Journal of North East India Studies
Vol. 13(2), Jul.-Dec. 2023, pp. 31-54.

State and Local Conservation Traditions: A Comparative Study of Fortress Conservation and Traditional Forest Forts

Rajiandai Bariam

The paper attempts to contribute to existing discourse on conservation and political ecology by juxtaposing the concept of "fortress conservation" which favors the creation of protected areas, to the concept of "forest forts," a traditional conservation practice woven into a traditional village society. By drawing insights from the theory of political ecology and colonial conservation laws and practices, the present paper reiterate the critique of "fortress conservation" while advocating a dialogue between the state, conservationists, and the local people. Unlike the forceful and displacive conservation projects and discourse that harbors dissent and protests, straining relationships between state and people, the paper shifts the paradigm emphasizing the healing of relationship among human agencies as of utmost importance, and a vital step in restoring our relationship with nature. It opines that if conservation is to be deeply successful and sustainable, the minimization of casualty and cases of displacement must be part of the equation. Furthermore, it seeks to explain such a possibility through the traditional forest forts in which the local people engaged in the traditional practices of conservation themselves based on their long-standing and time-tested traditional ecological knowledge.

Keywords: Fortress conservation, Forest forts, community forest, local conservation traditions, politics of partnership, conflict.

Defining Fortress Conservation

Fortress conservation, as an approach, seeks to preserve wildlife and their habitat by forcefully excluding local people who have traditionally relied on the environment in question for their livelihoods (Igoe, 2002). It is a strategy Rolston advocates for the "exclusion of human settlement and activity from the most fragile and valuable wild areas" (Siurua, 2006, p. 71). Rolston takes a very extreme view of conservation, aptly calling it "fortress conservation", advocating that the developed countries wanting to help alleviate the problems of the developing countries are "ethically

Rajiandai Bariam is with the Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad, India - 500046. [Email: ajeeanbung@gmail.com]

ISSN 2278-1455 / eISSN 2277-6869
© 2023 Association for North East India Studies
http://www.jneis.com

justified in prioritizing the protection of natural values over meeting human needs in some situations even where it means allowing people to starve rather than sacrificing "wild" nature to feed them." He emphasizes the need or inevitability of such harsh decisions due to the rapidly growing human population threatening fragile natural habitats (Siurua, 2006, pp. 72-73). Rolston is not the first to have advocated for such strong measures. John Muir, celebrated by the latter-day environmentalists, pressed for parks guarded by the military. However, for Aldo Leopold, responsible human behaviour outside the protected areas is even more important than the protection of wild species within them (Guha, 2000, p. 57).

Fortress conservation has a long, controversial history in the Global South. Though this concept is no longer popular and primarily criticized, the conservation method propagates the establishment of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and other forest-protected areas. This approach, termed "fortress conservation," "fences and fines approach," (Wells and Brandon, 1992) or "coercive" conservation, was based on the North American ideal of nature as wilderness. The 1964 Wilderness Act of the United States claimed, "man himself is a visitor who does not remain." This concept significantly shaped the creation and maintenance of landscapes devoid of humans to preserve the perceived wilderness of the areas from the encroachment of the local population. This western ideal of "pristine wilderness" is the philosophical base for the proliferation of protected areas.

This conservation paradigm continues to hold its grip and expand its reach in the Northeastern landscapes of India. This conservation approach started under the colonial regime, guided by an aim to acquire more forest areas under the colonial state's control. The colonial administration imposed the ideal of wilderness disrupting traditional system, understanding of human-environment relations of tribal communities, and material access to their land (Neumann, 1998) who were "guardian" of the forest for centuries. This ideal is exploited for certain interests by the colonial state. As seen in the colonial conservation frameworks, the main guiding principle was economic and commercial motives. In a state such as Manipur, characterized by its diverse ethnic composition and varied political interests, conservation initiatives are subject to many influences, often presented under the guise of environmental protection. Regrettably, the local populace frequently bears the brunt of these initiatives. The increasing number of designated parks, reserved forests, and wildlife sanctuaries in Manipur attests to the prevalence of this approach. The Tamenglong district of Manipur has Jiri Makru Wildlife Sanctuary, Zeilad Wildlife Sanctuary, Bunning Wildlife Sanctuary, Azuram Community Reserve, and Dailong Biodiversity Heritage Site.

Methods and the Field site

The field work was carried out in Tamenglong District. Tamenglong district is located in the western part of Manipur and erstwhile known as Manipur West District prior to 1972. It shares a border with Senapati district to the east, Peren district of Nagaland to the North, Dima Hasao district of Assam in the West, Churachandpur district to the South and Jiribam and Cachar district of Assam to the South-West. It covers an areas

of 4391 sq kms with a total population of 156784.[1] The district has three subdivisions namely (i) Tamenglong, (ii) Nungba, and (iii) Tamei and Tousem. (But Tamenglong district had been bifurcated leading to the creation of Noney sub division as a new district vide. Manipur Gazette No. 408 dated December, 9, 2016 Notification No. 16/ 20/2016-R dated December, 8, 2016)

Tamenglong consisted of mainly four cognate tribes of Inpui, Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei known as the Zeliangrong Nagas. They are the dominant tribes in the district. The four tribes have common origin with ethnic, cultural and linguistic affinity. Few population of other tribes such as Hmar, Gangte, Chiru, Khasi also contributed to the demography of the district.

The methodology for this paper is a combination of primary (field work) and secondary sources. The researcher conducted field work in six villages of Tousem subdivision under Tamenglong district in Manipur. It was focussed on understanding the notifications of protected areas and people's response to it. The field work was conducted using a mix of semi-structured personal and group interviews. It was conducted in November 2021 and December 2022. Forty people from Tousem subdivision comprised the sample. The villages within Tousem subdivision which the researcher have taken up as field sites are Tousem, Tousem Khullen, Mandiu, Phoklong, Taguaram and Azuram. Tousem subdivision is dominated by the Zeme tribe although there are some villages of other tribes as well. Tousem subdivision is the most backward and most underdeveloped area in Tamenglong District. Tamenglong is also considered as the most backward district in Manipur. Tousem is the western part of Manipur bordering Assam. The subdivision was a crucial site of environmental conflict due to the notification of the Jiri Makru Wildlife Sanctuary and its Eco-sensitive zone. The total area covers 454 square kms. The issue became sensitive only in the year 2020 when the villagers learned that 12 villages under Tousem subdivision had been notified under the Sanctuary and its Eco-sensitive zone.

Another set of fieldwork was carried out in Tamenglong headquarter to understand a particular traditional conservation tradition called the *Raengaan* or forest fort. Field work was conducted between December 2022 and March 2023. Several semi structured personal interviews and one semi-structured group interview were carried out. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate as the research requires an openness in understanding the traditions and experiences of the people. The informants were chosen from the sites of the three traditional village forts locally termed *Raengaan*: *Nrianglong Raengaan, Dailong Raengaan and Chiuluan Raengaan* respectively.

The paper presents state led conservation issues and its various impacts on the local people. The lack of bureaucratic procedure followed by the state, livelihood issues, and disruption on socio-cultural harmony and traditions will be assessed. And in contrast, The paper also discussed the traditional local practice of conservation called "*Raengaan*" which means "forest forts" in local dialect. This paper presents the importance and possible contributions of traditional community forest conservation to conservation discourse. Besides, through a contrast of the two approaches, traditional forest conservation is presented as an alternative to "fortress conservation."

The social construction of nature where these protected areas are imposed cannot be easily quantified. The absence of statistical and scientific data and evidence do

not mean the absence of struggles around these protected areas. The hardships of the Tousem villagers cannot be easily drawn into statistics when notifications for protected areas are issued. As Dan Brockington concludes, based on his study on the Mkomazi Reserve, the struggles over the reserve lies around social constructions of nature where they exist for reasons in which hard evidences or data will not necessarily figure (Igoe, 2002, p. 81, Brockington, 2002). And so studies around conservation and their struggles cannot be scientifically proven unless studied in a socio-historical manner.

