

A DISCOURSE ON SAL TIMBER TRADING IN GOALPARA DISTRICT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE BODOS OF ASSAM DURING COLONIAL RULE

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ABSTRACT:

*The old Goalpara district of Assam was lying in the extreme western part which has rich unexplored historical data. Goalpara with its rich natural resources housed the Landlords of the Gauripur Zamindary Estate, Parbatjoar Estate, Chapar, Mechpara, Koraihari and Bijni Raj Estates. The main inhabitants of the district were the Bodos, Garos, Rabhas and the Rajbangshis. These estates were full of heavy forests with valuable Sal trees (*Shorea Robusta*). The Zamindars through the system of leasing Forest Mahal to local bidders extracted the Sal trees for selling to the merchants from Dacca, Pabna, Sirajganj etc of Bengal and Bihar. The forest Mahal leasees employed local inhabitants of the district viz the Bodos, the Garos, the Rabhas and the Rajbangshis as labourers. As the Bodos were dwellers of forests took full advantages of the system of Sal extraction and the selling from sale depots situated at Bilasipara, Sapotgram, Bagribari and Saraishor Dabri. By engaging themselves in the Sal timber extraction and trading some Bodos gained livelihood and even became rich and wealthy. Those Bodo people later took leading role in arousing consciousness among the Bodos by voicing national identity polemics. In this paper attempt has been made to trace and highlight the unexplored historical knowledge for its dissemination among the stakeholders and interest groups.*

Key Words: *Extraction, Goalpara, Identity-consciousness, Sal Timber, Wealthy, Zamindary-system etc.*

INTRODUCTION:

Goalpara was a name of a district lying in the extreme western part of Assam with rich unexplored historical data. Now that district has been further subdivided into five new districts viz Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Bongaigaon and Mancachar. Economically viable district of Goalpara housed many Landlords or the

Zamindars who sustained until India attained its independence in 1947. They were Gauripur Zamindary Estate, Parbatjoar Estate, Chapar, Mechpara, Koraibari and Bijni Raj Estates. Zamindary system like that of Bengal province prevailed in that part of the country. The eastern boundary of Goalpara was bounded by the river Manas beyond which Ryotwari system in place of Zamindary system prevailed, because of which Goalpara is sometimes called the Bengal district of Assam. The main inhabitants of the district were the Bodos, Garos, Rabhas and the Rajbangshis who speak a dialect called the Goalparia Bhasa different from Assamese proper but Bengali verbal. On the other hand, the Bodos, the Garos and the Rabhas scheduled as tribals, speak their own dialects and languages with their own people and Goalparia Bhasa with others.

The British administrators and the Landlords remained engaged themselves with the collection of land revenue and exploitation of natural resources. The region of Goalpara is the natural habitat of the Sal (*Shorea Robusta*) species. The Sal for its robust and enduring qualities drew attraction and attention of both the Landlords and the British Colonial Administrators. The Landlords, as well as Colonial Administrators, for fulfilling their selfish motives of collecting more revenue ever remained busy cutting down Sal trees unscrupulously without least consideration of the consequences of such wanton destruction. On the wanton cutting of the Sal trees, W.W. Hunter reported that the Bengal woodcutters were found exceedingly busy cutting down whatever Sal trees they wanted in the valuable Sal forests of the Eastern *Duars*, in Goalpara District. The number of partial used trees (trunks only) lying on the ground provided ample evidence of such cuttingsⁱ. Woodcutters acted entirely on their own interests as suited them, as they were in no way restricted as to size or quantity of the wood, they cutⁱⁱ.

The colonial administrators expressed concern over the excessive operations of forest products and conceived the idea of preservation of Sal trees of the Government estates in the Eastern *Duars* and in the estates of the minor Raja of Bijni which was under the management of the Court of Wards. For Sal tree extraction from the Government Estates of Eastern *Duars* and for departmental working for the clearance of fire lines, the British administrators mitigated the shortage of manpower by employing the Bodos and other tribes from forest villages as labourers. The forest villagers were granted free trees for their own use in return for work done.

