UNIT 7: NATURAL RESOURCES IN COLONIAL ASSAM

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- know about the condition of forests in colonial Assam,
- analyse the growth of tea industry in colonial Assam,
- discuss the growth of mining industryin colonial Assam,
- examine the policy of colonial government towards opium in Assam.

7.2 INTRODUCTION



Natural Resources: Materials or substances occurring in nature without any kind of human action.

Assam is a land blessed by nature in abundance. The natural resources of the region made it a coveted area for the British to come and occupy it as an integral part of their colonial empire in India. Regarding the coming of the British and its gradual occupation of the area, you have studied in the previous two chapters (Unit: 5 and 6).

In this unit, we are going to study how after establishing its political hold over Assam, the colonial government explored its ***natural resources***

and utilised it for their benefit. This undoubtedly made the local inhabitants aware of the rich resources that the nature has provided to them as well as its economic potentiality.

7.3 FORESTS

Assam had a large area under forest cover at the beginning of the British rule.This was because of internal disturbances in the province since 1769 and subsequent Burmese invasions. These political happenings greatly reduced the population of Assam and large tracts of cultivable land turned into jungle.



LET US KNOW

During the pre-colonial period there was no commercialisation of forest in Assam. There was a harmonious relationship between man and forest. Whatever common people wanted they could collect from the forest. The Ahom administration did not have any kind of strict forest laws. There were officials like *Kathkatiya Barua* and *Habial Barua* who were in-charge of forest timbers and forest products respectively. The Ahom kings only collected revenue from few items like ivory, *agar* wood, etc.

The forests of Assam were rich in flora (plants) and fauna (animals). There were valuable trees like *sal*, *agoru*, *simolu*, *segun*, *chandan* (sandalwood), *sisu*, *khoir*, *gomari*, etcwere in abundance along with bamboo, cane andmedicinal herbs. There were silkworms of both domesticated (*eri*, *muga*, *pat* and *tasar*) and wild variety. Rhinoceros and elephants were there in the forests with other animals like different types of monkey, deer, tiger, birds, etc. The water bodies consisting of different rivers, lakes, etc were too rich in different varieties of fish and other aquatic creatures.

The English East India Company being a commercial concern looked after the resourceful forests of Assam as an object of commercial profit from the very beginning of their rule. The British forest policy was marked by revenue maximization and commercialisation of forest resources. They

destroyed the pre-colonial harmonious relationship between the local inhabitants and the forest.

The colonial laws brought the forests into their domain of revenue. The trees were the first to attract the colonial government and in 1850 it imposed tax on the timbers felled as the wood cutters from Bengal were carrying out large scale timber trade without any restriction. Even taxes were imposed on axes and for an axe annually Rs. 4.4 was to be paid by the wood cutter. Taxes on timber were also imposed in the form of *gorkhati*.

Later on in certain areas, tracts of forest were auctioned to the highest bidder for a period of five years during which the bidder was licensed to use the forest resources as per their wish. The bidder was free to cut the timber of any size. This resulted in large scale ruin of valuable resources in the forests.

The Imperial Forest Department was established in the year 1864 in India. Four years later in 1868 an Assistant Conservator was sent to Assam to inspect and report on the forests of Assam. The inspection was completed by 1870 and better forests were declared as 'reserved forests' which were to be under the charge of the forest department. The remaining forests were to be placed under the charge of the Deputy Commissioners who would be assisted in this work by a forester and four watchers.

Forests gradually became assets of the government or bidder.No longer could it be used freely.Even for grazing of animals taxes had to be paid. A tax called *khasury* was levied at the rate of two *annas* for cows and four *annas* on buffaloes for grazing. Taxes were also imposed on minor forest produce like honey, reed, etc.

For the colonial rulers, tracts of land without any cultivation, settlement and procuring no revenue to the government was a wasteland.As such highlands and forest lands for them were wastelands and attempts were made to bring them under cultivation so that revenue could be collected from them. Attempts were made from the time of David Scott to make the wastelands profitable for the company.

