

Forest Products and Livelihood of Marginal Men in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

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Abstract: *The fertile soil and favourable climate of Bengal grew natural forests and jungles in different parts of the province. Besides the wild animals, these forests and jungles were the sources of valuable forest produces necessary for mankind. Timber, firewood, honey, beeswax, canes, lac, Garjan oil, various kinds of medicinal shrubs, seeds and herbs, etc., were the most useful products of these forests in the nineteenth century. A considerable segment of the marginal people belonging to the untouchable Hindus, tribal communities, and lower order of the Muslims earned their livelihood collecting these economic products from the forests and jungles of Bengal and selling these products in the markets according to their demands. The majority of these classes were employed in this calling as their part-time work side by side with their principal occupations.*

Keywords: Forest, Economic Product, Collection, Marginal Men, Livelihood.

Under section 4 of the Indian Forest Act, 1927, the term 'forest produce' has been specifically defined. In terms of this legal definition, the forest produce or forest product includes timber, catechu, wood-oil, resin, bark, lac, leaves, flowers, fruits, and seeds of trees and plants, and all other parts or produce of such trees and plants; wild animals and skins, tusks, horns, bones, silk, cocoons, honey and wax, and all other parts or produce of such animals. In Bengal, the forests and jungles were located in different parts of the province. These woody and bushy tracts were the natural habitats of various species of wild animals, reptiles, birds, and insects. At the same time, they produced important economic products for the utility of mankind. The marginal communities of Bengal have never got any impartial treatment from the native *zamindars* in the matter of distribution of agricultural land. The British rulers adopted a policy of non-interference in this regard. As a result, the marginal people were compelled to live in unfavourable and inaccessible areas like the marshy tracts, newly-floated chars, barren lands, jungles, and remote hilly tracts of the province in the nineteenth century. The vast majority of them were engaged in the calling of agricultural activities. Others

were attached to various occupations involving hard manual labour, hazard, and risk. A segment of them was engaged in collecting useful economic products from the forests and jungles of Bengal as means of their life without being afraid of snake bites, sting of insects and attacks from fierce wild animals during the period of our review.

The soil of Bengal was well-known all over the world for its fertility. The moderate temperature and adequate rainfall in the entire province were also congenial for the growth of natural vegetation. The mean annual temperature at Calcutta was recorded at 78°F and Chittagong at 76°F in the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹ The province received sufficient rainfall under the influence of the South-West Monsoon. The mean annual rainfall was measured in the Divisions of Burdwan, Presidency, Rajshahi, Dacca and Chittagong at 57.6 inches, 60.4 inches, 86.9 inches, 78.3 inches, and 103.0 inches respectively at the end of the nineteenth century. The same period recorded an annual rainfall of 212.25 inches at Baxa on the frontier of Bhutan in Jalpaiguri District.² Fertile soil, moderate temperature, and adequate rainfall grew natural forests, jungles, and bushes in different parts of the province under the territorial Divisions of Burdwan, Presidency, Rajshahi, Cooch Bihar, Dacca, and Chittagong. The *Sal* forests of western Bengal, the forests in the Himalayan foothills, the forests in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the forests of the Sundarbans were widely familiar woody tracts of Bengal.

Marginalization is a social process of being confined to a lower social standing. Its concept is simultaneously complex and multi-layered. Marginalization refers to the process of social impairment and relegation at the fringe of society. In a social environment, people or communities may feel marginalized because they are poor or considered to be at a lower position in the social hierarchy. Sometimes, marginalized groups are viewed as less human than others. Iris Marion Young, the noted political theorist, argues that "Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination."³ Marginalization combines discrimination and social exclusion. It injures human dignity and denies human rights, especially the right to live effectively as equal citizens.⁴ In the Indian social perspective, the lower castes, untouchable communities and tribal groups are pushed to the fringes of the society as a result of diverse historical factors.

