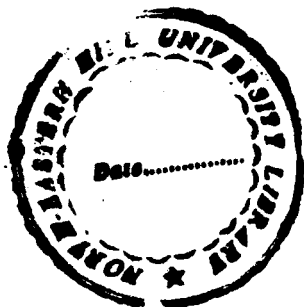


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NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**SIXTH SESSION  
AGARTALA : 1985**

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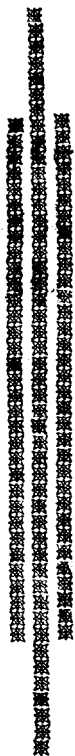
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## Preface

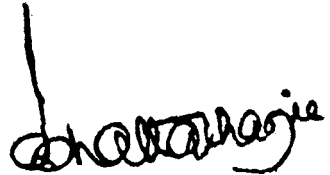
The Sixth Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Calcutta University Post-Graduate Centre, Agartala on October 3-5, 1985 was one of our most colourful academic meets in the region, attended by the largest number of delegates. Professor H. L. Gupta, formerly Head of the Department of History, Saugar University presided over the Session, which was inaugurated by Sri Nripen Chakravarty, Chief Minister of Tripura and graced by Dr. B. D. Sharma, Vice-Chancellor, North-Eastern Hill University as the Guest of Honour. Shri Dasarath Deb, Deputy Chief Minister of Tripura also addressed the delegates. Our colleagues, Professor J. B. Ganguly, Director, CUPG Centre, and Dr. Mahadev Chakravarti, Reader & Head, Department of Modern History at the Centre did us great honour as Chairman of the Reception Committee and the Local Secretary of the Session respectively.

We are grateful to the Calcutta University Post-Graduate Centre, Agartala for hosting the Session and warm hospitality offered to the delegates. The administration, members of the teaching faculties and the students' community in the Centre were all involved in the Session. The Centre received generous support from the Government of Tripura. The Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister and their cabinet colleagues generously spared time from their schedules to be with the delegates and participate in academic discussions. They entertained the delegates and offered as gifts some publications on Tripura and excellent pieces of indigenous handicrafts as token of love and affection of the people of the State. The Directorate of Information and Culture, Government of Tripura, organised colourful programmes depicting the rich cultural heritage of Tripura. Study tours were organised to the places of historical importance. On the whole, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the Session for a long time.

The academic standard of the Session was also very high. We have maintained our tradition of steady growth in membership pattern and the number of papers presented and discussed. Tripura is one of such areas in our region where we do not have enough historical studies. In Agartala Session, we indeed achieved a major breakthrough. Majority of the papers presented there were on Tripura. These shall certainly generate further research. The volume is a collection of sixty two papers, empirical as well as

analytical and interpretative. Some of the papers, particularly by the colleagues in other disciplines, have added to the merit of the volume by fitting well in our scheme of recording the living history.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. M. S. Sangma, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal and Dr. Gautam Sengupta for the ready help in editing and publishing the volume.



Shillong  
The 22 August 1986

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)  
General Secretary  
North East India History Association

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## Dupleix's Trade Mission to Assam 1738-40

### Amalendu Guha

Using some French sources second hand, this paper throws new light on and brings into significance an event of 1739 which found either too brief a mention, or none at all, in the royal chronicles of Assam. The paper shows that the 1739 visit of three Europeans to the capital of the Kingdom of Assam was a part of a well-planned trading mission, privately organized by some employees of the European East India Companies and that Dupleix's ambition to open up Assam for French trade was a major factor behind the move. The relevant French sources were examined by late Indrani Ray for their Assam context and both of us had once thought of writing jointly a paper on the trade mission. But this did not materialise, because of her untimely and sudden demise. The present paper is largely based on notes she called from two French sources and lent for my ready reference and record.<sup>1</sup> However, since its structuring is mine and since for its shortcomings I should alone be held responsible, I do not now venture to associate Indrani Ray's name with its authorship.

