

Sal Timber Trade in Goalpara District During Colonial Period

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Abstract

Sal (Soria Robusta), a hard wood tree, was found extensively in Goalpara forest of Assam. Before the establishment forest department in Assam, the Sal trees were exploited by the Zamindars and private traders for boat making and house constructions. The British India earned huge money from the selling of Sal timber of Goalpara forest division. The Railway line construction in Assam also compelled the extraction of Sal timber.

Keywords: *Goalpara forest, Sal timber, Railways, Trade and Communication.*

The Sal forests became important resources of Goalpara district during the colonial period which provided huge revenue to the British India. Before the establishment of forest department in Assam, the Sal trees of Goalpara region were exploited by the Zamindars and private traders for house construction, boat making and exporting to the other countries. The timber traders came by boats from Dacca and Mymensingh during rainy season to buy up Sal timber in Goalpara forest.¹ The timber was tied with boats and then floated down to the port of Narayanganj near Dhaka. The Sal forest of Porbatjhora and Khuntaghat Parganas were exploited by the *Daffadars* and timber lumbers of Bengal.² As Buchanan Hamilton reported:

Merchants of Goalpara usually export to the low country from the forests of Howraghat and Mechpara about 1500 canoes in the year...[T]he timber was floated down numerous rivers which included the Ai and Manas, from the Dooar region and also from Nepal and Bhutan, towards the southern ports like Fakirganj.³

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In 1850 Dalton, the Collector of Kamrup reported to the Commissioner of Assam that woodcutters belonging to Bengal used to visit the Kamrup forest in search of Sal timber after exhausting the forests in lower Assam.⁴ The Collector suggested the Commissioner of Assam to levy tax on all timber fell by Bengal woodcutters. The Collector also advised the authority to check the felling of valuable young trees in order to prevent waste and ensured for regeneration of the forest. In 1852, the tax was imposed at rate of Rs.15 per 100 logs, or nearly 2½ annas per log. Therefore, the timber tax collection then estimated was between Rs. 500 to Rs. 600 annually.⁵

British India requested the Dietrich Brandis, Superintendent of Forest of India, to survey the forests of Bengal and prepare a proposal report for making conservation on the forest of the province. He discussed with T. Anderson, Superintendent of the Royal Botanical Garden of Calcutta toward the end of 1862 about policy options. On 1st January of 1863, the British Government in India requested Bengal Government to give attention to the conservation of the forests under its jurisdiction and called for a proper administrative system.⁶ Consequently, Dr. T. Anderson was appointed as temporary Conservator of Forest of lower province of Bengal. Thereafter, Dr. Anderson submitted a proposal in January 1865 including the working report of forests of the Bhutan Duars.⁷ Now, Dr. Anderson selected Dhubri as timber depot of Goalpara forest.

The process for the establishment of forest department in Assam was started in 1868 under the management of Mr. Gustav Mann, an Assistant Conservator of Bengal Forest, who inspected the forests of Assam.⁸ He reported that the valuable Sal forest of the Eastern Duars in the Goalpara district was exploited by Bengal wood-cutters. There was huge felling of Sal trees which devastated the forest of Goalpara. Therefore, in 1868, a new revenue system was introduced to protect the forest.⁹ The tax was levied on the timber-cutters and made a provision that each timber cutters could extract only fifty logs in a year. The fifty logs came from 25 trees. The woodcutters had to pay Rs. 4, 4 annas only per axe per year and also fixed the rate at 2½ annas per tree.¹⁰ Mr. Gustav Mann submitted a comprehensive report of detailed inspection which was carried out on the forests of the eastern portion of the Bengal Duars from the Sonkosh River to Manas River. The inspection report was submitted to the Government of Bengal with Letter, No.57A, dated 5th February, 1869 by Mr. H. Leeds, the Conservator of Forest in British Burma.¹¹

The forests lying between Sonkosh and Manas were transferred to Assam after the formation of Chief Commissionership of Assam in 1874. Gustav Mann was promoted to the rank of Deputy Conservator of Forest of Assam. In 1875, the chief commissioner of Assam established forest divisions at Goalpara, Guwahati, Tezpur, Golaghat, and Cachar. The Eastern Duars Forests which were considered capable of being immediately reserved or brought under the strict operation of conservancy rules, had been demarcated by boundary marks.¹² The forest of Goalpara division covered an area of 422 square miles including 80 square miles of good quality of Sal forest.¹³ On this E.B. Stebbing writes:

