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Trade in the Pre-colonial Ahom Agrarian Economy

Nabanita Sharma

History Department, Delhi University, Delhi, India

KEYWORDS Bhutia. Chawkey. Haat. Paik. Salt

ABSTRACT Trade in the pre-colonial economy of the Brahmaputra valley has often been looked as something primitive and of little value. When the English East India Company entered into the Brahmaputra valley as the ruler, this notion of commercial primitivism of the Brahmaputra valley in general and the Ahom trade, in particular, was re-emphasised by the colonial journal writers and record keepers. The Ahom Buranjis provides scant information on trade. To understand the nature of trade in the valley in late medieval time, the author has used the meagre Ahom sources along with the European reports and the Company's records. These sources unanimously speak about the Ahom rulers' involvement in the trade. With the neighbouring communities, the valley had trading relations. This paper attempts to study nature and scope of trade in the valley with special reference to the Ahom monarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The Brahmaputra valley saw the existence of some small kingdoms based on agrarian economy and a small amount of trade of forest products with the rest of India till the twelfth century (Gupta 1992-93). By the time Turko-Afghans and the Ahoms entered into the region in the thirteenth century, the region was fragmented into small kingdoms of Chutiya and Kachari and non-tribal landholdings of Bhuyans (Guha 1982: 478). By the seventeenth century, the Ahoms controlled the entire Brahmaputra valley extending up to the Manas River, replacing the Bhuyans. The introduction of the *paik* system was one such unique feature of the Ahom economy. The *paiks* were all male subjects of the Ahom kingdom in the age group between 15 and 60 except the slaves, "serf priests" (Landholding Temple Authorities) and men of noble birth (Guha 1982: 483). The *paiks* formed the backbone of the Ahom economy. And, the use of these *paiks* for agricultural, military and other necessary activities for the state was called "*paik* system". Despite being based on agricultural activities, the Ahom kings also promoted trade on a limited scale. Wider dispersion of the Ahoms into the Brahmaputra valley of present-day Assam ensured certain kind of commercial activities in the region.

Address for correspondence:
Nabanita Sharma,
Room No. 5112, Rajiv Gandhi Hostel for Girls,
Delhi University, Dhaka Hostel Complex,
Mukherjee Nagar, Delhi 110 007,
E-mail: 345nabanitas@gmail.com

One of the earliest explicit descriptions of Ahom trade policy appeared in the reports of Captain Welsh (1794) which stated that the Ahom commerce was "inconsiderable…under the discouraging restraints imposed by a Government particularly jealous of strangers" (Welsh's Report 390). Captain Welsh further depicted the commercial policy of the Ahom state as "iniquitous monopoly" (Welsh's Report 385). Some *chawkeys* were earning as high as 12,000 arcot rupees. There was a prospect of trade. Even a single toll such as Chandahar *chawkey* collected toll as high as 12,012 arcot rupees within nine months. That means commercial revenue was an important appendage to the land revenue collection of the Ahom state. The late eighteenth-century report of Welsh mentioned at least seven groups of traders such as Matak, Miris, Bhutias, Naga, Daffalas and Bengali (Welsh's Report 387-388). Except for the Mataks and the Miris, most of these traders were not the proper subject of the Ahom state. They merely had a tributary relationship with the Ahom Raja. Some of them, (the Nagas, for instance) were not even tributaries of the Ahoms.

A recent study by Indrani Chatterjee looks at the monastic traditions of trade and matrimony that connected present-day Northeast India with Tibet, Bhutan, and China and as far as Nepal (Chatterjee 2013: 117). From Chatterjee's study, it comes to light that there was a shared view among the groups engaged in commerce that generation of profit and its appropriate expenditure accumulates moral-social capital called "punya" (Chatterjee 2013: 86). While discussing the "monastic geographicity" of Bengal and Tibet-Chin region, Chatterjee looks at Assam in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. She identifies posts such as *Bura Gohain* and *Wazir Barua* who were in charge of interaction with the rest of the world. Hajo was the place to which the messengers and traders of Bhutan came to trade. The influences of the Buddhist monasteries of Bhutan over the northern plains of Brahmaputra valley were visible till the early nineteenth century (Chatterjee 2013: 116-117). With the end of the First Burmese War, the Company's policy of segregation disrupted the "monastic geographicity" of Assam. The attempt to create "natural" boundaries led to the disruption of the "monastic geographicity" which covered the trade networks of the region.

