



Forest becomes frontline: Conservation and counter-insurgency in a space of violent conflict in Assam, Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Using the case of the Ecological Task Force (ETF) of the Indian Army as an entry point, this contribution nudges the existing conceptual and theoretical views on green militarization and violent environments in the context of reserve and protected forest areas. This is achieved by going beyond coercive physical violence and accounting for forms of symbolic and structural violence meted out to populations. I position this work within and also complement the broader literature on critical and militarized practices and apply it to the reserve forests in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) in Assam, northeast India. Here, politics that surround conservation is immersed within a context of violent ethno-religious conflict. The BTAD has been a theatre of recurrent insurgencies between the autochthonous Bodo tribe and the Adivasi, Muslim groups over land and demographics. A key characteristic of the conflict is its occurrence in the reserve forests on Assam-Bhutan borderlands, which can be traced back to the colonial process of forest making that brought immigrants into Assam, threatening cultural and territorial loss for Bodos. During the Bodo movement for a separate state, starting in 1980s and continuing, the militants operated from within the forest, leading to the departure of the forest department. As a result, rebels and locals appropriated the forest through rampant resource extraction. In response, the ETF was constituted in 2007. Fieldwork suggests that ETF through its military tactic and discipline engages in 'soft' militarization while also trusting on the regular Army for protection during conservation operations. Further, drawing on regional environmental history, I analyze how ethno-religious conflict influences modes of conservation and is exemplified by continuing inter-institutional competition between the forest department and the ETF. In the ensuing conservation-counterinsurgency nexus, retribution towards insurgents prevail over forest protection. Moreover, despite ETF's efforts to buffer from local politics, incidents of a political nature seep into its operations, e.g. ambushed by militants during conservation activities.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the role of the military across the globe has been to defend the integrity of country's international borders from external aggression, to ensure internal peace, counter-insurgency or anti-terrorism operations. After the Second World War, two additional dimensions were added: international peacekeeping and disaster relief. An abundance of empirical cases illustrates that the military has diverged from its traditionally assumed responsibility of defending the state from external enemies to nontraditional missions inside the state. For example, in the South Asian context the armed forces have often been used for disaster relief operations, along with rescue and rehabilitation in times of natural calamities. Timothy Edmunds (2006) asked the following question: "what are the armed forces for?" According to him, since the end of the Cold War in 1991, a profound shift occurred in states' perception of the role of the military. This was because after the collapse of the bipolar system and the US-Soviet rivalry, internal conflicts and civil wars came to the fore. It is this non-traditional role of the military especially its role in environmental conservation within the

Indian context is what this contribution seeks to explore and expound on.

In India, the army also started to engage in such less traditional roles. One example is the process of involving the armed forces in conservation that commenced in the 1980s. Since then six battalions of the Ecological Task Force (ETF) have been raised across five states, namely Rajasthan, Assam, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand. Thus far, there has not been a lot of work on this rather unique entity often staffed by demobilized soldiers from the Indian army who have retired or otherwise been discharged, along with those in active Army service. With increasing signs of the impact of climate change, combined with India's growing clout in global climate governance, D'Souza (1994) projected that the Indian military could be an instrumental player and leading force in India's climate change policy and strategy on domestic and international fronts.

Using the case of the ETF, this contribution shall expand on the existing conceptual and theoretical views within the critical conservation literature, by applying it to a violent forest space like the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) in Assam, India. The region has

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been a theatre of violent conflict on ethno-religious lines mainly between the Bodo tribe, the 'sons of the soil' and the *Adivasi*¹ and ethnic Muslims, both brought into the region by the British colonial administration to work on tea plantations, railways and settled agriculture, respectively. The contour and nature of the conflict is discussed in detail in a subsequent section.

This contribution seeks to bring together the call for environmental conservation on a 'war footing' and the actual deployment of military service personnel in carrying out conservation work in politically disturbed areas where counter-insurgency work is being undertaken. Alongside documenting the work of ETF in eastern India this contribution also highlights how new institutional arrangements are inserted into the political landscape in conditions of everyday violence. In this case, conflict, mainly over land and resources among different ethnic groups and the state and military operations against rebels in forests, creates the space for 'militarized conservation', i.e. the use of military and paramilitary personnel, training, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation efforts (Lunstrum, 2014). This has further been viewed as an attempt to inoculate the global good of forest restoration from local political contingencies.

Based on empirical evidence gathered over six months of fieldwork comprising of interviews and participatory observation with officers and workforces of the ETF, the forest department and local populations² living in these reserved forest³ areas, from February to May 2016 and from July to September 2017, this contribution highlights how the context here is used to complement and augment the more general literature on 'green militarization' (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2015) that expresses conservation as a means to produce violence or how nature conservation regimes produce 'green wars' (Duffy, 2014; Lunstrum, 2014). This is done by taking into account that militarized forms of conservation can also take on softer or milder forms of execution based on the premise of conservation on war footing using military tactic and discipline. This nature of green militarization does not necessarily result in elevated forms of direct physical violence, although can expose local people, who depend on reserved forest areas for subsistence, to particular and diverse forms of direct, indirect and symbolic forms of violence. These arrangements of violence are often facilitated and perpetuated by factors beyond immediate conservation practice. This further links the philosophy behind the ETF to green militarized processes by which "military approaches and values are increasingly embedded in conservation practice" (Duffy, 2014; Lunstrum, 2014). An important elucidation regarding who and what constitutes the local population is

¹ The Adivasi population in Assam consists of over ninety ethnic groups or communities who were brought by the British as indentured labor into Assam in the 1860s from present-day states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, to mainly work in the tea plantations (see Misra, 2007). In present day many of the ex-tea tribes are also referred to as Adivasis.

² The Bodos consider themselves the sons of the soil and Adivasis were brought into this area later on. Moreover, under the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution the Bodo Territorial districts were created which gives special rights and privileges to Bodo in terms of ownership of property and self-rule. Constitutionally the Bodo, residing in BTAD are categorized as Scheduled Tribe (ST) and the Adivasi in BTAD are not. This renders the Adivasi in this area landless.

³ Reserved, protected and unclassified are the three major legal classes of forest in India. A legal notification in a government gazette under Indian Forest Act, 1927 creates or defines the boundaries of "reserved" forests in India. A reserved forest is defined in the Indian Forest Act as: Any forest land or waste land or any other land, not being land for the time being comprised in any holding or in any village abadi, which is the property of Government or over which the Government has proprietary rights, or to the whole or any part of the forest produce of which the Government is entitled, and which is notified in government gazette as "reserve forest" under relevant section of Indian forest Act". Meaning, in such forest, most of the activities are prohibited unless allowed (see <http://www.fao.org/3/ae354e/AE354E10.htm>).

pertinent here. The reserve forest comprises mainly of Bodo and Adivasi population who are termed as 'encroachers' by the state. They rely on subsistence agriculture and/or work as daily wage laborer in nearby town. Living inside a reserved forest entails non-accessibility to schools, amenities like roads and electricity and other health and sanitation facilities. These populations have historically faced multiple displacements due to violent conflict where their houses are burnt down, or eviction by forest department, or destruction of property in human-animal conflict. They are also harassed repeatedly by the Army and para-military due to alleged linkages with local militants. Over the years there has been a deepening of informal arrangements related to forestland and access to resources. Their lives remain precarious (see Dutta, 2018).

