Captain Welsh’s Assam Expedition And Its Commercial Significance (1792-1794)

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Abstract

The Moamarias insurgency, Prince Krishnanarayan's uprising in Darrang, and the Barkandazes depredations all contributed to Assam's precarious political position in medieval period. While the frontier tribes continued to make raiding inroads into Assamese villages on the edges of the region, the local chieftains raised their heads and assumed a virtual status of independence. Because the standing army was insufficient, the Ahom government was unable to properly enforce its orders or protect the public from the oppression of tyrants and marauders. This was because the Ahom government was ineffective and it was on the verge of decline. There was almost no economic or commercial activity, and a sizable section of the populace deserted their homes. The nineteenth century is regarded as a particularly significant time period in Assamese history. It saw the British come into power and put an end to the Ahom monarchy, which had ruled Assam for more than six centuries. The British had intervened to fill the political void left in the kingdom after the Ahom monarchy began falling. Thus, the objective of this paper is to emphasise the significance of Welsh’s Assam expedition and its commercial importance of Brahmaputra Valley.

Keywords: Moamaria, Insurgency, Barkandazes, Ahom.

Introduction

The Ahom monarchy started to disintegrate in the middle of the eighteenth century. A number of inept but brutal kings who were each only interested in maintaining their own lives and power, regardless of the best interests of the state as a whole, shared the throne. After the court evolved into a breeding ground for intrigue and plots against the government, assassinations of political figures and uprisings soon followed. The king-makers were the officials and the senior nobles. The Moamaria Rebellion started out as a protest against the royal family's religious intolerance in 1769 but quickly turned into a power struggle in the years that followed. In 1778, when the rebels took over the capital, King Gaurinath Singha was forced to flee to the nearby city of Gauhati. The British, who had taken over the nearby provinces of Bengal, were eventually compelled to interfere in Assam's internal politics for their own reasons, which led to their eventual annexation of the region. One of the final provinces to be occupied by the British was Assam. However, the East India Company had already expressed a great deal of interest in the area before the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, especially in light of the potential for creating new trade routes.
Advent of European Powers into the Brahmaputra Valley

When Europeans began to dominate India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Assam was dealing with its own internal issue, namely the Moamarias' uprising. Gaurinath Singha turned to the British for help quelling the uprising after his control over it began to wane. When the Moamarias started causing trouble, Purnananda Barua Gohain frequently petitioned the British for assistance, and Raush, the salt merchant of Goalpara, supported his petition. Lord Cornwallis ultimately dispatched Captain Welsh to Assam. Welsh arrival in Assam in 1792 had a significant influence on the region's social and political climate. With 550 men, Captain Welsh's expeditionary force arrived in Assam. (Guha, 1991; p.120). The observation of Cornwallis is important here to mention according to him, “however extraordinary it may appear to people in Europe…. we know little more of the interior parts of Nepal and Assam than of the inferior parts of China.” (Banerjee, 1946; p.9). This assessment of him suggests that they were unfamiliar with the Brahmaputra Valley. They only had a good idea of the province after Captain Welsh arrived. Welsh was tasked with monitoring and calculating trading opportunities in the area. However, Lord Cornwallis was averse to making any political or military commitments because he was preoccupied with the problem of Southern India, but because Assam was economically and culturally associated to Bengal despite its complete distance from British territory by the Brahmaputra, he was unable to refrain from making these agreements. As England transitioned from merchant capitalism to industrial capitalism in the 18th century, with the goal of achieving economic dominance over the rest of the world, the emphasis shifted away from tax collection and international trade and toward developing new methods of surplus appropriation. The desire to expand their political and economic influence around the world was the primary motivation for the British to engage in colonialism. The British hunt for resources around the world must be viewed through this lens. This phenomenon resulted in the conquest of vast territory as well as the acquisition of new markets and raw materials with minimal financial outlay. The state of Assam, which is in north-eastern India, also adhered to the general British penetration pattern. Huge Baillie, David Killican, and George Bogle all gave the business a distinctive representation of Assam that piqued its interest. Additionally, a significant draw for the business was the enormous profits that the local traders and merchants made. Moreover, Captain Welsh emphasizes in his report that encouraging moral behaviour would be advantageous to business dealings with Assam. Assam and the Eastern Himalayas were well known for their abundant natural resources as well as for their strategic location since they bordered both Tibet and Burma. They were especially notable because of this. Britain made an effort to replace the economic gap left by the decline in its trade relations with Europe by engaging in trade with Burma, Tibet, and China.

