

# History of Cooch Behar District Forests

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The total area of Cooch Behar district is 3,338 Sq. km. and out of that only 80 Sq. km. area is under forests. Hence the forest covers only 2.40% of the total area. Out of this 80 Sq. km. forests, only 56.33 Sq. km. is under the direct control of Forest Directorate, the rest 23.67 Sq. km. forests still remain to be transferred to the said Directorate for protection and scientific management. It is very difficult to search out the history of the present forests of Cooch Behar district as the records available are mostly vague, un-authentic, and forests have hardly been dealt with. The only reliable record in this respect is that of Sri Y. S. Ahmed (1940) written on the development of Cooch Behar forests.

## PAST HISTORY

The forests of the district as we see today are very old and do not form a compact block except in two places, Patlakhawa and Garodhat reserves. They are mostly in patches of few hectares comprising of mostly thatches all over, with few scattered trees here and there. As sufficient care were not taken in the past for the protection and presentation of the forests in a scientific manner, indiscriminate felling and repeated firing occurred causing their gradual disappearance. In some areas like Patlakhawa and Garodhat reserves, annual firing was induced to initiate growth of grasses with the idea of creating shooting reserve for H.H. the Maharaja of Cooch Behar.

Informations collected from Land Revenue Records show that the first attempt to improve the State forests started in 1874 by raising *Teak* plantations from Burmese seeds. In 1878-79 *Sal* seedlings were brought from Bhutan and were planted. Several such attempts were made in subsequent years for raising *Sissoo* and Indian rubber plants for beautification (1880-81).

In 1882, the authority felt the necessity for a

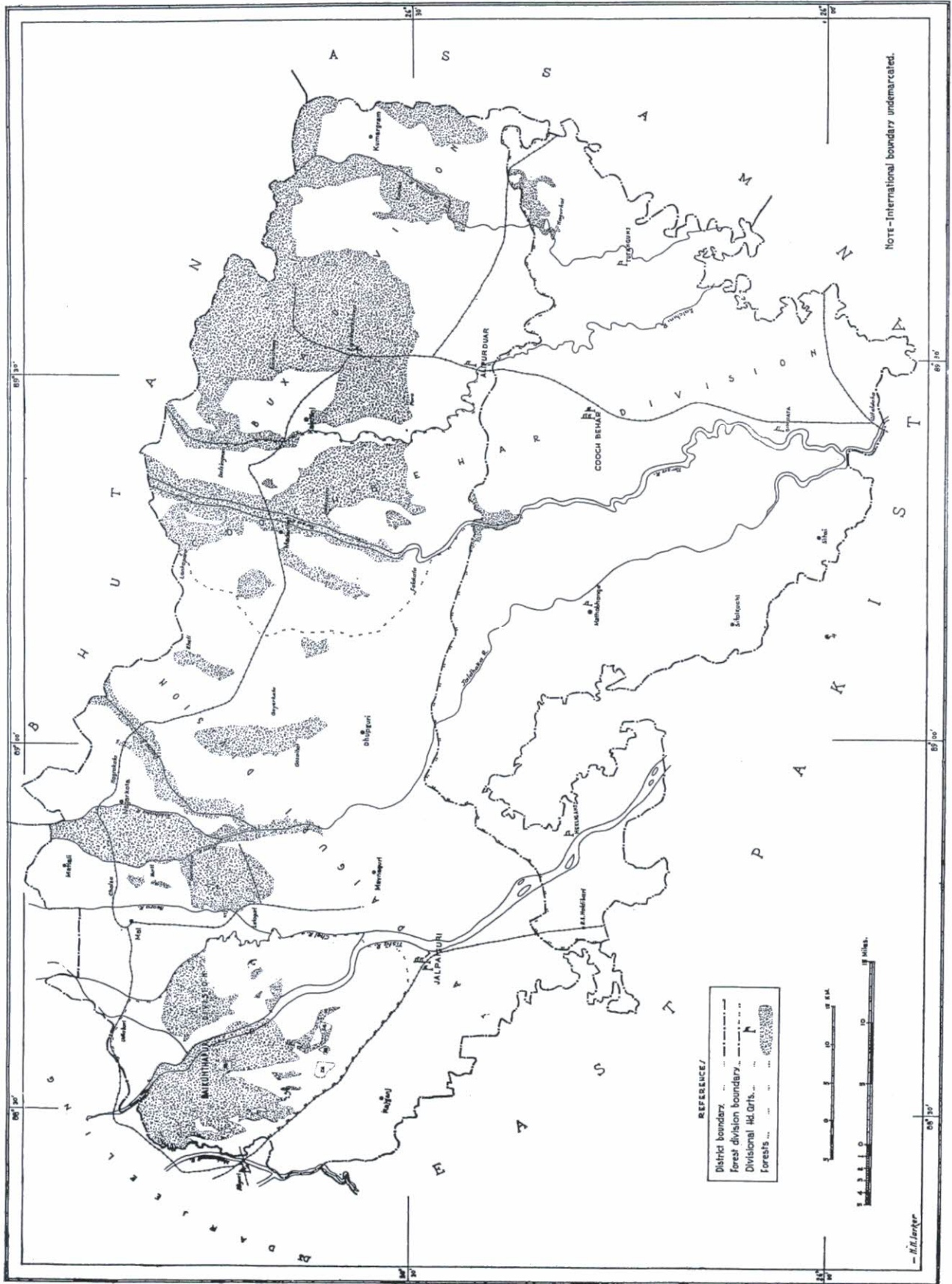
separate department called Agriculture and Forests and the same was organised. Considerable efforts were made to increase acreage of plantations during subsequent years 1882-1893 when 21 *Sissoo* plantations covering about 240 hectares were raised. Planting of shade trees in various sub-divisional headquarters and cultivation of *date-palm* on experimental basis (1887-88) were also taken up. But unfortunately due to change of policy in 1893 the same department was abolished and was again amalgamated with the P.W.D. to which it originally belonged.