Gunnel Cederlof's study focuses on the post-1826 scenario when the EIC encountered the "frontier" (Cederlof 2014). This region was a gateway to trade for private traders venturing into Assam beyond Goalpara. The region east of Goalpara was close to Tibet, Burma and China which offered unprecedented markets for Europeans and in return, they hoped for gold, elephant tusks, pepper, lacquer, hardwoods, cotton and exclusive woollen shawls (Cederlof 2014: 30). By the late eighteenth century, commerce in limestone was already a lucrative enterprise in Sylhet with more and more European private traders engaged in it (Cederlof 2014: 60). Though, for the European traders, it was not easy to reach the Brahmaputra valley due to the restrictions by the Ahom kings. Sanghamitra Misra's (Misra 2018) study on the Garo community as a trader of the pre-and early-colonial period in eastern trade throws light on the functioning of the community not merely as grower and trader of a very important item of trade: cotton, but also as a group of people exerting independence in their territory and influence over the plains where they traded. The Garos maintained close relations with neighbouring trading groups such as Bhuyans and Rengtas while asserting sovereign control over the territory they live.

Objectives

This paper makes two tentative suggestions. First, Ahoms did not have a uniform trade policy for the neighbours. With the eastern neighbours, trade was of reciprocal and pilgrimage nature. Trade often took the form of paying war indemnity with Bengal. With the expansion of European traders towards the valley, Ahom trade came into focus and Welsh's termed the trade as a monopoly of Ahom rulers. While it is not true that Ahoms were the sole traders, they controlled trade within the Ahom territory. Second, trade was an important element in the Ahom economy and Ahom rulers promoted trade in their ways. The seemingly strict regulations on trade in the form of *chawkeys* were actually to ensure the uninterrupted flow of certain necessary goods such as salt. Trade was also a means of maintaining diplomacy with neighbours, hence the Ahom rulers kept a close eye on trade and traders.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on Ahom chronicles known as the Buranjis, documents of the English East India Company available in the National Archives of India and Assam State Archives, early Europeans reports in the form of travelogues, military reports and journals. The available literature has been used to fill the gaps in the narrative. The first half of the paper that studies trade with neighbouring areas is based on Buranjis and reports. The second part that studies trade of the Europeans with the Brahmaputra valley is based on mostly archival sources.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The available literature remains silent on trading activities in pre-colonial Brahmaputra valley. Trade of Ahoms with neighbouring regions has not found a place in published work. A recent study of Sanghamitra Misra of the Garo community as an active trader is rich in archival sources. However, Misra's study looks at the negotiation of sovereignty by Garos with other communities living in close vicinity. Misra has pointed out shifting of narratives associated with the Garos by the colonial archives when from prolific traders, the Garos turned into "tribes" (Misra 2018: 385). Amalendu Guha's study is contemporary to the eighteenth-century debate that continued in the 1980s, focuses on the feudal mode of production to explain trade and other aspects of the economy in the valley (Guha

1982). Guha says that in the agrarian economy of the region a small group of merchants emerged. Some of them were specialized in the trade of some specific goods. Guha has provided examples of salt trade to show a faint beginning of commerce in medieval Assam. However, he emphasized on the agrarian nature of the economy.

Indrani Chatterjee's important work on the kinship-based ties in the Eastern Himalayas is more in line with Karl Polanyi's idea of a substantivist economy based on reciprocity (Polanyi 1944: 50). Chatterjee points out that commerce was carried on as a part of monastic exchanges (Chatterjee 2013: 88-89). This nexus spread across the area of Bengal and Northeastern India. Sanyasi Facquirs, Vaishnavas and Buddhist equally took part in these trades. In a similar line, Gunnel Cederlof points out the participation of different communities in trade (Cederlof 2014: 6). Cederlof's research is important to understand that the expansion of the Company in Northeastern India was motivated by the need for capturing old commercial networks in the region (Cederlof 2014: 87). These researches have helped in breaking the notion of backwardness of the region in matters of trade and commerce before colonial conquests. The author's paper is an attempt to contribute to these understandings of the past of the region in matters of commerce.