Therefore, the contribution keeps its focus to a micro level understanding of how state (ETF, the forest department and the armed forces) and non-state actors (local populations and rebel/insurgent groups) operate and interact with each other within a conflict setting especially the ones directly embedded in the conflict process. As Verweijen and Marinjen (2018) point out, although the larger body of work on green militarization makes important contributions to understanding the interplay between violence, conservation and conflict, including through the policies and activities of state (para) military actors, it does not analyze in detail how green militarization, including the way it is conceptualized in this case, affects the presence and practices of local insurgent groups (given that there are often overlaps between local populations and insurgent factions) alongside continuing counterinsurgency operations. In fact, this case in some ways resonates with what Verweijen and Marinjen (2018) describe in case of the Virunga National Park in Congo where 'hard' counterinsurgency approaches, such as violent law enforcement operations conducted by mixed units of armed park guards and the Congolese armed forces, combine with 'soft' counterinsurgency (militarized) approaches to conservation, resulting in a conservation-counterinsurgency nexus. In actuality, these 'softer' and 'symbolic' policies are aimed at establishing a practice of 'inclusionary control' that, in the words of Dunlap and Fairhead (2014, p. 945), is devised to maintain 'conflict in its most manageable phase – "peace"'. Moreover, as the literature on green militarization further insinuates, both conservation and counterinsurgency practices use violence, whether in its narrow conceptualization as intentionally and directly inflicted bodily harm, or as more broadly interpreted, in the sense of 'structural' (Galtung, 1969) or 'symbolic' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) violence. Additionally, this contribution seeks to add value to this growing body of work debating militarized forms of conservation by building on notions of 'soft' green violence in the context of India, since much of the work so far has focused on other geographical contexts. The historical and contemporary overview of military's involvement in conservation (here in northeast India), also referred to as military environmentalist discourse (see Woodward, 2001) is hardly an over researched topic.

This contribution is aimed at understanding the more mundane inter-institutional and multilayered approaches towards soft militarization rooted in everyday forms of structural and symbolic violence within this conservation-counterinsurgency nexus. Eventually, making contribution to another dimension of green militarization – its effects on violent conflict and everyday relationships among the various state and non-state actors operating in a space of violent conflict where conservation merges with counterinsurgency. This further nuance the analyses of the links between (counter)insurgency and conservation and depicts how in this particular case, counterinsurgency is bequeathed more currency over conservation practices.

The contribution proceeds as follows. First, it overviews the political ecology scholarship and the wider body of work on environmental security and militarized conservation in order to expand on the literature on military activity, conservation and counterinsurgency. Second, it outlines the formation of the ETF and situate it within the environmental and forest policy of India and trace the processes of colonial and post-

colonial forest making in India and Assam. Third, narrows down to the everyday working of the ETF and processes of 'soft' green militarization within the reserved forests in Bodo Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) and its relationship with the forest department, resulting in forms of inter-institutional competition. I conclude by empirically situating the working of the ETF within the larger micro political context of the region. And as already mentioned above, by taking into account the region's long tryst with counterinsurgency in such spaces in combination with historical and empirical factors, counterinsurgency continues to be preferred over afforestation.

2. Khaki conservation: Counter-insurgency and conflict

Although, the literature on the engagement of the military in environmental protection, and/or Khaki conservation is still scarce, the role of armed forces in environmental security activities is not as well documented in the global south as in the global north. Yet, militarized forms of conservation especially in developing countries has received harsh criticism within the emerging literature in political ecology focusing on 'violent environments' (Watts and Peluso, 2001) and green violence, outlined as 'the deployment of violent instruments and tactics towards the protection of nature' (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2015, p. 2). These scholars have argued that conservation by military personnel or representatives of nation-state regimes, often result in the use of excessive violence — physical, emotional and structural. Political ecologists and geographers have further acknowledged the use of military tactics, weaponry and even personnel to patrol protected areas such as national parks and reserved forests against incursion by those wishing to extract wildlife and other resources, which has been termed as 'green militarization' (see esp. Duffy et al., 2019; Duffy, 2014; Lunstrum, 2014; Duffy et al., 2019; Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2015; Kelly & Ybarra, 2016). This exercise of physical violence has been accompanied by rhetoric advocating often-extreme forms of punishment for the perpetrators of such incursions (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2015; Lunstrum, 2014). Drawing from the above discussion, it emerges that the military's role in conservation in the global south also encompasses counterinsurgency operations. This in turn aids in shaping human-nature relationships, processes of territorialization and resource access and control in relation to protected areas, including in this case, reserved forests (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011). This assumes further significance, when conservation has to be carried out in landscapes scathed in violent conflict, thereby developing linkages between violence, environment and conflict which has been a forte of political geographers (Raleigh & Linke, 2018; Springer & Le Billon, 2016, (Benjaminsen et al., 2017)). Moreover, direct violence could be complimented with at least two other forms: 'structural' violence, which remains intrinsic in social constructs to which many people contribute indirectly but for which no particular person is directly responsible; and 'cultural or symbolic' violence, by means of which other forms of violence are obscured or justified in the realm of discourse or ideology (see esp. Nordstrom, 2004; Tyner, 2016). It is these structural and symbolic forms of violence which leads to soft forms of green militarization as was witnessed within these reserved forest areas.

2.1. Conservation with might

Contemporary forms of conservation as the need to protect endangered species often comes into contact with the lives and rights of people who live in and around the increasingly threatened national parks. A mounting interest in political ecology sutures linkages between conservation, violence and conflict over contested resources in protected areas that include wildlife parks and sanctuaries, especially where local, state-led conservation efforts rely on eviction of marginalized peasant communities while promoting tourism and wildlife preservation as a form of capital accumulation (Brockington & Wilkie, 2015; Duffy, 2016; Lunstrum, 2014; Massé & Lunstrum, 2016; Watts and Peluso 2001).

Adding to this is a growing body of inquiry addressing what Büscher and Ramutsindela have termed 'green violence'. The predominant focus of this discussion has been the application of such violence by representatives of nation-state regimes that frequently include forest guards, para-military forces and national armed forces.

