

Colonial Impact on the Liquor Business in South West Bengal

Quazi Aktar Ali

Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of History, Vidyasagar University

Abstract:

East India Company as a commercial organisation became the full-phase state by acquiring power gradually in the second half of the 18th century. They gained different forms of power in different periods to control and regulate the affairs of certain areas. In that period the company intended to dominate its supremacy through reformatations. It affected the society, economy and politics of Bengal of that period. I have tried to point out in my discussion work how it affected in alcohol trade in Tamluk, Hijli, Burdwan and its adjoining areas.

Keywords; *Abkari, Arrac, Bhadrals. Elite Muslims.*

Introduction: A new type of competition was emerged when the colonial administration started in South West Bengal as well as entire Bengal. People of a particular caste were in the liquor business. But it brought a radical change in this business. The Community of Bengali *Bhadralok* entered in this profitable business. In the same way the indigenous people belonged to the higher caste also got engaged in this liquor business. These people were not traditional liquor traders. The people who consumed the liquor had no preference on any particular kind of special brand. At that time the liquor with different rates were noticeable. It led the liquor in variety of price. As a result the price for the liquor rose up. So between the Govt. and the traders there grew the relation of enmity as well as intimacy. There were two factors behind it – maintaining law and order and collection of duties.

East India Company as a commercial organisation became the full-phase state by acquiring power gradually in the second half of the 18th century. They gained different forms of power in different periods to control and regulate the affairs of certain areas. In that period the company intended to dominate its supremacy through reformatations. It affected the society, economy and politics of Bengal of that period. I have tried to point out in my discussion

how it affected in alcohol trade especially in Tamluk, Hijli, Burdwan and its adjoining areas.

Since late eighteenth century, public consumption of alcohol gradually increased in Tamluk, Hijli and Burdwan areas. Liquor business developed to take advantage of this emerging market. The existence of different kinds of alcohol was known at that time. Those were like country spirit, Bengalee rum or liquor by European method and imported liquor of various brands. Of these toddy was also one of that kind. It was especially for the consumption of lower classes. Other than these mahua, pachwari or home brewed rice – beer preferred in tribal areas as those were cheap. There were various categories of vendors.

Till late eighteenth century liquor business (both manufacture and sale) following the pre colonial customs and Hindu law and usage, was confined to a particular low caste (Suri). The traditional castes like Shaws, Bearer, Suri were engaged in liquor business.¹

In the past we see that the Bengalee people of gentleman class, known as '*bhadralok*' were not accustomed to drinking of alcohol because it was irreligious to them as the scripture did not approve the matter of drinking alcohol. In a word it can be said that as an important characteristic drinking wine was not fit for the Bengalee culture. But it is not so that in the pre- colonial period the Bengalee did not

¹ Board of Revenue 29th October 1790.

consume any type of wine. From the literature of ancient and medieval periods we come to know about the consumption of alcohol. But before the pre-colonial period in the Mughal regime wine was produced with local elements in indigenous process. Persian word 'abkar' and Arabic word 'arrac' highlight the existence of alcohol in entire Bengal in the pre-colonial period.²

Islam Khan, the Subadar of Bengal(1608-13) banned the drinking of alcohol strictly in the court for the officials.³ Even Aurangzeb made conscious his grandson Azim-us-Sun of the bad effect of taking alcohol.⁴ In the late eighteenth century the members of the ruling families got themselves engaged in preparing wine and its retail selling in entire Bengal. As an example, Mubarak ud-Daula can be mentioned in this respect and his family in particular dealt widely in toddy and 'spirituous' liquors.⁵ Among the Hindu rulers Raja Krishna Chandra, too consumed wine in different festivals like Durga puja in the middle of the eighteenth century.⁶

From various sources we have come to know the Bengalee elite class of people were addicted to taking wine and it was due to the proximity with the rulers. The general people of South West Bengal as well as entire Bengal were not in capability of taking wine.⁷ In the elite Muslims families consuming of 'spirituous' liquor was more or less common. But the general Muslims abstained from taking alcohol, especially in public places as the holy Quran did not approve it.⁸

The people with lower caste had a wide a strong desire in taking alcohol. To them alcohol was a common affair. In this respect Kalu Dom and other Doms can be cited for their habit of taking wine as reflected in the Dharmamongal. It can be known towards the end of the eighteenth century that the community of Suri

were engaged in preparing and selling wine according to the pre-colonial tradition.⁹

In this context it is reproached that 'the nineteenth century myth that was alien culture that had come to Bengal with the advent of the colonial rule'. But it was denied. Like other societies, the Bengalees have a long history of their own. The social norms and practices included both sanctioned against and permission to alcoholism. Drinking was popular as elite, popular and religious culture in the pre-colonial period.

