INTRODUCTION

Natural forests run through and through with the human civilization. Early communities of hunters and fishermen regarded the natural forests in which they lived as a form of property, either private or owned in common, and were ready to fight intruders to defend their assumed rights. As civilization and agriculture developed, private ownership of tracts of woodland became established in most countries, often taking the form of feudal systems of forest exploitation. The typical pattern of forest management in medieval Europe, for example, was the ownership of large tracts of woodland by kings and barons. Many forests, however, were additionally subject to the rights of the peasants, in well-organized communes, to gather fuel, timber and litter for use on their own properties, and to pasture defined numbers of sheep, goats, and cattle on the forest wastes. Hunting rights were vested solely in the feudal lord, and he also held the sole right to fell and export timber, often to distant cities. Regulations or forest laws, were essential for this system to work in an orderly fashion, and these laws were initially aimed at protecting game and defining rights and responsibilities. Such rules, however, were evolved in Europe before the middle of the eleventh century. During this period forest and forest animals and birds were being destroyed at random. In due order Europe felt the necessity of protecting the forests as well as its living creatures. With this end in view William the Conqueror of England introduced series of laws after 1066 A. D. According to these laws penalties for infringements were severe, and peasants who slew deer illegally faced the death sentence.[1] These laws, however, were bitterly resented by the Anglo-Saxons for generations thereafter.

Timber gradually assumed economic importance as commerce developed and forests in Europe diminished through over-felling, over-grazing by livestock, and clearance for agriculture. In England, King Edward IV promulgated a law for the regeneration of cut over woodland by the exclusion of cattle as early as 1482. In France and Germany special laws for the protection and extension of the forests and the protection of agricultural lands by means of the forests had long been in operation and similar laws existed in the Italian states.[2] In Indian scenario economic importance of forests was known from earliest times. The forests were of great economic value to the Indo-Aryans of the Rig-Vedic age. In the first place, they served as natural pastures.[3] Secondly, they were utilized as burial places and probably also as cremation grounds. Thirdly, a hymn of the Rigveda[4] makes it apparent that certain classes of people used to live in the forest tracts. Lastly, they provided the householder with the materials for the construction of houses, chariots, sacrificial implements and the like. Above all, they were a constant source of fuel to the community.[5] It is no wonder, therefore, that the people regularly

prayed that the trees and the plants would be endowed with sweetness so that they might conduce to the benefit of the people --

"To us Herbs and Forest trees be gracious".[6]

Again,

"May herbs that grow on ground and Heaven
And Earth accordant with Forest-Sovrans and both the
World-halves round about protect us."[7]

Various hymns of Rigveda show that there was some form of social control over the forests. But the systematic management had its true beginnings in the German states during the sixteenth century.[8] It was prompted by the need of the landowners to maintain a steady personal income from timber exports, while at the same time ensuring the provision of firewood and timber for local use by their feudal tenants. The classic solution was the working plan, under which each forest property was divided into sections for timber felling and regeneration. The aim was to sustain a steady annual yield of produce-and therefore a regular annual income -- for all the foreseeable future. This called for accurate maps as well as assessments of the timber volume of standing timber crops, together with their expected rates of growth. Professional foresters had to be knowledgeable in geology, soil science and meteorology, as well as in botany, economics, and technical aspects of timber marketing, and their calling attracted able men with university training.

During the nineteenth century the reputation of German foresters stood so high that they were employed in most continental European countries, and also by the British in their vast Indian and colonial forests. Early American foresters, including the great conservation pioneer Gifford Pinchot, gained their training at European centres. But the doctrine of responsible control had to fight a hard battle against timber merchants who sought quick profits in the exploitation of natural forests without regard to their renewal. The twentieth century has seen the steady growth of national forest laws and policies designed to protect woodlands as enduring assets. The character of these laws and policies reflect "national political philosophies". In communist countries all forests are owned by the state. In the United States both the federal and State Governments have deemed it prudent to hold substantial areas of natural forest, and allows commercial companies and private individuals to own other areas outright. Similar patterns of ownership are found over most of Asia, Western Europe, and in the British Commonwealth.[9] In Japan the extensive forests are largely state owned. Incidentally, India as a British colony formed a state owned Forest policy but initially allowed the existence of private ownership of forests in parallel. Tribal ownership is found in many African countries and proves a serious

obstacle to effective modern management. Private owners are nowhere wholly free from government control. Government operates in various ways, including taxation of profits, licensing permits for timber fellings, and requirements to restock cut over land. As timber is valuable for industrial raw material and conservation of soil and water, some form of centralized control becomes imperative. Every developed country has, therefore, established a forestry department, research stations, and training centres for professional foresters. International Co-operation is effected by the Forestry Department of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, with headquarters in Rome.

