

TRADE RELATION WITH THE FRONTIER REGION IN THE AHOM PERIOD AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

TINAMONI RAJKUMARI

M. Phil. Scholar, Department of History,

Dibrugarh Univeristy

Permanent Address: Mathurapur-785689, Dist- Charaideo, Assam.

ABSTRACT:

Trade is an important part of economic activity. Though trade in Assam was not conducted in large scale in the medieval period, trade was conducted to fulfill the necessity of the people. In the long reign of the Ahoms there was continuous trade with the frontier hill tribes. Here the paper attempts to study the trade relation between the frontier hill tribes, the Ahom policy and administration in the frontier areas, commodities of trade, communication system etc.

Key words: Frontier trade, Administration, Commodities of trade, Communication system.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The economic history of a society developed in parallel with other features of a civilization. The Ahoms migrated to the Brahmaputra valley from the region of Upper Burma and Southern Yunan in the beginning of thirteenth century. With the migration of the Ahoms the Brahmaputra valley had experienced many changes in the field of economy, society, polity, culture and also in process of state formation and administration. In the field of economy the Ahoms had brought a revolutionary change by introducing wet rice cultivation, different kind of professional *khels* or unit of *paiks* or groups of people equipped with different work. Hence surplus production in the agriculture made them enable to engage in non agrarian activities like making crafts, trade etc. The Ahom state which ruled about six hundred years from thirteenth century to the nineteenth century went through several changes. In the initial period of state formation the Ahoms had very little concern about trades. The Ahom kings promoted the trading activity by establishing *hat*, *phats* (markets) and *duars* (check posts). From these market places and check posts they had collected tools. They made appointment to different officials to look after the trade, collect duties from the check posts and markets. Usually there were three kind of trade practiced, domestic trade, trade with neighboring hill tribes and external trade with other countries. Those who conducted domestic trade, their principal items of exchange comprised of agrarian products while in the external trade forest products, mineral products, animals, silk threads and cloths were dealt in. Though the communication system was not much favorable for trading activity trade and commerce flourished gradually in the Ahom period.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The present study aims to analyze nature of trade and trade relation of the Ahom state with the frontier regions from historical perspective. It will focus on factors affecting the trading activities. This study will analyze whether the Ahom state policy had any impact on the trade and economy on the medieval Ahom state.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- Whether the Ahom State had taken any measurement to develop the trade relation with the Frontier regions?
- What were the factors affecting trade relation?
- Whether the Ahom State policy had any impact on the trade and economy?

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Trade is a necessary economic activity. Nature of trade and demands of the peoples changes throughout the time. The process of trade is connected with many factors such as raw material or natural resources, suitable transport system, geography, population, administration etc. The present study examines the nature of trade of the Ahom state with the Frontier regions. The study will helps to find out the factors which influenced the trading activities with the frontier regions. Also it will focus on whether the Ahom state policy had any impact on the trade as well as economy.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

A Socio Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam (1200-1800 AD) of S.N. Sarma studied about trade relations with Himalayan region, Bengal, Export and Import between Assam and Bengal, Medium of exchange. Here the author made an attempt to give a brief account of the nature of economy and trade of the medieval Assam.

Medieval Assamese Society book written by Sarbeswar Rajguru provides valuable information about the agricultural system, crafts, small industries along with commercial enterprises. Here the author examines the transport system, medium of exchange, weights and measurement, prices of commodities, frontier trade, internal market etc.

Itihashe Suwara Sosota Bosor of Sarbananda Rajkumar, a comprehensive work about the Ahom State and administration analyze the trade and trade relation in the Ahom period. Here we find mention of markets or hats established by the Ahom kings and appointment of different official in the frontier region to regulate the trading and other economic activities such as revenue collection in those regions.

Agrarian System of Medieval Assam composed by Jahnabi Gogoi Nath made an attempt to study the relation between trade and agriculture of the medieval Assam. The book analyzes the land system, method of cultivation, peasantry, trade in agricultural products, transport system and trade relation with the hill tribes.

The Comprehensive History of Assam (Volume 3rd) of H. K. Barpujari discusses about the internal and external trade of the Ahom state broadly. Here the author analyze the trade relation of the Ahoms with different countries and tribes, prices of commodities, communication system, mode of exchange, trade relations with the European merchants in detail.

6. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To study the trade relation between the Ahom State and the Frontier regions
- To examine the impact of trade in the economy
- To find out the factors that affect the Trade relation between the Ahom state and Frontier regions

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

In the present work all the available and relevant sources will be consulted. It will follow the descriptive and historical methodology. Both primary and secondary sources will be consulted in this study.