The institution of caste and the practice of untouchability are the unique features of Indian society. It is a divisive apparatus which rigidly divides people on the concept of purity and pollution. The system codifies the social norms and behaviours of the Hindus and determines the social status of each individual in the caste hierarchy based on his birth placing the Brahmins at the top and the Sudras and Untouchables at the bottom. In nineteenth-century Bengal, the Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas would constitute the

bulk of the Hindu *bhadralok* classes of Bengal.⁵ People belonging to these three castes were at the centre of the dominant social order and more influential. They represented the vast majority of the landed aristocracy and were wealthy, educationally advanced and politically powerful.

The lower caste people, particularly the untouchables, were discriminated against in different ways. They would sustain severe economic oppression and were pushed toward hard-working and hazardous occupations. They were compelled to live in separate quarters in villages and towns with their fellow men and deprived of basic education. Entry to public places and places of worship were prohibited for them. From a historical perspective, the Chandals have been despised by the Brahmins and upper caste Hindus from time immemorial. The Brahmanical aversion towards them was so deeply rooted that a Brahmin considered himself polluted not only by touching the body of a Chandal but also by treading on the shadow produced by the body of a Chandal.⁶ The social exclusion of the untouchable castes was so widely practised by the upper caste Hindus that the Chandals, Sunris, Bagdis, Jugis, Rajbansis and twelve other communities were prohibited from entering the temple of Jagannath at Puri under Section 7 of Regulation IV of 1809.⁷ The same pattern of untouchability was practised by the Muslims of Bengal in the nineteenth century. Among the Muslims, the Halalkhors, Lalbegis, Abdals, Bediyas, Nikaris, Naluas, Chaudalis, Jolahas, Dhunias, Kulus, Kunjras, Hajjams and Darzis were considered degrading and they were despised by the 'Ashraf' classes and the Sheikhs. The lowest classes of the Muslims (Arzal), such as, the Halalkhors, Lalbegis, Abdals and Bediyas were considered so degrading that no other Muhammadan would associate with them. The social position of these Muhammadan classes was just like the Hindu untouchables. They were forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial grounds of the Muslims.⁸ The tribal groups were also denied economic opportunities, access to primary education, fair treatment and minimum human dignity. Based upon the census data, report of Calcutta University Commission and observation of Risley, the following is a schedule of marginal communities of Bengal, though not exhaustive, who held not only a lower ritual rank in the caste hierarchy but also an inferior position in the economic scale in the nineteenth century :

Table-1

Marginal Classes of Bengal in Nineteenth Century⁹

Sl No	Caste/Tribe	Sl No	Caste/Tribe	Sl No	Caste/Tribe
1	Abdal	21	Hajang	41	Lohar
2	Bagdi	22	Hajjam	42	Mal
3	Bauri	23	Halalkhor	43	Malo
4	Bediya	24	Hari	44	Mech
5	Bhaimali	25	Jalia Kaibartta	45	Munda

6	Bhuiya	26	Jolaha	46	Nalua
7	Bhumij	27	Jugi	47	Namasudra
8	Chain	28	Kaira	48	Nikari
9	Chakma	29	Kaora	49	Nuniya
10	Chamar and Muchi	30	Kapali	50	Oraon
11	Chasa Dhoba	31	Kasta	51	Patni
12	Chasi Kaibartta	32	Khandait	52	Pod
13	Dai	33	Khen	53	Pundari
14	Darzi	34	Koch	54	Rajbansi
15	Dhangar	35	Koiri	55	Raju
16	Dhoba	36	Kora	56	Santal
17	Dhunua	37	Kulu	57	Sukli
18	Dom	38	Kurmi	58	Sunri
19	Garo	39	Lalbegi	59	Tipara
20	Hadi	40	Lodha	60	Tiyar