Gaurinath Singha's rule (1780–1794) marked the beginning of British intervention in the political and economic affairs of the Ahom. The development of trade ties between Assam and British India was among the factors contributing to the Government of Bengal's favourable response to Gaurinath's appeal for help. He travelled to Goalpara on November 8, 1792, along with Lieutenant MacGregor, a surveyor, and 360 sepoys. While through the salt trader Raush, he had a full understanding of the internal situation within the Ahom empire. It is interesting to highlight that merchants were not allowed to take part in policy discourse in the past because
they were always regarded with mistrust. However, we noticed that merchants were included in the discussions and given importance after Europeans arrived in the Assam territories. Or, to put it briefly, we may say that merchants were in the forefront of nearly every policy decision-making process since they were well aware of the internal conditions of the area. However, many European traders were enticed to the lucrative salt trade that existed between Assam and Bengal before to Captain Welsh's capture of Assam. Additionally, a significant lure for the business was the enormous profits that the local dealers and merchants made. Colonel James Mill is regarded as the first European trader in the Brahmaputra Valley from this angle. Ahom Buranji (Chronicle) also acknowledged James Mill's entry into the valley; it has been said that three firangis (foreigners) visited Shiva Singha's court during his reign. James Mill was said to be one of them. He had previously worked for the Ostend East India Firm, and after the company was dissolved in 1732, he moved on to establish himself as a lone proprietor. He was only able to conduct salt trade with Assam for a little period of time because the Ahoms banned him from developing economic relations with Assam. At the same time, a branch was established in Goalpara by Jean Baptist Chevalier, the Governor of Chandernagor and Commander-in-Chief of the French settlement in Bengal.

At Goalpara, he had also erected a salt warehouse. Goalpara became a hub for the transit of products from Bengal to other sites in Assam during the British colonial era. In April 1755, Renault de Saint-Germain, the governor of Chandernagar, sent the French trader Chevalier to Assam with the goal of acquiring property for a factory. He left Dhaka in June 1755 and arrived in Kandahar Chowki by November 1755. At this location, which marked the traditional border between the Koch Behar kingdom and the Ahom empire, he set out on his expedition. He finally reached the Ahoms capital in February 1756 after a second expedition that lasted about two months. Chevalier then moved to Goalpara and established a factory there. In the end, he turned up his items to the Assamese on credit for about a lakh rupee. (Bhuyan, 1949; p.64.) The French Company stopped trading with Assam after conquering Chandernagore, but Chevalier continued to work for certain English gentlemen at Goalpara as their agent for the salt trade with Assam. He fled Goalpara in 1763. Following his departure, a large number of additional European traders entered the scene and engaged in modest trade with the kingdom. His Company was given to Mr. John Robinson in 1757.

The traders of Assam conducted significant commercial ties with European traders, the British East India Company's trading agency, and Indian traders stationed at Goalpara. The commercial department of the British East India Company imported finished goods such as salt, broadcloth, and other items into Assam. However, they also carried raw materials into the country, including muga, silk, ivory, and gold dust. Since the beginning of time, Assam has been unable to produce salt; the brines of salt from Barhat and Sadiya were insufficient to meet the needs of the population. As a result, Assam is compelled to rely on Bengal salt, which is both cheap and readily available. To take part in the salt trade, numerous independent traders and business units affiliated with the British East India Company travelled to Goalpara. The British East India Company established several salt warehouses in Goalpara in order to turn a respectable profit. Salt was kept in the warehouses of Goalpara, Jugighopa, and Rangamati. Goalpara eventually developed into the centre of the salt trade for the nations along the North-
Eastern Frontier. The most essential commodity imported, according to Hamilton's list, was foreign salt, which cost a total of Rs 1,92,500 out of a total of Rs 2,28,300. (Hamilton, 1940; pp. 45-46). The remaining funds were spent on items of luxury for the upper classes as well as on a few foreign residents, the most of whom lived in Upper Assam.