Fortress conservation gained wide support and global funding generating billions of dollars. They had even incorporated a community development component that could whitewash fortress conservation as friendly to local people. So, Dan Brockington warned about the danger of community conservation of becoming an "anti-politics machine" concealing political conflict and historical inequalities. This warning arises as community conservation is being hijacked by the fortress conservation figures and institutions, setting up their community development component incorporating the post-liberalization imperative to benefit the local people from these conservation projects (Brockington, 2002). Although refuting the success narratives of fortress conservation and popular conservation projects is difficult, such a process nevertheless will need a deeper understanding of human ecology through a socio-historical context. The motive and the mode in which colonial conservation ideas had come to suppress our forests and its dwellers are explored. This process was heavily influenced by western notions of conservation which went hand in hand with colonial categorization of the locals as environmentally destructive, thereby justifying aggressive commercial forestry.

Relevance of the Political Ecology Framework

Ecological projects are not neutral socially and politically. Conservation is not neutral. David Harvey said "all ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa. Ecological arguments are never socially neutral any more than socio-political arguments are ecologically neutral. Looking more closely at the way ecology and politics interrelate becomes imperative if we are to get a better handle on how to approach environmental/ecological questions" (Harvey, 1993, p. 25). Although there are rich collection of Political ecology theories, it is important here to mention Bryant and Bailey who suggest that "an analysis of the political interests and actions of the various actors that participate in the political-ecological conflict in the Third world" could bring clarity, and aid the research field (Bryant and Bailey, 1997, p. 2). Political ecology helps to uncover the politicised nature of fortress conservation. This approach of conservation had been captured by powerful actors with certain agendas.

However, the framework of political ecology, with its emphasis on the weaker sections, could bring the importance of the "forest forts," a traditional conservation by local people with various social, political and economic underpinnings. This framework's focus on the actors (the "vulnerable" for Blaikie) rather than the environmental change is observed with Piers Blaikie, the stalwart of political ecology, over the course of his writings especially in his more recent writings. The point

of political ecology for Piers Blaikie is justice for the vulnerable (Forsyth, 2008). For Bryant and Bailey (1997) political ecology aims to "understand the possibilities for action by actors operating within broader political and economic structures". A blueprint for change linked to Third World political ecology would, they posited "undoubtedly encompass movement towards an ideal type in which local-level decision-making by grassroots actors (include poor farmers, shifting cultivators, fishers, hunter gatherers, and the like) would figure prominently at the expense of the activities of non-place-based, and traditionally powerful actors (denote states, large businesses, or multilateral institutions)" (Bryant and Blaikie, 1997, p. 4; cf. Dryzek, 1987). This focus on the grassroot actors makes political ecology pertinent in studying conservation areas where the decibel of the grassroot voices and their practices have been faint and low. When conservation issue is deeply political and motivated by different stakeholders' different interests , the weaker actors' interests can be crowded out.

There is a broader "historical process that contributed to creating a wildlife-based view of the world, where animals and humans found themselves placed along a spectrum of desirability for the government" (Barbora, 2017, p. 8). This historical process of such knowledge is propagated through the mainstream western discourses and popular institutions and media leading to the creation and propagation of massive conservation projects. "Fortress conservation" is the requisite product of such knowledge with massive security partnerships and global fundings (Igoe, 2002). This discourse that effectively pitched wildlife against the locals have entrenched over time attracting global fund and have become what is known as "mainstream conservation". This discourse is well absorbed and propagated by the colonial state as seen in the advent of state forestry marking the era of Government protected areas.

Advent of State Forestry and its impact on Manipur

State forestry marks the establishment of the Indian forest into protected forests or government forests. But since the time the forest department was set up under the colonial administration in 1864, state forestry had a commercial orientation obstructing the agrarian community's dependence on the forest produce for subsistence. And thus, the history of state forestry is marked by clash and resistance from the tribal people. The well known Chipko Movement was a resistance against the state's double standard whereby after denying the local people rights to fell trees to generate local employment and sustain livelihoods, gave the rights to a sports and goods company called Symonds from far away Allahabad (Guha, 1989b). The commercialization of forest areas continues in postcolonial India and the threat of land grabbing by the state and corporates looms large. New legislations and legalities are increasingly threatening the forest dwellers who have been protectors of the forest.

The beginning of a systematic forest policy can be traced back to 1855 when the then governor-general Dalhousie issued a memorandum on forest conservation. Under the guidance of Dietrich Brandis, a German Botanist, the forest department was organised and the first forest act was enacted. His work in the British civil service in India began in 1856, and he was appointed as the first inspector general of forests to the government of India in 1864.

In 1878, a comprehensive Forest Act was passed. Under the Act, the forests were divided into 1) reserved forests, 2) protected forests, and 3) village forests. The forest dwellers were to be notified to record their claims over land and forest produce in the proposed reserved and protected forests. Provisions were made to impose a duty on timber. Certain activities like tresspassing and pasturing of cattle were prohibited. Certain acts were declared as offences and were imposed fines and even imprisonment. (Kulkarni, 1987, p. 2143)

The Indian Forest Act of 1878 enabled the state to increase forest exploitation while limiting local people's access to the forest for their subsistence. These forests legislations were also accompanied by a colonial logic of "oriental despotism" against the local tradition. In a nutshell the state forestry that was introduced viewed the local tradition as unscientific. The locals are regarded as environmentally destructive and unscientific throughout colonial history that continued till the postcolonial period. Shifting cultivation, a form of agriculture prevalent among the hill people across India, was characterized by the practice of "jhum". Unlike the intensive cultivation ushered in by the industrial revolution, jhum was not financially rewarding. As noted by Gadgil and Guha (1992), the commercialisation of the forest intensified official hostility towards jhum. The British held without no reason, jhum to be "the most destructive of all practices for the forest." The reason being the lack of profitability of jhum and its clash with other interests of the colonial state. If "axe cultivation was the despair of every forest officer" (Elwin, 1942, p. 8), it was largely because timber operations competed with jhum for territorial control of the forest.

This conflict between traditional practices and commercial interests is further illustrated in the colonial context of Manipur, as documented in Johnstone's annual administrative report of 1878:

> I have made several representations to the Maharaja on the subject with, however, I fear, little effect, the prospect of immediate profit to be gained by establishing a system of forest conservancy not being sufficient to induced him to make an effort, more especially as, having the command of all the labour of the country, he himself will not fell the want of wood so long as there is any to be brought from a distance.[2]

Unlike during the time of Johnstone, the Anglo Manipur war of 1891 changed the balance of power which tilted towards the Political Agent. In 1895, Maxwell the then Political agent, created the first reserved forest in Heingangching without the need for consultation with the King:

> The hill here is covered with pine forest, and will be made into a forest reserve. The Manipuris in the time of the late Durbar never entered the forest, as it contained a *lai* (God) named Marjing, but it is currently reported that during the administration of the Europeans, all the Manipuri lais have left the country, and this report being accepted by the people, has induced them to cut away the forest. Some damage has also been done by the Nepali settlers, who, of course, are not concerned with local tradition. The forest, when more fully matured, will form a convenient timber supply for Imphal.[3]

With the introduction of the Indian Forest Act 1927, the people of Manipur gradually lost their indigenous rights over their forest land. As forest control progressed, the first attempt to formulate a forest law in Manipur was made with the Durbar resolution 1932. The government gradually increased its control over the forests by strengthening the forest department in order to regulate people's rights over forest land and produce (Kulkarni, 1987, p. 2143). Although the traditional rights of the tribals were removed, the British Forest Policy of 1894 had provisions for "rights and privileges." The National Forest Policy 1952 diluted this further into "rights and concessions." At present, the tendency is to treat them merely as "concessions" (Burman, 1992, p. 143).

