

The Sundarbans Forest Systems: Patterns of Colonial Control and Social Response to Capitalist Enterprises, c.1830-1905

Iftekhar Iqbal

Associate Professor, Department of History
University of Dhaka

Studies of the forest have received intense and varied attention in the past few decades, generating three major trends. One relates to the discourse of destruction of forest regimes. The intervention of colonial capital as well as pressure of population growth has been understood to be contributing to such destruction. Another theme is that of conservation which has highlighted the debates around the place of origin of conservation ideas and practices. Although the initial assumption was that conservation practices started in the USA in the nineteenth century, some historians have argued later that conservation policies and practices originated in the colonial world, where the destruction of the environment was most remarkable. Recently, particularly in South Asia, there have been important discussions on the intervention of the state in forest regimes and the resistance from forest dwellers. Seen in any way, the role of capital and the colonial state have been regarded as one of uninterrupted domination. While this proposition stands the test of empirical scrutiny in many respects, it blocks a more flexible reading of the varied development of capitalist intervention and colonial domination within a given ecological regime.

The Sundarbans, one of the largest mangrove forest systems of the world, sheds useful lights on the patterns of capitalist intervention and colonial control amidst changing societal responses. This paper studies the historical significance of the Sundarbans in Bangladesh from the perspective of nineteenth-century social formation and developments in the agrarian economy. The study depends

on three broad interdisciplinary angles. First, it examines the political economy of the colonial state's absolute proprietary rights over the Sundarbans. Then it emphasizes how colonial power lost its centrality and grip in the actual process of capitalist exploitation of the forest. Finally, it traces the ways in which indigenous society responded and operated in the wake of the colonial state's dilemma of owning the Sundarbans but its inability to fully exert its metropolitan muscle.

Return to the forest wasteland?

According to Manu, the ancient Indian sage, just as the wild deer of forests became the property of the man who first pierced them with arrows, so did the arable land become the property of the man who first cut down the jungle for purposes of cultivation (quoted in Mookerjee 1984). In Islamic tradition, as endorsed by the prophet of Islam, 'whoever gives life to dead land, it is his' (Farmer 1974). No wonder in ancient and medieval India, individuals who reclaimed and utilized wastelands were generally favoured by their rulers. The British colonial state also followed the existing practice of favouring the reclamation of wastelands; however, the Bengal wasteland became doubly significant in the context because of a number of circumstances.

One of the reasons that led to qualitative changes in colonial policy and practices in relation to the wasteland was the desire of the colonial state to keep Bengal connected to the world market of raw materials. This was imperative in the wake of the decline of deltaic indigenous commerce and industries at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This decline was mainly caused by the monopoly of the East India Company, which was sustained by a nexus of Company staff and their native collaborators, and which went against the spirit of the free trade of the time. Whereas in the late seventeenth century Dutch purchases of textiles in Bengal perhaps generated 100,000 new jobs for that region, by the end of the eighteenth century this situation had begun to change for the worse. By 1830, the decline, particularly in the textile sector, climaxed in Dhaka in particular and Bengal in general (Tomlinson, 2000; Boyce, 1987). The dismantling of Bengal as a commercial hub created a void within the array of colonial activities. Inevitably, the Company began to look for new avenues of raw materials and new sources of revenue. Against this backdrop, the Sundarbans drew fresh attention from the Company. Thus began an era in which the domain of the wastelands of the Delta became the last resort of the Company, their agents and, most remarkably, jobless commercial craftsmen, as well as landless peasants. This situation perfectly fitted the new wave of home and international demand

for raw materials. It formed part of the general nineteenth-century trend, which was regarded as the great age of commodity demand and consequent change in land uses (Tucker & Richards, 1983). Significantly, this was a time when the British colonies, after a long spell of closed mercantilist practices, were increasingly becoming open to the wider world (Fieldhouse, 1968).