8. ADMINISTRATION IN THE FRONTIER AREAS IN THE AHOM PERIOD:

The gradual development of trading activities can be seen from the reign of Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 A.D). Markets or hats were held mostly in the frontier areas and the neighboring tribe such as the Kacharis, Nagas, Karbis, Syntengs were connected with the markets.¹ Kacharihat in Sivsagar and Nagora served as trading centre where Nagas used to come from the Naga hills and Kacharis from the plains to exchange their products.² J.P. Wade mentioned about few names of hats or markets in his *Geographical sketch of Assam* such as Kachari hat, Naga hat, Kolor Phat, Khitlur hat, Nazira hat, Holor phat.³ The Bongal hat at Hadira Choky had maintained trade relation with Bengal.⁴ Ahom king Pratap Singha established market at Dupgarh and Namchang Borhat. The Nagas brought salt from salt mines in Namchang and exchanged it with rice, tin, coarse-red cotton cloth, dry fish etc.⁵ The Bhutiyas and Tawang people came to the market in the Daranga (northern portion of Kamrup) and Suwankhat, Udalguri of Darrang and Ghagrapar.⁶

The buffer region which were known as *duars*, between the organized states like Assam, Bhutan and Tibet, served as the common trading point.⁷ Seven *duars* or custom houses held on the frontiers of Assam and those situated at the foothills of the Himalayan region. During the Ahom reign these were used for trading purpose. Bijni, Chapakhamar, Chapaguri, Baksha, Gharkola, Killing, Buriguma were such *duars*.⁸ The trade relation between Assam and Bhutan had taken place through Kariaparduar, situated at the east of Darrang.⁹ The Khumpa Bhutia and Lhasa merchants had visited Darrang during the later phase of Ahom rule. There were also two *duars* Charduar and No duar which were given protection from the Bhutias and Dafalas by the grant of concession in the form of blackmail collected from the duar areas.¹⁰ The Bhutiyas came down to the valley of the Manas river via Tasong and Dewangiri to Hajo where a fair was usually held.¹¹ The Jayantiya Buranji provides information that the Syntengs and the tribes inhabiting in the Jayantiya hills adjacent to the Ahom border area presently south west of the Nowgong district of Assam come down to Phulguri, Hatiyamukh, Sonapur and Haterenga for exchanging or purchasing commercial goods.¹²

The Ahom state in order to control the regular trade and economic activities in the Ahom kingdom needed proper administration. They established some regulations and officials were appointed to regulate the sales tax, prices of articles etc. *Hatkar* (market tolls) was collected by Hatkhowas at a percentage of the price of the good as fixed by the state, which were changed from time to time. In the chronicle of Kashinath Tamuli Phukan it is mentioned that during the reign the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-41) an officer known as Bharali Barua from the Daivajna community was responsible for the determination of the rate of tax or duty

