

## **From Forest Wealth to Timber Trade: A Trajectory of Change in Forest Policies under the Colonial Rule in North Bengal.**

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**Abstract:** *From time immemorial, Forest played an important role in maintaining ecology as well as in fulfilling the human needs. In the Mauryan period realising the importance of the vast forest tracts the Mauryan ruler took rigid step to protect the Forest Wealth. In the Colonial regime from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, impetus was given to the development of communication and transport system in North Bengal. A portion of North Bengal was covered with dense forest consisting of valuable trees. Prior to the Colonial rule the use of principal forest produce for commercial purpose was not in vogue in the North Bengal region. For serving the Colonial needs the forests of North Bengal were exploited by the Colonial Government. The Colonial masters generated a handsome profit by utilizing the forest resources of North Bengal. Here an attempt has been made to represent the use of principal forest wealth i.e different kinds of wood or timber for commercial purpose in Colonial North Bengal.*

**Key words:** commercialization, north bengal, colonial, economy, timber- trade, merchant,

The region of North Bengal is a treasure trove of natural resources like dense forests, mineral resources to name a few, all of which were used for various purposes. With the arrival of the British due to the Charter Act of 1833, these free traders realised the importance of the region as a source of natural resources. Of these resources, the most lucrative for the British traders was timber. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the English traders paid attention to timber- trade. The importance of timber to British becomes evident from a letter drafted by the Collector of Purnia S. Heatly on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1790, where he reported that timber was one of the principal items imported from Nepal and the value of this import to Purnia, as per his estimate, was Rs. 70,000.<sup>1</sup> In 1797, Captain Hiran Cox, British Resident at Rangoon testified to the durability of Burma teak- ships. Timber from Sal, Pine and Fir trees were important for building masts and spare parts of ships as well as for other purposes and hence timber was of pressing necessity to the Colonial interests of the company. Initially, timber was imported from Burma at a very high price. It was felt that supply of timber from Burma might be hampered; thus the Company turned towards Nepal. In 1801 Captain Cox, the first British Resident at Kathmandu, was instructed to obtain the privileges of cutting and transporting timber on a contractual

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basis as he found the Government of Nepal was disinclined to come to terms with the seizure of the forest lands.<sup>2</sup> Francis Buchanan has left a graphic account of the timber-trade between Purnia and Nepal during the years 1809-10. According to him, the timber was floated down the River Kosi of Nepal. Dr. Buchanan Hamilton also referred to the timber-trade from Nepal talking of its importance especially with the woods of Bhutan getting exhausted.<sup>3</sup> Huge quantity of timber was floated down the various branches of the Kankayi river into the Mahananda. For this timber trade, a duty of four rupees on each boat loaded with timber was collected by the government of Nepal.<sup>4</sup> In 1833 the Nepal Durbar earned Rs.10 lakhs as revenue from Terai regions out of which Rs.3 lakhs came from the timber trade.<sup>5</sup> It is not easy to deny that there was an extensive trade of timber from Nepal by the merchants of the East India Company. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the import of timber from Nepal to India assumed a spectacular dimension. However from 1868, the Nepal Durbar employed their own officials to cut down timber which was afterwards sold through royal auction at different depots. By 1877 timber was no longer sold to British contractors and the Durbar did not allow the merchants from India to fell and remove timber from the forests for themselves.<sup>6</sup> The extensive fraud committed by the subordinate officials of the Nepal sovereign compelled the Durbar to prohibit this sale of timber and to restrict excessive export of timber from Nepal.

Owing to internal disturbances in Nepal and partly owing to alleged misconduct of some Indian and English traders, there was a sharp decline in the volume of timber trade in the last decade of the nineteenth century. At this point, they shifted their focus to the forest-wealth of North Bengal. Realizing the importance of the woods like the Baikunthapur forests the British East India Company employed some people in this region for conducting timber-trade at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup>

Timber from North Bengal was used to build sleepers required for lying railway tracks in India as well as in the tea plantation industries and even for various construction works. Among the vast forests in the Darjeeling sub-division, the most important forest tracts for supplying timber were:

- i) Mahaldiram tract was well-stocked with timber of all kinds – oak, magnolia, chestnut etc.
- ii) Panchar, a large tract of forest was very well-stocked with trees like Chilauni, fir, sal etc.
- iii) Outer hills, from Rangthang to the Tista River, were well stocked with Sal, fir and other trees. The hills from Sivak up the valley of the Tista, had nearly all the good Sal trees.