The beginning of tea cultivation soon turned the wastelands into profitable one. Vast tracts of wastelands were provided to the tea planters on

lease at minimal costs which included forest land. The forest lands were provided so that the planters could cut the trees and prepare charcoal which was initially the source of fuel in the tea factories of Assam for firing and drying the tea. Large scale deforestation took place because of the tea industry.

The forest department was itself engaged in timber trade. Gradually there was increase in the demand for timber to make tea chests, railway sleepers, bridges, etc. Saw mills were established to cut down the trees into logs. By 1901, there were 14 saw mills in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. Later on, plywood industry too developed in Assam. The cane from Assam was exported outside. A trade on *agar* wood also developed as it was required for preparing perfume.

The colonial government too tried to plant certain trees which have commercial demand. Rubber plantations were established at Charduar near Tezpur and Kulsi in Kamrup. Teak wood plantations were started at Makum, Jaypur and Kulsi.Attempts were made to plant even foreign variety of seedlings, but were not successful and thereafter only the local varieties were planted.

During the colonial period, certain forest areas were declared as 'sanctuaries' for refuge of animals. These were created to help animals survive the onslaught by human beings. However, rewards were given to those who kill dangerous wild animals. Other than ivory, no trade of any form was carried on the animal resources of Assam.

There was no forest policy in pre-colonial Assam. The colonial government tried to frame one such policy during their rule. Yet, we find that a uniform forest policy was not followed all over Assam.

7.4 TEA

Tea was growing wildly in Assam and was drunk by the local people for its medicinal qualities. Colonel Latter in the year in 1815 noticed the habit of tea drinking among the tribes of Assam.Few years later in 1823 Major Robert Bruce discovered tea growing wildly in hilly areas near Rangpur in the present Sibsagar district. This discovery soon proved to be a great economic boon for the company. Initially the quality of the tea was considered

as inferior for commercial cultivation. But after proper investigation, it was certified that the tea discovered in Assam is identical with the Chinese variety and more suitable for commercial cultivation under the local conditions.



LET US KNOW

Major Robert Bruce after discovering tea in 1823 decided to collect sample of the tea plants from the Chief of the Singpho tribe, Beesa Gaum. But in 1824 Robert Bruce died before doing so. However, he passed the information regarding tea to his brother Charles Alexander Bruce who completed the task left undone by his brother. C. A. Bruce was therefore considered as the pioneer of tea industry in Assam and was promoted to the rank of Superintendent of the Assam Company.Later on C. A. Bruce was even awarded a medal by the 'English Society of Art' for his role in the discovery of tea in Assam.

Identification of the commercial potentiality of tea in Assam came as a great relief for the company as it had lost its monopoly of tea trade in China on the renewal of its Charter in 1833. They were looking for an alternative tea growing areas within its colonies and Assam was one such area. Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of Indiain early 1834 appointed a 'Tea Committee' for advising on the possibility of commercial cultivation of tea in India. The Committee advised the government to encourage the private enterprise for producing tea on a commercial scale. As a measure of encouragement in Assam, the government started tea cultivation at Jaypur in 1837.To attract European capital for investment in the tea enterprise, wasteland grant rules were framed. These rules were designed and modified from time to time so as to facilitate the outside investors and at the same time discourage the local people from competing.**As already mentioned in the previous section** large tracts of wasteland were provided on leaseto the planters at minimal costs to start tea cultivation in Assam. The total area under tea cultivation increased from 2,311 acres in 1841 to 8,000 acres in 1859 and 31,000 acres in 1871.

In 1839 the first private tea company in Assam,'The Assam Company' was formed which in 1840 bought the government tea cultivation at Jaypur. Then the 'Jorehaut (Jorhat) Tea Company' was formed in 1859. The success of the 'The Assam Company' followed by the 'Jorehaut Tea Company' led to a rapid expansion of tea cultivation. Many new companies were formed for tea plantations in Assam. In 1859, there were 51 tea gardens owned by private individuals or companies - 10 in Lakhimpur, 15 in Sibsagar, 3 in Darrang, and 23 in Kamrup and Nowgong (Nagaon).

