

## Ethnic Elements in the Silk Industry of Assam

Debasis Sen

The river basins of the Yang tse Kiang and Hoang Ho of ancient China was the birth place of silk trees. This region was unfavourable for agriculture. The plantation of cotton was less remunerative than manufacture of silk from cocoons which had a spontaneous growth in the abundant silk trees (Viz. *monus indica*, *machi-lus odoratissima* and *ricinus communis*)<sup>1</sup>. Silk and its products became a major item of Chinese export to the Mediterranean markets, India and Europe<sup>2</sup>. Ethnic qualities of the Mongoloid Chinese was the secret of their proficiency in Silk. Primitive form of *Saivism* (Phallic cult) represented through plants and trees supplied source of inspiration in the opening of silk age in China, as a substitute of cotton textile and wool or as shelters against climatic condition in the post neolithic age. The Himalayan region and the foot hills were within the influences of *Saivism*. The relations between the dwellers and the mountains, forests and their products had been deep since the time of their emergence from primitive to culture<sup>3</sup>. The next was the structure of their society the very foundation of which was raised upon economic considerations. The mongoloid societies in China were classified into male and female lineage system with exogamy regulations obligatory in marriages and inheritance of properties<sup>4</sup>. The idea was to ensure solvency in food and cloth, the two essentials of livelihood. This arrangement was ideal for manufacture of silk at home by their women from cocoons grown and nourished on the trees within homesteads. This supplemented the huge volume of male labour needed in the unfertile agricultural fields in the outdoor. The mongoloid tribal societies of Assam, mostly of Bodo group, inherited this pattern of culture from China and had gone down in history as the creators of silk culture in Assam.

Even at present the Dimasa-Kacharis (a Boro group) of North Cachar Hills District of Assam are well known for its

male and female lineage system. Silk weaving was a sole right of a Dimasa woman and an essential qualification, a male was not to claim his access in silk craft and its equipments which belonged to the females<sup>3</sup>. The rearing of silk worms, turning out of threads, dying for colour a labourious process, required accurate and methodical knowledge. Hence it was a mode of education and a requisite of a marriageable maiden, as battle training, agriculture and craftsmanship for a boy, both supplemented each other in practical life in the absence of academic qualifications.

The Caste Hindus came to Assam from distant places of Middle India, Videha and Mithila, the process of which had started since the time of the Aryanisation of Assam<sup>6</sup>. They were reluctant in silk culture because it was a degraded one in the estimation of the Aryan Hindu Society. But silk clothes were sacred and Manu in his ordinances had prescribed the wearing of the silk treads for the Brahmanas<sup>7</sup>. Due to this heavy demand of silk, the later treatise like *Arthashastra* of Kautilya had allowed only the unmarried girls of the families to manufacture silk clothes from cocoons as a compromise<sup>8</sup>. Still silk culture failed to attract the caste Hindus of Assam inspite of the added advantages of gaining royal favour. Incidentally, it may be mentioned here that the Kings of ancient Assam were patrons of local arts and crafts. The manufacture of silk was economically gainful and cloth was accepted in the royal treasury as payment of revenue since circulation of coins were not widespread. By the 9th century A. D. silk became a popular product among the tribals and lower castes of the Aryan Hindu Communities of Assam, and it began to find mention in the royal inscriptions<sup>9</sup>. The occupational caste called *Tantuvaya* or the cotton weavers of the Aryan Hindu Society of ancient Assam had no link with silk<sup>10</sup>. The quantity of silk thus produced in Assam by women in their home-steads by tremendous labour were durable and attractive at sight. During the days of the Mahamedan Wars Assam silk had fascinated the imaginations of the Muhamedan writers and they compared it as excellent as that of China<sup>11</sup>. Assam silk gradually became a costly commercial commodity since that time. When the East India Company had established its capital in Fort Wilham at Calcutta they at once realised the immense commercial value of Assam silk and found it as an exportable commodity to Europe. The court of Directors in

London repeatedly investigated the affairs of indigenous silk trade in India through the authorities at Fort William.<sup>12</sup> Their aim was to manufacture silk in Assam through their own agencies. But it was difficult since manufacture of silk was carried out within homesteads by women. A French Company was successful to open a factory at Goalpara by a permission of the Ahom monarch Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769 A.D.).<sup>13</sup> The English had an old silk factory in Malda (West Bengal) which was established as early as in 1686 A.D. But there was scarcity of skilled craftsmen. A number of male artisans from Assam were appointed at the British factory at Malda towards the close of the sixties of the eighteenth century which was then under the supervision of one Gaur Mohan Seth.<sup>14</sup> In 1769, the British authorities took strong objection to the French traders trading in silk for export and this compelled the Ahom Government to stop the trading rights of the French in Assam and their factory at Goalpara was closed.<sup>15</sup> After the formal annexation of Assam to the territories of the East India Company in 1826 AD the prospects of silk trade in Assam seemed to have brightened for the English traders. In 1831 they began enquiries about the prospects of silk manufacture in Assam.<sup>16</sup> But it was not before 1872-73 that they were successful when Messers Lister and Company of London started production in their factories in the districts of Lakhimpur.<sup>17</sup> Three or four years later another European gentleman established his factory in the district of Kamrup.<sup>18</sup> But all these attempts failed. The experiment of Messers Lister and Company turned into nothing due to an epidemic in the cocoon population.<sup>19</sup> The Europeans had little control over the productive sides of silk which was indigenous and based upon the traditional skill of women in homesteads. In fact silk manufacture became popular in Assam by different stages by various measures taken by the rulers of ancient and mediaeval times. It was dependant upon certain circumstances and those had outlived their necessity during and after the British annexation of Assam.