Another rationale that drove the colonial state towards the systematic exploitation of the Sundarbans by the 1830s was related to social and political considerations. The policy shift came in sharp contrast to the policy which the Company had pursued right after its take-over in Bengal in the middle of the mid-eighteenth century. In 1793 the Company, under governor Lord Cornwallis, introduced the Permanent Settlement system of land management. In this system, landlords were given enormous power to collect revenue from actual cultivators and pay annually a fixed amount from the collection to the state. While this process created a new landed elite loyal to the government, it dealt a serious blow to the general well-being and social autonomy of peasant society. Landlords now took control of the countryside and employed all sorts of methods of exploitation to collect revenue. A remarkable consequence of this type of land settlement appeared to be the pauperization of the peasant population and led to a series of rebellion and resistance movements against colonial rule. Perhaps the most serious problem from the perspective of the colonial state was the development of the landlord's practice of collecting as much tax as possible from cultivators but paying a fixed revenue to the Government. The state had nothing to do in such cases since it was a permanently settled land treaty. The way the colonial state sought to meet the dilemma led to a policy shift which not only returned the state's gaze to the wasteland but also to those vulnerable members of society who were hitherto exploited by the landlords in the permanently settled areas.

The government policies and the peasants

The issue of settling the Sundarbans was raised by Lord Cornwallis during the debates that preceded the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in 1793. The Sundarbans indeed formed part of his general arguments for settling lands with a new class of landed aristocracy. The Sundarbans was, however, not only excluded from the Permanent Settlement, it even fell outside the jurisdiction of the mainstream revenue collection mechanism (Beveridge, 1876). Afterwards, following disputes between the government and landlords who wanted to have a share in the Sundarbans wastelands adjoining their permanently settled estates, the government clarified its position through subsequent regulations. An 1837

regulation thus established the government's 'inherent title to share produce of all lands cultivated in the Sundarbans on the ground that the tracts were waste in 1793 and thereby not included in the permanent settlement' (Pargiter, 1885).

In order to reclaim forests, the government opted for a lease system in which large capitalists, generally known as grantees, were awarded lease of large tracts of forests. The general principle, as framed in 1853, was that one-fourth of the total grant was to be held rent-free forever; that the remaining three-fourths should be rent-free for twenty years, and should then be held subject to the payment of a progressive rental. While these provisions appeared lucrative to grantees, there were two aspects of the whole affair that directly or indirectly went in favour of the *abadkars* or reclainer-cultivators. This is mainly because the grantees who took licenses to clear the forest were not in a position to operate according to their unbridled free will. Like the government, they were equally aware of the difficulty of earning profit without the active role of the *abadkars* who could clear, settle and cultivate lands in the wastelands. The grantees, therefore, were dependent on the actual reclaimers:

Not only are settlers able to obtain very favourable terms as to rent, but they are often assisted by the superior grantees by money advances, or by cattle purchased for them. A grantee naturally does all he can to lease out the whole of his clearing, as, if allowed to remain fallow, it quickly reverts to jungle (Hunter, 1875).

On the other hand, the field level organizers of the reclamation operations, known as *hawaladars* who took lease from the capitalist grantees could not clear and cultivate all the portion that they had received from the grantees. They would therefore create sub-tenures. For example, a *hawaladar* used to create a subordinate tenure called *nim hawala* and subsequently an *ausat hawala*, intermediate between himself and the *nim hawaladar*. Neither the government nor the grantee interfered in the *hawaladar's* right to create sub-tenures as each of the parties involved knew that unless things were left to develop in such an order, the project of reclamation and cultivation would not come through within a specific time. This system of sub-tenures shows that the very nature of the difficulties in the reclamation process made each of the tenures and sub-tenures dependent on each other (For details about the development of land tenure in colonial Bengal, see Islam, 1985).