### I

Edward Gait writes that in 1739 four Europeans whose names "appear to have been Bill, Godwin, Lister and Mill" visited the Ahom King, Shiva Simha, at his capital - Rangpur-in the interior of Assam. "The King met them at the principal gate of the city where, it is said, they did him homage *by falling prostrate to him*".<sup>2</sup> In Gait's book, there is no mention of his source of information. However, even in the absence of such documentation, it is almost certain that he got his information from a Tai-Ahom manuscript chronicle (*buranji*), which was brought to light in 1894 and which was subsequently entrusted to Golap Chandra Barua for translation into English under Gait's supervision. The aforesaid text, together with its translation, was published in 1980 and, in a preface to this publication, Barua says : "Gait got sufficient materials of Ahom rule from this Buranji for his 'History of Assam'".<sup>3</sup>

The information given by Gait about the visiting Europeans is too brief to be adequate and also somewhat confusing. Nothing is said about the motives of the visitors, their credentials or about the duration of their stay in Assam. Why this is so becomes clear when we look into the relevant evidence of the *Ahom Buranji* itself, which was Gait's likely source. In general, an avoidance of details marks the terse style of *buranjis*, and the *Ahom Buranji* is no exception to this general practice. After mentioning the year of the event, all that this source says about the visit is contained only in a few lines as quoted below :

*'Then one Musalman, named Ramsha, came to our country. Three Firingis Gudimbill, Distirbill and Mistirbill came with Ramsha. In the month of Dinkam (puh), the King came out to the principal gate of Rangpur to meet the Firingis. The three Firigngis paid their respects to the King falling prostrate at his feet and offered him five packets of needles, two Sarais (stands) for keeping in betel-nuts and two blankets'.*<sup>4</sup>

The *buranji* makes a clear mention of three visiting Europeans and also names them in a distorted manner ; but according to Gait, there were four of them. It is possible that in an attempt to restore the original European names, he reads four names in the relevant list, distortedly given in the *buranji*. Or, may be, he has a second source to fall upon for raising the number from three to four. But quite characteristically of him, he produces no evidence in support of his statement. He is however, at the same time, not very sure that he reads the European names correctly.

S. K. Bhuyan also adds little to what is there in the *Ahom Buranji* except for identifying one of the Europeans as Col. James Mill, who had first come to India as a subaltern in the service of the Ostend East India Company, established in 1722, and who, after this Company collapsed by 1732, opted for the career of a free-lance mercenary. Thereafter Mill carried on business in salt with Assam for some years, and Bhuyan credits him to be the first European to trade with Assam. However, there is evidence that an English merchant, Richard Edwards of Kasimbazar, used to send merchandise for sale as far as Guwahati in Assam as early as 1669-70. He of course, sent his goods with another merchant.<sup>5</sup>

## II

That three or four Europeans paid a visit to the King of Assam in 1739 is not a historically significant fact by itself and could be

overlooked for lack of further details in the relevant Tai-Ahom source as regards its purpose and background. However, some such details are indeed available in some French sources, which have so far remained unutilised by historians working on 18th century Assam. In course of her own research on French trade in 18th century India, late Indrani Ray came across some private letters of Dupleix, the French Governor of Chandannagar, all written and despatched during the period from 5 May 1739 to 8 March 1740. Mostly addressed to Mill and one Mathie, these letters not only corroborate the chronicler's record of the visit in its essence, but also reveal Dupleix as a key figure behind this visit.<sup>6</sup> They also reveal that the 1739 visit was integrally linked to a trade mission to Assam in which several European traders were deeply involved during the period from 1738 to 1740.

It appears from Martineau's account that the idea of sending a trade mission to Assam came first from Elliot, an English merchant residing in Calcutta, and Dupleix was seized with it. Accordingly in 1738, a trading association was formed in utmost secrecy between Dupleix, Elliot and Sechlerman. The last-mentioned was perhaps a Dutchman. It was apparently private profit motive that brought these men together. Neither the French nor the English or the Dutch East India Company had any role to play in it. There is no evidence of even their being informed of the venture. Yet, as we shall see soon, French national interest also was a factor that motivated Dupleix when he thought of the trade mission.

