railway sleepers to Assam Bengal Railway and Eastern Bengal Railways, which were engaged in extension of new railway lines in the Northeast, contributed a major source of income to the State. It contributed nearly 60 percent revenue to the total of forest income in the year 1912. The Second World War witnessed another spate of demand for forest materials for
construction of military barracks, temporary quarters and bridges. Contractors had brisk business during early 1940s in supplying bamboo and timber with the help of bamboo rafts flowing down the Brahmaputra River. The hill districts of Assam, inspite of transport bottlenecks, were not spared. Large quantities for timber logs, bamboo and other forest products found their ways through rivers, elephant and human labour.

During this long period of British rule a considerable area of forested land of Khasi and Jaintia Hills which were clad with rich forest and natural vegetation were brought under legal ownership of the British Government, depriving the tribal forest dwellers of their natural rights. According to an estimate the land converted into Reserved and Protected forests in Khasi and Jaintia Hills amounted to 427.79 sq. km., which is certainly a large area for a small hill district. An area of 590 acres was based in 1871-72 at the annual rent of Rs.150 from the hills situated around Shillong for the purpose of timber plantation. According to record available with the government of Meghalaya, in 1885 Riat Laban and Shyrwat forests were constituted into Reserved Forests, in 1889 Short Round, Upper Shillong and Laitkor Green Block were created as Protected Forests.
and in 1892 Riatkhwan was constituted into Reserved Forests. Another two big areas were converted into Reserved Forest from Jaintia Hills namely, Saipung in 1887 and Narpuh in 1909. For an average Khasi farmer who depended heavily on Jhum cultivation as his livelihood and collected his daily necessities of life from the forests, the conversion of these vast natural resources into state property not only told upon their tribal economy but also on their tradition and cultural heritage.

The Reserved Forests created by British Government through the process of law was no forest in the true sense of the tribal concept. The people could see no meaning in the so-called forest where they could not enter and cut down a branch of a tree and could not utilise its produce. For a tribal, the land and the forest are free gifts of nature and they belong to the community for the common benefit of all. It was, therefore, natural on the part of the indigenous people to feel resented against the conversion of their tribal land and forests into Reserved and Protected forests restricting the use of its flora and fauna. Although the illiterate and innocent villagers could not raise any organised resistance against this injustice meted out to them, some sporadic uprising of the people was not at all lacking. The voice
raised by one lakh Garos in February 1906 against reservation of forest in Garo Hills under the leadership of Sonaram Sangma is a case in point. In their petition they claimed that “their ancestors had enjoyed the privilege of living in forest in Garo Hills, made use of the forest products, sold them for their benefits besides cultivating and having rights of pastorage” (Sinha, 1993:45).

**Forest for Development**

The process of economic development that followed after successive implementation of various development programmes during the post-independence period brought about another wave of pressure on the land and natural resources of the country. Large-scale economic growth, mushroom growth of industries, increase in population, urbanisation, infrastructural development through expansion of roads and rails, buildings and parks, etc. resulted in the increased demand for raw materials like timber, bamboo, coal, limestone and other forest products. The forest situation during post-Independence period is no better. Immediately after Independence the Government of India adopted the National Forest Policy in 1952, which envisaged expansion of forest cover to one-third of the country’s geographical area and in case of hill states and territories to
60 percent of the total area of the state or territory. This policy gave a new thrust to the colonial forest expansionists policy and brought additional areas of land under forest cover through implementation of various schemes under Five Year Plans such as Social Forestry programme, afforestation drive, artificial regeneration programme etc. The National Commission on Agriculture, 1976 recommended establishment of Forest Development Corporations in all states in order to undertake plantation activities and to carry out felling, processing and marketing of timber. The Commission also recommended drastic restrictions in people’s access to forest and forest produce.

