

# FOREST TRIBE OF DOOARS AND BRITISH RULE

Sanchita Bhattacharyya

Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, Netaji Subhas Mahavidyalaya, WestBengal.

## Abstract:-

The total land area of the country is 3,287,590 sq kms of which 22.6% is covered by actual forests, which plays a vital and integral role in the life and lives of the forest dwelling people, especially the tribes. The forest dwelling people and the tribes are more or less dependent on the forest in most everything in life and life sustenance. The Indian Forest attracted the then British rulers with all its treasure, who realized the economic immanence found inside it, the potential outcome that could arise from it. Age-old rights over it generation wise were established by the aboriginals, the tribes, with forest as their own abode. When the British Government realized that the tribes were a step ahead in the understanding of the forest, to establish their absolute dominance, they quickly established a law about the forest. The naive, illiterate, poor tribes were uprooted and expelled from the forest; they were forced into danger, in absolute dismay without any known means of maintaining livelihoods.

**Key Words:-** Forest, tribe, British Forest Act, livelihood, Sustenance .

Tribes, also known as aboriginal/indigenous/Adivasi/Janjati/Schedule Tribes, have lived in forests since time immemorial. The tribal communities in India have fascinated the forest regions, living apart from the mainstream of life but in harmony with nature..Forests and tribes are related to each other culturally and historically. Tribals have existed in the ecosystem of the forest and that has influenced their lives and the community they currently have. Most of them live in close proximity to the forest and rely on their livelihood and sustenance from the forest. As they grow in these woodlands, their entire life grows around the forest and extracts prerequisites such as clean water, air, food, Medicines, tents, and even retreats from these forests for leisure. As a matter of fact, many anthropologists believe that indigenous religions Work to encourage equilibrium, harmony, and dynamic balance between Human beings and their environments, including evidence of what will be among the world's indigenous peoples, conservation ethics tend to be religiously motivated.

The forest dwellers depended on their natural habitat in a multitude of ways. An adequate forest cover was ecologically necessary to sustain cultivation on hilly terrain, whether it was jhum( shifting cultivation) or cultivation of the terraced variety( Singh IF 100 1974: 367-70).( Amalendu Guha briefly mentions these peasant

struggle in Jaintia Hills, and lower Assam districts but a detailed, analytical account is writing). And where animal husbandry was a valuable appendage to cultivation ( as in the Himalayan foothills) the forest were a prime source of fodder, in the form of grass and leaves.

It is important to stress that this dependence was institutionalized through a variety of cultural and religious mechanism which enabled the forest dweller to reproduce their existence. In tribal India, even today, 'it is striking to see how in many of the mythes and legends trhe deep sense of identity with the forest is emphasised' ( Gol vol. I, 1960-61:125).

Indian tribal population had a common feature totemic and it was their belief that they had mysterious relation with some plants, besides animals. Totemistic clans are the Munda, Oraon, Santhal etc. All these tribes consider that their respective ancestors of the clan concerned have been helped or protected by the totemic plants or animals or have proved to be of some peculiar use or service. Reverence is shown for by the people and their totem objects are not destroyed by them. **(Vidyarthi, Rai, 1976, P.243).**

The Dooars are the floodplains and foothills of the eastern Himalayas around Bhutan in North-East India and are one of India's main biodiversity zones. The Sankosh river divides this region into the Eastern and Western Dooars, consisting of an area of 8,800 km<sup>2</sup> (3,400 sq m.). The Western Dooars are referred to as the Bengal Dooars, and the Assam Dooars as the Eastern Dooars.(Dooars 2015, May 21).

The flat level strip of land, averaging about 22 miles running along the foot of the Bhutan hills, was known as the Bhutanese Duars or the western Duars. Prior to Bhutanese subjugation, they were in all probabily under the aegis of the Cooch Behar Raj. This Part of the country was never tatally integrated with the Mughal sstate apparatus. The Duars forest itself might have been a natural or ecological border for the expansion of the agriculturally based Mughals. (Singh,' 1988, PP.319-40.). The Duars persisted under the control of the Bhutanese until the British intervention.

