

# **Policing the Police: Salt Monopoly and the Colonial Rule of Law in Orissa**

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## **Abstract**

The system of salt monopoly was introduced by Marquis Cornwallis in the year 1790 for the improvement revenue of the East India Company. The manufacture was carried on under the strict supervision of European agents. The principal salt agencies were Cuttack, Balasore etc. Salt became the subject of strict government control both in the manufacture and sale in Bengal. In the early nineteenth century, the British East India Company monopolised the salt production of in Orissa. By 1860s the external political and economic forces devastated indigenous salt industry and its workers and sought to create a new market for English salt in India. This necessitated a series of institutional reforms by the colonial government. The legal machinery formed the fulcrum of the colonial administration to enforce the salt monopoly. Salt, its manufacturing site and its markets became public properties and the indigenous power centres were deprived of their landed and commercial interests of privileges and authority over it.

**Keywords:** Colonial State, Monopoly, Rule of Law, exploitation, and Subjugation

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The geographical location of Orissa is blessed with a considerable coastline which was famous for salt manufacturing historically. Andrew Stirling reported that the finest salt in the whole of India was produced in the "wild inhospitable tract". Before 1803, it was a private enterprise controlled by the coastal chiefs and Zamindars. The salt manufacturers of Orissa were under the Zamindars whose estates bordered the coast. After the introduction of the salt monopoly they were forced to surrender their salt and fuel lands to the Government and abandon all rights to manufacture salt. The Government agreed to pay them an allowance to compensate the loss. This allowance was known as Moshaira. Besides Moshaira, a diet allowance called Koraki comprising a certain quantity of salt was granted in 1811 for the loss of privilege of manufacturing salt on their own account.

The Regulation of May 1804 introduced salt monopoly and brought it under exclusive colonial control for the purpose of public revenue. As a result salt making developed as an important industry in the beginning of nineteenth century along the eastern coast of India. In the early years of British rule the salt was made by men hired by the government, and large staffs of highly paid officials was maintained to supervise the work. The salt makers called Malangis were hired by the Government for salt making and were paid a very low rate of wage.

The private manufacturing was forbidden and made punishable under law. A tax of 12 Annas for Maund was also imposed on the sale of the commodity. The regulation XXII established complete monopoly over the manufacture and sale of salt in Orissa. The salt industry was oriented towards profit earning disregarding the welfare of the salt makers and the concern of the ordinary people. Only 6 Annas were paid for making one Maund salt while the government duty from the same was as high as 3-4 Annas in 1860. The Board of Revenue observed in 1860 that the rise in food prices and the insufficient remuneration of the Malangis from the manufacturers was the reason behind salt smuggling by the Malangis. The rate was increased from 6 annas to 8 annas in 1860. The increasing prices of the salt hit hard the ordinary people. Geroge Plowden who enquired into the case of the salt manufacturers of Bengal Presidency in 1853 stated : "A tax of 500% appears to me a very high tax to impose upon any one article of consumption, when the article in question was comparatively very dear in the territory to which the tax applies". In 1854, Plowden recommended the gradual abandonment of salt monopoly and the introduction of the manufacture under the excise system. After the abolition of salt monopoly the government decided to discontinue such allowances of the Zamindars. The Zamindars challenged the Govt. decision in a petition of 12th March 1863. The Board of Revenue observed that the lands have been

restored to them and they are free to manufacture their salt. It restored their earlier rights and privileges. The Government of Bengal also did not find any reason to pay compensation to the Zamindars. The Board of Revenue observed that "there was nothing in the agreement made with them to prevent the Government, at any time that it pleased, withdrawing from their lands."

