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Nationalism in Industrial Sector: A Historical Context of Lac Industry of Purulia

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Abstract: Purulia, the then Manbhum, is rich in a variety of folk arts. Since ancient times, the people of Manbhum have been making a living by focusing on various forest and folk products. And based on that formula, Manbhum at that time became industrially prosperous. One of these folk industries was the lacquer industry of Manbhum. The people of Manbhum developed an industrial circle around this forest industry. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, an Armenian merchant named A. M. Arathun built a lacquer workshop in Jhalda and improved the lacquer industry of Manbhum and took it to the international level. From the first half of the twentieth century, non-Bengali dominance was gradually established in the lacquer industry of Manbhum. But surprisingly, no nationalist consciousness was awakened among the Bengalis to keep this ancient industry of Bengal alive. Except for the then communist leader Samar Roy, no other Bengali nationalist leadership of that time came forward to save this declining industry. This neglected and unexamined aspect of Bengali www nationalism is highlighted in the article under discussion.

Keywords: Ain-I-Akbari, Communist Leader, Jaiswal Company, Manbhum etc.

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Introduction

Lac is an ancient forest-based resinous substance of Bengal. Known as 'Lac' in English, it is a secretion from the bodies of a specific insect known as the Lac insect. The scientific name of this insect is *Kerria lacca*. Lac is formed from the secretions and excrement of these insects, which remain encrusted on the branches of trees such as Kusum, Palas, Kul, Banyan, Peepal, Siris, Arhar, and Babool. Generally, indigenous and marginalized communities collect this encrusted

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lac from the trees. At this stage, it is known as "stick lac" (raw lac). They then send this raw lac to factories, where it is processed through a specific method to produce "shellac" (locally known as *gala*).

Lac or shellac is a vital component of our daily lives and is used for various purposes. Its use has been observed in India since ancient times. In the *Atharvaveda*, lac was used as medicine.¹ In the *Mahabharata*, it is known as 'Jatu' and is recognized as a flammable substance. The episode of the burning of the 'Jatugriha' (House of Lac) in the *Mahabharata* serves as a reminder of its historical use.²

Lac was also used in ancient Bengal for the preservation of manuscripts. Such lac-coated manuscripts have been discovered at the famous archaeological site of Chandraketugarh in North 24 Parganas. These manuscripts are currently preserved at the Ashutosh Museum of Calcutta University.³ Furthermore, references to lac are found in many 16th-century manuscripts of the medieval period. In 1563, Garcia de Orta, the physician to the Portuguese Governor of India, published a clear account of the uses of lac.⁴ Mentions of its multifaceted uses are also found in Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* and the accounts of the traveler Tavernier.⁵

In the modern era, the use of lac/shellac remains significant. It is an essential element in jewelry making. Goldsmiths fill the hollow interiors of ornaments like gold bangles (*bala*) or armlets (*ananta*) with shellac to create intricate designs. Bangles are also made entirely of lac, which was once highly favored by the women of Bengal. *Alta* (red dye) prepared from lac is still a deeply respected traditional item for Bengali women.

Various decorative items are also made from shellac. Shellac-based pens, rulers, paperweights, and various toys were once widely appreciated in Bengali society. Lacquer dolls also enjoyed significant popularity. According to Gourihar Mitra, It is difficult to account for the many ways shellac is required. Gramophone records are made of shellac. Besides that, it is extensively used in the construction of the underwater hulls of ships, wood varnishing, sealing wax, and for coating conch shells.⁶ Due to this multifaceted demand, Bengal's shellac was highly sought after across the globe since ancient times.

Manbhum, on the Bengal-Jharkhand border, was one of the major centers of lac production. Additionally, the lac industry developed in Ilambazar of Birbhum and Sonamukhi of Bankura. However, the industry flourished most significantly in the Purulia, Jhalda, Balarampur, Chandil, and Manbazar regions of the Purulia district. To promote production and industrial development, The Indian Lac Cess Committee was formed in 1928-29.⁷ Under its initiative, India's first lac research center, known as the Lac Research Institute, was established at Namkum, Ranchi. This organization is currently known as the National Institute of Secondary Agriculture. In 1940, when this committee divided India's lac-producing regions into 12 divisions, the Balarampur and Jhalda divisions of Manbhum were ranked first.⁸ This indicates the superior quality of lac from this region.

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The fame of Purulia's lac industry is ancient. Regarding Purulia's lac, Prashanta Rakshit wrote in his essay, While the beginning of 'La' (lac) is unknown, it can be said that as long as forests have existed on earth, lac has existed too.⁹ O'Malley noted that the lac insect found in Purulia is named *Tuccharidia lacca*.¹⁰ Two types of lac are generally cultivated in Purulia: Rangini and Kusumi. The Rangini variety grows on Kul and Palas trees; cultivation starts in June-July, and it is collected in October-November. On the other hand, the Kusumi variety grows on Kusum and Kul trees; cultivation begins in January-February and is harvested in June-July. Lac is cultivated three times a year in Purulia.¹¹

People recognized the necessity of shellac from the local market. Markets were established, and the industry grew based on demand. Lac factories (*kuthis*) were set up. In the initial phases, the entire process was manual. Branches containing lac were cut into pieces, crushed using a grinding stone or mill, and the grains were then soaked in vats of water. Laborers would scrub the grains with their feet to remove the color and dust. After drying the cleaned grains in mild sunlight, they were filled into long cloth bags and rotated over a furnace's heat to produce shellac sheets (*chapra*), a process that continues today.¹²

