

Coming of Tea in the Brahmaputra Valley : Changes in Pattern of Trade

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The Brahmaputra Valley in the late nineteenth century was more dependent on trade than it had been earlier. The structure of the economy and society that preceded this period was basically subsistence in nature, and did not call for interactions of any significance with areas outside its orbit. The superimposition of the export-oriented plantation enterprise - tea, on this traditional economic base, was accompanied by concomitant changes in several spheres of the economy and society. Certain aspects of changes have been analysed elsewhere. The present paper aims to focus on one of these aspects - the transformation that took place in the trade of the region in a situation in which the Valley was brought within the orbit of the world market.

Tea was introduced into the region in the middle of the nineteenth century. The analysis in this paper broadly covers the period 1854 to 1914-15, the terminal period being marked by the beginning of the First World War, which brought about certain fluctuations in the economy of tea. The study would concentrate mainly on the period 1880-81 to 1914-15, because of limitation of comparative time-series trade statistics for the earlier period.

The Background

The economy of the Brahmaputra Valley in mid-nineteenth century has been aptly summed up in an official report :

The Assamese had very few wants, they lived principally upon rice and were clothed in their own silks and cotton and none of them had ever been traders, nor are they now, nor had they any other domestic manufactures. The trade of the Province was consequently confined to the sale of such articles as would procure for them the salt of Bengal, and the few luxuries and necessaries they wanted, not obtainable in their own country.¹

Nevertheless, trade in a few commodities, on a limited scale,

confined to a small territory comprising the neighbouring tribal tracts, and the adjacent province of Bengal, was there. An estimate of trade in the period of Ahom administration could be derived from an account of the province of 1808-09.² The figures related to the commodity flow between Assam and Bengal. (Tables 1 and 2) Imports far exceeded exports in value. In exports, products from agriculture predominated, whereas muga silk and cloth constituted around a fifth in terms of the total value. This was representative of a primarily agricultural economy where traditional cottage industries had also some significance. Among imports, salt constituted a major share. Of the rest, there were very broadly speaking, two categories of goods, the first constituted raw materials for industries, copper and red lead, and the second, items of conspicuous consumption.

The advent of British administration brought about few changes in the nature of trade. The composition of commodities exported remaining almost the same, the relative magnitude of certain items increased. This reflected the fact that the nature of the economy did not undergo any fundamental diversion within a span of three decades, though the volume of exports had increased considerably.³ The composition of imports, on the other hand, differed little from the earlier period. Little change had taken place in the general pattern of consumption.

The plains of Assam acted in the main as a transshipment point between the neighbouring hills and Bengal. Besides cotton, exported from Assam 'raised chiefly by the hill tribes',⁴ were ivory and gold dust. A part of the goods imported, mainly English woollens, English cloth, salt and other consumer products, found their way to the surrounding hills.⁵

Coming of Tea : Changes in Trade

The economy of the Brahmaputra Valley was undergoing gradual change from the middle of the nineteenth century. The introduction and spread of tea plantations was the determining factor in such a change.

The pattern of trade bore the mark of this transformation. But in analysing such changes, as reflected in trade statistics, one is confronted with the usual problem of using historical data and the paucity of comparative time-series information. There are broadly two sets of data available on the trade of the Brahmaputra Valley. The first available for 1854 is partial, whereas the second, available annually from 1880-81 to 1914-15⁶ provide comparative

time series figures for the region as a whole.

Quantitative estimates of the trade of three districts - Goalpara, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, and some qualitative information for the other three districts-Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong for 1854, are included in Mill's Report on the Province of Assam. The commodity-wise figures of exports and imports for the first set of districts can be examined from Tables 3 and 4. For the second group of districts, the exported items of significance were noted to be stick-lac, cotton, rice, mustard seed, muga silk etc., and salt, woollen and cotton cloth, bar-iron, brass-pots, etc., were imported.

Mill's account also provides us with information on the views of government officials regarding future prospects of trade. In spite of the fact that the government did not participate in trade directly, the officials had started expressing their opinion on the nature of items to be exported, as well as the steps to be taken to ensure it. The Agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier, viewed that,

the trade, though now of no very great amount, consist mostly of articles of value and of products which may be multiplied to any extent. Horns, ivory, lac, moonga silk, cotton, munjeet, are some of the old staple commodities of the country, but those most likely to benefit the agriculture of the country are mustard seed, tea, sugar and before long, jute will be introduced and perhaps the cultivation of other textile fabrics would be established. The introduction of any crop which would occupy much breadth of land will be of essential benefit to Assam by giving a value to lands now cultivated or unoccupied.⁷

Emphasis was laid on the export of products of agriculture, and the introduction of new crops in the list of exports, like tea and sugar, was thought about.