This historical trajectory of diminishing indigenous rights sets the stage for the recent introduction of the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) in 2014. Viewed as an attempt to control land use and steer it towards commercialization, the NLUP aims to transform both jhum and non-jhum cultivation practices in the hill areas. The goal is to promote a more sustainable land use system across both the hills and valley areas of the state (Government of Manipur, 2014, p. 7). However, this policy is seen as a strategy to advance the so-called "national interest" under the guise of the Centre's development push, conspicuously excluding the involvement of the indigenous and local people (Yumnam, 2014).

Rise in Reserved and Conservation areas in Manipur

Taking the case of one district in Manipur, the rapid rise in protected areas due to the measures taken by the state to reserve them and assigned it for conservation, can be observed. The table below presents the wildlife Sanctuaries,[4] Community reserves and Biodiversity Heritage site which have been notified recently,[5] in Tamenglong District.[6]

Name of the Protected area	Area in sq.kms
Jiri-Makru Wildlife Sanctuary (JMWS)	198
JMWS Eco-sensitive zone	256
Bunning Wildlife Santuary (BWS)	115.8
Zeilad Wildlife Sanctuary (ZWS)	21
ZWS Eco-sensitive zone	196
Azuram Community Reserve	5.85
Dailong Biodiversity Heritage Site	11.35
Chiuluan Barak Community Reserve	8.88

Table: Protected areas in Tamenglong District of Manipur

Critical Assessment of the Protected Areas

The Colonial Government had separated the hills and the valley in Manipur and

effected different administration with limited interferences on the hills. After the Government of India Act, 1935 was introduced, Manipur worked out the terms of federation with the Government of India. And one of the main subjects was the administration of the hills with 7,000 square miles out of the State's total geographical areas of 8,000 square miles. The British adjudged it to exclude the administration of the hills from the jurisdiction of the then Manipur Durbar. This led to the agreement on 21st July 1939, where the Maharaja of Manipur will "federate on terms which covered the exclusion of the hills from his direct control." This governance scheme remains unchanged even with the signing of the Standstill Agreement and the Instrument of Accession which happened on 11 August 1947 and the Merger Agreement on 21st September 1949 through which the principality of Manipur became a part of the Indian Republic (Gangmumei, 2009).

Although the hills and the valleys were amalgamated under one administrative unit, the British administered the two separately. Post independence, recognising their unique histories, the Union Government inserted Article 371C to protect the tribals and their land by constituting a Hill Areas Committee (HAC). The HAC consists of members elected from the Hill Areas of the State. The committee would look after the matters of the hill areas and represents the interests of the tribal people living in the hill districts of the state. The Manipur Legislative Assembly (Hill Areas Committee) Order, 1972, para 4(1) states "All Scheduled matters in so far as they relate to the Hill Areas shall be within the purview of the Hill Areas Committee."

The dual administrative arrangement although nominally continued after independence with the enactment of the Manipur State Hill Areas Administration Act in 1947 for the hill areas and the Manipur State Constitution Act 1947 for the valley. But this arrangement eroded further after the integration of Manipur with the Union of India. Prior to Manipur attaining statehood, the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act 1971 was enacted by an act of Parliament. But unlike the areas under Sixth schedule, this Act did not provide much autonomy and self governance for the hill areas. It gave rise to various challenges in protecting the tribal rights and their land and prompted the demand of the tribal people to extend Sixth Schedule to the hills areas of the state. In 2015, the tribals held a prolonged protest against the three contentious bills introduced in the state's legislative assembly. One of the bills was the attempt of the Government to extend the provisions of Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (MLR&LR) Act 1960 to the hill areas. The MLR&LR Act applied to the entire state of Manipur except the hill areas. But the Bill attempt to amend the Act by removing the exceptional clause that protect the hill areas.

Such a move negates the constitutional mandate and objective to protect and safeguard the tribals and their land. The tribals are apprehensive of Government's enforcement of forest acts and laws without proper procedure and see it as attempt of land grab and displacement of tribals. They interpret the attempt of encroachment on tribal land as being orchestrated under various pretexts, including the demand of Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, declaration of Wildlife sanctuaries and reserved forests. (cf. Haokip, 2021) The lack of proper decentralisation and a degree of autonomy for the hills adds to the growing apprehensions against the state. Such apathy combined with attempts to appropriate tribal land leads to conflicts in the state.

The expansion of protected areas has not been without controversy. The voice of protest and detest of government appropriation of forest land are echoed throughout the country's tribal regions today. As a peasant bitterly observed "the forests have belonged to us from time immemorial, our ancestors planted them and have protected them; now that they have become of value, government steps in and robs us of them." (Guha, 2001). One notable instance of this tension is the attempted oil exploration in the hills of Manipur. This venture in 2010, which was strongly opposed and subsequently suspended (Yumnam, 2014) involved an agreement between the Government of Manipur and Jubilant Energy, a Dutch company, without the people's consent. The total area granted for exploration was around 4,000 square kilometers. This case and increasing protests and resistance against various conservation projects implemented without transparency underscores the ongoing struggle over land and resource rights.

Local populations have often been on the receiving end of the detrimental actions taken by powerful actors. It is imperative to accurately ascertain the interests of local communities, rather than confining them within preconceived biases, given that discourses and knowledge bear significant implications. The historical trajectory of environmental movements provides insight into the position of tribal communities concerning development projects. For instance, the Chipko Movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan showed a different reality about the interest of these communities. They were never against any conservation or developmental works into-to but rather pertained to issues of benefit sharing and power sharing, given their inherent role as guardians of their habitat and territories.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan did not initially oppose the proposed dam as a "developmental project". The movement was initially triggered by the evident displacement and immediate losses incurred by local communities, leading adequate compensation and rehabilitation demands. When they saw that it did not happen, the mobilization took a step further against the unjust and displacive development projects that are unsustainable. Thus, while the communities accommodated the dreams of the government and the modern ideals of development, when they found out that these development projects failed to reciprocate this accommodation and could not even ensure their basic survival needs, they turn against it at all costs.

Lack of consent: Local communities' opposition to 'undemocratic' conservation initiatives

What happens when state led conservation clash with the people's basic dreams of infrastructure and development? These villages[7] in Tousem subdivision under Tamenglong district of Manipur where fieldwork for this paper was conducted, had been waiting for the construction of road for several decades. And in 2020, the Road and Transport Ministry sanctioned the budget for construction to begin passing through the villages of Tousem subdivision under Tamenglong District. But they came to know that their villages had been notified as a wildlife sanctuary and eco-sensitive zones only after the NHIDCL did not pass through their villages and drew a different route on the account of the notification. This was the beginning of a concerted struggle by the villagers against the unconsented move from the

government.

The villagers expected to be a part of a democratic decision process and be able to deliberate and define such a crucial step that directly affects their life, livelihood and the future of nature and society. The lack of consultation and consent was the main reason for their struggle. They feel cheated and exploited. They are not against conservation efforts as it is often the case with local people in other parts of the third world too (cf. Neumann, 1992) They are willing to cooperate, improvise and take measures as stakeholders of a crucial conservation effort. But they felt threatened by the non-inclusive unilateral conservation initiatives of the state. And such an atmosphere does not help both the villagers and the state. The villagers at Tousem, in their resistance are willing to defend their rights and livelihoods at any cost. Emphasizing about the democratic way of life in the village, one of the respondents noted "When we have a completely different way of life, and the Indians come and declare reserve over our land, we will oppose."[8] Such conservation efforts do not sync with these small villages pressing the need for a different approach.

In Uttarakhand, under the colonial rule after the forest laws were first introduced, the villagers burn the forest when they learn that they are no longer accessible to them (Guha, 1989b). Such a huge step of conservation often requires deliberate engagement, consultation of various stakeholders and multi-level awareness raising unless the motive of conservation is not conservation. Discussions and awareness raising about biodiversity and ecosystem, local values and traditions, indigenous knowledge systems that were long used towards biodiversity sustenance are integral steps in sustainable conservation.