Various types of laborers are employed in Purulia's lac industry. Their wages vary. Men and women work together to break the lac, but the washing and grain-making tasks are performed by female laborers. Male laborers process the lac into shellac.¹³

Despite the ancient tradition of Purulia's lac industry, there is no record of investment from the British East India Company. The history of investment began in the mid-19th century. Mahesh Chandra Bandyopadhyay of Sonamukhi, Bankura, established the first lac factory in Sonamukhi and later in Tulin, Purulia. However, Jhalda was the famous center for the lac trade, extending as far as Kolkata. Based on the Jhalda trade, two foreign merchants, Kenneth Angelo and Elliot Angelo, established Angelo Brothers Limited in Cossipore, Kolkata, in 1855.¹⁴ But the person who most significantly advanced the shellac industry in Purulia was A.M. Arathun.

An Armenian merchant by ethnicity, he arrived in Jhalda in 1897 and was attracted by the profitable lac trade.¹⁵ Not much is known about his early life, but available records suggest he was a resident of Persia. This undereducated young man came to Bengal in search of fortune and became involved in the lac business in Jhalda. He initially lived in a small hut but eventually established A.M.Arathun Private Limited.¹⁶

He became known as "Jhalda-Arathun."¹⁷ Mr. Arathun paved the way for the improvement of Purulia's lac industry. He showed how shellac could be utilized in numerous ways and provided a livelihood for people in remote areas by drawing them into the industry. Moreover, Arathun deeply integrated himself with the people of Purulia. In 1928-29, he even joined a procession protesting the murder of Congress worker Satyakinkor Dutta.¹⁸ According to Purulia researcher Dilip Kumar Goswami, "There are few examples of a foreign gentleman being embraced by the people of Jhalda in such a way. In that sense, Mr. Arathun was an exceptional man."¹⁹

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Mr. Arathun is a shining example of how nationalism can develop around an industry. It can be argued that a nationalist consciousness worked within him as he presented the lac industry, which was an ancient heritage of Bengal, to the world stage. Despite not being Bengali, he successfully demonstrated how to awaken Bengali nationalist sentiment and use it as a tool to revive an ancient tradition.

However, Mr. Arathun's dominance did not last forever. As the industry flourished under his guidance, it caught the attention of other capitalists. Specifically, Marwari capitalists began to invest. Initially, firms like M/S Mahadeoprasad Kashiprasad and M/S Shyamberam-Mahadeo Prasad established factories in Jhalda. Eventually, factories opened in Tulin and Balarampur.²⁰ The industry gained domestic and international fame. A 1908 railway report indicates that 200,000 maunds of lac were exported from the district via rail alone, with an estimated value of 4 to 5 million rupees.²¹

The industry faced no major issues in the early 20th century. Problems arose in the 1940s, when a significant decade in India's struggle for independence. While the world faced the crisis of World War II, India's political situation became complex with the Quit India Movement. During this time, the Jaiswal Company moved from Mirzapur to Balarampur to set up lac factories.²² They brought skilled laborers from Mirzapur. While the industry expanded under their leadership, local laborers and traders in Purulia faced challenges. This led to tensions in labor-management relations and the subsequent formation of labor unions. It was during this period that the Communist movement, led by Samar Roy, began to take root around the lac industry.²³

Purulia's lac industry is undoubtedly a promising one, but unfortunately, it has lost its luster today. Questions arise as to why this industry is fading. Tarundev Bhattacharya lamented the decline, noting as, at one time, the earnings of shellac workers were the highest in the district. Shellac was exported abroad. During the time of Second World War, there were many factories in Manbhum. Even when Purulia was merged into West Bengal, the number of factories was significant. Now the industry is on the decline; the number of factories and wages have decreased. Manbhum produced the lion's share of India's lac, exported to the United States of America and England. Following the invention of synthetic shellac, the demand for Indian shellac in the global market dropped. Additionally, Southeast Asian countries like Thailand have emerged as competitors in exports.²⁴ He emphasizes the need to explore the possibility of reviving this industry to stimulate the economy in remote areas.²⁵

Several factors contributed to the downfall of this rich industry. Firstly, The British East India Company never invested in Purulia's lac industry, despite the high quality of its product. Curiously, the laborers also never petitioned the administration for improvements. While Mr. Arathun tried desperately to save this heritage industry, a similar level of nationalist fervor was seemingly absent among the local populace.

The dominance of non-Bengali capitalists indicates a lack of entrepreneurial interest among Bengalis. While Marwari capitalists and the Jaiswal Company profited, no Bengali

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entrepreneur stepped forward to take the lead. During the labor-management tensions of the 1940s, the Congress leadership failed to take significant action. Even Mahatma Gandhi, who visited Manbhum several times, overlooked the issues of the lac industry. Local leaders also turned their gaze away. While Communists like Samar Roy led the laborers, he has been largely erased from the pages of history.

Conclusion

While much research has been done on the nationalist movements of India and Bengal, the role of nationalist consciousness in the development of the lac industry has been neglected. This neglect of Bengali nationalist sentiment in the context of this traditional industry is one of the primary reasons for its current decay.

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