

FORESTRY IN NORTH BENGAL

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The part of Bengal bounded by the river system Brahmaputra-Jamuna-Ganges to its North is generally known as North Bengal. The portion of North Bengal which came to Pakistan after independence of the country inherited small areas of natural forests. The scope of this paper is limited to the Pakistan portion of the North Bengal. Of the five Civil Districts of North Bengal namely, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Pabna and Bogra, there is no forest at all in Pabna and Bogra. About 85.5% of the forest areas are situated at Dinajpur district, 11% at Rangpur District but contiguous to the Dinajpur forests and 2.5% at Rajshahi. The forests of the present Rajshahi district were also the part of undivided Dinajpur district but became intercepted due to partition of Dinajpur district at the time of Independence.

The forest areas lie between 25° and 27° North latitude and 80° and 90° East Longitude. The topography is flat and only slightly above the mean Sea level (about 30' in the South-Eastern part (Pabna) to about 200' in the North-Western part (Tetulia)). Geologically ~~the tract is~~ rather not interesting. The whole area is covered by alluvial deposits of recent formations. Two distinct soil types are locally recognised in the alluvium namely, "Poli" and "Khlar". 'Poli'

is a light ash coloured sandy loam with varying proportions of sands, having greater moisture holding capacity and is thus fertile. 'Khlar' is a heavy yellowish soil formed from the old alluvium and is poor in moisture holding capacity. It is sticky and soft when wet but turns hard like rock in the dry weather. The main forest areas are in this 'Khlar' tracts.

Climatically the tracts lies just outside the tropic of cancer and its climate is on the whole drier than that of the southern part of the Province. The average rainfall varies from 90 inches in the northern part to 50 inches in the south-west (Rajshahi) and 60 inches in the south-eastern part (Pabna). Most of the rainfall (about 80%) occurs during the monsoon season, May through September. Mean monthly temperature varies from 90°F. in May to 60°F. in January. Evaporation rate varies from 45 to 55 inches per year.

The word "Forest" inevitably brings into the minds of general people a vast tracts of wood-land having undulating terrain, characterised by inaccessibility and abounded by wildlife. But in contrast North Bengal forests are neither vast in extent nor inaccessible. These are scattered wood lots situated on flat country side, intermixed with habitation and cultivation and where wildlife is a mythology, particularly to the younger generation. While patches of forests in some cases may extend to 200 to 300 acres, there are innumerable dots of forests dwindling to almost nothing. These should

better be called village groves.

The crop contained in these forests is almost pure sal (Shorea robusta) comprising over 95% of the stock. Kumbi (Careya arborea), Bahera (Terminalia belerica), Semul (Salmalia malabaricum), Treonia orientalis, Jarul (Albizzia stipulata), Sheora (Streblus asper), Am (Mangifera indica), Sonalu (Cassia fistula), Hargeja (Dillenia pentagyna), Litsea and Grewia species constitutes the balance 5% of the growing stocks. A few patches of sal forests of Rajshahi district are found mixed with Tendu (Diospyrus melanoxyton) seedlings and pole crop as an understory. The under growth consists of Bhattia (Clerodendrom infortunatum), Inrajal (Halarrhena antidysentrica) and various herbs and shrubs of the genera Cassia and Caesalpiniae. Of climbers the important are Spathololus roxbughii, Entada scandens, Smilax macrophylla, Mucana pruriens, Acacia pinnata, Tnospora cardifolia, Vitis species and Eupatorium odoratum.

The origin of Sal in these forests is rather obscure and a matter of speculation. These forests do not appear in the description of sal forests of Bengal and Assam in Troupe's Silviculture of Indian trees. There is, of course, no doubt that these forests definitely existed during the time when Troupe compiled his volumes and published in 1921. They probably have been omitted due to their insignificant extent in comparison to the 'Duars' forests of West Bengal (Now in

India) knowing the fact that Sal seeds do not retain its vitality for a long time and it, ordinarily, cannot invade an area beyond three hundred feet from the mother trees, it is not right to assume that sal has appeared in these areas in the process of invasion and succession, being situated, as at present, far away from the Sal forests of Duars. Apart from the legendory history of the Hindu mythology that these areas were a part of the jungle Kingdom of Kamrup reigned by the mighty Brahmin king Parashuram and that heroes Yudhister and his four brothers lived in exile in these tracts which is supposed to have been covered with deep jungles, the history of 'Barendra Bhumi' also indicate that this tract was full of tree growth even few centuries backs. All these leads to the alternative conclusion that the area contained sal as a continuous zone to the Duars sal at a time beyond the memory of the present generation. Slowly but systematically the forests have been destroyed by man leaving the present remnants of scattered areas in a dwindling stage.