The Goalpara Division comprises the government pen forest in the Eastern Duars of the Goalpara district, covering an area of 422 square miles, out of which about 80 square miles are Sal forest, the contents of which were estimated by the conservator of forest, Bengal, last year, a 2 ½ millions of Sal trees. This no doubt, is the most valuable state property, as regards forest, in the province. Any forest which it may hereafter be decided to conserve in the Garo Hills will form part of this Division. The Headquarters of the Officer-in-Charge was at Goalpara".¹⁴

In 1875 the open forests of Bijni, Cherung, Ripu and Guma Duars of Goalpara district were declared reserved forest under the Act VII., of 1865. W.R. Fisher was the first Divisional Forest Officer of then undivided Goalpara Division. The head quarter of Division was at Dhubri.¹⁵ In 1879 the Goalpara forest division comprised of several reserved forest of Ripu (65 square miles), Jengasi-Charaidaka (3 square miles), Ateabari (14 square miles), Chirang (250 square miles), Sidli (68 square miles), Bijni (33 square miles) and Guma (25 square miles).¹⁶

As per the departmental report, there were six distinct types of Sal forest in Goalpara District.

- a. Bhabar Sal forest.
- b. Terai Sal forest.
- c. Evergreen Sal forest.
- d. Xerophytic Sal forest
- e. Lateritic Sal forest.

The Sal wood exploitation in Goalpara was started by the forest department itself. The nature of demand of Sal timber of Goalpara was entirely foreign. All the Sal timbers were supplied to districts of Rangpur, Pubna, Mymensing, Faridpur and Dacca of Bengal. The Sal trees were cut

into *dhum* (logs between 6 and 7 feet in length and over 2½ feet in girth) and poles, for making boats and native house building.¹⁷ Since 1875 the local trader participated in Sal business and they apply a permit before the range officer to fell a certain number of trees which were charged at a rate of Rs. 10 per tree.¹⁸ During 1876-77 the *Daffadars* (timber traders) or woodcutters extracted 21,813 pieces of Sal wood; out of them 17,513 pieces were sold and the remaining 4,300 pieces were stacked in the Kokrajhar timber depot.¹⁹ During 1878-79, the price of scantling Sal timber in the Dhubri depot was raised from Rs. 1, 10 annas to Rs. 2 per cubic foot.²⁰ W.R. Fisher, Divisional Forest Officer of Goalpara Division had an intention to hike the price on the Sal timber logs brought from the Garo Hills measuring 6 feet in girth and 7½ feet in length will be to Rs. 13 per log or about Rs. 1, 9 annas per cubic foot.²¹

The Sal timber sold to the purchaser from Goalpara division as per the Progress Report of Forest Administration in the province of Assam for the year 1875 to 1897 which given below.

Year	Number of timber logs	Cubic feet	Piece of trees	Plank	Amount realized		
					Rs	Annas	Pies
1875-76					502	0	0
1876-77					14,363	0	0
1877-78	160	2,371		16	2,515	0	0
1879-80	7,722	9,115	1,282		12,862	0	0
1880-81	876		2,530		23,598	0	0
1881-82			2,677		13,616	0	0
1882-83			1,212		6,650	0	0
1883-84	1,312						
1884-85	1,064		285				
1885-86							
1886-87			2,064				
1887-88			4,694				
1888-89							
1889-90		8,484			7,100		
1890-91	116	2,318			2,132	4	0
1891-92	429	5,855			4,381		
1892-93	289	5,351			3,794	14	0
1893-94	1,575	25,480			17,152	14	0
1896-97	1,872	24,517			11,848	9	0

Source: Progress Report of Forest Administration in the province of Assam for the year 1875 to 1897