LOCAL INHABITANTS:

The Bodos formed most of the population in the Eastern *Duars* numbering 8752 adult malesⁱⁱⁱ. They were scattered all over Goalpara both north and south bank of the river Brahmaputra and throughout Assam and parts of North Eastern Bengal. They were an offshoot of the original great Bodo race. They seem to have no country from which they could trace their origin. Their dwelling places were situated near hills or forests. They

were also called as *Mech and Kacharis* by their neighbours^{iv}. *Meches* were the most numerous class in the Eastern *Duars*^v. In more clear dialogue, they were known as *Mech* in the Western part of the *Duars*, but in the more Eastern parts, they were called indiscriminately *Mech* or Kacharis and again farther East in Assam they were called by the name of Kachari alone losing the name of *Mech* altogether. Although different names like the *Meches*, the Kacharis were given to them by different castes and communities in various places but, they were undoubtedly the same people from the same stock speaking the same language i.e. Bodo. The Bodos lived in the forests and hills amidst nature for procuring every kind of natural food- meats, fishes, vegetables, etc. The meat of pigs and fowls were their favourite food. A kind of spirituous drink called *Jou*^{vi} was prepared by them which they drink in every occasion.

They claim themselves as Hindus, but they retained a considerable portion of belief in their old religion called Bathou, the chief characteristics of which is a regular sacrifice of pigs, fowls, pigeons etc to the good and evil spirits^{vii}. Probably, because the practices were not in conformity with the system of Brahmanical Hinduism, they couldn't be accommodated in the Hindu categorization of caste hierarchies. If, at all any Bodo intends to embrace Hinduism he was allowed to do so only after changing his tribe to caste by giving up his religious practices, traditions, customs and language. The Bodos have their own language which is one of the branches of the Indo-Mongoloid Linguistic groups. In the polyglot Assam, the Bodos of undivided Goalpara adapted themselves to speak trilingual- Bodo, Assamese and Bengali. In addition to their own language, the Bodos of undivided Goalpara district understood Assamese and Bengali and they spoke those languages in dealing with the people who are other members than their own tribe^{viii}. As per the Census Report of 1872, the number of Bodo in Goalpara was 22,755 and 29,877 was of *Meches*^{ix}. In the Eastern *Duars*, they were still more numerous^x.

The Bodos occupied the major forest areas of Goalpara district which lies north of Gauripur town. The deep forest cover starts from Rupsi widening further and further towards North-East direction, covering the areas of Parbotjoar, Guma, Ripoo, Cheerung, Sidli and Bijni *Duars*. From the report of B.C. Allen, it is reflected that the Bodos were poor not only in materials but in mental health too. The *Duars* were a very unprogressive portion of the district. The greater number of populations of those *Duars* was Bodos. They were in a very primitive and undeveloped state. The Communication and transportation system except river routes were bad^{xi}. Except trade in timber from the Government reserves there was no market. No any other trading activity was found in that portion of the country. The surplus products of the *Duars* were bartered with merchants who come up the rivers with boatloads of pottery and dried fish. The rate of exchange was generally very favourable to the trader. The rate of revenues as compared with Assam proper were distinctly low. In view of the backward condition of the people and the country, Government didn't take any step to enhance the existing rate^{xii}.

The lakes or *bils*, marshes and rivers are the gift of nature to the undivided Goalpara district of which Tamrangabil of Khuntaghat Pargana, Upadbil of Habraghat Pargana and the Saras (Saraishor) beel (lake) of Parbotjoar Pargana were important lakes or *bils*. The navigable important rivers of Goalpara were Manas, the Godadhar or Gangadhar, the Sankos or the Suvarnakos, the Tipkai and the Bamnai rivers which rise in the Bhutan hills. All of those rivers were more or less navigable during rainy season^{xiii}. Several large and important forests existed in the Eastern *Duars*, as well as in Goalpara proper, which yielded good profit. The Sal Timber trade of the *Duars* and of Parbotjoar and other parganas had contributed considerably to the wealth and prosperity of the District^{xiv}. The progress Report on Forest Administration in Assam for 1874-75, revealed that prior to that year there had been no conservancy or realization of revenue proper from the Government forests^{xv}. The report was worked out from a General Inspection and the survey of the forests of the province which was conducted in 1869-70.

