

Trade with East India Company during the Days of the Ahoms

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Abstract

In this paper a brief description is given how East India Company after the acquisition of Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765 made brilliant achievement in establishing business relation with Assam. In 1765 Society of trade included Assam in their commercial map and appointed Hugh Baillie at Goalpara to look after company's trade in Assam. From Baillie they could get the idea regarding the possibilities of trade in salt and other European commodities. But the time of starting the trade with Assam was not congenial. Internal troubles stood as hurdles in the progress of trade which ultimately compelled King Gaurinath Singha to seek for British help. Taking this chance Lord Cornwallis sent six companies of sepoy's under Captain Welsh to drive away the Burkundazes from Assam and to put Gaurinath Singha on the throne. After the restoration of peace and order in Assam Captain Welsh submitted a proposal of trade to Gaurinath Singha and the Ahom king accepted the proposal and signed a commercial treaty with the company on 28th February, 1793. Thus the British with a humble beginning of trade established their firm footing in Assam after 1826 A.D.

Key words : Trade, East India Company, Ahom, British, Merchants.

Introduction :

The Ahoms, a group of Tai Shans from South East Asian regions, entered into the Brahmaputra valley under the leadership of Sukapha in 1228 A.D. and ruled over the valley for long six hundred years. The Ahoms during their long period of reign not only encouraged internal trade but also encouraged external trade with the neighbouring countries like Tibet, Bhutan, China, Burma, Bengal etc. The circumstances also compelled them to establish trade relations with East India Company and other European merchants. Actually the trade with East India Company was established on

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a firm footing after the annexation of Assam to the British dominion but my study is confined only up to 1826 A.D. i.e. up to the treaty of Yandabo.

Objetives :

The main objectives of this study are

1. To give an idea to the readers how East India Company had established relation with Assam in respect of trade.
2. To assess the contribution of Baillie and Killican, the British agents at Goalpara, to the success of company's trade in Assam.
3. To evaluate how at the invitation of the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha the British came to Assam and how in the name of establishing peace in Assam persuaded the king to sign a commercial treaty with him on 28th Feb, 1793.

Coming of the European Merchants to Assam and the Initiative Taken by East India Company :

A new chapter in the history of Assam Bengal trade started when the *Nawab* of Bengal granted the *Dewani* i.e. the power to collect revenue and maintaining civil justice of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the East India company in 1765. Though the Company did not assume the direct responsibility of administration but indirectly the Company was the all in all. This dual government introduced by Lord Clive created much anarchy and confusion in Bengal. The Company's officers became very corrupt and engaged themselves in some illegal works. To compensate this loss and to put a check on these activities Lord Clive established the Society of Trade in 1765 and passed strict order prohibiting the officers from indulging in individual trade and from taking any bribe or present (Bhuyan, 1949). The Society was allowed to deal in salt, betel-nut and tobacco. He also proposed to the Company that the profits earned from these were to be distributed among the governors, councilors, senior civil and military servants. But the proposal of Lord Clive was not accepted by the Company and on the contrary the Board of Directors increased the salary of the officers (Baruah, 1997).

Besides this the Society appointed eleven agents among whom Hugh Baillie was appointed to the agency at Goalpara and he was allowed to deal in salt, betel-nut and tobacco. But Baillie could not make any profit on betel nut and tobacco. It was due to the fact that Assamese people were not fond of taking dried betel nut of Bengal and

they were habituated in taking ripe and unripe betel nuts plucked directly from trees. Tobacco was a common product that grew in the garden of every Assamese family. Therefore, the Society stopped the trade in betel nut and tobacco and confined itself only to salt. Salt at that time was a scarce commodity in Assam and so it was very expensive. Bengal salt had its great demand in Assam and the Assamese people consumed 1,00,000 *maunds* of Bengal salt annually (Pembarton, 1966) and the Company made much profit in this trade. But inspite of all these Baillie had to close the trade at the order of the Society of Trade on 1st August, 1768 and from that time inland trade was open for all Indian and European merchants (Bhuyan, 1949).

After the closure of this trade Baillie had to return to England and even after his return he wanted to revive the commercial relation with Assam and the adjoining countries. He submitted three memorandums to Board of Directors starting from 1771 to 1776 stating that Assam trade, if properly conducted, would be highly profitable to the Company. He also informed that though the only article of trade in Assam was salt but a merchant could deal with other items like broad cloth, metals of all specially copper and in return for it the Company would get *muga* silk, black pepper and spices of all sorts the value of which would be lakhs of rupees.

The period beginning 1771 to 1779 can be regarded as a glorious period for the Company because during this period Company was successful in establishing a trade relation with Assam. The authorities in Calcutta again deputed Baillie and asked him to proceed to Goalpara to make enquiries regarding the possibility of Assam trade by the Company. The Calcutta authorities also appointed Bogle, a Bengal civil servant, to make negotiations for opening up commercial relations with Tibet, Bhutan and Assam. As a result of the enquiries made by Baillie and Bogle regarding the resources and trade in Assam, the Board of Directors instructed the authorities in Calcutta to adopt some measures for placing the trade on a proper footing. When the Society of Trade was abolished in 1768 and the restriction on inland trade was withdrawn, a number of unauthorized merchants took the chance and the rivalries started among them which produced a situation not at all conducive to the growth of trade. All these problems compelled the Calcutta authorities to place the Assam trade directly under its control. European merchants seriously took interest in the trade of Assam in 1769 but in that very year internal troubles stood as hurdles in the progress of trade and ultimately brought ruin and gloominess to Assam.

