

Settler Bengalee Traders in Colonial North Bengal:A Study

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Abstract: *The economy of colonial North Bengal was primarily based on agriculture. Naturally, the trade, commerce and industries of this region were also agriculture-centric. The main occupations of the local inhabitants of colonial North Bengal were agriculture, and they were never interested in trade and industrial activities. This vacuum in the trading sphere of this region was therefore filled by many emigrants Bengalee and non-Bengalee traders from other parts. In this connection, the Saha, Tili, Kundu, Satier were the significant Bengalee trading communities that emerged in colonial North Bengal. These Bengalee trading communities were well engaged with trade, commerce and industrial production in this region during colonial period. The participation of Bengalee traders in significant businesses like rice, jute, timber and the tea plantation industry in colonial North Bengal was remarkable. In the present study, an emphasis has been given to providing a bright picture on the trading scenario of the settler Bengalee traders in colonial North Bengal.*

Key words: Bengalee, Entrepreneur, Merchant, North Bengal, Timber, Trader etc.

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Introduction

The North Bengal region had huge commercial potential and gradually this region emerged as an important trade and commercial hub. At present the eight districts of North Bengal during colonial rule was produced an abundance agro-based production. Besides, colonial North Bengal

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was rich in natural resources. These surplus production and natural resources were paved the way for increasing trading activities in colonial North Bengal. In this regard, Malda was famous for silk production. Undivided Dinajpur district was the rice producing region. Rangpur district was large production regions of rice and jute. But the hilly portion of North Bengal was the center of natural resources. Simultaneously the princely state of Cooch Behar was famous for a good number of tobacco and jute cultivation. Due to the trade and commercial prospects henceforth, North Bengal became the attracted region both to the foreign traders and native traders. In this study the trade scenario of settler Bengalee traders in colonial North Bengal region will be discussed.

Settler Bengalee Rice Traders

Agriculture was the principal occupation of the local inhabitants of colonial North Bengal. The southern part of colonial North Bengal was a significant rice producing region. The census report of 1911 mentioned that nearly 91 percent of the entire population of undivided Dinajpur district were engaged with agriculture.¹ From Malda and undivided Dinajpur district during colonial period rice was exported to other regions. Marwari and other local traders were involved in this trade. Besides the Marwari traders, the Bengalee traders were largely associated with the trade in rice of undivided Dinajpur district. In this context, the significant Bengalee trading castes in the rice trade of this district were the Baisya, Baisbania, Gandha Banik, and Subarna Banik.² The Sahas and Tilis were significant traditional Bengalee trading communities that controlled the trade of rice and grains.³ Meanwhile, the Marwaris primarily owned and operated the rice mills. In Hili, which is now part of South Dinajpur district, Sarat Kumar Ray established the first rice mill in 1914. In this area, rice mills began to proliferate from 1921. At that time, there were one Bengalee-owned rice mill at Bangalbari, which is now part of North Dinajpur district, and nine Bengalee-owned rice mills at Hili.⁴ However, the majority of the rice mills in the undivided Dinajpur district were controlled by Marwari traders.

Settler Bengalee Silk Traders

The most prominent center of silk manufacturing and trade of colonial North Bengal was Malda. The lucrative silk trade of Malda led to European traders assembled in Malda in great numbers

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during the 17th century.⁵ The French gave a great encouragement to the production of silk in the latter part of the 18th century.⁶ After 1833, the production of raw silk in Malda gained more importance during the period of open trade conditions. With the raising of mulberry cultivation in Malda due to the French and Dutch initiatives, the amount of sericulture and thread production also increased. W. W. Hunter mentioned that after the silkworms were born in the mulberry leaves, they were kept specially preserved and after one month of that, silkworms started producing cocoons.⁷ This entire process from rearing of silkworms to production of silk cocoons and making of thread was primarily carried out by the native women. In this process, women were much more skilled workers than the native men. A local tribe called Puro in Malda acquired special skills in silk production.⁸ In this context, the production of raw silk or thread in the khamru method was antireally dependent on the advance money from the *mahajanas* or the Europeans. Although there was some sporadic production by local enterprises. Raw silk or yarn produced in both indigenous and foreign methods were in competition with each other in the local market. The British capitalists procured filature silk from local brokers and sent it to the factories set up at Bholaghat and Baragaria.⁹