Can we call it a successful conservation method or strategy if it is not answerable to the local population? According to Hecht and Cockburn (1990, p. 274), "History of conquest and history of national parks are inextricably linked". The colonizers conquest of India and the reservation of forests and consequent creation of commercial forestry and national parks and sanctuaries is linked. In other words, forestry, parks and sanctuaries have a colonial color and history. And in Manipur, there is a clear pressure from the civil societies of the dominant group on the politics inside the state. The ones in power somehow attempts to dictate the creation of conservation parks and sanctuaries inside the state as well. But "the creation of parks and sanctuaries denies the Other their histories" (Neumann, 1998). Creation of such protected areas without consent denies and disrupts the traditional practices and histories of the marginalised within the State. However, preserving the traditional conservation tradition, specifically forest forts as the focus here, could be one step in preservation of the marginalised cultures and histories.

Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest

The Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest in Manipur, was notified under Section 29 of the Indian Forest Act, 1927. The forest was declared protected in 1966. But it became a center of controversy and conflict when locals from K Songjang, a village around which the protected forest is located, were evicted and their houses bulldozed in February 2023. While the Government claims that the village is a new settlement established in 2021 violating forest conservation laws, the villagers claim

that it was set up before the Indian Forest (Manipur Amendment) Act 2018 was passed. They accused the state of not following due bureaucratic procedures, violating their rights, and depriving them of consultation.

Kailam Wildlife Sanctuary and Jiri Makru Wildlife Sanctuary

In June 1997, the Government of Manipur issued a gazette notification, utilizing the powers bestowed by sub-section (i) of Section 18 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972. This notification declared an area of 187.50 square kilometers in southern Manipur as a Wildlife Sanctuary, named the "Kailam Wildlife Sanctuary." Subsequently, in 2015, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change issued a draft notification. This notification proposed the declaration of the areas surrounding the Kailam Wildlife Sanctuary as an "Eco-sensitive" zone. This zone would encompass an area of 734 square kilometers. At the time of the notification, the Wildlife Sanctuary area included 17 villages, while the proposed Eco-sensitive zone would cover an additional 48 villages (Hanghal, 2018). The declaration of the sanctuary was met with surprise by the local inhabitants, who were unaware of such a development until the arrival of the gazette notification.

Similarly, the Eco-sensitive zone for the Jiri Makru Wildlife Sanctuary, notified in 2017, only came to the Naga villagers' attention in 2020. Neither the villagers nor their local authorities were consulted or infored about these developments. When the author of this paper visited for his field work, he was met with suspicion, questioning his intentions for coming to their area. They were deeply agitated against the way the state pushed through these conservation initiatives.

These actions upon the vulnerable and marginalised communities reflect a continuing colonial mindset of surreptitious acquisition, particularly evident in issues surrounding protected areas. The tribal communities perceive this as an instrument of majoritarian interest delegitimising the state in the eyes of the tribals, as Hassan (2006, p. 14) puts it, where "the state's power (is) vested in an exclusivist Meitei elites." Concurrently, tribal demands for provisions like the Sixth Schedule, which grants a degree of autonomy or self-governance, have been consistently rejected and opposed. This opposition by the Meiteis displays a politics of denial by the dominant community (Kipgen, 2018, p. 123).

Socio-cultural disharmony and disruption

The gazetted notification of Kailam Wildlife Sanctuary and the proposal of Jiri Makru Wildlife Sanctuary to the Government of India came in 1997, a time of great upheaval within the state. There was a largescale inter-community conflict that erupted within Churachandpur district in 1997 and also an ongoing Naga Kuki inter ethnic conflict. And again in 2015, when Churachandpur district was witnessing intense upheaval against the three contentious bills passed by the Assembly, the notification of the Eco-sensitive zone was issued. This begs the question if the government takes advantage of large scale social upheaval to push through for declaration of protected areas without consent of local people. Thiankholian Guite, the Chief of Songtal village questioned if the government takes advantage of socio-political crisis in his district (Hanghal, 2018). One of the respondents from Tousem also asked if the bigger socio-

political climate had a role in the notification, "Is it possible that the State Government proposed the Jiri-Makru Wildlife Sanctuary because of the Indo-Naga Ceasefire Agreement signed in 1997?"

Equally, the unconsented declaration of protected areas and the unbureaucratic procedures towards protection of these areas by the state also results in social unrest and communal disharmony between communities and within communities. The Government issued a notice claiming that 38 villages in the Churachandpur-Khoupum Protected Forest Area were illegal settlements which led to widespread protests by tribal communities. And in Feb 2023, the Government bulldozed the houses of K Songjang villagers to the ground. The tribals see the government as an agent that works in the interest of the majority Meitei community. And in May 3, the tribals in the hill districts carried out a solidarity march against the Meitei Community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status seeing as a ground to take tribal land. The protest march set off the ethnic conflict between the Kuki Tribals and the Meiteis.

The social unrest is particularly intense where there are attempts of government intervention on land or forest. Makuai is one of the main village where another wildlife sanctuary called the Zeilad Wildlife Sanctuary and its Eco-sensitive zone were notified in 2016. When the Kuki Meitei conflict broke out in May 2023, the villagers became apprehensive about the Zeilad Wildlife Sanctuary leading to suspicions and conflicts within the villagers themselves. So, the state led conservation led to conflicts between and within communities. Guha and Gadgil rightly pointed out that there is increasing conflict in the Northeast with due to conservation (Gadgil and Guha, 1992)

For the tribals, this conservation and land grab also disrupt cultural and traditional continuity. It disrupts the traditional, communal and democratic values of the villages. The land holding among the Nagas is democratic. (Devi, 2006, p. 62) The land belongs to the people and not the state (Devi, 2006, p. x-xi) as decisions on land are taken collectively. Jhum cultivation is a community oriented cultivation where the whole village collectively decides to cultivate a certain patch of land by clearing the forest. And with such a customary tradition of democratic system, when conservation notifications and schemes were notified without prior consultation and consent, it disrupts these hill villages' tradition and customary practices and ethos. It also results in breakdown of traditional networks and socio-cultural harmony.

Livelihood and conservation

Community development programs and schemes for people living around the conservation area are promised. This is a post-liberalisation imperative. (Brockington 2002) Many of my respondents were skeptical and clueless about how to improve their lives economically. In fact, for the Chiuluan Barak Community Reserve that was set up in 2020 mainly for Amur falcon conservation, the villagers could not see the material benefit for the villagers yet. Describing the toothlessness of the schemes up to the interview, according to Ringbam[9], the Chiuluan village authority received no benefits after the Reserve was declared. For the villagers of Tousem, the people were promised piggery schemes in return for the conservation projects. They rejected such proposal to the forest team that visited them. A piggery scheme holds no significance as compared to a land that would be lost to conservation. The people

under Zeilad Wildlife Sanctuary and its Eco-sensitive zones were promised terrace cultivation or ponds for each family. And again in Azuram village under Tousem subdivision, the villagers had agreed to a community reserve with the promise of some financial reward. But one of the respondents pointed out the menace caused by wildboars on their crops. It is in the ethics of their village people to keep their promise. They have collectively decided to go for community forest reserve and a single individual will not break the collective decision. But he asked, "How do we proceed when wild boars continue to create a menace upon us?"

Sanjay Barbora (2017), looking into conservation, conflicts and militarisation of the Kaziranga National Park in Assam, underscored the popular deification of the rhinoceros and implications of the developmental discourse that seeks to put people and rhino in their "rightful place". Drawing his research from a "growing interest in political ecology that sutures connections between conservation, violence and conflict over contested resources that include wildlife parks and sanctuaries," he analysed how "local, state-led conservation efforts rely on eviction of marginalized farmers while promoting tourism as a form of capital accumulation" (Barbora, 2017, p. 3). He highlighted flashpoints between conservation efforts and those eking out a livelihood from parks (Barbora, 2017, p. 7). Based on his readings of the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) of Assam - a state in Northeastern India he observed that the urban centric opinion celebrated the government's efforts to protect the rhino and expel the villagers living along the fringes of the KNP.