levied on commodities, those were supplied for sale in the markets of Namchang and Barhat.¹³ To regulate the illegal transport of goods and to collect duties outposts or Chokys were established at strategic position. At Salalgarh, on the bank of Brahmaputra at Solalpath or 'Sewal choky' in Darrang, the Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-41A.D.) erected custom houses to collect tolls on the Daflas and other tribes of Wood's survey and duties in all goods brought from Kamrup and border areas. The Salal Phalia Barua was in charge to collect the duties which were about Rs.5000 per year.¹⁴ The Ahom state had good trade relations with the frontier tribes. Mostly small scale trade was conducted between the hill tribes and the Ahom state. Both exchanged and trade on the commodities which were available in their inhabiting regions. But sometimes the tribes of the hilly areas had made inroads in the plain region of the Brahmaputra valley and looted the food grains from the plain people. The Ahom State in order to provide protection from the inroads of the hill people appointed several frontier governor or Datiyalia Bisayas like Sadiya Khowa Gohain, Marangi Khowa Gohain, Kajalimukhia Gohain, Solal Gohain and Jagial Gohain.¹⁵ It is appeared from the chronicle that Sadiya Raja was first annexed with the Ahom kingdom during the reign of Dihinga Raja (1497-1539 A.D.) after it had been taken from Chutiyas. Fachengmung, an Ahom official was appointed as Sadiya Khowa Gohain.¹⁶ Three hundred Ahom families of Gharphalia clan and twelve chiefs were set up at Sadiya so that the position of Sadiya Khowa Gohain could make powerful. He was also assisted by thousand *paik* soldiers. He had to maintain good relations with the Miris, the Dafalas and the Khumpa living in the area.¹⁷ The post of Marangikhowa Gohain was first created during the reign of Ahom king Dihingia Raja with his fifth son Suchen along with one thousand *paiks* under his command. The area covering Jorhat to Kaziranga was under his supervision and had to serve as king's representative to maintain political and other relations with the Kacharis, Miris and other tribes living in the region.¹⁸ Kajalimukh situated at the confluence of Kolong and Kapili rivers, was considered as an important military outpost during the Ahom Mughal contest. Kajalimukhia Gohain was appointed to protect the western region around Kajalimukh against Jayantiyas and the Kacharis.¹⁹ The *duars* or custom houses served as an important source of Ahom revenue administration. It can be known that there were seven number of duars or custom houses situated on the border lying between the plains and foothills of the Himalayas. Of these Bijni, Chapakhamar, Chapaguri, Baksa, Ghorkola situated in the modern Kamrup and Goalpara district and Killing and Burigama in the Darrang District.²⁰ The frontier region of Darrang was subdivided into seven division which were under the control of seven chieftains known as Satrajas. From the reign of Ahom king Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-63 A.D.) the *duars* lying on the borders of Kamrup and Goalpara came under the occupation of Bhutias. Hence a commitment was followed by the Bhutiyas to allow them to pay annual tribute in the *duars*. There was dual authority practiced by the both Ahom and Bhutia Government in these *duar* areas.²¹ An officer named *Uzir Barua* was appointed at Simaliyabari (Simalabari) to look after the Assam-Bhutan trade. The *Barua* did not levy any duty but without his involvement no transaction was carried on. He served as the broker both for Assamese and Bhutias for their mutual exchange and purchase of goods.²² The trade relation between the Assam and Tibet conducted through the Kariapar *duar*, located to the east of Darrang. There were another two duars to the east of Kariapar *duar* known as Char-*duar* or four passes and No-*duar*. They got protection from the inroads of Bhutias and the Dafalas by the grant of concession in the shape of blackmail to be collected by them from the *duar* areas.²³ The revenue administration of the Bhutia duars was generally in the hands of *duarias*. But during the reign of Pratap Singha, Dharma Narayan the fugitive Koch ruler in Darrang was given the responsibility to maintain relations with the Bhutias on behalf of the Ahom government. He also had to give protection to the region from the inroads of the Bhutias in the north-west and Aka Dafalas in the north-east.²⁴ During the reign of Ahom king Gadadhar Singha, there was conflict with the Bhutias and payment of taxes by the Kachari Mahalias (Kachari traders of betel nuts) was withheld by the Bhutias in the Kariapar *duar*. But the dispute was settled with the intervention of the *duarias*.²⁵ Another frontier region located on the north of Darrang was Chatguri, which was under Chatguri Baruas. An amount of Rs.6000 is said to have been collected from the Chatguri check post.²⁶ There was also an internal trade outpost at Mayang in Nowgong district, where tolls were collected by Dhekial Phukan and Cholahdara Phukan.²⁷ The most important *choky* or *duar* was the Kandahar choky, situated at the mouth of the Manas river in the Bousi pargana opposite to Goalpara. This area was under the supervision of Kandahar Barua who conducted the commercial relation between Assam and Bengal.²⁸ Kandahar Barua was assisted by a number of minor officials known as Bairagis.²⁹ The responsibility to look after the Assam Bengal trade was handed over to two *Duaria Barua*, who worked as Officer-in-charge of the Kandahar Choky.³⁰ Besides these the Ahom had trade relation with the neighboring hill tribes and countries such as the Nagas, Abors, Miris, Mishimis, Garos, Singphos, Khamtis, Bhutanese etc.

9. COMMUNICATION SYSTEM:

In the development of trade and commerce routes or transport system played a very crucial role. In the medieval Ahom state transportation was mainly carried on by water routes and land routes. Assam had trade relation with Bengal by water routes though Jennaï and Pabna river.³¹ Three overland routes connecting Bengal and Assam were, the first by Murshidabad, Mauldah, Dinagepore, Rungpore, Baugwah and Goalpara; the second route via Dacca, Dumary, Puculoë, Jamalpur, Singymary and Goalpara and the last one through Sylhet, Chirra, Moplung, Nunklow, Ranneygodown, Cannymook and Gauhati.³² The trade relation with Bhutan and Tibet were conducted through the mountain passes or duars. The principal duars were Bijni-duar, Basa-duar, No-duar and Char-duar. M'Cosh mentioned five routes connecting Sadiya, Tibet and China. These five routes were known as Mishimi route, Dibang pass, Phungan pass to Manchee and China, the route by Manipur and Irrawady and the Patkai pass. M' Cosh refers to an open road from Upper Assam to Burma and thence to China, through which a brisk trade was conducted in Chinese and Burmese manufactured goods.³³ Pemberton also refers to routes connecting with Manipur, Roha Choky, Patkai

pass.³⁴ The internal routes constructed by the Ahom kings connecting different regions also served the trading purpose in the medieval Ahom state.