Before the advent of the British the dwellers of the forest enjoyed freedom to use forest resources. The ruler had limited and no interest in the woodlands. Coming in power in Indian, the British realised the economical value of the forest and tried to impose a number of restrictions of the use of forest resources. As timber was necessary for building railway tracks, developing shipbuilding industries, making furniture, providing a continuous supply of fire-wood and for the exportation of timber to Britian, heavy pressure was placed on Indian timber forests during this period ( **Schlich, .1906, p.126,**).

The early years of railway expansion saw an unprecedented assault on the more accessible forests. Great chunks of forests were destroyed to meet the demand for railway sleepers, no supervision was exercised over the felling

operations, and a large number of trees being felled whose logs could not be utilised. (Stebbing vol.I. 1922-27: 298-99). In 1856, Lord Dalhousie laid down a definite forest policy which realised the impact of forest destruction due to huge usage of timbers in railways and Government of India decided to take energetic steps to protect from further destruction the forests that still survived (Smythies, 1925).

Before 1855, the various groups enjoyed freedom of forest resources. But after 1855, limitations on the right of different communities to forest resources were enforced. In the first half of the British government (1757-1857) there was no guiding principle for the British administrative authority to collect forest resources from the most varied hills and mangrove forests of the province of Bengal. (Ghosal, (2011). 5(1), 107–116.; Saikia, A. (2011). Within a few months after the second half of the colonial period, the authorities divided forest land into three categories: protected, covered and unclassified forest areas (1857-1947). Lord Dalhousie first proclaimed a forest policy in Calcutta for forest landscape protection on August 3rd, 1855. **Blanford, H. R. (1922). Note on a Short Tour in Northern Bengal. Burma Forest Bulletin, 5.**) Lord Dalhousie first proclaimed a forest policy in Calcutta for forest landscape protection on August 3rd, 1855. Systematic forest conservation in the Bengal province began after the inspection of forest areas by Brandis (First Inspector General of Forests of India) in August 1864. In 1886, for the first time in Indian forest history, including the entire western Dooars region on the right bank of the Teesta River, an area of about 15,5,399.29 square kilometers was demarcated as a Reserved Forest. The forest landscape of sub-Himalayan Bengal changed dramatically after that. . **(Kar, A. (2004). RNI No. 53248/88, West Bengal.)**

The primary objective of colonial rule was the demarcation into three distinct types of natural forest-reserved, protected, and unclassified forest, since it was the main source of income for the British Raj. Forest delineation into the three classes brought considerable difficulties to the everyday life of forest dwellers and indigenous people.

In order to achieve monopoly power over Indian forest resources, the British Government had to regulate the rights of local dwellers by imposing strict rules and regulations. Later on, fury among forest communities was triggered by these policies. ( **Joshi, 1983, P.43-52, 2008,**). The same strategy was introduced in India to save commercially valuable forests from being illegally cut and to control the accumulation of forest products, ignoring the native people's forest-based livelihoods. Through 'The Government Forests Act 1865' the first attempt at asserting state monopoly right was made. The Act empowered the government to proclaim any land covered with trees, brushwood or jungle as government forest by notification, provided that ".....Such notification should not tell upon any existing right of individual or communities." **(The Government Forest Act, 1865, Dehradun 1961, P.337).**

The reservation lasted for about ten years and much of the reserved forest was demarcated and "gazetted" in 1884. From what was defined as 'unoccupied' wasteland, the forest declared as reserved was selected, and therefore no prior rights were recognized. The indigenous forest dwellers were not entitled to make such claims

and were, of course, ignorant of the procedures in question. The reserved forests in Duars were divided administratively into two forest divisions, i.e. the Jalpaiguri and Buxa Forest Divisions, separated by the Torsa River as the boundary. **(Progress Report of the forest Administration of Bengal, 1874-75 1875, page 16)**. In 1881, nearly 30,000 sleepers were removed for railway sleepers from the Buxa Division, which inevitably depleted the forest reserves quickly. **(Forest Administration of Bengal Progress Report, 1881-82,1882)**. It was forced to keep its ideas about conservancy in abeyance

