

# Indian Saltpeter: An Epistemic Enquiry

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to enquire into the location and positioning of Indian populace involved with Saltpeter procurement and how the commercial article became a material metaphor of the eighteenth-century Indian landscape. The conflict between the English East India Company and the ruling class in the eastern plains centred around the procurement and control over Indian saltpeter production. This essay traces the British interest in Indian saltpeter and the evolving trajectories of the political economy throughout the early years of colonial expansion in India. In doing so it would attempt to delve into the conflict and engagement that arose between the saltpeter manufacturers and the capitalist empire and locate the colonial discourse on Indian saltpeter.

**Keywords:** *Saltpeter, colonialism, commodity, anti-commodity, Kharee namak, resource, empire.*

## The British and the Indian Saltpeter

The discourse on Indian saltpeter has identified it as one of the most prized commodities for the British empire. Saltpeter production within the Indian subcontinent, especially in the eastern region has been understood solely in terms of its utilities for the British capitalist enterprise, favouring gunpowder manufacture. The foundation of such modern historical narrative, as this paper would outline has its origin in the Imperial epistemic exercise, that emerged since the second half of the eighteenth century with reference to Indian saltpeter. The narrative which this paper seeks to re-read, are the official British accounts that constructed knowledge about the Subcontinent for the British colonial administration since the second half of eighteenth century. These accounts, documented for governmental purpose and commissioned by the state, envisioned the subcontinental society and its resource production as fodder for the British empire both in Europe and the Indian subcontinent. These narratives determinedly suppressed the norms and praxis of saltpetre production in

the indigenous society and its variegated usages. As saltpeter in its refined form was directly related to political and economic interest of the British state and its colonial administration in the subcontinent, the tendency of these accounts revolved around the spectrum of refined saltpetre, against its 'unrefined' one. The 'unrefined' saltpetre was a widely used indigenous agricultural manure (regarded ineffectual for gunpowder manufacturing by the colonial state owing to its low carbon content). However, in the official doctrine, including that of the administrative correspondences, the existence and use of the unrefined *petre* salt was systematically quoted as 'illegal material'. This process of extraction was mainly practiced by the local community, transgressing the colonial legal framework. The binary of the 'refined' against the 'unrefined' was systematically invented in the narratives aimed at regulating the customs of indigenous community as per the new political-economic idioms introduced by the colonial state. The static nature of the discourse in regard to Indian saltpeter was fundamentally constituted on the axis of the refined form as 'legal' (used in gunpowder manufacturing, and exported from India) against the unrefined one (refuse of refined potash salt and was customarily used by the agricultural community in South Asia as manure) or raw as the 'illegal' material. The Company took measures to ensure absolute control over the local production process (for native use of the material) and labelled the indigenous usages as extra-legal transgression in respect to its use by the British State.

Essentially produced out of cattle refuse, the unrefined nitre-salt or *kharee namak* constitutes an indivisible part of the agricultural assemblage in vast tracts of eastern India (a practice still prevalent). This *kharee namak* did not conform to standards of British commercial demands; it gradually resembled what the British would deem an 'anti-commodity' by the burgeoning state.<sup>1</sup> In contrast its refined version was an essential ingredient for manufacturing gunpowder and the state initiatives were equipped to exert complete control over its productive and refinery units. Territories like Purnea, with its vast tracts of non-agricultural land was deemed to be one of the many important godowns to be set up for saltpetre storage.<sup>2</sup> The collector of Purnea was asked to furnish information of account sales of saltpeter godowns. In 1796, the Government asked the Board of Revenue to procure information on the following points; a) Number of Saltpeter

