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# British Colonial Intervention: Trade Pattern, Spatiality Of Markets, And Trading Networks In The Goalpara Region Till 1826

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## Abstract

Till 1826, Assam was controlled by the Ahoms. With the treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the long-ruling power of the Ahoms came to an end, and Assam got a new ruler, i.e., the British. With the signing of this agreement, the British gained control over Assam, Manipur, Cachar, and Jaintia. The Goalpara region's geopolitical status was quite significant for all the imperialist power who were eyeing the natural resources of Assam as well as its neighbouring provinces. The period of study undertaken about the region of Goalpara has its relevance. Before the East India Company's ascendancy, Goalpara was Bengal and Assam's most crucial commerce centre. This region has acted as a gateway to Assam for centuries. An essential commodity in the Assam market's, salt, was regarded as equivalent to gold by the locals due to its scarcity. Because of the less salt supply from the Naga Hills, Sadiya, and Burhat region, Assam was forced to rely on the supply of salt from Bengal. To earn a handful amount, the British East India Company opened various salt warehouses at Goalpara. Ultimately, Goalpara became the hub of the trade-in salt for the North-Eastern Frontier countries. Apart from salt, sal timber (*Soria Robusta*) and jute brought enormous profits for the Company. Thus, this paper attempts to highlight the significance of Goalpara in the British annexation of North-Eastern India.

**Keywords:** Salt, Goalpara, Rangamati, Jogighopa, Sal, Brines.

## Introduction

People from other parts of India and the rest of the world have always been fascinated by Assam's wilderness and sacredness, primarily because of its rich natural resources. Numerous references to Assam's interaction with the outside of India, including China, Tibet and Burma, and other regions of India, can be found in ancient<sup>1</sup> and medieval literature. One of such prominent examples can be found in the work of Minhaj-i-Siraj, where he pointed out that there were up to thirty-five passes in the north that served as a communication route between the hills and the plains. He also mentioned a market place Karampatan, where livestock trading was held every day, and roughly 1500

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient Assam, also known as Pragjyotisha in the Mahabharata and Kamrupa in the Puranas and Tantras, is frequently mentioned in the Hindu epics as well as in Puranic and Tantric literature. According to Yogini Tantra, Kamrupa stretches from the mountain range of Kanjagiri in the north to the junction of the Brahmaputra and Lakhya rivers in the south, and from the Karatoya river in the west to the Dikhu in the east.

tanganan horses from Bhutan were sold.<sup>2</sup> The overall prosperity of the region can be easily understood by the remarks of Tavernier, "the kingdom of Assam is one of the best countries of Asia, for it produces all that is necessary to man's life, and there is no need to go for anything to the neighboring states."<sup>3</sup> People of the Brahmaputra Valley lived a very self-sufficient life. During Ahom's reign, Assam followed a complete isolation policy. The rulers of Ahoms did not allow the inhabitants of Assam to go out, nor did they grant permission to the outsiders to settle in the region. Still, to some extent, they had commercial relations with the Bengal, Mughal, and other provinces of India.

The Europeans travellers like Manucci, Bernier, Tavernier has given some glimpses of the kingdom of Assam in their respective travelogues. As one of the first group of Europeans to travel as far as the capital or its vicinity, Glanius the Dutch sailor of Mir Jumla has left a record of his experiences in Assam, his narrative has its own significance. The main products of Assam are mentioned by Glanius as pepper, sandalwood, aloe wood etc.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand Manucci lists pears, apples, peaches, cherries and grapes as the principal products of Assam. Assam's conquest by Mir Jumla had been described by him as a prelude to the invasion of China and Pegu. Mir Jumla and Diler Khan both were anxious to open to Aurangzeb a door for entering China. For that seemed as easy thing after the acquisition of Assam.<sup>5</sup>

The Goalpara region of Assam is bordered on the north by Bhutan, on the east by Kamrupa, on the south by Garo-Hills<sup>6</sup>, and on the west by Koch-Bihar and Rangpur. The Brahmaputra River divided the region into two geographical zones, north and south. The British and the Bengali merchants used Goalpara as their commercial center. For the British to maintain control over or manage their relations with Bhutan, Mizoram, Manipur, Burma, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh, they need to have a firm foothold in Goalpara. The three commercial hubs from which Bengal and British merchants used to conduct commercial intercourse with Assam were Goalpara, Jogighopa, and Rangamati. Goalpara lies on the southern border of Brahmaputra, and Jogighopa and Rangamati are on the northern bank. At the customs house in Hadira or the Assam chauk at the mouth of the Manas River, the Duaria Barua, an agent of the Assam, lived. After exchanging Assam's commodities for Bengal products, he realized all

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<sup>2</sup> Minhaj-i-Siraj, *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, ed. and tr. H.G. Raverty, Asiatic Society of Bengal, London, 1813, pp. 567-568.