The trade of Khamru or locally produced silk was completely dependent on the capital of the Marwari traders, whereas French and English firms dominated the European silk trade.¹⁰ In the 19th century, Bholaghat and English Bazar emerged as one of the centers of raw silk production both locally and internationally. Native moneylenders or *mahajanas* used to collect Cocoons or raw silk from here and bring it for sale in the markets of Amaniganj, Subalpur or Jalalpur. From the information obtained in Hunter's account, there is a glimpse of the silk trade in these hats at that time. Whereas the total purchase and sale of silk on special days of the week was close to one lakh rupees.¹¹ In order to meet the demand of Malda silk in the domestic market, silk was exported from markets like Amaniganj or Subalpur to different parts of the country including Nagpur, Madras, Bombay mainly through foreign merchants. Similar to the foreign merchants, the native merchants were also associated with the silk trade. In this context, many traditional Bengalee trading castes were found in the silk trade. The Tili, Satier and Poddar were the prominent Bengalee trading castes of silk trade in Malda.¹² These traditional trading castes were the noteworthy raw silk dealers in Malda. The rise of new classes of traders in Malda was one more indication of the expanding silk trade.

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Settler Bengalee Timber Traders

At the beginning the Britishers were started the timber trade in North Bengal. Towards the closing phase of the 18th century, the British merchants began to turn their attention to the timber trade, especially when the East India Company took control of Purnia. Joseph Dalton Hooker gave a beautiful account of the timber trade in North Bengal. The costly *Sal* and *Sisu* timber of North Bengal were sent to Calcutta from Morung.¹³ Morung and Terai were the main centers of timber trade. Large wooden logs were floated down rivers to the north. The British merchants at that time required a consistent supply of timber for the shipbuilding industry.

In Jalpaiguri district, the Baikunthapur Estate was a prominent center of the timber trade and many tradesmen from Bihar and Benares were associated in this trade.¹⁴ After watching the huge profits in the timber trade, the Bengalee traders started taking part in this trade. But most of the Bengalee timber traders of the region came from East Bengal and South Bengal. In this regard, the majority portion of the timber traders in Jalpaiguri district came from Rangpur and Dacca.¹⁵ In the colonial economic period, ninety percent of the timber merchants were Bengalees, where the majority portion of them came from East Bengal and a small portion from Burdwan.¹⁶ Timber trade had vividly started even prior to formation of Jalpaiguri District at Sukhani area of Rajganj and Rameshwar Lahiri was a prominent timber trader of Sukhani area.¹⁷ Simultaneously Beharilal Ganguli was also an eminent timber trader of Jalpaiguri district during colonial period. He had a timber trade center at Baura port which was Rangpur region.

The timber trade in North Bengal began to flourish after the historic Bhutan conflict (1865) and the creation of Jalpaiguri District (1869). In order to prepare the land for tea planting, the British government began to clear the region's forest areas during this time. The timber trade brought a lot of people to this region as well. In this regard, Beharilal Ganguli, a native of Jessore, traveled to Jalpaiguri to buy timber after knowing that forests were being cleared for tea plantations.¹⁸ The majority of timber purchasers, according to J.F. Gruning, were local merchants. A prominent timber trader in Jalpaiguri, Durgamohan Basu is said to have expanded his business in many parts of Duars locations. However, it is found that Satyen Ganguli, Tulshi Charan Mukherjee, Khitish Basu, and Durgamohan Basu were all prominent timber traders in Jalpaiguri in the 1930s. The timber trade was well-known to Abdul Gaffar Khan, Ganesh Roy, Atul Chandra Dutta, and Nibaran Chandra Ghatak in Siliguri at the time. A prominent pleader of Siliguri, Pradyut Kumar