10. COMMODITIES OF FRONTIER TRADE :

Basically small scale trade was conducted between the frontier areas and the Ahom state. There was a good trade relation between the people of Assam and the Hukang, Lama valley and the Abors. It was mainly conducted through barter system. Different kind of valuable medicinal plants, copisteeta or mishimi tita, musk-bags, aromatic plants (gathion), bee wax, honey, Tibetan rock salt, ivory, gold, amber eggs, pigs, cattle and articles of hardware were the commodities of trade.³⁵ The Abors, Bor-Abors and Mishimis carried with them a few bags of musk, musk deer skins, ivory, copper pots which they used to collect from the Lama valley and brought Bisa, a vegetable poison used in poisoning arrows. These products were exchanged with the glass beads and cattle.³⁶ The Nagas dealt in salt and exchanged rice, jaggery, opium, cotton and eri-muga cloths with the Matakas. For the hill people inhabiting in the extreme north-east, Sadiya became the central point of market. The Singphos and the Khamtis brought their swords, spears, medicinal plant, ivory, copper and silver which they collected from China. The Adis and hill Miris dealt in spicy vegetables, Indian madder, wax and cotton blankets. In the Sadiya market, the Nagas sold cotton and salt. The Khasis and the Jayantiyas came to sale iron tools and honey.³⁷ While the Garos served as the intermediate between Assam and Surma valley. The Garos dealt with salt obtained from Sylhet and cotton from their inhabiting hills. Their main production were cotton and chilies. These were brought to the market held near the borders and exchanged for salt, dried fish, tobacco, betel-nuts etc.³⁸ In the Palashbari *hat* and Gohain *hat*, the Garos brought soft iron. In exchange the Assamese people gave them *kuji thekera* (*carallia intigerrima*), rice, mustard and plough-shares, nails, barbs, borers, chisels, adzes, rings attached to pestles, hooks for looms and rods for matchlocks etc.³⁹ Assam had a very profitable trade relation with Bhutan and Tibet. They brought a considerable amount of rock salt for sale to the Assamese traders. In exchange for salt the Assamese traders exported rice in large quantities and silk, iron, lac, skin, buffalo-horns, pearls etc. were sold.⁴⁰ There was a brisk trade carried on between Assam and Bhutan at Chimaliabari (Simaliyabari) in the frontier area where carpet, *muga* yarn, *muga* cloth, endi cloth, dried fish, wool, gold, musk, rock salt, horse. Lac, madder, Chinese silk were sold and bartered. The export from Assam were consists of lac, madder, silk, endi silk and dried fish. The Bhootanese dealt in woolen cloths, gold dust, salt, musk, horses, the celebrated Tibetan chowries and Chinese silk etc.⁴¹ In the Kariapar duar a large trade transaction taken place between hills and plains. Trade was conducted both in cash and kind by the Monpas, Bhutanese and Tibetan traders. It was considered as an important trade network with Tibet. From Tibet woolen cloths, gold dusts, salt, musk, horses, chowries and Chinese silk were imported.⁴²

11. CONCLUSION:

In the conclusion we must say the trade relation between the Assam and Frontier regions were basically interchangeable. The frontier hill tribes used to bring their products available in their inhabiting hills and exchanged those with the plain products. Mostly trade was conducted through barter system. The trading activities sometimes influenced by political factors. Though the frontier tribes were permitted to continue trade with the Ahom state. But sometimes the Ahoms discontinued trade relation with them if they were found causing violence against the Ahom territory. The factors like communication system also sometimes create havoc in the trading activities. Sometimes due to natural calamities like disaster, flood, storms the trade routes were blocked and it caused hamper to the trading activities. However despite its limitation it continued till the coming of the European merchants.

