

SILK AS AN ITEM OF TRADE IN PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL ASSAM**Dr. Kakoli Gogoi**

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Abstract: The development of Pre-colonial Assam's economy as a whole has been impeded by a number of problems, including geographical disadvantage, political obstruction, and socio-cultural reluctance towards embracing new production, trade, and other commercial activity. Assam's pre-colonial economy was built on a peasant community that was subsistence-oriented. The family largely shared production and consumption. Craft production and manufacturing were mostly family-based activities with a loose caste and occupation-based division of labour. Apart from other agricultural and forest-based products, silk, especially the Muga silk formed an important article of exchange. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study the trade in pre-colonial Assam with a special focus on the trade in indigenous varieties of silk.

Keywords: *Silk, Assam, Trade, Muga, Silk route, Ahom*

Assam's pre-colonial economy was built on a peasant community that was subsistence-oriented. The family largely shared production and consumption. Craft production and manufacturing were mostly family-based activities with a loose caste and occupation-based division of labour. At least in areas controlled by the Ahom state, the barter system predominated, and money was rarely used as a means of exchange in economic transactions. The economy's primary driver was agricultural production, which was supplemented by a small number of primarily agro-based manufacturing and crafts industries.¹ Apart from other agricultural and forest-based products, silk, especially the Muga silk formed an important article of exchange. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study the trade in pre-colonial and Colonial Assam with a special focus on the trade in indigenous varieties of silk.

The development of Pre-colonial Assam's economy as a whole has been impeded by a number of problems, including geographical disadvantage, political obstruction, and socio-cultural reluctance towards embracing new production, trade, and other commercial activity. The Ahom state's policy of seclusion resulted in very little contact between the Brahmaputra valley and the outside world. It would be incorrect to conclude that trade and commerce practices were wholly absent in these locations despite all of these restrictions.

Though money-based commercial activities were not so prevalent in the territories held by the Ahom state, commercial exchanges based on barter systems were widespread and carried out through numerous routes and mountain passes. The numerous river channels crisscrossing the

¹ Barpujari. H.K. (ed.) *A Comprehensive Account of Assam*, vol. ii, Assam Publication Board, Guwahati, 1992. Gogoi (Nath) Jahnabi, *Agrarian system of Medieval Assam*, Concept publishing company, New Delhi, 2002

entire landscape from Bengal provided suitable and commonly used roads of communication for the commuters. Jesuit Father Stephen Cacella mentioned in his letter that the trade with Bengal was carried mainly by the waterways in the 17th century. The large boats from Gaur used to frequent the capital of Koch Behar and moved up and down for the whole year. The capital was itself very ‘populas and well provided with both what the country itself has and that which comes from Patna, *Rajamol* (Rajmahal), *Gouro* (Gaur) by whose merchants it is visited’.² A century later, Jean Baptiste Chevalier maintained a very detailed journal of his journey from Bengal via Goalpara to Assam up to the capital of the Ahom state.

Shihabuddin Talish, who had accompanied the Mughal general Mir Jumla in his military expedition against the Ahoms in 1662-63, has a very interesting observation to make on the trading activities of the people of Assam. The trade was carried on the border of Gauhati once a year with the permission of the king. The products such as gold, musk, aloe wood, pepper, *Sazaj* (bay leaf) and silk clothes were exchanged for salt, sulphur, brimstone etc.³

Captain Welsh has mentioned that commercial intercourse was carried mainly through the waterways through navigable streams, which ‘intersect Assam in every direction’, especially in the season of the rains, including a period of seven or eight months.⁴ John M’Cosh has mentioned as many as four routes from Bengal to Assam, one of which was by water. The river route from Goalpara was down the Brahmaputra, and via Jennai from Jamalpur, and then after some distance, along the Pabna river, a navigable branch of the Ganges. It took almost 25 to 35 days of tedious journey to reach Goalpara from Calcutta by this route. The other three routes were overland routes, the first of which runs from Murshidabad through Malda, Dinajpur, Rongpur, Bagwa to Goalpara; second via Dacca, Dumary Puculoc, Jamalpur, Singimari to Goalpara and the third, via Sylhet, Cherra, Moplung Nungklao, Ranigaon Khannamukh to Gauhati.⁵

Studies on the Southern Silk Route (SSA) undertaken by scholars such as Bin Yang and Pachuau enable us to recognize a little more explicitly the networks of trade that existed in the region surrounding the Northeast amongst more established state systems. According to Bin Yang, the SSR had a maritime as well as an overland route, with the overland route passing through Yunnan; Upper Burma onwards to India through Assam. He traces the history of three commodities: cowries, horses, and silver, to suggest the wide networks that this route encompassed.⁶ But as the name suggests, apart from the other goods, different indigenous varieties of silk, both woven and raw, also entered this trading network as important items of trade.