When the first organized census was conducted in Bengal in 1872, the Burdwan Division covered the Districts of Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum, Midnapore, and Hooghly with Howrah.¹⁰ Burdwan District was essentially a rice-producing belt. Sugarcane, pulses, and oilseeds were other principal crops of the District.¹¹ No considerable volume of forest products was collected from the jungly tracts of the western portion of the District. The Bauris, an untouchable Hindu caste, collected some Tasar silk from the jungles located in the Bud-bud Subdivision of the District.¹² In the Bankura district, firewood was cropped either yearly or at longer intervals from the jungle estates of Maliara, Shahrjora, Kuchiakol, Panchal, Jaipur, Bankadaha, Haspahari, Kania-Mari, Sabrakon, and Harnasra for sale. Large quantities of lac and *tasar* were obtained from the western jungles of the District, the gathering of which would afford occupation to many of the poorer classes, chiefly the Santals and the Bauris.¹³ Manufacture of lac was also an industry of Ilambazar in Birbhum District. The stick lac was brought in from the western jungles by people belonging to lower castes or semi-aboriginal tribes.¹⁴ The best quality lac was gathered from the twigs of the *Kusum* tree. Lac was also produced on the *Sal*, *Palas*, and *Pakur* trees.¹⁵ The principal economic products which were gathered by people living in and around the jungles of Midnapore District were lac, tasar silk, beeswax, *rang*, bark fabrics, a few native drugs, resin, firewood, charcoal, peacock feathers, feathers of Nilkantha bird, and horns of the deer and buffaloes. The marginal people, who would subsist by collecting and trading in jungle products, were the Manjhais, Bhumijis, Santals, Kurmis, and the Lodhas.¹⁶ No extensive jungle tract was there in the Hooghly District. Only a few medicinal drugs were found in the uncultivated bushy tracts which were collected by the Bediyas, a gipsy-like wandering tribe, who subsisted by

trading in these products gathered from the jungles.¹⁷

The Rajshahi Division comprised the Districts of Murshidabad, Dinajpur, Maldah, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Bogra, and Pabna.¹⁸ The location of the *Sal* forest of Mohrapur was under the Palsa Police Station of Murshidabad District. This forest yielded *tasar* silk and beeswax besides timber. Two medicinal drugs, *santamul* and *anantamul* were also found in the forest. The Santals and the Dhangars were the two tribes who earned their livelihood by gathering and trading in these jungle products.¹⁹ The jungles of the Dinajpur District generally produced beeswax and indigenous vegetable drugs like *anantamul* and *satamul*. In the jungles, *Singahar* trees were numerous grown. From the flowers of those trees, a dye was produced.²⁰ Bamboo was the most common useful woody grass in this District. The houses, furniture, boats, and agricultural implements were entirely or partly made from this valuable reed, the annual value of which was estimated to be around 5,00,000 rupees. Cane was another valuable jungle product of the District. Canes of two varieties were found here. The lower classes people of Dinajpur District collected canes from the nearby jungles for making baskets and walking sticks.²¹ No caste or tribe subsisted entirely by collecting and trading in jungle products in the District. The marginal people exerted their extra labour in collecting and selling these products because they could not provide their two meals only through their principal occupations. The major forest products of Rangpur were honey and beeswax which were abundantly found in the south of the District. In the District, there were three honey collecting seasons. Honey and beeswax were gathered by people belonging to the marginal categories as means of their supplementary occupation. Jugis were a class of Hindu caste having a very low social position in the caste hierarchy.²² A segment of the Jugis of Rangpur District would collect a large quantity of shells from the jungles to produce lime by burning for their livelihood.²³ The important forest products of Bogra District were wood from *Somi* trees which was used in the sacrificial fires of the Hindus. The fruits of *Gab* trees whose juice was used to prepare a mortar by mixing it with powdered charcoal and boiling for use as tar to cover the bottoms of boats, cotton from Silk-cotton trees for stuffing quilts, and *haritaki* were sufficiently gathered from the jungles. Among other products, *Gamhar* wood was brought by woodcutter communities and was used for the manufacture of native musical instruments. Several species of Acacia were found in the jungles from which the ingredient of *khader* was accumulated. A red dye was prepared from the permanent calyx of the *dhauphal*, from the roots of the *al*, and the bark of the *lodh*. The colour was fixed with alum. The powder of the *lodh* produced a substitute for the *abir*, a saleable product, which was used in the *Holi* festival of the Hindus. The brown colour was also obtained from the seeds of the Tamarind trees. Beeswax was collected at Panchbibi in the District.²⁴ As a whole, the jungle products in the District of Bogra generated some sort of economic opportunities for the marginal classes to gain their livelihood.

The Districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, and Cooch Bihar fell under Cooch Bihar Division.²⁵ Darjeeling District contained a wonderful variety of trees and shrubs in its forests and jungles across the hills and the *Tarai*. The major forest products found in the Darjeeling hill tracts were rhubarb; Aconitum; *Palmatum*, from the roots of which a deadly poison was extracted; *manjit*, from which a red dye was produced; India-rubber; *pangya*, which was a root with medicinal properties, used to cure patients suffering from fever; *tarulbuk*, an excellent substitute for potatoes having three species found in the Darjeeling hills. They were produced in the hills so abundantly that almost the entire population of the region could subsist on them in the event of famine. The bark of *Deh* plant was an important jungle product from which the Nepalis produced paper. Other important economic products were cardamoms; beeswax; *punya*, a thistle which produced a firm silky fibre to be used in the manufacture of fabrics; *sisnu*, another variety of thistle found in abundance in the hills, used in the production of superior-grade clothes. The forest products of the *Tarai* and plains of the District were lac; *adra* which produced fibrous material for the making of ropes; and *dar haldi*, the roots of which were used for the extraction of red dye.²⁶ The hill tribes collected firewood for their own use from their adjoining jungles. The undergrowth of the forests produced hill bamboos which were most abundantly used for making mats. The Nepalis and the Bhotias gathered poles, timber, and fodder from the forests. In times of scarcity, the larger segment of the hill men, especially the Lepchas, would entirely support themselves on the roots and fruits growing wild in the forests.²⁷ The Nepalis in the hills and the Mechs in the plains were the two communities that were involved in the gathering and trading of jungle products.²⁸ Jalpaiguri contained several extensive and fine forest tracts. The local residents would collect very easily their firewood and timber necessary for making their houses from the nearby jungles. Only a few medicinal drugs and some lac were gathered from these jungles. The Rajbansis and the Mechs collected what little jungle produce was there in the Dwars portion of the District. But that was only a contingent occupation to agriculture.²⁹ Besides timber, the valuable forest produces by Cooch Bihar State were very few. *Makla bansh* was an indigenous species of Cooch Bihar found in the northern area near the Himalayas. Medicinal plants like *satamul*, *anantamul*, *amlaki*, *haritaki*, *baheera*, were found in abundance in the jungles which were gathered by the locals.³⁰ In Kuch Bihar, the Jugis, a weaver caste, confined themselves to the production of lime by burning shells collected by them from the jungles. They also manufactured bracelets made of shells for women.³¹

The Dacca Division was constituted of the Districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Bakarganj, Maimansinh, Sylhet, and Cachar.³² No big forest was there in Dacca District. The wooded land in Madhupur jungle did not produce many valuable products. *Amlaki*, *haritaki*, *baheera*, *dhaniania*, *radhuni*, etc., were the principal jungle products of the District. Some quantity of beeswax was also found in Madhupur jungles. No classes or castes lived by trading in jungle products.³³

