

The Environmental Destruction in North Bengal and its Impact on the Tribal People (19th -21st Century)

Abstract

The article seek important forest land, flora and faunas which have destroyed last 150 years from northern Bengal and greatly brought to changes on the socio-ecological condition among the tribes and other common people. Since the second half of the 19th century a large amount of tribal people migrated from Chotanagpur region and settled in the districts of northern Bengal and Assam. Local zamindars and Mahajans had appointed the immigrated tribals to clean the jungle and make to increase the arable land from wastelands. British policy of hunting and wood cutting destroyed the local forest and jungles. Moreover, tribal food habits and the practice of hunting also ruined wild animals. Tiger and other deadly animals were shot dead by the zamindars and mahajans and they liked much to hunt them. With the passing of time, tiger and other deadly wild animals also completely destroyed from the common jungles and bushes. Moreover, science and technology have developed which helped to destroy the environment. Its impact makes to change the agriculture, ecology, social habits, medicine, economic condition or occupation among the lower class people.

Keywords: Forest Land, Flora and Fauna, Tribe, Ecology, Medicine, Wild Animal, Agriculture

Introduction

The Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers have separated the North Bengal from the natural landscape of undivided Bengal. Northern part of the Ganga and western part of Brahmaputra and eastern part of Mahananda including Darjeeling hill tract, the region is denoted as North Bengal. Now North Bengal consist eight districts like Malda, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Cooch Behar and Alipurduar. In the nineteenth century, North Bengal was covered with thick jungle and forest including various wild animals. As tribal and semi tribal people, the Mech, Oraon, Munda, Santal, Nepali tribes like Mangar, Newar, Tamang, Damai, Gurung, Limbu, Kami, Sunawar, Yakha, Sarki, Gharti, Gorkha, Bhutia, Menial and Rajbanshi were the dwellers of Darjeeling hill tract.¹ On the other hand the Rajbanshi, Oraon, Mech, Toto, Bhutia, Santals and some Nepalese were so common in Jalpaiguri and Duars region. Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts were consisted maximum forest area of the North Bengal. The tea plantation was started covering a large landscape destructing of forest land. Other districts also were covered with deep jungle and the forests were maintained by the local king or zamindars. Santals, Mundas, Oraons, Malpaharis, Much, Dom, Dhoba, Dosadh, Gonrhi, Hari, Malo, Koch, Lohar, Poliya, Desi, Sunri, Turi, Tiyar etc. communities are so common in Dinajpur, Malda and Cooch Behar. But the Santals, Mundas and Oraons will not be found in Cooch Behar district. Within the twentieth century huge amount of forest area was destroyed where different tribal communities were dwelled.

After the fall of ancient capital of Pandua the Barind (Barendrabhumi) area of Malda and Dinajpur districts had become totally depopulated and covered by thick jungles.² From 1880s a good number of Santals were imported from Santal Parganas to clean the jungles. More than 117000 tribal people migrated from the Chotanagpur region and entered into the districts of North Bengal and Assam, which incident was known as 'great migration'.³ The Santals, Mundas and Oraons were given encouraged to immigrate into the North Bengal for various purposes. In Darjeeling and Terai and Duars areas they were engaged in tea gardens and jungle areas. On the other side Malda and Dinajpur they were settled