² Wessels, Captain T. *Account of Assam in 1773: Its Government, Resources, etc. with the comments of David Scott, 1826, reproduced in Mackenzie’s north-east Frontier of Bengal*, Mittal, 1999.n.d

³ Chevalier, Jean Baptist. *The Adventures of Jean Baptist Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765): Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet*, Guwahati: LBS Publication, 2008.p.5

⁴ Mackenzie, Alexander. *History of the Relations of Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal*, Mittal, 1999.n.d

⁵ M’Cosh, John. *Topography of Assam*, Bengal Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1837.n.d

⁶ Yang, Bin. ‘Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective’. *Journal of World History* 15, no. 3 (September 2004): pp. 281–332. Pachuau (2022), op cit.

Silk was a major trading item during the ancient world trade. The Silk Route/Road was a network of trade routes connecting China and the Far East with the Middle East and Europe. As the name suggests silk was one of the primary items of trade through this route. From around 130 BC, with the establishment of the Han Dynasty in China until 1453 A.D., when the Ottoman Empire boycotted trade with China, for nearly 600 years since the Silk Road had been used for international trade. In ancient India, Chinese silk was imported through the Silk route and indigenous varieties of silk produced in places like Bengal was highly coveted item.⁷ The art of sericulture including weaving and rearing of cocoons, and manufacturing of various silk cloths was mentioned in the Arthasashtra. Kautilya refers to the varieties of fibrous garments known as *patrorna* and remarks that garments which are produced in the century of *Suvarnyakundya* were of the best quality.⁸

Silk remained an important item of trade throughout the medieval period. As a luxury product silk was a favoured commodity among the elites. Silk remained an item of international maritime trade even during the colonial period. The British East India Company was founded in England in 1600 and came to India for trade in the Indian Ocean region during the Mughal period. The company rule effectively began in 1757 after the battle of Plassey and lasted until 1858. During this period The Company's basic commodities of trade were silk cloths along with cotton, indigo, saltpeter, tea, and opium. Climatic conditions in Britain did not allow for rearing the silkworms, thus Indian raw silk became the main imported item. Moreover, due to the Industrial Revolution, Britain no longer required finished cloth from India. Therefore in 1769, the directors of the company ordered the "manufacture of raw silk rather than silk fabrics in Bengal."⁹ The British East India Company invested heavily in Malda (Bengal) to derive maximum profit from the silk business.¹⁰ The company agreed with the native silk cultivators through the advanced system. The main provision of the system was that the local cultivators were bound to supply raw silk threads to the company agents on a regular basis.¹¹

Silk in Assam:

Assam has had a reputation for silk production since ancient times. The Classical writers mention that the production of silk and the silk trade started in the 1st century A.D. The royal presents which Hamsavega, envoy of Kamrupa king Bhaskar Varmana carried to Harsha included "Silken cloths (*kasaumani*) pure as the moon's lights." "Soft loincloths (*Jatipattikah*) smooth as birch bark" "sacks of woven silk", "wrappers of white bark-silk" and various kinds of smooth-figured textiles.¹² A trade route existed to Northern India, Bhutan, and Tibet through

⁷ <https://www.history.com/.amp/topics/ancient-middle-east/silk-road>. (Silk Road by HISTORY.COM.EDITORS) 2019

⁸ Barua. B.k. A Cultural History of Assam, 5th ed. (Kolkata: Ajanta printers, 61 Surya Sen Street, 2011), p.107.

⁹ Economic History of modern India, Study material, Calicut University. p. 25

¹⁰ Letter written by Thomas Hechman, Resident at Malda to William Aldersay, President and Member of the Board of Trade at Fort William, 18th Feb, 1777, Fort William the 28th Feb 1777, proceedings, BOT(commercial), 1777, vol. No. 10. WBSA, Calcutta.

