Chapter - 8

CONCLUSION

“India’s heritage of wild life is fast becoming a vanishing asset and some of our notable animals such as lion, rhinoceros, tragopan, cheetah, are on the verge of extinction.”

The above quote indicates the huge loss of wild animal population by 1950s. The province of Assam was also once full with rich and varied wild animals but the colonialism brought a different phase in the history of wildlife. The process of destruction of wildlife that was started after occupation of the province by the British led various wild animals on the verge of extinct and some in the list of endangered animals. The history of wildlife during British rule can be divided into three phases. In the first phase attempts were made to exterminate the wildlife which continued till 1900. In second phase attempts were made to protect wild animals in reserve forest but hunting was still practiced though under strict regulations. This phase continued till 1934. The conference for the protection of wildlife in India brought the phase of maximum protection of wildlife and hunting was banned inside the sanctuaries. Though the destruction of wildlife started with the annexation of the Province by the British but there was no concrete policy towards the wildlife in Assam prior to 1874. There was no attempt for clearance of jungle till 1851s the peasant had to pay revenue out of their pocket even for the clearance of 100 yards of jungle from their habitation. Assam being a periphery part under Bengal province wasignedored. It was when the British government realized the importance of extension of tea plantation that Assam was declared as a separate province. The introduction of railways in 1850salso facilitated the cutting of large number of trees for meeting the needs of wooden sleepers. The colonial need of timber and extension of the cultivation led to the clearance of jungle and wild animals losing the natural habitation started coming into human habitation. This caused more human–wildlife conflict.

1 Burton, R. W., (1953), The Preservation of Wildlife in India, Bangalore: Bangalore Press, P.IX
Forest played a very significant role in the life of the people of Assam during pre-British period. Forest provided a universe to them in which they resorted to jhumming, hunted the games, collected fruits, roots, tapped rubber juice and caught wild animals for games, trade in exchange. Most of the tribes depended on hunting for their livelihood. Tribal people of Assam i.e Garos, Mikirs (Karbis), Cacharese, Cossyah (Kasiahs), Meiris, Abors, Mishmis, Nagas, Akhas, Duflas, Shigphos, the Khamptis, Kukies were mostly depended on hunting and forest products for their livelihood. They eat meat of almost all the wild animals including elephant, rhinoceros, tiger, buffaloes, beer, dogs, pigs etc. As these tribes were mostly depended on forest they never attempted to destroy the forest and wildlife. These tribes had their own practices to protect the nature and managed by their own. The traditional practices revered the wild animals as for instance the Mikirs (Karbi) did not kill tigers for the fear it might offend their god. The native inhabitants of Cossya hills feared bison as evil spirit. Wild animals were also preserved in mangroves by in Lushai hills. Though there was no proper protection of wild animals still they were preserved and not destroyed. The Assamese people also revered the forest and wild animals. There was no professional class of shikariees in Assam as there was no native shikariees found in Assam. This is the reason when the British government attempted to exterminate wild animals they called up shikariees from neighboring provinces like from Purnia district of Bengal. Prior to the British rule hunting was practiced only as leisure activity but the British annexation of Assam changed the concept of hunting in the province. The game hunting gradually transform into the commodification of wild animals when the British realized the market value of its horn and skin.

The British annexation of Assam brought a new fate for the wild animals as well as for the tribal population of Assam. The need for the extension of tea plantation caused the huge destruction of wild animals as they were a hindrance towards the extension of the tea cultivation. The killing of wild animals by local inhabitants was occasionally practiced but the after the British annexation of Assam the killing of wild animals became a gradual process. The need for the extension of tea plantation led to the clearance of jungle i.e. wildlife habitation. The extension of cultivable land was necessitated as the main motive of the colonial state was to earn more revenue. The extension of tea also led the British government to call up labourer from Bihar, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa etc. The need of labourers for growing tea plantation could not be fulfilled by the local labourers. The labourers from other
provinces were encouraged to migrate with family. This led to the increase of population. To meet the need of food of the increased population extension of agricultural land was also necessitated which caused the clearance of jungle. In addition to these the introduction of railways demanded huge amount of timber which too caused the clearance of jungle to meet the need of wooden sleepers for railway tracts. Earlier wooden sleepers were imported from Norway which was a costly preposition for the British but the main cause of the clearance of jungle was the extension of tea cultivation.