Using the case of increasing militarization of Kruger National Park in South Africa, Lunstrum (2014) argues that this is not an isolated instance of such violent form of conservation by the military; rather it reflects a wider and deepening pattern of militarization altering conservation practice around the world. National armed forces, for instance, have performed important roles in establishing conservation measures, often forcibly across South America, Asia and Africa. This has been seen in Guatemala, Colombia, Nepal, Indonesia, Congo, Cameroon, South Africa, among others and in Botswana, the protection of its national parks is one of its Defense Force's primary responsibilities (Ethirajan, 2013; Henk, 2006; Ojeda, 2012; Peluso, 1993; Piombo, 2013; Ybarra, 2012). In the case of India, drones have been introduced in the Kaziranga National Park where around twenty-four persons (allegedly poachers, including a seven years old boy who was shot at) were killed in and around the core area of the park since 2014 (Barbora, 2017).

Some of the earliest and ongoing studies of military activity and the environment have investigated the deep-seated ecological destruction brought about by military activity, especially militarized forms of conflict (Lunstrum, 2014). Fashioning on this, Seager has contended that military activities have left a 'chain of militarized environmental destruction that stretches around the world' (1993,14). According to Lunstrum, (2014), the crux of these studies espouses the notion that militarized activities, during and post periods of conflict, cause overwhelming harm to the environment, and that the two are indeed antithetical. Duffy, (2014) re-emphasized that this whole notion of "militarized forms of anti-poaching are not new: for example, early game wardens in British colonial administrations were often ex-military personnel" (2014, 821). In fact the new war for conservation of biodiversity mirrors the language of interventionism and that the onus of wildlife preservation, especially endangered species lies with the international community and that military forms of intervention may be brought into effect to save them (Duffy, 2014).

More and more advanced states in the global north along with NGOs and para-state organizations increasingly connote rural protected areas in economically poorer countries as sites of (in)security which provide opportunities and threats in order to counter deforestation, mitigate loss of biodiversity, postulate ecosystem services and restrict terrorist access to valuable natural resources and nation-state borders (Kelly & Ybarra, 2016). This is how conservation paves the way towards securitization, the process by which spaces and subjectivities become targets of regulation and surveillance in the name of security. Kelly and Ybarra term this process as 'green security', "which refers to the overt use of policing and militarization of protected areas vast territories (land or maritime) in the name of security" (2016, 172).

The literature on political economy of lootable resources and crisis conservation (Springer and Le Billon, 2016; Duffy, 2014; Lunstrum, 2014), underlines that conservation hotspots and politically fraught areas are often spatially overlapped. The rainforests of the Indian northeast as well as the biodiversity regions of the Indian Himalaya are good illustrations of this. Peluso and Vandergeest (2011) argue that through the 1950s and 1970s, forests in South-East Asia were drawn in as sites of counterinsurgency activity to strengthen state power in areas with restricted reach. A similar argument can be made in relation to the war for conservation where wildlife and natural landscapes are remade to extend power in areas that are difficult to reach or are already entrenched in conflict. This stands particularly relevant for the introduction of the ETF in the conflict-ridden forest areas of northeast India.

This is where national heritage and security also tend to converge, as was seen in the Indian case in the 1960s and has been succinctly described by Mahesh Ranjarajan in his volume on *Nature and Nation: Essays on Environmental History*. Rangarajan explained how the

protection of nature was equated with the protection of heritage. These were the ways in which varieties of nationalism are mediated and constructed through reference to the natural (Rangarajan, 2015). Examples of these include and are not restricted to indigenous claims over forestland, protests against dams and developmental projects including Special Economic Zones.

Dovetailing the increased use of military and/or violent military strategies in conservation practices, the political ecology literature on conservation argues that one of the primary justifications of the current wave of green militarization is that wildlife crimes—including trading in animal parts and/or organs, poaching and hunting, especially in the global south—is recurrently driven by insurgent or terrorist groups (Duffy, 2016; White, 2014). Combatting such crime through militarized means is presented as an effective way to subdue insurgencies with the two-fold persuasion of conservation and stabilization (Verweijen & Marijnen, 2018). The literature discussed above pertains to instances in sensitive spaces where state-driven conservation enterprise is militarized in politically unstable regions by deploying armed services personnel to support the work of conservation bureaucracies, or to provide them security while discharging their duties.

2.2. Military and 'soft' militarized conservation

Militaries themselves have also been deployed for forcible eviction of populations in order to create, maintain or expand protected areas, thereby reflecting one of the core ways in which conservation rests on the use of violence (Gibson, 1999; Neumann, 2001; Ojeda, 2012; Peluso, 1993; Spence, 1999; Ybarra, 2012). Yet, another strand of scholarship within the domain of military diplomacy, security and International Relations, tend to either argue against the use of the military in environmental protection or highlight the positive aspects of military's involvement in conservation practices which is supported by improved civil-military relationships and disciplined management of protected areas. Dabelko and Simmons (1997), note that engaging the military in nontraditional roles would decrease its operational readiness. Finger (1991), instead, views the military as a possible solution to the problem of environmental pollution. Global militarization, he argues, would lead to the conditions in which environmental crises could only be addressed through crisis management, with the military as a useful tool. However, this would lead to increased pollution from military activities, creating a vicious circle.

Robyn Eckersley (2012) argues that this is worth exploring for at least two reasons. First, there are still imminent environmental threats, which national governments are grappling with. Second, viewed from this perspective the concepts of sovereignty, nonintervention, and environmental norms come once again under scrutiny. Eckersley (2012) concludes, although 'eco-humanitarian intervention,' like humanitarian intervention itself, is still 'particularly shaky on the question of political legitimacy, especially from the point of view of many developing countries,' (Eckersley, 2007,15), the moral nature of such interventions cannot be completely rejected, especially since it is now reaching a point "where extending the idea of 'responsibility to protect' to include biological diversity is no longer unthinkable" (2007,16). In the case of India, retired major general of the Indian Army, Eustace D'Souza, discussed the potential use of the Indian army for environmental protection. He argued that although the military establishment has been acknowledged as a powerful force in politics and economy, the positive role that the military can play in "protecting and restoring our degraded environment" is not usually acknowledged (D'Souza 1994, p. 208). As Duffy (2014) notes, in South Africa too, former soldiers from the apartheid-era South African Defense Force (SADF) carved out a new niche in conservation.

Military personnel usually possess skills akin to that of forest rangers, comprising of knowledge of weaponry, the ability to plan and carry out operations in remote and tiring terrains, and competences necessary to survive in these areas. Therefore, from the mid-1990s the conservation

sector increasingly saw the use of private military companies for enforcement—apparent in the case of Kruger National Park, among others. Pearson (2012) feels that scholarly positions on khaki conservation have become entrenched. Some researchers brand the military as the 'new defenders of wildlife' (Cohn, 1996). Meyerson (2001) dwells on a pro-military historical angle and argues that the US army was instrumental in the creation and survival of Yosemite national park. However, as Jeffrey Sasha Davis reasons, "the relationship between the military and the environment is a much more complex story than merely one of destruction" (131, 2007). This holds particular significance in the context of protected areas in the global south where the creation and maintenance of such zones is a colonial project enmeshed within unequal power relations.