¹¹ Letter written by Thomas Hechman, Resident at Malda to William Aldersay, President and Member of the Board of Trade at Fort William, 31st March, 1775, Fort William the 14th April 1775, proceedings, BOT (commercial), 1775, Vol. No. 3. WBSA, Calcutta.

¹² Barua., *Op.Cit.* p.106

Kamrupa. The Kalika Purana proves also the use and manufacture of silk (*kosaja*).¹³ The evidence from texts such as the Arthasashtra and the Harsh-Charita suggest that in the art of the rearing of silk cocoons and weaving of the finest silk textiles, the weavers of Kamrupa had a reputation equal to those of China.¹⁴ In fact, some scholars believed that sericulture originated initially in the Eastern Himalayas, even before China.¹⁵ In the age of Ramayana, Assam was probably known as the country of cocoon rearers. In the *Kiskindhya-Kanda*, for instance, while mentioning the countries one passes through going to the east, the poet refers to Magadha, Anga, Pundra, and the “country of the cocoons rearers”, (*Kosakaranambhumih*) which must be Assam.¹⁶ In the epic Mahabharata age, Assam was called *Suvernakanakanan*, meaning the golden silk-producing province, where Muga and pat fabrics were produced. King Bhaskar Varman of ancient Kamrupa presented a valuable Muga wrapper of golden colour to Hiuen Tsang as a mark of respect shown from the Royal Throne.¹⁷

During the six centuries of Ahom rule in the Brahmaputra valley silk production attained a high position and perfection. Under the Ahoms spinning of silk thread and manufacturing of silk cloth was extended to all sections of people. *Naoboicha Phukanar Buranji* mentions that as early as the fourteenth century, King Shu-Tupha (1369-76 A.D.) permanently assigned one thousand families to produce silk. Three main varieties of silk were produced in the kingdom viz. *Muga*, *Eri* and *Pat* or *Nuni*. There were also some less-known varieties such as *mejankari*, *Champa*, and *ketkuri*. The state allocated large tracts of land for raising *som* (*Persea bombycina*) trees: such areas were known as *Muga sumoni* or *sumonibari* (Silkworm cultivation field).¹⁸ Ahom State patronized the production of Muga silk and Muga silk became an indispensable item of Royal robes.

Actually, spinning and weaving were part and parcel of every household during the medieval period. Momai Tamuli Barbaruah made it compulsory ‘for every adult male to make a bamboo basket and every able-bodied female to spin a certain quantity of thread every evening.’¹⁹ Queen Sarbeswari, the wife of King Siva Singha (1714-1744) is said to have encouraged spinning and weaving by the womenfolk and also imported designs and patterns from other parts of India.

Ahom kings also encouraged the sale of silk thread and fabrics of Assam at various markets located in Assam proper and border areas of Assam.²⁰ Muga silk garments were only for the higher officials and the kings and they used them as their status symbols. For the development

¹³ Choudhury. Pratap. Chandra , *The History of Civilisation of the People of Assam to the 12th Century A.D.*, Third Edition (Guwahati: Spectrum, 2017)p.339.

¹⁴ Choudhury., *Op.cit.*, p.343.

¹⁵ Choudhury., *Op.Cit*, p. 339.

¹⁶ B.K. Barua.,*op.cit.*, p.107.

¹⁷ Bandana. Mahan, “Silk Industry in the Socio-Economic Life of the Tai-Ahoms of Dhakuakhana, Lakhimpur, Assam” (Ph.D Thesis, Gauhati, Gauhati University, 2013), p.26.

¹⁸ Ali. Ebrahim, Mondal, *A study of Textile Crafts Production in Medieval Assam during 13th to 17th centuries: As Reflected in Medieval Sources*, PalArch’s Journal Of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology.p.1095.

¹⁹ Bayan, Borah. Borgohain, Alpana, Minashi “State and Muga Silk Industry in Pre- Independent Assam,” Research India Publication 7 (2017). p.57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6

of the Muga silk industry, Ahom kings freed Muga rearers from taxation, and assistants were provided to Muga rearers for the plantation of Muga food plants.²¹ Ralph Fitch while visiting Assam in the Koch days noticed its silk industries.²²

During the early part of British rule in Assam, the silk industry was still occupying a high position. During this time, the colonial government diverted its attention towards the silk and silk trade.