The British administrators and the Landlords remained engaged themselves with the collection of land revenue and exploitation of natural resources. Their main attraction was on the Sal (*Shorea Robusta*), the special gift of nature to the region of Goalpara. For their own monetary benefits, the Landlords, as well as Colonial Administrators, ever remained busy cutting down Sal trees unscrupulously without least consideration of the consequences of such wanton destruction. On the wanton cutting of the Sal trees, W.W. Hunter reported that the Bengal woodcutters were found exceedingly busy cutting down whatever Sal trees they wanted in the valuable Sal forests of the Eastern *Duars*, in Goalpara District. The number of partial used trees (trunks only) lying on the ground provided ample evidence of such cuttings^{xvi}. As per the system, they only paid Rs 4.4.0 (8s. 6d) per axe for a year, from which the rate per tree of Rs 0.2.8. (4d) could be calculated. The timber-cutters brought down fifty logs by each man which were cut out two logs each from a tree. At that time, logs realized on the Brahmaputra was Rs 10 to Rs 15 (L 1 to L 1,10s.0d) per pair. Woodcutters acted entirely on their own interests as suited them, as they were in no way restricted as to size or quantity of the wood, they cut^{xvii}.

The colonial administrators themselves too were alarmed at the excessive exploitations of forest products which had become the matter of concerned. They were compelled to conceive the idea of preservation of Sal trees of the Government estates in the Eastern *Duars* and in the estates of the minor Raja of Bijni which was under the management of the Court of Wards. W.W. Hunter in his *Gazetteer of Goalpara District* cited the government notification of prohibitory order imposed under recent arrangement on felling of Sal timber (*Shorea Robusta*) in the Eastern *Duars*, in Government estates and in the estates of the minor Raja of Bijni which was under the management of the Court of Wards. The department of the Conservator of Forests had planned for the preservation of the Sal trees in the Eastern *Duars*^{xviii}.

They left no stone unturned to extract Sal trees of *Ripu Duar*. They purchased a 6 miles Portable Tramway at a cost of Rs 16,761.00 which ran from Kachugaon to Fakiragram. The line was laid with labour obtained in return for forest produce granted free for home use^{xxix}. In later times the Tramway lines became very useful for forest work. The purchase of the Portable Tramways couldn't mitigate all problems relating to the exploitation of Sal timber. The colonial administrators couldn't discard the necessity of human labour for extraction of Sal timber from the government reserves - Ripu, Cheerung, Sidli, Guma and Bijni. They continued to employ the Bodos and other forest tribes as human labour for extraction of Sal timbers from those areas. They were employed in large scale as they were best suited for the work and also being the forest dwellers, they loved the profession most^{xx}.

The British administrators for maintaining regular supply of human labour for extraction of Sal trees from the Government Estates of Eastern *Duars* and for departmental working for the clearance of fire lines, forest villages were established. The forest villagers were granted free trees for their own use in return for work done. To enable the department to establish forest villages, the Kachugaon with an area of 66 square miles was constituted a reserve in 1902, although, it contains hardly any timber of value. The object of constituting Kachugaon a reserve was for providing a permanent labour supply for the Ripu Reserve^{xxi}. The Ripu forest lies at the foot of the Bhutan Hills between the Sankosh and the Saralbhanga and covered an area of 235 square miles. The Sal trees of the Ripu reserve were the best developed which grew on the ridges between the numerous streams^{xxii}. At the commencement of the year, there were 182 house-holders, which increased to 263 at its close. The settlers of the newly constituted Kachugaon reserve were the Rabhas and the Meches who were brought from the Jalpaiguri district of Bengal. Most of the other new settlers came from the Goalpara district^{xxiii}. The inhabitants of the Kachugaon Reserve forests had to render 1075 days' labour on payment of the ordinary wage of six annas per diem^{xxiv} and until recent times the forest villagers used the term *Beggar Bwinai* which means in Bodo 'labour with no wages' which they had to render one day each from each family in a year^{xxv}.