The idea of making revenue from the forest resources was initiated in 1896-97 when annual revenue was mainly collected by selling the uprooted and thinned trees. In subsequent years sleepers were manufactured and supplied to the railways and a good deal of revenue was realised.

For protection against indiscriminate felling the authorities in 1908 realised the importance of making act and rules and as a result Cooch Behar Forest Act (XI) of 1908 and rules and orders thereunder were framed by the State council. The council also fixed the exploitable diameters of important forest trees like *Sal* and *Sissoo* and actual scientific management started from this time. Till 1917, the PWD managed forests were worked under the prescriptions laid down by the above state council. But in 1918 Patlakhawa and Garodhat reserves were taken out from the control of the said department and were placed under the direct control and supervision of the Private Secretary of H.H. the Maharaja Bhupbahadur. The idea behind this was to create two shooting reserves for the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and his guests.

With the creation of the above two reserves in 1918, collection of grass, dry firewood and timber trees was allowed for sometime but ultimately it was stopped, the idea being that the games would be scared away. Only fishing leases in the

DISTRICT JALPAIGURI AND COOCHBEHAR



Note - International boundary undemarked.

MAP 7—Forests in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar Districts.

streams and "beels" of the above areas were allowed. But this system did not affect the PWD who continued selling of selected trees mainly for bridge and building constructions. Local demand as a matter of fact was not entertained except in few special cases and this system of management continued till 1940. PWD also tried to raise some *teak* plantations in different parts of the state including Mathabhanga and Mekhligauinge but attempts proved to be failures. Amongst all the species tried from time to time *Sissoo* proved best, *Sal* though successful, became very much expensive due to collection of seeds from outside places like Rajabhatkhawa and Bhutan.

#### STATE POLICY

In 1940 H.H. the Maharaja Bhupbahadur of Cooch Behar in council formulated the first policy for his state forests. The main ideas were protection, preservation and improvement. Some resolutions were passed and adopted and the same were sent to Sri Y. S. Ahmed, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Divisional Forest Officer, Buxa, who then was taken to Cooch Behar on deputation to report on the development of state forests. Preservation of games along with the scientific working of the existing forests were the main idea of the abovementioned policy. It was also mentioned there that the state forests should be maintained in such a condition that they become suitable natural habitats of the wild animals found in that locality. Afforestation programmes were suggested for khas untenanted lands, situated at a distance not more than 5 miles from the reserve forests boundary. A separate forest department was also suggested to look after the cultural operations of the State forests. Provisions were made for maintenance of cleared lines within the reserves to act as *sikar* lines and future extraction paths. Last recommendation of the policy was that the state forest department would be under the technical control of Divisional Forest Officer, Buxa Division on suitable terms and conditions between Cooch Behar State and Government of Bengal. Divisional Forest Officer, Buxa would inspect the state forests at least for one week in every year and all arrangements for that would be provided by the State.