In the first working plan of 1889 only 5 feet in girth corresponding to an age of 100 years old was being accepted for commercial maturity.²² There was no major demand for Sal wood from market except for Railway. Practically, all the round timber was exported to eastern Bengal, the principal centres being Dacca, Mymensing, Faridpur and Pabna. The short logs or *dhums* were used mainly for boat building and for house construction.²³ There were local markets for sleepers at Fakiragram, Sapatgram, Tipkai and Kokrajhar on the Eastern Bengal Railways and at Bagribari, Bilasipara and Dubri on the Brahmaputra River.²⁴

The Railway network was built in the province of Assam to transport tea to the port cities of Chittagong and Calcutta.²⁵ The demand of Metre Gauge Sal sleepers increased considerably when Dhubri-Guwahati extension was started by the Eastern Bengal State Railway.²⁶ The construction of railway line required hard wood sleepers to paste the tract to the earth. The hard wood trees were available in Kochugaon forest reserve of Goalpara forest division. In 1897 forest department commenced sleeper operation in order to supply hard wood sleeper to Eastern Bengal State Railway. In Assam, only forest department of Goalpara Division carried out sleepers operation for railway line construction.

The mature Sal tree was sold to a maximum rate of Rs. 10 per stem. Actually, the average net outturn was 40 cubic feet per tree, so the rate was equivalent to 4 annas per cubic in 1906.²⁷ There were three type Sal log extracted departmentally from the forests of Goalpara: first class ones, over 4½ feet in mean girth sold at Rs. 1 per cubic foot, the second class one with 3-4 ½ feet in means girth sold at 12 annas per cubic foot and third class ones under three feet sold at 8 annas per cubic foot.²⁸ A batch of 346 logs sold in the auction of January 1907 at the rate of 15 annas per cubic foot. Metre Gauge Sal sleepers fetched Rs. 1,14 annas to Rs. 2, 2 annas each delivered on the railway line.²⁹ The Sal scantlings sold to the railway at Rs. 2 per cubic foot, which then used to yield a net profit of 6 to 8 annas per cubic foot.³⁰

The Sal sleepers and logs sold from Goalpara division as per the Progress Report of Forest Administration in the province of Assam for the years 1897-1901.

According the Progress Report of Forest Administration in the province of Assam for years of 1901 to 1920, Goalpara Division supplied the Sal sleeper and Sal timber to the railway department given below.

Years	No. M. G sleeper	No. B. G sleepers	No. Special sleepers	Sal timber in C.ft	Supplied to
1901-02				29,299	Eastern Bengal State Railways
1902-03	2,550			41,898	..
1903-04	21,406			36,404	..
1904-05	77,834				..
1905-06	59,966				..
1906-07	96,407				..
1907-08	6,466				Assam Bengal State Railway
1908-09	29,000				Eastern Bengal State Railway.
1910-11	39,520				..
1911-12	1,01,093				..
	1,075				Assam Railway and Trading Co., Ltd
		8,066			Lower Ganges Bridge
1912-13	67,181	2,068	1,902		Eastern Bengal State Railway
1913-14,	17,643	1,558			..
1914-15	40,469	50			..
1917-18				412	Local Board Carpentry
1918-19	12,570		8,419		Eastern Bengal State Railway
1919-20	773				..
Source: Progress Report of Forest Department, 1901-20					

No record of production of Sal sleepers in Goalpara forest during 1921-22. In the working year of 1922-23, huge number of timber was lying at Haltugaon in the Eastern Range of Goalpara Division due to shortage of cart to transport up to Kokrajhar Railway station. As a result, forest department forced to sell the Sal timber to the purchaser.³¹The following Table shows the selling of Sal timber to the railway department in the form of sleepers, logs, scantling, post, slaps.

