

Salt Wells in Cachar : An Appraisal

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Since the annexation of the valley of Barak, the Britishers were very much interested to increase its revenue resources and fulfil their commercial aspirations. One of the most important indigenous sources of revenue of Cachar were the Salt wells and Salt brines.

During the heyday of glory of the Dimasa rulers, Salt was manufactured from the brines situated in the Tilain ranges near Katigora¹ and some other parts of Gagrapore in the Valley of Barak². But the noteables among them were said to be found in Saraspur and Bhuban Hills.³ Formerly, Salt was supplied from these brines to the whole part of Cachar. Moreover, this salt was also regarded as the medium of exchange towards the hill-tribes who used to exchange it in lieu of cotton, wax, ivory etc.⁴ Even the prevalent system was that, if a person salt lands the interest was about eight times higher than the commodity itself during the Raja's regime.⁵

But inspite of its demand, the quality of the salt was a very inferior one. It was prepared only by the simple process of evaporation of the water by boiling. So naturally, the product was not clear rather it was dirty, and unrefined. W. J. Allen, in his report on the produce of well says. "The salt manufactured from the brine of the wells is of very inferior quality to that of Bengal and is consumed chiefly by the poorer classes residing in the neighbourhood. . . ."⁶

The British authorities undertook the administration of Cachar following the murder of king Govinda Chandra Narayan. It deserves mention here that, formerly with a view to increasing the commercial possibilities of the North-East Frontier towards the later part of the 18th Century, Hugh Baillie was appointed as the Superintendent of Assam trade at Goalpara.⁷ With this aim in view also, the foreign administrators intended to enhance the salt wells of Cachar along with other sources of revenue. They assumed that, the salt brines and springs of Cachar would become a valuable source of revenue to the Govt. and of extensive benefit to the province.⁸ Besides, a large portion of inhabitants had been engaged in the business of Salt-brines which was an indirect help to them of their paying revenue in time during unfavourable season.⁹ In a letter to the Commissioner of Dacca, the officiating Superintendent of Cachar Mc Cullah, reported that most of the wells were in a deplorable condition. But even in this stage also probably an amount of Rupees one thousand could easily be collected especi-

ally from the wells of Saraspur.¹⁰ But the very reason for their deplorable condition lies in the fact that, all these brines were leased for a short period. Naturally, the lease holders were not interested to the clearance and proper maintenance of the brines.¹¹ Above all, there was the question of expenditure also.

Under these circumstances, the authorities had increased the terms and conditions towards the lease of these wells. Accordingly, the salt wells of lower Cachar were leased out for a period of three years.¹² The Board of Revenue within a short time confirmed the settlement of three persons like Brijo Ram Barman, Radha Krishna Aditya and Krishna Ram Deb of Cachar for a period of three years with effect from 1841 to 1844 respectively at an annual rent of Rs. 900.¹³ Gradually these were confirmed by the Board of Revenue. The hereditary proprietary right was granted for the wells. The Board of Revenue stated that the *Ijaradars* were given the liberty to work for the betterment of these wells in case of failure of the proprietors. Again, they will not be allowed to eject their respective wells without showing sufficient reason.¹⁴

But the problem was that, most of the brines were in a wretched condition. During rainy seasons, fresh water from adjacent marshes poured into the brine springs and diluted salt water. There were shafts of 20 to 50 feet covered with hollowed of about 20 *haths* long to the surface of the spring. These shafts were sufficiently large to allow man to clear the dirty things yet their clearance was almost neglected.¹⁵

Formerly, the clearance and maintenance of the wells were undertaken by a class of people in accordance with the order of the Raja.¹⁶ But meanwhile, the condition of the wells were beyond description. There were about 63 wells in Cachar. Amongst them, 18 were irreparable, 27 were out of order and only 6 were in a bit better position. Besides, the wells situated in Saraspur in the Hailakandi division were said to be the most important in comparison with the other ones.¹⁷ Some *Mirasdars* expressed their willingness to repair the wells. Of course, the colonial administrators very well understood the necessity of reforming these wells and the matter had been referred to the Board of Revenue. Again, on an enquiry the Superintendent of Cachar estimated an amount of Rs. 1481 to be the cost of repairing some of these wells.¹⁸ The immediate plan of working with the wells had its threefold objectives - (a) to stop the dilution of Salt water with the outside water combined with all rubbish, (b) to strengthen the wells with stone perches etc, and (c) to dig the well deeply so that the sides will not be broken repeatedly.¹⁹ To eradicate all these problems the most secured solution was to use ring and to build the wells pukka so that it will last long. But the plan would require more money. At last it was decided that the work of repairing the wells was to be started following the winter season.²⁰