In the Tamenglong district of Manipur, where fieldwork was conducted, conservation is the buzzword made popular mainly by a conservation group called "The Rain Forest Club Tamenglong" as well as the district administration. The conservation focus is the Amur Falcon, a seasonal migratory bird that winters in Tamenglong, often perched atop the bamboo trees in the Barak valley, which stretches for several kilometres. In 2020, the Chiuluan Barak Community Reserve was declared to facilitate its protection.

However, tensions have arisen between conservation initiatives and the local inhabitants of the Barak Valley. Meiruangdinang[10], a local cultivator, noted that the Community Reserve covers the major part of the area where the Amur Falcon perched, granting officials the authority to apprehend anyone within its boundaries. He cultivates crops in the Barak Valley near the Community Reserve. On his way home, after spending a week in the field, he chanced to hunt a few falcons outside the reserved area. However, officials arrested him on the way and was fined approximately six thousand rupees.

He observed a disturbing phenomenon where numerous shooters, hunters and tourists camped at Barak Valley, hunting falcons for recreation. Many of them bring sophisticated guns for shooting. Despite the forest officials and the conservation police camped opposite them, no action was taken against these individuals. Meiruangdinang, along with three others, were apprehended, leading him to believe that they were scapegoats while those hunting for recreation were left undisturbed. He blamed these incidents on the lack of proper dissemination of such prohibition in local newspapers and awareness-raising at the village level.

This situation reflects the "Fortress conservation" concept, a product of Western knowledge creation and discourse sold across third-world countries. This conservation

is associated with security partnerships, global support, and funding (Igoe, 2002). Such discourse and arrangements effectively pitch the locals against wildlife with security arrangements to protect the latter from the locals who are seen as poachers. It increases the insecurity of livelihood from wild animals attacking their fields. The tribals bear the risk and insecurity of "securitization" from state security forces and conservation authorities. Declaration of reserves become spaces for insecurity (Masse and Lunstrum, 2016).

Western ideals of conservation, democracy and economic progress cannot improve people's lives in third world countries just because people wanted them to. These ideals can however obscure the mechanisms through which disparities are created and peoples aspirations are quashed. (Brockington, 2002; Igoe, 2002, p. 596). Pro-conservationists through the language of carbon footprints and carbon trading, eco-tourism, and biodiversity protection have promised flashy economic returns in the future. Pro-conservationists and state officials offered the Tousem villagers promises of terrace fields and piggery farms. Although it sounds flashy and progressive, it hands power to a few at the cost of many.

Rethinking conservation

Considering that local communities are not inherently opposed to conservation, analogous to those who resisted development projects not being fundamentally against development, it prompts a re-evaluation of conservation strategies. Brockington and Wilkie (2015) underscored the importance of honesty in building a robust "multi-level constituency" for protected areas with a readiness to characterise benefits and costs with honesty and to compensate those who incur the cost by those who benefit. It is imperative to conceptualise an approach to environmental conservation that is not only effective but also harmonious with the needs and aspirations of the local populace. Is it possible to devise a more acceptable method of conservation that circumvents the drawbacks, such as extensive displacement and significant human and livelihood costs? (Oommen, 2010, p. 331) Political ecology grapples with questions that are just for the vulnerable even within the quest for sustainability of the environment (Blaikie, 1999; Forsyth, 2008) The western wilderness movement and discourse taking over the management of national parks in India had led to the creation of massive sanctuaries covering thousands of miles and slapping a total ban of human ingression in the "core" areas of national parks (Guha, 1989a; Gadgil and Guha, 1992). Two axioms of this wilderness movement propagates, "wilderness areas should be as large as possible, and the belief that all human intervention is bad for the retention of diversity." Gadgil and Guha (1992) criticized the prejudices within the axioms of "gigantism" and "hands off nature". Instead, a decentralized network of small parks can fulfill the requirements for biodiversity conservation (Gadgil and Guha, 1992, p. 208) So, the question we must ask is: Does conservation have to be massive? Can we have successful conservation with small networks of conservation areas? (Gadgil and Guha, 1992, p. 208) And what does our cultural traditions and cultural conservation practices inform us of something feasible?

This leads to the question of village forest forts in Manipur. Tiwari et al. (2010) listed typology of traditionally managed forests in Northeast India. But the forest

forts in Manipur is unexplored and deserves to be studied. So apart from its conservatory values, it has the social-cultural embedding of the forest fort in traditional society and is thus explored and elaborated. Small conservations are possible especially in tribal areas and more congruent with tribal societies. Effectively using and reviving their rich traditional history will give more power, ownership and legitimacy. Many villages in Tamenglong have a village forest fort of their own. They are small and effective. They are a part of their identity and security with significant relation to and implications on their culture and social systems.

It is important to accommodate them into this conservation discourse, if such a space is possible. But if conservation has become so muddied and corrupted by fortress conservation discourse and actors, as Dan Brockington (2002) pointed out, community conservation could even become anti political. Community conservation might not stand for what it is, for it is in danger of being hijacked as it is used even by figures such as Hayes- the bulwark of fortress conservation. Community conservation has become ironic as it tends towards state control rather than the participation of the community. With a traditional lens of reading forest forts, the same needs a category of its own that is apposite in the contextual discourse on conservation.

The Significance of Forest Forts or *Raengaan*

Forest forts or *Raengaan* in local dialect is a forest cover under conservation at the vicinity of the village. *Raengaan* is Rongmei Naga word commonly used in Tamenglong for forest fort. Tamenglong District hosts four main tribes belonging to the Naga ethnic group: Inpui, Rongmei, Zeme and Liangmai. Among these tribes in Tamenglong, the village forest forts are a common feature among the Naga villages in the district although it is not found in every village. The idea and the social practice imbibe in *Raengaan* is a common thread for these tribes.

Shimray (2008) classified the land use of the Nagas (Tangkhul) into three categories - (i) Village settlement area (ii) Community land and clan's land (iii) Forest land. But the categorisation is problematic as the second category speaks of ownership while the other two caters to land use pattern. Apart from the faulty categorisation, the land use pattern of the Tangkhul Nagas and Nagas of Tamenglong are similar. A more accurate categorisation of land use is given by Dimchuiliu. According to her, there are three kinds of land use among Tamenglong Nagas - (i) Village settlement area, (ii) agriculture area and (iii) forest land (Dimchuiliu, 2013, pp. 60-62). There are two kinds of forest. One is the community protected forest adjacent to the village called *Raengaan* and the other forest is beyond the vicinity of the village.

Raengaan boundary starts adjacent from the most peripheral house in the village (Ruangmei, 2019) till the beginning of the fields marked for cultivation. It could range from a part of hill to several hill locks. It is a part of a traditional practice in the hill villages of Manipur that was woven into the social fabric of the village life laden with multiple meanings. An integral aspect of the village, it is taken by the villagers with utmost interest and effort that a lot of them still lasts till today and had become a site of wonder and attraction. But very little had been written about it. They are like the sacred groves found across India, well preserved and adorned. Dietrich Brandis, the then Inspector General of Forest of British India noted the importance of sacred

groves as early as the later part of the 19th century for its conservatory nature and the role played by the hills people. He noted:

> Very little has been published regarding sacred groves in India, but they are, or rather were, very numerous. I have found them in nearly all provinces. As instances I may metion the Garo and Khasia hills which i visited in 1879, the Devara Kadus of Coorg with which i become acquainted in 1868, and the hill ranges of Salem district in the Madras Presidency examined by me in 1882... These sacred forests, as a rule, are never touched by the axe, except when wood is wanted for the repair of religious buildings, or in special cases for other purposes (Brandis, 1897, pp. 12-14).

Socio-economic aspect - Raengaan provides for the vulnerable

The *Raengaan* is a holistic system of conservation with imbibed social welfare. According to TP Pouluangdinang[11]:

> the forest fort preservation is not just concerned with forest conservation. It also has social economic structuring that cares for the needy and weak. Traditionally, among the hills people of Tamenglong, the culture and practice of forest preservation was to protect the people and look after the welfare of the people and especially tend for the needs of the weakest sections of the society. As a matter of fact, I would be ashamed to collect woods from *Raengaan* when I am healthy and capable of taking it from the jungle for my needs. Ours is a society run by deep mutual respect.