In the colonial regime new elements were introduced. It brought a radical change in society and culture and also influenced in taking the habit of wine. Control over superstitions, free atmosphere of urban areas, brought independence in the society. It challenged the traditional social system. The *taste of the bhadrolok* was refined by the Victorian notions of purity and propriety. They moved towards certain common standards of behaviour and cultural norms that rejected alcoholism. Thus, in spite of being dominated by a powerful colonial culture, tensions and conflicts regarding alcoholism had surfaced in indigenous cultural domain.

Considering the importance of interaction of both colonialism and modernity with alcoholism in the nineteenth century, the *bhadrolok-concern* temperance can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives. The *bhadraloks'* fight against alcoholism was very rare. They differed in their views on various issues related to the problems of compatibility. Until the rise of the radicals in the 1830s, the *bhadraloks* used to believe in moderate drinking. Suddenly, they found that the barriers between controlled and uncontrolled drinking habits were overcome by excessive radicals. This was a danger signal not only to the conservative societies, but also to a section of western educators. Disputes over the adoption

² Sur Raktim, A History of liquor; Response and Resistance in Bengal(1790-1906) Ph.D Thesis, Jadavpur University, 2015, p 17

³ Ibid, p, 21

⁴ Ibid

⁵ WBSA-Revenue Department of Sayer, O.C, 31 December 1790. Also see Rajat Dutta, Society Economy

and Markets, Commercialization in Rural Bengal c.1760-1800. Delhi ; Monohar.

⁶ Dewan Kartikeyachandra Rayer Atmajivancharit, first published 1303BS(reprint edited by Mohit Roy, Calcutta,1990)P. 83

⁷ Sur Raktim ,op. cit, p22

⁸ Sur Raktim ,op. cit, p.24

⁹ Ibid.

of western practices by the youth had spread among the western educated elite. It seems that under the influence of the Victorian culture, they changed their position in the mid-nineteenth century, and many of them followed the steps the English reformers. They identified the contradiction between the true western culture and exclusionary policies adopted by the colonial authorities.

The native government of that time received a tax and then showed no more interest in either manufacture or sale or consumption of liquor. Neither was there any pressure on the people who held the license to increase consumption. The buying and management of the farms were more or less hereditary occupation Such as an account exhibiting the number of still as also distillers name of abode in Hidgelee Division;¹⁰

Pergunnah	Distillers Name	Place of abode	Number of Still
Keuhramahal	Kinu Bahur	Gopinathpore	1
„	Rushe Bahur	„	1
„	Puchoo Bahur	„	1
„	Chitum Chaukee	„	1
„	Ochul Bahur	„	1
Bougrai	Gokul Bahur	Bullapureah	1
„	Pasun (Sic)	„	1
„	Hury Bahur	Naulgureah	1
„	Keerpaul Bahur	„	1
Jallamootah	Monicharan Mondal	Bagwan pore	1
Magnamootah	Nage Majinah	Kircolee	1
„	Mandan(Sic)	„	1
„	Purusstum Bahur	Kooarpore	1
„	Kartik Bahur	„	1
„	Sonadur Patir(Sic)	„	1
„	Boogum Kutuah	„	1
„	Boistam Bahur	„	1
„	Damu Bearer	Bollugauter	1
„	Sadhu Pauter	„	1
Doroodamnaun	Bridaban Suree	Cookrahaty	1
Sujamootah	Panchuram Bahurer	Raddhapore	1
„	Bikraram Bahurer	Raddah pore	1
Chakla jallasore			
Beercool	Sagar Bahurer	Pooterpore	1
„	Hotoo Bahurer	Pantahchannah	1
„	Aerjune Bahurer	Comarpore	1
Mergodha	Collindee Bahrer	Jagadish pore	1
„	Ottoo Bahrer	Duallu	1
„	Bhum Bahrer	Sildah	1
Cakrachour	Kanu Bahrer	--	1
„	Gour Bahrer	--	1

The Company's government disliked the former system as it provided an opportunity for widespread evasion of revenue. However taking over the administration, the company

gained responsibility for the taxes that governed the production and sale of spirituous liquor. Company developed a series of regulation to

¹⁰ Comptroller of Salt and Collector of Salt District
Copies of Correspondence statement... Tamluk, Hijli and
Mysadal, 1792-1793, Vol. 3, P.9

govern distilling and vending spirituous liquors.