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in indigo plantation, common jungle and wastelands. Immigrated tribals were given promise by the local landlords to settle free raiyati or adhi where they cleaned jungles. The aim of the land lords was development of cultivation.⁴ Within the 1930s maximum of the jungles were cleaned and the land started to use agricultural purpose. Tribal immigration was stopped and the tribals were cheated by zamindars, mahajans and others. Finally they were being removed from their cultivated lands and rent revenue was imposed on their lands. Within 1931, 38.64 square miles land was expropriated from the aboriginals only in Malda district.⁵ This picture almost was same over the North Bengal. At the result some tribal revolt were organized in 1910 to 1932 against the zamindars, mahajans and the British Government. Tribes were hard worker and beloved jungles, and so the local landlords technically engaged them to clean the jungles. In Barind of the Malda district Santals had made even and suitable for agriculture which was high and low land of red clay soil, known as "Kandar"⁶ in Habibpur police station. Santals excavated the high land soil and bring it to low lands and made landscape as "Arkandar" which is most important land class for cultivation. On the other hand, the hill areas aboriginals were engaged to remove the jungles and making even of uneven hill tracts for tea cultivation.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to focus the rare floral and faunal species of North Bengal which have destroyed by last 150 years from the region. This destruction made the change of socio-economic life, food habit, health condition etc. among the tribes. The paper will attract the attention of the Govt. and different Schaller regarding the reckless destruction of forest and tribal condition. Ultimate goal of the paper is to protect the environment and maintain the balance between human and nature

Destruction of Major Floras and Faunas

In 1876 W. W. Hunter pointed out a large amount of forest land and various species of floras and faunas over the northern Bengal. According to him only Jalpaiguri district was consisted 342.54 square miles (or 219227½ acres) covered forest in 1876⁷. But 35 years later in 1911 this forest land much destroyed and stands 182 square miles in Jalpaiguri district⁸. The images of forest destruction of other districts were same. Towards the end of 19th century and first half of the 20th century the common floras were found sal (*Shorea robusta*), simul (*Bombax malabaricum*), pakur (*Ficus infectoria*), hijal (*Barringtoniya acutangula*) with other various species tress across the North Bengal. According to F. W. Strong "coppices of sal are fairly common throughout the district (Dinajpur)."⁹ Around nine categories of bamboos were so common. In the middle of the 20th century sal timbers were cutting down by the landlords and mahajans. Nowadays sal tree will not be found except one or two newly planted sal garden. A few sal forests may be found in Jalpaiguri and Darjelling which are protected in reserved forest only. Various species of floras were seen in Tarai, lower hill, middle hill of the Darjeeling district. *Chilauni* (*Schima Wallichii*), *lampate* (*Duabanga*

sonneratioides), *goguldhup* (*Canarium sikkimense*), *tun* (*Cedrela toona*), *mallata* (*Macaranga denticulate*), *panisaj* (*Terminalia myriocarpa*), *utis* (*Alnus nepalensis*), *latre* (*Dillenia pentagyna*), *kambi* (*Cereya arborea*), *goelo* (*Callicarpa arborea*), *udal* (*Sterculia villosa*) etc. trees were common and large quantity in the district.¹⁰ During 1947 the total Reserve Forest area was covered 437 square miles after destruction of large amount jungles in Darjeeling district. With the cleaning of jungles good number of floras have been destroyed for ever which were identified by the local *ojha*, *kabiraj* and other herbal medicine practitioner who used for various diseases.

Leopard is among the faunal animals still frequently common in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district only. But it was fairly common in first half of the 20th century over North Bengal even in Dinajpur and Malda. Not only that the tiger, jackal, monkey, wild cattle, wild pigs etc. were very common there.¹¹ Now tiger, monkey, wild cat, wild pig are not be found there and jackal also very poor. Moreover python (*python molurus*) of 7 to 20 feet long and various snakes were very common in Dinajpur and Malda. Two kinds of crocodiles (magar and ghariyal) were moving round in different bils, old tanks and rivers, specially Nagar, Purnabhaba, Mahananda, kalindri, etc. Various kind of big fish like Katal, the boal, a fresh water shark (*Wallago attu*) were so common. A boal fish, incredible length of 20 feet also was common in the historic tank Tapan dighi now in south Dinajpur.¹² Various species of fish and reptiles including tortoise, crocodile and python are abolished for ever from Malda, Dinajpur and Cooch Behar. Pemberton in the course of his revenue survey in the middle of the nineteenth century came across extensive stretch of jungle and marshes which were the abode of various wild animals including rhinoceros and different birds in Malda district¹³. He also pointed out large varieties fruits, trees, and wild animal many of them are not be found now. Beside tiger, leopard, *bara singha* deer, spotted deer, hog deer, wild buffalo, wild cat, *kutass*, *python* he saw the five and half feet long *gohsaup* (a snake- eating lizard), forty varieties of birds including peacock and golden oriel.¹⁴ Now these are completely abolished from the place. Hunter in 1876 looked tiger, elephant, leopard, wild buffalo, various species deer, nilgai in the Katal (Barind) which were hunted by the Santals.¹⁵ According to Hunter Barind was about 150 square miles thick jungle between the river Tangan and Purnabhaba. The region is populated by the Santals. J. C. Sengupta described in 1969 as "Nowadays the jungle has been almost entirely cleared" and some leopard was seen in small jungles of the both banks¹⁶. Within the end of 20th century entire wild animals have been killed by hunting and Barind become agricultural land. Not only that, several kinds of birds (various parrots, wild hen, wild duck, some hornbills, meat eater birds, some singer birds, water bird etc.) almost completely destroyed from the North Bengal. Various species of jujube plum (*Ziziphus Jujuba*) trees which grew up wild areas and interesting food to the tribes have destroyed for cleaning of jungle. Different kinds of date plums (*Khejur*) and plum trees (*Tal*) which gave juice and

