SAL WORKERS OF NADIA
1785-1795

Nadia, at the end of the 18th century, was a very large district, much larger than it was anytime in the 19th and 20th centuries. From the neighbourhood of Murshidabad, the district stretched down to the regions of the Sundarbans and included large areas of the present day 24 parganahs and Jessore. In the southern part of Nadia salt was extensively manufactured at the end of the 18th century, abundance of fuel available in the Sundarbans being one great factor favourable to the production of salt. The Salt Department of the East India Company, with headquarters at Khulna, operated in the Sundarbans region through a number of agencies in the 24 parganahs, Nadia and Jessore, with the help of a small military force. The Salt Agent of Roymungle looked after the production in Nadia.

Like all other concerns of the company, salt manufacture, too, underwent several experiments. The monopoly of higher officers in Clive's time was abolished in 1768 and the manufacture was thrown open to the Indians. In 1772 the latter practice was replaced by a farming system, and finally in 1780, the system of production by agency was introduced under which all the salt of the provinces was to be manufactured for the company.

The production of salt in Nadia reveals certain features which were peculiarly local in character and were altogether different from the system then prevalent in Midnapore. In Midnapore, about two-thirds of the actual producers of salt were known as "Ajoora Malangis". With them salt production was a family concern, their houses and lands being close to the Khalari lands (Salt Works).
The rest were "thika Malangis" who entered into contracts to produce certain quantity of salt and delivered them to the agents of the company at certain rates fixed from time to time. In Nadia most of the salt manufactories were situated deep in the Sunderbans with no habitation in the vicinity. Here the "malangis" were like middlemen, and the salt Agent of the Government contracted with them for the engagement of people as salt-boilers who were known as "maihanders". The malangis received large advances from the Salt-Agent and in their turn made advances to the maihanders who engaged to proceed to specified places far south in the Sundarbans where they gave their personal labour in the manufacture of salt. Besides, there were a few "Dessey" Khalaries, somewhat nearer to habitations, and the 'malangis' who worked there were like the "thika Malangis" of the Midnapore varieties. The production in the "Dessey" Khalaries was not substantial as the salinity of water was not very high.7

The records preserved in the Nadia Collectorate throw much light upon the system of advances in the salt-industry, the method of recovery of advances, the remuneration of the salt workers, the interference of the district authorities in the production, the growth of opposition to the industry, and the effects of this opposition upon the fate of the industry.

During the Mughal rule, production of salt in the Sunderbans was mainly confined to the vicinity of the river Meghna and salt manufacture in Nadia was carried in an extensive scale perhaps for the first time under the English rule. But nowhere in the district did the ryots accept their occupation in this industry voluntarily. Correspondences of the Collectors of the period under study contain numerous references to the forcible way in which money was pressed upon unwilling ryots and they were taken away from their hearths and
homes and carried down to the Sunderbans "from where many would never return". "Hardly one ryot in a thousand will of his own force\textsuperscript{9} take the advance money. The Collector describes the modus operandi of the malangis thus: "the malangis either throw it(money) into their (ryots') houses or lay it before their doors, and a mere sight of the money renders them liable to be sent down to the Sunderbans.\textsuperscript{10} The head-pikes of the villages were informed of the names of ryots thus pressed and they were made answerable for the appearance of the ryots when called for. The ryots who could afford it, would always purchase their exemption from the malangis but those whose poverty rendered them unable to purchase the same by these means had to go, and by being employed for one season only, they were ever afterwards considered as 'maihanders' or people whose services might be at all times commanded for the manufacture of salt.\textsuperscript{11} It was difficult to come out of the vicious circle of advance system as the malangis always demanded in return much more than they actually advanced. Mr. J. Westland reported that "the malangis were determined to receive back Rs.20 for every Rs.4 they had advanced."\textsuperscript{12}

The average price at which the company sold salt in the market was about Rs.300/- per hundred maunds in 1794.\textsuperscript{13} But what was the price offered by the Company to the 'thika' Malangis for their produce? Mr. Goodlad, the Salt Agent, writes to Mr. Richard Rocke, the District Judge and Magistrate of Nadia in 1794, "In the Dessey Khalaria at Ballish, I have lately got the price of salt increased to 77 rupees per 100 mds., besides paying for all their charges of woodcutters, boat etc."\textsuperscript{14} This compares favourably with the price received by the workers of the same category in Midnapore.
In 1794 in Hijli, the lowest rate of payment to the "thika" Malangis was 40 Arcot rupees per 100 mds. with 25 mds of surf and their highest rate for 125 mds was 60 Arcot rupees in Parganah Nausary.15

