

ABSTRACT

The Saltpetre Industry In the Bengal Presidency(1793-1814)

Saltpetre was a unique industry in the Bengal Presidency which was mostly depended on nature. Without the support of congenial climate, soil or earth and environment, collection of raw materials, filtration of crude saltpetre and boiling of brine were impossible. Geographically Bihar was the ideal place for such type of soil. The earth impregnated with the materials of saltpetre possessed various types of chemical substances. The earth or soil of some parts of Bihar contained such chemical substances for making saltpetre.

Like opium and salt, saltpetre was another example of monopoly industry under the East India Company. However, unlike salt and opium manufacture, it was a government monopoly for a limited period only. The monopoly was effective between 1793 and 1811 and again between 1813 and 1814. Therefore the time frame of the present research project has been selected from 1793 to 1814.

Bihar saltpetre helped the British in their war against Napoleon. By seizing Bengal, the British exerted mastery over 70 percent of the world's saltpetre production during the latter part of the 18th century. India was the largest gunpowder source in the world.

This thesis analyses the process of nitrification, leaching conversion refining and crystallization before production of saltpetre.

This thesis gives an account of the method of the collection of raw materials for making saltpetre. The saltpetre workers were called as Nunias. They collected raw materials by three different methods. In each method their main attention

was to collect raw materials impregnated with nitre without which making of saltpetre was impossible.

This thesis describes the poor condition of the saltpetre workers and their attempts to make themselves free from various types of oppressions.

In the first half of the 18th century there was co-existence of competition and co-operation between the Dutch and the English in saltpetre trade. But when Robert Clive came into the picture in 1750's, the East India Company had dominated the

saltpetre with the help of Nawab of Bengal. The East India Company was compelled to establish monopoly on production and trade of saltpetre due to war exigency.

The thesis has given in detail the chemical composition of different types of soil, raw materials such as urinemixed soil and efflorescence in mud walls, the water used in manufacturing saltpetre, raw materials after filtration, and after boiling, water in the saltpetre beds and finally the finished form of saltpetre crystals. This is a humble attempt of the thesis to throw new light on saltpetre industry.