By 1860 the salt trade had underwent several changes and facing challenges from the Liverpool salt. Upto 1860 it was the local salt which was consumed in Orissa and the foreign salt was despised largely due to a prejudice among the Oriyas that the foreign salt was impure and unfit for use in the land of God. This prejudice was overcome and foreign salt was freely sold throughout Orissa by 1860 largely due to its cheapness. The indigenous salt could not compete with the cheap Liverpool salt. The British govt. was convinced to abolish the salt monopoly and it was left to a private enterprise under a system of excise. The Government issued a set of rules to regulate the salt manufacturing to the private capitalists. The manufacturers agreed to pay a fixed amount of revenue to the government for every Maund manufactured.

The discontinuance of the Government manufacture exposed the Malangis to disadvantages that deprived them of their means of livelihood. However the indigenous salt could not compete with the imported salt in its quality and prices. S.C. Agarwal, the salt commissioner of the Govt. of India remarked: "the abolition of salt monopoly virtually led to the extinction of the Salt industry. Fraud and speculation was rife and smuggling on a large scale was winked at by the numerous and badly watched native subordinates. The Salt Agent and his army of Daroghas were abolished and the Collector had the salt department under his control. Government gave up making salt in its own account, and private persons were invited to engage in the manufacture. Enterprising merchants, contractors and others possessing a little capital embarked in this venture designated as contractor applied for permission to make salt there. The state exercised its control over the contractor by making him to deposit a sum of money with the collector to meet the pay of a small guard of police and a pass officer and weigh men. Thus the government indirectly exercised its sovereignty by posing itself as the possessor of law and order and entrusting its own sense of security over the contractors.

Raja Rammohan Roy says: As salt has by long habit become an absolute necessary of life, the poorest peasants are ready to surrender everything else, in order to procure a small proportion of this article; the dearth of the salt is felt by the whole community and the people in general are therefore obliged to make use of a bad quality; and few comparatively are able to incur the expense of procuring it in a purer form. Lieut. Colonel Colebrooke in a letter to the Right Honourable E.G. Stanley dated 20th November, 1833, states the high price of Salt throughout India is not only the occasion of much distressing privation to the inhabitants, but it has led to great adulteration; the Salt retailed being often a mixture of earth and other impurities. The Committee recommended to the Court of Directors to abolish this system to fulfil their humane intentions and do justice to the people of India.

### **Policing the Police: the Salt Arangs as Penal Settlement**

The men who do the work of salt making belonged to a special caste, called in Orissa- Mallangis, in Bengal- Nunias. The salt enclosures were called Arangs. Every step in the manufacture and sale of salt is surrounded with the minutest precautions on the part of Government and there is a distinct and separate kind of fraud practised at each stage. The area of Arang was extensive covering tall coarse grass and scrub. The narrow, winding footpaths on which only one man can go are known only to the Mallangis. The staff of police put to guard Arangs consisted usually of only four men and Head Constable. The work is unpopular because of the unhealthiness of the place and the difficulty of procuring provisions. Consequently only the worst men in the force were sent there and the salt Arangs are used as a penal settlement. A policeman who does anything wrong is sent to a salt Arang as a punishment.

The salt manufacturing sites made both the salt makers and as well as the official machinery guarding the production sites vulnerable. They were prone to floods, tidal waves, cyclones, inundations and the constant changes in the river course falling into Bay of Bengal. Further they were also prone to various diseases and wild animals. One of the inundations in the year 1834 destroyed some thousands of families and swept away the labour of many months. Considering the unhealthiness of the occupation, it is hard to believe that the sole reason for the Malangis to join the occupation was the advance wage payment, rather it was the illicit trafficking of the salt which gave them an opportunity to generate extra income.

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### **Salt Smuggling**

The Company made all attempts to restrict production so as ensure shortages in supply to increase the price of the salt. Each Salt Agent were instructed to keep their agencies supply level well below its actual capacity. Constant cutbacks in production therefore reduced the income of Malngis. This provided a strong impetus to make illegal salt to recoup losses and led to salt smuggling. To tackle the illegal salt production the Salt Agents tried to use a surveillance system. This surveillance system was composed of networks of native officers and informers know as *Goindas* to control the illicit activities of the Malangis. As the Board of Customs, Salt and Opium stated in 1822, the prevention of illicit traffic in the salt districts “can be accomplished by granting to the Malangis an enhanced price for the salt which they may deliver in excess of their respective *taidads*.”

