

# BENGAL DISTRICT GAZETTEERS

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## KHULNA.

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CALCUTTA:  
THE BENGAL SECRETARIAT BOOK DEPÔT,

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1908.

The flat swampy islands surrounded by interlacing creeks and channels in the lower delta are covered with dense forest. The most plentiful and important species is *sundri* (*Heritiera minor*), which is of larger size and forms a purer forest where the water in the channels is least brackish. Associated with *sundri* are species of *Amoora*, *Excacaria*, *Carapa*, *Avicennia*, *Cynometra*, *Intsia* and *Dolichandrone*. On the banks of creeks and rivers are two species of *Sonneratia*, a *Carapa*, a *Barringtonia*, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, *Brounietia*, *Pongamia*, two *Dalbergias*, a *Casalpinia*, *Avicennia*, *Acanthus ilicifolius*, *Cerbera*, *Ægiceras*, *Ægialitis*, *Phœnix paludosa*, *Nipa* and several other shrubs and climbers. These are especially plentiful in the northern parts, where some of them extend into the swamp forests, and, with *Tamarix*, *Pandanus*, *Calamus*, *Flogellaria* and some others, form a rather dense undergrowth; elsewhere the undergrowth is very scanty. With these plants on northern river banks some mangroves, especially *Kandelia* and *Bruguiera*, are associated. As the influence of the tides increases, the mangroves become more numerous, *Ceriops* and *Rhizophora* now appearing with the others, till at length the riparian vegetation is altogether mangrove. By this time too, *sundri* and its associates largely disappear from the swamp forests, which are now mainly composed of *gecā* (*Excacaria Agallocha*). Nearer the sea, *gecā* in turn disappears, and the forest is almost exclusively composed of mangroves. This pure mangrove forest sometimes extends into the tides, but at other times is separated from the waves along the sea face by a line of low sand hills on which reappear some of the swamp forest species, accompanied however by a few plants characteristic of other Asiatic shores, like *Erythrina indica*, *Thespesia populnea*, *Ficus Rumphii*, and others, for which the conditions present in the swampy islands appear to be unsuited.

The wild animals of Khulnā include tiger, leopard, rhinoceros, FAUNA. wild buffalo, wild pig, wild cat, deer, porcupines, otters and monkeys. These animals are found for the most part in the Sundarbans to the south and are comparatively scarce in the settled tracts to the north. The rhinoceros was formerly common, and Alexander Hamilton, writing of the Sundarbans in 1727, described them as containing many of these animals. "The tongue of the rhinoceros," he adds, "is somewhat of a rarity, for if he can but get any of his antagonists down he will lick them so clean that he leaves no skin or flesh to cover their bones." Even as late as 1859 we find it stated that the country at the mouths of the Malanchā and Raimangal rivers was infested by rhinoceros and deer, the whole ground being cut

up by their feet. Both rhinoceros and buffaloes have now been almost exterminated by native *shikaris*. Tigers, however, are exceptionally numerous, and as many of them are man-eaters, they are literally a scourge in the forest area. This is no new feature, for 30 years ago Sir James Westland mentioned one such brute who was an object of dread over a large tract of land. "Hardly a week passed but there were one or two reports of people carried off by him, and he used to be perfectly well known. He had apparently a charmed life. One day he came on board an Englishman's boat and coolly walked off with one or two of his oarsmen. The Englishman levelled a blunderbuss at him, but the instrument burst, and while it much injured the shooter, the tiger got off ~~scatheless~~. On another occasion the same tiger passed within a few yards of a gentleman who was accustomed to and prepared for such interviews. He of course fired, but again the beast escaped scatheless. This pest was finally killed by Mr. ~~Mortell~~ of ~~Merrillganj~~, who laid wait for him, shutting himself up in an iron cage. The tiger was only severely wounded by the shot and he charged and knocked over the cage; but the cessation of his ravages showed that the wound had a mortal effect."