<sup>3</sup> Tavernier, *Travels in India*, ed. William Crooke, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, 1977, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> *Bengal: Past and present*, Vol. XXIX, Part 1, Serial No. 57. The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1925, p.20.

<sup>5</sup> Niccolao Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor*, tr. Irvine, Vol.II, John Murray, Albemarle Street, London, 1907, p-98

<sup>6</sup> The Khasi Hills, the district of Goalpara, Maimansingh the district of Bengal form the northern, eastern and the southern boundaries of the Garo Hills, respectively. Garo Hills had a 3180 square mile size, and the Deputy-Commissioner calculated that there were 100,000 people living there. Additionally, only recently has the boundary between the Garo Hills and Goalpara been established. Some territories that were formerly part of Goalpara are now added to the Garo Hills. The general rule followed drawing the line was to include all of the hilly region inhabited by Garos in the newly created Garo Hills district and to isolate Goalpara from it. This idea has been effectively put into practise.

import and export taxes. In exchange for the exclusive right to trade with Bengal, which he had, he paid the Assam Government a 90,000-rupee annual rent.<sup>7</sup> For all the commercial and imperialist powers that entered Assam through the western border, the geopolitical status of Goalpara is highly important. Goalpara's vital location forced all the external powers to pay close attention to the region. Assam would function as the rich hinterland of Calcutta in addition to supplying a market and acting as a forwarding agency. With these high expectations, the Company embarked upon a determined penetration process into a region that had remained practically isolated from the rest of the country for centuries.<sup>8</sup>

J.M.Cosh discusses certain trade routes between Bengal and Assam in his *Topography of Assam*(1837). He calculated that the voyage from Goalpara to Calcutta is performed in twenty-five to thirty-five days and from Calcutta to Goalpara in about eight days more. There were mainly four routes, one by water and three by land. The three overland routes from Bengal to Assam were; the first by Murshidabad, Mauldah, Dinagepore, Rangpore, Baugwah, and Goalpara. The second road is via Dacca, Dumary, Puculoe, Jumalpore, Singimary and Goalpara. The third road passes through Sylhet, Moplung, Nunklow, Ranneygodown, Cannymook, and Gauhati.<sup>9</sup> The waterway communications were mostly used by the Bengal traders of Dacca, Mymensingh, Dinajpur and Koch Behar to go the seasonal trading locations at Goalpara and the Rangpur city. In this way, the creation of natural trade networks and communication linkages was significantly aided by the River Megna of Eastern Bengal, the Brahmaputra of Assam and their tributaries.

Goalpara has seen various jurisdictional changes since it came under the British administration. The permanently settled area was once part of the Rangpur (Bengal) district. The territory was divided from Rangpur by Regulation X of 1822, and it was placed in charge of David Scott, the first administrator of the frontier. It was necessary to exempt the Garo mountaineers and other rude tribes on the north-eastern boundary of Rangpur from the operation of the existing regulations and to establish a particular system of Government for the country occupied by them or bordering on their possessions.<sup>10</sup> This was done to civilize the underdeveloped races, quell inter-racial unrest, and stop neighbouring landowners from encroaching on their territory. When Assam was ceded to the British in 1826, Goalpara was annexed to the Assam Valley division. Its administration was placed in the hands of the Commissioner and the Judicial Commissioner of Assam.<sup>11</sup> And then Goalpara was separated from the province of Assam and placed under the Commissioner of Koch-Bihar division in all matters by the

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<sup>7</sup> S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, 1949, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Priyam Goswami, 'Colonial Assam: Trade, Development and Dependence', *Indian Council of Historical Research*, North-East Regional Centre, Guwahati, 2007, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> John M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, G.H. Huttman, Bengal Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1837, pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol. 2, Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1998, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

provisions of a government notification 1866.<sup>12</sup> It was placed under the judicial Commissioner of Assam for judicial purposes, and it was eventually incorporated into the new province when Assam was established as a separate administration in 1874. This district was again moved to the Bengal administrative divisions in 1905. The partition of Bengal was annulled in 1912 under the pressure of the Swadeshi Movement, and the Goalpara was permanently merged with the newly constituted province of Assam. After establishing its dominance in Bengal, East India Company started its sway over Assam. During the post-independence period there has been only one major change in the administrative set up of the district but its effect was confined within its boundaries. A new sub-division known as Kokrajhar sub-division was erected on February 9, 1957 by carving out of Dhubri sub-division the areas under Gossaigaon, Kokrajhar, Bijni, and Sidli police stations.<sup>13</sup>