The forest preservation becomes effective through a cultural understanding of social mutual respect. In this set up, people usually put the welfare of the other ahead of themselves. The ideology that define "*Raengaan*" stands in contrast to the capitalist society. It differs from the present conservation measures where the state tries to capture the land of the weak and the indigenous tribes. Unlike top down conservation that displace the most vulnerable sections of the people, it is provisionary for the most vulnerable. The Kuki villages too have Protected Forest Areas known as Ujok, where trees are strictly preserved and cutting of wood is prohibited and dealt with stringent penalty (Kipgen, 2018, p. 116). Among the Naga villages of Tamenglong with forest forts, the preservation has more to do with mutual understanding and respect. The moral sense keeps the forest forts intact instead of a strict law.

Very close to *Raengaan* of the Nagas in Tamenglong is a particular forest among the Khasi people of Meghalaya. There are many categories of traditionally managed village forests although with a similar overall forest management (Tiwari et al., 2010). One category of interest in this paper is the *Law Adong* -a village restricted forest. The only difference with this category is the higher degree of protection assigned to these forests. Like the *Raengaan,* access to forest resources is restricted except for the poorer families and for some occasional needs by the village. The collection of non-timber forest produces not resulting in negative impact on the forest health are allowed- for instance, mushrooms, edible fruits and vegetables. Certain exceptions for the extraction of timber from these forests are provided only to meet the acute need of constructing a house for the poor and needy, making coffin case of a villager's

death, for construction of community structures or in case of natural calamities. The decision making rests on the village council (Tiwari et al., 2010). The high semblance of the two forests and their social embeddings although from two different ethnic communities and state in Northeast India brings the common symbolic significance of symbiotic traditional conservation.

Security

Apart from its welfare practices, the *Raengaan* of the Tamenglong Nagas also wove in security into the practice of preservation. These practices are institutionalized through the Morung[12]. The Morung takes in charge of maintaining the preserved forests and deciding the size of the forest fort. According to Ahumei[13], "the Morung also uses the *Raengaan* as a strategic place to discuss secretive security issues of the village and to take critical decisions on battles." The youth maintains the forest forts as part of their vital social service forging social unity. Forest maintenance provides clear visibility of any enemy approaching the village. The safeguarding of the forest was in the interest of the villagers as it gives them a vantage point in an event of an incoming attack. This is in contrast to the securitization of protected areas under the state which leads to insecurity of the local people.

Recreation

The forest forts also constitute an integral part of recreation and rejuvenation for the villagers. Guiliangpou[14] underscored, "*Raengaan* is a place for rest and rejuvenation for the villagers who come back from the fields - tired and exhausted, to restore themselves just before stepping into the village." *Raengaan* is a system of recreation, woven into the village system to rejuvenate the drained villagers after a day's work. Furthermore, contrasting this idea of recreation to the present day where people set a day out to enjoy, Guiliangpou noted, that traditionally, "the recreation was a necessity in order for the villagers to come home refreshed and restored." But it serves multiple functions, underscoring the the integral role it play for the village. Pouluangdinang recalls, "It is also a place where the youth long to see a lover."

Cultural and traditional continuity and harmony

In that shelter provided by the trees, the villagers' future and continuity hold in both physical and symbolic sense. It holds legends and stories where the past continues to the present. It becomes a place and a poignant symbol for a village society. Unlike fortress conservation, displacive and subjugating to the local populace with socio-cultural disruptions, these traditional forest forts preserve socio-cultural continuity. Jhum cultivation, which is community-oriented as much criticised by the colonial administration and discouraged by the state, has been hugely curtailed, leading to increasing privatisation. Despite the neoliberal and privatising economic force along with the state's policies to induce private ownership in a traditionally community-oriented society (Fernandes, n.d, p. 5), these forest forts are places that defy such a trend, preserving the customary and traditional ethos of the past. These forest forts are cultural relics and marks of community conservation, community ownership, and responsibility towards conservation.

Conservation in sync with human habitation- a symbiotic relationship

These conservation traditions are deeply in sync with humans, forming a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. It shows the harmony between nature and humans rather than pitching them against each other in conflict. *Raengaan* is a protector of the village and a provider of the weakest sections of the community. It is a place of recreation and rest for the village commune. The villagers consider it with utmost regard for the forest and ensure its protection as their lives depend on them.

Envisioning Healing through Partnership

This final section asked the crucial question: In this state led conservation history marked by conflicts and resistances, how can relations between state and the people be envisioned? The colonial administration took over a large chunk of the Indian forest having deprived the local and the tribal people of their forest. The Forest Rights Act 2006 acknowledge the historical injustice meted out to the tribal and forest dwellers. But the FRA 2006 itself is a culmination of long struggle of forest rights. The Indian environmental history accounts for the long history of resistance against any outright imposition over the people's rights dating back even to precolonial times (Guha, 1989b; Guha, 2001). Forestry debates in postcolonial India grew in the 1970s and 1980s drawing on the heritage of earlier movements and critiques. The result of the changing tide and attitude among state officials and developing relationship between forest groups and the forest department became clear. West Bengal spearheaded the "politics of collaboration" with JFM originating in the state in the 1980s. Following which, a new National Forest Policy with guidelines for Joint Forest Management in 1988 was approved by the Indian government. It resulted from growing dialogue between activists and bureaucrats (Guha, 2001). Contemporary forest reforms were possible and conducive for activists due to external and internal reasons (Guha, 2001). However, contemporary attempts at fostering participatory systems of forest management hark back to a much older tradition (Guha, 2001, p. 234).

Poona Sarvajanik Sabha in 1878 anticipated of an effective conservation future if the Government earns the confidence of the villagers by empowering them instead of relying on excessive state control. They argued that maintenance of a forest cover can be brought easily by:

> Taking the Indian villagers into the confidence of the Indian Government. If the villagers be rewarded and commended for conserving their patches of forest lands, or for making plantations on the same, instead of ejecting them from the forest land which they possess, or in which they are interested, emulation might be evoked between neighbouring villages. Thus more effective conservation and development of forests in India might be secured and when the villagers have their own patches of forests to attend to, Government forests might not be molested. Thus the interests of the villagers as well as the Government can be secured without causing any unnecessary irritation in the minds of the masses of the Indian population (Gadgil and Guha, 2012, pp. 126-127).

Since colonial forestry began, the "politics of collaboration" although still on terms dictated by the state, had come a long way, despite its need to further democratize it. Noting the limitations of Joint Forest Management, Guha concludes, the future of Forestry must be partnerships which he calls the "politics of partnership". He reiterated the need for a more inclusive democratic structure where "the state listens to and learns from the community, and where the community itself recognizes and deals fairly with the inequities within its own ranks" (Guha, 2001, p. 233). But then, just as the momentum appears to be shifting in favor of the long and strenuous struggle for democratic and grassroot justice, the environmental movement experience a setback. It is due to the present regime's legal attempts - EIA draft 2020 and the New Forest Policy draft 2022 that removes the requirement of approval from panchayats. The passage of the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill 2023 by the Indian Parliament has left Northeast India in a state of uncertainty regarding their future. This Act exempts forest clearance within a hundred kilometres along the international border, encompassing the entirety of the states in Northeast India. These policy drafts and Acts seems to be stripped of a sense of history, turning its back on what had strenuously progressed and achieved with perseverance and sacrifice through the long struggle of environmental movement.