Maniram Dutta Barua, a Dewan of the Assam Company after resigning from his job in 1845 too joined the race of European planters. He established two tea gardens on his own and thereby became the first Assamese tea planter. One of this tea garden was at Cinnamara, near Jorhat and other one at Senglung, near Sonari. But the colonial government created lot of hurdles for him as they were unhappy with the fact that an Assamese was equally competing with the 'Whites'. Still, Maniram continued his tea plantations successfully facing all the odds. Probably he was the first individual tea planter of Assam. He was also the person who brought to the notice of the British the wildly growing tea in Assam and was therefore one of the discoverers of tea who remain unrecognised.



LET US KNOW

Maniram Dutta Barua was better known as Maniram Dewan. He was hanged by the British for conspiring against them by participating in the Revolt of 1857. After the execution, his tea gardens were confiscated by the British and sold in auction. This incident proved to be a setback for the Assamese people. But towards the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, a number of Assamese people started cultivating tea. Those Assamese tea planters were Raheswar Barua, Hemadhar Barua, Rai Bahadur Jagannath Barooah and Colonel Sibram Bora amongst others.

By 1870s tea became the most important cash crop of Assam.Means of communication also developed in Assam in the 1880s with daily steamer service operating from1883 and railway operating from 1885 which greatly fostered the tea cultivation. With transportation of tea becoming easier, there was a great extension of tea cultivation in 1890s resulting in the large scale production of tea and subsequent export.Machines too gradually started replacing the manual methods of production.

But the greatest problem faced by the tea gardens was in the case of labour. The local population was reluctant to work in the tea gardens.The Assamese males were not interested in working in tea plantations as they were all primarily farmers having their own cultivation. Even they did not allow their wife and children to work there.The only local people who considered working in the tea plantations were the Bodo-Kacharis and the Nagas. As such there was immigration of labour force to work in the tea gardens bringing a change in the population structure of the province.

There was a tremendous need of labour force with the area under plantation increasing rapidly. At a considerable cost, labours were imported not only from Bihar, Orissa, Chota Nagpur, Dacca, and Chittagong, but also from distant places like Madras and the Central Provinces. There used to be a class of agents who supplied labourers to the tea gardens in lieu of money. The planters had no connection with the recruitment process other than providing money to the agents.As such under inhuman conditions these labours were brought from their own places and forced to work in the gardens. These workers were called by their colonial masters as 'coolies'. The *Indian Tea Association* was formed in 1881 with its head office at Calcutta to work for further development of the tea industry. In 1900 the *Association* established the Scientific Department for conducting scientific research in tea industry and Dr. H. H. Mann started functioning as a Scientific Officer from a laboratory in the Calcutta museum. As this initiative proved beneficial due to the good works of Dr.Mann, a field station was established at Heeleakah Tea Estate, near Jorhat in 1904 and another entomological laboratory at Kannykoory in Cachar in 1906. Later on in 1911, both the laboratories were

closed and an experimental station was established at Tocklai at the south of the Jorhat town which later became famous as the 'Tocklai Experimental Station'.

The 20th century saw a movement for the popularisation of tea as a drink within the country. The Colonial Government passed the Indian Tea Cess Act in 1903 to raise funds for the Tea propaganda. In Assam, for popularizing tea consumption in rural areas, the tea companies send their employees to village fairs, festivals, markets, etc to demonstrate how to prepare and drink tea. Free tea was provided to everyone who visited the tea booth. Colourful processions were also taken out in villages by beating drums and shouting slogans regarding tea brands and their companies. To popularise tea as a drink in urban areas like Guwahati, Sibsagar, etc, advertisement were given of different tea brands and their companies in newspapers and periodicals. Posters of tea companies were posted at retailer shops, bus stands, railway stations, etc. Some tea companies even circulated booklets, leaflets and handbills to promote the sale of 'Assam Tea'.

