

Silk Trade of Brahmaputra Valley in Colonial Period and Future Perspective

Monowarul Hassan Khan

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of History and Archaeology, North-Eastern Hill University (Tura Campus) Meghalaya-794002, India

Abstract

The trade from Brahmaputra Valley has a unique tradition throughout the history. Although, origin of the silk industry and trade of the region is somewhat obscure, there is hardly any doubt about its antiquity. Silk has not been confined to the Valley alone and had world-wide reputation for the manufacture of varieties of silk. The art of the manufacture of various silk cloths and its trade were known to the Brahmaputra Valley since early times. The late eighteenth century was the period of transition from Mughal and Ahom state to the colonial state in the history of Assam. This transition brought about gradual transformation in the politico-administration and economic system of the region. It was in these period the company established salt trade with Assam. The colonial state started reorienting the trade, developed traditional trade routes and established new trade network of the region for its own advancement. For example the Stilwell road was newly constructed by the British in Margherita; the road begins to connect the northeast of India with China in the center of what could be rich economic zone of South-east Asia. More so, this region having rich resources played significant role both in inland and overseas trade since early times. Brahmaputra Valley had well established trade connection with Indian sub-continent as well as Southeast Asia and China.

KEYWORDS: Silk Trade, Trade-Routes, Brahmaputra Valley, And Colonial Period.

INRODUCTION:

The history of Brahmaputra Valley can be understood from the writings of scholars (Choudhury 1987:39-45, Barpujari 1990:63-78) who have studied the sources belonging to the period beginning from the earliest times to the colonial periods. Based on their readings of the evidence they tried to map out the major part of north eastern and eastern India under the 'state' of Pragjyotisha-Kamarup. According to P.C.Choudhury the state comprised the areas of Bhutan, Tibet and other hilly tracts in the north and the whole of Arunachal Pradesh (Choudhury 1987:39-45). In the early periods referring to the data of the Periplus of the Erethean Sea and Ptolemy's Geography, he further opined that the boundary of the state touched sea in the south, the Karatoya River in the west and the Sadiya region of upper Assam in the east. But the present Assam is surrounded by the mountainous regions of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the northern side, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram on the southern side, on the eastern side by Manipur and Nagaland and on the western side West Bengal.

The geographical location of the Brahmaputra valley played a crucial role in the economy of the region. It kept close contact with Bhutan, Tibet, North Bengal and its western part, parts of Bangladesh and distant China also. The Arthasastra of Kautilya (Kangle 1972:156-159) mentioned 'Paralauhiyakam' which was then famous

for commercial goods. If we identify 'Paralauhiyakam' with Lauhitya or Brahmaputra then the valley remained very busy in exporting commercial goods during the time of Kautilya. It is started in the Arthashastra that from Suvarnakudya traders supplied Ksuma Dukula and pattrarna fabrics to Magadha. The interpreter of the Arthashastra located this Suvarnakudya in Kamarupa which was then famous for supplying these exportable goods. The main trade routes that involved Kamrupa-Pragjyotisha during the period of the Varmanas, Salastambhas and the Palas lay between China, Tibet and Central Asia to the north east; the rest of India to the west; and to the sea port of Chittagaon to the south and thence via the sea to the rest of the world (Rhodes 1992.). Some trade have been generated by local products such as salt, cotton, ivory, tea, coal, silk, opium, oil, etc.

The numismatic evidence indicates that in the third quarter of the sixth century A.D. some gold coins were struck in the Samatta kingdom in East Bengal, extending westward to the river Meghna into southern Tripura. This state was at that time very important in terms of silk trade because it controlled the trade routes of Kamarupa to the sea. This is confirmed by the inscriptional reference of Mahendra Varman and other later rulers of the Varman dynasty that the territorial empire of Mahendra Varman touched the sea- shore (Sharma 1978). In the Si-Yu-Ki (Watters 1904:184.) there is reference that when Hiuen-Tsang wanted to go back to China, Kumara (Bhaskar Varman) offered to escort him up to the seaport which clearly indicates that the silk trade between Kamarupa and China continued by sea-route also. During the Pala periods the situation of the town like Pragjyotisa, Haruppesvara, Kamarupanagara, and Durjaya on the bank of the Brahmaputra Valley greatly facilitated commercial intercourse. In fact the network of the river system of Assam played a conspicuous part in contributing to the growth of all commercial enterprises both within the state and with other lands. Hiuen-Tsang states that the rulers of Kamarupa had the sea routes to China under their protection.