An important feature of post-Independent policy of India was rapid extension of agriculture operations through ‘grow more food’ programmes, which contributed to increase in agricultural land. In 1950-51 the area under agriculture was 118 million hectares, which increased to 143 million hectares in 1973-79. This additional land comes from wasteland, grassland, hill slopes, etc. through the process of reclamation and development. Obviously, these lands were the part of fallow lands where the tribals carried out *jhum* cultivation and were left temporarily fallow for vegetation to grow. The net result,
therefore, was reduction in the land for *jhum* cultivation. In this connection, a report published by the Director of Economics and Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, Government of India makes a significant revelation. The report states that during the period from 1972 to 1988 there is an increase in the area under forest in Meghalaya by 3.10 percent and under agriculture by 1.78 percent, on the other hand there is a corresponding decrease in the area under cultivable waste and pasture grassland by 8.90 percent and 1.50 percent respectively. This increase in the areas under forest and agriculture with corresponding decrease in the area under cultivable waste and pasture grassland undoubtedly suggests consequent deprivation of that much of *jhum* land to tribal *jhumias*. The Forest Conservation Act 1980 restricted the State Governments from conversion of any forest land into non-forest purposes meaning thereby that any further requirement of land for other development purposes like construction of roads, buildings, dams, stadia, fisheries, orchards, etc. has to be met from cultivable wasteland, pastures, jungles or vegetation etc. which again are the lands where *jhum* cultivation is carried out.
Our planners found in the hills, tremendous potentialities for development of various mineral and forest based industries with inexhaustible store of natural wealth. Numerous saw mills, plywood factories, cement factories, coal mines, carpentry and cane and bamboo workshops and paper mills grew up in and around Meghalaya. The course of development that took place during the next few decades left a deep scar on the green landscape of Meghalaya and almost dismantled its eco-system.

A Satellite Imagery Survey report of 1994 showed that Meghalaya lost 106 sq. km. (10,600 ha.) of forest cover during the last two years, i.e. 1992 and 1993 (D. Pyngrope et al., 1994:4). The Chief Conservator of Forest (Forest and Environment) of Meghalaya admitted that about 6000 hectares of state’s woodland area was subjected to felling for commercial or otherwise use, resulting in extraction of 2 to 3 lakhs cubic metres of timber every year on average (Apphira, Jan. 3, 1995).

In the present study, the people of village Lawbyrwa are the case in point who lost their jhum land for construction of Umiam Hydro-Electric Project, one of the biggest power projects of the North-East. In 1959-68, the Assam State Electricity Board acquired a
vast stretch of cultivable land from Lawbyrwa village measuring four square miles for construction of a massive water reservoir and a Power House including office buildings, workshop and staff quarters. No substitute lands were provided to the landowners who lost their lands and compensation was paid after several years of dispossession of the land. From the data collected during field study it is seen that as many as 50 percent of the villagers of Lawbyrwa are marginal farmers with land holdings less than 5 acres each and 20 percent of them are landless cultivators. These landless farmers either cultivate other’s land on crop-sharing basis or engage themselves in non-agricultural activities as daily labourers. Present study shows that 11.11 percent of the people of this village etc. eke their livelihood by working as daily labourers. It sounds paradoxical to find landlessness in the Khasi society where land belongs to the community and every member of the society has the right to possess and cultivate land. But it is a harsh reality today.

The diarchical form of control and management of forest in Meghalaya by the State Forest Department and the Autonomous District Councils has contributed to dual forest policies, lack of co-ordination and division of accountability. Both the authorities
formulate their own forest policies and follow a separate set of forest rules and regulations in their respective areas of operation. The main reason for such a diarchy is that, while the State Forest Department maintains a well-qualified team of skilled technical staff, it has a comparatively meagre area of 1127.23 sq.km of forest under its jurisdiction. (Statistical details given in Appendix III) The District Council on the other hand, has a large forest cover of 6250.68 sq.km under its management and control and yet it suffers from inadequate technical manpower, which has resulted in the lack of enforcement of rules.

Forest being the principal source of revenue the District Councils could not afford to stop forest operation under prevailing fund constraints. The private forest owners who own substantial areas of forests indulged freely in sale of timber from their forests. According to the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forest) Act, 1958, the private forests in Meghalaya are under the control and supervision of the District Council Authorities, but in reality, the private owners think themselves free to operate in these forests. Larger quantity of timber than what Meghalaya consumed found their ways to Assam and other
states. The Acts and legislation passed by the State for conservation of forests, protection of catchment areas, and prohibition of felling and removal of timber etc. had very little effect until the Supreme Court intervened with a blanket ban on logging timber in December 1996.

Looking closely at the above two perspectives of forest utilization viz. Forest for revenue and Forest for development, which have led to infringement of people’s traditional rights over forest, it is seen that they have had a serious impact on people’s livelihood thereby conflicting on their traditional rights over forest resources.