Tea became an important item of drink both in and outside Assam. But tea industry was completely a colonial concern with foreign capital investment and outside forced labour. Large tracts of agricultural and non-agricultural came under the grasp of the tea cultivation. Whole profit of the tea industry was drained away from Assam and it had little link with the local economy. Still, the tea industry led to the formation of some ancillary industries in Assam like plywood in 1918, helped in boosting the mining of coal and oil, etc. Besides, with the brand name of 'Assam Tea', the tea industry made the name of Assam world famous.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q1: Name some valuable trees found in the forests of Assam.

.....

Q2: Name a place where teak wood plantations were started by the colonial government.

.....

Q3: Who discovered tea growing wildly in Assam?

.....

Q4: Name the two tea gardens of Maniram Dewan.

.....

Q5: In which year the Indian Tea Association was formed?

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7.5 MINING INDUSTRY

Mining can be defined as the process of extracting valuable mineral resources from the earth. In Assam, mining of coal and oil started under the colonial regime and is continuing today. The process initially was manual one but gradually became mechanised and mining became an industry. In this section, we are dealing with the mining of coal and oil in colonial Assam under two different sub-sections.

7.5.1COAL

The discovery andmining of coalis a colonial development. The beginning of coal mining in Assam was a significant landmark in the economic arena of the province.It was in the year 1825 that Lieutenant Wilcox, a Revenue Surveyor posted at Sadiya saw coal beds at Borhat, Supkong and other nearby areas while going up the river Disang and Buridihing. This was the first official record of the existence of coal in Assam (Upper Assam).

David Scott was delighted on hearing about the existence of coal beds in Upper Assam as it would facilitate commercial navigation on the river Brahmaputra with the locally available coal providing at a cheaper cost the fuel for the steamers. Till than coal had to be brought from Calcutta for running the government steamers in the Brahmaputra. But the authorities at Calcutta showed reluctance at taking immediate measures for exploring coal resources in Assam.

Actually situation in the province was not suitable for coal exploration. Problem of labour was there.Climate was inhospitable

with difficult terrain. Transportation difficulties and insecure political condition was also there. Even private enterprises refused to go for coal exploration. But the attitude of colonial authorities made a shift when tea cultivation was started on commercial lines necessitating the cheaper availability of coal as a fuel for the tea industry.

There began search operations by the colonial government for prospective coal fields in Assam. David Scott in 1828 ordered C.A. Bruce to extract coal form Safrai, near theriver Disang and Bruce did it with utmost difficulty. Around 5000 maunds of coal were extracted but most of them were drowned in the water while bringing downwards in boats as the journey was hazardous. A portion of the remaining coal was sent to Calcutta (present day Kolkata) to determine its quality. Upon testing, the Assam coal was found as good as the English coal and the best ever found in India.

This test result was quite encouraging and subsequently many coal beds were discovered by Lieutenant Bigge and Captain Hannay near Borhat and Jaipur in Upper Assam. In the meantime in 1838 a Coal Committee was appointed to investigate about the position of coal reserves in Assam and to submit a report on it. The Coal Committee stated that the state of communication between Upper Assam and rest of India being not developed the coal from Assam could not be supplied to Calcutta at a cheaper rate than that of Bengal.

But regarding coal beds of Borhat and Jaipur, the Committee had a favourable opinion as these were located in advantageous position with easy accessibility to waterways. The Committee even gave a positive opinion that coal from Assam could be supplied for the steamers plying on the River Ganga. In 1847 steamer services were too introduced on commercial lines in the Brahmaputra increasing the demand for coal in Assam.

Already the tea industry was there and then the introduction of the steamer service together created a huge local demand for coal. This local demand could be met out from the coal mines of Assam. Still, government showed unwillingness towards taking any

initiative for coal mining other than providing on lease the coal fields to private companies and individuals who agreed to supply coal to the steamers at Guwahati or Dikhowmukh.Hence, individuals and private companies came forward to take the coal mines on lease with the hope of having a good profit by supplying coal for local use.

