

EARLY ATTEMPTS AT COMMERCIALISING THE INDIA RUBBER MAHALS IN ASSAM

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With the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765 the independent Kingdom of Assam, then under the rule of the Ahom Kings, became the immediate neighbour of the East India Company in Assam in the North East. The mercantile interest of the East India Company in Assam dates back to as early as 1785, when some merchants secured permission from the court to extend the Companies Salt trade into the neighbouring Kingdom of Assam. The salt trade, however received a set back with the tumultuous political situation. Captain Thomas Welsh, during his stay in Assam, executed commercial treaty with King Gaurinath Singha on 28th February 1793 establishing liberty and reciprocity of trade between Bengal and the Kingdom of Assam. The Burmese invasions of Assam and Cachar brought an end to the policy of indifference of the Company towards Assam. Following the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824-26 Kingdom of Assam came under British possession.

The pre-capitalist economy of Assam set itself on the path of capitalist development with the penetration of British Capital. Hitherto primarily barter oriented economy was monetised. The Society was opened to exploitation at various levels by the Capitalist economy. With the ascendancy of Industrial Capital over Mercantile interests in Great Britain by 1833, the British policy in Assam received a clear direction towards colonisation.

The first venture in introducing British capital skill an enterprise was in the tea industry. It took about a quarter century for the British to develop interest in the rubber in Assam. By 1865 the interest of the British turns towards the vast forest resources which promised a lucrative source

of revenue. The Natural growth of India Rubber in the forest of Lakhimpur, Darrang and the frontier region of Assam then attracted the attention of the Forest Department of the Government of India.³

History

Rubber in Assam drew the attention of Dr. Roxburgh as early as 1810 when a Vessel containing honey was sent to him from Sylhet. He says in his 'Flora Indica' that towards the close of 1810, Mathew R. Smith from Sylhet sent him a vessel called 'Turong' filled with honey. Smith observed that the inside of the vessel was smeared over with the juice of a tree which grew in the mountains. Anxious to examine the nature of the lining, the 'Turong' was cleaned and Roxburgh found it very perfectly lined with the thin coat of caoutchouc.⁴ Smith was thus the actual discoverer of caoutchouc in Assam.⁵ He also served as an agent through whom Roxburgh was able to prosecute the enquiry that finally led to the determination of the presence of India rubber in the forest of Assam.

In 1832, Lt. Charlton wrote that *Ficus Elastica* (the rubber tree of Assam) was abundant throughout Assam and yielded a copious supply of Gum Elastic.⁶ In December 1836, Dr. Royle in a letter to the Agri-Horticultural Society of India gave particulars of the formation of the London Caoutchouc Company which reward a person sending a sample of Assam rubber to England. He urged the desirability of starting rubber cultivation in Assam and stated facts made known by Roxburgh regarding *Ficus Elastica* that astonished the home authorities who had found the opinion that rubber was exclusively an American product. Shortly afterwards samples were sent by Lt. Vetch, Dr. Scott and Lt. Wemyss in subsequent years on which the Caoutchouc Committee presented a highly complimentary report stating "no doubt can be entertained that Assam is

quite capable of competing with any part of the world and it only remains to be ascertained what quantity the country is equal to the production of".⁸ From 1839 the defects of the substance were spoken of as damaging its further development as an article of European consumption and various theories were advanced to the cause. The defects complained of were adulteration, or exhaustive extraction which sacrificed quality to bulk. The local name of rubber has been 'Bor attah' which the natives of Assam had been using for ages to water proof their baskets and to burn as candles. The commercial use of the object was unknown till the British exploitation of rubber.

Corresponding to an increase in the railway network there was an increasing demand for India rubber which would facilitate the adoption of the material for springs for railway vehicles and other purposes of the kind.¹⁰ Dr. Dietrich Brandis, the Inspector General of Forests, in his correspondences drew attention towards the superiority of Para rubber of Brazil, but also emphasized on the economic importance of Assam Rubber.¹¹ Thus by 1872-73, new interests were awakened on the subject of India Rubber in Assam.

Administration of the Mahals

Rubber being a minor forest produce, its exploitation was carried out under a system of Mahals i.e. the monopoly of extracting a particular kind of produce sold to the highest bidder. In his instructive report, Dr. Gustav Mann, the Conservator of Forests in Assam, mentioned that as early as 1852, Messers Martin Ritchie and Company of Tezpur were granted exclusive rights of tapping over certain tracks of forests for a period of 15 years free of payment, on condition that tapping should be made between 1st November and 30th April, and that yearly they should plant 200 caoutchouc yielding trees.

