

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

NINTH SESSION

GUWAHATI ; 1988

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on behalf of

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PREFACE

The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.

Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.

The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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Industrialisation in the Brahmaputra Valley (1881 to 1921)

Keya Dasgupta

A major component of the non-agricultural economy in the nineteenth century Indian context was based primarily on artisan production. The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam was no exception. The artisan sector, along with other branches of industries (together comprising what we would presently term as the 'industrial' sector) at no point of time between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century accounted for more than two percent of the total workforce. These figures did not however portray the actual situation since in subsistence economies such as this, a large section of the artisans producing for home consumption remained unaccounted. The overall impact of colonialism which affected the artisans in other parts of India were also felt in this region. But the impact felt here, I feel, was qualitatively of a different nature. The present paper, based on secondary sources, seeks to enquire into the pattern of industrialisation specially, industrial employment in the Brahmaputra Valley in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, as well as the nature of economic decline that accompanied colonialism. It also seeks to highlight the intra-regional disparities as exemplified in the dominance of the traditional vis-a-vis modern sectors. The quantitative basis of the study is derived mainly from the decennial census figures on the workforce and the annual reports on rail and river borne trade. It must however be admitted that from the qualitative evidence of decline of the artisan class one can not generate a satisfactory explanation which could fit into changes in other sectors of the economy. The paper does not aim at all to specify the basic elements of a causal analysis. It merely seeks to outline the broad features of the trend in the development of the secondary sector in the region, and to put forward certain questions.

The Historical Perspective

The importance of artisan production in nineteenth century Brahmaputra Valley has been well described

in many contemporary accounts. In the time of the native rulers some industries were fostered, and we read that the Ahom King Chu Chengpa who reigned from 1611 to 1649 A.D. introduced goldsmiths, blacksmiths, and other artisans from Koch Bihar and tried to induce his subjects to follow similar occupations. Some of them did so. A section of the Kacharis took to gold-washing and became known as Sonowal Kacharis; members of the Koch, Kalita and other agricultural castes became, some of them potters, others blacksmiths and others workers in brass and bell-metal. For the early decades of the nineteenth century, Barpujari notes that, most of such artisans followed their hereditary pursuits. 'They had to furnish previously their fixed quotas of produce to the *Kheldars*, to whom they were attached; on the abolition of the *khels* their products were either hawked about or collected at spot by agents of foreign traders'.

Artisan production, was, in most cases carried on along with agriculture. Hunter notes that 'the social condition of the manufacturing classes is about the same as that of the peasantry, and indeed most of them combine agriculture with their trade, with the exception of workers in brass, who form a distinct and separate community and depend almost entirely upon their trade for their livelihood'².

Although there were a few castes known to be attached to particular occupations, Gait had noted 'the almost entire absence in the Assam Valley of the lower professional castes which are found in almost all other parts of India'³. But this in no way was found to have hindered the development of skill in certain artisan crafts.

Industry and Employment

The quantitative substantiation of the trend and nature of industrialisation in the period under review is far from conclusive. Data on population and employment, available in the decennial census provide a fair approximation of the participation rate in different sectors.

Since it is difficult to work out a comparable series for the workforce from 1881 to 1921, we would concentrate our quantitative analysis mainly for the period between 1901 and 1921, and provide information for the late nineteenth century wherever possible.

The importance of the secondary sector could perhaps be gauged significantly if one compares its share in the total workforce vis-a-vis other sectors of the economy.

Table 1: Share of Workforce in Selected Sectors of the Brahmaputra Valley.

	1901	1911	— 1921
Primary Sector			
Agriculture	67.76	67.73	65.02
Tea plantations	18.64	18.38	22.78
Secondary Sector	1.79	1.81	1.99
Tertiary Sector	2.51	4.61	4.28
Others	9.30	7.47	5.93
Total Workers	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Computed from Census of India (Assam) for the respective years.