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manufactures being carried on in the district; b) by whom are they carried on; c) the quantity in general annually that was being exported and to what places; d) the estimation of the annual produce; a reflection of the state's desire to augment its already growing clout over the colonized resources. Efforts were on to procure the available quantity of saltpeter that was being produced in the Eastern regions like that of Muzaffarpur, Purnea and Patna and by the early decades of the nineteenth century unrefined saltpeter production for local usage was already being considered as extra-legal activity.<sup>3</sup> The 'refined' saltpetre concerned the state in two ways, involving the security of the British state at home (the British Empire was engaged in a long-drawn conflict with France and it needed a constant supply of saltpeter for its gunpowder-based ammunitions and its only supplier being the English East India Company, the pressure on the Indian officials was ever increasing).<sup>4</sup> The other aspect was fiscal in nature that was primarily the interests of the English East India Company trade in saltpeter and the gunpowder industry in Britain intertwined.<sup>5</sup>

The British state's enquiry in respect to saltpeter was necessitated by the demand back home both as a mercantile product and a fodder for the state. It inevitably led to the company officials' discounting the social and communal praxis of the local community. The empire envisaged such 'crude' practice of saltpeter production in the village household had its origins dating to a period that was not scientific in its approach. The British sought a move towards a more regimented form of saltpeter manufacturing and a regulation and control over saltpeter production that served the empire machinery and the increasing capitalist demands over the refined product.<sup>6</sup>

### **Encoding Saltpeter**

Overwhelmed with the nineteenth century political economic principle of the *Imperium*, the historicity of Indian saltpeter throughout was contoured on the dialectical paradigm of 'refined' and the 'unrefined'. The production and consumption of saltpeter in its various forms (raw state) by the local agrarian community, a hallmark of the agrarian assemblage – prevailed while the official narrative revealed that this violated the authorities' legal rights of monopoly over the final product. The prevalent existence of a variety of potash salt obtained during the process of

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refinement had distinctive usages in the society including that of saltpeter as a manure within the agricultural community, a cooling agent for many a rich landlord and as an anti-septic cure for many. However, in the British collective imagination saltpeter remarkably remained a raw material that primarily fed their cannons. Their enquiry of the unrefined saltpeter was determined by the objective of acquiring information of the local saltpeter trade and its consumers. Saltpeter in its unrefined state, signified an everyday materiality owing to its variegated usages and utilities. However, as a state determined to subjugate any form of local production for household use, the British onslaught on saltpeter producers and means of production continued and use of force was not rare. The Company's desire to regulate the production continued unabated after the 1833 Charter Act that had the English East India Company officially acting as the representative of the British crown. At the expense of a local market the British stranglehold over saltpeter meant codifying laws to control the produce. The Salt Act of 1884 finally gave shape to what the company officials sought to encode in their efforts to exert control over the saltpeter production and limit its usage as primarily a 'refined' product. The epistemic enquiry of the colonial officials drew its conception of categories from the contemporary taxonomic apparatus catering to the bourgeois state, comprehending the 'unrefined' saltpeter and its traditional use as an act that transgressed authority of the colonial order. The syntactic nature of the official discourse that categorized and underlined the duality of 'refined' and 'unrefined' in respect to Indian saltpeter throughout the nineteenth century unravels how the modern perception towards Indian saltpeter followed the trajectory of the Imperialist discourse.

British naval strength around the nineteenth century has been viewed as a stimulant that supported the growth of British overseas authority.<sup>7</sup> The colony in India, John Darwin argues, was founded on the basis of gunpowder-based ships which guarded the goods on the seas and facilitated the smooth operation of the British capitalist transaction.<sup>8</sup> Following this rise in naval and gunpowder power a steady supply of Indian saltpeter was marked to be a necessary attribute in this era. Even though the British engagement with saltpeter manufacturing involved critical scientific pursuit since the time of Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century till the nineteenth, it bore no fruitful epistemological