The local inhabitants whom Hunter called Castes and hill tribes were the most benefited populations who gained subsistence from the forest products. He said that the castes and hill tribes who gained their subsistence by collecting and trading in jungle products and timber were the Bodos (Mech, Cachari), Rabhas, Garos, Rajbansis and Hajongs. About six hundred boats come up every year from Sirajganj, Decca and other places in Bengal for the purpose of purchasing timber^{xxvi}. They carry down with them timber to the average value of pound 20 for each boat. The total value of the timber traffic was about pound 12,000 per annum^{xxvii}.

SYSTEM OF EXTRACTION:

The Bodos were engaged in the works of felling Sal trees and rafting down the Sal logs along the river routes to various sale depots like Bagribari, Bilasipara, Saraishaore Dabri and Dhubri from where the Sal logs were taken to Sirajganj, Decca and other places of Bengal. The people of the Eastern Koch country were already familiar with the traders from Pabna, Rajmahal and Gour^{xxviii}. There was no direct engagement of the Bodolabourers by the British Authority, but they were engaged through the interlocutors called *Daffadars*. Names of many *Daffadars* are still current among the Bodos in their oral history. The *Daffadars* engaged *Badaris* (lumberjacks) as labourers for felling Sal trees and for rafting down the Sal logs for their masters^{xxix}. The *Badaris* accomplished the works by going in a group to the appointed location in the deep forests and established temporary makeshifts called *Bada*(in Bodo). They stayed there until they accomplished their tasks of felling and rafting down the logs to different sale points. To accomplish those troublesome works, one needed to be an able-bodied man, strong and stout. The Bodos had those qualities which might be testified by the remarks of W.W. Hunter on the Bodos (Meches). He said that the Bodos (Meches) were an able-bodied and well-behaved class of people; very few crimes took place among them^{xxx}. He further remarked that the Meches (Bodos) although a degraded race was far from being destitute of good qualities. They were much more honest and trustworthy than the Hindu peasantry of Bengal and less quarrelsome; chastity was esteemed a virtue and crime was comparatively rare^{xxxi}. B.C. Allen in his report identified some sale depots. According to him, the present sale depots were at Bilasipara on the Brahmaputra river, Bagribari on the Tipkai river, Kachukata on the Gurufela river and Barabadha on the Baunai river^{xxxii}.

The Government forests were situated in the Eastern *Duars*^{xxxiii} and the southern half of the district of undivided Goalpara was permanently settled. B.C. Allen reported that the reserves were seven in number. Bhumeswar was an isolated hill covering an area of 7 square miles in the extreme South-East corner of the *Sidli Duars*. The Guma reserve was another isolated forest covering an area of 26 square miles about 30 miles North of Dhubri. The high land was covered with almost pure Sal forest and the strips of low-lying ground with which it was intersected were gradually filling up with sum (*machilus odoratissima*). The rest of the forests lie at the foot of the Bhutan Hills. The Kachugaon, Ripu, Bengtol and Chirang reserves form compact block 558 square miles in area in the North-West corner of the district^{xxxiv}.

The Sal timber was in great demand for its enduring and robust quality. It was used for building boats and used as sleepers in the newly laid railway tract through the Goalpara district. The Sal trees were abundantly found in the forests of the Eastern *Duars* but there was a shortage of labour to extract the Sal trees which the

Bodos supplied to some extent. A vivid description of the operational system and occasions was made by B.C. Allen in his report on Goalpara district which said that the trees selected by the purchasers were felled early in the year and cut into logs between 6 and 7 feet in length and over 2 ½ feet in girth. Towards the end of the rains when there was plenty of water but no risk of flood they were attached to canoes and floated down to sale points. From there, those logs (*dhums*) were sold to purchasers from Eastern Bengal where they were used for boat building^{xxxv}. There was also a considerable demand for Sal posts, but that was principally met from the forests of the Zamindars. The construction of the Eastern Bengal State Railway through the Goalpara district had created a great demand for sleepers which had been met by the department. Labour was very difficult to procure and in order to facilitate the extraction of timber 9^{1/2} miles of portable Tramway had been purchased^{xxxvi}.