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Basu, observed that the timber trade was a thriving Bengalee business in Siliguri from the ending phase of nineteenth century to the beginning phase of twentieth century.¹⁹ He further stated that Manmathanath Sarkar, Bireshwar Chattopadhyaya, Promodranjan Bhowmick, and Narendranath Roy were important Bengalee traders in timber trade of Siliguri throughout 1920s.²⁰ Meanwhile, there were similarities between the participation of Bengalees in the timber trade of North Bengal and Assam. In both regions, timber trade attracted the Bengalee traders, and they established a monopoly on this trade. In the 19th century, one of the three principal trading activities of the Bengalees in the Terai region was the timber trade.²¹ Therefore, during the colonial period in North Bengal, Bengalee traders were able to establish a monopoly in the timber trade. In this regard, it should be noted that many timber traders later started investing in the tea plantation industry after getting success in this trade.

Settler Bengalee tea planters:

In North Bengal, the British capitalists were pioneers to establish tea garden, but the Bengalee businessmen or aristocratic landlords were not far behind in this regard.²² Many tea gardens were planted by Bengalee immigrants in North Bengal, particularly in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. In Jalpaiguri, a few rich Bengalee lawyers and government servants who belonged to middle-class families had shown their interest in establishing tea gardens. In 1877, the first tea garden in the district was established at Jalducca under the initiative of Munshi Rahim Buksh.²³ During the Anglo-Bhutan conflict, he earned a lot of money by providing supplies to the British troops. Beharilal Ganguly, a timber merchant from Jessore, developed the second tea garden at Alterdanga. The victory journey of Bengalee entrepreneurs was started with the establishment of Jalpaiguri Tea Company in 1879 AD.²⁴ Among those who came forward to establish this company was Gopal Chandra Ghosh, Jadav Chakrabarty, Jay Chandra Sanyal, Hriday Nath Bagchi, Madanmohan Bhowmik, Ram Chandra Sen, Mahim Chandra Ghosh et al. And under their initiatives Mughalkata Tea Estate was established. In North Bengal, eleven tea estates were established by native initiative during the 31-year period between 1879 and 1910 AD.²⁵ But after 1910, the Bengalee entrepreneurs were divided into two groups, namely the Hindu group and the Muslim group. During this time tea gardens were also established in Duars. Dr. Shib Shankar Mukherjee in his research work showed that out of 126 Bengalee tea entrepreneurs, 10 were Hindus and 36 were Muslims.

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The inaugural Bengalee venture into the tea industry of North Bengal was the Makaibari Tea Estate, established in 1858 through a collaborative effort between Captain Samler and Girish Chandra Banerjee in Darjeeling hill. Although G. C. Banerjee was born into an aristocratic Bengalee zamindar family, at the age of sixteen, he left his home in Boral, South 24 Parganas, and came to North Bengal. His good relations with the colonial rulers helped him become an Indian tea entrepreneur in the Darjeeling hills. This cordial relationship led to the establishment of the Makaibari Tea Estate in 1858.²⁶ In 1859, G. C. Banerjee permanently purchased this Tea Estate from Captain Samler. The three sons of G. C. Banerjee were Tarapada, Hemachandra, and Haripada. Under the name of his own family, Tarapada purchased the renowned Happy Valley Tea Estate in Darjeeling. In 1854, David Wilson primarily founded it. But it was purchased in 1903 by Tarapada Banerjee, who subsequently combined it with another garden to create Happy Valley Tea Estate.²⁷ Additionally, the Nurbang Tea Estate in Tindharia was also purchased by Tarapada and Haripada. However, after the ancestral property was divided in 1929, Tarapada acquired Happy Valley Tea Estate, and Hemchandra acquired Nurbang Tea Estate. In Darjeeling, the colonial government, in honor of two late Bengalee tea entrepreneurs, namely Girish Chandra Banerjee and Tarapada Banerjee, named two roads as G.C. Banerjee Road & T.P. Banerjee Road.