As to the condition of the 'maihanders', we have in the district correspondences of the period frequent references to the petitions of the ryots stating their distress, and praying for relief.16 The Collector of Nadia, while forwarding to the Board of Revenue one such petition of twenty-four labourers of parganahs Balinda,17 Sarabassea, Bhaselah and Runneguchee, remarks: "these poor people with families to maintain do not on an average receive for their labour above one-quarter of what is allowed by Government in diet money to the prisoners in the Jails and not more than one-eighth of what is earned by the commonest cooley".18 These petitioners in an annexed statement gave the amount received by them for their labour during the whole of the salt-making season, or from November to June - between seven and eight months. The figures show that the maximum amount earned by a worker in this period was Rs.4/- and the minimum amount Rs.1-8-0, the average earning being Rs.2-6-0.19 The payment was always according to the amount of salt produced by them rather than on a monthly wage basis. Formerly the maihanders were required to provide for their own food but deep in the woods, food was not easily available and they (the maihanders) were left at the mercy of the malangis and others who were able to import their supplies from the north. Since 1787 the Salt Agent provided the stores for the maihanders.20
Mr. Goodlad stated in a letter to the District Magistrate of Nadia that the maihanders were provided with rice, tamarind, dhall, tobacco and oil in addition to the wages which they earned. But even this compares unfavourably with the earning of a common labourer in Midnapore which was 13 gondas per day. Mr. Goodlad's assertion that the pay the workers in Nadia received was "considerably more than any other malangis in Bengal received and I may add more than they could earn by daily labour," is thus highly exaggerated. The arduous work in a hostile surrounding failed to attract the labourers who on the other hand frequently petitioned and prayed for exemption from producing salt even agreeing to pay off in cash money the balance of advance.

The Officers of the salt agency were allowed, exclusive of their salary, a commission of ten per cent on the profit which accrued to the Company under their management. This bait of commission led in many respects to the connivance of the officers at the exploitation and maltreatment of the maihanders by their Indian agents. However, the system of advance was not originated by the Company. The Company merely took up an age-old practice and applied it to the looms, filatures or the khalaries.

Curiously enough, the very system of allowing commission to the officers of the Revenue department of the Company operated as the prime incentive behind the early interference of the District authorities with the evils of the salt production. Before the Permanent Settlement, the Collectors in the districts received commission on excess collection of revenue. Nadia after the famine of 1770, was a sparsely populated district. People were encouraged to come and settle here. The ryots used to desert the district whenever the oppression of the tax-farmers became unbearable, and
the vagaries of climate hit cultivation. The salt industry in the district caused dislocation of labour in cultivation and the oppressive means of recruiting labourers further encouraged desertion of the district by the ryots. The Collectors' zeal for smooth and increased collection of revenue made them, in many cases, serve as barriers between the workers and the salt agents. They played a similar role in the case of oppression of the ryots by the tax-farmers, money-lenders and the opium contractors. Thus the Collector of Nadia in 1786 in a letter to the Board of Revenue, gave very distressing facts about the salt workers, but urged the Board to issue necessary orders to secure to the ryots "an unmolested residence in the homes," for no other reasons than that a heavy balance in revenue in the parganahs from which they were taken would be the certain consequences. That the desertion of the ryots was a common phenomenon may be corroborated by the experience of a neighbouring district, viz. Backergunj. Manufacture of salt was introduced there in 1218 B.S. (1811 A.D.) but because of oppressions 350 homesteads had been deserted by 1225 B.S. (1818 A.D.).

Nadia was not the only district where there was feud between the District authorities and the salt department. J. Westland extensively reported from the contemporary records the clash between the Judge of Jessore and the Salt Agent at Roymungle and had stated that in April 1785 the Salt Controller complained to the Government of the interference in salt matters exercised by the Judge both of Moorly and 24 parganahs. The Collector of Jessore Mr. Henckell took the initiative in 1787 in suggesting reforms for the functioning of the Salt department at Sunderbans.
which the Government accepted. Mr. Henckell himself took over
the charge of Roymungle agency and kept that office for about
three years. Most of the proposals of Mr. Henckell were
included in Lord Cornwallis's Salt Department rules of
December 1788, subsequently codified into the Regulation 29
of 1793. The engagements of the salt boilers were made
voluntary and the Salt Agents were directed to be the protectors
of the workers instead of their slave-drivers. It provided for,
wherever possible, direct dealing with the maihanders instead
of the system of intermediaries.

