

# An analysis of the Salt Industry in Coastal Region of Midnapore District in the Nineteenth Century: The Emergence, Development and gradual Decay

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## Introduction:

Salt was the major merchandise next to textile products in the internal markets in the Coastal region of Midnapore District. It was man's most essential commodity of daily use.<sup>1</sup> Salt has been manufactured by solar evaporation from seawater brines since time immemorial. The extraction of salt from seawater consists of progressive evaporation of brine in large open khalaris using solar heat and wind. As the brine evaporates, its concentration rises and the constituent salts crystallize in a set order. During this process, the sodium chloride fraction is separated from the brine over a fixed concentration range in a series of flat khalaris and deposits as a uniform crust. This salt is 'harvested' by a variety of processes ranging from simple hand labour to the use of mechanised equipment to scrape the salt and transfer it for storage. The principal salts that crystallize from seawater along with sodium chloride are the chlorides and sulphates of magnesium, calcium and potassium. The harvested salt in the form of wet crystals can be washed with saturated brine to remove insoluble matter like sand and clay as well as the soluble impurities. It is then allowed to drain and dry in the sun and crushed to a coarse or fine powder as required. As the name implies, vacuum salt is common salt, manufactured by evaporating sea brine in steam-heated vacuum evaporators. It can be dissolved very quickly due to its fine crystalline structure and is more freely available in salting-out processes. The area was periodically flooded by the waters of the Bay of Bengal, fuel-wood necessary for boiling salt was easily available from the coastal jungles in Midnapore district.

Salt was one of the vital sources of revenue for the government.<sup>2</sup> Salt manufacturing had its origin in the coastal areas of Midnapore district since the remote past. During the *Mughal* regime of the medieval age the coinage '*Nimak Mahal*' was first mentioned in the *Mughal* ruler Suja's customs settlement '*Bandobasta*'. At that time all salt oriented trading were managed and maintained by the *zamindars* under the *Nawab*.<sup>3</sup> The salt that had been manufactured at Hijli and Tamluk, the coastal areas of South West-Bengal was much more superior in quantity than that of the other places of entire Bengal.<sup>4</sup> So at that time *Kashmiri, Sikh, Multani, Bhutia* traders would come to entire Bengal as well as South West-Bengal to procure salt.<sup>5</sup> The people who were directly involved in salt production would fulfill the local demands and at the same time they earned their livelihood through salt trading with the merchant from different parts of the country.<sup>6</sup>

Already in some research works, topics like salt trading, fiscal experimentation of the British Company in the salt estate after 1760 and also salt- trafficking had been focused the larger perspective of Midnapore. Midnapore district was supposed to be an important zone of salt–trading. So attempts have been made in research works to explore and assess the authority and control of the rulers on salt manufacturing and trading during the pre-British phase in the context of Midnapore district. With the change of political scenario the Company enjoyed the monopoly over salt trading. As a result the activities of the merchants in Midnapore district and the changes in internal trade due to monopoly of the Company come into my research. This discussion also cites the effect of the Company’s monopoly on the salt producers and on the whole production –organization identifying the area of developments and stimulating its manufacture.

### **Salt Production/Industry in pre-colonial period:**

It is evident from the pre-*Plassey* period of history that salt production and trading was being regulated and controlled by the *Nawab* and as well as native traders.<sup>7</sup> Actually the *Nawab* regulates the salt trade as ‘a matter of favour or as a source of revenue.’<sup>8</sup> The *Nawabs* possibly had no inclination of regulating the production of salt which was left to the *zamindars* and lease holders of their *khalaries*.<sup>9</sup> Like the advance system or *dadni* system prevalent in the field of silk and piece goods, producers of salt would take advance from the traders and remained bound by contract to deliver the produce at a fixed rate.<sup>10</sup> Production merchants kept the system alive by supplying the salt producers with money in advance. The production merchants maneuvered their business networks in co-operation with the local *zaminders*. Being local administrators, the *zamindars* had the power of maintenance. With the assistance of ‘*mukdamas*’ or village headman (*pradhan*), ‘*sikdar*’ and chief criminal justice, they would co-operate to supply salt to the traders. At that stage there was no exclusive monopoly on salt trading. The *Mughal* administration had direct control over the legal production and distribution of salt. As a rule, the emperors controlled salt trading as a source of revenue. They did approve of the monopoly of the chosen trader or the highest bidder in regard to salt production and distribution. ‘*Faker-Ul-Tejar*’ was the head merchant.<sup>11</sup> At the time of Alivardi Khan the *Nawab* of Bengal the head salt merchant was Khwaja Wajid.<sup>12</sup> The *zamindars* were virtually the direct government representative in the arena of salt production. To establish monopoly on the part of a merchant was next to impossible as the salt pans (pots from extracting salt) sprawled over the vast coastal areas of the entire province. Most of the traders were of native origin. Of them the Muslim and the Hindu traders paid tax to the government at the rate of 2.5% and 5% respectively and were entitled to enjoy the benefit of salt trading.<sup>13</sup>