The British Colonialism commenced in India only after the acquisition of Diwani rights of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa by the Treaty of Allahabad (1765). After the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26), the British conquered the whole province of Assam by the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. This established British influence upon the region and gave them a secure foundation in the Brahmaputra Valley. As mentioned above, Assam and the eastern Himalayan region were significant not just for their natural resources but also for their strategic location as the area shared a demarcation line with Tibet and Burma. The military and commercial routes that connected Bengal with Bhutan, China, Burma, Tibet, and Sikkim through the northeast of India were vividly described by R.B. Pemberton in his account Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the emphasis changed from revenue collection and trade to new kinds of surplus appropriation as the country transitioned from merchant capitalism to industrial capitalism, intending to dominate the world economically. This colonialism process undertaken by the British was mainly to extend their political and economic power. The British's search for global resources must be evaluated from this perspective. The overall effect of this phenomenon was that enormous territories were conquered, and new markets and raw materials were taken at a meagre cost. The politically emerging alliance at home between land and money, they argue, created the notion of power being centred in land and hence the preoccupation of the Company-state with "the need to raise revenue as well as to keep order."<sup>14</sup> Hence, Assam in the north-eastern region of India was no exception to the overall British penetration pattern. The Company was attracted to Assam by the massive gains made by the traders and the merchants, as well as by the different representation produced by Huge Baillie, David Killican and George Bogle to the Company. Additionally, Captain Welsh points out in his report that encouraging correct conduct could benefit the business dealings with Assam.

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<sup>12</sup> D.P. Barooah, *Assam District Gazetteers Goalpara District*, The Editor-in-Chief, District Gazetteers, Government of Assam, Gauhati, 1979, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition and After*, Orient Black Swan Private Limited, New Delhi, 2004, p.62.

Assam and the Eastern Himalayas were notable not just for their natural resources but also for their strategic location, sharing a common border with Tibet and Burma. Britain tried to fill the gap left by the decline in commerce with Europe by engaging in trade with Burma, Tibet and China. As Tibet imported more than it exported, trade with the country was of even greater importance, as the balance was made up in gold and silver.<sup>15</sup> The mission led by Welsh, sent in 1792 by Lord Cornwallis to quell the rouge raids of Bengal Burkendazes,<sup>16</sup> was the first official visit by Europeans to Assam during the pre-yandaboo period. In the colonial era, Goalpara's trade was primarily limited to salt, forest products, and agricultural items, particularly jute and sal timber. Salt, which was very rare in Assam, was regarded as being equivalent to gold in the region. A large amount of salt was being exported to Assam from Bengal. Literary sources of ancient and medieval Assam are entirely silent about the mass-level salt production in the area. However, there were few salts of brine sites like Sadiya, Burhat and Naga Hills. But these salts were not affordable for the masses. People in the valley used khar (alkaline-like substance), the burnt ashes of specific trees that provided a salty taste, instead of ready-made salt before the British settlement in the region. The chronicler of Mir Jumla explained the region's local salt production in his words, "some natives cut the young banana trees and dry them in the sun, then they are burnt and the ashes are kept in a canvas bag, and the canvas bag packed with the ashes is put on a high platform and water is poured over it. In this process, it is distilled and used as salt though it is very acidic."<sup>17</sup> The East India Company was drawn to the salt trading possibility; therefore, they established salt warehouses at Goalpara. Under British rule, the primary commercial good of Goalpara, salt, was turned into a monopoly trade, bringing them significant profits. Jean Baptiste Chevalier, a merchant who belonged to the French East India Company, came to Assam in 1755. From Sylhet to Goalpara, he conducted his trading activities. At last, he opened up a salt factory and warehouse at Goalpara and continued his commercial activities over sometimes as the salt business was highly profitable in the region. The annual use of Bengal salt in Assam was often calculated to be 100,00 maunds.<sup>18</sup> George Lear, another merchant in 1769, came to Goalpara for trading. After that, he spent rupees 21,742 for constructing an independent salt factory and emporium to carry out his business smoothly.<sup>19</sup> In 1759, Paul Richard Pearkes, a European trader, entered Assam and established a factory at Jogighopa for some time. He was enthralled by the Assamese wares, which primarily consisted by the Assamese wares, which mainly consisted of fir and other types of woods and gold obtained from the Brahmaputra's sand. He wrote to a friend, "I am at present on my voyage to Assam, a country that only two Europeans have visited besides myself, and where trade may, I am certain, be carried on greatly to the advantage of the Company and

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<sup>15</sup> Alastair Lamb, *Britain and Chinese Central Asia the Road to Lhasa*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960, p.5.

