

CHAPTER – VI

RISE OF THE INDIGENOUS TIMBER TRADERS

Timber trade is an age-old business of the Indians. From ancient period through medieval period to modern period the Indians were involved in the timber trade. But unfortunately, about the indigenous timber traders operating in North Bengal forests upto 1920 practically no information is available. Stray references are yet available that timber merchants from eastern Bengal, particularly from Dacca used to come over here to purchase timber. But, who were these merchants, what was their class character, how far they approached to collect timber, where from they usually collected timber, who were the people at the other end, how was the contract signed, what were the conditions, whether there were middlemen between the sellers and the purchasers, what was the rate of the deal, whether there was re-sale system in Dacca and Sirajgunj, if so, who were the purchasers thence, from which time did the trade begin in colonial period, what was the nature of demand in eastern Bengal and another places, which timber had a demand most, purpose behind the demand, how were these heavy timbers transported in private capacity – all these and allied questions cannot be answered to with the materials at our disposal. It is an interesting field of study, but at this stage of our knowledge we are handicapped.

Most interesting feature of this timber trade was this that before the involvement of the Europeans no indigenous people of higher social hierarchy used to come to this business. When the higher caste Hindus and upper class Muslims came closer to the European business circle they showed interests in such business to which they had previously sneers at adopting. Indigenous people regarded the Europeans as Gods, and when the indigenous people of higher social hierarchy found the Europeans in timber business which earned much profit, the Indians of higher class began to deal in timber trade.

In our period of study the Europeans showed the path for timber business in large scale. However, we find the origin of this business in colonial period by going back in time. It is known from modern research that the British officials in their private capacity were involved in timber trade in the middle of the 18th century. George Gray, the chief of the Malda Factory (1761-63), Richard Barwell who replaced the former in 1765, Sykes, the Resident at the Durbar

of Murshidabad – all were involved in timber trade. They operated mainly in Morung country (Nepal) and in Purnea forests.¹ The Murshidabad city in the 1770s and 1780s imported timber from Purnea forests.² Terai forests were also rich in timber trade. Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker in 1848 wrote in his famous “Himalayan Journals”: “In the latter country it is called the morung and supplies Sal and Sissoo timber for Calcutta market, the logs being floated down the Konki and Cosi rivers to the Ganges.”³ And from the history of Raikut dynasty it is known that the Zamindar of Baikunthapur (Raikut) had established in their forest tracts “Kachhari” (offices) to facilitate forest operations and timber trade. They established forest offices at Salugara, Bodagunj, Shikarpur, Lantong and Farabari.⁴ Many timber merchants from different parts of the country used to go there for business transactions in timber. Dr. Barun De and Pranab ranjan Roy in their “Notes For The History Of The Darjeeling District” have given a well-documented description of timber trade at Baikunthapur Centre. They wrote, “The Baikunthapur Estate was an important centre of the timber-logging and trade. Many merchants from Bihar as well as Giri Gosains of the Dasnami Naga sect of Beneras invested in this.”⁵ If the timber traders could come all the way to Baikunthapur, adjacent to Western Duars, certainly the indigenous timber traders including the timber traders of East and South Bengal were attracted to the timber trade of Western and Eastern Duars. The British sources mentioned that there was a timber market at Jalpaiguri before their arrival in this place.⁶ It was also reported in 1865 that in Rajshahye Division there were special hauts in which timbers were sold, but timbers were, however, procurable in almost all large bazars in every district under the division. They were “Singrah in Rajshahye, Nemansurai in Maldah, Chapgatee, Bhugwangolah, Jellingee, Devipore, Azimgunge, Jeagunge, Ellahegunge and Berhampore in Moorshedabad.”⁷ Besides the above there were several places on the banks of large rivers in which timbers were sold, though no haut or fair was held there. From these information it may be assumed that these timber markets were operated by the indigenous people; but unfortunately particulars about them are not available. There are other indications of local people’s involvement in this trade because there were great demands of timber in East Bengal. Besides country-boats and pleasure-boats, ‘Sal’ and other hard-wood had a great demand for plough, yoke, bullock-carts, carts drawn by horses and palanquin. Demand for ‘Sissu’ was for furniture. Timber was also used for house-building purposes and poles, and bamboo were in need to construct mud-built house. Even in the construction of brick-building, for supporting roof, the beam of ‘Sal’ wood was essential in those days. It seems that to meet these many and various demands in East Bengal the Dacca merchants used to come at Buxa, Jalpaiguri, Baikunthapur and Eastern Duars to collect timber and poles, and usually they contacted with the timber-thieves to avoid governmental restrictions, and ensure attractive margin in their deal. To facilitate legal timber trade government, on the

other hand, established timber depots at Alipurduar, Buxa, Kawnia, Rangpur, Sirajgunj, Dhubri and Dacca.