The Pre-Colonial Assam was relatively isolated from the rest of India. But it had a unique socio-economic structure. Tavernier (Tavernier 1899) stated that the kingdom of Assam was one of the best countries in all Asia, without any need of foreign supply. There were mines of gold, silver, steel, iron and a great store of Silk (Barpujari 1986:171). The industry and craft were developed and a considerable volume of trade and commerce existed with neighbouring territories (Gait 1926:267-293.). The textile industry reached a very high point of perfection under the Ahom government. The muga silk was an article of trade with Bengal as well as with the coromandal and Malabar coasts in the early 17th century. According to Shihabuddin, every year in normal times, quantities of aloe wood, peppers, spikenard, musk, gold and a variety of silk were offered in exchange of salt and several other products at the Ahom-Mughal check-post (Baruah 2000:437-438.). Muga silk was also one of the articles of trade with countries like China, Bhutan, Bengal Tibet, and Burma during the Ahom periods. In 17th century by Mumai Tamuli Barbarua, a great administrator of the Ahom kingdom (Sudeshna 2005:23) made it compulsory "for every adult female to spin a certain quantity of thread every evening". Embroidery and dying were highly skilled jobs at that time. Besides, large quantities of lace used to be exported to Mughal India, China, and Japan. He also establishes a craft village in the northern bank of Brahmaputra known Sualkuchi. Silk weaving and trade in Sualkuchi (a village of present Assam) actually has been traced back to around 10th-11th centuries when King Dharma Pal of the Pala dynasty sponsored the craft by bringing the Tanti weaving community from Tantikuchi to Sualkuchi (Bahadur 1914). The best quality of Patroma (Pat) was produced in this village in around the 4th century B.C,

patronized by the Pala and the Ahom kings. In Nowgong also, this special thread was made for weaving for royal garments (Baruah 2000:438).

The trade routes of these periods were connected with Mughal India through Bengal. There were four routes from Bengal to Assam, one by land and three by water. The first land route laid through Mursidabad, Malda, Dinajpur, Rangur, Bagwa and Goalpara. The second route was via Dacca, Dumary, Puculoe, Jamalpur, Singimari and Goalpara. The third route was through Sylhet, Cherra, Moplung, Hungkloa, Ranigaon, Khanamukh and Gauhati. The last two land routes were almost impassable during the rains. The river route and the first land routes were the most popular (M'Cosh 2000:9). The Tabaquat-i-Nasiri says that there were thirty five mountains pass between Kamarupa and Tibet. The trade with Tibet and Bhutan was more profitable. He refers to as many as five routes leading from Sadiya into Tibet or China proper. For conducting trade with Bengal, choukis or outpost were established by the Ahom king and also appointment Duaria Barua or Chakial Barua. The most important chouki was Kandahar or Hadira Chouki.

The Ahom also migrated to the Brahmaputra valley through a pass in the Patkai hills later on the Burmese also invaded the land through the same pan. Being the most accessible and well-known route, Pemberton was of the opinion that through this route the British hope to establish a commercial relation with upper Burma and China also. An important trade route between Bhutan and the Brahmaputra valley was through the river Manas via Tassagong and Dewangiri to Hajo. The Bhutias were usually accompanied with coloured blankets, gold dust, silver, salt, musk, bees wax and munjeet. They took back with them raw and manufactured silk, cotton, dried fish and tobacco. In west of the Buriguma Duar was the Kuriapara Duar which had been the main trade routes between Tibet and Brahmaputra valley (Goswami 2008:172-174). There were two principal trade routes from Lhasa and China to Brahmaputra valley during the time of pre-colonial period and that is ought to be right away invigorated in the Colonial period. About the citation of the routs Hamilton writes, 'At a place called Chouna two months journey from Lassa on the confines of the two states there is a mart established and on the Assam side'. Further he also mentioned that Geegunshur was one of the importance place 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 at Geegunshur. Through this place rice was exported to Tibet from Assam in large quantities and silk cloth, manufactured by the native women in Assam.