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enlightenment for the English nation, who remained inferior in this discourse in comparison to other European nations such as France and Holland or even the Spanish empire till the nineteenth century. Yet, since the period of Henry VIII English military strength primarily developed by increasing its gunpowder artillery.<sup>9</sup> In the words of David Cressy, the search for saltpeter in England throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century was a vexatious attempt of the state that violated society's private rights. Subsequently in the seventeenth century with the beginning of English East India Company's trade in Indian saltpeter England's indigenous sources were deserted. Since then, Indian saltpeter became the sole source of British gunpowder, a process that experienced a steady increase in subsequent years. In one of the letters of the late eighteenth century the English East India Company administration informed their superior in the metropolis of nearly a million investment against saltpeter from the eastern region of the subcontinent. Steady growth in saltpeter procurement from the Eastern part of the subcontinent took place since the second half of the eighteenth century under the Company State and as observed the quantity was more in times of peace rather than war to maintain sufficient reserve that served both the British military and commercial interest.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to its gunpowder utility other usages of saltpeter that persisted, as encountered and recorded by the British administration in the subcontinent since the second half of the eighteenth century, was labelled to be ineligible for gunpowder manufacturing hence futile for state use. The disposition around refined saltpeter simultaneously conjured a narrative that stigmatized the production and usages of the unrefined variant of saltpetre *Kharree namak* as illegal and as means of clandestine trade by the local community. Throughout the nineteenth century in course of the appropriation and construction of administrative narrative in respect of Indian saltpeter this binary was irrespectively maintained, even though empirical experiences at various administrative level within the authority revealed the inevitable agrarian productive nature of this produce. In the words of James Scott the administrative postulations failed to analyse the natural complexity of the unknown territories that it conquered.<sup>11</sup> The necessary abstraction of the uncharted peripheries was primarily based upon the availability of its resources suitable to statist interest.<sup>12</sup> In this respect this epistemological enterprise

reshaped and mapped the unknown by adhering to the state's commercial, political interest and to advance administrative authority thereby rejecting prevalent indigenous praxis. By the end of the eighteenth century the earliest official British account from the subcontinent was provided by H.T. Colebrooke (an Orientalist scholar and officer who was stationed at various parts of the Eastern region of India) whose objective was to map the resources of the conquered territory for the nascent British administration in the Subcontinent. Ranked as one of the earliest specimens of British narrative that intended to delineate the unknown region in order to cognize British nation about the riches of India, Colebrooke was the earliest to produce a narrative account of the conditions under which saltpetre was produced in the eastern part of the subcontinent. Stationed in one of the peripheral sub-terai region of the subcontinent in Purnea, Colebrooke encountered the existence of the agrarian modes of saltpeter production, that of its *nuneah* technique. To Colebrooke the methods of the *nuneahs* were crude according to his rational cognition yet he was aware of it being the sole means of production on which British saltpeter trade was dependent. Colebrooke delineated his curiosity regarding saltpeter production: 'Considered with a view to science, the process by which it is obtained from earth, and its reproduction in the same ground are deserving of diligent attention....'<sup>13</sup> In his account he left a detailed account of the stages through which saltpeter was produced and his opinion was that the region of Bihar, if controlled properly, would be able to produce more of the article in future. In this taxonomic account gauged and endeavoured to rationalise the unknown reserves of the Indian subcontinent, with the objective to increase the fiscal and commercial base for the metropolis. His account of the Oriental therefore highlighted those articles of the Subcontinent, which in his view would be commercially prudential for Britain of which saltpeter was one of the commodities of the Imperial trade. Ignorance of the indigenous technique generated misapprehension in his account as he concluded that the region of Purnea if controlled properly would yield further 'mans' (unit of weight) of saltpeter as the present quantity was too low. He wrote:

The actual extent of manufacture would admit of much greater production of the saltpetre, than commerce is now supplied with. The present quantity, including the importation from provinces west of Bihar, falls short of 200,000 mans, the greater part of which passes into Company