Timber from Sal trees was very useful for building railway sleepers while fir timber was used for making tea boxes.

Like Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri District also contained several extensive and fine forest tracts. In the regulation part of the district, located in the extreme north, there was an extensive and valuable Sal forest known as Baikunthapur Jungle Mahal under the possession of the Raikat or Raja of Baikunthapur. In 1809 Dr. Buchanan Hamilton mentioned that the woods of Battris – hazari i.e trees of Baikunthapur had been nearly exhausted most of their valuable Sal and Sisu trees that were exported contained a great abundance of timber. The total forest area under Baikunthapur covered an area of 219,227.5 acres or 342.54 square miles and was a private property held by the Raikat of Jalpaiguri. Besides Baikunthapur, Hunter mentioned seven forest- tracts in the western Duars located in the following areas (i) Bhalka Pargana, (2) Bhatibari Pargana, (3) Buxa Pargana, (4) Madari and Charoa Kshattriya Parganas, (5) Lakshimpur Pargana, (6) Maraghat Pargana, (7) Mainaguri Pargana. The total area of the forest tracts of Jalpaiguri district exclusive of the Baikunthapur jungle Mahal was 41,737 acres.<sup>8</sup> Most of the forests of Jalpaiguri District contained valuable Sal and Sisu trees along with many kinds of common regional trees.

In 1835 the area particularly between the Kyal and the Balasan region on the east and the Rangnu and the Mahanadi (Mahananda) region on the west, was entirely covered with dense forests and was practically uninhabited. From 1839 onwards, East India Company started the cultivation and manufacture of tea in Darjeeling. Consequently, the expansion of tea gardens in the areas of Darjeeling resulted in the conversion of vast forest tracts into cultivated land, where the Company started to grow tea for its own interest. Thus the rapid clearance of forest considerably extended in Darjeeling. The hill areas between the Mechi and the Balasan as well as between Tista and Mahanadi (Mahananda) were taken over by the Company in 1850 with the Kalimpong subdivision being annexed to it in 1865. Both these newly annexed areas witnessed rapid deforestation for extension of cultivation and a large influx of settlers, increasing the population of the region.

Prior to 1863, the British Government paid little attention to the conservation of forests. As a result the British Government carried out its policy of felling trees indiscriminately. As the prices of fuel and timber rapidly increased with gradual deforestation, the Colonial Government could no longer remain indifferent to the dangers of deforestation. Gradually, the Colonial Government began to realise the problems stemming from the over exploitation of the forest reserves of India and the Colonial Government tried to save the remaining forests from total destruction, thereby introducing measures for forest conservation.

In 1865 Government Forest Act introduced a definite Colonial policy regarding the forests in India. So, naturally forests of North Bengal too came under the purview of this Colonial Forest policy. To implement the conservation of forests in North Bengal,

Dr. T. Anderson was temporarily appointed as the Conservator of Forest. Dr. Anderson was entrusted with the work of carrying out preliminary investigation and inquiries regarding the northern part of the province, i.e. the Eastern Himalayas including Sikkim and the belt of Sal forest at the foot hills of the Terai and Duars. In August 1864 forest conservancy was formally introduced in Bengal and the first reserves were notified in 1865 within the Darjeeling Division.<sup>9</sup> With the reservation of Darjeeling Division being notified as early as 1865, but till 1874 the Forests of Darjeeling District fell within the Cooch Behar Forest Division. In 1875, the Darjeeling forests were taken out of the Cooch Behar Division and marked as a separate Division with the hill portion of Kalimpong and Kurseong also being included in this Darjeeling Division. In 1878 the Reserved Forests of the Darjeeling District comprised of three separate regions viz. Darjeeling Division, Kurseong Division and Kalimpong Division. According to Dash, there was 2,80,000 acres of reserved forests within the three divisions of Darjeeling District.