Actually the late eighteenth century was the period of transition from Mughal and Ahom state to the colonial state in the history of Assam. This transition brought about 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 (Gait 2012:521). It was in these periods the company established salt trade with Assam (Bhuyan 1990:156). The colonial state started reorienting the trade, developed traditional trade routes and established new trade network of the region for its own 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 with China was the center of what could be rich economic zone of South-east Asia.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study is to analyse the Silk Trade of Brahmaputra Valley in Colonial Period and Future Perspective

Methodology:

Historical research methodology has been followed for the study. The paper evolves a critical use of both primary and secondary sources based on internal and external criticism. As primary source, archival documents is used and as secondary sources, books and articles that published in journals and magazine etc are used. To understand the changing socio-economic condition of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoin area in the colonial period; silk trade has adopted as attributes of analysis for the study.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF TRADITIONAL HANDLOOM OR SILK INDUSTRY OF BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY:

The handloom or silk industry has a tradition in India as well as in Assam or Brahmaputra Valley. The history of silk industry of Brahmaputra Valley may be traced back to the fourth century B.C. when Kautilya in the ‘‘Arthashastra’’ wrote about the Karpasik (cotton), Dukula (muga silk), Khauma (eri) and Patroma (mulberry silk) were products of the ancient Kamarupa (Kangle 1972:342). Assam had a high reputation and early traditions in manufacturing cotton clothes required for her own use. ‘Harsha Charita’ mentioned one of Dukula cotton which was sent as a present to king Harsha by king Bhaskaravarman of Kamrupa. Silk weaving and trade of Brahmaputra Valley actually has been traced back to around 10th-11th centuries when King Dharma Pal of the Pala dynasty sponsored the craft by bringing the Tanti weaving community from Tantikuchi to Sualkuchi (Bahadur 1914:13). The best quality of Patroma (Pat) was produced in this village in around the 4th century B.C, patronized by the Pala and the Ahom kings. In Nowgong also, this special thread was made for weaving the royal garments (Baruah 2000:438)

The medieval sources such as Persian writers Mirza Nathan, Shihabuddin Talish’s and the Ahom Buranji proved that the traditional handloom silk industry occupied a remarkable position in the economic filed of that period. The handloom or silk industry of Brahmaputra Valley encompasses cotton textile, silk textile as well as khadi cloth, which are in fact traditional cloth endowing social and moral value in the region. The Assamese handloom or silk industry is not only linked with the culture and tradition of Brahmaputra Valley it has also own significance in the Socio-economic sectors. With the British occupation of Assam in 1826, the administration policy resulted enormous change in the economy as well as socio- political history entire northeast Indian. The British administration towards making the economy of Assam a producer of commercial-cum-industrial by the business, trade as well as the improvement of traditional handloom or silk industry. In 1831, David Scott established a factory at Darrang. He introduced reels, reelers and plants from Rangpur to expand cultivation and production. For the materials well-being of the people, Scott found no other industry more suitable than traditional handloom or silk industry because the soil of Assam and the genius of people both favoured the production of the silk. But in December, 1832, when the Board of Trade expressed an unfavourable opinion of the market value of the Assamese silk, Robertson brought the experiment to a close (Barpujari 1986:257-258). However the attitude of the colonial Government can be followed through the remark of E.Stack on Assam Silk. Realizing the possibilities of the silk trade between Brahmaputra valley and Bengal, he suggested trade on the silk cocoons and not in silk threads. The government was not interested on developing the native industries, but only filling their pockets by profits. The tradition and culture of handloom or silk weaving is best illustrated by the remark passed on Assamese woman by the Father of the nation M. K. Gandhi who said that ‘‘every women of Assam is a born weaver’’. Even Gandhi highly surprised about the

art and culture of weaving of Assamese women when he visited an exhibition of eri and khadi clothes in Sualkuchi village in 9th January, 1946.