In post modern period every country, whether big or small, thinks that forests are the essence of environment and are considered essential for the maintenance of physical features of a country. History preserves cases where the destruction of forests had resulted in the decimation of civilizations. Civilizations which once bloomed on the Indian subcontinent and the Mediterranean coast of North Africa died because they denuded the land that supported them and, in the process, left behind a belt of deserts which now stretch from Rajasthan through Sindh, Baluchistan, Iran, Iraq, Arabia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt to Tunisia and Morocco. It is thus aptly said that forests precede civilizations and deserts follow them.[10]

There is a possibility of such occurrences even today. Today, although about 30 per cent of the globe is still covered with trees, only a fifth of that original primeval forest remains intact. These ancient forests survive in some of the remotest places on earth — Siberia, northern Canada, Papua New Guinea, Amazonia, and the Congo Basin in West and Central Africa. But even these remnants are increasingly threatened by uncontrolled logging, oil and mineral exploitation, road and dam building, industrial development and the impact of poor, often landless farmers who are forced to clear forests to survive. [11]

As recently as fifty years ago, 15 per cent of the earth's land surface was covered in tropical rain forests; today less than half is left. Worldwide, almost half a million hectares of forest are destroyed or seriously degraded each week. Large-scale forest destruction is often followed by climate disruption which, in drier countries with poor soils, often leads to desertification. This problem of growing deserts now affects over 100 countries worldwide and is almost always associated with forest destruction.[12]

Thus it seems that forest is in trouble and it is clear that there is a global crisis facing forests, and that there are just as many problems occurring in the developed countries of the North (weakening of natural forests as a result of human influences) as there are in the developing world (due to over population, poverty, unemployment and industrial development).

However, the most direct cause of forest degradation and loss today is the activities of the international timber trade, and logging is the single important cause.

All these are the legacies of the reckless activities of man in the past. Modern research in history reflects the diversities of approach which have been characteristic of recent historiography. Modern historians all over the world have now shown interest in reviewing forest operations in different parts of the world, and the Indian historians are not far behind. To enrich the diversities of approach modern scholars in India like Ajay Singh Rawat, Ramchandra Guha, Neeladri Bhattacharya, M.V. Nadkarni and others have recently devoted themselves to examine the colonial approach to forest settlement and reactions of the people in different places of India. There are many perspectives in a single problem. At the backdrop of this, taking a cue from them I thought to examine the history of the forest settlement in two districts of North Bengal (Northern part of present West Bengal), namely, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri and allied problems thereto. Primarily my objective was to trace the various stages through which the forests of these two districts had passed during the development of the country under the British rule. But this simple approach does not take into account the fact that all segments of Indian society – wealthy persons, peasants, tribes, pastoralists, slum-dwellers and industry – have a heavy dependence on the produce of the forests, as the source of fuel, fodder, construction, or raw material for processing. To see whether these things troubled the British in their attempt to forest settlement and management in the said two districts urged me onward to select this subject in consultation with Dr. Anandagopal Ghosh and Dr. Ratna Roy Sanyal as my Ph.D. thesis.

B. Ribbertrop in 'Forestry in British India' and then E.P. Stebbing in 'The Forests of India' described the history of the Forestry in India. But their approach to the northern part of Bengal is too sketchy to have a clear idea of the whole problems allied to the forest settlement in this part of Bengal. No detailed studies so far have been made on these two districts, let alone micro studies. In the absence of detailed studies on the administrative, social, economic and commercial history of these two districts the present study provides a preliminary mapping of the various dimensions of the forest-based problems in British India. Through a synthesis of the available existence from both primary and secondary source materials, I have tried to indicate the quite astonishing range of problems. It is not so quiet as the forests look. I wish to enter the forests.

I have made use of English and Bengali source materials in writing this thesis. I have fully utilized the available sources preserved in West Bengal State Archives in Calcutta and National Archives of India in New Delhi. I have also collected documents from the Office of the Conservator of Forests, Hill Circle, Darjeeling, Divisional Forest Office, Darjeeling, Office of

the Conservator of Forests, Northern Circle, Jalpaiguri. These district records came to my help much. Besides, I have utilized the National Library, Calcutta and made use of the library of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. I have also got much benefit from the library of the Divisional Commissioner's Office, Jalpaiguri. In addition to these, to some extent I have used oral tradition kept in the memory of senior citizens of the locality. Many of the sources I have used were not examined so far by other historians. While preparing this thesis I tried to depend mostly on primary sources, but in certain cases I selectively drew from the secondary sources as well. One source led me to the next, but, also, one problem led me to another.

The scheme of this thesis is roughly chronological, but there are frequent overlaps in the different chapters. A policy touched upon in one may be fully developed in another; or a plan told from one point of view in one chapter may in the next be retold from another angle.

The observant reader will detect inconsistencies in the spelling of the Indian names in this work. Whenever I have been free to do so, I have followed the spelling of the 'Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary of Current English' compiled by AS Hornby and Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary edited by William Geddie, but there are many names so familiar to the Britishers and Germans that it would be pedantic not to use the form with which they were familiar, and in the case of quotations the original spelling has been maintained.

At the beginning of my effort I only saw the twig of the trees from a distance. Then I plucked up courage to enter the forests. Gradually I am like a parachutist coming down in unknown territory: at first knowing only a few yards of forest land around me, and by degrees extending my exploitation in each direction. As I pursued each line of investigation I left it to a fairly late stage before I attempted to familiarize myself with the available historical writings and documents left by the British and German foresters, and here my debt to them will be apparent.