In 1879, it was notified that 280 square miles of forest areas will be treated as reserved forest in Jalpaiguri.<sup>10</sup> The reserved forests of Jalpaiguri District were divided into two divisions, the Jalpaiguri and Buxa divisions. The forests of Jalpaiguri division was situated between the Tista and Torsa rivers while those of the Buxa division stretched from the East of the Torsa river to the Alipurduar subdivision. In 1911, the total forest area under Jalpaiguri Division and Buxa division was 182 square miles and 327 square miles. The Baikunthapur forest which was a private property of 342.54 square miles belonged to the Raikat of Baikunthapur wherein the Colonial Government tried to impose the Forest Act. According to Gruning, the Colonial Government had decided as early as 1904 to bring this region under purview of the Forest Act to this forest and in June 1908 a preliminary notification was issued to this effect. But the manager of the estate strongly protested against the imposition of the Forest Act by the Government on the Baikunthapur forest. Due to the strong protest, the forest department could only extend their control over this forest in 1913. The British by extending the Forest Act in North Bengal attempted to colonize the forest wealth and natural resources of North Bengal.

The implementation of forest conservation by the British in North Bengal allowed the Colonial Government to commercialize these, which is evident from the large scale export of timber from North Bengal to the other parts of Bengal. Dr. Anderson, the Conservator of Forests in a report on the feasibility of forest operations in Duars during the Anglo-Bhutanese War (1865) remarked that: --

“The Western Duars themselves are very thinly populated and the requirements of the people are very small indeed. On the other hand timber is much in demand in the districts south of the Duars, especially in Cooch Behar, Rungpore and the Western part of the Dacca presidency”.<sup>11</sup>

The forest department was also optimistic that timber of North Bengal could replace the more expensive timber from Oudh and Nepal in the markets of East Bengal and they would soon be able to gain a handsome profit from this trade. Despite the timber markets in Eastern Bengal it was the Construction of North Bengal Railways and the tea industries here that provided the forest department with the much-needed market for its products. At this outset, the Colonial Government failed to chalk out a plan, but its wishful aim to utilise the forests of North Bengal for financial gain succeeded very soon. At the primary stage the Railway Department was the main buyer of the timber from the forest department. The Colonial Government hoped to commercialize the forests on the basis of the demand of the railway sleepers. However, a peculiar rule of the railways prevented the Railway Companies from dealing directly with the Forest Department. The Forest Department was compelled to sell the timber for railway sleepers to the designated contractors who then sold it to the Railway Companies. In the year 1865, one Mr. Dear secured the monopoly over the forests in the entire region of the Darjeeling District for supplying railway sleepers.<sup>12</sup> Apart from such European Contractors one also finds the references of Native contractors engaged in supplying large number of railway sleepers.<sup>13</sup> Due to this rule at the outset the Forest Department could not improve its timber trade. For developing the timber trade & to save the Department from losses the Government thought of changing its policy and started departmental operations of the Forests of North Bengal. E.P. Dansey, the then Forest Conservator informed & advised the Government to take a systematic series of steps to improve the commercialization of the timber trade in both the Jalpaiguri and Buxa division.<sup>14</sup>

The three reserved Divisions of Darjeeling i.e. Darjeeling Division, Kurseong Division & Kalimpong Division and the two reserved Divisions of Jalpaiguri i.e. Jalpaiguri Division & Buxa Division supplied the required timber to different parts of Eastern Bengal & North Bengal. In addition to the reserved forests, the timber of Khas Mahal or unreserved forests and Baikunthapur forests of Jalpaiguri also supplied timber. Sal timber cut from the forests of the western Duars and Baikunthapur was floated down to the Brahmaputra river, where the greater part of it was sent to Dacca and Sirajganj. This Sal timber exported to the markets of Eastern Bengal was mostly purchased by native merchants from Nator, Dacca and Rangpur. The timber exported from Jalpaiguri was primarily used by the native merchants of Eastern Bengal, chiefly for building boats. An important role in transporting timber was played by the numerous streams of the region, namely- Tista, Jaldhaka, Mujnai, Torsa, Kaljani and Sankosh. In the western Duars a timber depot was established at Domohoni. The Statistical Report of Feb, 1876 showed the export of 1310 and 1926 logs of timber from Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar respectively.<sup>15</sup> Main demand for timber was for making tea chests and railway sleepers. The forests of Jalpaiguri fulfilled the timber requirements for the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri. There was also an almost unlimited demand of Sal timber for constructing the