Thus, although the military has the potential to engage in efficient and organized management of biodiversity, the way this potential is operationalized on ground is a different story. Additionally, Osborne (2013) and Dunlap and Fairhead (2014) have shown how subsequently counterinsurgency is also assimilated into forms of 'green grabbing' to 'pacify' and 'neutralize' resistance movements, thereby strengthening or producing new environmental commodity markets.

Not surprisingly, counterinsurgency appropriates and is being appropriated by an environmental ethic that facilitates control of populations and territorial expansion. Using cases from Southeast Asia in the 1950s through the 1970s Peluso and Vandergeest (2011) demonstrate the ways in which both insurgencies and counterinsurgencies have enabled the establishment, extension, and normalization of political forests, for "insurgency and counterinsurgency brought new political forests into being and vastly extended national forest territories. In due course, particular materialities of tropical forests, including, biological and ecological properties and spatialities as specific locations and extents facilitated guerrilla warfare" (2011, 589). Peluso and Vandergeest (2011) further add that the relationship between war and forests can be comprehended in relation to a historiography of insurgency in which forests had been important principally as cover for insurgents along with being coveted strategic territory. This in turn led to systematization of military counterinsurgency practices targeted towards regulating forest territories, insurgents, and forest dwellers.

The discussion above leads me to identify yet another pattern of military form of conservation. These occasions rest on the creation of a terrain of warfare against insurgencies and armed criminals (poachers, illegal miners, and timber thieves) by using the legally mandated exclusion of civilians enabled by protected areas to insert armed forces into these areas for combat operations. Conservation areas emerge as missions and theaters, respectively, for military personnel and special units. Nonetheless, what the above literature focused on only in passing is how conservation on war footing by armed state forces is carried out in contexts where violent conflict and counterinsurgency overlap. The disparate (though not in most cases) emphasize on the exercise of physical potentially undermines the forms of symbolic violence meted out to local populations in areas where conservation and counterinsurgency are intertwined.

Therefore, my attempt here is to empirically demonstrate how wider geographies of prevailing violent conflict feed into the conservation efforts of the ETF especially in the presence of a motley crew of actors operating at different scales, and how they react to the specific challenges of conservation in conflict zones. This assumes momentum since, owing to the ETF's military training and discipline they are better equipped than the ordinary forest guards. This leads to more control over local population (albeit symbolically). This has also narrowed the scope and space for negotiations with the local population in relation to what kind of trees are to be planted, the area of plantation and duration, rendering the process non-participatory. As one of the ETF officers recounted to me,⁴ "the villagers are more scared of us than the forest

⁴ Interview with an officer of ETF on 28th September 2017.

guards and if in the way of planting we come across any illegal settlements we inform the forest department, which then takes care of it (usually through eviction) to enable us to carry on with the plantation. Unlike the Forest Department we are very strict, and fence off the areas where plantation is being carried out so that it cannot be used for cattle grazing or other activities by the locals.”

3. “Our mandate is not Counterinsurgency”—the ETFs role in risky conservation in Assam

The raising of the ETF has to be situated in the context of the larger environmental and ecological history of India beginning with World War II, when large parts of the Indian sub-continent was under the British rule. During World War II, the Indian sub-continent became a base for allied operations in West Asia and the Burmese front, leading to a large number of Indian troops being stationed in different parts of the country and deployed from to fight the Japanese in Myanmar and defend the empire in Singapore and Hong Kong. *Shikar* or hunting surfaced as the most popular form of recreation and game laws were lax or not non-existent (D’Souza, 1994). In an effort to build roads and railways in support of the war, massive forests were cleared in the eastern parts of India. Environmental degradation continued unabated until stringent restraints were applied when Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India in 1966 and environmental protection became *de rigour* with strict implementation guidelines.

Subsequently the Wildlife Protection Act was passed in 1972, the Forest Conservation Act in 1980, and as Jairam (2017) notes, these acts were almost single handedly pushed through by Mrs. Gandhi at a time when discourses around environmental protection and security were far from being imbibed into both national and international psyche. In this period the military became conscious of their role in biodiversity conservation. General P.P. Kumaramangalam was elected President of the World Wildlife Fund for Nature-India during its formative stages, and numerous other officers, took leading roles in wildlife and environmental protection (Ramesh, 2017). This was the phase in India’s ecological history where environmental policies were created and implemented through a central fiat from the top. The creation of the ETF has to be situated within this historical phase.

Conceptually, Dr. Ernest Borlaug, popularly referred to as the father of the ‘green revolution’, suggested the idea of using military in conservation efforts in the early 1980s by proposing the need for a disciplined force to undertake such tasks, which according to him, was beyond repair by civilian agencies (Gautam, 2008; Ramesh, 2017). He recommended that the Indian Army on ‘war footing’ should take up the task of environmental protection and restoration. To be on war footing entails for the armed forces the amount of preparedness required being ready to fight a war. The then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, on observing the ecological degradation in the Himalayas, operationalized the idea by issuing an executive order to form an ETF comprising of cadres from the Territorial Army.⁵

In fact, one of the primary objectives of the Ministry of Environment, Forest (and now Climate Change) in constituting the ETF was to instill discipline and dedication into the whole exercise of conservation. Armed forces personnel shared this thought as well, for example (Mohan (2005)) felt that the armed forces could execute specific ecology-related projects with a military-like work culture and commitment. Conservation, however, was not the sole aim for the creation of the ETF. It encompassed the dual role of conservation as well as rehabilitation of ex-service men of the Indian Army. Since serving personnel could not be

⁵ The Territorial Army is a part of Regular Army and its current role is to relieve the Regular Army from static duties and assist civil administration in dealing with natural calamities and maintenance of essential services in situations where life of the communities is affected or the security of the Country is threatened and to provide units for Regular Army as and when required.

withdrawn from regular service, it was proposed that young ex-servicemen from the same region (if and when possible) where the environmental activities were to be carried out be recruited for either five years or having an upper limit of forty years of age.

The Ministry commissioned the ETF in 1982 with the aim of saving nearly 2500 ha of deforested mining area in the Shivalik hills from turning into a rock-strewn desert. By this time, the 128th Infantry Battalion was deployed (in 1983) in Thar desert in Rajasthan for the stabilization of sand dunes and the creation of a greenbelt, covering about 35,000 ha. These initial successes of the ETFs inspired other state governments to partner with the central government and establish similar battalions in other ecologically degraded parts of the country.