Forest for Livelihood

The Autonomous District Council has classified these forest products as “minor”, as it gives little revenue to it, but for a Khasi, minor forest products form a major source of income. According to Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forest - revised rates of royalty) Rules 1984, the minor forest product includes Tezpatta, firewood, agarwood, broomstick, charcoal, thatch, bamboo, fodder grass, wild pepper, sisia bark (*Cinnamomum zelanicum*) etc. This means that practically all kinds of natural resources growing in the forest, except commercial timber are classified
as minor forest products, which constitute the most essential items of everyday use of the tribals. More than timber, it is the above mentioned minor forest products which play a crucial role in supporting the life of the tribal community in the shape of subsidiary source of income generation. In our sample village Lawbyrwa it is found that 17.22 percent of its population are engaged in collecting and selling of minor forest products like wild vegetables, tubers, bamboo shoots and edible fruits etc. Firewood and charcoal are indispensable sources of energy used in every Khasi household for cooking, heating and drying purposes. Date collected from Lawbyrwa village shows that 20.56 percent of adult workers are engaged in cutting and selling firewood and 22.22 percent of them eke out their livelihood by making and selling charcoal. The provisions of existing forest rules of Meghalaya claim that all forest produce irrespective of major or minor legally belong to the State and removal of any of the product is illegal and punishable as per rules. The section 5 of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management and Control of Forest) Act 1958 lays down that “No timber or forest produce shall be removed for the purpose of sale, trade or business from the protected forests, Green Blocks, Unclassed forests and
Reserved forests without order in writing of the Forest Officer of the District Council.” Thus the State and the Autonomous District Councils have systematically appropriated and commercialised the forest resources depriving the Khasis of the benefit from the minor forest products, and with this the indigenous people stand completely alienated from their community land, the timber fuel food and fodder. According to records available from the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, the revenue collected from minor forest products during the last five years from 2001 to 2005 was Rs.75,45,970/- which comes to Rs.15,09,194/- per year on an average. This shows the volume of income generated by the minor forest produces of Khasi Hills which would have otherwise gone to the dependents had it not been appropriated by the District Council.

According to Khasi Land Tenure System, there are two categories of land, namely, Ri Raid or Community land and Ri-Kynti or Private land. The former category of land is set aside for the use of the community over which each Khasi member of the village has the right of use and occupancy. But he has no right to inheritance or transfer of the land. His occupancy right lasts as long as he uses the land for himself and his family, but his right terminates if he fails to
utilise the said land for three consecutive years and the land reverts back to the community. However, if he has made any permanent improvement over the land or raises any structure or permanent fencing around the plot of land it becomes his permanent property as *Ri Kynti* land. This loophole present in the Khasi land tenure system offers an incentive to many people to convert *Ri Raid* land into their private property as *Ri Kynti* land. Persons with wisdom and ability could through application of labour and capital establish durable assets or *Ri Raid* land and claim the same as their individual possession at the cost of the community. This process of converting community land into private land has come a long way taking the advantage of Government grant-in-aid and loans under various development schemes like social forestry, fishery and farming. Today vast areas of *Ri Raid* land all over Khasi Hills have been transformed into farmlands, fishery ponds, orchards, forestland etc. The socio-economic implication of this trend is all too apparent, as it has led to gradual diminishing of cultivable community land and vegetations where the people had easy access to their necessities of life. There is no knowing as to how much of the *Ri Raid* land has been converted into *Ri Kynti* land or how much unclassed forest area has been
brought under Reserved forest and protected forest because of the fact that in Khasi Hills no land has been surveyed and cadastral record prepared except for Government land. This is another serious loose end of the Khasi land tenure system. Thus it is seen that there is a process of gradual privatisation of community land and concentration of the basic means of production in the hand of a few people who pose as landlords and moneylenders.

