



Management

COMMERCE, MERCHANTS AND MARKETS IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY c. 1800-1900

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Abstract

Trade and commerce in the Brahmaputra valley of colonial Assam is understudied. This paper attempts to study the trade and commercial activities in the valley while keeping in mind the transition from pre-colonial to colonial rule. The late Ahom sources do not speak purposefully about trading activities in the valley. Early colonial sources term the region as backward and averse to trade. The valley came under colonial rule in 1826 with the Treaty of Yandabo. Were the first few decades of the nineteenth century in the Brahmaputra valley backward in matters of commerce? How different was the latter half of the nineteenth century? Analysis of Ahom chronicles, archival sources, and personal papers available in the National Archives of India has helped in finding structural changes in trade and commercial activities in the valley in the century under study. These findings help in understanding the nature of colonial economic policy and present economic structure of the region better.

Keywords: Merchant; Market; Commerce; Bazaar; Trade; Bhutia.

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1. Introduction

The study of the history of commerce naturally brings the terms, such as merchants, goods, market places and trading network, etc. under discussion. In general the term commerce implies the activity of buying and selling in a large scale.¹ Kenneth Pomeranz argues that conventionally the term commerce implies exchange of goods either for other goods or money, between parties who are in some economically meaningful way separate.² But all exchange of goods is not commerce. Exchange could be anything: tribute, ritual and social propriety or reciprocal gift giving.³ Pomeranz differentiate the distinction between “commerce” and “production” saying that commerce adds extra value to the commodity.⁴ Karl Polanyi argues about “economistic transformation” of labour and land commoditized man and nature. He again says that trade could have varied objectives, as he gives example of monasteries as the biggest trading establishment in Europe.⁵ These were basically for religious purpose and the desire to earn profit was less dominant.

All sorts of exchanges are not necessarily profit driven. Using Pomeranz's idea, what we find is that commerce is the exchange of goods that involves profit either in large or in small scale.

Commerce is very closely associated with merchants as merchants carry on commerce. The general understanding of merchant is a person who carries on exchange of living or non-living goods for profit. A trader could be a person involved in small scale transactions for little or no gain. In an archaic society the chief alone is entitled for trade and this trade is more or less warlike and diplomatic venture.⁶ And even if some sort of trading activity exists, the archaic society lacks a trader class.⁷ Karl Polanyi said that no society could naturally live for any length of time unless it has an economy of some sort; but previous to our time no economy has ever existed that, even in principle, was controlled by market.⁸ Polanyi talks about "substantive" economy where through day to day interaction the society fulfills its needs. And eventually the society regularized such interaction.⁹ Polanyi's argument helps us to draw the conclusion that market is an essential ingredient of any sort of economy, though it became important by modern period.

Markets too can be divided into several categories on the basis of the nature of society. In context of India or in a broader sense middle east, bazaar was the term commonly in use. *Haat* was another term used for local markets in South Asia. This term can be equated with fair. *Haat* is a far less commercialized place with weekly or monthly or yearly exhibition of goods and produces. In Assam, the term *haat* is in widespread use and these are of both large and small scale and with duration ranging from a week to two-three months. *Haats* had socio-economic significance in case of Assam but these were not profit driven, with people engaged in trading necessary goods, such as salt and rice. These were part of religious and political tradition. The migration of Buddhist monks from Bhutan to Hajo to trade their goods and also to visit the temple at Hajo clearly marks their tradition.¹⁰

For circulation of goods inside a market or throughout some markets, it is important to have a network of merchants and trading routes in both water and road ways. Polanyi in his study of economy in a primitive society talks about four important components to circulate goods— 1.personnel, 2.goods, 3.carrying and 4. two sidedness.¹¹ These four stages help us to formulate the idea of how trade routes develop. The diplomatic mission or reciprocal exchange between two chiefs of some distant region could possibly take the shape of trade and trade route. By using Polanyi's view, development of any sort of communication was not with the purpose of trade, but eventually it played important role in the growth of trade.¹² In a "backward" economy of Assam, the English East India Company's (hereby EIC) attempt to use modern technology served the dual purpose of administrative control and expansion of trade. This paper studies the communities, the routes as well as the goods that were in circulation in and through Assam from 1800 to 1900.