The British official polices initiated the destruction of wild animals by projecting damage caused by wild animals for the safety of life of people and property. After the discovery of tea in Assam and need for its extension led to the extermination of huge number of wild animals. Primarily the economic interests of colonial state from the forest and wildlife were driven to initiate policies for the destruction of wild animals. Simultaneously commodification of wildlife started with the tea. British officials for instance Captain B. Rogers of Bengal Corps identified that the selling of wild beast skins would bring a lakhs of rupees per annum. The selling of horn and hides of elephants, rhinoceros and buffaloes also brought good sum of amount for the government. After recognising the commercial value of the wild animals the British officials agreed that there was too much profit in the business of rhinoceros horn. The policy of extermination of wild animals was justified for the safety of life and property but it was applicable only to carnivores. Though rhinoceros is not a destructive animal but it was killed in such a large number that led rhinoceros on the verge of extinct by the early part of twentieth century. This animal was also exterminated from those places where once they were numerous. Rhinoceros was the main attraction of the British sportsmen and elites, the animal was also killed for its horn for its market value. It was also easy to kill rhinoceros because of their habit of depositing its ordure always on the same spot until a considerable mound formed. This caused the killing of rhinoceros in large numbers. Apart from these though elephants were preferred to be captured but in initial days of colonial rule they were also killed for ivory. Elephants became extinct from those places where once they were found in large numbers by the early twentieth century. The main motive of the British government to the extinct of the wild animals was the extension of tea cultivation and commercialisation of wild animals.
Hunting was practiced by all the classes of people. For elites hunting gave them social standing and fame. The hunting by elites went beyond the purpose of recreation and could be linked with the question of cultural negotiation with colonial elite. The native rulers and zamindars did not allow the British to capture the forest within their estate as that could help them to make friendship with the British officials by giving them opportunity to hunt in their estate. Hunting was an aspect which made a good social network between the ruling families both within and outside Assam. The Maharaja of Cooch Behar was a close friend of Phukan by virtue of their hunting practice. Phukan’s family were also good friend of the British by virtue of their hunting practices. Hunting for game was a popular concept during the British rule. British officials were encouraged to spend time in hunting during vacations and leisure time. A large number of wildlife sports accounts reveal the experience of hunting by British officials. The peasant did not normally involve themselves in the killing of wild animals. But only on some occasionsthey organised themselves to kill destructive wild animals when wild animals destroyed their crops and killed cattle. Other than this the peasant class did not involve themselves in killing wild animals. They feared wild animals and normally did not attempt to kill wild animals. They feared wild animals so much that on hearing news of tiger they approached British officials to help the villagers from its attack. The peasants appreciated the killing of wild animals by British officials as it saved their crops and cattle. They also occasionally accompanied British officials in their hunting expedition to collect the flesh especially of rhinoceros. But they themselves did not kill wild animals as they believed wild animals are a form of ‘bad spirit’. For British officials wildlife hunting was a sort of character-building. It depicted the masculine power of the officials over the orient nature and indigenous people. On the other hand they criticized the hunting practice of tribal people as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘utilitarian’. British officials depicted their cultural and ideological superiority over the indigenous people. However, British officials hunting with guns and modern arms, sometimes wounded tigers and other wild animals which were became more destructive for human life and cattle.

The clearance of jungle led the wild animals to enter the human habitation which was contributory factor for more human-wildlife conflict. It reached a stage where both wild animals and human killed each other. A large number of cattle were killed by wild animals as the killing of herbivore disturbed the food chain and wild animals started attacking cattle of villagers. Tigers, leopards started killing cattle, jackals
targeted *murgee-khana*. Elephants destroyed crops as their habitation was disturbed. Snakes killed a large number of human being. Official statistics reveals that wild animals killed 5,97,3231 cattle during 1875-1915 and 18,604 people were killed by wild animals during 1875-1927. These numbers could have been much more as the reporting was not proper. People from remote areas or faraway places did not take trouble to report to police station. Life and property became unsafe from the attacks of these wild animals.

Apart from the local inhabitants Christian missionary activities also suffered from the attacks of wild animals. Missionary gospel preachers and activists were killed when they went to interior areas and travelling into hilly region in the province. As the remedy the British government adopted measures like reward giving, calling of professional *shikariees*, supply of gun licences and liberal distribution of guns for killing wild animals. The reward system contributed to the killing of a large number of wild animals during the British rule. The calling of professional *shikarees* not only led to the destruction of carnivores but a large number of herbivores like deer, pigs, buffaloes were also killed for its skin and horn. Prior to the British rule traditional weapons like *dao*, bow & arrows, etc. were used to hunt but the British government supplied guns to the cultivators and villagers for the protecting life and property from the attacks of wild animals. Guns were also given to professional *shikarees* to eliminate wild animals. The use of traditional weapons did not contribute to the killing of a large number of wild animals prior to the British rule but the supply of guns had huge impact on wildlife. The destruction of the wild animals was justified by the British as it was dangerous for human life and property. However, there were conflict of opinions between the British officials, some of them argued that the destruction of large numbers of carnivore led to the increased population of herbivore which were destructive for crops, thus, and the food chain was disturbed. Rhinoceros was mostly killed for sport and trade. Few statistical records reveal the killing of rhinoceros. However, it was killed in large number as during the early part of twentieth century rhinoceros was on the verge of extension. It became extinct from areas where once they were numerous.