There were two tribes belonging to the Mongolian variety of human species - the Koch and the Rajbansi in the northern forests of the District. They lived in the heart and along the borders of the forests of Bhowal, Cossimpore, and Attyah, and throughout the whole tract of the jungle as far as Moodapore. They collected deer's horns from the jungles and sold them in the weekly markets or exchanged them for wines.³⁴ The Sootars, a carpenter caste of the District, were principally engaged in collecting timber from the neighbouring forests for building boats and making ploughs.³⁵ The forests of Bakarganj were located in the southern tracts of the District. They produced many varieties of trees for the abundant supply of timber and firewood. These forest produce were chiefly obtained from the Sundarbans tracts. There were a large number of woodcutters in Bakarganj though they generally combined agriculture with their trade. Bent or cane was collected from the jungles for making baskets. *Partia* was a variety of reed gathered from the jungles from the bark of which fine *sitalpati* mats were manufactured by a class of people known as *Paitiyas*. *Golpatta* or wild cocoa-nut was another important economic product with which houses were thatched.³⁶ The Namasudras (Chandals), living in the southern wastes of Faridpur, Jessore, and Bakarganj Districts, collected reeds from the swampy jungles and carried on the occupation of mat-making and basket-weaving in addition to agriculture, fishing and bird-catching.³⁷ The principal articles of forest produce in Maimansinh District were honey and beeswax. Many of the Garo tribes who lived at the foot of the hills would gain their subsistence by pasturing cattle in the forest or by collecting and trading in jungle products. Others brought down from the hills honey, wax, *pachapat* leaf, cotton, etc., and bartered for rice, salt, tobacco, brass utensils, and dogs for flesh.³⁸ The major jungle products of Sylhet consisted of lac, honey, beeswax, thatching grass, bamboo, and rattan besides timber and firewood. These products were chiefly collected from the jungles by the wild tribes of Tipperahs and Kukis. Many of them gained their subsistence by trading in these jungle products. In Patharia pargana of Sylhet District, a kind of *attar* was extracted from the wood called *agar*. The *agar* was found on the trees called *Pitakara* growing wild in the jungles. The wood was gathered from the jungles and cut into small pieces. The pieces of wood were boiled in water in a copper vessel and from this infusion, the perfume was distilled. This product was despatched to Calcutta for export to Arabia and Turkey.³⁹ *Jarul* timber, rubber, giant size bamboos were the principal forest products of the Cachar District. But, cane or rattan was the most important jungle product. Beeswax was collected in considerable quantities from the jungles. There was no class of people in the District who lived exclusively by collecting and trading in jungle products.⁴⁰ But, the jungle products available in the forests and jungles of the District, created a supplementary occupation for the marginal people.

The Districts which fell under the jurisdiction of the Chittagong Division were Chittagong, Noakhali, Tipperah, Chittagong Hill Tracts, and Hill

Tipperah.⁴¹ The hill forests of Chittagong District consisted of useful timber trees like Jarul, Koroi, Garjan, Gamhar, Jam, Tun, Simul, etc. The maritime swampy jungles produced Sundri, Keora, Ora, Tiyan-baen, and other minor trees.⁴² Besides timber, firewood was gathered from these jungles in abundant volume for sale in the markets. The scattered jungles of the Chittagong District also yielded thatching grass, canes and bamboos. Bulk quantities of reeds and canes were brought from the moist valleys of the hill-ranges. The *Sitalpati* reeds, largely grown in the damp localities of the District, were collected and used in the manufacture of excellent matting.⁴³ The whole of the hilly tracts of Tipperah District was covered with heavy forest. Within the District, jungles sprang up spontaneously. Timber was the most important forest produce. Other forest products were bamboos, canes, reeds, etc. The bet was a natural vegetation which grew all over Hill Tipperah. The rattans were split and made into baskets and wicker works and twisted into cables for boats. In the marshy tracts, reeds grew luxuriantly. The locals gathered reeds from the marshes and made *sitalpati* mat with the grassy plants which they sold in the markets.⁴⁴ Throughout the entire District of Chittagong Hill Tracts, different species of valuable forest-trees were found. Of the timber-trees, the most valuable were the Jarul, Shurusabad, Gamhar, Telsur, etc. People, who went from the plains to the hills to cut timber for their own use or sale, were required to take a pass, but there was no such restriction on the operations of the hill men.⁴⁵ The hillmen cut down forest trees and brought down the timber in the rough or hewn into boats for supply to their buyers. They also gathered other saleable forest produce from the tracts and carried them to the markets where these goods were sold. Oil-bearing seeds of *Chalmongree* trees were an important commercial product from which "Chaulmugra oil" was produced. These seeds were in great demand in Calcutta and were sold for two rupees a *maund* (hill price). A tree yielded about 15 to 20 seers of seeds. Some 300-400 *maunds* of seeds were exported annually. This oil was very useful for skin diseases.⁴⁶ Seeds from *Chalmongree* trees were collected by hill-men for their high demand. They occasionally got ivory and wax which they brought to the markets for sale.⁴⁷ *Garjan* tree was principally known for the oil which was obtained from it. This oil was of considerable commercial importance and largely applied as varnish and for caulking the seams of boats.⁴⁸ Three varieties of *Garjan* tree were found in the hills, viz., Dobe, Kalee, and Rangee. Kalee *Garjan* yielded a good quantity of oil. The oil from the *Garjan* tree was extracted using a hole made in the stem about 3 to 5 feet above the root of the tree and burnt with a few dried leaves every third day. The oil was generally collected during the hot seasons. It was much in demand and sold from 6 to 10 rupees a *maund*. The oil was collected only by the Bengalis, not by the hillmen.⁴⁹ The Kukis gathered and brought India-rubber in the markets.⁵⁰ Different species of rattans were valuable forest products of Chittagong Hill Tracts. *Golack* rattan was used in house-building and as a substitute for rope. *Kerack* rattan, grown especially on the sides of the hills, was used as a substitute for rope and also for making walking sticks. The hillmen ate its