These brutes, who roam with broad streams in search of prey, are justly dreaded by those whose business takes them into the forests. No woodcutters go there to cut wood unless accompanied by a *fakir*, who is supposed to have power over tigers and other wild animals. Before commencing work, the *fakir* assembles all the woodcutters of his party, clears a space at the edge of the forest, and erects a number of tent-like huts, in which he places images of various deities, to which offerings are made. When this has been done, the allotment is considered free of tigers; and each woodcutter, before commencing work, makes an offering to the jungle deities, by which act he is supposed to have gained a right to their protection. In the event of any of the party being carried off by a tiger, the *fakir* decamps, and the woodcutters place flags at the most prominent corners of the allotment to warn off others.

The difficulty of clearing the forest of these brutes is naturally very great owing to the dense jungle, and it has sometimes happened that while the sportsman imagined that he was following up a tiger, the tiger was stalking him. No less than 101 men were killed by tigers in the Sundarbans forests in 1905-06, and 83 in 1906-07. In order, if possible, to reduce their numbers, Government pays a reward of Rs. 50 for each tiger shot east of the Passur river and Rs. 100 for each of those to the west of it,

given by Pierre du Jarric in his *Histoire des choses plus memorables advenues aux Indes Orientales*, Bordeaux, 1608-14.

"It appears that Pimenta, who was a Jesuit visitor and stationed at Goa, sent two priests, Fernandez and Josa, to Bengal in 1598. They left Cochin on 3rd May, 1598, and arrived in 18 days at the Little Port (Porto Pequino). From thence they went up the river to Gullo or Goli,\* where they arrived eight days after leaving the "Little Port." While at Gullo, they were invited by the Rājā of a place called Chandecan (in Italian Ciandecan) to pay him a visit, and accordingly Fernandez sent Josa there, and he was favourably received by the king. One year after these two priests had left Cochin, Pimenta sent two other priests, viz., Melchin de Fonseca and Andrew Bowes, to Bengal, and they arrived at Chittagong or at Dianga† some time in 1599. On 22nd December, 1599, Fernandez wrote from Sripur, giving an account to Pimenta of the success of the mission, and on 20th January, 1600, Fonseca wrote from Chandecan giving an account of a journey which he had made from Dianga to Chandecan by way of Baklā. Fonseca's letter is most interesting. He described how he came to Bacola, and how well the king received him, and how he gave him letters patent, authorising him to establish churches, etc., throughout his dominions. He says that the king of Baklā was not above eight years of age, but that he had a discretion surpassing his years. The king "after compliments" asked me where I was bound for, and I replied that I was going to the king of Ciandecan, who is to be the father-in-law of your Highness. These last words seem to be very important, for the king of Ciandecan was, as I shall afterwards show, no other than the famous Pratāpāditya of Jessore, and therefore this boy-king of Baklā must have been Rām Chandra Rai, who we know married Pratāpāditya's daughter."

Fonseca then proceeds to describe the route from Baklā to Chandecan, regarding which Mr. Beveridge writes—"Though the good father evidently had an eye for natural scenery and was delighted with the woods and rivers, it is evident that what he admired so much must have appeared to many to be "horrid jungle," and was very like what the Sundarbans now are. In fact, a great part of this description of the route from Baklā to Ciandecan is still applicable to the journey from Barisal to Kāliganj, near which Pratāpāditya's capital was situated. The chief difference is that the progress of civilization has driven away the herds

\* Gullo is identified by Mr. Beveridge with Baudol.

† Dianga has been identified by Professor Blochmann with Dakbindanga on the Sangu river south of Chittagong.

of deer and monkeys from the ordinary routes, though they are still to be found in the woods and the deer have given their name to one of the largest of the Sundarban rivers (the Haringhātā). The faithfulness of Fonseca's description seems indicated by his modestly admitting that he had never seen a rhinoceros, while stating (quite truly) that there were such animals in the forest. Had he come upon any town on his route, it is reasonable to suppose that he would have mentioned it.