### State Regulations to popularise Silk

It has been stated before that in ancient times silk culture was not popular among all sections of the population of Assam. Hence to encourage silk craft there was a specialised department. The duties of this department was to look after

the production of best quality clothes which had a great attraction outside the province.<sup>20</sup> In the tribal areas, the Kings were patrons of their traditional arts and crafts. Thus in the Dimasa state of North Cachar the Kings patronised the weaving families by bulk purchase of their clothes and recognised it as substitute of money payment of revenue to the state.<sup>21</sup> During the days of the Muhamedan wars when there was an economic deadlock the Ahom Government took a bold measure to solve the twin problem of the scarcities of the constant supplies of uniforms to the troops and the payment of revenue to the State by the masses affording facilities to the artisans in silk. Suhungmung Dihingia Raja (1497-1539 AD) was the first Ahom monarch during whose time certain measures were taken in this regard.<sup>22</sup> Momai Tamuli Barbarua, father of illustrious Lachit Barphukan and an officer of the womenfolk of Assam to spin at least two bundles of silk thread per head each night before going to bed. For the execution of this order weakly and bi-weakly vigilance was enforced.<sup>23</sup> The system subsequently proved its usefulness. It kept the families self-sufficient in their garment requirements and the surplus substituted the payment of revenue to the state by coins and widened the scopes of income by trade. Rudra Singha (1696-1714 AD), the illustrious Tungkhungia monarch took further measures for the development of silk industry in Assam. For specialised royal robes Assam was dependant upon distant provinces. This was discouraged by his initiative providing arrangements for the manufacture of best quality silk and tailoring of royal robes. Importation of tailored royal robes from outside thus was prohibited.<sup>24</sup> This afforded incentives to the silk weaving families because it was lucrative to supply royal robes. With the passage of time Assam silk had attained a place of status in an all India standard the management of which gradually began to be regulated by the British traders for export to Europe. In a letter to the authorities at Fort William, the Court of Directors wrote "...there is no branch of our trade which we more adequately wish to extend than that of rawsilk, we cannot think of effecting it by any measure that may be oppressive to the natives".<sup>25</sup> In 1769 AD the office of a Superintendent and an Assistant was proposed to be established at Calcutta for the upliftment of Indian silk. Mr. John Chamier was the Superintendent of this department with his Assistant Mr. Joseph Ponchon both having wide

experience in the line.<sup>26</sup> The scope and functions of this department was confined to all silk producing centres of India.

### Commercial prospects

It has been stated before that Assam silk became a commercial commodity during the days of Muhamedan Wars. Pratap Singha (1603-1641 AD) was the first Ahom monarch who was instrumental for the rise of the commercial value of the three varieties viz. *Muga* (produced from cocoons viz. *antheroea assamoea*), *Eri* (produced from cocoons viz. *attacus ricini*) and *Pat* (produced from two species of cocoons viz. *bamby textor* and *bamby croesi*). By his circular fifty families of weavers in Sualkuchi in Kamrup District had been entrusted to produce finest silk for the Mughal Emperor of Delhi.<sup>27</sup> Silk tradition thus began to grow by leapse and bounds in Sualkuchi and in present times this place is a top most centre of Assam Silk.<sup>28</sup> It has been stated before that the importation of silk garments in Assam was prohibited by an order of Rudra Singha in the eighteenth century AD. The weavers and manufacturers of silk and silk robes thus had attained a lot of proficiency and began to face their competitors of China, Tibet, Bhutan and Burma. Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1810 AD) the last great Ahom monarch deputed a special envoy to the Deva Raja of Bhutan with many presents which included finest silk and silk robes.<sup>29</sup> Ahom Government had absolute control over trade and commerce and therefore inspite of vast potentialities scope of private enterprises were limited except in the internal markets. In medieval times such markets were established in Raha in the Nowgong district and at Dimapur, now in Nagaland by the Ahom and the Dimasa rulers respectively.<sup>30</sup> The annexation of Assam to the territories of the East India Company and the establishment of a uniform system of administration widened the scope of French and private enterprises under British regulations. Thus the French traders who were all along objected to carry on trade in India were allowed to import silk thread and silk clothes from Assam by the opening years of the present century.<sup>31</sup> Private traders also got similar opportunities. Trading companies were established in various parts of Assam. One such company was the Assam Valley Trading Company with their offices in Tezpur and Gauhati; the other one was owned by Messers R. K. Saraswati of Gauhati.<sup>32</sup> In the Cal-

cutta Industrial Exhibition of 1901 AD the Assam valley Trading Company displayed their silk commodities with great success. Messers R. K. Saraswati exhibited their products in Calcutta, Tangail and Ahmedabad exhibitions about the same time and won a good reputation<sup>33</sup>. Subsequently silk became a useful object in the struggle against the colonial rule in the economic front as part of Indian National Congress programme.