The condition of the salt-wells in pargana Saraspur in the Hailakandi division were in a better position. There was the possibility of extracting a huge quantity of Salt the depth of which was about 20 to 50 feet.²¹ During the year 1850-51 about 413 maunds

of salt had been manufactured only from Saraspur and the rest about 50 maunds has been extracted from rest of the mehals of Cachar. Besides, salt water was also used to sold out two pie per barrel which was also a source of income of the people.²² Thus, having observed the possibility of prospect from these wells, the salt wells of Saraspur pargana were settled in public auction to the highest bidder for a period of three years in 1878 -79 and thereafter was confirmed by the Chief Commissioner of Assam on June 3rd, 1885 in the manner as follows: ³

1 Number	2	3	4	5	Remarks
	Salt wells in pargona Saraspur	Jitamia Laskar & Fulmia Laskar.	3 years from 1st April 1885	Rs. 12	

The lessee was to abide by certain rules. The instructions were issued by the Deputy Commissioner in the form of *Kabuliyat*.²⁴

But inspite of all these attempts done by the British administrators to enhance the salt revenue in Cachar, there was a gradual diminution of the product. Of course, there were some defects in the system of manufacturing the salt. The only process was the evaporation and boiling. Under more scientific management and modified method of manufacture huge amount would have been produced.²⁵ Besides the disturbances created by some of the hill tribes, inconviencing road facilities²⁶ seemed to be the hindrances against the development of the industry. Moreover, advent of foreign salt in the markets of Cachar with its better taste gradually kept apart this indigenious resource.²⁷ The undermentioned statement will show the gradual decline of the Salt mehals within a period of about twenty years as per the Report on the Revenue Administration of Cachar 1872-73.²⁸

year	No of Mehals	Revenue in Rs.
1852-53	9	1030
1857-58	2	840
1862-63	2	340
1867-69	2	143
1871-72	1	95

Notes & References

1. U. C. Guha, *Cacharer Itibritta*, Guwahati, 1971, p. 123.
2. F. P. P., No. 85, Feb. 1835.
3. C. R. No. 184, 1836 ; J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar Under British*

- Rule in North East India*, New Delhi, 1977, pp. 168-169.
4. F. P. P., n. 2.
 5. "Kachari Rajar Rin-dan Bidhi," published in the *Sovenier of Banga Sahitya Sanskriti Sanmalen*, 8th Session, Khaspur, 1987, p. 3.
 6. W. J. Allen, *Report on Cachar*, p. 24; Hunter. W. W., *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. II, Delhi, 1879, p. 370.
 7. H. K. Barpujari, *Assam In the Days of the Company*, Gawahati, 1980, p 6.
 - 8 F. P. P. No. 35, 1835
 - 7, D. Dutta, *Cachar Records*, Silchar, 1969, No 59, 30th May 1842.
 10. Ibid.
 - 11 W. J, Allen, n, 6.
 - 12 C. R. No. 5, 30th July, 1835.
 13. C. R. No. 42, File No. XXI, 1850.
 14. C. R. n, 12.
 15. C. R. No. 106, 4th August, 1850.
 16. C. R. No. 106 of 1850 ; 10th March 1851 ; No. 15 of 1851.
 17. C. R. No. 101, 18th July, 1850.
 18. Ibid.
 17. C. R. No. 485.
 20. C. R. No. 15, 1851.
 21. C. R. No. 25, 1851.
 22. C. R. No. 148.
 23. Quoted in the Thesis the "Land Revenue Admistration of Cachar During British rule (1832-1900;)" an unpublished Thesis submitted to the Gauhati University, 1988, by Dr. R. Dey.
 - 24 Ibid

As I (here write the name and description of the settlement holder) have purchased the leased salt-well in Pargona Saraspur in the District of Cachar with the several ghats fixed for selling the salt-water at auction for a term of 3 years from 1st April 1881 to 31st March 1884 at annual rent of 36/- Rs I do hereby execute this Kabulyat voluntarily and agree to pay the Government revenue in the usual way on the 25th of every month as written in the Schedule of instalment given below, that I will not raise any objection of having paid the revenue without taking receipts, that I will pay the revenue without making any objection as to any actual loss that I may suffer, that I will not open any new Ghat or Fari other than those fixed last year for selling the salt water, that I will not contravene the existing custom under which the salt water is sold, that I will not raise any objection to the Mehal being resold for failure to pay the revenue of any instalments and should the mehal go for a less sum than what I agree to pay, at such sale to the realisation of the deficiency by attachment and sale of my property and the property of my subjects furnished as security that I will not act against the orders of the Deputy Commissioner or against custom, should I do so I will be liable to punishment.

Schedule of instalments

Rs. 36/- for every year of the period of 3 years from 1st April 1881 to 31st March 1884.

1st instalment	25th October	Rs. 18/-
2nd instalment	25th February	Rs. 18/-
Total		Rs. 36/-

- C. R., 1881
25. Bhattacharjee, J. B., n. 3, p. 1 .
 26. F. P. P. No. 85, 1835.
 27. Guha, U. C., n. 1.
 28. Report on the Revenue Administration of Cachar, 1872-1873.