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warehouses for the first cost: and that does not much exceed two *rupiyas* for a man. The rest, paying duty and charges of transport, and affording profit to several intermediate dealers, sells in general at four or five *rupiyas* the man, for internal consumption, or for traffic with different parts of India.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence of administrative endeavour to gather precise information about the quantitative output of saltpeter production appeared since the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1802 the Superiors in the Calcutta Council demanded from the Patna Factory Supervisor facts about the precise amount of ‘saltpetre as delivered by the *Nuneahs*.’<sup>15</sup> By the first half of the nineteenth century the then English East India Company administration intervened as direct procurers by expelling the intermediary indigenous agents in order to extract direct information from the primary saltpeter producers the *Nuneahs*. Along with this measure individuals like Francis Buchanan (doctor and scientist) was officially commissioned by the British colonial state by the nineteenth century in India to gather knowledge of the vast unknown territories recently acquired. By applying the Linnaeus methods of classification, he redefined the territory and its people according to the interest of the British Colonial state. In doing so, the manufacture of saltpeter across the region of Bihar was prominently outlined. In his view, monopoly exercised by the Company state had a negative effect on *nuneah* livelihood and in their modes of production. Buchanan added that throughout the year *nuneahs* remained engaged with the production of saltpeter which was found extensively in almost all the households out of the cattle refuges. The imposition of the monopoly rights therefore in Buchanan’s opinion complicated the scenario as it failed to prevent the manufacturing of saltpeter owing to its agrarian nature. Buchanan noted that in almost all the cattle sheds of an agricultural family this product was available and the *nuneahs* scraped it out from these places to produce saltpeter a system that prevailed undaunted to Buchanan’s concern in spite of the authority’s monopoly rights. The extensive agricultural availability of this produce was apprehended by the authority as an obvious source of violation of its monopoly rights, a premise that dominated the official narrative throughout the nineteenth century. Besides Buchanan’s account, since the first half of the nineteenth century, mention of *kharee namak* as associated

with saltpeter manufacturing was a crucial part of official investigation.<sup>16</sup> In a series of correspondences dating 1800 the administration encountered the presence of *kharee namak* as an inevitable process within saltpeter production. The Correspondences reveal the concern of the state about the utility of the product and therefore specialized expert chemical opinions were sought to discover its chemical property.<sup>17</sup> The chief criterion for the state at this juncture was to rationalize the intrinsic ambiguity of saltpeter manufacturing as encountered, to be able to exert authority over all the modes of production in order to facilitate British commercial gains. As in one of these correspondences the Factor at the Patna Factory noted that further investigation over *kharee namak* was considered so that ‘the export of the article may appear advantageous to the Great Britain.’<sup>18</sup> These investigations further revealed that varieties of unrefined salt, that were produced in the process of refining saltpeter, had several other utilities for the local communities. Traditionally, this unrefined salt was fed to cattle, and it was used in the leather tanning industry with other medicinal usages. To Robert Montgomery Martin (the famous civil servant of the nineteenth century), the prevalence of the local consumption of the unrefined saltpeter in similar vein epitomised an illegal trade by the indigenous community.<sup>19</sup> By 1837 Martin wrote a detailed account of North India. His report on the Eastern Region of the Subcontinent made a further attempt to establish the extensive manufacturing of saltpeter owing to its agrarian nature. Nevertheless, he too classified them as illegal against the authorised salt manufacturing units. As the state prerogative primarily revolved around the axis of its commercial vantage point, these accounts produced a syntactic framework that categorically classified the unrefined saltpeter known primarily as *kharee namak*; but it had other variants as *Bhad*, that were clandestine products, illegal commodities, which not only violated the authority of the British state but decreased the source of fiscal resources for Great Britain.

### **Conclusion**

These statistical investigations thoroughly constructed the indigenous praxis of saltpeter production as a ‘primitive method’. Nevertheless, these constructed conceptions laid the foundation for the drafting of the 1885 Indian Salt Law.<sup>20</sup> The law enabled the Colonial State to declare transaction of any variety of saltpeter without the prior knowledge of the State to be



