



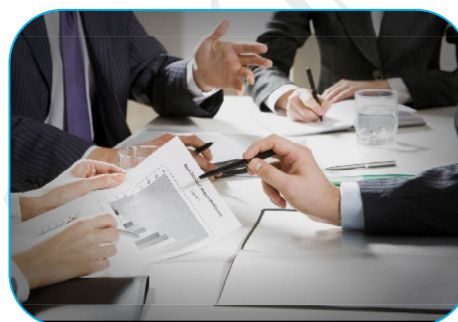
A BRIEF ECONOMIC PROFILE OF GOALPARA WITH REFERENCE TO EARLY EUROPEAN TRADE

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ABSTRACT:

The district of Goalpara is bounded on the north by Bhutan; on the east by Kamrup; on the south by the Garo Hills; and on the west by the Bengal district of Jalpaiguri, by the native state of Kuch Bihar, and by the Bengal district of Rangpur. It lies between 25^o, 28' and 26^o, 54' N. and 89^o, 42' and 91^o, 6' E and covers an area of 3,954* square miles.¹

KEYWORDS: Goalpara, trade, commercial transaction, indigenous traders, foreign traders.



INTRODUCTION

Medieval Assam, being relatively isolated from the rest of India, had a atypical socio-economic pattern of its own. The economy of its plains was very much integrated with that of the hills. Raw cotton, forest products, oranges, rock salt and iron from the hills were bartered for rice, dried fish, silk and cotton cloth from the plains. This symbiotic relationship was maintained through a chain of foothill marts and fairs where both sides met.²

The method of agriculture, coupled with primitive technology, kept production at the subsistence level. Industry was home-based and directed to meeting essential consumption needs. The manufacturing activities of the people centered round small-

scale cottage industries like weaving, pottery, basket-making, hand-carved ivory, wooden and bamboo articles.³ In the absence of mass production in agriculture and industry, forest resources played an important role in the economy of hill.

Trading activities were not confined in the hand of a particular caste.⁴ So far in the available sources it is totally absent the existence of trading class in the state of the Assam during the period under survey. However, a small trading community designated as Vaishya-Saud (Sunri), a counterpart of the Saha caste of Bengal were present. The Vaishya-Saud took initiative in carrying out trade in different parts of the Assam and neighbouring areas since remote past. It is informed that "Chand

Sadagar of medieval folklore is said to have belonged to this caste. Besides, the Kalita craftsmen of Kamrup, silk-weavers and bell-metal artisans, used to sell their specialized products as itinerant traders all over Assam. People of Barpeta were described as vigorous traders by the early nineteenth century British administration. Their boats, laden with surplus mustard seeds of Assam, used to ply even on Bengal rivers. The folk literature of the sixteenth century referring to the trading activities of boat owning sauds is as much a living tradition with Lower Assam as with Bengal".⁵ The evidence given by the Amalendu Guha is very important to prove the existence of river-borne trade between Lower Assam and other areas during medieval times. Black

pepper, long pepper, ginger, cumin seeds, mustard seeds, coriander seeds, incense etc. were the merchandise goods which carried on by means of boats.⁶ The traders of the Assam touched up to Dhaka and other places with their boats. Aloe-wood (*Agar*) of Assam was very precious item of the trade which Muslim merchants in the Mughal period were more attracted and focus their trade in the aloe-wood (*Agar*).⁷ Most of the trade and commercial transaction of medieval Assam was essentially carried out through the medium of barter.⁸

Quoting from the *Fathiya-i'ibriya*, a monumental work of Shihabuddin Talish (1663), Amalendu Guha⁹ supplied the following very valuable information relating to the trade and commercial transaction of frontier trade:

“Formerly once a year, by order of the Raja, a party used to go for trade to their frontier near Gauhati; they have gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, spikenard and silk cloth in exchange of salt, saltpeter, sulphur and certain other products”.

With the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the British needed more more raw material for their industries to produced manufacturing goods. The finished products were exported to different countries of the world which make more profit to the British. However, without the sufficient raw materials it was not possible to produced industrial product on a large scale. As a result of which they kept their eye to the place where raw materials were available in abundance including the Assam from where they could get large quality of raw materials. Sudatta Sikdar rightly remarked that “the need for seizing new markets set the pace in forging new between inner and outer zones. The process led to the consolidation of British power in India, which extended its jurisdiction to the Brahmaputra Valley in 1826. The sparsely populated territories of the Arunachal tribes lacked enough economic potential to attract the immediate attention of the colonialists, but with the gradual consolidation of British rule in Assam, imperialism discovered new motives in an apparently barren area”.¹⁰