The most recent 135 Infantry Battalion was set up in 2007 in the Haltugaon forest division within the BTAD in Northeast India. Unlike the other battalions of the ETF (Jammu & Kashmir being an exception), this is situated within the context of recurring ethno religious conflict between the various rebel groups and the Indian government. This region continues to be politically disturbed with episodes of recurrent violent conflict that breaks out every few years. Therefore, primary task of the ETF in this region is re-forestation and soil conservation of the reserved forests destroyed over the years by rebel violence and counterinsurgency operations through massive illegal logging. So, the setting up of the ETF in this context echoes the case of how state driven, or managed conservation enterprise is militarized in politically troubled regions by deploying armed services personnel to support the work of conservation bureaucracies, or to provide them security while discharging their duties. In terms of composition, at the time of this research, the ETF battalion was composed of five officers in charge, out of which one was from the regular Army. Additionally, the unit also had two Junior Cadre Officers from the regular Army. These officers were the “nucleus” of the unit in order to instill and maintain military like discipline in the regiment. This is stated in the Planning Commission document as, “... where the nuclear core of the force is constituted of regular servicemen”. The regular Army officer recounted, “I am the only officer from the regular Army here. So, I am responsible for training them and keep them disciplined just like in the regular Army.”⁶

The reasons for establishing this unit could be foregrounded in the fast depleting forest cover in the region coupled with increasing political instability due to violent conflict which led to the expulsion of the forest department from the reserved forest, resulting in further (il)legal extraction of resources like timber. For example, the forest cover in Kokrajhar district alone, declined from 51.44 (as percentage of total geographical area) in 1999 to 36.10 in 2009 (Nath & Mwchahary, 2012). From 2007 to 2013, the ETF had planted over 300,000 saplings in an area of over 9000 ha.⁷ The notified forest area of Kokrajhar district includes six reserved forests, namely Guma, Ripu, Kachugaon, Chirang, Bengtal and Manas. The ETF has been carrying out its plantation activities along with the forest department across these reserved forest areas.

Worth reiterating are the ways in which spatial qualities of protected areas matter immensely for the convergence of conservation and militarization and the concrete forms this convergence takes. Within the BTAD, this accounts for the areas being demarcated as reserved forests, the counterinsurgency measures put in place by the state to combat local militants and semi-porous borders with Bhutan. Although, the ETF’s activities are not directly aimed towards anti-poaching by use of violence, yet the fact remains that the unit was established to carry out conservation using military tactic and discipline. The ETF don Army attire and carry INSAS rifles and do not involve the community in plantation tasks, unless (and rarely) as daily wage laborer in some cases. When it comes to deciding what trees are to be planted, the blueprint is

⁶ Interview with ETF officer on 10th March 2016.

⁷ Interview with a senior officer of the ETF in Kokrajhar on 12th September 2017.

made by the forest department and the ETF carries out the plantation activities. The local population are by default considered as those involved in illegal logging and destruction of the ecosystem and leading to non-plantation of commercial trees native to the soil. Instead fruit, non-valued and medicinal trees are planted, negating participatory forms of resource management. Negating historical dependence on forests amounts to symbolic violence.

Consequently, it is significant to prod the broader work on green violence to account for 'soft' militarization, and this includes within the Indian context, the ETF battalions, where military habits have become a valued skill in carrying out arduous, and at times risky, conservation work in sensitive spaces. The abilities of retired military personnel coupled with their knowhow of local ecologies become desired attributes when such people are redeployed now as peaceful conservation workers. The case of the ETF brings to fore the juxtaposition of the inherent violence of conservation, that often begins with displacements and exclusions (of unwanted human settlements) and confinements and surveillance of preserved non-human species and organisms, against the care and restoration aspect of conservation work that seeks to engender protected lives and sustain valued communities of plants and animals.

Outspreading this discussion further to involve the role of retired army personnel who are the major recruits of the ETF, demonstrates that the scheme incorporates the dual role of conservation and rehabilitation. This finds its roots in the post-World War II demobilization of soldiers where it was suggested by parliamentarians that carrying out plantation activities in England would not only be therapeutic for the ex-soldiers but also be a gesture in home coming. The idea of protecting the earth with spades after having protected the nation with tanks and guns seemed to be the motivating factor working behind the creation of the ETF.

3.1. Conflict and conservation in the RFs

Assam's contemporary politics has been defined by political violence on ethno-linguistic and religious lines since the 1980s (Baruah, 1994). The conflicts nonetheless coincide with contemporary concerns for conservation that had emerged following a period when insurgents took refuge in Manas National Park (discussed below) even though conserving areas for wildlife go back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it was introduced (by the colonial administration) amid protests from local peasants (Barbora, 2017).

Historically, the Bodo, who are also the largest plain tribe of north-east India, consider themselves to be the autochthons of the region. During the colonial times large-scale immigration took place from Bengal and Bengali Muslim peasants were settled in western Assam. Adivasis comprising of *Santhal*, *Orao* and *Munda* tribes were also brought in to work in the expanding tea plantations as well as building of the railways (see footnote 1). Some tribes were recruited by the British forest administration to work in definite forest zones in timber plantations. Since the then local populations (i.e. the Bodo) mostly engaged in shifting cultivation rendering them mobile, the abovementioned tribes were brought in from parts of Central India. Eventually the groups of migrant workforces resorted to settled forms of agriculture leading to scarcity of cultivable land for the Bodo. This forced the Bodo peasants to move into reserved forests and eventually being termed as 'encroachers', despite this being the land of their ancestors who used it for cultivation and also as a trade route with Bhutan. This could be seen as a starting point of the feeling of contention for the Bodo, who consider themselves the autochthons.

However, immigration and faulty land policies is not a sufficient explanation for the raging and continuing violence in the region. According to Vandekerckhove and Suykens (2008) it was the commoditization of forests and the implantation of tea estates that led to the creation of restrictive boundaries furthering entrapment of the tribal communities living in the area, especially the Bodo. Added to this, the insufficient responses of both the Indian and Assam governments to this

increasing entrapment have furnished the basis for the organization of violent movements. The situation worsened when in the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, new restrictive forest rules and regulations were introduced under the banner of 'protection', since by then over eighty percent⁸ of the forest had become inaccessible.

The violence in the region also commenced during the 1980s for the creation of a separate state of Bodoland within the Indian federation. Thereafter, in 1987 the movement became violent with the launch of an insurgent group which later became the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and one of its wings came to be led by Songbijit, resulting in the creation of NDFB(S), which is active till date and was allegedly responsible for the latest episode of violence against Adivasis in the Chirang reserved forest in December 2014. Violence on ethno-religious lines also ensued in 2008, 2012 and twice in 2014 claiming over hundreds of lives and displacing over a hundred thousand people, belonging to Muslim, Adivasi and Bodo ethnic groups. Majority of violent episodes happened inside the reserved forests. The first major attack hit the Manas reserved forest and in 1996 and 1998 and the worse casualties occurred in the reserved forests bordering Bhutan (Kimura, 2017). In the following decade the violence of 2008 and 2014 affected the Chirang, Riphu and Kachugaon reserved forest areas.