Given the unique circumstances in the wasteland, it was not the capacity to collect rent from corresponding sub-tenants, but the capacity to employ physical enterprise and labor which held the intra-tenural relationship in this

system intact and which amply rewarded each party involved. At the same time, in the same situation in which lands were too extensive to till, *abadkars* tended to regard themselves as having occupancy or proprietary rights in the land they had reclaimed by hard labour. This was an *abadkari swatwa*, or reclamation right, which were founded upon 'original reclamation' (Westland, 1874).

Robert Morrell, holder of one of the largest grant of wasteland in the Sundarbans, used to contract *hawaladars* at a certain rate. Under this system, they were obliged to clear away forest and settle cultivators on it and cultivate it for three years by themselves or by the cultivators. On the settlement of cultivators, initial contracts were given first in the shape of *amulnama*, or mere orders to remain in possession and to cultivate. Thereafter they were to pay rent according to the amount of *beegahs* which had been cleared and measured. On the question of whether cultivators would take up contracts unless given in perpetuity, Morrell mentioned that in that case some would not refuse it, 'but', he continued, 'unless I give such *pottas* (written contract), they would not come willingly and in numbers, and my object is to get as many *ryots* (cultivators) as I can'. According to Hunter, the abundance of spare land and the scarcity of labour were 'sufficient protection to the cultivator against oppression on the part of the grantee'. In addition to the compulsion as entailed by the highly fluid ecological circumstances in the wastelands, the government ruled that failure to reclaim a certain tract of lands in a stipulated time would result in the termination of grants, including those parts of the granted tract that had already been cleared and cultivated (RAB, 1873-4).

These circumstances put the Sundarbans grantees, unlike grantees or colonizers in the Nilgiri Hills or Darjeeling, under considerable pressure. It compelled them to give leases to the *abadkars* on the same lucrative terms that they were given by the government. They were given lands in perpetuity with occupancy rights as well as money to settle their families and to buy animals and other agricultural equipment. Besides, the termination of any grant did not affect the rights of actual reclaimers. Under the term of lease of 1853, when a grant was cancelled, land found to be actually under cultivation was to be measured and settled with the cultivator or under-tenant. As the Delta was most capable of creating new lands, this policy presumably affected a large section of the cultivating class who had settled in those lands owned by the government. For instance, Morrell admitted that the oppressed cultivators in the permanently settled lands could only run from one landlord's estate to another to be oppressed again, but the opening of a fresh tract of wasteland gave them a chance of

escaping altogether from oppression, and obtaining and holding lands for a better terms, which, in a measure, was a 'check upon the practice of the zemindar'.

The society

In addition to securing entitlement to the land they had settled in, the *abadkars* in the Sundarbans entered the wider network of domestic and international market in a direct and free manner. This was a welcome change in agrarian market relations as in the landlord's territory every producer-seller was subject to various undue hindrances. For instance, Lal Behari, a contemporary tourist, observed that in a market place that operated on a land owned by a landlord, *Brahmins* would ask tax for *pujas* (Hindu religious worshipping), *phandidar* or police constable would ask tax for providing the so-called 'safety' of the villagers, and the landlord himself would collect tax in various ways. The landlord would not impose tax for the ground itself, but would reimburse himself by taking a small quantity of goods in which the sellers dealt. By adopting this method of remunerating himself, Lal Behari thought that landlords got 'a hundred times more than he would have obtained if he had charged a fair rent for the ground.' (Day, 1894).

The creation of new markets by the grantees in the Sundarbans opened wider scope for the cultivators to sell their produce without such traditional marketing hazards. As a government official reported, there were numerous markets of different sizes in the Sundarbans. This was because the Sundarbans itself was producing a huge volume of export crops, notably rice and jute, and also because the Sundarbans possessed the principal river routes to Calcutta Port. The Sundarbans markets were used not only by the cultivators who resided in the territorial boundary of a particular *grant/lease*, but also by cultivators of adjoining and distant estates of the landlords. Peasants would bring their produce by boats, three to six hour pulls, to these markets and sell the products themselves. Morrell used to let shopkeepers have their lands rent free for six or seven years, and reduced the price of salt from eight to *six pice* (equivalent to a penny) per kilogram by procuring salt direct from the government. By this measure, he said, he had 'induced the ryots to come stealthily' to his bazar, and so gradually his bazar became the largest in the Sundarbans. It was reported that in Chandkhali alone, on an average, 3,000 to 8,000 rupees worth of rice changed hands every market day when about 1,500 boats were brought up.