The necessity of the hour is the materialisation of effective involvement of the local people, revisitation of their histories and their customs and practices that could become a cornerstone for organic sustainable conservation. Shifting the focus from a policy to fence wildlife, the efforts must prioritise healing, reconciliation, and recovery from selective biases against the local communities. The western discourse of conservation is not only a discourse promoting wildlife and flora over humans depicted as being destructive. But it gets into a selective agency of humans representing forest officials as protectors while villagers are destroyers of the forests. Historical evidence has documented an abundance of conflicts and casualties and a multitude of ineffective and unsustainable conservation strategies that predominantly rely on scientific methodologies or Western conservation ideologies (Guha, 1989; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Neumann, 1998). These approaches often overlook the importance of engaging with local communities. Accusations directed towards tribal and forest-dwelling populations exacerbate the existing conflict. This is precisely where conservation initiatives have failed the very individuals entrusted with their stewardship, thereby fostering increased hostility within these habitats.

The fundamental cause of our wildlife and environmental challenges can be attributed to the breakdown of human relationships, predominantly between forest officials and government entities on one side, and local inhabitants on the other. Inclusive and accommodative discourses that gives opportunities and empowers the local people to protect the wildlife and environment are the stepping stones towards healing the deep layered wounds that have strained the people- state and human-nature relationships. Political ecology suggests to zoom in on the local actors and their contributions (Bailey and Bryant, 1997). The conflicts over protected areas and non-bureaucratic approach of the state that unfolded in the hills of Manipur also points to what Mark Poffenberger and Betsy McGean (1996) argued that "attempts to tighten bureaucratic controls over state forests have often led to heightened conflicts

among users and further assaults on the ecosystem, rather than conservation and sustainable use." So, healing the human - non human relationship requires healing of relationship between various stakeholders.

Conclusion

Conservation initiatives, supported and legitimised by the European ideal of wilderness could serve as a political instrument for certain interest groups fostering conflict between and within communities. The state, as perceived by the tribal people of Manipur, capitalizes on conflicts and social upheaval to push through conservation initiatives often bypassing proper bureaucratic procedures. This leads to a viscious cycle of conflict. But the opposition of the local communities is not against conservation itself rather against the unbureaucratic approach of the state towards it. Their communities' traditions are in sync with conservation. The disruption of their traditional rights, practices and livelihood are issues that needs a collaborative effort with mutual respect between the state and the local people. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive decentralization mechanisms, akin to those provided under the Sixth Schedule in other Northeast tribal areas which empowers the marginalised along with their customary traditions, contributes to the state's appropriation of forest and land, thereby exacerbating conflicts. This issue warrants further examination and redressal.

There is a sense of ownership of the forest among the tribals. They rejected the categorisation of their land as wasteland or as forest reserves. For the Nagas, they believe that since time immemorial, their land has belonged to the village community or the clans that establish the village (Devi, 2006, p. x). For effective involvement of these communities, their traditional conservation and culture needs to be respected and strengthened. Nature is "embedded in social histories" and intimately intertwined with cultural identities and thus calls for decolonising of such notions and approaches that separate nature from culture (Willems-Braun, 1997, p. 6). The ideals of wilderness thinking have disrupted traditional societies and threatens their material access to land and its resources. A repertoire of conservation tradition and traditional wisdom are at the verge of extinction. It is incumbent upon the state to rejuvenate these practices rather than undermining these customary rights and traditions. The state should strive to foster a sense of belonging among the local populace towards the concept of conservation and rejuvenate their practices and natural surroundings. Once this is accomplished, real partnerships can be envisioned. The task necessitates diligent effort from the state, recognition of local wisdom and facilitation of active participation.

What is worth underscoring is the intriguing aspect of traditional forest management in Northeast India that lies in the villagers' rigorous forest protective measures, which simultaneously accommodate the community's needs. While being safeguarded by the villagers, the forest cater to the most vulnerable sections of society, as seen in the tradition of *Raengaan*. A concept absent from contemporary conservation practices is the perception of the forest as a provider, with humans assuming an active role in its protection. The colonial approach to conservation often overlooks the "symbiotic co-existence" of tribals and forest. According to the draft of Indian Forest Policy 1987, the forest communities must be involved in the conservation and

development of forests and their essential needs should be met from the forests on a priority basis (Kulkarni, 1987, p. 2148). Tribal welfare cannot be treated as distinct from a forest or conservation policy. The Debar Commission and the Roy Burman Committee have stressed the need to integrate forest policy and tribal development policy. Without focus on tribal welfare and regard to their customary traditions, conflict is embedded as a Forest Officer once said to Verrier Elwin, "Our forest laws are of such a kind that every villager breaks one forest law every day of his life" (Elwin, 1942, p. 12). The forest forts of Tamenglong throws light of a culture that could bring new possibilities of "symbiotic co-existence" which was impossible within the fortress conservation approach. This shifts the dominant narrative of forest conservation, which is biased against the locals, has dichotomised human and non-human kingdoms, and has bred conflict amongst communities. This narrative shift underscores the need for a more inclusive and participatory approach to environmental stewardship that respects and empowers the traditions and rights of local communities.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Prof. Hoineilhing Sithlou for her guidance in writing this paper. I express my sincere gratitude to the anonmous reviewer for the valuable comments and feedback. I am also thankful to Dr. Rhelo Kenye for his keen reading of this paper and offering constructive feedback.

Endnotes

[1] This information is based on the District Administration website as accessed on April 3rd of 2023. Refer to https://tamenglong.nic.in/

[2] Annual Administration Report of the Manipur Agency, 1877-78, Foreign Department, p.2

[3] Manipur State Archive (MSA), Imphal, Diary of Major H.St.P Maxwell, political agent of Manipur and Superintendent of the state, 28th October, 1895.

[4] Refer to Introduction | Manipur, GOI (manipurforest.gov.in)

[5] Refer to the article titled, "Need for further research and monitoring of Amur Falcon in Tamenglong district." *The Sangai Express*. https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2022/10/6/Kh-Hitler-Singh67th-Wildlife-Week-is-celebrated-across-the-State-of-Manipur-as-being-celebrated-in.html

[6] Refer to the article "Bunning, Zeilad and Jiri-Makru Wildlife sanctuaries, a term only on paper." *The Sangai Express* https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2021/2/6/By-Our-Staff-ReporterIMPHAL-Feb-5-Three-proposed-wildlife-sanctuaries-Bunning-Zeilad-and-Jiri-Makru-in-Tamenglong-district-are-existing-only-on-paper-There-is-not-a-single-development-in-thes.html

According to this report, the Three Wildlife Sanctuaries namely Jiri Makru Wildlife Sanctuary, Bunning Wildlife Sanctuary and Zeilad Wildlife Sanctuary were proposed in 1997. But the Gazetted notifications of the Sanctuaries and their Eco-sensitive zones came after more than a decade later.

[7] Based on the author's field work and discussion with the villagers with around 40 villagers from 6 villages under Tousem subdivision of Tamenglong district in Manipur. The villages were Tousem, Tousem Khullen, Mandiu, Phoklong, Taguaram and

Azuram.

[8] The respondent is Ira from Tousem village although i had chosen to not fully disclose the name. He made this statement during a semi structured group interview on 28th November 2021.

[9] Ringbam is a local news editor of *The Ganphiu Mail* hailing from Zeilad area under Tamenglong District. He had organised several awareness campaigns and initiatives in Zeilad area and surrounding villages. He said that although he is not an activist, as a Media person, he is regarded by some supporters of the Sanctuary as someone with a vested interest and benefactor of certain funds and projects. He was interviewed at his place in Tamenglong HQ, on 2nd January 2023.

[10] Meiruangdinang is a local cultivator who have a field at Barak valley near the Chiuluan Community Reserve where the Amur Falcon protection is set up. The interview was carried out on 3rd of January 2023.

[11] TP Pouluangdinang is an elder of Nrianglong Kaipi village in Tamenglong District. He is a 69 years old man who had grown up in a Morung, whose Father was the incharge of Morung. And he himself had gone through various rituals and rites, and personally observe the rite of Matuimei (the rite of rearing up Giants). I interviewed him on the 31st December 2022 at his residence in Tamenglong Kaipi Village.

[12] Morung is a traditional youth male dormitory. It is a key institution of the Nagas and a centre of social life of unmarried male members of the society.