Manas National Park⁹ on the border of Bhutan was declared a wildlife sanctuary and a subsequent tiger reserve in 1973. In fact, most of the plantation drive carried out by the ETF is on the fringes of Manas. Conversely, in 1992, Manas was declared a 'World Heritage Site in danger', a label attached to the reserve as a result of continuing insurgency (Vandekerckhove and Suykens 2008). Conservation in Manas culminated into a face-off between the state and the insurgents, resulting in a shift in control over the contested forest territories. The insurgents extracted timber and engaged in poaching to fund militant activities¹⁰ while simultaneously using the forest as passage to their bases in Bhutan. The park lost almost ninety per cent of its one horned Rhinoceros¹¹ and a large number of swamp deer and wild buffaloes as a result of the unrest.¹² Between 1988 and 2003, the park became the central ground for the Bodo movement. In February 1988 both reserve and park were violently occupied by the armed faction of the All Bodo Students Union campaigning for autonomy for its people and for restoration of their right to use forest lands and resources (Jackson, 1989). This led to the exit of the forest department resulting in rampant arson, looting and the murder of forest guards. Under these circumstances the park was closed to the public between 1989 and 1996.

Although in 2007, four years after the creation of BTAD, the forest department had started re-building forest offices inside the reserved forests, forest rangers continue to be scared to reside in the interior forest.

The recurring conflict over the years has led to a steep rise in the number of army and para-military forces who have now become a permanent feature of the forest landscape. Alongside the reserved forest being a sensitive location due to bordering Bhutan, it is also a site of conflict and counterinsurgency. Moreover, it is used by the local administration to set up temporary relief camps post conflict for the rehabilitation of those displaced in violence. This has led to the stationing of armed forces inside or in the vicinity of these reserved forest areas. Due to paucity of infrastructure in these remote locations, with a

⁸ See BTC, Profile on Forest and Wildlife of Bodoland Territorial Council (Kokrajhar: Forest Department, n.d.), p.10.

⁹ For more on Manas see https://conservation-development.net/Projekte/Na-chhaltigkeit/DVD_12.WHS/Material/files/WCMC_Manas.pdf.

¹⁰ This is a contested claim, although in most of the interviews with officials of the forest department, local NGO workers and personnel of state Police Services, this was believed to be true.

¹¹ See <https://www.kaziranga-national-park.com/one-horned-rhino.shtml>.

¹² See <https://www.sahapedia.org/manas-national-park-those-living-the-fringe-areas>.

directive from the state home affairs and district administration most of the forest guesthouses have had to be converted into camps for the army and para-military to facilitate counterinsurgency operations. Although Manas is now open to the general public, at least 100 persons were displaced and over forty were massacred on May 2, 2014, when militants opened fire in the villages near Manas National Park. Fieldwork with the forest department soon revealed that these rebels are still pursuing to control the inner parts of the forest. By launching attacks on forest guards and locals, they are trying to define who has access to resources and who does not. This merits reverberation of the nature of spatial overlaps between conservation hotspots and politically fraught areas.

In June 2017, about forty Songbijit faction were found to be taking shelter in and around Manas.¹³ This also blurs the categories of local populations and insurgents as fieldwork often showed that the insurgents often belonged to the local populations and/or the local villagers provided cover to these insurgents due to fear for their lives. Given the continuing insurgency and the state's priority of ushering in negotiated peace, counterinsurgency operations in this context accrues more currency.

Although there exists similarities in the practices that relate to both militarized conservation and counterinsurgency including violent rationalities such as 'shoot-to-kill' policies, property destruction, threats, evictions, displacements, patrolling, surveillance and the construction of informant networks (Verweijen & Marijnen, 2018), within these reserved forests, such practices are firstly, predominantly aimed at counterinsurgency operations and carried out by the Army and para-military forces. Secondly, exercises like eviction, displacement and threats are the decree of the forest department aimed at those encroaching forestland, illegally. As a senior officer of the ETF recounted,

We have a clear mandate. We do not involve ourselves in counter-insurgency and neither are we here to foster civil-military relationship. It is the forest department that is supposed to interact with the local populations. From time to time we distribute saplings to villagers to create awareness about the environment and also employ them under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) as daily wage workers to assist in our plantation activities, but that is where our interaction ends.¹⁴

The context here assumes consequence given the longstanding presence of armed forces in the region which has come to be synonymous with rape, torture and abduction. The Army garb of the ETF is supposed to create symbolic fear and given the existing distrust towards the Army; the conservation process becomes non-participatory.

Within this milieu the ensuing relationship between the forest department and the ETF in regard to conservation deserved elucidation.

3.2. *The forest department and the ETF — community engagement, inter-institutional competition and local politics*

The militant attack on the Adivasi population in December 2014, led to the setting up of post conflict relief camps for the quarter million people who fled their villages again, inside the reserved forest. A visit to the reserved forest in January 2015 indicated the improvement in the security situation as compared to the heydays of the Bodo insurgency in the mid 1990s; nevertheless, political power was far from being completely in the hands of the ruling government. Eventually, over the years, the forest department had devised a form of forest politics rested predominantly on negotiation and only selective contestation towards

forest crime fueled by the discrepancy between the rigid forest laws since the 1980s and the lack of financial means or local support to implement these.

Although rebel groups continue to strive to define access to and use of natural resources like timber and hunting, interviews with local populations revealed that the forest department was still regarded as a main protector of the forest responsible for eviction operations and penalizing forest crime. The scarce presence of the forest department in the interior parts of the forest has not adversely affected the states recognition within the forest. It appears that in the years of militia violence the desire for state presence in the reserved forest areas had essentially increased, and this is discernible given the large presence of the armed forces. To the existing forces was added symbolic force through the admission of the ETF, to restore extreme forest degradation and specifically plant in the interior areas of the forest where the departure of the forest department had created a void.

It ought to be mentioned that forest is a transferred subject, meaning when the Autonomous Territorial Council was constituted in 2003, the department of forest was transferred to the council from the Assam state and now comes under the jurisdiction of the department for forest and tourism of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). Moreover, exchanges with officers of the ETF indicated that although the ecological forces in other Indian states are more engaged and work closely with the local communities, here they have to be on alert and guarded given the fragile political environment. Therefore, there has not been any transformation in civil-military relations due to the coming of the ETF, who maintain their distance from the civilian population, if anything, an added layer of surveillance has been thrust upon them. Since the ETF often reports encroachments and suspicious activities to forest department and the Army, respectively. However, what has been an interesting development is the transformative while simultaneously derogative relationship among the ETF, the forest department, the regular Army and the local administration.