It was not at all feasible on the part of the gentlemen, forming the association, to undertake the voyage to Assam personally. They needed other people for this as their active agents. Mill, who was then residing at Dacca, was available for such ventures. So a deal was made with him on a profit-sharing basis, for his making a preliminary trading trip to Assam in the same year. He was accompanied by Goodingt, a Dutchman selected by Sechlerman, in this trip. As per terms of the deal, Mill was to receive as much as one-third of the profits from the sales of the merchandise placed under his charge. But he had to give one-fifteenth portion of his own share to Goodingt for his services. No further information on this first trip is available. However, since the trading efforts were not discontinued even after 1738, it may be presumed that this trip was, on the whole, commercially successful. So far as Dupleix's share of the merchandise was concerned, he was able to get amongst other things, a diamond ornament sold

in Assam, but not the topazes he sent there.<sup>7</sup>

For the next trip to Assam in 1739, also, Mill remained the chief of the enterprise. Goodingt was to be with him as before. But now a third man, Mathie, was sent by Dupleix to join them. When Dupleix wrote to Goodingt on May 1, 1739, the latter - it appears - was already inside or in the neighbourhood of Assam, gathering 'curios' of that country for the former. Preparations for the trip were in full swing by May 1739. Altogether Rs. 80,000 worth of jewellery and goods (broadcloth, vermilion, corals etc.) were entrusted to Mill as merchandise for the voyage. Securing a passport from the Fauzdar of Rangamati as a precaution against harassments was left for Mill to arrange. But Dupleix provided *dastaks* in advance for the return journey to Chandannagar from Rangamati. The latter was Bengal's river port on the Brahmaputra bordering on Assam at a distance of nine days journey from Dacca. However, the voyage to Assam was somewhat delayed, as Mill had to go to Kasimbazar and Mursidabad first to get a sample of Assam silk checked and also to secure the Nawab's *parwana* for the journey. Then, reaching Dacca, Mill was again held up there for getting his house-boat (*bajra*) repaired. While at Dacca, he received four more boats sent for him from Chandannagar. He also received there a horse and a sealed letter sent by Dupleix for delivery to the King of Assam after the trading there was over.<sup>8</sup>

It was at Dacca that Mathie joined Mill. Both arrived at Rangamati on 14 July 1739, and this news was conveyed to Dupleix vide Mathie's letter, written from Kandari (check-post on Assam side of the border) on 26 July. Mathie also mentioned that they had no news of Goodingt and that they needed more boats. In his letter of 13 August 1739 to Mill, Dupleix acknowledged both Mill's and Mathie's letters and promised to send two more boats to the Assam check-post, Kandari. To Fream, on the same day, he wrote that half the journey of the trading mission to Assam was over. With ten loaded boats under their charge, Mill and Mathie proceeded separately towards Guwahati, and Mill was expected to reach the place ahead of Mathie. The party began to face some difficulties only at and beyond Guwahati. In his letter of 19 November addressed to Mill, Dupleix acknowledged the receipt of their joint letter sent from Rangpur.<sup>9</sup> They could however meet the King not before late December.

We have only Dupleix's letters on the subject, but not the letters he received from his respondents. Consequently, the story

of the venture is difficult to reconstruct. We have no knowledge as to whether the horse and the sealed letter were ever delivered to the King and, if so, whether a reply was secured from him. This part of the mission was Dupleix's own headace, and not a concern for other members of the trading association. Dupleix had apprehension that, though already committed to the embassy, Mill might play some mischief at the last moment. In fact Dupleix gave vent to this apprehension, again and again, in course of his correspondence.<sup>10</sup> He begged of Mathie to do everything to secure a reply from the King permitting, 'the French nation to do trade in his country'.<sup>11</sup> In any case, as has been said, there is no evidence that Dupleix's diplomatic letter reached the Ahom royal court or that it received any consideration there. There is no mention of the meeting with the King in the available French records either.