In Darjeeling, the Pal Choudhury family of Nadia was another pioneering Bengalee tea entrepreneur.²⁸ This family especially came from East Bengal and established cordial ties with the Britishers. The main entrepreneur of this family was Naffer Chandra Pal Choudhury. At the beginning, Naffer Babu was an indigo merchant. Due to good relations with the Britishers, he started investing surplus capital into the tea industry. Besides, after 1850, the establishment of a good number of tea gardens in Darjeeling tempted them to invest capital in the tea industry. Their first privately-owned tea estate was Yogmaya Tea Estate. In 1854, Naffer Chandra Pal Choudhury bought it from Sir William Bell. Subsequently, this tea garden was transferred several times. Other significant tea estates owned by the Pal Choudhury family were Washabari & Radharani Tea Estate in Duars, Mohargaon Gumma Tea Estate in Terai, and Krishnakoli Tea Estate in Assam. In addition to Naffer Chandra Pal Choudhury, another prominent Bengalee tea entrepreneur in Darjeeling was Bipra Das Pal Choudhury. He was the brother of Naffer Babu and had extensive experience in tea cultivation, which led to the establishment of Gayabari Tea Estate in the hilly area.

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Although Bengalee Hindu tea planters dominated the tea estates in Jalpaiguri, there were few Muslims who enjoyed the same status as the Bengalee Hindu planters. Khan Bahadur Rahim Buksh was one of the chiefs among them. He enhanced the reputation of the Nawab family of Jalpaiguri.²⁹ His father, Munshi Makram Ali, was the founder director of Altadanga Tea Company. Khan Bahadur Rahim Buksh established two tea gardens named Rahimabad and Chuniajhora. His son-in-law, Mussaruf Hussain, received three grants for the Atiyabari tea estate. In 1910, Musaruf Hossain formed Rahimia Lands & Tea Company, Diana Tea Company in Duars, and Naxalbari Tea Company in Terai. Besides, he promoted the Malnudi Tea Company along with the Malnudi Tea Estate and established the Hossainabad Tea Estate in 1912.³⁰

The evolution of Bengalee entrepreneurship entered a significant phase with the emergence of native Jotedars. Following the initial settlement in Duars between 1871-73, numerous native Jotedars, comprising both Hindus and Muslims, acquired vast tracts of land covered in dense jungles. The scarcity of khas lands in Duars prompted several promoters to explore these jotelands for establishing tea plantations. There were only a few Jotedars who were able to supply the vast tracts of land required for tea estates. Among them, the Raikot family from Jalpaiguri town was noteworthy. After assuming control of the Zamindari in 1914, Prasanna Deb Raikot developed two significant tea estates, viz., Sikarpur and Bhandarpur. Meanwhile, the construction of a railway connecting the two estates was another excellent illustration of his thoughtful provident thinking in the industrial sector.³¹ In this context, the Rahut family of Jalpaiguri was notable in addition to the Raikot family. Under the direction of this family, two tea plantations, Anandapur and Kailashpur, were established in Duars. As a colonial police officer, Kailash Chandra Rahut moved from Dacca to Jalpaiguri. Ananda Chandra Rahut, his brother, inherited the land after his death. In 1902, the Gazoldoba T.E. was acquired by Ananda Chandra Rahut from the Oadlabari Tea Company. The Gazuldoba T.E. was wholly owned by this family between 1939 and 1940.