A year before the expiry of the term, tapping was discontinued as rubber could not be drawn at remunerative prices.¹² This necessitated regulation in tapping. By 1863, new conditions were attached to the lease. To prevent excessive tapping rubber was to be collected within 1st January and 31st March and a lessee was bound to plan 100 trees within the boundary of his area. Failure to conform to such rules would result to forfeiture of the lease.¹³ Brandis drew up a comprehensive plan to protect this source of Revenue as well as financial interests of the State. The plan aimed at protecting certain areas of the Government forest and leasing out the remaining forests for tapping. Under Section 41 of the Indian Forest Act, depots were to be set up at all entrepots for India rubber and after inspection, a pass covering the amount carried was to be issued.

The outcome of such proposals was that rubber Mahals were put up for auction sales in those parts of the province where the article was most largely produced and certain areas were reserved against tapping. The income coming from the sale of rubber Mahals from 1879-82, averaged to Rs. 328,000 and by a simple process of deducting imports from exports the amount of rubber amounted to 5,840 maunds.¹⁴ The 'Kyahs'¹⁵ conducted all trading activities in Lakhimpur district. The boundaries within which a lessee was to conduct his operations in the said district was indefinitely defined. In Lakhimpur the boundary was set out thus East-Mountains; North-Mountains; South-Boundary of the Sibsagar district; West-Boundary of the Durrang district.¹⁶ Under the lease the Kyahs purchased rubber from the people who worked the forest and they encouraged the latter to obtain as much as possible within a short period, in total disregard of the destruction of the tree.

Eastern Lakhimpur district was inhabited by tribes called Singphos, Khamptis and others. On the

bordering hills were the Abors, Mishmis and cognate tribes over whom the Government had little jurisdiction. All these people were largely engaged in collecting rubber from the Hills beyond the British Territory and formed a disturbing element over the question of rubber trade in Lakhimpur and Cachar.¹⁷ Very little rubber came from the Government settled revenue limits, much of it was coming from the country which was not under British subjection at all.

Taking advantage of the vaguely delimited boundary of the rubber Mahals in Lakhimpur, the Kyahs tried to claim a monopoly in their dealings in "foreign rubber" under the pretext that such a right was granted to them by virtue of being a lease holder. The term "foreign rubber" refers to all rubber produced in areas not within British territory. It can be seen from the papers that the revenue accruing from the lease of rubber monopoly, was by no means¹⁸ in considerable and had been increasing yearly. The colonial Government which represented industrial interests was not willing to allow the mercantile interests of the European speculators to hold good.

The entry of the European speculators for a share in the profit of trade in foreign rubber was an element of danger to the Government. The farmers of the India rubber Mahals in Lakhimpur complained that their rights under the lease are being infringed by the operations of speculators, insisting of buying from the frontier tribes direct and ignoring claims of farmers to¹⁹ monopoly of purchase within limits of their Mahals.

The Khamptis and Singphos were, semi-frontier tribes who accepted the sovereignty of the British, but were politically independent. Most of them tapped rubber from within the rubber Mahals in Lakhimpur. Since their rubber fell into the category of home

rubber, traders offered them very low prices. On the other hand, the rubber produced in the Dufla, Abor and Mishmi region was "foreign rubber" and speculators paid very high prices for it. This gave rise to discontent among the Khamptis and Singphos. The Government too was getting a very small amount of revenue and thus set out to prevent the traders from exploiting the resources of the hillmen, over which the Government had no claim of revenue. On such considerations the Khamptis and Singphos were prohibited from tapping the rubber forests within their tracks. It was decided that later on a forest officer working under the Deputy Commissioner Lakhimpur was to issue licences to the chiefs on condition that they brought it to the Government depots for sale.

The earliest arrangement regarding the management of rubber Mahals and at the same time ensuring a steady supply of revenue, was to sell it to the highest bidder rent free for a period of 15 years. In Lakhimpur and Darrang which produced a considerable amount of home rubber this system failed to work effectively. This was because the lease shrunk from the condition of replacing trees. In the districts, the Government, after considerable deliberation evolved a system of farming out the Mahals year by year.

In the district of Cachar, no attempt was made at the earlier stages to draw revenue by leasing out the Mahals.²¹ The rubber exported from Cachar was collected from the forests in Manipur, Lushai Hills and Cachar. Rubber collected from Manipur could enter into Assam duty free. Thus there were chances that rubber collected in Cachar were taken into Manipur and pass out duty free. The Government in such a case would be deprived of a considerable amount of revenue. To prevent such attempts, the authorities allowed no rubber into Cachar unless countersigned by the Political Agent, containing the

amount of rubber intended to cover, the excess to be confiscated.²² The rubber collected from the Lushai Hills would go duty free, but the traders were to pay on return a tax of Rs. 4/- a maund on all rubber brought down by them. The real difficulty lay in the fact that most of the lessees poached on the rich Lushai forests, thus deprived the Government of the levies accrued from Lushai rubber directly. Taking into consideration the difficulties of direct management, Mr. Edgar suggested that the only means of raising a feasible revenue could be raised by leasing the farms initially for a period of 1 year. At the end of the period if it was found workable, it was to be leased out for a period of 3 years, liable to revocation in case of breach of agreement.²³ This was to be undertaken by restraining the lessees from encroaching on interfering with the border tribes.