Between the government policy of encouraging the commercialisation of agriculture and flexibility in tenure and landholding, peasant society in the Bengal Delta showed signs of remarkable dynamism. After meeting its domestic

consumption demand, it not only supplied rice and jute, among other items, to the domestic and world market, it was the last resort for the famine stricken-districts of the older parts of Bengal in particular and India in general. The qualitative changes brought about in the socio-economic conditions were reflected in the rates of labour-cost and range of indebtedness. It was noticed that whereas debt was 'worse in Behar, [it was] somewhat considerable in Central and Western Bengal and Orissa, less decidedly in Eastern and Northern Bengal' and was 'altogether disappearing in parts of Eastern Bengal and Northern Bengal' (Temple, 1876). On the question of the wages of labour, Richard Temple observed that, in general, it was one to *two annas* a day in Behar, two *annas* in Orissa, three *annas* in Northern Bengal, four *annas* in Central Bengal and five *annas* in Eastern Bengal.

It was estimated that among those who reclaimed wastelands, nine out of ten cultivated them with their own hands, though they might have employed others to assist them. This collective process of reclamation and settlement bonded the reclaiming tenants together in a spirit of equality. They developed mutual dependency as well as a collective way of doing things. In the Delta, for instance, it was the custom of the cultivators to assist each other mutually with labour and recourse to hired labour was unusual. Probably as a result of such customs, social stratification did not develop to any remarkable extent. As old aristocratic Muslim families, like the Brahmans, were not involved in the actual reclamation process, the whole range of *ashraf* or *atraf* typology mattered less than it did in the older tracts of Bengal. In fact, Beveridge was surprised by the dearth of aristocratic Muslim families in Bakarganj, which was full of Muslims.

The deltaic wasteland provided new opportunities for survival and even prosperity for those who took advantage of the new opportunities. They included unemployed weavers to landless and oppressed peasantry. In the 1871 Census of Bengal, it was found that among the weaver class of Deltaic districts, only about 45 per cent were actually engaged in the weaving profession. The rest were assumed to have gone to the fields reclaimed from the coastal wasteland (Eaton, 1990). Beside the weaving class, a large number of people who were outcasted from their own community also found their way into the deltaic hinterland. In Faridpur, the bulk of the agricultural population was mainly composed of *Chandals*. This had been a community of Hindus of many castes, who had all, from Brahmans downwards, been 'outcasted and banished' to what were then the great swamps of Faridpur. They made mounds in the swamps, and lived by fishing. 'Gradually' as one contemporary observer noted, 'the swamps dried and

became rich land, and the Chandals from a race of starving wild men became substantial yeomen, increasing abundantly in wealth and in number' (Carstairs, 1912). Among the Muslims, too, a process of upward mobility and a sense of collective strength developed (Ahmad, 1970). This trend among Muslim was manifested in a socio-political movement known as the Faraizi movement. The *Faraizis*, who concentrated in the new lands in the chars, islands and the reclaimed lands from forest, not only represented the improving economic condition of the peasantry, but also organized resistance against the injustice imposed by the colonial system. In his search for the causes of the increasing Muslim discontents in Bengal, William Hunter found in 1871 that 'a hundred and seventy years ago it was almost impossible for a well-born Musalman in Bengal to become poor; at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich' (Hunter, 1871). But Hunter proved himself self-contradictory on the issues of the Faraizis. In his multi-volume *Statistical Account of Bengal*, whenever he described the Faraizis, he invariably pointed out to their economic well-being. Recently, historians have attributed the development of a distinctive political identity in the nineteenth century to the Faraizi movement (Ahmed, 1979; Bose, 1986; Samad, 1983).