Extent of Trade in the Ahom Economy

From sixteenth-century onwards, some growth in trade and monetization were taking place in the Brahmaputra valley (Guha 1982: 488). In 1543 the first batch of Ahom gold coins was issued, and in 1555 the Koch kings took to regular coinage. By 1663 Ahom coins consisted of gold, silver and cowries. Two new features of the Ahom economy in seventeenth-century were – (i) use of coins, (ii) cultivation of cash crops such as pineapple and tobacco (Guha 1982: 485).

Sicca rup, mohar, kara or kari (cowrie) were in use in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Ad-maha* (one-eighth of a rupee) and *charatiya* (one-sixteenth of a rupee) were minted for the first time during the reign of Gaurinath Singha in the late eighteenth century. Koch currency *narayani* was also in circulation in the valley (Barua 2013: 442). From the late seventeenth century, minting of coins became very common for Ahom rulers. However, the extent of their use for commercial transactions is not certain.

In the Ahom period, several *chawkeys* were constructed to facilitate trade among tribes. These *chawkeys* also promoted inter-regional trade. In 1554 *saka* (1632 A.D.), Khan Nawab (Mir Jumla) attacked lower Assam and was defeated by the Ahom king. The Nawab fled but some Muslim soldiers stayed back as captives. Some of them who knew how to write in Nagari, Urdu and Bengali were given the responsibility of noting down the buying and selling that took place in the *chawkeys* at Guwahati. The Ahom king also ordered that henceforth, no boat coming from Bengal would be allowed to move upward to sell goods but *Barphukan* will buy the necessary things for the Ahom king from the boats and the literate scribes will note the transactions down (Tamuli 2017: 91). *Duaria Kakoti* post was renamed as *Duaria Barua* by Rudra Singha (Tamuli 2017: 130). Ahom king Jayadwaj Singha established Phulguri *haat* on the banks of the Kallang River to facilitate trade with Jaintias and Garos (Bhuyan 1937: 18). Phulguri *haat* was discontinued after the arrest of Jayahari Mudoi by Jayantia king. After repeated requests by the Jayantia kings' agents, Siba Singha ordered for reopening of Phulguri *haat* in 1723 A.D (Bhuyan 1937). Swaragadeo Rudrasingha established Raha and Jagi *chawkeys* after making Jaintias subsidiary kingdom to the Ahoms. The purpose was to sell areca nuts and leaves (Bhuyan 1932). Gobha *haat* at Gobha duar was under Lehetia Duaria was closed to open Raha *haat* at Raha *chawkey*. The boundary of the *chawkey* was fixed and the prices of tradable goods were fixed. Cow, areca nut, betel leaves, paddy, silver, cotton and cowrie were goods to be traded in the *chawkey*. The profit from this *haat* was to be shared among the kings of Kachari, Ahom, Mikir-Kachari and the local officials such as Chakiyal-Bora and Barua-Bora (Bhuyan 1932). Singimari (Singori) in Kamrup was one place where traders gathered to conduct trading activities. Hajo, Biswanath and Singimri were trading places where traders from Bengal and Assam came and trade. These places were in Koch territory, the traders were at the receiving end of any political clash (Bhuyan 1945). In Singimari traders from Bengal such as Ratan Saha stayed and traded in timber. These traders often faced the wrath of the political clash between Koch and Bengal. Bhutia, Dafala traders, Darangia Chutia prince's agents etc. too visited Singimari by 1640 A.D. (Bhuyan 1930). In Ahom—Tripura trade, Nagas played the role of traders by carrying goods amongst groups. Goods of varied description were traded. Spices, paddy, vegetables, cotton, cattle, the mettle of verities, salt, edible oil, *gur*, dried vegetables, etc. were traded (Bhuyan 1938).