Thus it is apparent that, "Land" and "Forest" being the natural productive resources at the base, there is an emerging conflict between the State and the people over the rights to land and its natural products ever since the advent of colonial rule in India to the present time. Inspired by the ideals of nation building as upheld by the Constitution the Government of India forgot about the tender man-nature relationship that existed in the tribal areas. During the past few decades the state increasingly overstepped in its forest policies in the tribal land in respect of both control and utilisation of the forest resources. Needless to say that the most affected by these policies were the forest dwellers who lived in the villages. The study has ample evidences to show that the State control of forest and enactment of Forest Acts and rules over the years have not only
infringed into the people rights over the minor forest produce but also contributed to depletion of natural forest resources. The process has led to a number of untraditional economic phenomena like decline in shifting cultivation, transition from forest based economy to open and diversified economy, concentration of land in the hands of certain group of people, landlessness, share-cropping etc. which cannot be termed as positive indication of development.

III. The Inevitable Shift

The facts and circumstances discussed above lead us to the conclusion that there is a gradual and inevitable shift in the pattern of Khasi livelihood from a traditional forest-based economy to a modern, open and more diversified means of living. There is a visible transition in Khasi society with regard to the state of their dependence on forest resources like food, fodder and shelter to other means of living. The depletion of land and natural forest cover, which were their only economic base, resulted in the paucity of forestland for jhum cultivation. Pressure of population on existing land aggravated the situation and reduced jhum cycle period from 15-20 years to 3-5 years resulting in degeneration of jhum land and low productivity. The jhumia families gradually turned to settled cultivation or Bun
cultivation, an alternative method of *jhum* cultivation. According to a report of the State Soil Conservation Department there was 27.04 percent decline in the number of households dependant on *jhum* during the past 30 years from 1971 to 2001. In Lawbyrwa sample village 19.23 percent of the land was used for *jhum* cultivation and 3.85 percent for settled cultivation while in the village Madan Šing Syiem 15.24 percent land was under settled cultivation and no land was used for *jhum* cultivation.

The conversion of natural forests and wastelands into Reserved forest, Protected and Unclassed forests by the State and Autonomous District Councils led to increased restrictions on tribal access to forests, rivers and fisheries etc. The plethora of forest laws and regulations enacted by the authorities in the name of development of forest and environment severely infringed the tribal rights to natural forests and forest produces.

On the other hand a change in the economic pursuit is well reflected in the village Madan Šing Syiem, another sample village of his study. This is an old Khasi village of greater Mylliem village, which was once a centre of Khasi culture and tradition. Iron smelting and export of iron to Sylhet was its traditional industry, which has
become extinct today due to its primitive and unscientific method of processing and also because of the thin forest cover in the village. This is evident from the field data, which shows that except for the privately owned patches of forest, the overall forest cover in the village is nil. The total area under forest cover in this village is only 10 acres (4.76%) as against a total land area of 210 acres, which is why, local felling of trees even for firewood and household requirements is totally prohibited today. A sizeable section of the inhabitants i.e., 37.11 percent are engaged in various trade and business, cottage industry and Government services while less than half of the working adults, i.e., 40 percent still carry out agriculture of which some as secondary occupation. A striking feature of the economy is that not a single household is engaged in forest activities for its livelihood. There is no Ri Raid (community) land, all lands are Ri Kynti (Private) land and there is no practice of jhum cultivation.

They have taken to settled cultivation.

Recently, The Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill 2005 was formulated by the Indian Ministry of Tribal Affairs to affirm the land rights of India’s forest dwelling tribal people. The Bill seeks to recognise rights to forest produce, intellectual property and
traditional knowledge, while also conferring duties on the Scheduled Tribes and acknowledging the close connection between the well being of the forest dwellers and the health of the eco-system. However the Forest Rights Bill has been criticised by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, which argues that the Bill will hinder efforts to preserve India’s dwindling forest cover, cause irreparable ecological damage. Social groups are also concerned that the Bill will harm the livelihood of forest dwellers who are not considered to be part of Scheduled Tribes. Thus the Bill in its present form is bogged by controversy with many social and conservation groups as also the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MOEF) opposing it. In response to these concerns, the Indian Cabinet has suspended discussion of the Bill until it receives comments from members of the public. Nonetheless, the drafting of the Forest Rights Bill, which explicitly recognises historical and social injustice, as a serious and legitimate concern, represents a significant step towards the recognition of forest dweller rights in India. The Union Minister for Development of North-East Region has recently converted a draft National Tribal Policy with a view to addressing issues like enhancement of human development index of tribals, ensuring their control over natural
resources and distribution of wealth and opportunities among the tribals who are hitherto deprived of them (Shillong Times, dt. 24.7.2006).