The salt produced in Midnapore District was primarily ‘*pungah*’ or boiled salt. But in certain areas, salt was produced through ‘*karkatch*’ or solar vaporization.<sup>14</sup> The processing of salt continued from the *Bengalee* month ‘*Kartick*’ to ‘*Jaistha*’. In the rainy season, the lands which become flooded with high-tide saline water of the sea produced salt. The areas which were backwashed by high – tide water were known as ‘*char*’. These ‘*chars*’ (Tract of land) were divided into different segments. These segments were called ‘*khalari*’. In ‘*khalari*’ seven workers were engaged who would manufacture two hundred thirty ‘*maunds*’ (one *maunds* is equal to 40 kgs) of salt per year. The persons engaged in salt production in *khalaris* were known as ‘*malangi*’. The reference of *malangis*’ has been found in a *sloka* in an old Sanskrit manuscript of the 15th century, discovered by Haraprasad Shastri. It has been mentioned in the ‘*sloka*’.<sup>15</sup>

``Kouchdamlake Deshang Gayanti Deshbasina  
Labanama Karashcha Jatra Tisthanti Bhurisha  
Pranali Di Eta Tatra Sada Bahit Bhumipa  
Malanginama Manushyanang Nibasang Bahit Kil. “

English rendering: In the estate of kouchadam, people are singeing in praise of their land./they are also praising the salt that abounds in this soil./ the king is fully aware that two streams have become one here/ Malangis (people of Malango province) have been living here for so many years.

### The Role of the Malangis

In Midnapore District two types of ‘malangis’ have come to be known – (1) ‘ajoorā’ and (2) ‘thika’ ( *thika malangis* came to be seen at Hijli in the year 1770) . It was known that in the year 1793, as many as 13,388 *malangis* were engaged in salt production in the salt estate of Hijli and Tamluk. They had been engaged in this particular job for over generations.<sup>16</sup> ‘*Ajoorā malangis* were traditionally salt – labourers’. They had their existence even a century back to the arrival of the British. ‘*Ajoorā malangis* took part in the process of salt production by generation after generation and they had their dwelling houses and cultivable land, very close to the salt – producing zones. However, in some cases, the producer’s home and workplace would be far away. Sometimes five or six members of a family earned their livelihood through salt production. In this case, a *malangi* continued to render service to produce salt for five to ten days and then went back home, following which another member of the same family came to join the ongoing stream of salt production.<sup>17</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> October 1790 the ‘Governor General of Council’ of the Company regime instructed to abolish the system of salt production by *ajoorā malangis*. It was revealed that the *ajoorā malangis* produced salt under the contractor in Hijli.<sup>18</sup>

Normally the ‘malangis’ filtered saline water of the soil and heated with burning faggots. Then water evaporated and solid salt remained deposited on the pans. All that salt was collected as a whole and stored in the warehouses. Faggots were being collected before the processing of salt. The places where from the faggots were collected were known as *jalpai* (land liable to be under water) lands. The *jalpai* lands in the southern part of the district were crucial suppliers of fire wood to Midnapore salt industry.<sup>19</sup>

As wages of the *malangis* the *Nawab* of Bengal fixed up a rate of 22.00 rupees for production of one hundred ‘maunds’ (40 Quintals) and made an agreement with the *zamindars*. The *zamindars* did not pay the entire amount of a year. He paid them the wages of only six months and for the rest amount they allowed them to enjoy cultivable agricultural land either free of tax or on some profitable terms. After serving in the salt industry from the Bengalee months ‘*Kartick*’ to ‘*Jaistha*’ the ‘malangis’ engaged themselves in farming on their own land, known as ‘*chakran*’.<sup>20</sup> Thus, side by side with salt production, the ‘malangis’ would earn their livelihood through farming.<sup>21</sup> During the ‘*Nawab* period’, there were more than 4000 ‘*Khalaries*’ in the undivided Midnapore district in modern West Bengal.<sup>22</sup> According to the Bolts, salt was sold to the traders of 60/- rupees per one hundred *maunds* (40 quintals).<sup>23</sup> But at the same time the price commodity was supposed to be 150 rupees per hundred *maunds*.<sup>24</sup> Maratha expedition was the main reign for this diversity. After remained beyond expenditure was the profit of the *zamindars* and high profile government representatives.<sup>25</sup>