<sup>16</sup> The disbanded soldiers of Muslim armies of Zamindars were collectively called as "Barkandazes" They were organized in small groups and had their weapons ready to give services to anyone who paid them money.

<sup>17</sup> Shehabuddin Talish, *Tarikh-i-Aasham*, ed. Akdas Ali Mir, tr. Mazhar Asif, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, 2009, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> R. Boileau Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, DHAS, Guwahati, 1991, p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> S.K. Bhuyan, 1949, p. 97.

their servants, and doubt not I shall make it turn out to my present profits.<sup>20</sup> John Robinson and Hugh Baillie followed Pearkes in the district. The East India Company's direct commercial relationship with Assam began in 1765 when Robert Clive established the Society of Trade. The main aim behind the establishment of this society was to deal with areca nuts, salt, and tobacco. Hugh Baillie was recruited by Robert Clive to serve as an agent of the Goalpara Society of Trade in 1765. Later, he became a monopoly trader who controlled the trade in Bengal and Assam after obtaining the lease of the salt trade at Goalpara from the Company in 1768.

Along with the English merchants, there were several Frenchmen living at Goalpara to conduct salt trade with the Assamese traders, specifically Laval, Giblot, and Campanag. In 1767, Mr. Laval moved to Goalpara to conduct a salt trade with the Assamese merchants. Robert Bigger and Mc Cullam, who both lived in Jogighopa and had a trade branch in Goalpara, were significant merchants who traded salt with Assamese dealers. Daniel Raush, another important English salt trader, visited Bengal in 1766. Under David Kallican, he did continue his business.

On August 31, 1787, the Government had published an advertisement inviting tenders to transporting 50,000 maunds of salt from Narayangunge to Goalpara.<sup>21</sup> A Greek trader by the name of Constantine Theodosius made the first and only request. Due to his expertise in river transportation between Narayangunge and Goalpara, the Greek merchant had been employed. On August 16, 1787, Baillie asked the Bengal authorities to send salt of Khulna to Goalpara. By October 15, 1787, the Bengal Government had sent 50,000 mounds of Khulna salt, along with 25,000 mounds in July. By the middle of August 1788, Goalpara had also received about 25,000 mounds of salt.<sup>22</sup> Numerous Indian merchants engaged themselves in the Assam trade, especially in Goalpara. For instance, Naib Dewan of Bengal, Muhammad Raza Khan granted Gunny Sam Sarkar and Sooberam Palit Perwanas a three-year monopoly in the salt trade at Goalpara. Jagat Seth, the famous banker of Murshidabad, also had trading concerns at Jogighopa, Gauhati, and Goalpara, which continued up to 1815 and even later.<sup>23</sup>

W.W. Hunter's work *A Statistical Account of Assam* (1879) pointed out that the local trade of Goalpara region was principally in the hands of Marwari merchants.<sup>24</sup> Following Assam's conquest, the British East India Company eased trade restrictions between Assam and Bengal, encouraging Marwari traders to establish themselves in Assam. During the second half of nineteenth century the total number of Marwari merchants in the region was 155, Agarwala traders 19, Oswal traders 215, jaswar 13, Bais-baniya 17, Gandha-baniya 285 in number.<sup>25</sup> Marwari merchants handled the majority of the export and import while also conducting a sizable amount of retail

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>24</sup> Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, p. 76.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.41.