Years	B.G. sleepers	M.G. sleepers	Special sleepers	Logs	Scantling	Tram sleepers	Post	slaps	Amount realized
	No.	No.	C. ft.	C. ft.	C. ft	C. ft	C. ft	C. ft	?
1923-24	18,458	3,452	705		2,579				
1924-25	21,340	7,607	9,111	1,54,463					
1925-26	7,067	2,416	18,701	5,49,472	6,196	3,633	4,455	10,883	1,53,024
1926-27	3,314	3,583	359	75,407	9,216	606	11,036	24,219	93,851
1927-28	---	9,978	74,767	19,789	12,026	482	10,419	126	1,25,452
1928-29	129	2,301	4,568	14,624	7016	6,011	2,859	6,360	44,611
1930-31				1,541	7,1552		7,494		
1931-32				6,842	7,927		3,323		
1932-33				4,443	2,816		7,492		

Source: Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for years 1923 to 1933

Table V
Sale of Sal Timber to Railway Department 1939-47

Years	No. M.G sleeper	Naubho sleepers	Guma sleepers	Special sleepers	Amount
1939-40	39,250				1,12,843
1940-41	1,000	47,600	1,125		2,51,000
1943-44	40,000	50,000	3,807		6,22,560
1944-45	44,490	61,424	551		7,34,577
1945-46	42,004	43,072			
1946-47	53,514	39,000			

In 1929-30, only 13,138 numbers of dead Sal trees were sold under public auction in western range of Guma forest but only the price of 20 Sal wood deposited in to government royalty.³² During the working period of 1930-33, there was no record of sleepers operation in the forest department of Goalpara division. In 1935-36, 675 numbers of Sal timbers had been exploited for logs and posts.³⁴ Before the Second World War in 1937-38, the Goalpara forest works out 20,000 numbers of Sal timber for railways sleeper.³⁵

Source: Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for years 1939 to 1947.

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The export of Sal timber to the Bilasipara and Bogribari depots was carried on through numerous tributaries of the Brahmaputra. In the eastern range of Goalpara forest, the Saralbanga, Champamati and Gaurang were the main rivers for transporting timber to Bilasipara Sales depot near the Brahmaputra River.³⁶ In the central range, the Hell, Gukshi and Gongia Rivers were utilized for transporting timber to Sapatgram then followed by Tipkai River to Bagribari Sale Depot near the Brahmaputra River.³⁷ The Jakati and Janali River were most frequently used in the western range for transportation of timber. The timber flowed to Sapatgram and then to Bagribari by the Tipkai River.³⁸ Guma range timbers were floated down by the Tipkai River to Sapatgram and to Bagribari.³⁹ The timber logs and post were sold to the traders at Bilasipara, Bogribari and Sapatgram from where timbers were removed by large country boats down the Brahmaputra River.⁴⁰

The forest of the northern block of Goalpara division was divided by east and west parallel lines at one mile interval which known as ride,⁴¹ while in the southern blocks of the Eastern Range and Guma Range, divided by north and south rides lines into squares with an area of one square mile. All rides lines can be used as fair weather roads.⁴² The North Trunk Road passed through the southern portion of the reserve forests towards east started from the Sankosh to Gurubasha, through the Kochugaon reserve forest. The Kochugaon-Dhubri road passes through the Guma Range connected an outlet road to Sapatgram station. Another road from the forest to Tipkai station was also there.⁴³ There was a local board's road from Gurubasha to Bilasipara, which crossed the railway line at Kokrajhar. In Bijni, only watercourse became means of export during the rainy and dry seasons.⁴⁴

The Tramline was a most important method of rapid transport of timber from forest to Fakiragram Railway Station, the Eastern Bengal Railway.⁴⁵ The Tramway established in 1901 at Kochugaon for siding the Sal timber to nearby rivers and timber floated to Sale depots, Sapatgram, Bilasipara, Bogribari and Dhubri. There was an extension of 3 ½ miles from Kochugaon to Gurufela River where from timbers were transported.⁴⁶ With due passage of time, the manually operated Tram was converted into steam haulage in 1912 and extended to Fakiragram Railway Station in 1923. The Tram carried about 75% timber from central range of Goalpara forest. The length of the Tramline from Kochugaon to Fakiragram was 16 miles and there was a total mileage of 12 miles of line in the forest itself.