Two Bengalee Hindu families from the town of Jalpaiguri, the Ghosh and the Ray, had tremendous influence over the tea industry in the Jalpaiguri Duars during the colonial era. Under the suitable leadership of Gopal Chandra Ghosh, a member of the Jalpaiguri Tea Company Group, the Ghosh family's involvement in the tea industry started. He was a member of the first generation of Jalpaiguri town's pioneering Bengalee tea entrepreneurs. Along with his son-in-law Tarini Prasad Ray, he founded several tea gardens and served as a major source of inspiration for

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others. Gopal Chandra Ghosh began practicing law at Rangpur Court before moving to Jalpaiguri Court. The primary reason for this is because the then-Commissioner of Cooch Behar encouraged him to move to Jalpaiguri court instead of working in Rangpur, which is where he started his brighter future. In Jalpaiguri, Gopal Chandra Ghosh was a prominent figure in tea industry, and was a founding member of Jalpaiguri Tea Company, Mogulkata T.E., and Anjuman Tea Co. Ltd. His son, Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, promoted the Gopalpur Tea Company in 1913, which was named after his father. The company was formed by a group of friends and relatives who shared a common regional identity and hailed from the same native village. Notably, the Ghosh and Roy families, like the Nawab family, also adopted the practice of naming properties after their own family.³²

The Sanyal family of Jalpaiguri played a significant role as a Bengalee entrepreneur particularly in the tea industry. Jay Chandra Sanyal was the pioneer who led the family's venture into tea planting. Their first company, Durgapur Tea Company, was established in 1916, and they received substantial support from prominent tea planters like Lokendra Nath Bagchi and Makhanlal and Chandidas Chakrabarty.³³ Interestingly, Durga Chandra Sanyal, Jay Chandra's younger brother, devoted his life to the Swadeshi Movement and kept himself aloof from the family business.³⁴ The Sanyal family also promoted other notable tea companies, including the Sunny Valley Tea Company (1918) and the Ashapur Tea Company.

The Saha family, hailing from Amla Sadarpur in Nadia district, emerged as notable Bengalee tea entrepreneurs in Jalpaiguri town. Initially, they appeared as shareholders in the Anjuman Tea Company, later venturing into developing tea estates.³⁵ Their inaugural venture, Totapara T.E., was established on April 14, 1892, by Janaki Nath Saha, Bhagwan Chandra Saha, Kedar Nath Saha, and Badri Nath Saha. Following this success, the Saha family launched Ambari T.E. in 1908.³⁶ In 1907, the Saha family founded Sahabad T.E. in the Terai region.³⁷ However, it's noteworthy that none of these tea estates remain under their ownership today, having been transferred to non-Bengalee owners. For instance, Totapara and Ambari tea estates are now owned by the Sanjib Singhanian group, while Sahabad T.E. is owned by the Birla family.³⁸

The Karmakar family, another enterprising family of Jalpaiguri town in the tea industry, founded the Dheklapara tea estate with an authorized capital of Rs. 1.5 lakhs.³⁹ In 1913, Kumud Kanta Karmakar acquired 796.78 acres of land to establish the tea estate. Born in 1859 into a Zamindar family in Bharanga Village, Pabna District in undivided Bengal, Kumud Kanta Karmakar also

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founded the Gaur Nitai T.E. in lower Assam in 1922. Additionally, he played a key role as a founding member of multiple Tea Companies in Jalpaiguri.

But the presence of Daga family in Jalpaiguri was a major turning point in the growth of the tea industry, and about 1875, Mohanlalji gave local tea companies needed financial support in the form of loans on promissory notes. His two deserving sons, Ram Chandra Daga and Dhuli Chand Daga, contributed to the growth and success of many tea companies in Jalpaiguri town.⁴⁰ Dhuli Chand Daga realized in his following years that it was not enough to simply provide money for the loan. Thus, he started to tie up with several tea companies in Jalpaiguri town. Ramananda Daga was the son of Ram Chandra Daga and was closely involved as a director of numerous tea companies viz., the Kohinoor Tea Company, the Bengal Duars National Tea Company, the Merry View Tea Company, the Atiabari Tea Company, the New Assam, and the Duars Tea Company.