The forests of North Bengal in its present state may, therefore, be presumed to be a sporadic continuation of the Himalayan foot hill forests. Prior to independence of the country these forests had very little importance and consequently very little known at large so much so that people to the South of Brahmaputra-Jamuna-Padma feels curious to hear that some forests exists in North Bengal. This is primarily because the forests are small in extent and were privately

owned and secondly because undivided Bengal had better quality and scientifically managed forests in the Duar and Terai belts which used to feed the whole of Bengal (Particularly in respect of Sal timbers). Assam Sal is so much preponderantly familiar to our people that it is hard to make them believe that Assam Sal is the same species as is existing here and we are growing now in our plantations.

The recorded history and regular scientific management of these forests started after independence of the country. From the contemporary history, revenue records and also from the remnants of past felling it appears that in the not too distant a past these were well stocked forests with big sized trees. The first onslaught came when the Bengal Private Forest Act, 1945 was enacted. The landlords, who were the owners, wanted to reap the maximum before any plausible takeover of the forests by the Government. Soon after came the major event of partition of the country which induced the migrating owners to fell and sell as much as they could before leaving the country. The final blow and extreme attitude came when the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 was being formulated. The well informed Zaminders conceived of the impact of the proposed legislation well ahead and deliberately felled the forests ruthlessly in a bid to extract the last juice.

This is all about the damage to the forest crop. But the legal complications created by the owners are enormous. The

East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 was so hurriedly executed that all the plausible mischief by the landlords could not be effectively guarded or guaranteed. The hasty method deprived the province of invaluable revenue records, sometimes dating back to the Moghol period, which were in possession of the Zaminders and Maharajas but were either destroyed or concealed by them and this void in revenue records is never to be filled up. Since Government could not seize their records, the landlords and their agents mischievously sublet a bulk forest areas with back dated settlement in defiance of Govt. order not to transfer any land without Govt. sanction. In this way a sizable tract of forest have gone to private hand and were promptly turned into Agricultural land or homestead by disforestation. This has also created big forest protection problem. Often few acres in the midst of a block of forests were settled and the owner has proved to be a cancer to the surrounding areas both by gradual and perpetual encroachment and by grazing their cattles.

After a decade of deliberate ruthless felling by the owners, the forests were taken up for management by the Forest Department with young coppice crop of poor quality and bad formations with a view to recoupe the already depleted forests and to improve the quality and stocking by bringing them under systematic and regular scientific management. A working scheme has been drawn up and the potentially good quality sal bearing

areas are being converted to regular sal forests by clear felling followed by artificial regeneration departmentally. Upto 1969, 1916.52 acres of sal forests have been raised by artificial regeneration method. Sal is the principal species raised in plantation. Depending on the success of sal other species like Teak, Jarul, Jam, Simul etc. are used to supplement the failures. Pure plantations of Teak were raised in some patches at Nowabgonj, Singra and Dharmapur Forest Beats but the growth is poor and quality class is of 3rd grade. Some poor quality sal bearing areas situated near towns and rail roads are being managed under simple coppice system.