The diplomatic failure apart, the outcome of the trading enterprise was also frustrating. The year 1739 was especially a bad year for Dupleix because of huge losses in his private trading activities elsewhere due to shipping accidents. But he sustained a hope of being more than compensated by his gains from the Assam trade. From the very beginning he was clear as to what he wanted from Assam. On 1 May, 1739 he wrote to Goodingt that elephant tusks, reportedly priced at Rs. 400/- per maund in Assam, were not worth purchasing. He wrote to Mill on 11 June to note that *muga* silk was not required so much and that it was more desirable to procure the white silk. On 14 July Mathie was instructed to enter Assam before the Bairagis, who were Assamese Brahmins regularly sent by the King of Assam on intelligence work abroad, returned to their country. What was apprehended was that the Bairagis would be returning with some marchandise, procured from outside Assam, and that their competition might depress sales. On 17 August he, again, wrote to Mill to procure as much papper as possible, since the commodity was expected to fetch very high prices in Bengal that year. But, despite all such meticulous instructions at every stage, things went wrong.

It appears that goods offered by the trading mission were not in much demand. If sales were poor, purchases were also bound to be poor, since barter was the main basis of the Assam trade. Local merchants entered into some deals at Guwahati, but only to cancel these later. Commenting on this in his letter to Mathie on 11 November 1739, Dupleix cast aspersions on the business ethics of the Assamese merchants and expressed doubts about the

prospects of future deals as well. When the trade mission was returning with huge stocks of unsold goods - such as broadcloth, vermillion and corals, Dupleix instructed Mathie in course of his letter of 8 March 1740 to leave the unsold goods with his gomastha, Gopalchand, at Dacca. Bitterly, he continued :

*"I was told that there is plenty of musk in Assam. But it is not mentioned in the list of goods sent to me. So far as pepper is concerned, received only 11 maunds. So all that has been reported to us about this country must be false".<sup>12</sup>*

### III

Thus ended Dupleix's mission to Assam which remained there on the Rajah's territory for six months or so. If there was no trading success, the fault was Dupleix's rather than of the Kingdom as such. The regnal years of King Shiva Simha, 1714-1744, were years of peace and relative prosperity in Assam, as compared to the previous century of Mughal-Ahom warfares or the period of civil wars beginning with 1770. There was steady demand there for at least salt, saltpetre and sulphur. Dupleix's letters give the impression that men were coming from or going to Assam rather constantly up and down the Brahmaputra, and this helped maintain communication and trade. So, it appears to us that the mission's Assam-bound boats were stocked more with wrong goods than with the right ones. Dupleix's hope to find a market for broadcloth there was belied. Secondly, Dupleix's letters suggest that his men on the spot were not of the right sort. Mathie had to be rebuked for attempted private trade on his own and had to be advised against drinking too much. About Mill's loyalty, too, Dupleix was all along suspicious.<sup>13</sup>

Had trade prospects in general been bleak in Assam, as Dupleix came to believe at the end, then James Mill would not have continued for years to carry on his trade with that Kingdom. After the Mahratta invasion of Bengal in 1742, he was found escorting with his armed men a number of salt boats to Assam. Thereafter, he himself used to carry on business in salt with that Kingdom for some years, as has been mentioned earlier.<sup>14</sup> After Dupleix, the next Frenchman to engage in Assam trade was Jeane Baptiste Chevalier who afterwards became the Governor of Chandannagar. He was deputed from Chandannagar by the French East India Company to trade with Assam on its behalf. He es-

established his headquarters at Bengal's border town of Goalpara in 1755 and, having obtained the permission of the King of Assam went with a large fleet as far as its capital in 1757. Although the Goalpara factory of the French East India Company was closed down in 1757, Chevalier was in the region until 1763 and, later, other Frenchmen followed in his footsteps. However, the Seven Years' War, 1756-63, and the Battle of Plassey of 1757 having been meanwhile concluded in favour of the English, the situation radically changed, and the persistent French interest in Assam came to nothing. Individual French traders, operating from Goalpara till about 1778, were thereafter mere agents of English merchants. After 1778, they were no more to be seen on or near the scene.<sup>15</sup>