The Europeans also continued private trade in timber along with the indigenous traders in the second half of the 19th century. For part of the Sal forests on the bank of the Ranjeet (Rangit) Major Wardroper⁸ held a lease rent free for fifteen years. The lease was dated from 8th November, 1854. The area of this lease-hold was around the junction of the Little and Great Rangit. Reference to native contractors has been given by Dr. Anderson. These native contractors contracted to deliver large number of railway sleepers before the expiry of working season in 1865-66. They were asked to work in Tista valley. In giving information about the working of the Forests Dr. Anderson wrote, "The Assistant Conservator has received the greatest annoyance from these native contractors; none of them would commence work without an advance, and one or two have absconded without fulfilling their contract."⁹ Again, about the year 1865 one Mr. Dear secured monopoly for working the whole of plains forest in the Darjeeling district for supply of railway sleepers.¹⁰ He removed all the big trees, except hollow and unsound ones from the plains tract. After an examination of the forests in 1867, it was reported that practically all the 'Sal' trees over 5 feet in girth were removed from the plains forest and such trees could only be found in the lower hills. Later on removal of 'Sal' trees on the basis of exploitable girth limit on permits at a fixed price per tree under the supervision of a responsible Forest Officer was introduced. But for shortage of staff the condition could not be rigidly followed and the result was that all good trees were removed from easily accessible areas. The contractors employed by the department in timber operations for supply to the Railway and of building and bridge materials to the Communications and Works Department made further inroads into the forests and felled smaller trees in accessible areas in disregard of the girth limit rule. The Conservator of Forests who inspected the outer hills between the Darjeeling Hill Cart Road and the Mahanadi (Mahananda) river in 1870, wrote in his inspection report that the tract had been stripped of nearly every Sal tree "sufficiently large and sound to yield one sleeper." Sale of Sal trees on volume measurement was introduced as a remedy but the local people favoured the rate per tree system. This showed that the local people entered into the timber business in the late 19th century along with the Europeans.

In the Progress Report of 1868-69 the Conservator informed the Government, "It is still found necessary to work the forests by the agency of petty contractors. Large timber contractors, men of sufficient influence and means to undertake as in Burma the whole work of felling, converting and transporting to depots, have not yet been found."¹¹ However, an offer was received from Messrs. K.C. Roy and Co., Calcutta, of Rupees 9 per log for all Sal logs lying in the forest near Buxa not under 6 feet in girth and 25 feet in length on the following conditions :-

1st. – The timber to be made over to them or their agents, by the Forest Officer, in the forest.

2nd. – The privilege of sawing the timber in the forest to be allowed to them.

3rd. – Payments to be made prior to the removal of the timber from the district in cash.

4th. – All timber removed by them within 12 months from the date of contract to form the subject of the contract, and at the expiry of the term should any timber be left it will remain optional with them to take it on the same terms on a renewed contract.

In dealing with Messrs. K.C. Roy and Company the conservator's observation is interesting one. He wrote, "I do not think it would be advisable to accede to these terms, but if Messrs. K.C. Roy and Company or any others are willing to pay a fair amount of royalty and to subscribe to conditions of sale sufficiently stringent to secure, with certainty, the conservancy of the forests they propose to work under the permit system, it might be desirable to enter into an agreement with them, and thus test the operation and effects of that system as applied to the forests of Bengal."¹² He further noted that to ascertain if the offer of Rupees 9 per log was reasonable one, it would be necessary to deduct the cost of converting the timber and transporting it to Calcutta from the value at that market, and allow a fair margin of profit to the permit holder. He calculated that a log, 25 feet long 6 feet in girth, would give two scantlings 16 inches broad by 8 inches thick, which at Calcutta would, according to Messrs. Mackenzie, Lyall and Company's timber market quotations, realize about Rupees 50 each, or Rupees 100 for the two.

	Rs.	As.	P.	Rs.	As.	P.
Market value of one log at Calcutta				100	0	0
Deduct						
Profit to permit holder, at Rs. 20 per cent ...	20	0	0			
Cost of Sawing per log	5	0	0			
Transport to Revenue Station	15	0	0			
Transport to Calcutta	<u>30</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
	Balance			30	0	0

This calculation gave a balance of Rupees 30, which if the items were correct and none omitted would represent the real value of the timber to Government as it lay in the forest. Probably, however, the timber when sold at Calcutta would not realize quite so much, and the expense to be incurred by the permit holder might be insufficiently estimated. The Conservator finally observed, "A royalty of Rupees 15 per ton for logs and one rupee a piece for sleepers might be a fair rate to charge for the first year, or until further experience indicates whether this is too high or too low. The rate might then be revised."¹³