meter gauge as well as for building sleepers for the Eastern Bengal State Railways, Bengal and North Western Railways and Bengal Duars Railways. The timber for all these railways was supplied by the Jalpaiguri forests. Dacca and other places of Eastern Bengal procured a large quantity of Sal timber from North Bengal, which instead of being cut into railway sleepers, were taken by the local purchasers to Alipurduar, where it was sold to merchants coming from Dacca and Rangpur.<sup>16</sup> The timber being taken to Eastern Bengal was brought to Gitaldaha Junction, from where it was sent further east via the Eastern Bengal State Railway. The reserved forests of the Buxa division were rich in Sal, Sisu, Khayer and Magnolia trees. Hunter mentioned that much of the fine timber was cut from this forest, before the tract came into the hands of the British Government. From 1875 to 1888, the exploitation of forest resources was done departmentally, but during the next ten years departmental work was almost suspended and purchasers removed nearly the whole of the small out-turn obtained from the forests. From Buxa forest division to meet the demand of the railways, the number of sleepers supplied in 1879 was 18449, in 1880 it rose to 22683, in 1881 it was 29865 and in 1882 it was 21602.<sup>17</sup> During the four years from 1879 to 1882, 92,599 Sleepers were supplied for railways from Buxa forests. In 1899-1900, again the departmental operations began and sleepers were supplied to the Eastern Bengal State Railway. In 1911-1912 the Colonial Government supplied 1.5 lakh of Sal Sleepers for the Eastern Bengal State Railway and the Sara Bridge from Buxa and Goalpara divisions, earning a profit of about Rs.1,40,000.<sup>18</sup> In 1930-31, from Buxa division, timber extracted departmentally amounted to 16.8 percent of the total out-turn against 9.1 percent in the previous year owing to the large supply of sleepers to railways.<sup>19</sup> In 1933, the most noticeable trade was that of matchwood. 1858 tons of match wood was transported from the Buxa division to Calcutta during 1933-34. Further, from the North Borojhar Reserve of the Buxa division through an agreement with Messrs. Kanyalall Lakhiram of Beech Tea Estate, 23,760 cubic feet of Khair trees were sold for which the Government gained a royalty of Rs.5,197.80. In that year the total value of the sale of timber, fuel, bamboo, grazing and minor produce rose from Rs.380075 in the previous year to Rs.452414.<sup>20</sup> Sisu tree is an important tree found in the Buxa forests which is suitable for making tea-boxes. The forest department sold this wood at a very high rate to the tea garden owners. The tea garden owners were compelled to import the tea-boxes. To solve this problem the Colonial Government entrusted the duty of extracting timber from Buxa Reserve Forest to M/s Davenport and Company to produce locally tea-boxes. At Rajabhatkhawa within the Buxa Division, the Buxa Timber and Trading Company erected a veneer factory. The factory supplied the required three and five Ply boards for tea boxes. During World War-I, the company had gone into liquidation, but within a short time it showing signs of revival. E.P. Stebbing mentioned that in 1925 he had seen some beautiful three and five Ply boards in the factory.<sup>21</sup>

