

Trade and Economy in the Brahmaputra Valley during Colonial Period

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how the Agro-economic condition of the region helps to promote trade in the Brahmaputra region during the Colonial period. It also studies the geological advantage and agricultural production of the Brahmaputra valley that played a vital role in promoting trade and commerce in this region. The trade from the Brahmaputra Valley has had an inimitable tradition throughout its history. While the basic information of trade in the region is somewhat incomprehensible, there is hardly any doubt about its antiquity. The various kinds of trades were known in the Brahmaputra Valley since early times. The early nineteenth century was the period of transition to a systematic trade and economy and Ahom states to the colonial state in the history of the region. This transition brought about rapid changes in the field of trade and commerce transformation as well as in the politico-administrative and economic growth of the Valley. It was in this period the East India Company had established the salt trade from Bengal to the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The Brahmaputra Valley had a well-established trade connection with the Indian subcontinent as well as Southeast Asia and China. Also, rich natural resources and agricultural production are found in this region. Agricultural production has played a significant role both in inland and overseas trade which facilitated the development in trade and economic fields in the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial period.

Index Terms: Trade, Economy, Brahmaputra Valley, And Colonial Period.

1. Introduction:

The trade and economy of Brahmaputra valley on the eve of the British colonization were characterized by acute shortages of labor and capital. A series of civil wars during the last three decades of the eighteenth century and Burmese invasions at the beginning of the nineteenth century 'brought in depopulation, disorder and all-round decadence' and left the economy in a region of muddle. The persistent chaos and anarchy led to the Burmese occupation of the Brahmaputra valley plains from 1817 to 1824. Then came the British to rescue the people from the dissolute of the region and the Burmese were forced to surrender their claim over the Brahmaputra valley of Assam under the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. With this came historic

changes in the polity and, most importantly, in the trade and economy of this region. The discovery of tea, oil, and coal as well as the development of transportation in the Brahmaputra valley. However, the growth of the modern sector did not bring wealth to the people of this region. By the end of the nineteenth century, 'the economy of Brahmaputra valley had developed all the characteristics of a dual economy'. It is in this context that the present paper tries to analyze the trade and economy in the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial period.

2. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study are:

1. To explore how agriculture base economic condition helps to promote

trade and commerce of the proposed region.

2. To explore and to study how the geological condition and agricultural surplus production promoted trade and commerce in the Brahmaputra valley during colonial periods.

3. Methodology:

Historical research methodology has been followed for the study. The paper involves a critical use of both primary and secondary sources based on internal and external analysis. As a primary source, archival documents are used and as secondary sources, books and articles that were published in journals and magazines, etc. are used. To understand the economic importance of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining area in the colonial period; trade has been adopted as elements of analysis for the study.

4. The Colonial economy and Trade in the Brahmaputra Valley:

The Brahmaputra valley with its compound land and ethnic groups that lived on continuously underdeveloped agrarian practices had been lightly occupied to the region since time immemorial to the present. The Shifting cultivation or Jhumming cultivation has been the mainstay of the agricultural practices among the tribals and theirs was a nomadic lifestyle of the region. Under such practices land was held as communal territory. Under such condition the Brahmaputra valley has played a key role in the field of trade and commerce with the help of its agricultural production and the geological condition of the region. In 1826 A.D the occupation of the Brahmaputra valley by the East India Company was an important event in the history of the region. At the same time as Great Britain had undergone immense economic transformation following the Industrial Revolution in the early nineteenth century. A new economic order had come into existence, bringing with it additional demands for industrial raw materials and food. New markets were developed and new sources of raw materials had to be explored to meet the rising demands of various European and Latin American British colonies. Against this background, Britain transformed its earlier policy of mercantilism and

rather gave importance to free trade and later changed into economic imperialism. Within a short time, India became an agricultural colony of British capitalism for raw materials and a flourishing market for British manufactured goods. However, as J. B. Bhattacharjee pointed out that...

They reached India and its prosperous regions for trade; trade led to the conquest and empire. Even after the conquest, trade and profit continued to be the key motives of the Raj. The actual conqueror was an enterprising commercial organization, the East India Company. The transfer of authority to the British Crown (1858), a hundred years later, did not change the mercantile character of the Raj....