The term *Gor Kati* was used for a system of felling Sal Timber and *Thaljat* for stacking timber. The estimated amount of earning of both was pound 3000 per annum^{xxxvii}. The bulk of receipts were obtained from the Ripu, Cheerang and Guma forests. Sal was sold standing at Rs 10 per tree or annas six per cubic foot at present schedule rates^{xxxviii}. Timber was also extracted from the forests of the Zamindars (Zamindari Forests) of Bijni, Chapar, Gauripur, Mechpara and Parbotjoar. It was generally worked out in the form of poles^{xxxix}.

The tenants were left unattended to their own fate and destiny. The relationship between the Zamindars and the tenants were nothing more than rent paying and receiving affairs. The British authority allowed those affairs to continue as long as they got their due share of fixed lump sum revenue from the Zamindars. The British authority left no scruple in allowing the Zamindars to go scot-free to enjoy their forests without payment of any revenue. W.W. Hunter commented that besides Sal there were innumerable valuable other kinds of trees, bamboos, canes etc comprised the heavy forests and jungles of Goalpara District^{xl}. Hunter further reported that those proprietors whose land was situated in Goalpara proper did not pay any revenue to Government for their forests, which were included as an integral part of their permanently settled estates^{xli}.

The Goalpara Division comprised the Government open forest in the Eastern *Duars* which had an area of 422 square miles. Of those tracts about eighty square miles were Sal forest; the contents of which were estimated at two and a half million of Sal trees, with an annual yield, if properly protected, of 25,000 trees^{xlii}.

CONCLUSION:

An important factor that could be considered as the herald for the growth of consciousness among the Bodos was the opportunity to trade in timber provided by the presence of huge Sal Forest near the Bodo settlements. The Bodos of Goalpara district specially of Parbotjoar area grasped the opportunity of timber trading

for the first time and some of them became rich and wealthy. The natural habitat of the Sal (*Shorea Robusta*) timber species was the Parbotjoar, Guma, Ripu, Sidli, Cheerang and Kachugaon Reserve Forests in the present district of Kokrajhar where cluster of Bodo settlements could be found. The Bodos could take advantage of timber trading as the Sal trees were within proximity to their homestead.

There were some big landed gentry among the Bodos, the oral information of whom are still extant. They were in an advantageous position than average Bodos who could spare a little amount of capital for carrying on small scale trade in timber. By the introduction of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793 the Southern portion of Goalpara (district) which was a part of the Rangpur district till 1822, came under the Zamindari system. From the period of Zamindari System, the extraction of Sal Timber of the Parbotjoar Estate was carried out by the system of leasing out of the *Sal Mahal*. The person who took the *Mahal* on lease were called the *Ejadar*. In turn, they would employ *Daffadars*, the intermediary class of people who were the supplier of labourers. The labourers engaged in ‘Sal Timber Operation’ (felling, barking and dragging activities) were called the *Badaris*(lumberjacks) and those class of people were also engaged as ‘timber rafters’, for rafting down the Sal timber logs along the river routes to the sale points situated at Bagribari, Bilasipara, Saraishor Badri, Sapatgram. By engaging themselves in those professions many Bodos became rich and wealthy who later came into limelight amongst the Bodos.