12. NOTES AND REFERENCE :

- [1] S.N.Sarma, *A Socio Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam (1200-1800 A.D)*, Guwahati, first edition, 1989, p.126.
- [2] R.B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern frontier of British India*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1991, p.182.
- [3] J.P. Wade, *An Account of Assam*, North Lakhimpur, 1927, pp.8-9.
- [4] Hiteshwar Barbarua, *Ahomr Din*, Gauhati, 1981, p.453.
- [5] Ajit Dutta, Maniram Dewan and the Contemporary Assamese Society, Appendix-E, p.226.
- [6] K.N. Tamuli phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1844, p.24.
- [7] L. Devi, *Ahom tribal Relations*, Gauhati, 1968, p.199.
- [8] S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations (1771-1826)*, Gauhati, second edition, 1974, pp.34,35; F. Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1963, p.68.
- [9] E. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati, 1967, pp.273-274.
- [10] S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, second edition, 1974, pp.54,55; Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1963, p.74; M' Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, pp.66,144; R.B. Pemberton's *Report on the Eastern frontier of British India*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1991, p.182.
- [11] S. Gupta, *British Relations with Bhutan*, Panchsheel Prakashan, 1974, p.20.
- [12] S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), *Jayantiya Buranji*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1937, pp.61,62.
- [13] K.N. Tamuli Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, Calcutta, 1844, p.24.
- [14] Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1963, pp.47-48.
- [15] S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, second edition, 1974, pp.10-46.

- [16]G.C.Barua (ed.),Ahom Buranji, Jorhat,1930, Guwahati,1985,pp.57,58; S.K.Bhuyan, *Satsari Asam Buranji*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1957,p.15; E. Gait ,*A History of Assam*, Guwahati,1967,pp.89,90.
- [17]F.Hamilton ,*An Account of Assam*, DHAS,Guwahati,1963,pp.37,78.
- [18]H.K.Barua,*Asam Buranji*, Assam Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, Calcutta 1906, reprint 1976,pp.40,41; N.B.Phukan, *Asam Buranji*, 1900,pp.241,242.
- [19]Francis Hamilton, An Account of Assam, DHAS,Guwahati,1963,pp.39-49; Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern frontier of British India*,DHAS, Guwahati, 1991,p.74.
- [20]S.K. Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha*, Secretary Publication Board Assam, Guwahati, Second edition,June2005,p.240; Francis Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, DHAS,Guwahati,1963,p.74.
- [21]S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, second edition,1974,pp.34,35,54,55.
- [22]R.B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern frontier of British India*,DHAS, Guwahati, 1991,pp.83,181-185; Hamilton,pp.48,68; S.K.Bhuyan (ed.),*Tungkhungiya Buranji*,DHAS,Guwahati,1933,pp.151,153.
- [23]S.K.Bhuyan, Anglo Assamese Relations, Gauhati, second edition,1974,,pp.54,55;Hamilton, An Account of Assam,p.74;M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, first published 1837, Sanskaran Prakashak, Delhi print, 1975,pp.66,144.
- [24]S.K.Bhuyan,Anglo Assamese Relations, Gauhati, second edition,1974,pp.36,37.
- [25]P.Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, Gauhati University,1968,pp.380-81.
- [26]S.K.Goswami, *A History of Revenue Administration in Assam (1228-1826 A.D.)*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, first published,1986,pp.201,202.
- [27]Ibid, p.203.
- [28]S.K.Bhuyan,*Anglo Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, second edition,1974, pp.51,161,421; Hamilton's Accout,p.42;E.Gait,*A History of Assam*,pp.275-76.
- [29]H.K.Barua (ed.),*Asam Buranji*, Assam Prakashan Parishad,Guwahati, Calcutta 1906, reprint 1976,p.120
- [30]S.K.Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha*, Secretary Publication Board Assam,Guwahati,Second edition,June2005,,p.82.
- [31]M' Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, first published 1837, Sanskaran Prakashak, Delhi print, 1975,pp.8,9.
- [32]Ibid,p.9.
- [33]Ibid,pp.10,11.
- [34]R.B.Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern frontier of British India*,DHAS, Guwahati, 1991,pp.61,66.
- [35]U.N. Gohain, *Assam under the Ahoms.*,first published, Jorhat, 1942,p.169.
- [36]M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, first published 1837, Sanskaran Prakashak, Delhi print, 1975p.144.
- [37]S.K.Bhuyan,*Early British Relations with Assam*, EBH Publishers, 2013,p.15.
- [38]W.W.Hunter,vol.I, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati,1998,p.35.
- [39]A.Dutta, *Maniram Dewan and the Contemporary Assamese Society*, Jorhat,1990, p.223.
- [40]R.B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern frontier of British India*,DHAS, Guwahati, 1991,pp.84f.
- [41]Ibid,p.83.
- [42]Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, 1st published 1884, Indian reprint, Mittal Publications,pp.15,21, 27.