The trade and commerce changed into a new direction as the Britishers got deeply engaged in the business opportunities of the Brahmaputra valley. It is indispensable to study the changes in trade and commerce in those aspects such as internal, frontier, and external trade to understand the changes that occurred for trade and commerce, after the advent of the British in the Brahmaputra valley.

The late 18th century was the period of transition from Mughal and Ahom state to the colonial state in the history of Assam. This transition brought about a gradual transformation in the politico-administration and economic system of the region. Gradually, the colonial state introduced the currency in place of the barter system. It was in this period that the company established salt trade with Assam and the colonial state started reorienting the trade, developed traditional trade routes, and established a new trade network of the region for its advancement. For example, the Stilwell Road was newly constructed by the British in Margherita; the township near Ledo from where the Stilwell road begins to connect the northeast of India to China is the center of a potentiality rich economic zone of Southeast Asia. During the colonial periods, the major trade items were salt, cotton, ivory, tea, coal, silk, opium, and oil, etc.

Important trade relation between Bhutan and the Brahmaputra valley was through the river Manas via Tassagong and Dewangiri to Hajo.

The Bhutias brought with them colored blankets, gold dust, silver, salt, musk, beeswax, and munjeet. Raw and manufactured silk, cotton, dried fish, and tobacco were the things that they usually took away with them. Kuriapara Duar, which falls west of the Buriguma Duar, had been the main trade route between Tibet and Brahmaputra valley. In the Brahmaputra valley, there were eighteen Duars or passes, either wholly or partially dependent on Bhutan. Among these passes, eleven touched the northern borders of Bengal, and seven touched that of Assam. The plains-hills contact was maintained through these passes. There were two passes in Assam, viz Buriguma and Kulling Duars in the Darrang district of Assam. While the Ghurkola, Baksha, Chapakhamar, and Bijni Duars were situated in the Kamrup district during the colonial periods. It had close contact with Bhutan, Tibet, North Bengal and its western part, parts of Bangladesh, and distant China also.

Lhasa and China served as two important routes to the Brahmaputra valley during the time of the pre-colonial period and that was further revived in the Colonial period. About the citation of the routes, Hamilton writes, 'At a place called Chouna two months journey from Lassa on the confines of the two states there is a mart established on the Assam side. Further, he also mentioned that Geegunshur was one of the prominent places where carrying silver, bullion to the amount of about a lakh of rupees and a considerable quantity of rock salt were sold to the Assamese merchants. Rice and silk, cloth manufactured by the native women of Assam, were exported to Tibet through this region.

Numerous weekly and bi-weekly markets were once again rejuvenated throughout Assam during British imperialism. The Britishers wanted to exercise political control over the frontier tribes and also wanted to promote their commercial interest by encouraging internal and international trade and popularizing European goods. For the same reason, they officially organized trade fairs at many places in and around the *Sadar* stations. Some of these fairs were held daily, some bi-weekly, and the rest annually. These fairs became a one-stop point for the hill people who sold their surplus products and purchased their requirements. Apart from the people on both sides of the frontier, Marwaris

(called as *keyas* by the local people), *beparees* (traders from Dacca and Calcutta), Europeans, Chinese, and Tibetans also attended the fairs that were organized in the winter season. Although the official fairs were for three days, the actual trade usually continued from January to March. Four annual fairs were held in Darranga, Udalguri, Daimara, and Khargrapara. Marwari merchants, traders from Rangia, and various frontier tribes like Bhutias and Tibetans exchanged their products in these fairs.

The importance of these trade fairs slowly increased during British rule. Darrang Fair was annually held in January to March and largely attended by Bhutias, and the traders from Rangia also attended these fairs. The Udalguri fair was held at the village of the same name in the Mangaldai subdivision and was attended chiefly by Tibetans from Tawang. The Khargrapara fair took place near Kerkeria in the northwest corner of the Mangaldai subdivision and was attended by the Bhutias. The Daimara fair was held just outside the English territory, not from Udalguri.

These markets were directly controlled by the British Government. The cost of organizing the fairs was met from provincial and district funds. According to H.K. Barpujari, "Most of the *hats* were sold out to the highest bidder and the proceeds credited to the Municipal or district funds." Although the duty received by the Government from the markets was less than the cost involved, Britisher's policy encouraged the fairs as they provided the opportunity to exert political influence over the tribes who attended the fairs and at the same time to introduce European goods, which would easily attract the local consumers.