"Fonseca arrived at Ciandecan on the 20th November, and there he found Fernandez's companion Dominic de Josa, who must either have been left there by Fernandez in 1598, or had returned some time afterwards. The king received Fonseca with great kindness, so much so, that he says he does not think a Christian prince could have behaved better. A church was built at Ciandecan, and this was the first ever erected in Bengal, and was as such dedicated to Jesus Christ. Chittagong was the second, and then came the church at Bandel, which was erected by a Portuguese named Villalobos. The fair prospects of the mission as described by Fernandez and Fonseca were soon overclouded. Fernandez died in November 1602 in prison at Chittagong, after he had been shamefully ill-used and deprived of the sight of an eye; the king of Ciandecan proved a traitor, and killed Carvalho the Portuguese commander, and drove out the Jesuit priests.

"Leaving these matters, however, for the present, let us first answer the question, where was Ciandecan? I reply that it is identical with Pratāpāditya's capital of Dhūmghāt, and that it was situated near the modern Kāliganj. My reasons for this view are first that Chandecan or Ciandecan is evidently the same as Chānd Khān, and we know from the History of Rājā Pratāpāditya by Rām Rām Basu (modernized by Harish Tarkālankār) that this was the old name of the property in the Sundarbans, which Pratāpāditya's father Vikramāditya got from king Dāūd. Chānd Khān, we are told, had died without heirs, and so Bikramāditya got the property. And there is nothing in this contradictory to the fact that Jessore formerly belonged to Khānja Ali (Khān Jahān); for Khānja Ali died in 1459, or about 120 years before Vikramāditya came to Jessore, so that the latter must have succeeded to some descendant of Khānja Ali, and he may very well have borne the name of Chānd Khān. When the Jesuit priests visited Ciandecan, Pratāpāditya cannot have been very long on the throne, and therefore the old name of the locality (Chānd Khān) may still have clung to it. But besides this, Du Jarric tells us that after Fernandez had been killed at



Backergunge Sundarbans eastward of it, are all distributaries of the Ganges, and contain sweet water during most seasons, down to within a short distance of the Bay of Bengal. In the central portion the water of the rivers, though not so saline as those further to the west, is gradually becoming more brackish as the rivers are silting up at the heads and the tides come further up.

These waterways are of the first importance, as being the chief means of communication by water between Calcutta and the Eastern Bengal. All the streams are tidal, and the boats proceed on the ebb and flow of the tide. Part of the day's journey has to be made with the flow, so that the duration of the voyage depends entirely upon the success with which each tide is caught. A whole fleet of boats may be seen at the recognized anchorages waiting for the tide, and the district from which they come can be readily distinguished by the shape of the bow and stern. Some of these anchorages are far from any human habitation, but necessaries of all kinds (including water) can be obtained at a sort of floating bazar. Country boats also ply from place to place along the cross channels, some of which are so narrow and so overhung with trees that the rigging of small craft at times gets caught in the branches.

The main streams, during the inundation in the rainy season, have what are usually termed "double currents," that is, the surface down to a certain depth flows downward or southward, while below that depth the tide advances upward or northward. This is caused by the freshets sweeping down from a higher level and over-topping the flood tide from the sea. Even to skilful swimmers this treacherous double current or under-current is most dangerous. A person falling accidentally or suddenly into a stream naturally sinks at first below the surface, when the under-current drags him in one direction, while the upper current, flowing in a contrary direction, prevents his rising to the surface. The result is that he is quickly drowned, and the body is sometimes never recovered.

The Sundarbans present several peculiar features, which have been well described in an article *The Gangetic Delta* published in the Calcutta Review, March 1859. "In whatever light we regard the Sundarbans—whether as a tract of country possessing an abundant pachydermatous fauna, or a flora peculiar to itself, whether we look at it as the stronghold of gigantic and destructive saurians, voracious sharks and peculiar fish, whether as a tract of country of the most beautiful aspect, but at the same time most fatally pestilential—we must still view it as a curious and an anomalous tract, for here we see a surface soil composed of