The emergence of a plantation economy brought in certain important features in the nature and volume of trade. Exports exceeded imports in value - a reversal of the feature present earlier. For Sibsagar district this could be explained in terms of the presence of tea, accounting for nearly 63 per cent of the total exports. Grain and pulse constituted the new entrants in the list of imports. The stress that had been laid on the production of exportable crops was absent perhaps in the production of foodgrains, not only for local consumption, but also for the new demand created by the plantation enterprise. This could probably explain the import of manufactured goods, specially metalware and textiles.

The process of breaking down of the subsistence economic system of the Brahmaputra Valley, initiated in the middle of the nineteenth century was taking a definite shape by the 1870s. Hunter's Statistical Account of Assam provides us with evidence on this count. The growing predominance of tea is observed in this phase. 'It is chiefly owing to the extension and manufacture of tea that the exports exceed imports in value',⁸ Hunter observed.

From the data on trade, for the period between 1880-81 and 1894, two important results are evidenced, first, the excess of exports over imports (Table 5) and second, predominant share of tea in the exports, (Table 6). The movement of tea exports corresponded to that of total exports, a feature common in most export-oriented economies.

A broad overview of the composition of trade for the period between 1880-81 and 1894-95 could be suggested with the help of the division into three periods of five years each. The five-yearly averages show that with the exception of cotton piece-goods, the exported commodities were of primary category - products of agriculture, mines and forests. The only product from the manufacturing sector was cotton piece-goods, insignificant in proportion. The importance of the primary sector, and the relative insignificance of the secondary sector in the composition of exports from the Brahmaputra Valley are focussed.

For the demand for commodities generated from the plantation enterprise the Brahmaputra Valley had to import most of the manufactured goods consumed in the limited market created by this sector. Metals and manufactures of metals constituted the capital goods, whereas cotton piece-goods, both of European and Indian origin constituted a bulk of the consumer goods. The other component of the latter were provisions including grain and pulse.⁹ The import of grain and pulses presents the alarming picture of an agricultural region being forced to import agricultural products to meet the needs of local consumption. The Chief Commissioner of Assam expressing his concern on this matter, wrote,

*It seems extraordinary that a province eminently suited for the growth of rice and with an unlimited quantity of suitable land available should not grow enough for its own consumption, and that it should be necessary to import large quantities into Assam from Bengal.*¹⁰

It is difficult to surmise the actual sources of most of the goods imported into the region. In the case of cotton goods, however,

the major share was of European origin. Over the period of analysis, this source contributed to over 97 per cent of the total imports of cotton goods.

Between 1900-01 and 1914-15 one has the advantage of analysing trade statistics, regionally, for Upper and Lower Assam.¹¹ The two exemplify distinct regional characteristics in their respective economic spheres. The first could be characterised by the predominance of tea in the economy, while the second by the dominance of the traditional agricultural sector and cottage industries, with the relative insignificance of tea.

Upper Assam contributed 86.45 and 89.67 per cent of the total exports of tea from the Valley (Table 9). Coal and coke were the other exported items of significance. All traditional commodities, namely, cotton (both raw and manufactured), oil seeds, lac and wood were exported from Lower Assam. The two manufactured commodities exported, cotton and silk, remained relatively more significant in Lower Assam.

Cotton piece-goods, (both European and Indian), metals (both raw and manufactured), grain and pulse, provisions including liquor were relatively higher in the imports into Upper Assam (Table 10). This distinction would have been understandable, if the higher demand for imported goods could be explained in terms of the relatively higher share of the total population in Upper Assam. But in the period of analysis, the situation was just the reverse. Most of the consumer goods mentioned above were to cater to the demands of the growing tea garden population in the main. They constituted the bulk of the population in the plantation districts. The demand for goods generated by them varied thus from earlier periods. The imports of metal goods was also significant in Upper Assam. The oil-fields of Lakhimpur district at this period had just started operations. The coal mines, as well as other industries were also not developed significantly. The plantations were the only enterprise where machinery was applied in the production process.

Summing Up

The economy of the Brahmaputra Valley in the late 19th and early 20th century consisted of two sectors - the modern and the traditional, with limited linkages between the two. The overwhelming bulk of the trade flows emanated from the modern sector - the plantations, to the outside, and back again, The traditional sector was left largely to itself, trading little either with the modern

sector or the world.