fruits, much popular to the common people including tribe and semi tribes also reduced and vanished with deforestation.

Around 1850s tea plantation was started in Darjeeling cleaning the foothills jungles. In very soon the tea industry was well raised there. A table is given

here mentioning the development of tea plantation in Darjeeling. When the tea cultivation was developing and at the same time the area of unclassified forest land is decreasing.

Year	Number of gardens	Area under cultivation in acres	Outturn of tea in lbs.	
1870	56	11000	1,700,000	
1874	113	18888	3,927,911	
1885	175	88499	9,090,298	
1895	186	48692	11,714,551	
1905	148	50618	12,447,471	
1910	148	51281	14,137,500	
1915	148	54024	20,203,500	
1920	148	59356	15,850,000	
1925	148	59356	18,732,500	
1930	148	59356	20,870,500	
1935	148	59356	20,798,000	Black
			2,28,000	Green
1940	142	63059	22,743,000	Black
			9,78,500 ¹⁷	Green

Tribal Culture and Forest Destruction

Tribes are liked to live in jungle or hill tract or closely related with forest or jungle. They love to hunting, moving, eating of wild food, tending of wild animals etc. Each tribe has their own hunting (*shikar*) practice in their social system. Moreover, they used different kind of trap, tools and method for hunting. Hunting dog also was used during hunt. Santals, Mundas, Oraons, Mahali, Mechs, Lodhas, Nepalese, Asur, Rabha etc. including the Rajbanshis have their own hunting customs, method and tools. Santals of North Bengal used to celebrate '*Sahara*' which is known as '*Badhna Parab*' festival including other festivals. This festival is organized in *poush* month when the autumn crop is collected home from the field. They celebrate it for seven days, as first day '*um*' or holy bath, second day '*daka*' or finish of harvesting and eating rice, third day '*khuntou*', fourth day '*jali*' fifth day '*haku katkom*' or fishing and hunting of crabs, sixth day '*sakra*' or drinking and eating and seventh day '*sika*' or hunting by groups¹⁸. That day they are bound to go hunting. Not only that day, they were engaged maximum of days in hunting during 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Santals used farsha, bows and arrows, net, hunting dog, hunting pipe, trap etc. As object of hunting they hunted mainly requirement of food and shelter. They hunted wild pig, rabbit, fox, jackal, python, monkey, wild birds and reptiles (various tortoise also) including rats and ate their flesh. Tribal food habits and hunting practice is one of major reasons of animal destruction. Other tribes also have own hunting practices and hunted. In the first half of the 20th century tribes have achieved the technique of making poisonous arrows which was much dangerous than a gun fire. They used it to kill wild pig, tiger, leopard and crocodile etc. And the results in very soon wild animals were being destroyed. Moreover, they also used the poisonous arrows during Adina battle (14th Dec. 1932, Malda)