The Planning Commission mentions that: "the establishment and operational expenditure on the ETF Battalions raised by Ministry of Defense is reimbursed by the Ministry of Environment and Forest" (October 2011, 40), while operational assistance like provision of saplings, fencing, as well as overall professional and managerial guidance has to be provided by the respective state forest departments. This entails that the ETF would have to both rely on and communicate with the forest department and maintain a close working relationship especially in a hostile environment as that of BTAD. Yet another major hurdle the ETF faces, as pointed out by the officers is encroachment of forestland. Occasionally land allocated to the ETF is encroached on by locals. As an officer noted,

Encroachment seems to be considered almost legal in these areas (sic). We have tried bringing this up with the forest department as well as the local administration but to no avail there is a lot of political pressure and at the moment it is just about maintaining the status quo and not undertake any eviction operations. Who knows may be the state itself settles these people on forestland?¹⁵

The local social and political circumstances seep into the ETF's conservation efforts, revealing the different objectives of the forest department, Army, local administration and the ETF that does not ally. Besides, the officers of the ETF deem the forest department officials to be "lazy, corrupt and useless" and often have to "be pushed and given constant (personal) reminders"¹⁶ to attend meetings on conservation and planning organized by the ETF. Moreover, it is the responsibility of the forest department to supply the ETF with saplings for plantation, but the ETF doesn't rely on the forest department's quality of saplings and

¹³ See <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/this-assam-national-park-now-a-sanctuary-for-bodo-militants/20150617.htm>.

¹⁴ Interview with an officer of ETF on 12th September 2017 in Kokrajhar, Assam.

¹⁵ Interview with a senior officer of ETF on 15th September 2017 in Kokrajhar.

¹⁶ Excerpt from an interview with field officers of the ETF.

currently maintains several nurseries and often provides saplings to the forest department. These nurseries and vermin-composts ensure quality saplings with better survival rates.

The officers of the ETF feel they have been forced to take up some workload of the forest department in terms of maintaining the nurseries, creating awareness programs and even communicating with village headmen regarding plantation drives around the respective villages, which is mandate of forest department. In line with the protocol, 300 ha of land per year is handed over to the ETF by the forest department for plantation for a minimum period of five years. During the first year, they prepare the ground and soil and plant the saplings. In the second year, a tree count is carried out. The forest department is required to take account of the progress, annually. At the end of five years, the area is handed over to the forest department. This is where the discord arises, since the forest department does not carry out the annual monitoring of the sites and additionally during handover, the forest department habitually come up with excuses, besides finding flaws and eventually refusing and/or delaying taking over the site.

This seems to be a case of conflicting jurisdiction within the federal structure, especially in an area where the state is very much present and is neither fragile nor collapsed. The officers of the forest department did not seem to consider the ETF important enough and instead felt like they were treading on the department's erstwhile territories. As a forest ranger said, "we are already overworked and do not have time to attend these functions and train these people."¹⁷ Despite prevailing frictions, what emerged from the various interviews is that both parties have come to realize this as a relationship of dependency and some form of mutual tolerance is in place.

The ETF is aware of the corrupt practices of the forest department and their alleged linkages with the illegal timber trade, but they have decided to stay quiet about this. If at all they encounter logging or poaching activities during their plantation drives, they report it to the forest department or the local administration. The forest department has the added advantage of having historical dominance over the forests. Over time, however, the forest department has come to the realization that it shall not be able to match the efficacy of the ETF and nor will it be able to venture into areas deep inside the forests, till rebels continue to operate in the region.

Since, the ETF has to work with and under the supervision of the forest department, the scales tilt in the latter's favor. As the above shows, there are resource and authority issues between these two institutional structures, but at the same time there also exists strained collaboration as expertise and control become exchangeable.

3.3. The ETF and the local political context

Conservation activities even in relatively peaceful settings can be daunting since it often necessitates fencing off forestland which villagers use as grazing land, or clearing of encroached land often leading to contestations with local populations. Yet, conservation within these reserved forests, under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA),¹⁸ is particularly challenging for the ETF, since the image of the army or the

paramilitary is synonymous with rape, abduction, torture and killings.¹⁹ Interestingly the ETF was not only brought into BTAD for its discipline but also their uniform, which is the same as the regular Army. In an interview, an officer of the ETF said to me "local population cannot distinguish between regular Army and us and usually view us with similar awe and fear". So, the ETF carries out their plantation drives in interior forestlands where in principle their uniforms and discipline act as deterrents for villagers.

The regular army is extremely unpopular among the local population. It appears as though a Janus-faced Army is at play, which is on the one hand trying to protect the ecology and on the other killing and torturing at random. The relationship between the forest communities and the forest department was based predominantly on negotiation and the latter exercised only selective contestation towards forest crime.

A senior officer with the ETF also pointed out the drawback it creates for the ETF in terms of additional threats and mistaken identity. As is frequently the case in sensitive spaces of violent rebel led conflict, the militant groups are regularly in contact with the local villagers and retain informants in interior villages. As the officer related, their presence also leads to the villagers reporting on them to the militants who do not distinguish between the ETF and the regular Army. Although the officer added "in case we stumble upon any solid intel, we pass it on to the regular army. This though is sporadic"²⁰ When I spoke to the village headman of one of the villages situated next to the plantation site, he did seem slightly baffled as to why the ETF was so fearful of the local situation, for him, they are the army. He further recounted,

This is the last village beyond which we have the plantation site and then flows the *Saralbhanga* river on the banks of which lies Bhutan. This has been a corridor for illegal activities, smuggling of timber and also movement of insurgents. Of course we had insurgents frequenting our village, but in recent times insurgency seems to have declined. The ETF ask us things like if the insurgents extort money, if the area is safe and look at us for reassurance it seems. Usually they call us once a month to check on the insurgency situation.²¹

Although the ETF, or the forest department do not directly engage in counterinsurgency operations, but these institutions do support one another through occasional exchanges of information. Thus, conservation on war footing within this recurring conflict context is characterized by often non-aligned inter-institutional competition and occasional cooperation among the state and non-state actors, who usually have their individual directives to fulfill and act upon. Although violent counterinsurgency practices over the years against militants (and sometimes locals) and vengeful attacks has played a role in shaping human-nature relationships (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011) especially in relation to determining access to and control over forest spaces and resources, but this contribution goes beyond green violence in biodiversity conservation (Ybarra, 2012; Marijnen and Verweijen, 2016), to account for soft violence and holding counterinsurgency over conservation. Hitherto given the ETF's close (physical and symbolic) association with the regular Army, their perception among the militants and the local populations is akin to that for the Army.