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illegal, and hence to be penalized. In the eighteenth century, in England too, the constitution of the law and its enforcement were modified to suit the objective of the newly emerging bourgeoisie by discarding the rights that were till date enjoyed by the plebian members of the English community.<sup>21</sup> Scholars have identified similar trends in British India. In this context the amendment of the Salt Laws in 1882 brought forth the inherent capitalist tendencies of the British administration to the fore. Moreover, it also established the crucial role of the state-sponsored accounts and reports in executive initiatives.<sup>22</sup> The chief criterion of these statistical discourses was to classify, to calculate and formulate them into lexical accounts so that the impossibility of the unknown could be controlled and tamed. In Michel de Certeau's words, historically, these descriptions, even after grasping the materiality of these practices, 'had failed to ascertain their forms as a characteristic embedded in the nineteenth century' British administrative ideology. In case of saltpeter manufacturing, throughout the nineteenth century the dichotomous discourse around the 'refined and unrefined' saltpeter was created from the British vantage point that highlighted the refined potassium nitrate to be the 'commodity of the empire' rejecting the other unrefined refuses obtained naturally in due process to be 'anti-commodity' for the state. Recently scholars have argued how the colonial periphery transformed the mind of the colonizers and created space for a unique system of acculturation that reflected not only in the administrative apparatus but equally corresponded in British narrative.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the notion of variation as highlighted by recent historians, the Colonial epistemic engagement in case of Indian saltpeter, as this paper has argued, remained rather uniform without any shift in perspective. From the eighteenth century to the early twentieth, the contention of 'legal and illegal' was the enduring discourse in the British official discourse. By juxtaposing the binary of illegal as raw saltpeter against legal as the refined saltpeter, these narratives systematically thrived to regulate the customary practices of the Subcontinent in accordance with the political and economic interests of the British state. The paradigm of illegal production of trade and usages by the indigenous community thus became a template, that was appropriated and replicated in the accounts of the period that reflected upon saltpeter

produced in the Subcontinent.

**Endnotes :**

- <sup>1</sup> Sandip Hazareesing and Harro Maat, *Local Subversions of Colonial Cultures: Commodities and Anti-Commodities in Global History* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2020), pp. 20-29.
- <sup>2</sup> Board of Revenue, 1791, 21, March, West Bengal State Archive, Kolkata.
- <sup>3</sup> Francis Buchanan, *An Account of District of Purnea, 1809-1810* (1923; Repr. Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1810), p. 64.
- <sup>4</sup> Board of Revenue, 1802, 14th April, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.
- <sup>5</sup> Brenda Buchanan ed, *Gunpowder, Explosives and The State: A Technological History* (Cornwall: Routledge, 2016), p. 74.
- <sup>6</sup> David Cressy, *Saltpetre: The Mother of Gunpowder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 57.
- <sup>7</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), see pp. 2-8.
- <sup>8</sup> Darwin, *The Empire Project*, pp. 182-183.
- <sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 100-101.
- <sup>10</sup> Cressy, *Saltpetre: The Mother of Gunpowder*, pp. 57-58.
- <sup>11</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like State: How Certain Schemes to Improve Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 262-306. Also see, Greg Bankoff and Peter Boomgaard, *A History of Natural Resources in Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 2014), pp. 10-15.
- <sup>12</sup> David Harvey, 'The Sociological and Geographical Imaginations' *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 18. 3/4 (2005): 211-255, 216-217.
- <sup>13</sup> H.T. Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal* (1884; Repr. Calcutta: Statesman Steam Printing Works, 1808), pp. 108-111.
- <sup>14</sup> Colebrooke, *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal*, pp. 112-113.

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- <sup>15</sup> Board of Revenue, (1802, August 27). West Bengal, BOR.
- <sup>16</sup> Buchanan, *An Account of District of Purnea*, pp 550-551.
- <sup>17</sup> Board of Trade, W. B. (1800, July 22). Salt Proceedings, West Bengal State Archives.
- <sup>18</sup> Board of Trade, W. B. (1800, July 22).
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Montgomery Martin, *Historical documents of Eastern India, Vol.I* (1990; Repr. Delhi: Caxton Press, 1838), pp.231-235.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Unrepealed Acts with Chronological Table, Vol-III:1882-1887, both inclusive* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1938), pp.119-132.
- <sup>21</sup> Denis Hay Peter Linebaugh (*et. al.*), *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth century England* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1976), pp.10-15.
- <sup>22</sup> Gyanendra Pandey ed., *Unarchived Histories: "The mad and the trifling" the Colonial and Post-Colonial World* (New York; Routledge, 2014), pp.220-221.
- <sup>23</sup> Kim Wagner ed., *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History* (New York: Pan Macmillan, 2012), pp.10-15.