### Internal Trading

Three notable features of internal trade were – structurally internal trade was classified in to inter-regional and local trade. Secondly; there was uniqueness among the markets. Thirdly; inspire of this uniqueness these markets were inter-linked by the network of different groups of merchants, by the role of intermediaries and by the function of wholesale markets. This enabled a large flow of commodities, cash, credit and information, despite such divisions.

Affluent businessmen exchanged commodities between the urban trade centers and wholesale trade centers under larger perspective. The movement of commodities between the wholesale trade centers and rural trade centers and within local markets by numerous smaller merchants should be categorized as the local trade. Each trade maintained its own structure and together worked as one trading system, inter-linked by wholesale markets.

Prior to 1757, salt trading was open to all. Under such a state it was impossible for any trader to achieve dominance in salt trading. This was because the ‘*malangis*’ would produce salt unconditionally over the vast areas of South West Bengal.<sup>26</sup> In alliance with the *zamindars*, one class of production merchants procured salt, produced at cost labor of the ‘*malangis*’, and sold it to another classes of traders like wholesale salt traders, *paikars* and *beoparies*. This second type of traders used to supply salt not only to South West Bengal but also to all over India.

This however does not mean that the second category of traders were all Bengali people. Besides the *Bengalees*, the merchants from the upland of the country came to the districts of South West-Bengal to collect salt and to sell it to the petty dealers, and shop keepers in their locality. The common customers purchased salt from the petty dealers, shop- keepers from their daily use.<sup>27</sup> Under the control and authority of the *Nawab*, traders freely handled their business. In this context William Bolts admitted that the artisans and producers of Bengal would produce goods and sell those independently. The *Nawab* of Bengal made no interfere in it.<sup>28</sup>

### The Company Era & Its Implications on the Salt Industry

In 1760, Midnapore came to be under the full control of the Company. Subsequently in the year 1765 the Company having attained civil power, Tamluk, Mahishadal and Hijli came under the custody of the Company. In this respect the most profitable trading commodities salt came under the control of the Company. At that time Tamluk and Hijli were not the parts of Midnapore. Hooghly was under ‘*faujdari*’ Hooghly *faujdari* was divided into two sub-divisions-- Tamluk and Hijili. Each sub-division was under the control of the collectors of Salt Districts.<sup>29</sup>

Before the proper establishment of the East India Company in South West Bengal, The Company wanted to dominate the salt trade. After the battle of *Plassey*, the Company claimed the privilege of duty free internal trade on salt on the basis of *farman* (1717).<sup>30</sup> But the *Nawab* of Bengal did not approve it, perhaps, which was the main cause of Mir Qasim’s downfall of power. After grant of ‘*Dewany*’, the Company formulated ‘a more equitable and satisfactory plan’ for regulating salt trade in their best interest.<sup>31</sup> But before leaving England for the second time Lord Clive wrote to the ‘Court of Directors’ for strict prohibition of the Company officials from taking part in salt trading. As per decision of the ‘Court of Directors’ an autonomous ‘Select Committee’ was framed under the stewardship of Lord Clive. The

Directors gave permission to the officials that they would be entitled to take decisions for their own satisfaction. In this regard Lord Clive instantly devised a plan to promote Intra-trade management, keeping in mind the benefits of the Company officials. In this plan it was suggested that the 'Society of Trade' could be formed with the common consent of all other members (local Company's government members).