Rewards system led to the killing of 78,010 wild animals and 1,68,112 snakes in fifty two years according to statistical records. There were a large number of wild animals killed in Assam. Compare with other provinces of the country wild animals killed in Assam was only 9.02 percent of the total number of wild animals killed in the country.
and 1.1 percent snakes of the total number of snakes killed in the country for the period of fifty years (1877-1927). Assam was recorded less number of killings of wild animals because of underreporting. It was not possible for the people of interior regions to visit the police station to report the killing of wild animals and to get the rewards. Moreover, they could get more money by selling the dead animals than the amount of reward that government sanctioned. Therefore people were not ready to take trouble to report. Professional shikarées though appointed for the killing of carnivorous but they preferred to killed herbivore as there was less risk in killing them and secondly the herbivore animals like pig, deer, buffalo etc. had good market value. The liberal use of gun licenses and distribution of guns also caused a large number of destruction of wild animals. A large number of animals were killed during flood as high flood drove the wild animals to high land where villages were situated and that led to direct attack on villages and resulted in the killing of both wild animals and human. Snakes were killed in large number during flood and a large number of people died by snake bite during flood. On the other hand the absence of flood caused less conflicts between human and wildlife. The spread of Christianity brought a change among the tribes in the concept of the killing of wild animals. Before embracing Christianity the tribes had belief that wild animals were form of evil spirit and feared to kill wild animal. After conversion to Christianity this belief of tribes was changed and motivated to kill wild animals as they were dangerous to human life, cattle and crops.

Elephant hunting was different from other wild animals hunting. They were treated as hunting friend. Because of its administrative use it was mostly preferred to capture than hunting in wild sport game. Government monopolised the capturing of the animals through Khednah department. The right of capturing elephant was also given to private lessees. The lessees were subjected to the rules and conditions granted under the elephant preservation policy. The government reserved the right to purchase all elephants from the owners of Mahals. Though elephant was mostly preferred to be captured, it was also necessary to keep down the number of elephants as it could be destructive for crops. For this reason hunting rights continued to be sold. However, the killing of elephants for sport was also not uncommon. Elephant were also killed for ivory. Rogue elephants were killed for which government sanctioned a reward of Rs.100 to Rs.50 was given as reward. The strategic need of elephant led the government to monopolize the access over animal. Government adopted various
techniques through which government attempted to exclude zamindars, native chieftains, local inhabitants, forest dwellers to gain maximum profit from elephant hunting. The khed-dah system and the private lease system were the instrument through which the government put some restriction on the access of animal. However, final step in this regard came with the passing of Elephant Preservation Act, 1879. It was claimed to be the first attempt to preserve elephants. However, this act extended colonial state rights over the access of elephants of the province. Though the extension of the act was necessitated for the protection of life and property but colonial state monopoly over elephants was also extended. It can be call an instrument through which government played monopoly over elephant catching. However the Elephant Preservation Act (1879) was the first attempt for the preservation of fauna in the late nineteenth century which also foster the cause of the preservation of wildlife.