Among the European private companies, besides Messrs. Mackenzie, Lyall Company, Messrs. Queiros and Company had a timber business with the Forest Department in Bengal. W. Stenhouse, Offg. Conservator noted, "In the forest near Buxa a portion of the timber felled by Messrs. Queiros and Company, under contract with the Forest Department, has been removed to the bank of the Deema River, whence it will be floated to the Alipore Depot."¹⁴ To exploit the Calcutta market he suggested that Goalanda, which was situated at the junction of the Ganges (Padma) and Brahmaputra rivers, and was the proposed terminus of the Eastern Bengal Railway, would probably be the best place for the establishment of a main depot for government timber from the Assam and Bhutan Forests. From this main depot, it seems, that the petty indigenous timber merchants of Bengal collected timber and used to do timber business in Eastern and Western Bengal. Indigenous timber merchants of Dacca, however, preferred to collect timber from Assam and Chittagong.¹⁵ Dacca based timber merchants were not interested about the timber of Buxa apparently due to its inferior quality and high prices. That was the opinion of an Officer in the Forest Department. It seems that it was a tactics of the Dacca merchants. They spread this view only to keep the price of Buxa timber low, otherwise the Railway Department would not collect Buxa timber for railway sleepers.

However, it is evident from facts that the timber merchants from Dacca and other places were active in illegal timber trade. It is found in stray references of the English officials that timber theft became a profitable business of the local people adjacent to forest tracts. What did the timber-thieves do with this timber cannot be assessed properly. It seems from the report of the Forest Officials that there was a collusion between the timber-thieves and the timber merchants. The Government Officials described these merchants as 'unscrupulous' and these merchants used to come from Dacca and other places. They preferred illegal trade to legal one. Profit-margin in their favour was the only objective, and they did it without scruple. The Dacca merchants offered high prices of timber in comparison to the rate in local sale. This has been reflected in the report of W. Stenhouse. It runs : "The high prices offered for Sal timber by traders from Dacca and other places on the Brahmapootra river present very great temptations in the way of the inhabitants of the Eastern Dooars to assist and participate with these unscrupulous

people in the plunder of the Govt. forests. It will therefore require the constant presence of an active and vigilant forest establishment to counteract these powerful influences.”¹⁶

Incidentally, mention may be made about the timber trade in Baikunthapur forest as revealed in the Statistical Account of Jalpaiguri. Although Baikunthapur or *Battris-hazari* was a private forest of Baikunthapur Raj Estate but it was almost surrounded by government forests. Hunter noted that in this forest tract the purchases were mostly made by native merchants from Devgunj in Jalpaiguri district, and from Kangtapukhuri in Natore in Rajshahi district; the timber was intended chiefly for building boats. The advances were made to men called, *dafadars*, who employed workmen at monthly wages; and each of them contracted to deliver what was called a *dhura* of timber at a specified place on a river bank, from which it could be floated down stream.¹⁷ Hunter further informed us that from twenty-five to thirty *dafadars* were usually employed every year. In order to superintend the *dafadars* to settle with the owners of the forest, and bring the timber home, the merchant employed a man called a *Charandar*, who was allowed Rs. 3 a month for nine months in the year. On the Tista, the usual expense of bringing out a *dhura* of Sal timber was as follows :- For the *Charandar* or agent, Rs. 27; rent, say Rs. 50; for floating the timber to Fakirganj, two logs being tied to a canoe, one on each side, a rupee for each log, Rs. 126; for the wood-cutters, Rs. 150; total Rs. 353.¹⁸ This was the rate and usual expense in and around 1876. On an average, about two *dhuras* or 252 logs might be cut out yearly on account of Europeans.

Following the foot steps of the European timber traders indigenous people of higher social hierarchy or *Bhadroloks* entered into this business. They comprised both Hindus and Muslims. First of them was Beharilal Ganguly who hailed all the way from Jessore. He, somehow, got the news that by clearing the forests the entrepreneurs were establishing Tea Estates in Duars. He came to purchase these timbers for business.¹⁹ It is also known that main business centre of Beharilal Ganguly was at Boyra river port in Rangpur. From thence big canoes reached Jalpaiguri to carry timbers, and navigable Tista river helped to transport timber to Rangpur.²⁰

Ananda Gopal Ghose's article referred to was based on the claims of the oral tradition of Jalpaiguri. This tradition may help us with materials in writing this history of timber trade. But we cannot clutter up our pages with dates and supporting written documents. However, this does not mean that we are going to spice up facts with fiction, and let no one rush to the conclusion that all this is speculation. It is based on facts, professionally verified and logical analysis.