Traders were a mixed category. The traders sometimes were a distinct group, especially in matters of external trade of the Brahmaputra valley. Mudoi was one such group of traders who stayed in Goalpara and traded with Bengal. These merchants were expected to confine their business to pure trade (Bhuyan 1945). Traders were looked up with suspicion, but at the same time, traders' services were sought after. Santosh Bangal was one such trader "captured" and used for trading. Santosh was from Pandua. He escaped from the Jaintia king and was captured by Ahom Barua at Dimarua *chawkey*. He was given to Kina Barua. Santosh made a fortune for Kina Barua by trade. Eventually, he was made the Barua of Dimarua *chawkey* (Bhuyan 1937). Santosh's refusal to go with the Kharami Garos became a reason for apprehensions and trade was affected at Dimarua *chawkey* (Bhuyan 1937). Traders voluntarily or involuntary often became a means of diplomacy. During any war or clash between two kings, traders were first to face the brunt. Jayahari Mudoi, a very influential trader of the 17th century Ahom kingdom was kept as a hostage by the Jaintias. He was sent to the Jaintias as a diplomat by Jayadwaj Singha. This incident negatively affected Ahom-Jaintia relations, as the Ahom Kings terminated trade with Jaintia (Bhuyan 1937). The important place of traders is reflected in another event when soldiers captured in war with Nawab of Bengal in 1632 A.D. were appointed at the *chawkey* in Guwahati. This *chawkey* was created the same year to register a trade with the traders coming from the south. Those literate in numerals were appointed at the *chawkey* to keep an account. They will work under the Brarphukan (Tamuli 2007).

Several Assamese merchants earned handsome profits through trade. Bhabananda was one such mustard seed trader who established trade relation not only with the Ahoms but also with Bhutan, Mughals/ Bengal, Garo hill, etc. Garhgaon was the main town of the Ahom kingdom and also the capital city. The markets at Garhgaon sold only betel leaves and clasp knives were produced for wide markets. Besides Dhubri, Ghila, Gauhati (Guwahati) and Hajo were other important towns. Hajo was an important town for the Koch kingdom in the seventeenth century. Barphukan was the kings' deputy at Guwahati and administered the territory from Kaliabar to the western frontier of the Ahoms. He maintained political relations with Bengal, Bhutan and the chieftains of Assam passes. The *Choladhara Phukan* was in charge of foreign affairs both political and commercial. The diplomatic relations of the Ahom king with neighbouring regions were aimed at promoting trade and the Ahom officials were aware of the risk of loss involved in the trade (Bhuyan 1987). The state itself was involved in trade with neighbouring tribes and offered state protection to trade. Ahom King was keener to promoted large scale trade between Assam and Bengal via the *Bor mudois* and *Shah Mahajans* (As the traders from East Bengal were called in Assam).

Assamese merchants were not allowed to bring any foreign diplomat to the Ahom court and no foreigner merchants were allowed to overstay in Assam (Bhuyan 1987). During the reign of Pratapsingha, in around 1621-1622 three merchants- Sonari Mudoi, Jayhari Mudoi and Narahari Mudoi were executed due to their involvement in politics (Bhuyan 1945). Following were some factors responsible for such treatment of the Ahom kings towards merchants: (i) Trade, just like diplomacy was a way to maintain relationships with neighbours. The Ahom king recognized the importance of both and used trade as a state measure to maintain relationships with the surrounding regions. Hence the king realized that increasing influence of traders in political affairs may diminish the king's image as the sovereign. (ii) To retain state monopoly over the natural resources of the kingdom such as elephants and precious woods. (iii) Ahom kingdom had earned profit from the bilateral and multilateral trade links by appointing *duwaria* at the *chawkeys*. They thought that merchants with political power may undermine their authority and reduce their profit by opening new ways for favouritism. Hence, Ahom kings maintained a safe distance from traders from the valley as well as those from outside the region.