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In August, 1765 Lord Clive and 'Select Committee' instituted a Society of Trade.<sup>33</sup> This Society of Trade exercised control over the sale and production of salt, betel nuts, and tobacco.<sup>34</sup> That was a mile – stone in the history of trade and commerce not only in South West Bengal but also in India as a whole. The salt monopoly regulation it was stated that salt was the most important item of indigenous trade. The proposed Society of Trade would conduct the entire salt business. In the trading of locally manufactured or imported salt, the direct or indirect participation of the common people were strictly prohibited. This rule was enforced on those who were on good terms with the Company to forbid them to take part in that process.<sup>35</sup> The *Nawab* was authorized to issue a public notice to this effect. In the public announcement it was stated: "That until the contracts for salt of the said gentlemen are settled, no salt shall be made or got ready in any district; that a *gomastah* be sent to attend on the said gentleman, and having given a bond, he may then proceed to his business and make salt; but till the bond be given to the Governor and gentleman of the committee and council; they should make none. Therefore, this order is written, that you send, without delay, your *gomastah* to the said gentlemen in Calcutta, and give your bond and settle your business; and then proceed to the making of salt. In case ...as a strict order"<sup>36</sup>

### **Mughal Era & Company Era vis-à-vis Salt Industry**

The history of the salt industry in Midnapore district is very old. The duty imposed upon the salt industry during the Mughul empire was an important source of revenue. Huge quantity of salt was produced in the Coastal region of Midnapore districts in West Bengal. The East India Company earned a lot of money as rent of land and duty from salt from the 'Nimki' or 'Nimak Mahal' in the Coastal region of Midnapore district. Later, many eminent persons and even Prince Dwarkanath Tagore earned huge wealth from the Nimak Mahal region by way of rent of land used for the production of salt and from salt business. Of course, the duty from salt production was deposited in the government's treasury. None thought deeply over the issue before the imposition of the British rule in India. All the authorities in all spheres were satisfied with their dues. So the labourers employed in this industry were mostly exploited. Arrangements for drinking water and accommodation were very much inadequate in the salt-producing areas in Bengal, i.e., Hijili and Tamluk Sub-divisions in the Midnapore district, where such 'Nimak Mahal' was located, 'Malangis' and their associates (Mahindars), a very poor class, worked like slaves in such salt-producing areas. The extremely poor people used to live in very dirty conditions near the land used for salt production. The East India Company from the very beginning took control of the entire production and sale of salt in Bengal. With the help of the 'mahajans and landlords, they monopolized the business of this most important food item. Finding the opportunity of huge profit, some of the staff of the East India Company entered in this trade and earned a lot of money by dishonest means and without paying taxes. In order to control this situation, Lord Clive, Warren Hastings, and Lord Cornwallis introduced, at different times, agency system, salt auction system, etc. But their main aim was to earn more money from salt duty and salt business. During the last half of the eighteenth century, the income of the East India Company from salt was second in order. The East India Company had earned Rs.6,25,000 as tax and profit from the

salt industry in the year 1784-85, Rs.4,58,000 each in the years 1785-86 and 1786-87. Finding that a huge profit in this monopoly industry is being earned by the foreign staff and their Indian associates, the persons associated with the salt industry in England became interested to export salt to India, especially to Calcutta.

The British employees admitted before the Select Committee that the price of salt in Calcutta was the highest in the world. Because of various rules it was not possible to import salt to Calcutta from outside. The salt producers of England tried, through different commissions or committees, to establish the right to export salt to Calcutta. The East India Company in its own interest actively opposed this attempt. But it could not prevent this for long. In the fourth half of the nineteenth century, salt was imported to Bengal and reached the 'laban gola' in Salkia near Calcutta. This arrangement brought added supply in the local market without any possible loss in the revenue but brought relief to the misery of the people.<sup>37</sup>

### Evils Plaguing the Industry and Company Initiatives

But Lord Bentinck, one of the Governors in British India, did not support it. He tried to improve the conditions of the industry along with the conditions of the 'Malangis' employed in this industry. But he could do little due to the non-co-operation of the higher British officials and the Indian landlords. The production of salt began to fall from the first half of the nineteenth century. It was not possible to maintain the high standard of production by the oppressed and distressed 'Malangis'. The quantity and standard of production began to fall steadily. But the price of salt was increasing day by day because of the monopoly nature of the business. Gradually the situation came to such a state that the imported salt was available in the Indian market at half the price than that of the local made salt. The public opinion went against the East India Company. So the British Government made a special change in the Charter of the East India Company. In the Charter of 1853, the East India Company was deprived of the right *hato* to produce salt and do salt business in Bengal, But Lord Dalhousie restored the right of the East India Company but did not give it the monopoly right because there was huge import of salt from abroad. As a result, finally, the production in the Chittagong region stopped and the same followed in 24 Parganas. But in 1870 salt agents were engaged under Hijlee & Tamluk in the Midnapore district.