### References

1. Richard Carrington, *The Million Years of Man*, Wiedemann and Nicholson, 20 Bond Street, London, 1963, p. 226.
2. Rev. James Summers, "Chinese and Japanese Repository of facts and events", *Science, History and Art*, London, 1865, Vol. II, pp. 127-131; Vol. III, pp. 57-72.
3. R. L. Banerjee, "Identification of certain Tribes mentioned in the Puranas with those noticed in Col E. T. Dalton's Ethnology of Bengal," *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, January 1874; ; R. A. Jairazbhoy, "Some Aspects of Tree and Pillar Worship," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, New Series, Vols. 39-40, 1964-65, pp. 249-252; H. Risley, *The People of India*, 1915, p. 103.
4. Marcel Granet, *Chinese Civilisation*, Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner and Co., New York, 1930, pp. 153-156.
5. B. N. Bardoloi, *Dimasa Kacharis of North Cachar Hills District of Assam*, Directorate of Information and Public Relations, Gauhati, 1976, pp. 35-45.
6. *Kalika Puranam*, Panchanam Tarkaratra(tr.), Nava Bharat Publishers, Calcutta, 1384 B. E., *Ashtotringso Adhyaya* 105 : 107 : 108, p. 319.
7. *The Ordinances of Manu*, Arthur Coke Burnell and Edward W. Hopkins, Trubner and Co., London, 1884, Lecture II, pp. 19-21.
8. *Kautiliya Arthasastra*, Rajani Kanta Dev Sarma (ed), Asom Prakashan Parishad, Gauhati, 1977, 39th Prakarana, *Dva-vingso Adhyaya* and 40th Prakarana, *Troyodosa Adhyaya*, pp. 80-82.
9. Lines 52-54, Uttarbil Copper Plate of Balavarman III, (First quarter of the 9th Century AD) in *Inscriptions of*

- Ancient Assam*, Dept. of Publications, Gauhati University, 1978, pp. 127-136.
10. B. K. Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, Lawyers Book Stall, Gauhati, 1969, pp. 122-129.
  11. E. Gait, *A History of Assam*, Thacker Spink and Co., Calcutta, Revised Edition, 1967, pp. 268-277.
  12. Fort William India House Correspondance, 1767-1769 AD, S. N Sen (ed), Vol V, National Archives of India, Delhi, 1949, Letter from Court, No 7, dt 28 Nov, 1767, pp. 42-43.
  13. S. K. Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha*, Asom Prakashan Parishad, Gauhati, 1975, pp. 82-96.
  14. *Ibid* ; *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. IX, W. W. Hunter, Trubner and Co., London, 1886, p. 245.
  15. Fort William India House Correspondance, op cit., Letter from Court, No. 10, dt. 15 Sept., 1969, p. 236.
  16. Political Consultation (Foreign Dept) 1831, 20 May, No. 38.
  17. E- Stack, "Silk in Assam" *Notes on Some Industries of Assam from 1884-1895*, Shillong, 1896, pp. 4-5.
  18. *Ibid*.
  19. *Ibid*.
  20. *Harsha Charita of Bana*, E. B. Cowell and F. B. Thomas, Motilal Banarasidass, pp. 211-213.
  21. *Ahom Buranji* (Tr), G. C. Barua, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1930, Para 39, p. 66 ; C. A. Soppitt, *A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Kachari Tribes in North Cachar Hills with Sepecimens of Tales and Folklore*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1885, p. 27-28.
  22. *Wade's Account of Assam*, Benudhar Sarma, ed., Gauhati, 2nd Reprint, 1972, pp. 34-35.
  23. S. K. Bhuyan, *Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha*, op. cit., p. 262.
  24. *Tungkhungia Buranji*, S. K. Bhuyan, ed, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1968, pp. 32-53.
  25. Fort William India House Correspondance, op cit., Letter from Court, No. 16, dt. 17 March 1969, pp. 175-178.
  26. *Ibid*.
  27. *Wade's Account of Assam*, op cit, p. 299.

28. L. C. Khullar, "Role of Silk Industry in Solving Unemployment", *Yojana*, Vol. XXII/17, 16 Sept 1978, pp. 13-14.
29. *Tungkhungia Buranji*, op. cit., pp. 164-165.
30. *Deodhai Asom Buranji*, S. K. Bhuyan, ed, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Gauhati, 1962, pp. 142-143 ; B. N. Bardoloi, *Dimasa Kacharis of North Cachar Hills District of Assam*, op. cit., pp. 16-17.
31. R. C. Rawley, *Report of an Inquiry into the utilisation of Indian Silk in Great Britain and France*, Superintendent of Govt. Printing, Calcutta, 1918, pp. 44-47.
32. *Weekly Chronicle*, Sylhet, March 8, 1904, p. 3.
33. Ibid.