But the Regulation failed to attain their objects. The
compulsion and the oppression of the maihanders could not be
removed and if complained to, the Salt Controller was always
biased in favour of his own department. The balance of
advance now began to be regarded as fresh advance for the next
year. Pranchandra Roy was sent by the Collector to prevent
forcible carrying off of the ryots to the woods but was told by
the Salt-Agent of Roymungle, "such of the salt-labourers as had
worked at this business for 10 years and were in balance, must go
again." Ryots were not permitted to pay back the balance in
cash money to secure their release. This issue was referred
to the Board of Revenue with the Collector's comment: "If a
balance should be considered in the light of a new advance, I am
of opinion that the services of the people who work any one year
in the salt-business might be claimed the remainder of their
lives." To similar complaints by Mr. Henckell the Salt
Controller had directed "that the advances already made should be
worked out."
It is difficult to work out accurately the extent of dislocation of labour caused by the salt industry. Dislocation took place on a larger scale in the Parganah close to the Sunderbans than in the far away Parganahs. In a petition the farmer of Bhalkah and Collaroah stated that one hundred and forty ryots were pressed from 21 villages of those two Parganahs. The Parganah Boorun was nearer to the Sunderbans and contained Dessey Khalaries. It depended almost wholly upon amon crops, which was generally cut in the month of December. Salt production which ordinarily commenced in the month of November must have seriously dislocated the harvesting programme in that area.

By 1793 the situation in the salt-industry worsened very much. The ryots refused to work after taking advance. They opposed collection of "Mazoors", maltreated the agents of the Salt Department and refused to sell articles of necessities to men of the Aurangs. The Zaminders joined hands with their ryots. "The zamindar of Boorun Parganah has thought proper to confine four malangis and peons - I beg you will take the trouble to cause enquiry to be made why he has done so and to order the release of the people." Again, "You will issue an order to the Zamindars and other Mufussil officers to forbid their interference with the malangis of this Division and that they will not prevent the malangis collecting the Mazoors." Part of their difficulties, Mr. Goodlad ascribes to "the chicanery of the Mofussil amlahs," and to "a set of vagabonds who make a subsistence by taking money from the malangis." Obviously there was no dearth of miscreants to fish in the
troubled waters. Clandestine activities of the rivals of the Company aggravated the situation. There was an Armenian Zamindar in a neighbouring Parganah, Cojah Aratoon Petruse by name. The Gomostah of the Cojah took muchlekas from the malangis that they were not to receive the Company's advances and declared that any person engaging to manufacture salt for the Company should no longer reside in the Talook. He afterwards engaged them to manufacture salt clandestinely.

The situations deteriorated further when the malangis, after taking advance, themselves began to abscond. Often they furnished false accounts of the persons advanced for. In Feb. 1795 Mr. Goodlad wrote to the Judge of Nadia: "the very confused state of the business arising from the manner in which advances have been made... makes me apprehensive that the whole of the Roymungle advances will be lost." He continues, there are this year upwards of three hundred 'Jals' advanced for in the Roymungle and although this is the 19th of February not one has been dispatched into the woods.

Voluntary resistance of the ryots was encouraged by the improvement in administration and Judicial Regulations. On 6th March, 1793, Manik Pode, Adaar Pode and Eeda Pode complained to Mr. Spottiswoode, Acting Collector of Nadia, against Saade Gajee, of having placed peons over them to force advance. The Collector at once requested the Salt Agent to enquire into the complaints and to afford redress. In 1795 the Magistrate of Jessore ordered his police officers to prevent the inhabitants from being forcibly taken into the woods, and their interference made it impossible for the contractors to assemble even those people to
whom they had fairly advanced.50

Thus by 1795 a great crisis had engulfed the whole venture
of salt production in the District. The officers of the Salt-
Department repeatedly implored the District authorities to
intervene on their behalf, to afford them every assistance in their
power so that "this important branch of revenue might not be annihi-
lated altogether." The Officers assured the District Magistrate of
justice and fair play in their future dealings with the salt-workers
and promised to change the old system of advance. "The ensuing season
I will adopt any plan that you may think proper. If you would wish
it you may depute a person to see that all the advances are fairly
made or I will deposit in your court an amount of my advances with
the receipts of each individual."51 Again, "you may if you please
depute a person to see that nothing improper takes place."52