Conclusion

In the light of the present economic and social condition of Bangladesh, the nineteenth-century picture of relative prosperity and social mobility may appear surprising. In this paper, I have attempted to show that though this region did not experience a peasant utopia in the nineteenth century, it nevertheless had a relatively better time, compared to other regions in South Asia. This was possible mainly because of the extensive wasteland and dynamics of reclamation. The question remains; why has this region failed to perform in the twentieth century through the present day? Throughout the nineteenth century there was no instance of remarkable food shortage, but the new century saw a number of small-scale famines culminating in major famines in 1943 and 1974. Although there has not been massive food shortage since then, the overall social and economic developments for the majority have remained unrealized. Historians have sought to answer this question from different perspectives, including that of the lack of capital formation, suppressive hegemony of religion, or the false ambition of nationalist politics. Given the strong link between a formative ecology and socioeconomic dynamism in the nineteenth century, it is perhaps also time to see to what extent the dislocations of the ecology of the region in more recent times can help formulate an answer to the question posed above.

References

- Ahmad, Muzaffar. (1970). *Myself and the Communist Party of India* (Calcutta), pp. 1-5.
- Ahmed, Rafiuddin (1979) 'Islamization in Nineteenth Century Bengal' in Gopal Krishna (ed.), *Contributions to South Asian Studies* (vol. 1, Delhi), p. 88;
- Beveridge, H. (1876). *The District of Bakarganj* (London: Trubner), p.160.
- Bose, Sugata (1986). *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947* (Cambridge,), p.184.
- Boyce, James K. (1987). *Agrarian Impasse in Bengal: Institutional Constraints to Technological Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 4.
- Carstairs, R. (1912). *The Little World of an Indian District Officer* (London), p. 58
- Day, Lal Behari. (1892) *Bengal Peasant Life* (London), pp.169-70.
- Eaton, Richard M. (1990). 'Human Settlement and Colonization in the Sundarbans', *Agriculture and Human Values*, 7, 2, pp. 12.
- Farmer, B.H. (1974). *Agricultural Colonization in India since Independence* (London, Oxford University Press), pp.5-9.
- Fieldhouse, D.K. (1968). 'Colonialism: Economic', *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, p.9.
- Hunter, W.W. (1871). *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (London).
- Hunter, W.W. (1875). *Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. 1, pp. 338-9.
- Islam, Sirajul. (1985). *Bengal Land Tenure : The Origin and Growth of Intermediate Interests in the 19th Century* (Rotterdam: Comparative Asian Studies Programme)
- Mookerjee, Radharomon. (1984). *History and Incidents of Occupancy Right*, (Delhi: Neeraj Publishing House), p.10.
- Pargiter F.E. (1885). *A Revenue History of the Sunderbans from 1765 to 1870* (Calcutta), p. 12.
- RAB. (Report of the Revenue Administration of Bengal) (1873-4). (Calcutta: Government of Bengal) p. 34

Samad, Abdus (1983). 'Dynamics of Ascriptive Politics: a Study of Muslim Politicization in East Bengal (Bangladesh)' (unpublished P.hD. dissertation, Columbia University, 1983).

Tomlinson, B.R. (2000). Bengal Textiles, British Industrialisation, and the Company Raj: Muslins, Mules and Remittances, 1770-1820, *Bulletin of Asia-Pacific Studies*, X (31 March 2000), 209.

Tucker, R.P. and Richards, J.F. (eds), (1983). In the editorial introduction, *Global Deforestation and the Nineteenth- Century World Economy* (Durham,), pp. xi-xv.

Temple, Richard. (1876). quoted in *The Bengal Times*, 29 January, p. 68.

Westland, J. (1874). *A Report on the District of Jessore*, p. 178.