The River Borne Annual Trade Reports from 1880-81 A.D to 1894-95 A.D notes that except for cotton piece goods, the exported commodities were of primary category-products of agriculture, mines, and forests. The only product from the manufacturing sector was cotton piece goods, insignificant in proportion. Metals were considered as the capital goods, whereas cotton piece goods both of European and Indian origin constituted a bulk of the consumer goods. The import of grain and pulses presents an alarming picture of an agricultural region being

forced to import agricultural products to meet the needs of local consumption .

Internal trade facilitated the growth of the commodity-money relationship and this led to the emergence of *mofussil* or private *haats*, in which tea-garden laborers and traders assembled. Merchant and usurer capital represented by the Marwaris found a potential field in this respect and established various private markets for their benefit. Villages of Assam became abundant with numerous Marwaris shops. The Marwaris shops were very common in the *haats* (markets), which developed into a permanent commercial center. These places were Barpeta, Rangia, Gauhati, Kalaigaon, Tezpur, Chaparmukh, Bishwanath, Golaghat, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Sadiya. British replaced the demand and realization of tax in money for the greater use of money as the popular medium of exchange in internal trade and commerce. Before this, only bigger commercial transactions, like those with Bengal, were conducted by the customs officers in money. With the neighboring countries of Bhutan and Tibet, goods were exchanged mostly with bullion. The new policy of demanding land revenue in cash was fully enforced by 1842 A.D.

In the lieu of trade and commerce with the frontier hill tribes, the British first controlled the traditional foothill markets, and then they extended the sphere of control in phases over a hill segment that was inhabited by a particular tribe or group of tribes. The general pattern was that the Political Officer of the immediately bordering plains' district maintained political and commercial relations with the tribal chiefs, then an officer subordinate to the said Political Officer of the plains district was placed in the occupied portions of the hills and when the entire hill area has occupied the headquarters was shifted to a convenient place within the hills. To promote trade among the frontier tribes, the Governor-General, on 30 May 1833 A.D, appointed Captain White, as an officer of Sadiya, the tract between the rivers Burhidihing and Dehong, which were occupied by the Moamarias, Khamtis, and Singphos. Accordingly, the Agent to the Governor-General, North East Frontier, instructed White thus: Another great object will be an advancement of the commerce in the Frontier and any obstruction to free trade that the agent of the Marwaris may bring to your notice

either on one side of Ava, you will endeavor to remove or report to me as you deem necessary.

The British authorities realized that for the promotion of trade and commerce and the security of the Brahmaputra valley particularly, the plantations and mining areas from the frontier areas and the powers beyond them, it was necessary to command the trade routes of the region with Tibet, China, and Burma. This called for an intimate knowledge of the region. Accordingly, Captains Bedford, Wilcox (1825-28 A.D) and Neufville, G.T. Bayfield, (1836-37 A.D) S.F. Hannay, (1835-26 A.D), and Lieutenant Burlton were employed on the frontier for extending the Company's geographical knowledge about the countries beyond North Eastern Frontier of India . Their investigation not only exposed the geographical map of the whole of the extreme North Eastern Frontier of India but also revealed the commercial opportunities of the East India Company in the region. These reports proved the fact that there was an exchange of goods by tribes in India's North Eastern Frontier with those in Tibet, Bhutan, China, and Burma. The tribes in the foothills played a prominent role in trade between Assam and the tribal communities in the bordering areas in China and Burma. According to the researchers, reports conducted by the British officials, gradually convinced the higher authorities in Calcutta that intervening in the tribal region would mean a considerable volume of trade and commerce after that British periodically occupied the commercially rich frontier areas. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century trade increased in volume and value and in the thirties the trade deficit turned into a trade surplus.

Due to growing industries in tea, mineral, and timber, the Brahmaputra valley emerged as an important area for commercial exploitation. The resources of the province and the fertility of agricultural land also suited the Company's policy of revenue maximization. Therefore it was necessary to protect the valley from the predatory raids of the hills and the imperial forces beyond. This impelled the authorities in Calcutta to pacify the tribes and to carry the line of colonial control to its strategic limits. The Government began to set up outposts along the routes of tribal movement to check the inroads of the tribes. But the nature of the terrain made such measures

inadequate, for the tribes succeeded in attacking their prey by maneuvering around the border posts. Col. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam, in 1862 A.D, wrote- “A military outpost in Assam is a protection against the hill tribes as an umbrella is against rain, but no more”.