business. Numerous Bengali merchants were also very active in the region. Rice, pulses, paddy, silk, jute, wax, mustard seeds, tobacco, cotton clothes, timber, betel-nuts, dried fish, cows, pigs, buffaloes, sheep, goats, etc., were some of the essential articles in the region. Apart from the list of the commodities of export and import Hunter has also mentioned the important places of trade and commerce. Bilasipara, Bijni, Dhubri, Jogighopa, Dumaria, Gauripur, Patamari, Agamani, Simlabari, Kherbari, Dimakari, Bagribari, Marnai, Rangjuli, Damra, Jira, Nibari, Singimari, Rajabala, Putimari, Manikachar, Karaibari, and Dalo where commercial activities happened frequently.<sup>26</sup> Local trade in Goalpara is conducted at permanent markets and occasional fairs in conjunction with religious festivals. Many shops were also dispersed around the region. There were two different categories of traders: petty traders and big merchants. Periodical markets, fairs and marts were some common places where these petty traders used sell their commodities. The gandha-baniya, the beparis and the bais-baniya were the small traders. The gandha-baniya and the bais-baniya mainly engaged themselves in the business of spices and grocery.<sup>27</sup> B.C. Allen, in the Goalpara District Gazetteer (1903), had given us the details about the prices of the commodities that were some of the common items in the market of the region. He noted that unhusked rice also made up an export item in the market. Though the prices were not static, they kept fluctuating according to the prevailing situation of the society, and also it depends on the production level. Prices increase during the time of famine, and calamity made it impossible for ordinary people to afford even a little amount of rice. The following table shows the price of the commodities in the early colonial period of Goalpara region:

Items	Prices
Hoes	Rs 1 to Rs 1-4
Sickles	2 to 4 annas
Sal trees	Rs 10/-
Cow	Rs 10 to Rs 15
Eri clothes	Rs 8 to Rs 12
Good quality trees	Rs 6 each
Ordinary trees	Rs 2 each
Mats (kath)	Annas 6 to Annas 10
Mats (Pati)	Annas 8 to a rupee
Idols	Rs 3 to Rs 4

Daily wages of the colly were 4 to 6 annas a day. Traders came up to the rivers and exchanged earthen pots, dried fish, salt, and other articles for rice, at rates of exchange usually fixed by the panchayat. Typical rates are 5 seers of paddy (unhusked rice) for one

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 75-76.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.41.

seers of salt, which is equivalent to about 12 annas a mound for paddy, and 6 seers of paddy for an earthen pot, while dried fish fetches about twenty items its weight in grain.<sup>28</sup>

Prior to the British annexation, Bhutan enjoyed extensive commercial relations with Assam and Bengal's plain area. The five Duars, Guma, Ripu, Chirang, Sidli, and Bijni collectively known as the eastern duars, are located close to the Goalpara district. The Bhutanese were very frequent in the trade fairs, which were conducted seasonally in the lower Assam region. They came up with products like musk, cow, tails, rubber, elephant tusk, ponies, Chinese silk, knives, etc. Eastern duars, which became a part of British India after the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1866, was annexed to the Goalpara district for administrative purposes. And on the other hand, Garos too were very frequent in the frontier markets. Cotton was the principal commodity sold by the Garos in the market, and it was bartered for rice, livestock and other goods. The Assamese also engaged in significant trade with Tibet, China, and neighbouring hill tribes in addition to the Bengal trade. The trade with Tibet amounted to 200,000 rupees a year.<sup>29</sup>

In 1823, Robert Bruce, a Scottish adventurer made the discovery of tea in the Brahmaputra Valley. This was the crucial outcome of the annexation of Assam as it began well-organized tea cultivation. In order to compete with the Chinese tea, the British Government decided to promote tea cultivation in the area. The sole reason behind the formation of Assam Tea Company in 1838 was to encourage more production. In order to entice European investment in the tea gardens, the Government also passed the "Waste Land Rules" in March 1838.<sup>30</sup> In accordance with this regulation, European planters were given land at extremely low prices to grow tea gardens.

As colonial trade developed in Goalpara, the population of immigrants grew. Most Marwari were traders and money lenders by trade, acting as middlemen between the Company and the locals. Some semi-permanent Marwari traders from Bengal arrived in Goalpara around the eighteenth century and set up branches of their firms to conduct trade there. They belonged to the Agarwal, Jaswal, and Oswal communities. For jobs in British administrative offices, people from Sylhet, Dacca, Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Central India also migrated to Goalpara. The British East India Company thus found a lucrative market in Goalpara from which they benefitted greatly. Sal, jute, and timber from the Goalpara area were extremely important products with high market demand.

To sum up, this study has examined at how and in what ways British mercantile policy and its involvement in local politics during the early stages of colonial authority in the Goalpara region changed the pre-existing trans-frontier regional trading practices.

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<sup>28</sup> B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Goalpara*, vol 3, City Press, Calcutta, 1903, pp. 47-48.

<sup>29</sup> S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, p.55.

<sup>30</sup> Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, pp. 12-13.



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