**Commercial Treaty between Gaurinath Singha and Captain Welsh**

At Gaurinath Singh’s request and in response to information from John Lumsden, the Collector of Rangpur (Bengal), Captain Thomas Welsh was sent by Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General, to help the Ahom monarch re-establish order and calm in Assam. On the other hand, Gaurinath Singh was successful in retaking his kingdom in March 1794 with the assistance of Captain Welsh. Captain Welsh’s report states that Ministers were in control of vast tracts of land that they farmed with the help of their slaves. It was incredibly challenging to purchase grain from the Assam market because the output from this farm was never brought to market. Additionally, Captain Welsh requested some boatloads of salt and opium from Cornwallis, saying that these goods would be more helpful than money to buy rice. He added that it would be a successful approach to earn money to pay the troops because these products could be offered at a significant discount. The request was granted by Cornwallis.

On February 28, 1793, Captain Welsh and Gaurinath Singha signed a trade agreement. The primary features of this agreement were:

- All items and merchandise should be traded freely and reciprocally between Bengal and Assam going forward.
- That the seer be charged a 10% surcharge on the alleged prime cost of Bengal salt, computed at 400 rupees for 100 maunds of 84 tolas weight.
- Bengal's Company administration agreed to deliver salt, European broadcloth, Bengal cotton cloths, carpets, copper, lead, tin, hardware, jewellery, and spices in exchange for Assam's muga textiles and thread, pepper, elephant tusks, munjit, and cotton.
- That any person or persons detected attempting to defraud the Ahom monarch of the duties charged shall be subject to seizure of their property and permanent exclusion from trade.
- Every transaction involving imports and exports was subject to a 10% surcharge. Rice and other grains were exempt from import charges.
- The customs house in Kandahar (Bengal) and Guwahati were to be built. The Company was principally in charge of the Kandahar Chokey, which was overseen by the Coch Bihar Commissioner.
- A remuneration proportional to the amount collected should be paid to the agents as an incentive to be diligent in the performance of this work. For the time being, the remuneration should be set at 12% of the collected money, which should cover any incidental expenses.

Captain Welsh was also instrumental in collecting duties and conducting trade with Assam. The Treaty allowed trade between Bengal and Assam to grow into previously unexplored territory. He has mentioned some significant items traded between Assam and Bengal. (Mackenzie, 1884; pp 387-390). According to his observations-
Table-1 Items of Import and Export between Assam and Bengal according to Captain Welsh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Export from Assam</th>
<th>Import to Assam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cotton (limited quantity), Munjeet, ginger, gold, musk, small horses, jaggery,</td>
<td>Copper and other metals, red lead, woollens of Europe (coarser kind), cotton (coarser),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pepper vine, indigo, mustard seed and oil, tobacco, areca nuts, saltpetre, lac,</td>
<td>chinty particularly kinkhbs, cloves, nutmegs, mace, cinnamon, blue vitriol,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silk (muga), elephant teeth, rhinoceroses ‘horns, buffalos’ hides, deer skins etc</td>
<td>alum, darmook, orpiment, drugs and salt.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

To summarise, the period of Ahom sovereignty in Assam was characterised by a general stability that was conducive to the creation of commercial ties with the peoples and kingdoms in the region. Even though there was some resistance to opening up, this was the case. As a result, it would be an oversimplification to say that Assam under the Ahoms lived in isolation, culturally and commercially isolated from its neighbours. It would be more correct to say that Assam was isolated throughout this time period. It is crucial to highlight that, despite the fact that the arrival of the British caused huge changes in the region's communication, trade, and economy, many problems remained unresolved. By establishing economic and administrative relationships with the various tribes, the Ahoms laid the groundwork for the British to build on.

Works cited

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