and Aksha movement (28th June 1932, Gangarampur, Dakshin Dinajpur) and several British polices were died by the arrows of tribes¹⁹. British police department was anxious about the poisonous arrows and Superintendent of Police and District Magistrate of Dinajpur constantly requested to the Chief Secretary of the Bengal Government for restriction of illegal use of poisoned arrows.²⁰ Finally British Government was imposed license on Santali bows and arrows in Gangarampur police station declaring order on 20th August 1932.²¹ But this act was not possible to implement by the Government. Hill tribes including Lepcha of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri involved in hunting of animals and used a good number of tools for those purposes which are stored in Kalimpong Lepcha museum. Beside the tribes the Rajbanshis are also involved in hunting culture. Generally last day of Chaitra month (Chaitra Sankranti) different groups used to come out for hunting. Thus the wild animals were constantly being finish with the invention of new deadly weapons. On the other hand *jhuming* or shifting cultivation was common among hill tribe which was another reason for deforestation. This practice was stopped by the Government.²²

Local Zamindars and Tiger Hunting:

On the other hand maximum local tiger and leopard were destroyed by the land lords. They bought gun and most of the zamindars were skilled gun fighter. They indiscriminately killed the tigers and leopard which were harmful to the locality. They thought it was their legal duty that provides safety of tenants killing the tigers. One incident is that, around 1960s at Dhamdhol village of Itahar police station in Pashchim Dinajpur district a dangerous tiger was remain there. He snatched cows and goats from village houses at night and local Rajbanshis tried to kill him but failed. This news informed to the zamindars of Churamon state and zamindars

Shibprasad Choudhury rushed there with two guns. Mr. Choudhury adopted technique and killed the tiger and became much popular to the tenants. Not only it that about one hundred tiger he killed from his state.²³ Like him almost all zamindars were do same and most important zamindars regarding this matter Abul Hayat Khan Choudhury, zamindars of Kotwali in Malda was much skilled of gun fire. Thus the local tigers of North Bengal are abolished for ever from the place. People had no concept of conservation. Zamindars took the duty of protection of his tenants. So they were bound to kill harmful animals. Moreover, zamindars were awarded as great and bold zamindars by people those who had able to hunt much more tigers. Regarding this matter, we know Jim Corbett hunted more than 1500 wild animals. Though he thought for conservation of the forest and wild animals (established Corbett National Park)²⁴, but unfortunately this conception was not present to the local zamindars of North Bengal. Again huge numbers of trees and wetlands also have been destroyed with the explanation of urbanization or increasing of population.

The Government and the Environment

To protect the countrymen British Government expensed certain amount of money in each district. For example, in 1832 to 1870 Government expensed Rs. 2127.5.4 (or £212 14s. 8d.) for keeping down the wild beasts in Malda district. Average amount was given nearly £6 per year, but of course the amount was varied very considerably. Again, in 1847, the sum £24, 10s. 0d. was paid in one lump for the destruction of 196 hyenas in Malda.²⁵ Beside it, in Dinajpur Government cost for keeping down wild beasts were in 1800-01 the sum of £266, 1824- 1829 the payment averaged £63. 4s. 0d. per annum, 1844-45 to 1848-49 £4,10s.0d., per annum, and from 1867-68 to 1869-70 £19. 12s. 0d. per annum.²⁶ Moreover, to do that a large number of individuals killed by wild beasts. According to the police report the deaths from wild beasts reported averaged 37 per year in Dinajpur for the five year ending 1869-70. The loss of lives by snake bite during the same period averaged 147 per year in Dinajpur.²⁷ On the other hand, in Malda, the number of deaths from wild beasts for the 8 years ending 1860 at 40, which would give an average of 5 for each year. The number of deaths from snake bite in the same period is 447, or an annual average of 51.²⁸ By the way it should be indicated that in Jalpaiguri the sum for wild animal destruction was much more. In 1869 Rs. 1738 (£173, 16s. 0d) was paid for that purpose, because more and more wild animals lived in the forest of Jalpaiguri. Government announced and increased the rewards in 1868 that £2 for each tiger and £1 for each leopard killing.²⁹ According to W. W. Hunter each and every Zamindar kept some skilled hunter to kill the wild beast in their zamindari region. At the same time so many skilled hunter of Zamindar and Europeans rewarded from the British Government. Common people also committed glorification to them. Between 1875 -1925, more than 80,000 tigers were killed with inspiration of British Government in India³⁰. Therefore,

the wild animals and their ecosystem were destroyed by the British Government.