In a primarily agrarian economy, agricultural employment quite naturally accounted for a major share in the total workforce - between 65 and 67 percent. The non-agricultural component was found to be distributed among three broad sectors - Tea plantations comprised the first accounting for about 20 percent. Next in importance was the tertiary sector, comprising of trade, commerce, transport, storage and communication. The secondary sector constituting the industrial workforce remained insignificant in such a background, the regional figure remaining below 2 percent throughout our period of analysis, and this figure including certain production, as I mentioned before, which did not deserve to be called industries.

In a situation of a general stagnancy in agriculture, the plantation sector gradually gaining ground, the mining and the tertiary sector making a slow progress, the industrial sector thus witnessed a very slow, almost stagnant rate of growth.

The very presence of an industrial sector indicates a phase of industrialisation, however stagnant or retrograde it may be. It thus becomes necessary to enquire into the nature of such industrialisation.

Problems of comparability (see fn.4) prevents us from analysing the trend of industrialisation from 1881 and 1921. One could, however, get a broad estimate of the significance of this sector if one compares the magnitude of the population dependant on industries (workers plus dependants), between 1881 and 1921.

Table 2 : Population Dependant on Industries

Districts	1881	1901	1911	1921
Goalpara	7,156	8,727	10,510	14,217
Kamrup	6,769	16,326	20,240	19,937
Darrang	8,903	2,461	3,330	6,473
Nowgong	2,351	3,044	3,766	5,747
Lakhimpur	2,092	8,611	6,414	9,080
Sibsagar	3,287	7,341	8,549	9,351
Brahmaputra Valley	30,558	46,510	52,309	65,092

Source : Same as Table 1.

In spite of the fact that we have so far been considering the Brahmaputra Valley as an unit by itself, one must not dismiss the fact of marked intra-regional differences that exist in the pattern of industrial development (Table 3)⁵.

Table 3 : Share of Industrial Workforce in the Total Workforce

Districts	1901	1911	1921
Goalpara	2.53	2.87	2.78
Kamrup	2.65	3.34	3.50
Darrang	.07	.82	1.58
Nowgong	1.41	1.25	2.22
Lakhimpur	2.43	1.16	1.53
Sibsagar	1.06	1.12	1.08
Brahmaputra Valley	1.79	1.81	1.99

Source: Same as table 1.

To get a broad overview of the industrial situation as prevailing in 1881, one could examine (taking into account the limitations already stated) the relative share of each industrial category (Table 4).

The general distribution found in 1881 does not get altered markedly in 1901, 1911 and 1921. Traditional industries, represented by textiles, brass, copper and bell-metal, earthenware and food industries accounted for a major share, whereas industries pertaining to relatively modern methods of production were represented insignificantly. This is perhaps not an unexpected situation prevailing in such economies.

Around 65 percent of the industrial workforce constituted males between 1881 and 1921. There were however variations- both at the district level and in the type of industry. For example in Kamrup, the female workforce was almost equal to its male counterpart. Females mainly accounted for the vast majority of the artisans engaged in textile production. Females outnumbered males in magnitude also in the industries of 'food, drinks and stimulants' and 'ceramics and earthenware' in certain districts. In all other industries the female workforce remained far below that of the male workforce. The relatively modern sectors in the industrial scene were on the other hand conspicuous by the absence of female workers.

Table - 4

Districts Industrial Categories	Golpara	Kamrup	Darrang	Nowgong	Lakh- impur	Sib- sagar	Brahma- putra Valley
Persons working & dealing in textile fabrics and dress	58.19	13.40	86.56	12.01	41.64	28.08	48.57
Persons working & dealing in food and drinks	20.99	33.45	2.13	12.48	31.23	6.48	16.73
Persons working and dealing in vegetable substances	.11	-	-	-	-	-	.03
Persons working & dealing in minerals	15.60	46.38	8.68	64.25	7.59	60.24	28.44
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Report on the Census of Assam, 1881.

Differentiation at the intra-regional level was also marked. For example, in lower Assam (the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong), one finds the predominance of traditional industries, such as textiles, brass, copper, bell metal etc. catering mostly to local needs. In Upper Assam (Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar) is on the other hand, relatively modern industries (for example, construction of means of transport) mostly present.