However, in 1865, H. B. Medlicott, Deputy Superintendent Geological Survey of India came to Dibrugarh and surveyed the coal fields of Upper Assam.Medlicott was impressed with the coal resources of Assam. But he was stunned as government took no concrete measures for establishing coal mining as an industry inspite of introduction of steam navigation up to Dibrugarh and ever increasing demand in the tea industry. Medlicott was surprised to know that until than tea planters were using wood as fuel. In between 1874-76, another geologist Mallet made a survey on the coal fields of Assam and held the same impression like Medlicott.

Other than Upper Assam, coal was found in other areas of the then Assam. In 1882 coal mines were found in Garo Hills, by 1889-90 in Khasi and Jaintia Hills and in 1898 in Mikir Hills. But these coal mines located in both plains and hills were in hazardous areas and extraction of coal was a difficult task and it needed persons having technical know-how in this direction.The government initially provided lease to the interested parties on liberal terms.But thenput limitations on the lease by imposingcertain specific terms and conditions.

Initially large areas of coal fields with a long tenure were provided on lease. In 1875, R.H. Keatinge, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam limited the grants to fifty acres for a period of three years and even prohibited the holding of more than one site. However,individuals and private companies failed to achieve desired success in extracting coal as there was the basic problem of communication and labour, particularly skilled labour amongst other problems. Besides, Elliott, successor of Keatinge too found the then existing norms of lease not sufficiently attractive for the speculators.

Elliot once again made the terms for lease liberal. Messrs Shaw Finlayson and Company was given the Makum and Jaypur coal fields on lease for a period of twenty years in 1881. The Ledo coal field was taken over by the Assam Railways and Trading Company which was formed in 1881. A year later in 1882 the Company opened the first colliery of Assam at Ledo. Subsequently, collieries were opened at places like Tikak in 1884, Namdang in 1896, Borgolai in 1909, etc.Railway lines were also constructed to connect the coal fields as large production was there.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Assam became self-sufficient in coal. Until, the construction of the Assam-Bengal railway was completed, coal was used locally by the tea gardens and for running the steamers on the Brahmaputra. But after the completion of this railway, coal from Assam other than being locally used was also sent to Calcutta from where it was shipped to different parts of the world. The coal of Assam became an important commodity of international trade like the tea.

However, the coal industry was manned by immigrant workers and all investment made there was from outside. As such the local economy of Assam was never boosted by the development of coal mining industry under the colonial set up.

7.5.2 OIL

The discovery of oil in Assam was an accidental development which greatly boosted the colonial economy. During their search for coal,the officials of the English East India Company found oil springs in Upper Assam. It was again Lieutenant Wilcox who for the first time found oil springs in Assam in the bed of the River Buridihing at Supkong in 1825. After him, several other British officials like C. A. Bruce, Major White, Lieutenant Bigge, Dr. Griffith, Captain Hannay and Jenkins recorded the existence of oil springs near several coal beds in Upper Assam.



LET US KNOW

C. A. Bruce in 1828 reported about the existence of oil springs at Safrai and found oil seepages at Makum. Major White in 1837 found several oil springs at Nampong near the River Namrup.Lieutenant Bigge and Dr. Griffith Captain while exploring the Namrup River for coal came across oil springs in 1838. Jenkins also in 1838 noticed several oil springs near Borhat. Captain Hannay in 1845 reported to find oil at Naharpung near the Namchik River.

Besides the colonial officials, geologists like Medlicott and Mallet of the Geological Survey of India in 1860s too found oil springs in different places of Upper Assam. Medlicottsaw some oil springs near Makum with very positive symptoms and hence suggested of making experimental borings there to test the value of the oil found.On a later survey Mallet found traces of oil at Hukanjuri near Jaypur, Telpung near the Dikhow River and at BabuBarpung on the northern part of the Tipam Hills.

Already in early 1854,Wagentriber, an Australian speculator applied to the Government of Bengal for lease of the oil springs of Lakhimpur district to determine the quality and commercial value of the oil. There were then three oil springs at Makum, Bapu and Namchik. But on the recommendation of then Commissioner of Assam, Robert Jenkins,the Board of Revenue gave Wagentriber only the Makum oil fields on lease for a period of three years. Unfortunately, this experiment failed and there is no record of it.