The forests of the Darjeeling Division had been used mainly to meet the local demand. The timber of the Darjeeling forests was mostly used as fuel for the tea estates, for tea box planking and constructional works. The box planking from the departmental saw mill at Sukna was sold to the local tea gardens. The total out-turn of timber of different kinds amounted to 7.75 millions of cubic feet during the year. In 1921 a departmental depot opened at Darjeeling for the continuous supply of charcoal showing satisfactory results.<sup>22</sup> Large quantities of firewood was consumed by the different tea estates while the Darjeeling Division forests supplied large quantities of firewood for the cantonments of Jalapahar, Lebong and Darjeeling Town.<sup>23</sup> This forest division supplied a small quantity of Sal timber which was exported from the Tista Valley. However, in 1920-21, large quantities of sleepers were sawn and supplied from this division to the Eastern Bengal Railway and Sal logs were sent to Messrs. Martin and Co. Calcutta and to Messrs. Howard Brothers. London for further dispatch.<sup>24</sup> The Kurseong division also exported large quantities of sal timber. The export of sal poles took place by cart to Kishanganj while sal and other logs and scantlings were sent by rail from Siliguri. Kurseong Division supplied large quantities of timber for the construction of bridges on the Ganges and for the Northern Bengal State Railway in 1877-78. In 1878, 12540 sleepers were supplied to Northern Bengal State Railway from Kurseong division.<sup>25</sup> In the hills, Kurseong and in the plains, Siliguri were the main markets for the produce of the forests of the Kurseong Division. In 1927, for timber business, three saw mills were opened at Siliguri; of which one was owned and operated by the forest department.<sup>26</sup> In its opening year, the Government saw-mills profited Rs.15458 and the gross revenue on sales of sawn timber from these mills amounted to Rs.125943 in 1929. In 1930, it was Rs.110759.<sup>27</sup> The forests of Kalimpong division supplied Sal timber for constructing the Tista Valley Cart Road, as well as for the tea industry in Jalpaiguri District.<sup>28</sup> From 1906-07 to 1922-23, 1186383 cubic feet of Sal timber, 3732675 cubic feet of other species of timber and 19590266 cubic feet of firewood were produced from Kalimpong division. The Colonial Government fully utilized the forest wealth, particularly the timber of North Bengal for commercial venture and colonial interest. However depression also hit this bustling timber business. In the Jalpaiguri and Buxa Divisions, departmental operations were reduced due to the slump in the timber market and the decrease in the demand of sleepers for railways. The sale of round Sal timber at the Government timber depot at Siliguri decreased from 21077 cubic feet to 20789 cubic feet, but the sale of sawn sal increased by about 8000 cubic feet and in spite of considerable reductions in sale prices the gross revenue collected on mill account increased by nearly Rs.11000. The trading account of the Siliguri Saw mill, however, showed a loss of Rs.982 on the year's working.<sup>29</sup>

The local people had very limited requirement of the timber or the principal forest produce. The British merchants and the Colonial Government looked at Timber as

a profitable commercial venture. Besides, railway sleepers and tea industries, there was a great demand of timber in Eastern Bengal for various uses. Sal and other hard-wood had a great demand for country boats and pleasure boats, plough, yoke, bullock carts, carts drawn by horses and palanquins. Demand for 'Sisu wood' was especially for making furniture. In the construction of brick buildings, for supporting roofs, the beam of 'Sal' wood was essential in those days. To meet these manifold demands in Eastern Bengal, the merchants from Dacca used to come to Buxa, Jalpaiguri, Baikunthapur and Eastern Duars to collect timber. As there was a great demand of timber in the markets of Eastern Bengal and also in the adjacent districts of North Bengal timber trade flourished at a large scale. Thus Baura, Sukhani, Lataguri, Domohani, Ramshai, Khagrijan, Malbazar, Naxalbari, Siliguri became important timber trading centres of North Bengal. For easy transportation of timber logs, the forest department also paid attention to the maintenance of roads and the Colonial Government opened branches of railway-line. In Jalpaiguri District between Rajabhatkhawa and Alipurduar, the road was maintained by the forest department, and as such much of the timber was carted to Alipurduar and floated down by the Kaljani river from that place. There were certain roads maintained by the forest department in the Darjeeling district. For carrying timber logs, branches of railway lines were opened from Rangpur and Parbatipur to Lataguri and from Lataguri to Meteli hill. The Colonial Government wanted to utilize the timber of North Bengal to generate a handsome profit from open market, but it was mostly used for serving the Colonial needs. Subhajit Roy in his book "Transformation on the Bengal Frontier, Jalpaiguri, 1765-1948" touched this issue and showed that it was the broader needs of the Colonial State, the forests in the Duars were utilized for their own exploitation.<sup>30</sup> His discussion was confined only to one of the forest divisions of Jalpaiguri district i.e. Buxa forests divisions. The picture was somewhat same in the Jalpaiguri Division and the three forest divisions of Darjeeling district. For the opening of Bengal Duars Railways in 1891-92, the Colonial Government made a free grant of mature sal trees and the value of this concession was amounted to Rs.30000.<sup>31</sup> So, the sum total effect of the timber production of North Bengal during Colonial rule in North Bengal was that large quantities of timber were used for railway sleepers, tea industries for serving the Colonial interest. The utilization of timber as a commercial venture and the commercial outlook of the Britishers also paved the path for the involvement and emergence of the native Bengalees in timber trade in North Bengal.

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