Traditional Vis-a-Vis modern industries

In terms of the relative magnitude of employment industries which were part of the local economy and society, associated with local skills, and with local consumption, accounted for a major share of the secondary workforce.

Artisan production was more highly developed in Lower Assam than in other parts of the Valley. Till about the late nineteenth century almost all people

used iron tools, while brass, copper, bell metal and pottery were universal in their usage, and cotton, was woven in looms in almost all households, mainly by women. Small settlements centred round the manufacture of these articles developed in the nineteenth century. Most of such industries have lost their significance in the twentieth century.

Cotton Textiles

One of the oft-cited examples of traditional industries in the region was that of cotton textiles. The textile industry, developed mainly at the level of the household, was based primarily on raw material brought in from the neighbouring hills. It was reported in a contemporary account of the late nineteenth century that there were no regular weavers in Assam unless the Jugis, or Katanis could be classed as such⁶. The production of cotton has been long associated with consumption locally, and it was noted that 'superfluous articles, found after their manufacture not to be required are sold but, generally speaking, there is no trade in home-made piece-goods'⁷.

As regards the employment in cotton, the census figures relating to the workforce engaged was found to be very misleading. This was because throughout the Brahmaputra Valley weaving was not a profession, nor was it strictly speaking, an industry. It was carried on by those of every family, rich or poor, high caste of low⁸. Since most of the produce was meant for home consumption the people engaged in such production, (mainly women in the case of cotton) remained unaccounted.

If one examines the trend in cotton trade during the same period, certain facts become very clear. First, the import of cotton piecegoods of European origin-increased greatly in magnitude, followed by a substantial increase in that of European twist and yarn (Table 5). It was thus reported, 'as the consumption of cotton fabrics could not have increased to any appreciable extent, the only inference ... is that the local weavers are giving up spinning their own yarn, in favour of imported yarn'⁹. As regards piece-goods, it was found that, 'the people of the Assam Valley are exchanging

the ordinary clothes woven by themselves for those imported from the west. These imported fabrics have flooded the valley and are now to be found for sale even in the remotest villages. It is therefore only the poorest classes, who cannot afford the slight extra cost of these clothes, that still continue to weave their own¹⁰.

While piecegoods imports were on the increase, one finds a concomitant increase in the export of raw cotton from the province (Table 6).

Table 5: Import of European Cotton Goods into Brahmaputra Valley

Years	Twist and Yarn	In maunds Piece-goods
1880-81 to 1884-85	34755	33628
1885-86 to 1889-90	54309	189252
1890-91 to 1894-95	58298	286567
1895-96 to 1899-1900	89176	345822
1900-01 to 1904-05	32955	367985
1905-06 to 1909-10	53230	215583
1910-11 to 1914-15	123527	254272
1915-16 to 1919-20	123527	225392

Source : Reports on the Trade carried by Rail and River of Assam for the respective years

Table 6 : Export of raw cotton from Brahmaputra Valley

Years	Export of raw cotton in maunds
1880-81 to 1884-85	85330
1885-86 to 1889-90	170555
1890-91 to 1894-95	185962
1895-96 to 1899-1900	153259
1900-01 to 1904-05	176421
1905-06 to 1909-10	96482
1910-11 to 1914-15	191746
1915-16 to 1919-20	164512

Source : Same as Table 5

European imports were thus making a dent in the economy in two ways. The first was a substitution effect where hand-made coarse cotton yarn of local production was being gradually replaced by finer twist and yarn of European production. Secondly, mill made piecegoods were replacing local handloom products.

Brass, Copper and Bell-Metal

A considerable share of the workforce in the metal industry were occupied in brass, copper and bell-metal. This industry in Assam was confined largely to the production of utensils for household use. This branch of artisan production was not based on raw material locally available. A major part of the brass and copper sheets were imported from Calcutta. Certain villages in Lower Assam came to be known for the production of these articles.

The share of the workforce engaged in the production of brass, copper and bell-metal was not significant, but there was a general stagnancy between 1901 and 1921 in most districts. This feature is all the more significant in Kamrup district which had the largest concentration of workers in this branch of industry in the region.