Though Wagentriber met with failure, Goodenough of Mckillop Stewart and Company of Calcutta (presently Kolkata) in 1865 applied for the lease of oil springs in an aroundMakumfor a period of twenty years and successfully got a rent free lease as per the order ofCecil Beadon, the then Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. Goodenough made his first systematic attempt for oil drilling in November, 1866 at Naharpung which was unsuccessful. But in his second attempt he found oil at a depth of 118 feet at Makum. This oil well became the first successfully mechanically drilled one in Asia.

Still Goodenough failed to establish oil industry in Assam because of transportation problem which raises the price of the oil of Assam at Calcutta and it fails to compete with the oil of America or Rangoon.Hence, Goodenough sold his rights of lease to a private company, the Assam Mineral Oil Company. But the Company too failed in establishing an oil industry because of the transportation problem. Then in 1878 came forward the MessrsBalmer Lawrie and Company securing a lease on rent of working in the Naharpung and Makum oil springs for a period of fifty years. This Company also made with limited success.

As already mentioned in the earlier sub-section,the Assam Railways and Trading Company was formed in 1881. The Company in 1882 secured a lease against royalty over the Makum oil fields for a period of twenty five years with the option of renewing it for another twenty five years. But success eluded theCompany until their engineers engaged in constructing Dibrugarh-Margherita railway line saw oil seepages near present Digboi. After securing necessary permission to drill in the area, the Company struck oil at a depth of 178 feet in October, 1889.

Then in 1892 oil was struck at another well and thereafter by 1894 eleven oil yielding wells were struck. At Margherita, a small refinery was erected where oil from Digboi was sent by rail for six years. Meanwhile, another company the Assam Oil Syndicate came forward for oil drilling and was given on similar lease an area adjacent to that given to theAssam Railways and Trading Company.The syndicate also succeeded in obtaining considerable quantity of crude oil and it decided to start refinery of its own. The MessrsBalmer Lawrie and Company even abandoned their own project and joined hands with the Assam Oil Syndicate.

Meanwhile, theAssam Railways and Trading Company started a new company the Assam Oil Company in 1899 for the oil sector and transferred its rights and privileges over the Makum and Digboi oil fields to it. Owing to their weak financial position, the Assam Oil Syndicate inspite of getting success also transferred its rights to the Assam Oil Company. In 1901, the Company started a refinery at Digboiwith a capacity of 500 barrels or 20,000 gallons a dayreplacing the one at Margherita.

Within a year, the kerosene produced in the Digboirefinery reached the market. Gradually, petrol, diesel, wax, lubricants, etc were also produced in the refinery. TheAssam Railways and Trading Company continued to have its share in the oil sector and was involved in the management of the Assam Oil Company. But in 1921, theAssam Railways and Trading Company sold its shares to the Burmah Oil Company and this company thereby became the commercial and technical managers of the Assam Oil Company.

Like tea and coal, the development of oil industry did not boost the local economy of Assam. Oil industry was largely capital intensive and the entire capital invested there came from Europe. Hence, the lion share of the profit went outside. Technically skilled labour was required to run the machineries and the labour force was brought from outside. All the machines involved in producing oil were brought from Europe. Other than kerosene, there was no demand of the other oil products. Hence, all were sent outside the province and even exported to foreign countries.

7.6 OPIUM

Opium is made from the seeds of the poppy plant. It was used by the Assamese people as a medicine as well as an intoxicating drug. Opium is locally known as *kanee*. The Assamese people used to cultivate poppy plant in their homesteads (*Barimati*) for their own consumption.It is believed that during the Mughal invasion of Assam in the 17th century, the local people were introduced to the poppy plant and its use.

Barkendazes:They are the mercenary soldiers who used to fight for the sake of money.