Faced with problems of smuggling, indiscriminate tapping and traders claiming rights in trading foreign rubber, suggestions were made by Government officials, to make all rubber trade their monopoly. Mr. Schlich the Conservator of Forests, Assam in his letter to the Secretary Government of Bengal Agriculture Department says "considering that the principle of monopoly is admitted in the Indian Administration. I do not see any serious reasons why it should not be extended to rubber on the North East Frontier, specially as political difficulties are in the question."²⁴

Graham Clarke, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, made an extensive study of profits that would accrue out of the Government constituting itself as a sole purchaser of rubber. Subsequent correspondences reveal that the Government did not take up monopoly in rubber trade, in spite of its declaration that the rich forests were being destroyed by profiteers. The Government officially proclaimed that a monopoly in rubber trade would

alter their relationship with the frontier tribes. The actual reasons were that since the rubber forests were scattered, it was difficult to control indiscriminate tapping. Such an attempt at managing the rubber Mahals would need a lot of manpower and subsequently become an expensive proposition. An efficient Forest Department for conservancy would necessitate extra expenses. The margin of profits left with the Government would be less than the amount coming from annual leases.

Plantations

Mann in his exhaustive report remarked on the exhaustion of Assam rubber supply. He stated that "unless the time of collecting rubber is limited and some plantations are started to provide for future supplies, there will be no more rubber procurable from the forest of few years hence."²⁵ working on Mann's suggestions, the Government in 1869 started caoutchouc plantations of *Ficus Elastica* in Assam.²⁶ By May 1884, the Government issued directions to increase the plantations by 200 acres a year, for five years.²⁷ To test the financial result of the cultivation, 50 matured trees were to be tapped year by year. The results tapping showed an inexplicable irregularities year by year in the amount obtained per tree. In 1882-83 the average yield was 4 seers 4 chataks; in 1883-84, 1 seer 1 chatak; in 1884-85, 2 seers 5 chataks. In 1885-86, it was 12 seers 10 chataks. In 1886-87, two of the new trees were tapped giving 8 seers 3 chataks. No cause²⁸ could be attributed to this material fluctuation. The plantations had been established at Kulsī in the Kamrup division, on the Bamoni Hill and in the Charduar Reserve in Darrang division.²⁹

The average income from the sale of rubber Mahal in Assam between 1879-82, was Rs.32,800, the quantity being 5,840 maunds. In 1883-84, the yield was as high as 8,150 maunds. A sudden fall

in the market price in 1884-85, made the traders less active indicated by the fact that the rubber Mahals in Kamrup and the Naga Hills were not sold. The yield was 7,290 maunds and the amount realised was 29,510.³¹

In 1902, the Revenue increase from rubber amounted to Rs.42,511, and increase of Rs.6,593 as compared to the preceding year. Out turn of home rubber fell by 258 maunds owing to closure of the Lakhimpur Division and the non-tapping in the Kulsi plantations. The imports trebled due to the rise of the market price in Calcutta, which induced traders to offer high rates for rubber purchase from hillmen.³² In 1914, the selling price of Ficus Elastica was low.³³ In 1939-40, with the flooding of the English markets by Para rubber in huge quantity with very low prices,³⁴ the demand for India rubber stopped all together. J.E. Conner in his "Review of the Trade for British India" for 1874, gives retrospective account from 1868-69. He mentions that all rubber brought to Calcutta were produced in Assam.³⁵

EXPORT AVERAGE FOR FIVE YEARS

	1872-73	1873-74	1874-75
CWT	12,003	16,839	15,893
VALUED AT	63,217	117,775	108,645

A report on the trade of India Rubber shows that there was rise in Exports from 1872 to 1882-83. When it reached its maximum at the value of Rs.12,59,165 from which date it fluctuated downwards.³⁶

With the awakening of Government interest in rubber in the forest of Assam, a system of

reckless extermination of all accessible trees took place. No real progress was made towards establishing a commercial industry, nor was any attempt made to replenish such a rich product. With the decline of Assam supply all interests died out.

Notes & References

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4. Sir George Watt, **A Dictionary of the Economic Products of India**, Vol. IV, p. 345.
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