## **II. LITERARY REFERENCE**

The short story Punar Musiko Bhava written by Fakirmohan Senapati tells the story of an untouchable Kinarama Simha. He was appointed as a constable in the salt police and was handsomely paid by the villagers in return of illegal manufacturing of salt. After an abortive trial of one of the villagers who taking advantage of the constable’s inexperience, got acquitted on perjured evidence, the constable allowed himself to become part of a conspiracy whereby each month one willing Dama was arrested and imprisoned for illicit salt manufacture on evidence fabricated by the villagers. Kinaram’s luxurious reign eventually ended when the Government got wind of these fabricated cases and sent plain clothes police to investigate. It ends in the arrest and punishment of a criminal Kinarama Simha. But the villagers who were technically criminals escape scot free. Fakirmohana considered the salt laws unjust. It was wrong on the part of the Government to abandon the production of salt locally and to insist on the consumption of European salt when people’s incomes were insufficient to allow them to purchase it. His position was perhaps that of most people who consider that the law must accord with public opinion otherwise these laws will be flouted and this will engender contempt for the law as a whole and a readiness on the part of the general public to indulge in corruption. Obviously the whole population of Balasore considered the salt laws unjust and frankly flouted them. However in the scheme of values that Fakirmohana is describing Kinarama’s social crime. The self- importance of a petty untouchable is the really serious crime in Punar Musiko Bhava and is punished both legally by imprisonment and socially by his fellow caste members.

### **Working Condition of Malangis**

A select committee appointed in 1836 to inquire about the working condition of the Malangis. But in reality it was a confrontation between the supporters of monopoly system and the supporters of the free trade system. While the free trade supporters insisted that the Malangis were “the most wretched human beings” and their conditions were “in the state of slavery” because they were coerced into labour. The East India Company, the protector of the monopoly system however argued that the Malangis are in better condition in comparison to other cultivators since salt manufacturing provided them with extra income in addition to cultivation. Further the colonial laws and regulations protected them from extortion under Regulation 10 of 1819.

Salt Agents were appointed by the Board of Revenue to manage their respective agencies. These Agents were to contract the Malangis, pay advances to them, supervise the entire production sites, the storage of the salt in Company warehouses and its delivery to merchants. They were also required to look out for illegal production and smuggling of salt. A chain of native officers were appointed to enable the Salt Agent to manage these entire ranges of economic activities. By establishing direct control over production the British was able to remove the customary intermediaries such as the Zamindars, merchants etc. Malangis were responsible for producing a fixed amount of salt according to their respective *taidads* and deliver to the Salt Agent. The Salt Agents were responsible for producing the authorized annual quota. Weather conditions such as flood, storm etc. often caused production failures. The Salt Agents were also expected to take relief measures whenever the Malangis suffered from natural disasters. They were also suffering from various contagious diseases such as cholera, malaria etc. the Salt Agents were also to look at that the Malangis spent the advance amount exclusively on salt production and should not pocket a portion of it.

## **III. CONCLUSION**

The traditional industry of salt along Orissa's coast witnessed the control over salt under colonialism. This was a major resource and salt monopoly was extended to coastal Orissa from 1814, and by the 1840s the East India Company made nearly Rs. 18 lakhs annually by introducing the monopoly system. This meant unemployment for those who were associated with this indigenous manufacturing of salt. Justice was at crossroads in the manufacture and sale of soil. The whole system revolves around the sub monopoly or

combination of salt dealers who attend public sales and afterwards distribute their salt purchases at an advanced price throughout the country. This was death knell to the poorer sections that were unable to afford this basic commodity. On the other hand it gave rise to different types of crimes in society and the colonial Rule of Law was moulded and remoulded from time to time to deal with these law and order problems. Largely it benefited the privileged and the rich and exploited the common and poorer sections of the society.

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