Before the formal occupation of Assam by the East India Company, European traders had visited Assam for the purpose of the trading and to some extent they had trade relation with the people as well as indigenous trader. When East India Company ruled the Bengal, the European traders had contact with Assam. During that period some important outposts, between Bengal and Assam were there through which trade was carried on. Among them mention may be made the name of Goalpara, on south, and Jogighopa and Rangamati, on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra.¹¹

In the beginning Assam was not so much known to the European traders. East India Company failed to established formal trade and commercial relation with Assam. Nevertheless the merchants of the European were found and their numbers were increasing in the land of Assam. Baptist Chevalier, an agent of the French East India Company landed in Goalpara in 1755 to do trade in salt.¹² The following were the prominent merchants who were carried out their trade and commercial activities in Goalpara in the initial stage of the European trade in the region:

- a) Paul Richards Pearkes, an English merchant who had established regular trade with Assam traders and even established a salt factory at Jugighopa.¹³
- b) Hugh Baillie and John Robinson reached at Goalpara and Rangamati respectively. John Robinson was the agent of Johnstone, Hay and William Bolt. Hugh Baillie did salt trade in Goalpara on behalf of Henry Vansittart, the Governor of Fort William of Bengal.¹⁴ In 1763 he left Goalpara and all assets had been delivered to John Robinson.¹⁵

In 1765 Society for trade was founded by Robert Clive with the aim to do trade in the remote areas of the Bengal for which eleven trade agents were appointed on 1st November, 1765. Out of those eleven agents, three were sent to Goalpara to supervise and carried out the trade. They were Hugh Baillie, Tom Lewis and Hargreaves who were appeared at Goalpara, Rangpur, Hargreaves and Chialmari respectively.¹⁶ S.K. Bhuyan reported that “Hugh Baillie already was an important trade agent who carried out salt trade on behalf of Henry Vansittart till 1763 before the appointment as a trade agent under Society for Trade”.¹⁷

By that time salt was very important commodity of the people who inhabited in that region, so later on, Society for Trade started concentration on salt trade which became most important inland

trade article in Assam.¹⁸ The imported salt of the Bengal and European broad clothes were the main merchandise commodities in Assam.¹⁹

The Court of Director of British East India Company terminated the Society for Trade in 1768. In this regards it is asserted that "Court of Director declared all monopoly trade of Company servants and creation of private trade agencies under the influence of Company as illegal. In 1769, George Lear, an English trade agent came to Goalpara to carry out trade with Assam. He built an independent salt factory and salt emporium at Goalpara town at the cost of Rupees 21,742. He founded salt warehouses and godowns at Dacca which became the headquarter of his business".²⁰

In 1771 a regular trade relations between the East India Company and Assam was established. The information about the available resources of Assam and Bhutan was collected by the company through its agents. Hugh Baillie reported to the Company about the immense possibility of profit in trade with Assam and Bhutan. It was pointed out that lac of all sorts, *Muga* silk, black pepper and specie could receive from Assam in exchange for woolen cloth and salt. With the information supplied by Hugh Baillie the government then sent him to Goalpara with a license to trade in salt.²¹ It is furnished that "the East India Company granted, in 1780, the exclusive privilege of salt trade to David Killican, a Bengal Civil Servant and Calcutta merchant, who enjoyed it till March 1783. Kilican earned huge profits, but many local people complained of oppressive behavior of the Europeans, including the Company's agents".²² In 1787 Baillie became Superintendent at Goalpara and very soon Assam trade was revived. Herein is the report supplied by Baillie that "the trading pattern of Assam and estimated the sale of about 100,000 *Maunds* of salt in a year. The Company could get, in return, black pepper, *Muga-Dhotis*, *Muga*-silk, stick, lamp lac and *Munjit*".²³

Meanwhile there was revolt of Moamarias which led critical political situation in Assam and Ahom king Gaurinath Singh was compelled to flee from his capital Rangpur and lived in exile at Guwahati. It is informed that ".....Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General, at the request of Gaurinath Singh, and on the basis of the report sent by John Lumsden, the Collector of Rangpur(Bengal), decided to send Captain Thomas Welsh to help Ahom King to bring back normality to Assam".²⁴

In the history of Anglo-Assamese relations the expedition of Captain Welsh to Assam (November 1792-July 1794) was a very significant event. He had been asked to "acquire every information that may be possible both of the population and of the manners and customs, of trade and manufactures, and natural productions of countries".²⁵