SILK TRADE OF BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY IN COLONIAL PERIOD:

Trade is mainly two way traffic and course of commerce. It is a practice and skilled occupation where purchase and sale are carried out. It is also considered a way of livelihood. The trade structure in the region during the colonial periods mainly consisted of Trade Fair, Local Trade and Cross-country Trade. The silk fabrics were woven both for home consumption and for sale. The Brahmaputra valley of Assam proper consists of six major districts Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakkhinpur during the colonial period. The river Brahmaputra forms the natural highway between this Valley and the adjoining areas. On an average, eight steamers a month leave Calcutta for Dibrugarh, laden with goods of every description. There is no doubt that the trade of this valley will continue to expand for many years to come (River Borne Trade Report: 1881-82:2). The trade in the valley of Assam proper is mostly in the hands of Kaiya or Marwari merchants and Muhammadan dealers, chiefly from Decca. The inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are keen traders, who themselves reap the profits of their increasing trade with the valley. The usual trade fairs were held in the Brahmaputra valley at Udalguri, Khagrapara, Daimara and Sadiya in the years of 1878-1882. These trade fairs were held as usual in the month of February. All those trade fair lasted to the end of February. The principal articles sold by the hill men at the fair are rubber, wax; musk and boats etc and the principal articles taken from the valley by the hill men are silk cloth, broadcloth, iron pans, brass utensils and beads (Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries Annual Report: 1881-1882:2-3). The trade of Bhutan proper is carried on with the neighbouring districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang. There was also fair increase in the export trade of the Brahmaputra valley during 1881-82.

However the silk and some other articles were exported to Bengal and adjoining areas of the valley by the hill tribes (Robinson 2003:240). The silk trade of Brahmaputra valley played a crucial role in the economic field of the region. In the Brahmaputra valley, Nowgong, Kamrup and Goalpara were the main district where locally made cloths like *gamosa* and *borkapor* as well as silk cloths such as *riha*, *mekhela-chador* were trading with the adjoining areas though the Brahmaputra valley.

There had been regular traffic between the people of the plains and the hills since the hill men had to depend on their neighbours of plain for necessities of their daily life. In every winter, through the *duars*, the Bhutias descended with mule loads of rock-salt, gold-dust, musk, woollens and carried up different kinds of cloths such as cotton-muga and erendi, raw silk etc (Barpujari 1980:270). Through the duars or the numerous passes across the mountains traffic was carried into the heart of the territory of the Bhutan and thence to Tibet. The Monbas and the Kampa Bhutias, it appears, were the middlemen in Assam-Tibet trade. M'Cosh in his 'Topography of Assam, traces the existence of a route from Sadiya to Tibet across the Himalayas and parallel to the Brahmaputra valley. The commerce among China and Ava and Brahmaputra valley is of much importance, and increasing every day. The imports are nankins, silks lacquered and China-ware, lead, copper, etc, (M'Cosh 2000:10, 67). The trade between Brahmaputra valley and Bhutan during 1809 was said to the amount of two lakhs rupees per annum. The chief articles of the trade through the valley to Bhutan were lac, madder, silk, erendi silk and dried fish (Pemberton 1991:83). Bogle describes that spices, timber and coarse cloth of silk and linen were imported into Tibet from Brahmaputra Valley (Markham 2010:125-126).

The trans-frontier trade is carried on with Bhutan at Darrang and Subankhata. The Bhutias come down with the trade items such as lac, wax, chillies, blankets etc. They sold these things to the traders, and proceeds to buy cotton thread and cloth, rice, silk cloth and thread etc (Assam District Gazetteers of Kamrup vol.iv 1995:182-183). The principal articles exported from the Brahmaputra valley was timber mustard seed, jute, unhusked rice, fish as well as silk cloth, cotton etc. The rivers also take very prominent part in the distribution of the internal trade of the valley (Assam District Gazetteers of Goalpara 2012:101).

FUTURE PERSPECTIVE AND ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE:

The economic importance of the Brahmaputra valley was not only for its resources but also for the strategic location which help the native people to conducts trade with adjoining areas of the valley. Future hope for development silk trade and trade routes of the existence routes of valley. The Frontier Tribal Convention organized by eighteen ethical tribal groups on April 9-10,1998 at Margherita, demanded that the Stilwell Road be opened to maintain the traditional economic and cultural relations with their original homeland where live their kith and kin. Such bonding could be a balm and wean away frustrated youth from insurgency and inspire them to build a new cooperative commonwealth in which they have a central place and manifold opportunities for self-fulfilment (Bora 1999:273).The Brahmaputra valley having a common frontier with Bhutan, Tibet, Burma and neighbouring areas which will help the people to build a worldwide silk trade, trade as well as other economic and cultural relations of the adjoining areas of the Brahmaputra valley because of global demand of silk fabrication. Henceforth in the adjoining areas of the Brahmaputra valley the silk trade is allowed to take place in a clear and systematic manner, many dynamic economic forces may be unleash of the valley to opening up of mutually beneficial for the rural and urban people in the economic field of the valley.