[13] Ahumei is an elder of Dailong village - a village which host an important Raengaan today, attracting tourists and nature lovers from various places. He was interviewed on 10th March 2023.

[14] Guiliangpou is a native of Chiuluan village in Tamenglong District. Chiuluan also boasts of a popular Raengaan that had seen many visitors in the recent past. Guiliangpou took an active part in the rebuiliding and maintenance of the Chiuluan Raengaan. He was interviewed on 12th March 2023.

References

Barbora, S. (2017). Riding the Rhino: Conservation, Conflicts, and Militarisation of Kaziranga National Park in Assam. *Antipode,* 49(4), pp. 1-19.

Barpujari, S.K. (1987). Naga attitudes Towards Land and Land Revenue. *Land Relations in India, pp.* 193-201.

Blaikie, P. (1999). A review of political ecology: Issues, epistemology and analytical narratives. *Zeitschrift fur Wirtschaftsgeographie,* 43 (3–4), pp. 131-147.

Brandis, D. (1897). *Indian Forestry.* Oriental Institute.

Brockington, D. (2002). *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania*. James Currey.

Brockington, D., & David, W. (2015). Protected areas and poverty. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B,* 370,(1681), pp 1-6.

Bryant, R. L., & Bailey, S. (1997). *Third-World Political Ecology.* Routledge.

Burman, B K R. (1992). Historical Process in Respect of Communal Land System and Poverty Alleviation among Tribals. In B. Chaudhuri (ed.), *Economy and Agrarian Issues*, (pp. 131–161). Inter India Publications.

Devi, P. K. (2021, February 22). Why Phoklong villagers are opposing declaration of Jiri Makru as wildlife sanctuary. *Imphal Free Press*. https://www.ifp.co.in/

5749/why-phoklong-villagers-are-opposing-declaration-of-jiri-makru-as-wildlife-sanctuary

Devi, P B. (2006). *Tribal Land System of Manipur.* Akansha Publishing House.

Dimchuiliu, P. (2013). Customary Land use pattern of the tribals in Manipur- a case study of the Zeliangrong Community in Tamenglong district. *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science,* (IOSR-JHSS) 11(1), pp. 57-63.

Dryzek, J. S. (1987). *Rational Ecology: Environment and Political Economy*. Basil Blackwell.

Elwin, V. (1942). *Loss of Nerve: A Comparative Study of the Contact of Peoples in the Aboriginal Areas of Bastar State and the Central Provinces of India.* Wagle Press.

Fernandes, W. (n.d.). Tribal customary and formal law interface in North-Eastern India: Implications for land relations. https://studylib.net/doc/7638687/tribal-customary-and-formal-law-interface-in-north-easter

Forsyth, T. (2008). Political ecology and the epistemology of social justice. *Geoforum,* 39(2), pp. 756–764.

Gadgil, M., & Ramachandra, G., (1992). *This fissured land: An Ecological History of India.* Oxford University Press.

Gadgil, M., & Ramachandra G., (1994). Ecological Conflicts and the Environmental movement in India. *Development and Change*, 25, pp. 101-136.

Government of Manipur. (2014). New land use policy/project of Manipur (2014): An approach paper. http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/file/Approach%20Paper%20on%20NLUP%20Manipur%202014.pdf

Guha, R. (1989a). Radical American environmentalism and wilderness preservation: a Third World critique. *Environmental Ethics*, 11(1) Spring 1989, pp. 71-83

Guha, R. (1989b). *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya.* University of California Press.

Guha, R. (2000). *Environmentalism: A Global History*. Longman.

Guha, R. (2001). The Prehistory of Community Forestry in India. *Environmental History*, 6(2), pp. 213–238.

Hanghal, N. (2018, May 22). Kailam Wildlife Sanctuary threatens to displace forest tribes. *E-pao*. http://www.e-pao.net/epSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.opinions.Kailam_Wildlife_Sanctuary_threatens_to_displace_forest_tribes_By_Ninglun_Hanghal

Haokip, T S. (2021, April 19). Mt. Koubru: A Mountain Of Contentious Claims. *Outlook*. https://www.outlookindia.com/national/opinion-mt-koubru-a-mountain-of-contentious-claims-news-380675

Harvey, D. (1993). The nature of environment: the dialectics of social and environmental change. In R. Miliband and L. Panitch (eds.), *Real Problems, False Solutions: Socialist Register 1993*, (pp. 1–51). Merlin Press.

Hassan, M. S. (2006). Explaining Manipur's breakdown and Mizoram's peace: The state and identities in Northeast India. *Crisis States Programme,* LSE, Working Paper, 79 pp. 1–34.

Hecht, S., & Cockburn, A. (1990). *The fate of the forest: Developers, destroyers and defenders of the Amazon*. HarperCollins.

Igoe, J. (2002). Reviewed Work(s): Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve, Tanzania by D. Brockington. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35(2/3), pp. 594-596.

Kamei, G. (2009). Ethnicity, Identity and Land in Tribal Manipur. In C. P. Sindh (Ed.), *Tribalism and the tragedy of the commons land, identity and development: The Manipur experience*. Akansha Publishing House

Kipgen, N. (2018). Land Laws, Ownership & Tribal Identity: The Manipur Experience. In A. Battacharyya & S. Basu (eds.), *Marginalities in India: Themes and Perspectives,* (pp. 111–126). Springer Nature.

Kulkarni, S. (1987). Forest legislations and tribals: Comments on forest policy resolution. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22(50), pp. 2143–2148.

Massé, F., and Lunstrum, E. (2016). Accumulation by securitization: Commercial poaching, neoliberal conservation, and the creation of new wildlife frontiers. *Geoforum* 69, pp. 227–237

Neumann, R. P. (1992). Political Ecology of Wildlife Conservation in the Mt. Meru Area of Northeast Tanzania. *Land degradation and rehabilitation,* 3(2), pp. 85-98.

Neumann, R. (1998). *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa.* University of California Press.

Oommen, T.K. (ed.). (2010). *Social Movements II: Concerns of Equity and Security.* Oxford University Press.

E-pao. (2021, November 3). Signs of a thriving wildlife in Kuilong forest- The People's Chronical Editorial. *E-Pao*. https://www.e-pao.net/pSubPageExtractor.asp?src=news_section.editorial.editorial_2021.Thriving_wildlife_in_Kuilong_forest_PC_20211103

Poffenberger, M. & Betsy McGean. (eds.). (1996). *Village Voices, Forest Choices: Joint Forest Management in India.* Oxford University Press.

Ruangmei, H. (2019, August 11). Chiuluan Raenggaan: Tourists attractions in chiuluan with special emphasis on raenggaan. (Local magazine published by Huaineiguang Ruangmei of Chiuluan village).

Shimray, UA. (2008). Land Use System in Manipur Hills: A Case Study of the Tangkhul Naga. In W. Fernandes & S. Barbora (eds.), *Land, People and Politics: Contest Over Tribal Land in Northeast India* (pp. 88–112) North Eastern Social Research Centre and International Workgroup for Indigenous Affairs.

Siurua, H. (2006). Nature above People: Rolston and "Fortress" Conservation in the South. *Ethics and the Environment,* 11(1), (Spring, 2006), pp. 71- 96.

Tiwari, BK, Tynsong, H., & Lynser, MB. (2010). Forest Management Practices of the tribal people of Meghalaya, north-east India. *Journal of Forest and Environmental Science,* 31(1), pp. 24-37.

Wells, M., & Brandon, K. (1992). *People and Parks: Linking Protected Areas with Local Communities*. World Bank.

Willems-Braun, B. (1997). Buried Epistemologies: The Politics of Nature in (Post)Colonial British Columbia. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* 87(1), pp 3-31.

Yumnam, J. (2014, February 6). Oil Exploration: Boon or Bane for Manipur. *Centre for Research and Advocacy*, https://cramanipur.blogspot.com/2014/02/oil-exploration-boon-or-bane-for-manipur.html.