The Sal timber of Goalpara forest occupied important market for railways sleeper. The mature Sal sleeper was stronger and durable than the

iron sleeper. Therefore, forest department itself exploited the Sal timber of Goalpara division to meet the sleeper demand of railway department. There was problem in extracting Sal timber from thick jungle and geographically backward area due to shortage of labour and lack of proper transportation. So, the forest department invited many labourers from Bengal, who were mostly Mech and Rabha tribes to solve the problem of forest labour. So, forest department allowed them to settle and form villages on the forest land to render service for extracting timber from remote forest. The Sal timber transportation through the river route was done in the rainy season only, which did not satisfy the forest department. Thereafter, the Tram was established in the Goalpara forest to transport Sal timber to various commercial centres. The Tram service gave huge amount of revenue to the forest department. The transportation of Sal timber by Tram from Kochugaon timber depot to Fakiragram was continued up to post Indian independence. Development of road transport and lorry service reduced the work of Tram and on other hand the Bodoland movement of 1987 disrupted the Tram service. The ruined structure of Tram Station and Tramline in Kochugaon bring back the picture of Sal timber transportation from Kochugaon depot of Goalpara Division.

Notes

- ¹ Sangamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity*, p 68.
- ² *Ibid.*
- ³ Sangamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity*, P. 68. Cited from The Hamilton paper, Book III, Mss. Eur. D 74, OIOC, London, p 207.
- ⁴ T.C. Campbell, *Notes on the Goalpara Forest Division, Assam*, p 23.
- ⁵ Stebbing, *The Forest of India, The forest of India, Volume III*, p 213.
- ⁶ --- *The Forest of India, The Early History of Forest in India, Volume I*, p 514.
- ⁷ --- *The Forest of India, The Early History of Forest in India, Volume II*, p 371
- ⁸ Arupjyoti Saikia, *Forest and Ecological history of Assam 1826-2000*, p 114.

- ⁹ E.B. Stebbing, *The Forest of India, The Forest of India, Volume III*, p 215.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ E.B. Stebbing, *The Forest of India, The Early History of Forest in India, Volume II*, p 418.
- ¹² E.B. Stebbing, *The Forest of India, The Early History of Forest in India, Volume II*, p 418.
- ¹³ Arupjyoti Saikia, *Forest and Ecological History of Assam 1826-2000*, p 117.
- ¹⁴ E.B. Stebbing, *The Forest of India, The Forest of India, Volume III*, pp 223, 224.
- ¹⁵ *Kochugaon Forest Division Departmental Profile*, p 2.
- ¹⁶ Rajib Handique, *British Forest Policy in Assam*, p 71.
- ¹⁷ W.W. Lloyed, *Working Plan of the Goalpara Sal Forests*, Goalpara Division, p 6.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 8.
- ¹⁹ Gustav Mann, *Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the Year 1876-77*, p 16.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, 1878-79, p 23.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 1879-80, p 23.
- ²² W.F. Perree, *The Second Working Plan for the Goalpara Forest Division, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1907*, p 14.
- ²³ W.F. Perree, *The Second Working Plan for the Goalpara Forest Division, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1907*, p 10.
- ²⁴ N.R. Bor, *A Working Plan for Forest of the Goalpara Division, Western Circle, Assam, 1929 -30 to 1938-39*, p 4.
- ²⁵ A.C. Singha, *Colonial Legacy and Environment Crisis in North East India*, pp 19, 20.
- ²⁶ W. F. Perree, *The Second Working Plan for the Goalpara Forest Division, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1907*, p 9.
- ²⁷ *Ibi*, p 10.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p 11.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 1922-23, p 9.

³² *Ibid*, 1929-30, p 9.

³³ *Ibid*, 1931-32, p 11.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 1939-40, p 29.

³⁵ A. C. Singha, *Colonial Legacy and Environment Crisis in North East India*, p 38.

³⁶ N.L. Bor, *A Working Plan for Forest of the Goalpara Division, Western Circle, Assam 1929 -30 to 1938-39*, p 14.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

⁴¹ It was W.L. Fisher, the first Divisional Forest Officer of erstwhile Goalpara Division, who introduced the concept of Rides and Parallels in these forests. The idea was borrowed from the German model wherein the forests were divided into square mile a side, at right angles.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p 13

⁴³ *Ibid*.

⁴⁴ Perree, *The Second Working Plan for the Goalpara Notes on the Goalpara Forest Division, Assam Forest Division, Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1907*, p 9.

⁴⁵ N.L. Bor, *A Working Plan for Forest of the Goalpara Division, Western Circle, Assam, 1929 -30 to 1938-39*, p 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

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