The first scientific management of the state

forest was proposed by Sri Y. S. Ahmed in 1940 who divided the whole Cooch Behar State forests into 4 Working Circles of which 2 important ones were (a) selection and (b) savannah working circle consisting of the areas of Patlakhawa and Garodhat reserves. The erstwhile state forests of Cooch Behar prior to its merger with India were exclusive property of H.H. the Maharaja Bhupbahadur of Cooch Behar. The accession of Cooch Behar state to Indian Union took place on 12th September 1949 and its merger with the state of West Bengal on 1st January 1950. Between the period mentioned above Cooch Behar came to be known as Chief Commissioner's province. On 3rd January 1950, the charge of the erstwhile state forests was taken over by Divisional Forest Officer, Buxa Division, on behalf of the Forest Directorate, Government of West Bengal, and a separate division called as Cooch Behar forest division was created in 1951 by taking in Madarihat range from Jalpaiguri Division and Nilpara and Chilapata ranges from Buxa Division. With the enforcement of Estate Acquisition Act of 1953, some of the private forests vested in the Government and only a part of it has come under the direct control and supervision of this Division. But a substantial part of the vested area have already been encroached by the migrating refugees from East Pakistan from time to time. However, the present trend of management of the forests in Cooch Behar district is to tap the natural resources to a maximum limit by afforesting unproductive waste lands and marginal lands with quick growing species. The work is in progress and there is immense scope for the development of forestry in the district.

#### COMPOSITION OF THE CROP

The forests are dry mixed or an intermediate between dry mixed and riverain type. According to Champion's classification the forests are of the following types—3b/1S-6, 3b/E-6, 3b/1S-7(b), 3b/2S-7(a) and 7(b).

In the grassy Savannah areas the following grasses are very common :—*Cassia grass* (*Saccharum spontaneum*), *Erianthus elephantinus*, *Batta* (*Saccharum narenga*), *Speargrass* (*Saccharum arundaniceum*), *Narenga perphyrocoma* etc. The much shorter *sum grasses* (*Imperata arundinacea*) also occur in patches. In moist areas *nal* (*Phragmites karka*) *Khagra* or *ekra* and *pundi* (*Alpinia alugash*)

are found. The dry mixed type of forests occupied the largest area and there are patches of immature *Sal* in it.

In Patlakhawa and Garodhat reserve the general condition of the crop is not satisfactory and the Savannah areas get burnt every year. *Sal* is non-existent excepting in small patches in Garodhat Reserve. The *Sal* trees are unhealthy, mostly full of epicormic branches and do not produce sound timbers. The other trees which are found are mainly *Sissoo* and *Simul* but they are also not of good quality, *Sissoo* being the best amongst all. Some isolated patches of *Sal* as are found at Choto Salbari, Natabar, Khalisha Gosanimari and Jambari in Cooch Behar Range are quite good. The old *Sal* plantations raised in different parts of Mekliganj in the past are also not very promising. (Young seedlings of natural *Sal* do not exist except in some areas in Garodhat Reserve.) The *Teak* trees as found in different plantations raised in the past are mostly fluted and badly grown. Some of the *Teak* plantations, which were felled in the past and at present are covered with *Teak* coppice crops, are mostly malformed and diseased. *Pitali*,

*Khair*, *Sissoo* and *Simul* are the main crop of Cooch Behar District forests and *Lali* (*Amoora wallichii*) *Premna* species and *Salix* species along with *Jarul* and *Toon* are also found. Natural seedlings of the above mentioned species are found in different patches though *Khair*, *Sissoo* and *Simul* are most common. *Pitali* is also common in moist areas. Most of the forest areas are covered up with thatches with few scattered trees here and there.

#### WILD LIFE

The Patlakhawa and Garodhat reserves of the district were famous for games in the past. But in recent years the number of wild lives has gone down considerably. In other areas wild lives are almost absent. A few *Rhinoceros* are found in Patlakhawa reserves along with a few *Royal Bengal Tigers* and *Leopards*. *Barking* and *Hog Deer* are rarely found. It has also been reported that *wild buffaloes* were visible in Garodhat reserve in the third decade of this century. *Wild Pigs* are still found in the above mentioned reserves. Amongst birds *Jungle fowls* and *Peacocks* are seen along with other common birds.



PLATE 15. *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) with *teak* in the periphery.