The stiff competition among the retail and wholesale dealers for obtaining licenses to open shops was revealed from the petition of Satkari Suri, a whole sale liquor vendor of Bara Bazar in Burdawan town.¹¹ The area was very much lucrative to liquor sellers for quite a long time. In 1812, Kamal and Radha Krishna Saha proposed to the Collector of Burdwan to pay a daily tax above the 'jama' for vending sprits in that area as a retailer.¹² The Licenses were obtained through auction. The former holder of the shop was given the advantage of taking the shop at the sum offered by the highest bidder. He was not required to bid more than the highest of new competitors. However, it was ensured that the government would not incur any loss by this concession the present 'abkari'. The old vendor often tried to prevent the new vendors from occupying the shop if they failed in auction.

License was granted to the distiller for distilling and vending spirituous liquors and

was to be parted on the still in the presence of the Sikdar of the pergunnah. That for the license distiller paid to the Government, an annual tax of 2 sicca rupees on each still that he might work. If distiller used his license for extra still then he would have to pay 25 sicca. And if he moved the still from one house to another in an unlawful manner, he would have to pay extra compensation according to the above rule.¹³

The distiller might vend his liquors either at his own distillery in retail or by wholesale to the consumers. But they had to offer a monthly return to the Sikdar of the pergunnah, of the quantity sold, rate of sale, and if in wholesale the name of the purchaser and place of his abode. That if distiller were proved to mark a false return either in quantity sold or rate of sale, he would have to pay 5 sicca as penalty. All the persons were forbidden in distilling any spirituous liquor. But who had taken out license under the penalty of 50 sicca rupees for each still, could clandestinely work.¹⁴

Statement of the quantity of the spirituous liquors manufactured in the Tamluk Division;¹⁵

Pergunnah	Name of the people who make liquors	Number of Jouis manufactured monthly	Total Quantity Manufacture monthly	Total Sayer
Mysadal	Jaganath Sahaw	1	32	0.6.0
„	Gyaram „	1	32	0.6.0
„	Kiparam „	1	32	0.6.0
Teraporreah	Pachu Sahau	1	32	0.4.0
„	Kalicharan Sahau	1	32	0.4.0
Kassimnagar	Ratan Sahaw	1	32	0.3.0
„	Rogonath „	1	32	0.3.0
„	Seebram „	1	32	0.3.0
„	Bikram „	1	32	0.3.0
„	Morelli „	1	32	0.0.0
Aurangnagar	Santiram „	1	32	0.0.0
„	Kundoo „	1	32	0.6.0
Gumgar	Teeroo Bearer	1	20	0.6.0

¹¹ Board of Revenue, 22 July 1853, proceedings no.41

¹² Board of Revenue (Misc. Proceedings) no. 6, 24 April 1812.

¹³ Comptroller of Salt and Collector of Salt District Copies of Correspondence statement... Tamluk, Hijli and Mysadal, 1792-1793, Vol. 3, P 10-11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Comptroller of Salt and Collector of Salt District Copies of Correspondence statement... Tamluk, Hijli and Mysadal, 1792-1793, Vol. 3, p 14.

„	Kinoo Bearer	1	20	0.6.0
„	Mocooren „	1	20	0.6.0
„	Busnab „	1	20	0.6.0
„	Rassu „	1	20	0.6.0
Tamluk	Tilak Suree	1	32	0.4.0
„	Diaram „	1	32	0.4.0
„	Suberam „	1	32	0.4.0
„	Niranjan „	1	32	0.4.0
„	Chytan „	1	32	0.4.0
„	Kisnoi „	1	32	0.4.0
„	Roopai „	1	32	0.4.0
„	Basnab „	1	32	0.4.0

There was competition in other sector, too. This competition was between the manufacturers of the country spirit and rum distillers on the one hand and the vendors of the local manufactures and imported liquor other hand. The European rum being heavily taxed, demanded certain privileges from the government. They thought that the native producers of spirits were unduly privileges. This had shut out the markets for selling rum and that is why the distillers compelled to close their distilleries. The distillers opined that the entire exclusion of rum from the markets for local consumption resulted in stimulating the production doasta of inferior and unwholesome quality. C.H. Blake, the owner of Dhoban distillery, Burdwan, complained that the native distillers, who manufactured the liquor according to the European method near Calcutta, performed fermentation of unwholesome spirit to increase quality. They used to pay a tax of six annas per gallon. This had made him more incompetent than the native distillers, as he had to pay a tax of eight annas per gallon. The Abkari Commissioner explained that six annas per gallon was the manufacturer's tax while effecting retail or wholesale, a further duty was required to pay. The rates of still head duty and additional duty were different in various districts to protect local sale.¹⁶