BIDI PLANTATIONS :

Bidi made out of Tendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) leaves is popular throughout the length and breadth of the Indi-Pak Sub-continent. After independence, the Tendu producing forests went to India and as a result Pakistan had to spend huge amount of her hard earned foreign exchange in importing Indian Tendu leaves for wrapping Bidi. In order to save this huge drainage on country's foreign currencies, experimental Tendu plantations were under-taken in East Pakistan. On the basis of the favourable results in experimental plantations, large scale Tendu plantations were undertaken during the 2nd and 3rd five years development plan periods in Dinajpur and Rajshahi where, as mentioned earlier, some tendu is occurring naturally as an associate of sal. Upto 1967, an area of 6115 acres of new plantations were raised with Tendu. But after 1965 hostilities

with India, the Government of Pakistan revised their policy with respect to import of Indian Tendu leaves and also use of Tendu leave vis-a-vis the notorious border smuggling at the cost of country's food grain and finally in 1966 Govt. of East Pakistan promulgated Tendu Ordinance banning the use of Indian Tendu leaves. On the face of the Tendu Ordinance, the Tendu plantations raised so far and also ~~the on-going Tendu plantation Development Scheme of the Forest Department was very much~~ under fire from various quarters. The arguments against these Tendu plantations being that the plantations shall not be able to meet the total demand of the country and that there is no yardstick to differentiate Tendu leaves growing in Pakistan with that of Indian one. So even with the Ordinance in force, there will always be scope for smuggling Tendu leaves from India. Ultimately the Tendu Scheme was abandoned in 1967 and the plantations raised so far were decided to be destroyed.

AFFORESTATION OF WASTE LANDS:

Although, literally, East Pakistan has about 17% of her areas under forests but about 9% are productive forests and that too located mostly in the hill ranges of the extreme Eastern districts i.e. Sylhet, Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts and in the tidal forests of Sundarbans. Wood being a bulky and unwieldy product, the cost of transportation and handling becomes too prohibitive to allow purchasing capacity of the ordinary man by the time it reaches North Bengal. In

order to increase the forest areas and consequently forest wealth of North Bengal, some private waste lands in Rangpur, Dinajpur and Rajshahi districts were vested to the Government under East Pakistan Private Forest Ordinance, 1959. During the 2nd and 3rd five year plan periods development schemes were drawn for afforestation of these waste lands and upto 1969, 6180 acres of plantations were raised.

The idea of Afforestation of Waste Lands was conceived of in the mid nineteen fifties. The East Pakistan Private Forest Ordinance, 1959, under which vesting was done, the 'Waste' lands were defined as those which remained fellow for a period of 3 years or more prior to the date of initiating vesting proceedings. But since then there had been a tremendous change in the land use pattern in these areas. With the establishment of a number of Sugar Mills, the extension of irrigation facilities by WAPDA by development of both surface water and sub-soil water, provisions for loans, improved seeds, fertilizers and technical know how by P.I.D.C., A.D.C. and A.D.B.P. and finally extensive campaign by the Government for growing more food in a bid to attain self sufficiency in food grains within 1970, there is virtually no land which had not been brought under cultivation and remained fellow. The situation in respect of waste lands is further aggravated by the effluence of refugees from across the border and migration of river eroded people from the Southern districts of the province and settling in these hitherto relatively thinly populated areas, with the

result that there is a tremendous pressure of population on land. Forests being traditionally considered as the only available surplus land, encroachments on forest lands are rampant. The owners of the vested waste lands also played definite part in this process. Since Government have taken their lands without paying any compensation, the owners thought that the lands went out of their hands permanently. So they have disposed of some lands to the landless refugees and migrants, although the ordinance does not permit such transfer after vesting without the permission of the Government. The refugees and migrants, by nature and of necessity, are arrogant people and with some paper in their hand they have proved to be the most hostile people towards Forest Department activity. The result is that the Forest Department is in constant clash with the public and the efforts of the Department in raising plantations are being continually and purposely foiled by them by damaging the plantation by uprooting, grazing and setting fires. Besides these, the waste land itself are very scattered in nature causing serious protection problem and in the event of non co-operation from the public, the Forest laws and ordinances also failed to protect the forests. There has been wide-spread representation from the public to the Government for releasing their lands for cultivation.

In view of the circumstances discussed above it will transpire that it will be extremely difficult to manage the

lands as forests and under the latest available inputs in the field of Agriculture, it will neither be economical to manage the lands as Forests. The ultimate intension of the Government being betterment of the lot of the people, we, as an agency of land use, feel that under the changed circumstances these waste lands should better be utilised for Agriculture than for Forestry and accordingly the Forest Department has made a re-appraisal of its policy of Afforestation of Waste Lands and recommended to the Government to release the lands to the owners for cultivation. The matter is now being studied and considered by the Government.