black liquid mud supporting the huge rhinoceros, the sharp-hoofed hog, the mud-hating tiger, the delicate and fastidiously clean spotted deer, and nourishing and upholding large timber trees; we see fishes climbing trees; tides running in two directions in the same creek and at the same moment; we see wild hog and tigers, animals generally avoiding water, swimming across the broadcast rivers as if for amusement; in one creek a dead calm, in the next a raging sea; in some creeks the abundance of insect life is overpowering, in others close by not a living creature is to be seen; some creeks are deadly to sleep in, others perfectly free from miasma; some are dry at low water, in others, and those contiguous, no bottom can be found at ten fathoms; in one, all is fog and doubt, in the next, all is in the brightest sunshine; and many other anomalies present themselves, all rendering the Sunderbans a spot of much interest, offering as they do so many subjects for investigation and research. Most travellers in passing through this labyrinth of interminable forest, mud and water, become exceedingly wearied with the monotonous appearance of the banks of the rivers and creeks, and are only too glad when they escape into the open and cultivated northern parts of the delta, where all the breadth of the land is one vast sheet of rice cultivation."

Since the above was written the one-horned rhinoceros has become rare and is only found within the southern portion of the reserved forests. Buffaloes are also fast disappearing and at present are found only in the waste lands of the Backergunge portion of the Sunderbans. Tigers and crocodiles, however, are still as numerous as ever. A number of natives are killed every year by tigers, which break through the matted walls of dwelling-houses at night and carry off their inmates; it is a curious fact that they never carry their victims away through the side of the house by which they enter, but break through the opposite side to do so. Crocodiles are equally destructive. It is reported that they will enter houses at night, and that during the day-time they frequently move into the fields, seize cattle, and drag them into the nearest stream. Among birds more or less peculiar to this tract may be mentioned the gigantic stork or adjutant, known to the natives as *hārgila* or the bone swallower, on account of its swallowing its food, bone and meat together; the feathers of this bird furnish the beautiful plumes known as "marabou feathers." The reptile tribe is well represented in the Sunderbans, both venomous and non-venomous. Among the former are included salt water snakes, the deadly cobra (*Naja tripudians*), the scarcely less deadly, carpet viper (*Echis*

*carinata*), and the large venomous snake-eater (*Ophiophagus bungarus*), which is remarkable for subsisting on its own kind, devouring its smaller brethren without mercy. Of the non-venomous snakes may be mentioned the huge python, erroneously called the Indian boa-constrictor (*Python molurus*), which attains great length and is capable of swallowing deer or pig whole, and the *dhāmin* (*Ptyas mucosus*), both of which are common. During the cold weather months special snake-catchers visit the Sundarbans and capture numerous snakes, which are disposed of in Calcutta.

The name Sundarbans is an incorrect English designation, the tract being properly known as Sundarban. Various etymologies have been proposed in order to explain the name. The word has been derived from *sundar* and *ban*, meaning a beautiful forest, or from *samudra-ban*, through its corrupted and vulgar form *samunda-ban*, the whole meaning the forests near the sea. Others, again, have derived the word from *Chandradwip-ban*, i.e., the Chandradwip forest, Chandrawip being the name of an old zamindari occupying the south and south-east of Backergunge. The name has also been connected with the Chandabanda, an old forest tribe engaged in making salt, who are mentioned in a copper-plate inscription, dated 1136 Sambat or A.D. 1079, which was found at Idalpur (Adilpur) in the north of Backergunge. Grant, in his *Analysis of the Finances of Bengal* (1786) derives it from *Chandra bāndh* meaning the embankments of the moon, because, he says, "the richest and greatest parts of the Sundarbans are still comprised in the ancient zamindari of Chandradwip (lunar territory)" and he somewhat fancifully justifies the derivation by saying that it means the offspring of the moon and refers to the tract being overflowed by the tide. It is now generally recognized that the name is derived from *sundri-ban* or the forest of *sundri* trees, for that tree is the commonest in the forests, and the word is sometimes pronounced locally as Sundarban. The application of the name Sundarban or Sundarbans to this tract is evidently modern. The Muhammadan historians do not use the term, but give the coast-strip from Hijili to the Meghnā the name of Bhāti, which signifies low-lands subject to the influx of the tides; and this name was used at the close of the 18th century by Mr. Grant, who says that this tract is "always included under the local description of Bhatty with all the neighbouring lowlands overflowed by the tides."\*

**Swatch of no ground.**—A name given to a great natural depression or hole in the Bay of Bengal situated due south of the

\* For much of the information contained in the above account, I am indebted to a note by Mr. D. H. E. Sunder.