Table 5.1

Assam's Trade Statistics, 1808-09 (Estimated at Goalpara, Hadira Chowki)

Exports	Quantity in maund*	Value in Sicca**
Paper	50	500
Mustard seed	15,000	20,000
Long pepper	50	300
<i>Manjit</i>	-	500
Elephant tusk	-	6,500
<i>Muga</i> thread	65	11,350
<i>Muga</i> cloth	75	17,000
Cotton (with seed)	7000	35,000
Lac	10,000	35,000
Bell metal vessels	-	1,500
Iron hoes	-	600
Thaikal fruit (<i>thekera</i>)	50	150
Slaves	100	2000
Total		1,30,900

Source: Hamilton, Francis (Buchanan), *An Account of Assam*, (ed) S.K. Bhuyan, 2nd ed, Ghy 1963. [*1 maund= 37kg or 40 seer**Sicca= rupee minted by the EEIC till 1835]

From the above table of Francis Hamilton, it is clear that Muga silk was an important item of trade which was also quite expensive. Muga silk was traded both in woven cloth form and also in the form of thread. Hamilton also remarks that Assamese women of all castes from the Queen downwards wove four kinds of silk that are produced in the country. He also said that the silkworm reared on mulberry is the least common. The production of a species of *Laurus*, which is called Muga. There are two crops: the silk procured at the beginning of the dry season (Kartik) is red; that which is cut at the end of spring (jaishta) is white and is reckoned the best. The silk is called Medanggori and is reared in Assam proper, on a tree that is cultivated; it is higher priced than the Muga. The silk called Erendi is reared on the *Ricinus* in great quantity as in

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.57

²² Jahnabi. Gogoi (Nath)., *op.cit.*, p.76

Ranggapur.²³ Hamilton also speaks about the cloth which is wrapped around the waist of both sexes and is made of different sizes, according to the purpose for which is *Dhuti, rihe, mekla, chelleng, jhardar or mongjuri, mosaris*, etc. Medanggori silk is for higher ranks, Muga silk is for the dress of the middle ranks, and Erendi silk serves as clothing for the poor.²⁴

During this period 'Muga Dhotis' were sold from Rs. 2.50 to Rs. 6.00, Muga Rihās from Rs. 1.00 to Rs. 4.00 and 'Muga Mekhelas' from Rs. 1.00 to Rs. 3.00.²⁵ In the early 19th century Assam exported Muga silk, Muga cloth, Eri cloth, dry fish, and lac to the countries of Bhutan, Tibet, and China and in returned Assam received woolen cloth, gold dust, musk, horses and yalk tails. From the Nagas, the Mataks received salt and exchanged their rice, jaggery, opium, large-sized clothes, cotton, and Eri-Muga clothes.²⁶

David Scott tried to develop the traditional silk industry of Assam and established a factory at Darrang, to extend the cultivation of Silk. In 1870-71, the British Govt. surveyed about 58,401 bighas of the Muga host plant area throughout Assam. Out of these 82% of the land was in Sibsagar district, followed by Goalpara 8%, Lakhimpur 5%, Nagaon 3%, and Darrang 2% respectively.²⁷ In the British period, the real picture of the silk industry was low-spirited. There was no appreciable development in the silk industry due to their colonial interest in opening up the market for Lancashire products.²⁸ Even in the areas of *som* (*Persea Bombycina*) plantations, the British Govt. imposed taxation. The silk industry had to face stiff competition from mill-made artificial cheap silk and cotton cloths during the British period.