Maniram Dewan states that it was the Rajput ***Barkendazes*** who started cultivating poppy at Beltola in present day Guwahati city during the reign of Ahom King Lakshmi Singha. Initially, the members of the royal family as well as nobility use to consume opium as an item of luxury. But gradually, opium became a common man's drug as not much tax was imposed on the land under poppy cultivation and no restriction was imposed by the Ahom government on its use as a drug.



LET US KNOW

Addiction to opium or *kanee* was a great evil for the Assamese society. The Assamese people, high or low, rich or poor and young or old consumed opium. This converted the hardy, industrious and enterprising Assamese people into weak, lazy and degenerated race. The carvings for opium made the people so desperate that they refrained from working to meet even the basic necessities of life. For this idle nature of the Assamese people they were called as *kania*. Even today this term *kania* is used to denote a lazy and idle people in Assamese language. From the word *kanee*, the word *kania* had its derivation.

Though Assamese people were using opium during the Ahom period, but it was the colonial government who made it a commercial commodity.On knowing about opium (*kanee*) addiction of the local people, the colonial government tried to gradually discourage the indigenous cultivation of poppy and develop their monopolistic trade on opium. There begin the sale of *abkari*opium by the colonial government at Goalpara in 1844-45 and by 1850-51it spread all over the province making it easily accessible for all including those who don't cultivate poppy.

A.J. Moffatt Mills came to Assam in 1853 and representations were made before him by the Assamese intelligentsia like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua and Haribilas Agarwala amongst others to save Assam and its people from the evils of poppy cultivation and opium addiction. But Mills supported the consumption of opium, but advocated for the abolition of poppy cultivation and preparation of opium locally.

Meanwhile, in 1857 the tea planters urged the colonial government of India to impose restriction on the production and consumption of opium as it has made the local people lazy to come for work in the tea gardens. The then Chief Commissioner, Jenkins gave his support to this demand and on his recommendation, the colonial government of India prohibited the cultivation of poppy all over Assam in April, 1860. But the sale of government or *abkari* opium continued.

Actually, by preventing poppy cultivation, the colonial government of Indiaindirectly allowed their provincial government to have their monopolistic control over opium in the province. There started to be gradual rise in the price of the opium from Rs. 14 per seer in 1860 to Rs. 20 in 1867, Rs. 23 in 1873, and Rs. 50 in 1918-19. In 1873-74 there were 5,137 licensed opium shops for selling the drug all over the province. There was a little fall in opium consumption amongst the local people, but there was increase in opium consumers from the laboring communities of the tea gardens.

Representations were also made by leading Assamese intellectuals like Satyanath Bora, TrinayanBarkataki, GunabhiramBarua and RadhanathChangkakoti before the Royal Commission on Opium in 1893 for the prohibition of the drugs. But all these efforts were in vain. With no governmenteffort made towards complete eradication of opium menace, occasional public meetings were held to make the people conscious towards the ill effects of opium consumption. *KaneeNibaraniSabhas* (Opium Prevention Societies) were established in several districts. Even in the Provincial Legislative Council, the issue of opium was raised by the Assamese legislators like PadmanathGohainBarua and PhanidharChaliha. Still, the opium menace continued until the Assam Provincial Congress under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi made opium prohibition one of the main agenda of the Non-Co-operation Movement. Anti-opium agitation reached a momentum during the course of the Movement and gradually this ill habit of opium consumption eradicated from the province.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer the following questions:

Q6: Where was for the first time coal found in Assam?

.....

Q7: In which year the Coal Committee was appointed?

.....

Q8: Name the Australian speculator who applied for the lease of oil springs in Assam.

.....

Q9: In which year the Assam Oil Company started?

.....

Q10: In Assamese language opium is known as.....



7.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt about:

- the condition of forests in colonial Assam in the light of the policy adopted by the colonial government.
- how tea was discovered in Assam, its plantation started on a commercial scale and it developed into an industry.
- there were coal and oil resources in Assam and colonial officers discovered it. Mining of these resources started and took the shape of an industry.
- opium was cultivated in Assam from the pre-colonial times. But the colonial government turned it into a commercial commodity and thereby increasing its consumption and sale in the province.



7.8 FURTHER READING

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