Such developments, when placed in a spatial context, the evolving structure of a colonial economy becomes evident. In the plantation economy of the Brahmaputra Valley, this was reflected in the concomitant development of a steadily expanding transport network, connecting as efficiently as possible the centres of production with the ports. The resultant network of railways specifically, and the improvement of riverways and roadways was the result.¹²

The very existence of the plantation system necessitated the establishment of linkages with the external world. The external world exerted its domination by absorbing the bulk of the produce of the Brahmaputra Valley, as well as supplying what was consumed in the Valley. And here evolved a distinct pattern of trade.

TABLE 1

Exports from Assam, 1808-09

Items	Value (in Rs.)
Mustard Seed	20,000
Stick Lac	35,000
Cotton (with seed)	35,000
Muga Silk	28,850
Muga Cloth	
Bell Metal Vessels	1,500
Ivory	6,500
Manjista or India Madder	500
Black Pepper	500
Long Pepper	400
Iron Hoes	600
Others	2,150
TOTAL	130,000

Source : F. Hamilton, *An Account of Assam*, (compiled in 1807-1814).

TABLE 2
Imports into Assam, 1808-09

Items	Value (in Rs.)
Salt	192,00
Copper	4,800
Red Lead	1,000
Cutlery & Glassware (European)	500
English Woolen	2,000
Taffeta	2,000
Satin	1,000
Gold and Silver Cloth	1,000
Muslin	10,000
Benares Silk Cloth called Kinkhap	500
Jewels and Pearls	5,000
Stone Beads	2,000
Others	6,000
TOTAL	228,300

Source : Same as Table 1

TABLE 3
**Exports of Selected Commodities from Goalpara,
Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, 1852**

Commodities	Goalpara		Lakhimpur		Sibsagar	
	Qunt. (Mds.)	Values (Rs.)	Qunt. (Mds.)	Values (Rs.)	Qunt. (Mds.)	Values (Rs.)
Mustard Seed	400,000	824,000	7,000	6,000	17,000	17,000
Muga Silk	600	2,622	385	51,850	315	50,400
Muga Cloth	4,000	16,000	1,050	1,050	—	—
Eria Cloth	—	—	3,000*	6,000	—	—
Cotton	50,000	175,000	600	1,800	12,609	36,500
Stick Lac	7,000	36,750	—	—	—	—
Wax	300	82,500	100	2,500	12	240
Ivory	100	18,750	25	3,750	17	2,550
Jute	20,000	20,000	—	—	—	—
Tea	—	—	—	—	33,378	200,250
Others	—	21,755	—	64,633	—	11,585
TOTAL		1,197,377		135,783		318,525

Source : A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Calcutta 1854.

Note : *Quantity in pieces.

TABLE 4

**Imports of Selected Commodities to Goalpara,
Lakhimpur and Sibsagar, 1852**

Commodities	Goalpara		Lakhimpur		Sibsagar	
	Qunt. (Mds.)	Values (Rs.)	Qunt. (Mds.)	Values (Rs.)	Qunt. (Mds.)	Values (Rs.)
Salt	100,000	370,000	7,910	35,000	25,000	112,000
Cloth*	—	200,000	—	24,441	—	8,763
Iron & Steel	4,000	12,000	—	4,395	—	6,686
Manufactured						
Metal goods**	2,000	80,000	—	22,072	250	10,000
Grain and						
Pulse	152,000	252,500	—	10,000	3,845	6,399
English stores	—	—	—	—	—	1,917
Stone & Coral						
Beads	—	—	—	—	—	2,875
Opium-						
Abkari	—	—	—	—	60	24,000
Others	—	108,100	—	22,919	—	62,345
TOTAL		1022,500		118,825		234,985

Source : Same as Table 3

Note : * In the case of Goalpara, it is referred to as 'cloth of kinds', whereas in the case of Lakhimpur, it is referred to as 'English and foreign piece goods' and in the case of Sibsagar, it is 'gold and silver cloths' and 'printed calicoes, silk and miscellaneous cloths.'

** In the case of Goalpara, it is 'cooking utensils of sorts'. For Lakhimpur, it is 'valuation of brass, pewter, etc.' and in the case of Sibsagar, it is 'brass vessels' and 'iron pots and spoons' etc.