English Merchants at Goalpara :

Of the English merchants to carry on trade with Assam, the most prominent were George Lear and Daniel Raush. They came to Goalpara in 1769 and Lear built a factory there at a cost of Rs. 21,742/-. He had also warehouse and godowns at Dacca which was his head quarter (Bhuyan, 1949). Daniel Raush was the collector of the salt revenue at Goalpara who played important role in Assam's politics also. The other English merchants who had their establishment at Jogighopa and carried on extensive trade in salt, clothes and other articles of commerce were William Dow, Robert Bigger, and Bernard Maccullam, Wheatland, (Bhuyan, 1949) Cator and John Taylor.

Besides these English merchants, there were some Frenchmen who residing at Goalpara carried on trade with Assam. Among them the most important were Laval, Gibbot and Campagnac. There were also a number of Indian merchants particularly Bengalese engaged in Assam trade and they were Subiram Palit, Gunny Sam Sarkar and Ganganarayan Roy (Barpujari, 2007). One noted banker named Jagat Seth of Murshidabad had also establishments at Goalpara, Jogighopa and Guwahati which continued up to 1815 and even later (Barpujari, 2007). The Marwari merchants of those places had extensive commercial relations with Jagat Seth.

But trade with Bengal was very badly affected due to the commercial rivalry among the merchants and non-payment of dues by the Assamese debtors. Besides this, the Duaria Barua appointed in the *choki* also prevented the merchants from entering into Assam. The doubtful measures adopted by the merchants to drive out their rivals compelled the Calcutta authorities to place the Assam trade directly under its control.

Killican's Exclusive Privilege in Assam Trade :

On June 9, 1780, Killican, a merchant and Bengal Civil Servant, submitted a proposal to the Government of Bengal that he would pay to the Company Rs.50,000/- per year if the Company granted him exclusive privilege of trade in Assam for four years (Bhuyan, 1949). He also proposed to appoint another person in the border to collect revenue from the farmer, to protect him in exercising his privilege and in maintaining peace, order and goodwill among the people of Assam. The main intension of submitting this proposal by Killican was to improve the trade with Assam and to collect some revenue for the Company. Killican's proposal was accepted by the Board and Huge Baillie was appointed as resident at Goalpara for the regulation of trade and

smooth functioning of collection of revenue. On the same day i.e. on June 13, 1780 the Board announced the grant of exclusive privilege of trade in Assam to Killican for four years. Though in the beginning Killican was confident of being successful in Assam trade but later due to the frequent disturbances in Assam he was compelled to inform the Board that he was not sure of achieving the desired success. So the Board cancelled the exclusive privilege granted to Killican and also the power granted to his agent Baillie was withdrawn (Bhuyan, 1949).

Achievements of Baillie as the Superintendent of Assam Trade at Goalpara :

Baillie after his recall from Goalpara sailed for England but he was determined to execute his plan of establishing a market in Assam for the Company with himself as its director or superintendent. Surprisingly the attitude of the Directors took a new turn in favour of Assam trade. The Company decided to open salt trade in Assam in return for gold dust and other commodities. In the mean time, Henry Lodge, who held several responsible positions under the Company, submitted a proposal to the Company to bring Assam trade particularly salt under the exclusive control of the East India Company. His proposal was granted and the Government of Bengal directed to appoint Baillie as the superintendent of trade at Goalpara on the basis of his past experience and also for the fact that he was the first person who revealed Assam to the Company. Though he was re-appointed but was forbidden to conduct any private trade either in his own name or in the name of others. Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of India, sent a letter to the *Ahom* king Gaurinath Singha informing the appointment of Baillie and his appointment was only for the regulation and protection of trade and for establishing friendship with Assam (Bhuyan, 1949).

Baillie's commercial enterprise was not successful due to the fact that salt was not a necessity of the general people but a luxury to the nobility. Apart from this, Baillie started his commercial activities in Assam during the disturbed period when the *Moamarias* rose in revolt and had occupied the capital by driving away king Gaurinath Singha to Gauhati (1780-94).

On November 8, the Barphukan, the viceroy of Guwahati, sent a letter to Baillie in the name of the king of Assam seeking help from British to control the disturbances in Assam. Baillie dispatched a letter to the Governor General stating that in such critical situation it was not safe for him to reside at Goalpara without sufficient protection and

so he requested the Governor General to abolish his residentship at Goalpara. At his request the Government of Bengal promptly decided to abolish the residentship at Goalpara. Baillie handed over the charge to Henry Douglas, Commissioner of Coch Behar on 25th January, 1790 and returned to Calcutta and finally left for England in 1792 (Barpujari, 2007).