shoots. *Jaiyot* rattan was the best of its kind which was used for every purpose of tying and thatching baskets. The seats of chairs were also made from it. *Bandorah* rattan was used for the same purposes as *Jaiyot* rattan. It was more particularly used by fishermen as an anchor rope for their nets. *Boodoom* rattan was obtained in abundance from the Cox Bazar Sub-Division. It resembled *Golack* rattan and was used principally in tying boats.⁵¹ All varieties of these rattans were gathered by the marginal people of the region either for making saleable articles by them or for direct sale in the markets. Trading in forest products was carried on almost by the entire people of the hill tracts as an auxiliary means of livelihood to that afforded by cultivation.⁵²

The Presidency Division of Bengal comprised the Districts of 24-Parganas, Calcutta, Nadia, and Jessore.⁵³ The Sundarbans had a length of around 165 miles along the sea face of the Bay of Bengal from the Hooghly to the Meghna. They were bounded on the north by the lands of the Districts of 24-Parganas, Jessore, and Bakarganj.⁵⁴ The forests of the Sundarbans grew many varieties of timber. The principal timber trees among them were Sundri, Pasur, Keora, Kirpa, Garan, Jin, Oriya-Am, Geoa, etc.⁵⁵ Woodcutting and supply of timber of the Sundarbans to the merchants were a source of livelihood for a considerable number of people living to the north of the Sundarbans. They were usually engaged upon contracts by wholesale wood merchants with advances to them. The season of the woodcutters began when the rainy season had ceased. A body of them having ten or fifteen men started their expedition for the Sundarbans in a country ship with provisions for four months or so and went far south near the sea. They anchored their ship at a favourable location where they set up their headquarters. Every morning, they left their ship in a body, worked all day, and returned to their ship at night. The woodcutters were very superstitious and believed in the existence of forest spirits. None of them would enter the jungle to collect timber unless accompanied by a *fakir* who was supposed to have the power to save them from the attacks of the tigers and other wild animals. Their expeditions were aimed at gathering larger kinds of wood suitable for posts, furniture, boat building, etc. The occasional woodcutters who were cultivators living within the Sundarban limits procured smaller timber to be used as firewood. The demand for timber and firewood was so great that the cultivators would exploit their spare time, and go down to the Sundarbans forest in country boats, cut a cargo of wood, and bring it up for sale. Sundri timber was excellent quality of hardwood suitable for beams, posts, buggy shafts, paddles, flooring planks, native furniture, and boat building. The greater number of boats used in the Sundarbans, and the Northern Districts of the 24-Parganas, Jessore, and Bakarganj, were made either entirely or partly of *Sundri* wood on account of its durability in salt water. So, the demand for *Sundri* timber was always high. Because of that, the major wood which was gathered from the forest was Sundri timber. All woodcutting parties in the Sundarbans always consisted of some members of the Bhawali, or regular woodcutting