CONCLUSION:

The trade had been one of the most vital determinant aspects in the Brahmaputra valley. The Brahmaputra valley had a long tradition of trade and commerce since the earliest times and the silk trade across the valley centred on it. This trade of the valley was an important instrument of socio-economic exchange amongst the Brahmaputra valley populace were bonded together that they belonged to different ethical groups and culture. The British period maintained this ancient legacy of trade and commerce by the might of Imperialism and consequently altered the very fabric of the valley polity and economy.

REFERENCES:

1. Assam Secretariat (c) Administration (Record & Library) Department. *Report on the River-Borne Trade of the Province of Assam 1880 to 1895*. Dispur: Guwahati. State Archives.
2. Assam Secretariat (c) Administration (Record & Library) Department. *Annual Report on the Trade between Assam and the Adjoining Foreign Countries 1881 to 1882*. Dispur: Guwahati. State Archives.
3. Allen,B.C.1995. *Assam District Gazetteers of Kamrup*. Dispur: Guwahati. State Archives.
4. Allen,B.C.2012. *Assam District Gazetteers of Goalpara*. Dispur: Guwahati. State Archives

5. Allen, B.C. 1915. *Assam District Gazetteers of Darrang*. Dispur: Guwahati. State Archives.
6. Bora, S. 1999. "The Stilwell Road: A Saga of the Past and a Hope for the Future". *Proceedings of NEIHA*. Dibrugarh.
7. Bahadur, K.L.B. 1914. "The Weaving Master". Letter, to the second secretary Government of Assam, Shillong, March no 13, (Assam, 1914)
8. Barpujari, H.K. 1986. *Assam in the days of Company 1826-1859*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication.
9. Barpujari, H.K. 1990. *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.-I, (Ed)*. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
10. Baruah, S.L. 2000. New Delhi: *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt, Ltd.
11. Bhuyan, S.K. 1990. *Anglo-Assamese Relation: 1771-1826*. Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
12. Barpujari, H.K. 1980. *Assam in the days of Company 1826-1858*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication.
13. Choudhury, P. C. 1987. *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the twelfth century A.D.* Guwahati: Department of Historical Antiquarian Studies.
14. Gait, E. 2012. *A History of Assam*. Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall.
15. Goswami, P. Bezbaruah, R. & Banerjee, D. (ed.) 2006. *North East India: Interpreting the Sources of Its History*. New Delhi: Indian Council of historical Research.
16. Kangle, R.P. 1972. *Kautilya Arthasastra*. Bombay: University of Bombay Press.
17. Markham, C.R. 2010. *Narrative of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet*. London: Cambridge University Press
18. M'Cossh, J. 2000. *Topography of Assam*. New Delhi: Logos Press Publication.
19. Pemberton, R.B. 1991. *Report on The Eastern Frontier of British India*. Guwahati: Published by the Government of Assam in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies Narayani Handiqui Historical Institute Assam.
20. Stack, E. 1896. *Silk in Assam, notes on some Industries of Assam from 1884-95*. Shillong: Assam Secretariat printing office.
21. Tavernier, J.B. 1889. *Travels in India*. London: Macmillan Publication.
22. Rhodes, N. 2003. *The trade routes of Early Assam-the Light shed by Coinages*, NEIHA, XXIV Session, Guwahati. Also see Mukherjee, B.N. 1992. *External Trade of Early North-East India*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publication.
23. Robinson, W. 2003. *California: A Descriptive Account of Assam*. California University Press.
24. Sharma, M.M. 1978. Guwahati: *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*. Guwahati University Press.
25. Sudeshna, P. 2005. Delhi: *Indigenous Industries of Assam*, Anshad Publishing House
26. The French traveller, *Jean Baptiste Tavernier*, came to India in 1640. His Travels in India (translated V. Ball, London 1899) forms an invaluable source of material for the socio-economic history of India of the periods.