Besides this general economic feature some associated evils could be catalogued to explain the discouraging tendency of labour utilisation and lack of improvement in the material conditions of the labourers in the lowest stratum of the production sector. These were i) low standard of living ii) because of poor money wage and iii) slow upward trend of price level. In spite of the fact that there was heavy demand for labour all the year round, sizeable increase in the birth rate and in the position of the labour supply, the existing settled as well as migratory labourers could not answer in all fronts. This was also owing to the i) inclement weather and mounting death hazards consequent to lack of sanitation, failure in the drainage system and above all, owing to lowering of saving capacity of the labourers. This again explains the ruthless rural indebtedness as a normal feature of economy. The whole process of poverty and deplorable economic situation moved within a vicious cycle from which there was no respite. It was possibly the ruthless exploitative system of alien capitalist Raj which could explain the inextricable tragedy in the labourers life.<sup>38</sup>

In the fifth decade of the nineteenth century, the production began to decrease and at last it stopped. At the time of submitting the account of 1864-65 in the British Parliament, it was declared that, considering certain harmful effects, production of salt was totally stopped in Bengal. Later, salt was produced in some

areas by personal efforts but the quantity was negligible. In 1898, production of salt was totally stopped by imposing law. In this way, the long history of the industry in Bengal came to an end.

After the establishment of the British Raj, some industries were stopped from functioning in order to protect the interests of the British merchants. One of them was the salt industry. During the last half of the nineteenth century, this industry was totally ruined. As a result, the people had to depend upon the imported salt and practically no salt-dependent industry developed.

The end of the nineteenth century with the emergence of national consciousness among the people political agitation sprang up to stop the economic dislocation in the country side. In the early twentieth century the idea of Labana Styagraha joined hands with the idea of revival of village level industries to achieve economic independence. This was thought to be the cementing force for organised demand for political independence for the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

Under a system of private manufacture, the supply of salt in the interior of the country would not be deranged; a few capitalists would not obtain a monopoly of the supply. Nor need there be more evasion of the tax and under a regulated Excise need not be more expensive to Government, or more vexation to the *Malangis*, than the present plan of Government manufacture. This is not practicable to render the manufacture and sale of salt in Bengal absolutely free. A system of modified Excise is perfectly feasible. When the Government stocks are replenished, private manufacture may safely be encouraged further, by gradually giving up to speculators portion of the best Salt Districts, such as Tumluk and Hijlee. But at the present moment the Government has done all that can be done, without incurring the risk of a dearth of Salt. A general Revision of the Agency Establishment, with a view to increasing the pay of the Native Officers employed by the Govt. to superintend the manufacture, is a measure, which should receive early consideration, as the manufacture on account of Govt. is likely to be continued for some time. In Tamluk, the preventive Agency should be separated from and made independent of the Agency employed in the manufacture of the Salt on Account of Govt. and the whole preventive force in those tracts should be plucked under the authority of the controller of Salt Chokies, in accountancy with the system which prevails in all the other Salt producing localities. The preventive Agency should be concentrated in the neighborhood of actual Govt. manufacture and should be distributed. The River Hooghly and the channels of the Sunder bunds require to be closely watched and the guarded tract might be still further limited. The gratis of endorsing rowannahs might be entirely abandoned.

The *Malangis* are subject to the last degree of the coercion or that their condition is in any respect worse than that of any class of labours in Bengal. The Salt Tax was the only tax, direct or indirect of any description, which labours and other people in India were obliged to pay. The argument is that Salt was the only condiment as Indian labours consumers with his food, which is of such a nature that without salt it would be intolerably insipid, is a mistake of fact. These old industries not only contributed for the economic development of our country but it also helped towards the formation of new cities. The cities like Bombay, Madras were developed immensely on the one hand and other Midnapore under Bengal presidency were also developed. In the Mughal period the local Zamindar were engaged in producing Salt. At the outset of British Empire in India the Salt traders of Europe trader salt without payment of excise duty. After the battle at Plassey the company gained the monopoly business upon Salt without tax. Production of salt continued only in Hijli and Tamluk in the Midnapore district. This ushered in a new era

in the history of Salt production and trading. Above all the Angle Salt Industry is bearing the heritage of the past. It also has kept financial foundation. The Salt Industrial Development could be come about if our Govt. takes some preventive measures to solve its problems and obstacles. After all it would pay a vital role the livelihood of the people.

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