2. Communities in Trade

The Ahom kings maintained trade with Bhutia traders from Tibet and Bhutan, the Nagas, Dafalas and Miri traders. The Miri's were supplier of copper, munjeet, ouka whereas the Naga traders supplied cotton, different varieties of silk such as luckibilla, toatbund and narakapore along with Nagazattee - a variety of spear and red hair. Besides, Garo/ Garrow traders used to carry on trade with the plains of Assam till the late 18th century.¹³ The group of people engaged in trade and commerce in the Brahmaputra Valley underwent change in the period from 18th century to mid-

19th century. The dominant groups of traders transformed from *Bepari* or Muslim traders from East Bengal and Bhutiah or Tibetan traders to Marwari and Punjabi traders, and the composition in the list of exchanged goods also changed. Salt trade of mid-19th century was dominated by Marwari traders. These traders were located in *Sudder* stations and principle marts in the interior. In fact Marwari traders extracted most of the profit derived from trade in the province.¹⁴ Bhutan and Naga Hills too exported a small quantity of salt to Assam in exchange for local products.¹⁵ Though trade with Bhutan was still going on but the clashes between the Bhutiah traders and the new government on the issue of paying tribute for the five *duars* bordering Bhutan and Assam disrupted commerce time and again.¹⁶ The Naga people willing to exchange goods with the plains of the Brahmaputra valley and were looked upon as opportunity to open new fairs by the British government.¹⁷

The census report of 1881 shows the increasing flow of people from the rest part of the Indian subcontinent to the Brahmaputra Valley. And this import of people was not motivated by agricultural purposes alone but trade was an important motivating factor.¹⁸ The same report says that they were not permanent settlers but used to go back to their home in Rajputana.¹⁹ During the 18th and 19th centuries the composition of traders as a community was very small but heterogeneous. The dominant traders were from Tibet and East Bengal with some traders from Burma. The Monpa and Bhutia traders coming from Tibet via Bhutan were mostly pilgrims and they used to carry goods while on pilgrimage. This eventually took the form of fair. Traders from East Bengal were more profit-driven as they used to pay taxes at Hadira *Chawki* to the Duaria Barua to enter into the Brahmaputra valley. Polanyi's use of the term 'reciprocity' perhaps explains this network of exchanges that covered a large part of Asia.²⁰ Eventually, these trade networks were overshadowed by the European traders and Marwaris.

3. Market Places: (A) *Haats*, (B) *Chawkis* and (C) *Bazaars*

Haats were a common feature in the commercial economy of Assam with people frequently selling their surplus products in these *haats*. The census reports of Assam of 1881 defined *haats* as a periodical market, where local people used to hold stalls to sell their products.²¹ Periodic *haats* were meeting place for both local traders as well as for long distance merchants. The fair in Hajo was another such annual *haat* that played a crucial role in pre-colonial diplomatic, spiritual and economic relations of Assam with Tibet and Bhutan. If we study Hajo as a case, then we see that it had not only mercantile importance, but politically and spiritually too this annual *haat* of Hajo was important. Hajo was a village in lower Assam not more than six miles from the northern banks of the Brahmaputra. Large number of Munpa(Monpa) and Bhuteeah(Bhutia) traders used to flock to the village on the season of trade. There was some sort of annual fairs held at Hajo.²² Chouna, Geegunshur and Simlibari along with Hajo were places where traders used to conglomerate. Along with these fixed places, marts were established at foothills to carry on internal trade.²³ Hajo falls into the religious network that existed in the South East Asia region cutting across Tibet, Bhutan, Burma and North Eastern India.²⁴ The bond of people of northern part of the Brahmaputra with the monasteries of Bhutan was at the same time religious and secular, as the people of northern Assam started following shaivism, but continued to pay tribute to the Buddhist monasteries. It marks the territorial influence of these Buddhist temples. At the same time the monks coming to Hajo for pilgrimage as well to trade used to pay tribute to the Ujir Baruah.

Besides Hajo, Sadiya was another place that was historically important. Goalpara had trade relation with Sadiya and other neighboring regions. In 1835 the value of trade in Goalpara was calculated as 22, 19, 877 rupees. And this trade was carried on through Marwari merchants entirely.²⁵ Goalpara as a bordering place between Assam and Bengal and because the Brahmaputra River passes through the place, she was the entry point for traders to come upward into Assam. Sadiya and Goalpara were the outposts for traders coming from Burma (Ava) and Bengal. These outposts were known as *chawki* with some officials to regulate the movement of traders in the Ahom period. The *Duaria Barua* was the official appointed in these *chawkis*.²⁶

Creation of the Hadira *chawki* along with the post of *Duaria Kakoti* near Guwahati in the 17th century indicated the intention of the Ahom kings to regulate the movement of traders and goods in and through Assam.²⁷ The purpose behind the creation of this *chawki* was to record the buying and selling of goods by the *Duaria Kakoti* from the Bangal merchants on behalf of the Ahom king. Susengphaa or Pratap Singha was the Ahom king at the time when the *chawki* was created. Similarly, *Wazir Barua/Uzir Barua* was in charge of the intercourses with Bhutan.²⁸ *Wazir/Ujir Barua* was the controller of Assam-Bhutan trade at Simlibari.²⁹ Both these posts of *Duaria Kakoti(Barua)* and *Wazir Barua* were hereditary.