The inconstancy was purely run because of the increase or decrease in price of rum compared to country spirits and imported brandy. The taste of people in entire Bengal was not same. During mid- 1860s, people preferred country spirits rather to rum in Calcutta. At that period in Burdwan, Birbhum and Hooghly consumption in country spirits decreased, but it was counterbalanced by increased consumption of rum, and pachwai.¹⁷ When people in Calcutta preferred rum, in 24 Paraganas, Dacca, Midnapore and Hooghly preference was shown to the country liquor.¹⁸

In the early nineteenth century, consumption of foreign liquor was confined to the higher class because of its limited supply and high price. There was a general increase of revenue from imported wines and spirits throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in Calcutta and its suburbs, due to a steady demand among the Europeans and upper section of 'bhadraloks' especially of urban areas. Advertisements of foreign liquor were found in the elite newspapers like, *The Statesman*.¹⁹ Initially, champagne, and brandy were most preferable drink.

The natives and the colonial authority differed in their opinion regarding quality of different types of liquors. It was a common belief of the colonial rulers that arrack (native

¹⁶ Board of Customs, Salt and Opium 14th April 1838.

¹⁷ WBSA, Financial Proceedings No. 38 March 1870, Financial Department (Excise) Government of Bengal.

¹⁸ WBSA, Financial Proceedings No. 4-8, November 1879, Financial Department (Excise) Government of Bengal.

¹⁹ Biswanath Joardar, *Purano Kolkatar Annya Sanskriti*, New Delhi, 2009, P-328.

liquor) was the most deleterious to the health of the European soldiers, while Akshay Kumar Dutta wrote that rum was more harmful than arrack.²⁰ In general, Native-European discrimination was very much present in recommendations of European officers. Health Officer C Fabre-Tonnerre recommended that no native drink should be allowed in punch houses, boarding houses and hotels frequented by Europeans. All native retail liquor vendors should be restricted to sale to the natives only. They should be severely punished if they would sell liquor to the Europeans.²¹

Conclusion: The abkars and vendors took recourse to unlawful practices to maximize their profit. They were accused of fraud. Shops remained open throughout the night with the knowledge and concurrence of police subordinates. They sold liquors contrary to the articles contained in their licenses. They often violated the sunset rule and sold liquor beyond the fixed hour not only to the public but also to the European soldiers.²²

A new type of competition was emerged when the colonial administration started in South West Bengal as well as entire Bengal. People of a particular caste were in the liquor business. But it brought a radical change in this business. The Community of Bengali *Bhadralok* entered in this profitable business. In the same way the indigenous people,ss belonged to the higher caste also got engaged in this liquor business. These people were not traditional liquor traders. The people who consumed the liquor had no preference on any particular kind of special brand. At that time the liquor with different rates were noticeable. It

led the liquor in variety of price. As a result the price for the liquor rose up. So between the Govt. and the traders there grew the relation of enmity as well as intimacy. There were two factors behind it – maintaining law and order and collection

Bibliography

Primary Sources;

1. WBSA, Board of Revenue.
2. WBSA-Revenue Department of Sayer.
3. Comptroller of Salt and Collector of Salt District Copies of Correspondence statement... Tamluk, Hijli and Mysadal, 1792-1793.
4. Board of Revenue (Misc. Proceedings) no. 6
5. Board of Customs, Salt and opium.
6. WBSA, Financial Proceedings.

Ph.D thesis:

1. Raktim Sur, A History of liquor; Response and Resistance in Bengal(1790-1906) Ph.D Thesis, Jadavpur University, 2015

Secondary Source;

1. Rajat Dutta, Society Economy and Markets, Commercialization in Rural Bengal c.1760-1800. Delhi ; Monohar.
2. Biswanath Joardar, Purano Kolkatar Annya Sanskriti, New Delhi, 2009, P-328.
3. Akshay kumar Dutta, Bahjya bastur sahit manab – prakritir sambandha – Bichar, Calcutta, 1922, P.186.
4. Mohit Roy edited Dewan Karttikeya chandra Rayer Atmajivancharit, first published 1303Bs(reprint, Calcutta,1990)

²⁰ Akshay kumar Dutta, Bahjya bastur sahit manab – prakritir sambandha – Bichar, Calcutta, 1922, P.186

²¹ WBSA, Revenue Proceedings No. 20 March 1864, Mise Revenue (Excise) Government of Bengal.

²² WBSA, Board Of Revenue, Mise Proceedings , No 35, 25 September 1828.