A. J. Moffat. Mills in his report wrote that in the year 1835, the export of 600 maunds of Muga silk from Goalpara was valued at 2,622.²⁹ He also stated that in the Sibsagar District, Muga and Mulberry silk cloths are extensively woven by the women of the families for their use and also for trade in the year 1838-39.³⁰ According to Mills, in the Luckimpoor (Present Lakhimpur) district, every family has its looms for weaving and implements for cleaning and spinning silk and cotton thread. The trade of this district was monopolized by the Marwari traders. During this period, the most valuable exported item of Assam was Muga silk, Eri silk, Mustard seeds, Cotton, Tea, etc. in considerable quantity.³¹ David Scott, the first British Officer understood the economic potential of the extension of Sericulture and handloom operations in Assam. Therefore, in 1831, Scott established a factory at Darrang in upper Assam with the object of extending silk cultivation and improving the reeling of Muga silkworm.³² Between 1834 and 1840, Muga cocoons and thread of the Muga silkworms with woven cloth were submitted to the sub-committee of the Agriculture and Horticulture Society for approval. Though the

²³ Hamilton. Francis. *An Account of Assam*, Bhabani offset & Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd. 2017. Pp.65-66.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp.67-68.

²⁵ Phukan. Raju. "Muga Silk Industry of Assam in Historical Perspective.," Global Journals Inc. (USA) 12, no. 9 (2012).. p.6.

²⁶ Dutta. Ajit., *Maniram, Dewan and the Contemporary Assamese Society* (Jorhat, 1990). p. 227.

²⁷ Hamilton., *Op.Cit.*, pp.4-5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.7.

²⁹ Mills. A.J. Moffat, *Report on the Province of Assam* (PUBLICATION BOARD ASSAM, 1984). p.282.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.503.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.650

³² Bhattacharjee. Mahua., *Silken Hues, Muted Voices* (Panbazar, Guwahati: DVS PUBLISHER, 2014., p.53.

products were reported favourably, they did not stimulate the silk trade and no attempt was made to invest capital in the industry for a long time.³³ In the year 1873, a gentleman by the name of Mr. Leeper was commissioned by Messer's Lister and Company to make an effort to introduce silk on a commercial basis in the district of Lakhimpur. According to Leeper, the climatic condition of this area is exceptionally favourable for Muga cultivation. But the difficulties, such as the expenses of procuring the labour required were so great that there were no attempts have been made to extend the industry.³⁴ During the late 19th century some diseases like flacherie and Pebrine created havoc in silkworm production.³⁵

During this period the two most important varieties of silkworms were eliminated the Mezankari and the Champa- silk that was worn only by the Ahom kings and their nobles. By 1889, the Mezankari variety of silk had totally disappeared. The clearing of forests for various colonial projects led to a decrease in the growth Mezankari tree.³⁶ In 1907-08, the silk industry was again contending with unsatisfactory market conditions. The East Bengal and Assam Administrative report of that year noted that the condition of the silk weavers was depressed and much of the profit earned was being taken by the *Kyan Mahajans (Marwari traders)* who advanced money to the weavers. The whole export business was in the hands of the Marwari traders and they had no interest either in the welfare of the weavers and also the improvement of the weaving industry.³⁷ The report of the Department of Industries, 1920-1921 by way of its achievements in that year noted that "... pat seeds were distributed to the rearers in Sibsagar and Nowgaong districts and a study of the life history of the Muga silkworm..." was made.³⁸ Again the Assam Administrative Report of 1926-1927, notes, "...5000 laying of disease-free pat and 3000 laying's were distributed... and a considerable quantity of Eri and Muga seeds were sold both locally and outside the province."³⁹

In conclusion, it can be said that silk production and silk as an item of commercial exchange in pre-colonial and colonial Assam underwent stages of high and low. The demand for silk as a coveted luxury item has made it an important article of trade with different agencies trying to control its production and distribution. It was such an important item that it became part of a royal gift as we have seen in the case of Harsha. Similarly, the Ahom state decreed that silk could be worn only by royalty and aristocratic people. The colonial powers saw silk as a profitable item of maritime trade and tried to monopolize it through their agents and bringing the silk weavers under the ambit of the putting-out system. Thus, silk as an item of commercial interest and trade item occupies an important position in the economic history of pre-colonial and colonial Assam.

³³ *Ibid*, .p.54.

³⁴ *Ibid*., p.54

³⁵ Chaudhury. S.N., *Muga Silk Industry*, Directorate of Sericulture and Weaving Government of Assam, Gauhati, 1981.n.d

³⁶ Bhattacharjee. Mahua., *Op.Cit.*,p.58

³⁷ *Ibid*., pp.58-59

³⁸See, Report on the Department of Industries, 1920-1921.

³⁹See, Report on the Department of Industries, 1926-1927.