The term *bazaar* appeared in the census report of 1872 when the report mentioned about Tezpur with only 1877 people residing in it, Nowgong (with 324 people) and Debrooghur or Dibrugarh (4452) as *bazaars* of Assam. Gowhatty or Guwahati was the only town in the region.³⁰ The concept of *bazaar* was not local, but with the Colonial government setting up their footmarks in the region, the term became popular. Guwahati as a market place or *bazaar* area was important for mustard seed trade.³¹ Goalpara lost its' commercial importance after British occupation of Assam. However, it remained the largest settlement of Marwari traders in 19th century.³² Guwahati became important in 1850s with four markets of which *Fancy bazaar* was of particular importance.³³ From late Ahom period to early colonial period, Assam's trading places underwent changes, not only in terms of terminology but also in terms of traders involved in it and the composition of goods. *Chawkis* and *haats* which represented primitive economy (Polanyi; 1977) became less important and regular markets or *bazaars* became more important as meeting point for both local and long distance traders.

4. Goods in Circulation

After 1826, the British officials in the Brahmaputra Valley were active in looking for some profitable goods which could be traded. Discovery of tea and the individual attempt of some British as well as other European entrepreneurs for introducing tea plantations in Assam are well known. But the early Company records also talks about the changing position of some commodities, such as cotton and silk. David Scott was one such official who examined the local variety of cottons and in 1832 he started silk worm rearing on experimental basis.³⁴ Same year a visiting officer of the company sent some silk specimen to Calcutta which was categorized as of good quality and there was demand from the side of the company for more silk.³⁵ There were several attempts on the part of company officials to find out the quality of the locally available cotton and it was discovered that local cotton resembles an inferior kind of Canton silk. But there was a growing interest in Muga silk and it was a valued item in the gulf and the Red sea countries.³⁶ The experiments on silks and cottons and at the same time discovery of tea in 1830s marked a shift

from the goods traditionally in circulation in Ahom period. But at the same time officials such as Scott were anxious of long term benefit of trade in Assam as Scott's personal view was that silk was the only commercially valuable item in Assam.³⁷

Prior to the colonial experiments, the local people as well as long distance traders were carrying on trade of some specific items. Circulation of goods was also a part of diplomatic ventures. As on certain occasions, the king of Bhutan, Deva Dharma Raja sent envoys on diplomatic missions along with long list of presents. For example, in 1801 four envoys named Jiva, Dindu, Khupa and Barukdewa met the Ahom *Barphukan* and the *Swargadeo* to inform about violation of border with Bhutan by some Ahom villagers. They gifted the king several items which included sword, different varieties of cloth, blankets, blankets from China, yaktails, both local gomcheng and Firanghee gomcheng, dwarakas of different colours, waist belt made of kocha cloth, frock-coat of kuchi, satranj, namdang, rug made of fur, horses and ponies, and blankets made of fur.³⁸

The latter half of 19th century marked a shift from the "traditional" pattern of economy. B.C.Allen's report on Lakhimpur district states that the tea industry that started in 1835 in the Koondil mukh in Sadiya occupied some 27% of total cultivated land by 1905.³⁹ Till 1840s the plantations were owned by the EIC but it was not profitable for the company because of high processing and transportation costs and these plantations changed hands to Messers, Warren, Jenkins & Co.⁴⁰ Besides tea, timber, rubber and coal were other natural product that the company government was looking up as potential trading goods. The British officials as well as individual European companies already started with commercial cultivation of these goods. Cotton and different varieties of silk were already dominant goods of production and trade.⁴¹ Colonial intervention brought new interest in certain goods. Improvement in communication played important role in the process, as steam communication was introduced in the region in 1847 which helped the Company to expand its colony in the region.⁴²

5. Conclusion

The nineteenth century saw transformation in matters of commerce in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The agrarian nature of economy remained same as in pre-colonial time. The new element was the commercialization of crops such as tea. Commerce was looked up in a new light. The traditional reciprocal trade which corresponded to substantive exchange gave way to complex nature of colonial commerce. In colonial commerce natives had a negligible role to play. Indigenous communities engaged in trade were often categories as frontier tribes engaged in barter. Here Pomeranz's idea of commerce as something that brings profit can be applied, as traditional way of *haats*, fairs etc. were looked down as "backward". Profit in trade and commercial activities became the goal. It replaced the old way of approaching commerce as a means of diplomatic gift giving and religious reciprocity. By the end of the nineteenth century, commerce was part of the colonial enterprise to create a market form of exchange which would support the colonial commerce in the global scale.

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