Eastern Neighbours in Commerce: Tibet and Burma

While studying the history of trade in the agrarian region such as Assam it is important to understand what motivates commerce in a region. If commerce is the exchange of goods, for the exchange itself, there must be a need. Different factors determine this need for something. Geographical location, social values, religious beliefs etc., all these determine the range and scope of needs in a region. Wim van Spengen argues: 'what is considered scarce in one culture or period may not necessarily be so in others'. Spengen's study is based on Tibet where he has observed an alternative mechanism of trade. Here psychological well-being and communal welfare surpassing the need for individual profit maximization while maintaining trade (Spengen 2000: 96-97). The Brahmaputra valley was connected with Bhutan through well-laid routes and trade had continued since the early medieval period. The *duars* were an important feature of the Assam-Bhutan trade. These *duars* were fertile plains near hillocks which were granted to the Bhuteah raja for rice cultivation for eight months a year by some ancient Assam ruler to guard against their 'intrusion' into the plains. These *duar* were the source of revenue for the Bhuteah king and in place of it, he used to pay some tribute to the Ahom king (M'Cosh 1837: 135). There were officials appointed on both sides to check the exchanges that were carried on via these *duars*. These *duars* continued to play an important role in the early colonial period. Bhutan was cut across by routes through the Himalayas. The villages on these routes were mart itself and travellers who were traders used to procure necessary goods while going to China (Hodgson 1832). Bhutia community played an important role in carrying on this trans-Himalayan trade and Assam was an indispensable part of this network.

The trade of Tibet with upper Assam was mainly in salt. Assam used to supply good quality rice in place of salt (Spengen 2000: 103-4). Places in Assam, such as Sadiya, Udalguri, Doimara and Hajo were part of the larger monastic network of trade fairs surrounding Tibet (Spengen 2000: 131). The Khampa Bhoateah or Lhasa merchants used to have 'unreserved' commercial intercourse with Assam. The *duars* that allowed passes to Assam from Bhutan and Tibet were further connected to routes that used to reach Kabul through the Himalayas (Gait 1905: 273-4). Seelpotah in Darrang along with Hajo were two important towns that were meeting points of the Bhutia traders and local people (M'Cosh 1837: 66). And, the items of exchange were more or less the same with that of Hajo trade. The Dalai Lama had enormous control over Tibet, Bhutan and northern parts of the Brahmaputra. It was often said that Bhutan was under the protection of the Dalai Lama (Frontiers and Overseas Expeditions 1907). The importance of trade with Tibet was that it helped the Brahmaputra valley region to connect with a larger network of trade and traders that was extended up to Central Asia and Mongolia.

The Ahom rulers too were involved in sending gifts to the Grand Lama and trade was an annual affair with caravans coming from Lhasa to Chauna and Assamese people reaching to Gegansur to carry on exchange in large scale (M'Cosh 1837: 66). The analysis of the goods that were traded between pre-colonial Assam and Tibet via Bhutan shows that what Assam was importing from Bengal was further exported to Tibet and in return, Assam used to get rock salt among other goods. The Brahmaputra valley also had a trade connection with China and Ava. Assam used to import nankins, silk, lacquered and China-ware, lead, copper and silver bullion from these countries (M'Cosh 1837: 67). The Ahom kingdom was dependent on Tibet for both necessary natural products for daily consumption as well as finished goods coming from China. It suggests that the Brahmaputra valley region was not merely a final destination for goods coming from Tibet. The Brahmaputra valley was also a way to reach other neighbours as well.

Western Neighbours in Commerce: Bengal

The Mughals were the largest trading partner of the Ahoms in the eighteenth century as per available data, and the apparent reason was Mughal demand for elephants, aloe wood and

Muga silk. And, since elephant catching was a laborious affair, the Ahom ruling class engaged themselves in it. And these were exchanged at the designated Ahom/Mughal check post. There were four trade routes from Bengal to Assam. One of the routes was by water and three by land (Barua 1993). All these routes ended at or connected Goalpara with important trading marts of Bengal such as Calcutta, Decca and Sylhet. No places of Ahom kingdom were connected to any of those routes. Places such as Jugighopa, Goalpara and Rangamati which were part of Eastern Bengal were important centres of trade between the Bengal merchants and Ahoms (M'Cosh 1837: 51). Ahom kings regularly sent *Kataki* or diplomats to facilitate trade with Bengal. All clashes with Bengal were to protect Ahom trade interests in the *haats* of border areas. Often traders were the victims of such clash for control over *haats* (Bhuyan 1945: 53).