According to this tradition major centres of timber trade in Western Duars were Lataguri, Odlabari, Chalsa, Damanpur, Gayerkata etc. All these localities were under the Bhutan Government before 1865. From the late seventies of the 19th century Bengalis of prosperous families invested capital in timber trade. One of such families was the Lahiri family of Sukhani, once a prosperous port adjacent to Rajgunj in Jalpaiguri district. Rameswar Lahiri, contemporary with Beharilal Ganguly was a big timber merchant. Even today this family lives at Sukhani in 'Lahiri Para' (Locality of the Lahiris) named after this family. In early decades of the 20th century notable indigenous timber merchant of this district was Durgamohan Basu who had many business centres in Duars. His son Prafulla Kumar Basu was also a reputed timber trader. His main centre of operations was Meteli, a northern most locality of this district.

Siliguri, a sub-division of the district of Darjeeling had a flourishing timber trade business of the indigenous people. Among them Abdul Gaffar Khan, Ganesh Roy, Suresh Joardar, Rajendra Datta Majumdar, Madhusudan Chottopadhyaya, Atul Chandra Datta, Nibaran Chandra Ghatak, Tinkari Kundu and Dr. Satya Kumar Roy are some of the names to be mentioned.²¹ This has been corroborated by another writer named Pradyut Kumar Basu, a pleader who noted that from the late 19th century to early decades of the 20th century timber trade was a flourishing business of the locality and timber trade was almost a Bengali monopoly.²² He further noted that an advocate named Kalikinkar Singha had an old store-house of timber (kathgola) and such a store-house of timber was also possessed by Dr. Rashiklal Ghosh. In his memoir he has further noted that in 1925 he saw in Siliguri a good number of established Bengali timber traders of whom Manmathanath Sarkar, Bireshwar Chottopadhyaya, Promoderanjan Bhowmick and Narendranath Roy were renowned timber traders.²³

Recently I went to Lataguri along with my friend to meet a senior citizen named Mr. Niranjan Mukherjee, an old-timer, who has a first hand knowledge about the timber trade of the Bengalis in Duars since nineteen forties. His family came at Lataguri from Jessore and intimated us that timber business was also run in this area by the people from Khulna and Barisal – all the three are South Bengal districts. His father, Durgapada Mukherjee was the first generation to enter into timber business, but he recollected information handing down from earlier generations. He told us that in this business there were some Hindi-speaking people of Western India and one of them was Dilip Singh, but most of the timber traders of this area were the Bengalis. He called back to mind some of them who were older than him by fifty to sixty years. He remembered one Satish Chandra Roy who came from Barisal and established himself as timber magnet in Gayerkata. Other two timber businessmen at Gayerkata were Hiralal Ghosh and Binode Sarkar. Durgadas Mitra and Santi Biswas's timber business centre was at Binnaguri. Chhakmal Agarwala, Gopal Mukherjee and Monotosh Majumdar worked at Odlabari, Chalsa

and Lataguri respectively. Satish Chandra Kundu began his timber business at Banarhat and Panchanon Nag at Birpara. Incidentally he informed us that the Rajbansis of North Bengal who were the early settlers in this area were not interested in timber trade and worked as labourers. Be that as it may, according to the claims of the local traditions the Western Duars was dotted with various timber trade centres run mainly by the Bengalis of higher strata of the society, and none of them was of local origin. The relocation or immigration of the South Bengal people to North Bengal to earn livelihood is a peculiar feature of this period. Before the arrival of the higher castes the labourers as immigrants from South Bengal, particularly the Muslims populated this area effecting a demographic change. This has been corroborated by Binoy Choudhury. He writes, "In Rangpur, however, particularly in the northern parganas, the immigrant labour was mostly Muslim and the first initiative in this was taken by the Raja of Baikantapur. The immigration, beginning soon after the Permanent Settlement considerably increased during the next two decades. While by 1793 the Muslim population in Baikantapur was 'numerically of no account', in 1809 Buchanon found nearly half of the population to be Muslims, and, indeed, in some police stations they actually outnumbered the Hindus."²⁴

Last but not least, Buddhadev Guha, a Chartered Accountant turned forest based novelist in Bengali wrote in one of his novels that his father, who was also a Chartered Accountant, had many clients who used to do big timber business, namely, S.N. Ghosh and Company, Standard Timber Company, B.N. Guha and Company etc. Standard Timber Company mainly operated in Burma for *Segun* (teak) timber. B.N. Guha and Company's major areas of operations were Russel kunda, Buxa, Nepal and Bhutan borders. One of the business-partners of B.N. Guha and Company was Buddhadev Guha whose centre of business was Dacca. And all the way from Dacca this Company used to come to purchase timber from Buxa, Bhutan and Nepal borders.²⁵

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