It was however, difficult to check the forces of decline.
Meanwhile other factors created further difficulty for the salt
industry. In the nineties of the 18th century indigo plantations
were rapidly spreading all over the district53 causing great
demand on labour in an already thinly populated area. The distur-
bances in the Sugar Islands during the French Revolution had
created a temporary scarcity of sugar in the continental market,
and the East India Company since 1793 was making all out efforts
to increase sugar production in the districts of Bengal. They
assisted the ryots of Nadia in every way to take to sugar cane
cultivation.54 This further aggravated the labour market, and
no longer people could be recruited and carried down to the woods,
as in former days. Already in 1795 the Aurang at Roymungle had lost its separate existence, and was annexed to the agency in the 24 Parganas. Though salt production in the Sunderbans continued for sometime even after 1795, the venture must have received a serious set back in Nadia. In the District Records of the years following 1795, we have no reference to forcible taking of people to the Sunderbans.
1. Letter from Collector of Nadia to the Bd./Rev., 21st Sept., 1785
2. 'Report on the District of Jessore' by J.Westland, p.84
3. Situated near the junction of the three rivers Hariabhanga, Roymungle and Jamuna - Statistical Account of Bengal Vol.I P-295 - In Rennell's Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan the place has been shown as connected on three sides with passages navigable throughout the year. The Salt Agent at Roymungle looked after the production in Jessore also.
6. Ibid.
8. 'Statistical Account of Bengal' Vol.I by Hunter, p.389
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid
16. The grievous oppression of the maihanders was corroborated by Mr.J.Westland from the contemporary records of the district of Jessore.
17. Parganah Balinda contained the towns of Harua and Balinda, while the Parganah Balliah mentioned above contained the town Basirhat - Statistical Account of Bengal Vol.I Pp. 365-366.
20. J.Westland's Report p.89
According to Buchanon's calculation, hired labourers in Purnea normally got in nine months 4\frac{1}{2} rupees together with food or grain worth about 1\frac{1}{2} rupees but a family of four persons in a village required about 24 rupees a year for expenses - Economic History of Bengal Vol.2 by N.K.Sinha, P. 144.


25. Before the establishment of regular courts in the district by the British, the Salt officials decided all disputes arising out of salt transactions. The maihanders could complain against the Malangis only to the Salt officials who always sided with their oppressors being directly interested in the extension of salt manufacture.

26. Dr.A.Tripathi - Trade & Finance in the Bengal Presidency, Page 262.


29. J.Westland's Report - p.90

30. Ibid

31. Ibid - p.91

32. Letter from Collector to Bd./Rev. 9th June, 1793

33. Ibid

34. J.Westland's Report - p.91

35. Bhalkah was situated between the Beyja Bill and the Kapotaksha, while Collaroah somewhat above, joined with Husainpur - Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol.1 - Pp.365-366

36. Letter from Collector of Bd./Rev. 9th June 1793.


38. Letter from Collector to Bd./Rev. 14th June, 1788.

39. H.C.Horseley, Asst. Salt Agent of Khulna to Rocke, 10th Jan., 1794

40. Ibid

41. Ibid. 14th Jan., 1794
42. Letter from Goodlad to Rocke, 31st Jan., 1794
43. Ibid
44. Aratoon Petruse was a big Zamindar, one of the proprietors of Satsakya, and also owner of a number of Parganahs for which he paid revenues to the District Jessore. - Letters from Collector to Bd./Rev., 31st July, 1790, 16th March, 1794.
45. Letter from Goodlad to Rocke, 31st Jan., 1794
46. Letter from Horseley to Rocke, 14th Jan., 1795
47. Letter from Goodlad to Rocke, 19th Feb. 1795
48. Ibid
49. Letter from Spottiswoode to Goodlad 6th March, 1793.
50. Letter from Goodlad to Rocke, 19th Feb., 1795.
51. Ibid., 31st Jan., 1794.
52. Ibid. 19th Feb., 1795.
54. Orders of the Board of Revenue to the Collector of Nadia, 25th February and 8th April, 1793.
55. Letter from Goodlad to Rocke, 19th Feb., 1795.