While concluding, we raise a question which can be answered only by historians well-acquainted with the French records. Is it possible that Dupleix's letter to the Assam King - its contents remain unknown - could have been written not on his own personal behalf, but on behalf of the French East India Company? If so, it will explain his excessive anxiety he gave vent to over the fate of the letter. Besides, if so, it will also suggest that his trade mission was essentially an authorised step towards expanding the French sphere of influence. Even otherwise, it remains to be a forward action of his own towards the same purpose. Finally, we note that Dupleix's efforts were continued in the follow-up by Chevalier.

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1. A. Martineau, *Dupleix et l'Inde Francaise* (Paris, 1929) and Dupleix's letters, 1739-49, preserved in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.
2. Sir Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (posthumously revised 3rd edn., 1963 : Calcutta, reprint 1967), p. 190.
3. Rai Sahib Golap Chandra Barua, ed. and trans., *Ahom Buranji : from the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule* (Calcutta, 1930). The Preface has no pagination.
4. Quote from *Ahom Buranji*, n. 3, p. 274.  
The month of *puh* (paush) coincides with the second half of December and first half of January. The Tai-Ahom year referred to is Lakni Kasheu (= 1739 A.D.).
5. S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826* (Gauhati, 1949), pp. 63-64. For information on Mill, also W. S. Seton-Karr, *Selections from Calcutta Gazette*, Vol. 1, (Calcutta, 1864) pp. 153-4, as cited by Bhuyan. For reference to Edwards, see B. Watson, *Foundation for Empire : English Private*

*Trade in India* (New Delhi, 1980), p. 268.

6. Of the 16 letters, taken note of by Indrani Ray as having a reference to the visit to Assam, seven were addressed to Mathie, six to Mill and one each to Goodingt, Elliot and Fream. The first three were members of the visiting team, and the *buranji* record apparently refers to them. Elliot was an English merchant residing in Calcutta and Fream was Dupleix's close Dacca-based associate.
7. Dupleix to Goodingt, 1st May 1739.
8. Ibid, and Dupleix to Mathie, 11 June 1739.
9. It appears that it took them about three months to reach Rangpur from the border post of Kandar.
10. Dupleix to Goodingt, 1 May 1739 ; Dupleix to Mathie, 31 May 1739 ; Dupleix to Mathie, 11 June 1739 ; Dupleix to Mill, 15 July 1739.
11. Dupleix to Mathie, 14 July 1739.
12. Quote from Dupleix to Mathie, 8 March 1740.
13. Dupleix to Mathie, 13 August 1739, Duplix to Mill, 17 August 1739 ; Duplieix to Mathie, 11 June 1739 ; Dupleix to Mathie, 14 July 1739 ; Dupleix to Mill, 13 August 1739.
14. Bhuyan, n. 5, pp. 63-64 ; also Seton-Karr, pp. 153-4, as cited *ibid*.
5. Bhuyan, n. 5, pp. 64-65, 99-100 and 104-07 ; also S. K. Bhuyan, *Early British Relations with Assam* (Shillong, 1949), pp. 4-5 and N. K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*, Vo.. I (3rd edn. Calcutta, 1965), p. 38.

From the time of Chevalier's departure no Frenchman resided at Goalpara until in 1767 M. Lavel was appointed agent of English private traders, in partnership with Chevalier. The concern did not succeed and was soon closed down. Two other frenchmen, Giblot and Champanac, doing business at Goalpara since were seized and deported on the renewal of the Anglo-French hostilities in 1778.