I would like to substantiate this claim with an incident that ensued between the NDFB(S) militants and the ETF. On the morning of October 2014 a heavily armed group of about seventy NDFB(S) cadre ambushed a team of the ETF while they were carrying out plantation activities in

¹⁷ Interview with Forest Ranger on 20th September 2017 in Saralpara

¹⁸ AFSPA, 1958, gives armed forces special power to maintain public order in disturbed areas. They have the authority to prohibit a gathering of five or more persons in an area, can use force or even open fire after giving due warning if they feel a person is in contravention of the law. If reasonable suspicion exists, the army can also arrest a person without a warrant and also shoot; enter or search premises without a warrant; and ban the possession of firearms.

¹⁹ For a more comprehensive account of the AFSPA affects the everyday life of the people in the region see: https://conservation-development.net/Projekte/Nachhaltigkeit/DVD_12_WHS/Material/files/WCMC_Manas.pdf; <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/2008/india0808/>; <https://thewire.in/culture/rape-security-forces-afspa>.

²⁰ Excerpt from interview(s) with personnel of ETF on 25th and 26th September 2017 in Kokrajhar, Assam.

²¹ Verweijen and Marijnen 2018.

the *Khalasi* area inside the Chirang-Riphu RF. The militants of the NDFB (S) outnumbered the ETF and snatched seven INSAS rifles along with magazines. Although this is the official version as reported in local newspapers,²² according to local villagers²³ not only did the militants loot the members of the ETF but also took a lift in the latter's truck to a certain site. There have been similar instances where personnel of paramilitary forces have been waylaid and executed by rebel groups. Post this confrontation, the ETF abandoned this specific plantation site and also moved their base camp and nursery from inside the reserved forest, closer to Kokrajhar town. The entry to the base camp is extremely restricted and interestingly the villagers who live around the camp view the ETF as regular Army and attribute their presence for protection from militant attacks.

This signifies that despite the numerous efforts the ETF makes to buffer itself from local politics, incidents of a violent nature invariably affect their conservation practices. This also leads to the ETF relying heavily on the regular Army and the forest department and even local populations. Since this incident the ETF is often accompanied by a small group of army personnel when they go into interior areas for plantation. Interviews conducted with villagers who live close to plantation sites revealed that before starting plantation projects, the ETF personnel often have informal meetings with members of the village council and request them to keep the ETF abreast of any recent happenings pertaining to security in the area or if they happen to site insurgent activities. The fact that the ETF finds itself in a vulnerable position both in terms of self-protection and also everyday interaction with the forest department, points to the deployment of a central body in a conflict zone, seeking co-operation from the state government. Conservation emerges as a combination of cooperation and co-inhabitation in the forest areas. The hostility and resignation with which different agencies are viewed by the local populations as well as the way they perceive and relate to each other becomes important both to the relative effectiveness of conservation activity but also the extent to which violence is actually bred or exacerbated by this activity.

4. Concluding remarks

Using the case of the ETF as an entry point, I have explained the roles of the various state and non-state actors within the context of the reserved forest in the BTAD. This includes both the individual tasks carried out by these agencies, plantation by the ETF, ecological conservation by the forest department as well as their joint roles like prevention of illegal logging. I have also highlighted the long-drawn struggle between the militants and the forest department and the ensuing fight in relation to control over and access to forest resources. These are further entwined within processes of encroachment of forestland by local populations (Bodos and Adivasis). The contribution goes on to consider the moral force of conservation and how that has grown with the heightened awareness of ecological crisis, especially since in this conservation hotspots and politically fraught areas are spatially overlapped.

However, the simultaneous processes of counterinsurgency operations and the forest being sites of violent conflict and post conflict resettlement areas, renders conservation and environment only a second fiddle to issues around counter-insurgency and national security.

As the literature shows, there tends to be three emerging narratives about the role of military in society with respect to the environment. First, is that the environment and national security stand opposed to one another; second, the notion that environment needs to bend if national security is an issue; and the third narrative suggests that conservation

efforts are encapsulated within the larger goal of counterinsurgency and national security, carried out by military and paramilitary personnel, through training and technologies. It is this third narrative which emerges as most important in the given situation. This contribution demonstrates the novel political architecture that sometimes emerges for natural resource management in conflict zones.

Here, although on paper, counterinsurgency and securitization remains the forte of the regular army; eviction operations lie with the forest department and intense afforestation and soil conservation is the domain of the ETF, these functions do overlap. The non-convergence of counterinsurgency and conservation is also explained by the coming together of regimented bureaucracies in environmental operations, along with local and historical factors operating alongside conservation.

Additionally, conservation by the military does not in every occasion transform into militarization of the environment but soft forms of militarization prevails, as this case has shown. There is always a risk of this happening as in Kaziranga National Park in Assam, that boasts of a remarkable conservation success, with considerable costs, including human lives. In spaces where the nation-state is more vested with fighting insurgency and separatist tendencies and the preservation of law and order is of paramount importance, counterinsurgency shall invariably prevail over conservation and the coalition among the various state and non-state actors will be steered towards this goal. Therefore, I expect my findings to have resonance beyond Assam and India, as similar conservation and coalition approaches are likely to exist elsewhere, and hope to have made a case for the inclusion of soft green violence incorporating symbolic and structural violence while carrying out conservation activities.

In this contribution, I have drawn precise conceptual linkages between the political geography and political ecology literature on 'violent environments', crisis conservation and green militarization and the broader work on military security and violent conflict. I have expanded empirically on the concepts of 'violent environment' and green militarization by applying it to a space where the politics of conservation is embedded in a larger context of violent conflict and inter-institutional competition. Using the case of ETF, I demonstrated how conservation by a wing of the Indian army in sensitive borderland spaces does not lead to the convergence of counterinsurgency and conservation. Localized conservation practices are intertwined with micro conflict dynamics and inadvertently perturb both the ETF and the forest department. Hence, conservation on war footing in actual zones of conflict encompasses a range of different state and non-state actors, operating at different scales and their reaction and adaptation to the specific challenges of conservation in 'violent environments' and a non-alignment of their functional goals. Thus, conservation work is a combination of cooperation and co-inhabitation in the forest areas, the hostility and resignation with which different agencies are viewed becomes important both to the relative effectiveness of conservation activity but also the extent to which violence is actually bred or exacerbated by this activity. This is where accounting for symbolic forms of violence becomes imperative.

A better understanding of these dynamics and relationships seems all the more urgent in the light of rising involvement of militaries in conservation activities across the globe. Also important is to distinguish and allow space in the growing body of literature to account for the differences related to values, contexts and cultures. Only robust analysis will lead to the production of counter-narratives that are sufficiently powerful to work towards 'green demilitarization'.

The goal is to find sustainable futures for both people and the ecology which requires coalitions that work together.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

The author hereby declares that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this article, the data used etc.

²² https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/ndfb-s-militants-s-natch-eco-task-force-rifles-114102200443_1.html.

²³ Interview with the headman of Jharbari village under Haltugaon Forest division on 30th September 2017.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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