For a large number of individuals in the Dooars, grazing buffalo was a significant means of subsistence. The large herds of buffaloes were brought from the adjoining districts to graze in the plains of the Dooars. These large numbers of herds passed annually through the Dooars for sale in Assam, which posed a danger to the department of the forest as they caused great harm to the young plants. **(P/2025 Progress Report of the Forest administration, 1882/83, P.38 )**. The department predictably decided it was important to put a stop to this in the future. Cattle pounds were developed as a step in that direction and large fines were imposed for illegal grazing in the reserved forests.

The cultivation of cotton by Jhoom was another significant component in the symbiotic relationship between different communities in the Dooars. who suffered the same fate. As early as 1870, it was forbidden within the boundaries of the forests, but it was permitted in the Jhars or areas where the jungle consisted of bushes, shrubs and stunted trees. **(P/433/1 Progress Report of the Forest Administration, 1868/69. P.19)**. Mech occupied eight out of ten villages in the Buxa Forest, and Garos shifted their residences from one location to another and cultivated them periodically. In addition, they have no claim to the land and have to pay the government a capitation fee. **(Progress Report of Forest Administration of the Bengal presidency, for the years 1875-76 1876, page 16)**. The government could simply tell them that they have to move beyond the forest area declared to be reserved. The government knew that the Jhummas were in desperate condition, and it also made an effort to set aside land for them. Mech and Garo colony' was established for the the Aboriginal races, who were oppressed by their more intelligent neighbors and were in danger of losing their lands. **( Gruning, 1911, P.91)** Some of the indigenous communities become agricultural workers or adhiars, working leased land on a fifty baris, in these troublesome situations of decreasing access to the forest. Rabhas, Meches and the other indigenous people had no position in the economic and social systems focused on settled permanent farming, tea gardens and scientific forestry, which took shape in Duars under the British Raj. In this situation, the population of Mech was gradually driven to the east. **(grunning 1911, P.37)**.

The establishment of the forest village became completely necessary after the taungya revolution to secure a permanent labor force for the protection of fire. Inside the reserved forests the first laborer had been settled in 1894. This was a temporary settlement and. in 1902, all of them were uninhabited. Forest village is an administrative term that refers to a village located within the reserved forestland under the Forest Department's administration. Within the reserved forests, grazing and farming were otherwise prohibited. The inhabitants of the villages were greatly hindered by the new rules and many of them left the forested villages. **(Shebbeare, 1920, p. 9)**

Those are the Rabhas who, under the hard rule of the Forest Department, were transformed from relatively independent shifting cultivators into settled forest villages. Two types of forest villages were mainly present, firstly villages with registered lease holder families, secondly with non-registered families or faltu. Fifty percent or more forest villages were in the group of Faltu. The faltus did not have any right in reserve forest and the forest department does not bear any responsibility for them, according to the forest department. The issue started during ' establishment of forest villages by the British rulers. (kalosson, P.101,102).

The tribal people were practically rulers of forests until the introduction of the British Forest Policy. They did not have any forest limits and were therefore free to access forest products. Yet colonial policies gave the state absolute power and the state began to regulate the forest management. As a consequence, much of the privileges enjoyed so far by the tribes have been stopped. After the British annexed it, the landscape and population of the Dooars area underwent a drastic transformation. For the tea plantation, a wide area of the forest was cleared. Before the British came, timber extraction had taken place, but after the British came, cutting of Shal and other valuable tree increased remarkably as these trees were used as sleepers of North Bengal's newly built rail line. The region of unclaimed forests began to decline steadily, shifting tribal agriculture in reserved forests began to close and the tribes lost their traditional livelihood. Due to the development of roads and railways, huge quantities of mineral resources were destroyed, and industrial growth became the main economic activity during the colonial period, which was also a cause for the destruction of natural resources in this area.

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