caste.⁵⁶ The other classes who engaged themselves in woodcutting and collecting economic products in the Sundarbans were the lower orders of the Muslims and the Poundras (Pods), Bagdis, Kaoras, Tiors, Namasudras (Chandals), Mahishyas (Kaibarttas), and Kapalis among the Hindus. In addition to cultivation and fishing, these classes employed their spare time in felling timber in the forest.⁵⁷ Honey and wax from wild bees' combs were also gathered by them from the forests mainly in April and May, and were despatched to Calcutta. The taste of the honey varied with the varieties of flowers from which it was gathered. Shells of two species of molluscs known locally as *jhongra* and *jhinuk* were collected from the Sundarbans and brought up to Khulna where lime was produced by burning them.⁵⁸ The Sundarbans forests supplied huge quantities of forest produce year after year to Khulna District (formed in 1882 out of Khulna and Bagerhat subdivisions of Jessore District and Satkhira subdivision of 24-Parganas District) and the adjoining Districts of 24-Parganas, Jessore and Bakarganj. Besides timber, *golpatta*, *Garan* posts and firewood were procured from the forests which had a great demand in Calcutta.⁵⁹ Reeds were a kind of jungle product which were abundantly grown in the Sundarbans and were extensively used for making mats and baskets. The mat-makers, Naluas by caste, usually would not dwell within the Sundarbans. They undertook several trips southwards in the forest in cold weather and returned with a large quantity of reeds which when dried, were woven into mats at their own houses. The Sundarban reeds were also used for basket-weaving. Both the mat-makers and basket weavers dwelt just beyond the Sundarbans. During cold weather, the basket-weavers migrated to some towns in the Sundarbans and remained there weaving baskets with reeds collected from the jungles which they readily sold as they were required for rice harvesting. At the end of the cold weather, they returned to their villages with a large stock of reeds with which they manufactured baskets in their own houses and sold locally.⁶⁰ Canes were another Sundarbans produce which grew indigenously in the virgin forest.⁶¹ Different species of canes were also collected abundantly from the Sundarbans. The classes of people principally engaged in the trading of jungle products of the Sundarbans were the low-caste Maules, Bagdis, Mahishyas (Kaibarttas), Poundras (Pods), Namasudras (Chandals), Kaoras, Karangas, and the poorer class of Musalmans.⁶²

Conclusion

The natural environment of Bengal has been congenial for the growth of normal vegetation from time immemorial. Fertile soil, moderate temperature and sufficient rainfall produced natural forests, jungles and bushes in different parts of the province. These forests and jungles, having different sizes and features, were stretched almost in all the administrative divisions of Burdwan, Presidency, Rajshahi, Cooch Bihar, Dacca, and Chittagong. They

were not only the habitats of the various species of wild animals but also were the source of valuable economic products like timber, firewood, honey, beeswax, canes, lac, *tasar* silk, *Garjan* oil, medicinal herbs and fruits, etc., which were very useful for mankind. The marginal communities of Bengal have always been economically exploited by the native *zamindars* and were deprived of their basic human rights. The Bhadrakalok classes also possessed a strong aversion toward them. That is why the marginal classes were compelled to live in the swamps, riverine *chars*, sterile lands, jungles, and remote hilly areas away from them. They have hardly received any state support for the improvement of their economic life. They always had to adopt hard-working occupations like agriculture, construction works, carrying of loads, etc., for their livelihood. The vast majority of these wealth-producing marginal people of Bengal were engaged in the occupation of cultivation of land in the nineteenth century. Others were construction workers, fishermen, boatmen, manual labourers, artisans, craftsmen, etc. Among the lower order of them, a considerable number of people earned their livelihood by way of gathering economic products from the forests and jungles and selling these products in the markets. These marginal men belonging to different groups included the Santals, Bauris, Manjhis, Bhumijis, Kurmis, Lodhas, Bediyas, Santals, Dhangars, Jugis, Rajbansis, Mechs, Kochs, Garos, Tipperahs, Kukis, Chakmas, Poundras (Pods), Bagdis, Kaoras, Tiors, Namasudras (Chandals), Mahishyas (Kaibarttas), Kapalis, Bhawalis, Naluas, Maules, Karangas, and other lower classes comprising both the Hindus and the Muslims. The majority of these classes engaged themselves in the collection and trading of the forest and jungle products as their part-time occupation together with their principal occupations in nineteenth-century Bengal.

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