In comparison to the Jalpaiguri Duars, there is found a completely different perspective regarding the entrepreneurial activities of the Terai region and the Darjeeling hills. While the majority of Bengalee entrepreneurs in Jalpaiguri Duars were lawyers and maqtars, the majority in Darjeeling district were government employees, zamindars, bankers, merchants, and tea garden workers. Apart from that, the majority of Bengalee-owned gardens were either acquired from European planters who looked at these to be unprofitable, while the majority of Bengalee tea gardens in Duars were apparently made on leased land. Additionally, purchasing Jote lands and combining them into a tea grant was the first step towards Bengalee entrepreneurship in the Terai region.

Settler Bengalee jute traders:

In North Bengal, the jute trade began to flourish in the second phase of the 19th century. But this trade achieved an especial importance in the 20th century. During that time, the jute trade of colonial North Bengal was mainly under the control of Marwari and European traders. The significant jute exported areas of North Bengal to Calcutta during this period were Parbatipur, Purnia, Kishanganj, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. The Marwari traders who dominated the jute trade in these areas were either *brokers* or *Mahajans*.⁴¹ Besides, there was participation of the Saha and Tili traders in the ground level of the jute trade.

The jute trade greatly expanded in both the northern and southern portions of North Bengal during the period of British rule. During that period, many jute firms emerged in North Bengal,

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especially in Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, and Coochbehar. The jute of Dinajpur was widely exported during the time of the First World War.⁴² In Jalpaiguri and Siliguri, many jute firms emerged with both European and native investment. One native jute godown, known as Gosthi Estate jute godown, emerged in Kadamtala.⁴³ However, most of the jute godowns in Jalpaiguri and Siliguri were under the European companies like Barkmayar, Ralli Brothers, Landale & Clarks, R. Sim, etc.⁴⁴ But the Bengalees were the majority of the workforce in these jute companies.

In regards to the jute trade, the Haldibari area of Coochbehar district emerged as a significant trading center. A large portion of the jute from Jalpaiguri was transported to the markets through the Eastern Bengal State Railway to Haldibari.⁴⁵ In Haldibari, many trading communities connected with the jute trade and founded jute firms. In this regard, the Bengalee traders were involved in the jute trade of Haldibari. At Haldibari, there were at least fourteen indigenous jute firms, including Marwari & Bengalee, engaged with the jute trade by 1916.⁴⁶ From 1920 to 1935, there were four Bengalee jute firms at Haldibari. The prominent traders of these Bengalee jute firms who controlled the trade were Dhawjar Uddin Pradhan, Rahamattulla Pradhan, Fakasha Muhammad and Sachindragopal Bhattacharya.⁴⁷ Therefore, it appears that during the colonial rule along with the Marwari & the European traders, the Bengalee traders also participated into the jute trade of North Bengal.

Conclusion

Thus, the trade and commerce of colonial North Bengal were lucrative to native traders from other parts of the country, similar to European traders. In the trading sphere of colonial North Bengal, the participation of Bengalee traders from other areas of undivided Bengal was not far behind. Many Bengalee traders participated in the rice trade, though the control of the rice trade was mostly in the hands of Marwari traders. In the silk trade, a few Bengalee traditional trading castes were engaged along with the European traders. However, Bengalee traders established a monopoly on the timber trade. Subsequently, their investment in the tea plantation industry was significant. During that time, many Bengalee families emerged as prominent Bengalee tea entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the participation of Bengalee traders in the jute trade of colonial North Bengal was noteworthy.

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- ⁴⁴ Ghatak, Bijoy Chandra, *Siliguri Saharer Itibritiya* (in Bengalee), Gagrity Press, Jalpaiguri, 1389 (Bangabda), p. 9.
- ⁴⁵ Gruning, J.F., *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- ⁴⁶ Mitali, Special Haldibari Issue, 2001, P.V.N.L. Librari, Haldibari, Cooch Behar, p. 13.
- ⁴⁷ Ghosh, Sujit, *op. cit.*, p. 221.