The factors of timber trading and the existence of landed gentry among the Bodos as discussed above provided the fertile ground for the growth of middle class among the Bodos. The instances of the various roles played by the middle class in the social movements or revolutions were many in various parts of the world. The Bodo middle class was also not exception in leading their society. Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma was the pioneer among the leaders of the Bodo middle class who led the Socio-Religious Reformation Movement among the Bodos in early 20th century. He was able to arouse a new spate of consciousness among the Bodos who were reeling under poverty, darkness and backwardness. The Bodos were illiterate at that time. There were very few literate and educated men among the Bodos who were the sons of rich timber traders of Parbotjoar area. Many Bodo youths from Parbotjoar area engaged themselves in Timber trade in various capacities like *Ejadar*, *Daffadar*, Bidderand some as *Badaris* (Lumberjacks) who could lead a comfortable life by their occupations. That small group of Bodos exerted influences in the society. Their positions and interest became common and united. The educated youths from those wealthy classes worked like harbinger of new ideas among the Bodos. They had played an important role as self-appointed volunteers and became competitors for establishing ethnic Bodo identity. Thus, they led the Bodos to recognize that they had a stake in each other’s well-being and from there they did develop ethnic consciousness.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- ⁱW.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of the District of Goalpara*, vol. 2 (Reprint) 1982, p.25.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.25.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.117.
- ^{iv} *Ibid*, p.36.
- ^vThe Himalayan sub montane tracts falling in North Bengal, Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang were within the 18 *Duars* under the Devraja of Punakha, Bhutan which was wrested by the British India after the conclusion of the treaty of Sinchula, 1865.
- ^{vi} *Ibid*, p.36.
- ^{vii} *Ibid*, p.37
- ^{viii} *Ibid*,
- ^{ix} WW Hunter in his *Statistical Account of the District of Goalpara* mistook the Meches and the Kacharis to be two different tribes, but they are same tribe. Because of that he had shown two different population figures for the same tribe in the same year.
- ^x *Ibid*, p.37.
- ^{xi} B.C. Allen, *District Gazetteers of Assam, Goalpara, (1905)*, p.123.
- ^{xii} *Ibid*.
- ^{xiii} W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, pp. 20-21.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid*, p.24.
- ^{xv} *Ibid*, p. 43.
- ^{xvi}W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of the District of Goalpara*, vol. 2 (Reprint) 1982, p.25.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid*, p.25.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid*, p. 24.
- ^{xix}C.G. Dingwall Fordyce, *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1900-1901*, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1901, p.4.
- ^{xx} Asharam Brahma, informant, age-67, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Naisarbari, P.O. Panbari, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 24/12/2015; Katiram Brahma, informant, age- 84, occupation- former school teacher, Vill.-Panbari, P.O. Panbari Bazar, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 09/10/2014.
- ^{xxi} E.S. Carr, *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1902-1903*, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong, 1903, p.19.
- ^{xxii} B.C. Allen, *District Gazetteers of Assam, Goalpara, (1905)*, p.79.
- ^{xxiii} E.S. Carr, *op. cit*, p. 19.

^{xxiv} *Ibid*, p.19.

^{xxv} Aswini Basumatary, informant, age-86, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Panbari, P.O. Panbari, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 29/11/2015; Gajendra Mushahary, informant, age-70, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.-Narayanpur, P.O. Panbari Bazar, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 24/01/2015.

^{xxvi} W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, pp. 26. 27.

^{xxvii} *Ibid*.

^{xxviii} N. Rhodes, S.K. Bose, *The Coinage of Cooch Behar*, Mira Bose, Dhubri, 1999, P. 55.

^{xxix} Boloram Brahma, informant, age-71, occupation- Cultivation, Vill.- Kokhlingbari, P.O. Binya Khata, District- Kokrajhar, Assam, interviewed on 04/11/2015.

^{xxx} W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.117.

^{xxxi} *Ibid*, p.119.

^{xxxii} *Ibid*, p.117.

^{xxxiii} B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, p. 77.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid*, p. 79.

^{xxxv} *Ibid*, p.81.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid*.

^{xxxvii} W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p.24.

^{xxxviii} B.C. Allen, *op. cit*, p.82.

^{xxxix} *Ibid*, p.83.

^{xl} W.W. Hunter, *op. cit*, p. 25.

^{xli} *Ibid*.

^{xlii} *Ibid*.