It can be mentioned that Baillie was the pioneer of English trade in Assam. He was so much popular among the Assamese people and he enjoyed so much trust and confidence among them that they addressed him as '*Beli Saheb*'.

After the return of Baillie, the situation in Assam gradually became worse. Gaurinath Singha appealed for help from his vessel chiefs of Cachar and Jayantia but he was disappointed. The Ahom king unable to suppress the Moamarias and to expel the Burkandazes finally asked for military help from the Governor General, Lord Cornwallis. The British who were always interested in expanding their trade and territories in Assam found a golden opportunity when the Ahom king himself requested the Governor General for help. Besides this, British also realized that a peaceful and submissive Assam was most essential for them without which their trade interest would be hampered. So the Lord Cornwallis sent six companies of Sepoys to Assam in September 1792 under the command of Captain Welsh. He was also accompanied by Lt. Robert MacGregor as adjutant, Ensign Wood as Surveyor and Dr Peter Wade as assistant surgeon (Baruah,1997).

Gaurinath Singha's Commercial Treaty with the Company :

Though Captain Welsh had to keep himself busy with active military measures and political negotiations he had not forgotten the commercial objects of his deputation to Assam. Finding an easy access to Assam the British on the pretext of restoring peace in Assam submitted a proposal of commercial treaty. Gaurinath Singha accepted the proposal and signed a commercial treaty with the Company on 28th Feb, 1793 with the object of establishing a reciprocity and liberty of trade between the subjects of Bengal and Assam (Barpujari, 1996). The main terms of the agreement were:

1. All imports into Assam were subject to a duty of 10%. Salt of Bengal be subject to an import duty of 10 % on the supposed prime cost at Rs.400 per 100 *maunds*, while broad clothes of Europe, cotton clothes, carpets, copper, lead, tin, pearls, hardware, jewellery and spices were to pay an equal import duty of 10%.

2. The duty on export, from Assam was also to be 10%.
3. Rice and grains of all kinds were to be exempted from all duties.
4. Two custom houses would be established one at Kandahar and other at Guwahati. The agents at the former place were to collect the duties on all imports and those at Guwahati to collect duties on all exports and the remuneration of agents was fixed at 12% on all collections.
5. No European merchant or adventurer of any description would be allowed to fix his residence in Assam without the permission of English government and that of the *Swargadeo*.
6. It was proposed that out of total probable collection of Rs.90, 000/- at Kandahar *Choki*, a sum of Rs.26,000/- should be paid to Assam *Raja* and the remaining amount would be a contribution to the expenses of the British contingent serving in Assam (Barpujari, 2007).

Hardly Captain Welsh had signed the treaty with the Assam king, there occurred a radical change in the policy of the British Government. Sir John Shore (1793-98) who succeeded Lord Cornwallis followed a policy of non interference i.e. not interfering in the politics of other states. Consequently troops sent to Assam under Captain Welsh were recalled. In spite of the request of Gaurinath Singha and his subjects, British forces were withdrawn from Assam in July 1794 leaving the province of Assam into anarchy and misrule. After the departure of Captain Welsh from Assam, European merchants suffered heavy losses that they had to protest officially to Gaurinath Singha from Calcutta to get their legitimate dues from Assam traders.

Conclusion :

As a result of the civil war (*Moamaria* Rebellion) and repeated invasion of the Burmese, economic life of the people of Assam was dislocated. The dreadful atrocities committed by the Burmese soldiers resulted in wholesale depopulation. Industry collapsed, agriculture neglected and trade came to stand still. Assam's trade with Bhutan which was estimated at Rs. 2 lakhs suffered so terribly that only two *Bhutia* merchants came down from hills (Barpujari, 2007). A sharp fall was noticed in the import of salt, the most important commodity which was 1, 00,000 *maunds* in 1782 dwindled to 35,000 *maunds* in 1809 and 25,000 *maunds* in 1824-25 (Hamilton, Francis,

1963). External trade was crippled by revival of the monopoly of *Duaria Baruas* following the withdrawal of commercial regulations and the indiscriminate manner in which duties were collected at Kandahar *Choki*.

Thus the British with a small band of soldiers led by Captain Welsh suppressed internal disturbances in Assam which indirectly brought Ahom king to their control. The Moamaria rebellion invited another great disaster to Assam i.e. three of the Burmese invasions. It was in the worst hour of peril, Assam once again sought help from the British and they came as a deliverer to the people of Assam and the people of Assam also greeted them with 'unbounded joy'.

In 1813 when the monopoly of East India Company was abolished, the Government of Great Britain was interested in creating favourable conditions for investment of capital for expanding market opportunities in Assam. This change had brought significant impact upon the trade policy of Britain. The British policy of trade was connected with the political decisions of British Raj and many of the treaties either made with the Ahom king and with the East India Company did not materialize for change of Government policy in the post treaty period.

The British who came to Assam as protectors finally annexed the whole of Assam into their dominion, putting an end to the independent and powerful Ahom monarchy. After the British occupation of Assam, an era of modern industrialization began which slowly and steadily transformed the economic façade of the state by the end of the 19th century.

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