TABLE 5**Exports and Imports in the Brahmaputra Valley,
1880-81 to 1894-95**

(Value in Rupees)

Year	Exports	Imports	Difference between Export and Import
1880-81	22978676	7955702	15022974
1881-82	22621136	9743704	12877432
1882-83	18642182	12416298	6225884
1883-84	22085165	13320995	8764170
1884-85	24372964	13555940	10817024
1885-86	27565188	14629206	12935982
1886-87	20312259	11212405	9099854
1887-88	25432462	13620485	11811977
1888-89	29945812	11401770	18544042
1889-90	32758689	11894953	20863736
1890-91	28729560	13291946	15437614
1891-92	31586345	16123434	15462911
1892-93	37586409	16796279	20790130
1893-94	35026356	18804055	16222301
1894-95	38635101	18494220	20140381

Source : *Reports on the River-borne Trade of the Province of Assam for the respective years.*

TABLE 6**Share of Export of Tea to Total Exports from Brahmaputra Valley,
1880-81 to 1894-95**

Year	Total Exports	Exports of Tea	Percentage of Tea Exports to Total Exports
1880-81	22978676	18216540	79.28
1881-82	22621136	17325240	76.59
1882-83	18642182	13939120	74.77
1883-84	22085165	16885850	76.46
1884-85	24372964	18272150	74.97
1885-86	27565188	21401050	77.64
1886-87	20312259	15376075	75.70
1887-88	25432462	19209896	75.58
1888-89	29945812	21241956	70.39
1889-90	32758689	21474259	65.55
1890-91	28729560	19937332	69.40
1891-92	31586345	19660436	62.24
1892-93	37586409	25195772	67.03
1893-94	35026356	23132918	66.04
1894-95	38635101	28684194	82.24

Source : Same as Table 5

TABLE 7**Exports of Selected Commodities and their Shares in the Total Exports of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Years 1880-81 to 1894-95**

(Values in Rupees)

Commodities Exported	1880-81 to 1884-85	1885-86 to 1889-90	1890-91 to 1894-95
Total Exports	22140024.6	27202882.0	34316754.2
Tea	16927780.0 (76.46)	19740647.2 (72.57)	23322130.4 (67.96)
Oil Seeds	2153882.8 (9.73)	3089003.6 (11.36)	417285.2 (12.16)
Wood	819995.6 (3.70)	1239838.6 (4.56)	1135460.4 (3.31)
Fibrous products	313515.0 (1.42)	632692.4 (2.38)	1297956.2 (3.78)
Coal and Coke	81.0 (—)	285744.4 (1.05)	1209804.2 (3.53)
Silk	174761.2 (0.79)	384110.8 (1.41)	332762.8 (0.91)
Lac	451642.4 (2.04)	567542.8 (2.09)	130473.8 (0.39)
Indian Cotton (Raw and Twist and Yarn)	101648.0 (0.46)	220430.2 (0.81)	222192.2 (0.07)
Indian Cotton (Piece Goods)	—	368.0 (.001)	4769.4 (.014)

Source Same as Table 5

Note :— Figures in brackets indicate share of each commodity in the total value of exports in each corresponding five-year periods.

TABLE 8.

Imports of Selected Commodities and their Shares in the total Imports of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Years 1880-81 to 1894-95

(Value in Rupees)

Commodities Imported	1880-81 to 1884-85	1885-86 to 1889-90	1890-91 to 1894-95
Total Imports	11398527.8	12551763.8	16701986.8
European Cotton	350589	550140.6	866259.6
Twist and Yarn	(3.08)	(4.38)	(5.19)
European Cotton	1401953.8	2293627.8	3981765.2
Piece	(12.83)	(18.27)	(23.84)
Goods			
Indian Cotton	1050	53437.2	124731.2
Raw and Twist and Yarn	(.009)	(.48)	(.75)
Indian Cotton	8024.2	11397.6	18179.2
Piece Goods	(.07)	(.09)	(.11)
Metals & Manu- factures of Metals	1667295.4	2276518.4	1922510.8
	(14.63)	(18.14)	(11.51)
Provisions in- cluding Liquor	798787.4	2794286.4	2107822.4
	(7.01)	(22.26)	(12.62)
Grain & Pulse	1338289.4	1647563.2	198294.8
	(11.74)	(13.13)	(11.87)
Salt	831003.2	918426.8	1077833.0
	(7.29)	(7.32)	(6.45)

Source Same as Table 5

Note :— Figures in brackets indicate share of each commodity in the total value of imports in each corresponding five-year periods.

TABLE 9

Exports of Selected Commodities from Lower and Upper Assam and their Shares in The Values of Exports from the Brahmaputra Valley 1900-01 to 1914-15.