Francis Buchanan Hamilton in his Account of Assam has provided a table of imports and exports of Assam with Bengal. Though he has not mentioned any specific year, the account was written between 1807 and 1814. The trade statistics corresponds to this period (Bhuyan 1987: 47-48). Also, there were some networks of pilgrimage trade in entire South Asia from Punjab to Bihar-Bengal (Bayly 2005: 150). There is a possibility that goods from Assam such as elephant tusk and muga silk were incentives for such *Bairagis* and *Gosains* to venture into the Brahmaputra valley. Sanghamitra Misra indicates the fluid nature of the groups living in the western part of the Brahmaputra valley in the precolonial period. The loosely identified agrarian community was a part of the trading activities in the region. Though the Mughal influence led to agrarianisation, the region was marked by cultures of mobility and interdependence till the colonial rule (Misra 2011: 40).

From the study of the routes and networks, it can be assumed that the valley was an integral part of networks of trade. The valley was under influence of both Bengal traders and Tibetan religious pilgrim traders. There were several other neighbouring communities such as Jayantia and Kachari engaging in trade (Bhuyan 1937: 11). There were diplomatic communications on the part of the chiefs of these tribes to set up haats at the foothills between the valley and the hills (Bhuyan 1937). Ahom state was in favour of trade with neighbouring places. Besides protection to traders, in several instances, the kings sent several officials to collect precious metals such as silver. Ahoms imported silver from the outskirts of Garo and Khasi hills and Burma (Phukan 2007: 30). In such transactions traders themselves were officials.

Involvement of European Traders Before 1826

In the last phase of Ahom rule, a new category of traders appeared in the Brahmaputra valley. Colonel James Mill of Ostend East India Company (of the Holy Roman Empire in Austrian Netherland) was the first European trader, actively trading in Assam. This Company was established in 1722 with a charter from the Roman Emperor Charles VI. This Company had a factory at Bankibazar. In 1732 the Company was abolished. Following the anarchy in Bengal in the 1740s due to Maratha attack, Mill started salt trade with Assam (Bhuyan 1949: 63). Jean Baptiste Chevalier of the French East India Company was deputed to trade in Assam. After the French were defeated by the British in 1757, Chevalier continued to stay at Goalpara working for some English traders. Paul Richard Pearkes from the English East India Company (hereafter EIC) was another European trader working in Assam. Pearkes was followed by some private traders such as John Robinson and Hugh Baillie who were agents of big merchants active in trade with India (Bhuyan 1949: 64-5).

Direct involvement of the EIC with Assam started in 1765 when the Society of Trade was set up by Robert Clive. The purpose of the Society was to deal with salt, areca nut and tobacco trade (Bhuyan 1949: 67). Hugh Baillie, Tom Lewis and Hargreave were appointed as agents in Goalpara, Rangpur and Chilmari respectively. In 1773 Hugh Baillie for the first time suggested that trade with Assam would be of many benefits for the Company. His observations were based on his eight years of stay in the region when he saw profitable trade of Assam. Assam used to return its import by muga, silk, black pepper and spices. The Company expected to earn gold dust and other articles by trading with Assam. Mr Killican was granted the exclusive monopoly right to trade with Assam (File No. 23, 1787, ASA, BR). After Mr Killican, Mr Lodge tried to establish trade monopoly at Goalpara under his supervision. His idea was to dispose of 250,000 maund of salt in Goalpara annually. However, his proposal was not accepted by the government. In 1790 the post of Resident at Goalpara was abolished and the district was put under Rangpur's collector Baillies's administration. Baillies' appointment resulted in the removal of the restriction on free trade of salt. Hence trade between the two countries in salt and other articles was thrown open to all eligible people for trade (File No. 44, 1790, ASA, BR).