In many parts of the region, the increasing use of imported enamelled-ware in place of the traditional bell-metal utensils was stated to be one of the causes. For example Hunter in his account of the Lakhimpur district wrote that 'the Assam braziers formerly manufactured cooking and other-domestic utensils of well-amalgamated metal, and of a handsome shape, but this trade now may be said to have almost died out, the cheaper imported brass vessels in common use throughout Bengal having quite superseded the Assam Manufacture which though of better, quality, was very much more costly'.

These are just two instances amongst many of the position of traditional artisan crafts in the industrial economy of the Brahmaputra Valley- an economy which no longer retains its traditional glory. The reasons for the decline or perhaps stagnancy has in most instances been the same - the increasing stress of foreign competition.

Table 7 : Share of Workforce in Industries Engaged in Brass, Copper and Bell-metal

Districts/Year	1901	1911	1921
Goalpara	4	30	41
Kamrup	802	938	164
Darrang	162	72	80
Nowgong	26	78	105
Lakhimpur	56	45	39
Sibsagar	235	302	245
Brahmaputra Valley	1285	1465	674

Source : Same as Table 1.

We have noted earlier, the relatively higher share of workforce in non-traditional production in Upper Assam. Upper Assam, as we know, witnessed the inception of the comparatively modern sectors of tea plantations, coal and oil. One would thus expect a concomitant spread of industrial production to cater to the latter. Judging from the figures of the workforce one finds that this was not so. Construction of the means of transport, one such industry which happened to dominate in terms of relative magnitude accounted for less than one per cent of industrial workers in all the three Upper Assam districts with one or two exceptions.

Where was the demand for such goods, such as machinery, clothing, for the workforce etc. met from ? One again looks at the trade figures for some answer. The increasing volume of imports, catering to the modern enterprises is reflected in such figures¹². To give an example, lead used for lining tea chests required in plenty by the plantation enterprise was imported from abroad¹³. In a timber rich region like Assam, it was found that 'during the First World War the supply of three-ply chests from Europe was interrupted and the local saw-mills again began to thrive but manifestly for only a short period pending the inevitable revival of imports after the war should end', and 'by 1924-25, three-ply chests to the value of Rs. 90 lakhs a year were being imported into India

and so far as tea was concerned, the local shock industry had practically ceased to exist¹⁴.

From the analysis of the employment figures and other supportive evidences, one finds that in the economic set up of the Brahmaputra Valley, while traditional industries mainly in the nature of artisan crafts were stagnating or decaying, the primary (or 'modern') sector based on plantations and mining were nurtured with the help of external forces. The disparity between the former and the latter was tremendous - in organisation, in employment, in infrastructure, and in the marketing of their products. The former was developed mainly by the local people. The latter was developed by overseas finance employing a migrant workforce. While the products of the traditional industries were meant mainly for the regional population, that of the latter was meant nearly or wholly for overseas markets. This needed an improved infrastructure. Railways were built connecting the mines and plantations with ports and urban centres, these developing as enclaves in the traditional agrarian economy of the Brahmaputra Valley.

I do not, in such a short paper, want to draw any definitive conclusions. If one could generalise from the study very broadly, a few tentative conclusions could perhaps be arrived at.

One finds certain differences when comparing this region with other parts of the country around the same period. There seem to have been no established artisan sector or artisan class in the Brahmaputra Valley. We find that the colonial impact that was felt in the economy of the Brahmaputra Valley was qualitatively of a different nature. The impact that was felt in other parts of India, commonly referred to as the 'deindustrialisation' process,¹⁵ was a decline in the workforce engaged in the artisan sector. In the Brahmaputra Valley, where most of such products were produced for home-consumption, the shift was not evident in the workforce. Instead, a section of the population changed their consumption pattern in favour of foreign goods. In the case of the handloom

sector, the shift took place, (apart from the piecegoods) from the use of local yarn to that of imported yarn. Export of large volumes of raw cotton produced in the province partly supports this point. Thus instead of the local industries developing to cater to rising demands, the latter was met by an increasing volume of imports. This was true for almost all sectors of the economy. The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam thus represented a case of what one might term 'non-industrialisation', where starting from a relatively low base, the industrial sector never really took off.