The British Government had taken several steps to take information and protection of environment. In 1787 a botanical garden was established in Kolkata (Shibpur). A large variety of species of floras and faunas were identified and statistics were written mentioning the locations of landscape. But they did not take any rigid policy to protect these. District gazetteers, survey settlement reports, regional tribal report and some others statistics were made for better revenue collection and good governance. In 1878 the first forest act was circulated in India but the act of 1927 (Forest Act 1927 and the Wildlife Protection Act) was the most important to protect forest and wild animals. This act classified forest areas as Reserved Forest, Protected Forest and Village Forest. The Wild life Protection Act of 1972 of West Bengal State Government was the landmark regarding wild life protection, where forest officials were given much power. Total recorded forest area in West Bengal (in 2007-08) is 11879 sq. k.m, of which 7054 sq. k.m is Reserve forest, 3772 sq. k.m is Protected Forest and 3053 sq. k.m is Unclassified State Forest, thus constituting 13.38% of the geographical area of the state.³¹ Moreover, Government created compulsory course on environmental science in school and colleges for more awareness to young.

Impact on Agriculture, Occupation and Medicine

Environmental change affected the climate. Irregular rainfall makes floods and droughts which effected on cultivation. Regarding agricultural system a big change occurred. Commercialization of agriculture, development of science and technology affected the old crops. Among the old rice or paddy crops the *Indra sail*, *Kanti sail*, *Chandan chur*, *Sindur katua*, *Chini dumber*, *Surjya ujal*, *Kanak chur*, *Salina*, *Baghan bichi*, *Ulkabar*³² etc. have abolished with the competition of high yielding paddies like Swarna Masuri, R.I 36, Gobindabhog, Sankar, Laxmibhog etc. Government also encourages farmers to cultivate the high yielding (or hybrid) crops. Same condition are noticed on cereals, green crops, oil seeds, dal, potatoes all kinds of foods including indigenous tobacco, chili, sugarcane. Regarding agricultural explanation, 19% paddy, 29% pulses, 48% potato, 36% vegetables production and marginal area increased in 2007-2008.³³ Once tribal and semi tribal people liked to live in jungle areas and depend on hunting, fruits gathering, fuel and honey collecting besides the cultivation. Irrigation system fully depended on rain water and organic fertilizer. By the forest destruction the agricultural land has increased, city and urban areas rises day by day. Various steps have taken to develop the irrigation. At the result a large amount of non arable land are used as agricultural purpose. People earn better and look for education, job, business etc. Finally, life style and occupation have changed. Jangly life and hunting culture have abolished to the tribes with finish of jungle and wild animal. Food habits also changed due to lack of wild food. They forced to accept various job like scientific agriculture, labour, fishery, paltry farm,

shop keeper, cycle mechanic, and other business. Various important medicine plants which were found deep forest and bushes identified by the local kabiraj, ojha, mahats and other herbal medicine practitioners. A variety of deadly diseases including poisonous bite (snake, dog, bees, and insects) were cured by the forest medicine. Medicine plants also abolished with the forest destruction. Health condition also changed and people force to accept the allopathic medicine. A good number of medical centre and hospitals set up in block and region wise by the Government and private interest.

In the twenty first century people emphasized something about the green environment and started some new plantation in the rural areas. The Government also encourages and helps the people for plantation and tried to increase greenery. But the return of past forests and wild animals is not possible. However, if we be conscious of environment, the existing floras and faunas definitely can be protected.

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