With the assistance of Captain Welsh, king of Ahom regain his lost position in March 1794. A Commercial Treaty was signed between Captain Welsh and Ahom king in February 1793 with the aim of establishing "a reciprocal and entire liberty of commerce between the subjects of Bengal and Assam for all singular goods and merchandize. The Company government of Bengal was to export Bengal salt, broad cloths of Europe, cotton cloths of Bengal, carpets, copper, lead, tin, hardware, jewellery, spices, while Assam was to export *muga* cloths and thread, pepper, elephants tusks, munjit, and cotton to Bengal".²⁶

Two custom houses were opened. They were at Kandahar (in Bengal), and the other at Guwahati. These two customs outposts- the Kandahar Choky and Assam Choky were to facilitate trade between Assam and Bengal. A 10 per cent of duty charge imposed on all the imports and exports excluding rice and other grains. The Duria Baruas who was the incharge of the outposts collected duties of all imports and exports on behalf of the Ahom government.²⁷

It is furnished that "Captain Welsh recommended to the government to abolish Daniel Raush's monopoly of the Assam trade, particularly the salt trade. Daniel Raush was an English private merchant who did salt trade in Goalpara without license from the government as an agent of David Killican, a civil servant of Company as well as a merchant of Calcutta. In fact the salt trade was the most profitable, because the Assamese people were bound to purchase it from Bengal and all the salt consumed in Assam came from Bengal".²⁸

The systematic commercialization by the colonial rulers converted the Goalpara economy into a satellite economy. The supply of finished products in the markets of Assam decreased the demand for indigenous handicrafts, as the people became more and more used the imported commodities.²⁹

Indigenous handloom industry faced the problem to survive and could not compete with the cheap mill made cloths. Cheap Bengal salt flooded in the market which led to diminishing used of the local salt. Similarly, weaving, spinning and dyeing etc. had also become things of the past. In the early part of 19th century, salt became as major import goods of Assam which was exchanged with *Muga*, silk, mustard seeds, ivory, gold and slaves of Assam.³⁰

It is reported that in 1808-1809, the Company's imports, on the basis of customs returns at Kandahar choky were worth Rs. 2,28,300 and exports were worth Rs. 1,30,300. The balance of trade was in favour of the Company.³¹

Assam Trade Statistic, 1808-09 (Estimated at Goalpara, opposite Hadira Chowki)

Table: 1

Export				
Sl. No.	Items	Quantity in mds	Value in Rs. (sicca)	Average Price (per md) Rs.
1	Paper	50	500	10.0
2	Mustard-seed	15,000	20,000	1.3*
3	Long-pepper	50	300	6.0
4	Manjit	----	500	----
5	Elephant-tusk	----	6,500	----
6	Muga thread	65	11,350	75.0
7	Muga cloth	75	17,500	233.3
8	Cotton (with seed)	7,000	35,000	5.0
9	Lac	10,000	35,000	3.5
10	Bell-metal vessels	----	1,500	----
11	Iron-hoes	----	600	----
12	Thaikal fruit (medicinal)	50	150	----
13	Slaves	100 (No.)	2,000	----

Total = 1,30,900.00

Assam Trade Statistic, 1808-09 (Estimated at Goalpara, opposite Hadira Chowki)

Table: 2

Import			
Sl. No.	Items	Quantity in mds	Value in Rs. (sicca)
1	Salt	35,000	1,92,500
2	Fine Pulse	----	800
3	Ghee	1,000	1,600
4	Sugar	----	1,000
5	Stone-beads, corals, jewel and pearls	----	8,000
6	Cutlery and Glassware (European)	----	500
7	Muslin	----	10,000
8	Taffeta, Kinkhap, Satin and other luxury cloth	----	4,500

9	Wollens (European)	----	2,000
10	Copper	----	4,800
11	Red lead	----	1,000
12	Paints	----	500
13	Spices	----	1,000
14	Shells	----	100

Total = 2,28,300.00

Source: Francis Buchan-Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, 1807.

From the above (Table 1 and Table 2) tabulated quantities and their total values were estimated by the Francis Buchanan-Hamilton³² on the basis of custom returns. The total adverse balance of trade of 1808-09 was Rs. 97,400.00.

With the Charter of 1833 which abolished the Company's commercial interests, there opened up the prospects of colonialization with import of private enterprise and capital from Britain. From this year onwards, Englishmen were encouraged by the administration to invest their capital in the wastelands of Assam to produce cash crops like indigo, sugarcane and tea.

CONCLUSION:

No doubt, Assam was rich in natural resources. Before the advent of the British, she could feed her people without too much depending on other. It was the place where the European traders were attracted more and more. Abundant of the raw materials draw the attention of the European traders who brought finished goods from their own industries and sold in this region. They also could fetch handsome amount through their business. Assam could not produced available salt to meet her needs so salt business was the main focused to outside traders who brought salt of the Bengal on large scale.

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