(Value in Rupees)

Commodities Exported	1900-01 to 1904-05			1905-06 to 1909-10		1910-11 to 1914-15	
	Value	Percentage of LA & UA to Brahmaputra Valley		Value	Percentage of LA & UA to Brahmaputra Valley	Value	Percentage of LA & UA to Brahmaputra Valley
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
TEA	LA	3467276.8	13.55	4072494.2	11.38	5926523.0	10.33
	UA	22114127.0	86.45	31710103.0	88.62	51454596.0	89.67
	BV	25581403.8		35782597.2		57381119.0	
COAL & COKE	LA	76547.6	4.82	123481.9	26.03	19837.3	3.82
	UA	1511884.2	95.18	474179.8	73.97	500103.7	96.18
	BV	1588381.8		597611.7		519941.0	
INDIAN COTTON RAW AND TWIST AND YARN	LA	230551.8	99.72	431883.4	88.01	336515.9	68.89
	UA	598.2	.28	60836.2	11.99	151985.8	31.11
	BV	231150.0		492219.6		488501.7	
INDIAN COTTON PIECE GOODS	LA	5113.6	82.16	8350.1	75.91	11449.5	73.93
	UA	1110.6	17.84	2072.7	24.09	5096.5	26.07
	BV	6224.2		11022.8		19546.0	
OIL SEEDS	LA	1836696.7	82.04	1900349.7	74.14	2274586.0	79.90
	UA	398252.9	17.96	662821.9	25.86	572205.6	20.10
	BV	2234949.6		2563171.6		2846791.6	
LAC	LA	404583.9	97.17	1792170.1	95.01	759916.0	92.90
	UA	11808.6	2.83	94196.9	4.99	58071.3	7.10
	BV	416387.5		1886367.0		817987.3	
SILK	LA	179788.9	66.98	69003.3	68.64	436934.4	94.10
	UA	88593.5	33.02	31530.6	31.36	27371.1	5.90
	BV	268382.4		100538.9		464305.5	
WOOD	LA	1880205.1	99.86	312794.7	93.72	1645602.8	94.13
	UA	2590.4	.14	20957.7	6.28	102685.9	5.87
	BV	1882795.5		338752.4		1748288.7	

Source : Same as Table 5

Note : LA- Lower Assam ; UA- Upper Assam ; BV- Brahmaputra Valley

References

1. A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, (Calcutta, 1854), Appendix B, p. 4.
2. F. Hamilton, *An Account of Assam* (compiled in 1807-14), Second Impression, (ed.) S. K. Bhuyan, (Gauhati, 1963).
3. W. Robinson, *Descriptive Account of Assam* (Calcutta, 1841), p. 240.
4. *Ibid.*
5. R. B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India* (1835), Second Impression, (Gauhati, 1966), p. 74. See also Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 242.
6. The period of the present analysis would extend between 1880-81 to 1914-15. According to the availability of information, we propose to use primarily two sets of data. Between 1880-81 to 1894-95, we have used the data based on the respective values of the commodities, since this information is not available after that. From 1900-1901 to 1914-15, since only data regarding quality is available, we have computed the values of selected commodities by multiplying the weights with the current price.
7. Lt. Col. F. Jenkins, Agent, Governor General, North-East Frontier, to A. J. M. Mills, Judge of the Sudder Dewany and Nizamat Adaulut, dated Gowhatty, 23rd May 1833, Mills, *op. cit.*, Appendix-B.
8. W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Volume 1 (London 1879) Reprinted Delhi, 1975, p. 385.
9. In the period of analysis, husked rice constituted between 50 and 75 per cent of the total imports of grain and pulse into the region.
10. Sir George Campbell in a resolution dated 17th May 1872, quoted in *Colonisation of Wastelands in Assam*, being a reprint of the Official Correspondence between the government of India and the Chief Commissioner of Assam, The 'Indian Daily News' Office, (Calcutta, 1898), p. 34.
11. Upper Assam, as defined in the trade statistics used in this paper, constitutes the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, the Tezpur Sub-division of the Darrang district and the Naga

Hills, whereas Lower Assam is composed of the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong, the Mangaldai Sub-division of the Darrang district and the Garo Hills. The inclusion of the Garo and Naga Hill districts does not affect the trade statistics significantly since the commodity flow of these areas were almost negligible.

12. For details see K. Dasgupta, *The Formation of a Transport Network in an Export-oriented Economy : Brahmaputra Valley, 1839-1914*. Occasional Paper No. 36 (CSSSC), a reduced version of which was published in *The Geographical Review of India*, Vol. 44, No. 1, March 1982.