Along with free trade, the British interest was on abolition of all kind of monopoly that could exist in the trade of salt, beetle nut, tobacco, rice, etc. (File No. 2, 1775, ASA, BBR). In 1782 Rangamati was separated from Rangpur and annexed with Goalpara under Baillie's supervision for the convenience of trade with Assam (File No. 9, 1787, ASA, BBR). In 1787 Mr Hugh Baillie was appointed as the resident of Goalpara. As Assam was dependent on Bengal for salt, the Company wanted to break all salt trade monopoly to open up the opportunity to English traders. There was gold dust to gain in return of salt. Broadcloth and other European commodities were the goods that the English merchants could sell in Assam in place of muga silk, black pepper and spices (File No. 20, 1787, ASA, BBR).

Meanwhile, the Company was able to diminish the traditional markets of the neighbouring Garos. The passes through which the Garos supplied cotton and other articles to the Kisangunj traders in exchange of salt were taxed by the Chaudhuries appointed by the Company (File No. 348, 1788, ASA, BG). Boyle's report pointed out the favourable trade of Assam with Bhutan and the presence of Assamese traders in Bengal. He sought equal liberty to the European traders to trade in Assam (Bhuyan 1949: 81). Boyle's report mentioned the routes through which the intercourse between the traders of Bhutan and Bengal were carried on. There were three routes of which two ended up in Hajo of lower Assam. One was via Tassgong and Dewangiri and the other via Tawang and Kuriapara *duar* to Hajo. From fifteen miles on the north of Brahmaputra at the *duar*s, the British and Chinese frontier met. The Tibetans connected Assam with the rest of the world as the report stated with the Tibetan traders entering the valley via either of the above-mentioned routes. Boyle's report also stated that before 1799 the entire trade of Bhutan with Bengal in its west and Tibet in the east was at a volume of 50, 000 Rs. per annum, although it was estimated that at times it was of Rs. 2, 00,000 for Assam alone (File No. 1-41, 1839, NAI).

Besides the European merchants, there was another category of traders active in the Eastern frontiers of the British Empire in the late eighteenth century. They were the American traders trading mainly lime in Sylhet and Cachar. The Khasi traders used to bring wax ivory, iron, limestone and muga dhuti for sale to Sylhet. And the European and American traders were looking for permission to reside as well as trade (File No. 39, 1790, ASA, BBR).

CONCLUSION

Trade as a politico-economic activity and trader as a community was present in the Ahom kingdom. By the mid-eighteenth century, Europeans entered the valley and witnessed substantial trade. The Ahom-Bengal was mostly in favour of the latter. Benjamin Constant argues that trade is the way to get what two or more nations want. Trade can unite people. In a context where goods can be acquired by force, there was little incentive for peaceful trade. The Ahoms relation with the neighbouring monarchies was based on this notion of trade as a substitute for war. The Ahoms had little or no inclination for commerce as a way to run the economy. By the eighteenth century, the Ahoms had established a sophisticated agrarian structure based on the *paik* system, which paved the way for self-sufficiency in economic matters.

The Ahom dependence on the *paik* system did not hinder the growth of trade. The passes to the Brahmaputra valley from Tibet and Bhutan were some of the several routes to the Bay of Bengal via Bengal and Burma. Hence, the apparent Ahom disinclination towards active trade and strict control over traders did not discourage commerce to a great extent. The Ahom sovereign used their political influence to earmark some profit from the trading activities for their use. In this way, they had exploited the existing trading activities for their politico-economic ambitions. The profit earned from these trades was used for the expenses of the monarchy in the form of paying tributes of various sorts, the salary of *Baruas* and other officials. Once the European traders realized the importance of the region as a connecting spot between the Indian subcontinent and China in matters of trade, they competed among themselves. The weakening of the Mughal Empire after the death of Aurangzeb and the subsequent victory of the EIC over Bengal paved the way of the EIC towards the Brahmaputra valley. The early EIC agents' view of commerce as an appendage is not true, as trade existed independently in the Brahmaputra valley despite Ahom presence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has exhausted the available Buranjis and archival material to write a narrative of trade. However, limited availability of published work on trade in the region under study leaves scope for further research in understanding the relations between trade and politics in the region. The eighteenth century in South Asia was a vibrant time when a lot of mercantile activities were going on. Regional economies based on trade and manufacturing were flourishing. The Brahmaputra valley trade can be studied in the light of the changing light of polity just before colonial advent.

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