The conflict over elephant was also common among the various branches of administration. The right of the government khed-dah department over the elephants caused dissatisfaction for the district administration as they could not procured elephants for inspite of their need in various works. There were also clashes between the Assamese privileged class and colonial authorities on the issue of their right over elephant catching. This led to hostility before the commencement of any effective rule to supervise the elephant catching operation. The hostility was so much that the forest department could not keep the right of elephant capturing in its own hand and was also transferred to military department. However, the military department did not keep the right over elephant catching for long. But the main conflict over elephant was between the zamindars on the one hand and state on the other hand. The state’s control over zamindari estates was long debated. The zamindars claimed that they had been capturing elephants without hindrance for over 60 years and therefore had acquired a right for the elephant hunting. The zamindars main interest was obtain whatever small tax they could get from the elephant hunting. The zamindari estate being important for elephant catching the British government did not want to leave their right over the access of elephant. The local inhabitants were put an application against the extension of elephant preservation act as it was an abstraction in the agricultural work. But their petition was rejected on the ground that the estate was one of the best hunting grounds. Thus, Elephant Preservation Act (1879) was used by the government as an instrument to play their monopoly over elephant catching and
elephant catching was an important part of generating forest revenue during British rule. During the early part of nineteenth century British ornithologists concerned on the collection and preservation of bird’s skin, classification, identification and geographical distribution of birds. Along with this they also wrote on rhinoceros, elephants, wild dogs etc. however their writing does not include the study of carnivores like tigers, leopards and bears. Thus, they mostly concentrated on animals which are not dangerous for human life and cattle. The nineteenth century world consciousness towards the protection of wildlife led the British government to take some initiatives towards the protection of wildlife. The Forest Act (1878) thus restricted hunting in reserve forest. Though some regulations were imposed on hunting wild animals but practically it did not provide protection to wildlife. On the other hand the wholesale destruction of wild animals brought some of the species on the verge of extinction. The protection of wildlife was not the main concern of British government. The main concern of the British government was to earn more revenue from the extension of tea plantation and wild animals were hindrance toward it. The formation of reserve forest was more the extension of British Empire over forest and an attempt to debar local inhabitants from using forest produce. The Bird preservation Act came in 1887 that attempted to protection birds but the protection of wild animals came only with the Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act (1912). This act brought incomplete complete protection but enforced some restriction on the number of wild animals to be killed. The formation of reserve forests brought the forest under the control of government and debars the aboriginal people from their traditional rights. The forest acts also put restriction on the access of forest resource by the local inhabitants. This led to a rift between state and local inhabitants. As their rights were curtailed local inhabitants started violating forest laws and involved themselves in the task of poaching. But the reality it was the British government who could be called ‘real poachers’ as they debar the aboriginal inhabitants from their traditional rights. British used game laws to brand the indigenous forest people who earned their livelihood form the forests, as ‘poachers’. No doubt that the forest and wildlife was destroyed because of the policy of the exploitation of forest resources for commercial purpose by the British. However, some efforts at provincial level initiated for the preservation of wildlife. The measures to preservation of wildlife started during the early part of twentieth century with the official concern over depleting population of
rhinoceros in Assam. As part of these measures, three game reserves namely Kaziranga, North-Kamrup and Laokhowa were proposed by Mr. Arbuthnott, Deputy Secretariat of Assam Valley and Mr. Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam. The protection of game in Assam, as evident elsewhere in British India, was not a top priority of the government and was mostly part of the amateur activity of local officials. These concerns on the depletion of rhinoceros gradually led to the establishment of game reserves. The wildlife sanctuaries were formed mostly in the areas where the land was not suitable for cultivation in which it should not affect the existing cultivation and not much money was to be spent on its formation. By the year of 1905 the formation of forest reserves attempted only at the protection of rhinoceros. However, the killing of carnivores like tiger, leopard, and bear continued till the year 1927. The Protection of carnivores attempted since 1930s with inspiration of various international wildlife conferences. The International Conference for the Protection of Wildlife (1931) was held in Paris. Another International Conference held in London for the Protection of Wildlife in Africa (1933) in which along with representatives of other countries India was also participated. These conference agendas stimulated to organize similar conferences for the protection of wildlife in India. It was only after these conferences there were attempts to provide total protection of wildlife and hunting was banned inside the sanctuary. From 1934 onwards, the Government of India tried to create awareness among people about the importance of preserving wild animals. Assamese elites also supported measures initiated by the colonial government as they considered these as part of providing a better environment to wild animals for its preservation and the conflict between human-wildlife could also be minimized.

The rift between state and native inhabitants however caused the occurrence of poaching both inside and outside the sanctuaries. Though the cases of poaching were also filed and fine was imposed on the people who convicted. British realized that the protection of wildlife in the Province was not possible without the support of tribal people. Tribes were appointed as forest guards as they were familiar with the local language. It helped in successful reduction of the cases of wildlife poaching. Trade in wildlife was also another factor for poaching. The staffs employed for the protection of wild animals in sanctuaries were not sufficient as the government was not ready to spend much on the protection of wildlife. By 1940s gradually wild animals were provided total protection in wildlife sanctuaries but that also brought the
commercialization of wildlife and wildlife sanctuaries by selling animals to other provinces and countries. Wildlife sanctuaries were also used for generating by allowing visitors to see and take photographs of animals.

In Assam like Africa most of the people were meat eaters and the tribes ate all meat including that of tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, elephants, pigs, deer, buffaloes etc. However they never attempted to destroy the forest or wildlife as they were depended on forest for their livelihood. The tribal practices also revered wild animals and it did not disturb the balance of nature. The British annexation of Assam can be called a watershed as it disrupted the harmony between the nature and human. The British greed to earn more revenue made a rift between people and nature in the colony. The traditional rights of local inhabitants were debar with the implementation of forest acts and legalised the access of forest products with British legislation in the name of protection of wildlife. With the reservation of forest by colonial state the rights of indigenous people over forest were curtailed. Tribes being not ready to accept the denial of their rights over forest resources started poaching. This led to a rift between colonial state and indigenous people during British rule which still continues even in post-independent India.