External trade with Bengal was conducted through the Kandahar *chokey* opposite to Goalpara on the Brahmaputra from the period of Ahom rule. The *chokey* was under the supervision of an officer called Duaria Barua, and he had to pay an annual rent of 10 percent *ad valorem*, but fluctuating from time to time. The Duaria Barua enjoyed the monopoly of trade with Bengal and demanded a high rate of duties. But mostly the foreign merchants were irregular in complying with their contract or refused to carry on trade with particular individuals. This led to constant troubles. To overcome these difficulties, the British Government brought the *chokey* under direct control in 1833 A.D, although the problem remained unsolved. The duties levied continued to be high. On all exports and imports, the duty was as before, 10 percent *ad valorem*, but in certain commodities rates were very high, for which even the most enterprising merchant did not engage in trade with Assam. Moreover, detention for search, forfeitures, and penalties, apart from unauthorized exactions, were common features. All these harmed the British industrial and agricultural activities of the province. The renewal of the Charter Act of 1833 had allowed for free trade and free competition. Hence a decision was taken in March 1835 A.D, to abolish Kandahar and all other *chokies* in the neighborhood of Goalpara, and trade with Bengal was made free. As a result, the trade with Bengal was greatly benefited.

5. Findings and Conclusion:

Thus the prospect of a profitable venture in tea plantation brought British capital into Brahmaputra valley. A modern sector, consisting mainly of tea plantation, a few other resource-based industries, and minimum infrastructure to support the growth of these industries, emerged by the end of the nineteenth century. The substantial investments that rolled in at the initiatives taken mainly by the Europeans however left the traditional agrarian sector

untouched. The two sectors virtually did not have any link through the linkage effects of these investments in labor, capital, and commodity markets. The shortages of local labor and capital at the advent of the British colonization and throughout the nineteenth century, coupled with the deliberate policies of the government came in the way of dynamic interactions between these two sectors. As a result, the traditional sector which had hitherto been underdeveloped remained an enclave untouched by the process of growth and development.

Thus, it can be concluded that British involvement in the Brahmaputra valley marked a watershed in the trade, commerce, and economic development of the region. It was in striking contrast to the gradual changes that had occurred in the pre-colonial period. Apart from geological isolation, the administrative policies of the Ahoms had contributed a great deal to the economic isolation of the region. In their attempt to commercially exploit the region through the free flow of imports and exports, the British removed all barriers in internal, frontier, and external trade. As a result by the end of the century, like the rest of India, Assam too became an exporter of raw materials and a market for their finished goods.

A significant change was the rapid growth in trade and commerce in comparison to the earlier period. It reflected the changing nature of the demand for the articles for consumption as well as a pressing need for converting every bit of surplus into cash. Other notable changes in this regard were the penetration and control of traders and trading capital in the process of distribution. Further, the basic structure of trade and commerce remained simple. Although there was considerable generation and accumulation of capital in the economy of Assam in this period, the region still faced the problem of shortage of money. While it affected the poorer sections most seriously, it also hit the uprooted nobility and clergy of the erstwhile Ahoms regime.

At the same time, the structural changes led to the evolving structure of the colonial economy in the valley. In the plantation economy of the Brahmaputra valley, this was reflected in the concomitant development of a steadily expanding transport network, connecting as efficiently as possible the centers of productions

with the ports. The network of rail ways specifically, and the improvement of river ways and roadways were the result. Thus the external world exerted its domination by absorbing the bulk of production of the Brahmaputra valley as well as supplying what was consumed in the valley.

The economic importance of the Brahmaputra valley was not only for its resources but also for the strategic location which helps the native people to conduct trade with adjoining areas of the valley. The Brahmaputra valley having a common frontier with Bhutan, Tibet, Burma, Bangladesh, and neighboring hills and plain areas helped the people to build a worldwide trade and commerce as well as other economic and cultural relations of the adjoining areas of the Brahmaputra valley.

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