It is difficult thus in the case of Brahmaputra Valley to gauge the industrialisation (or deindustrialisation) process merely by studying the change in the industrial workforce. One has to look for supporting evidence, for example the pattern of trade, which clearly reflects the change that was taking place in the economy, where artisan production was being gradually replaced by foreign imports.

One notices marked intra-regional distinctiveness in the industry/trade nexus. Lower Assam, with its relatively greater emphasis on artisan production vis-a-vis Upper Assam with its 'modern' bases of economy and a relatively insignificant artisan sector. The economy of Upper Assam changed with the plantations, whereas Lower Assam retained its traditional character.

Notes & References

1. H.K.Barpujari, **Assam in the days of the Company**, Gauhati, First Edition, 1963, pp. 234-235.
2. W.W.Hunter, **A Statistical Account of Assam**, Volume,1, Delhi, Reprinted in 1975, p 261, First Published, London 1879.
3. E.A.Gait, Brass and Copper Wares in Assam, **Notes on Some Industries of Assam from 1884-1895**, Shillong 1896, p.112.
4. The difficulty in working out a comparable time series between 1881 and 1921 lies in the fact that (as the Census Commissioner of 1881 himself admitted), in the occupational data of the Census there was a general tendency to enter caste names as occupation-

- al categories and thereby inflating the numbers dependent on non-agricultural occupation. Even in the 1891 Census, many of the occupational categories were confused with castes, and principal and subsidiary occupations were not carefully distinguished. In the 1901 Census however, occupations were more carefully distinguished than before, and actual workers were generally counted. Since makers and sellers of many products were counted as industrial workforce we have tried to deduct the number of pure sellers from the number of makers and sellers. In many cases however, this distinction was not possible.
5. One could perhaps question the premise upon which the development of such enterprises (like food, dress and toilet) could in the proper sense of the term be categorised as identifying industrial development. But, if one excludes the **employment** figures of such industries from the total figure of industrial employment what is left of the sector, would affect a substantial drop in the already negligible participation of the industrial workforce. On the other hand, we find those enterprises, which conform more closely to the definition of industries, were very insignificantly represented.
 6. H.Z.Darrah, Cotton in Assam in **Notes on Some Industries of Assam from 1884-1895**, Op.cit., p.49.
 7. Ibid., p. 60.
 8. H.F.Samman, **Monograph on the Cotton Fabrics of Assam**, Calcutta, 1897, p.3.
 9. G.N.Gupta, **A Survey of the Industries and Resources of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the Year 1907-08**, p.7.
 10. Samman, op.cit., p.7. Several examples are available in the evidences collected in the **Reports on the Condition of the Lower Classes of the Population in India**. Condition of the people of Assam, Revenue and Agricultural Department, famine proceedings, December 1888, (commonly referred to as Dufferin Enquiry Committee Report) where from the consumption pattern a cross-section of the villagers it has been found that the foreign component constituted around 20 to 86 percent of the expenses of clothing of males, whereas females do not use foreign textiles at all.

11. W.W.Hunter, *op.cit.*, p.383.
12. See Keya Dasgupta, 'Coming of Tea in the Brahmaputra Valley : Changes in Pattern of Trade', in Proceedings of the North-East India History Association, Sixth Session, Agartala, 1986.
13. See 'Annual Reports on Rail and River-borne trade of the Province of Assam in the early twentieth century.
14. W.R.Gawthrop, **The Story of Assam Railways and Trading Company Limited, 1881-1951**, 1951, pp.47-48.
15. Notable among the recent contributions are D. Thorner, 'De-incustrialisation in India', in D & A Thorner : **Land and Labour in India** (Bombay 1962); A.K.Bagchi: 'De incustrialisation in Gangetic Bihar, 1809-1901' in **Essays in Honour of Prof. S.C.Sarkar** (Delhi -1978) and 'De-industrialisation in India in the Nineteenth Century: Some Theoretical Implications, *Journal of Development Studies*, 12,2(1976), and others.