INDUSTRIALISATION-POLICY AND CONTENT
The Ahoms ruled the Assam Valley for almost six centuries. The main factors which enabled them to consolidate their power and to maintain it for such a long period were their "militaristic cult, their highly developed political sense and their religious tolerance, detachment and neutrality."¹ They produced shrewd statesmen whose actions were determined by considerations of political necessity and practical expediency. Therefore, as in their religious and social outlook, the Ahom rulers were equally adept in their commercial policy. They encouraged free trade to a limited extent so that people of the neighbouring territories could frequent them with commodities and thereby contribute towards the maintenance of a steady income from market duties and customs revenue.

PRE COLONIAL ECONOMY OF ASSAM

The state of the economy of Assam during this period was, on the whole, prosperous. Tavernier² stated that "the kingdom of Assam is one of the best countries in all Asia, for it produces all things necessary for human subsistence, without any need of foreign supply. There are in it mines of gold, silver, steel, iron and a great store of silk."³ During this period agricultural products were sufficient to meet the requirements of the people; industry and crafts were developed, and a

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² The French traveller, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, came to India in 1640. His Travels in India (translated V. Ball, London 1899) forms an invaluable source of material for the socio-economic history of India of the period.

³ Quoted in H.K. Barpujari, The American Missionaries and North-East India 1836-1900, p 171.
considerable volume of trade and commerce did exist with neighbouring provinces.\textsuperscript{4}

Agriculture was the main occupation of the people and, as such, the village was the pivot of the economic system. The Assamese led simple lives and had few wants. They lived principally upon rice and grew nearly every article of domestic consumption in their own fields.\textsuperscript{5} The varied but rich soil of Assam was well-adapted, from its diversified elevation, to the cultivation of every kind of crop.\textsuperscript{6} Apart from paddy and mustard seeds, sugar-cane and cotton were widely cultivated. Every paik was allowed two puras\textsuperscript{7} of rice land free of rent in lieu of his services to the state. In addition, he was given land for his house and garden for which he paid a poll tax of rupee one per annum. If personal services were not required, he paid two rupees instead.\textsuperscript{8} All land in excess of allotted portions of the paiks were rented out to any individual offering to cultivate them. The land in Assam was divided into four main classes, viz.,

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(i)] Basti or Bari or homestead land;
  \item[(ii)] Rupit or low rice land;
  \item[(iii)] Faringati or high land and
  \item[(iv)] waste land.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{4} E. Gait, A History of Assam, pp 267-93.

\textsuperscript{5} A.J. Moffatt Mills, Report on the Province of Assam, 1853, p 59.

\textsuperscript{6} ibid., p 1.

\textsuperscript{7} Approximately three acres.

The Basti land was used for the purpose of constructing houses and gardening. On the Rupit land the Sali rice was grown; while the Faringati land was used for growing crops such as mustard and Ahu paddy. The wastelands were generally classified into three categories, viz., the forest and high waste land; the extensive reed and grass-lands and the grass-lands amidst cultivated land. It was not the usual practice in Assam to pay the land revenue in cash. The average Assamese, therefore, could easily provide for his moderate wants and, as he led a life of ease and comfort, had little inclination to exert himself.

INDIGENOUS INDUSTRY

Although basically an agricultural people, the Assamese combined agriculture with other trades. There are references to weavers, spinners, goldsmiths, potters and workers in ivory, bamboo, wood, hide and cane. There was hardly any distinction between the capitalist and labour. Most of the people were self-employed and seldom worked for hire. They generally manufactured their products in their own homes and on their own account. Secondly, no class of workers was hereditarily attached to any particular trade in such a way as to affect his personal freedom. There was, therefore, considerable social mobility. Each village was a self-sufficient socio-economic unit containing persons

9 H.K. Barpujari, Assam in the Days of the Company, p 212.
10 E. Gait, op.cit; p-255.
11 ibid., pp 268-73.
skilled in all trades. In fact, the autonomy of the village was a significant feature of medieval Assamese society.

One of the most prominent industries prevalent at that time was silk culture and its manufacture. The Ahoms greatly encouraged this industry and grants of land were conferred upon the Jogis or weavers, who were also exempted from personal labour extracted by the state from all other classes. The Ahoms greatly encouraged this industry and grants of land were conferred upon the Jogis or weavers, who were also exempted from personal labour extracted by the state from all other classes.12 Three varieties of silk worm were reared, viz., the Eri polu, Pat polu and Muga polu. The Eri worms (Attacus ricini) were fed on the castor oil plant or on leaves of two main jungle plants called the Kesaru and Gamari.13 These worms which could be reared indoors throughout the year, yielded a thread which was not reeled but spun by hand. It produced a silk which spun into a coarse thread and was woven into large sheets called Eria cloth. The Pat worms (Bombyx textor) were akin to the silkworm of Europe and were fed on the mulberry leaves and reared in considerable quantities. There were two varieties of Pat worms, viz., the Bor polu and the Saru polu, the differences between the two being that the latter worms matured early and produced a fairly white silk while the silk spun by the former worm was yellowish.14 The scientific name of the Muga worm (Anthereaca Assamoca) denotes its peculiar connection with Assam. It was found nowhere else in India except Dehra Dun where it occurred

13 E. Stack, Silk in Assam, 1884, Shillong, 1896.
14 Ibid, p 22.
The Muga moth was generally reared on the Sum trees (Machilus addoratisimma) in the open air. The silk produced from these worms was considered to be the most valuable and was the prescribed attire of all the high officers of the Government. The rearing of Muga worms required great care and attention. The manufacture of the silk was left entirely in the hands of the women.

Apart from these three varieties of silkworms, there were a number of wild silkworms like the Bon Muga (Attacus cynthia) closely allied to Eri, Bon pat (Ficus indica), Kutkuri (Antheraea paphia) or Assamese tusser. These were, however, destitute of all commercial value. The cocoons in the wild state were not found in sufficient numbers to repay the cost of collection.

All the three domesticated varieties of Assam silk were extremely durable and very much in demand. In fact, commenting on the specimens of Assamese silk, the secretary, Foreign Department wrote:  

Judging myself of these specimens compared with the common Bengal silk in the same stage of manufacture, I would say that the Assamese article is much harder, but at the same time shows much greater lustre than the former.... it strikes me we may get valuable articles of the Meteria medica from the Assam hills.

Silk fabrics were woven both for home consumption and for sale. All the higher class ladies in the Assam Valley dressed themselves very largely in silk, and even the poor women always had one or two silk mekhelas for

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18 Ibid.
19 F.P.C., May 1830, No. 52.
special occasions. Therefore, eighty percent of the production was consumed at home. The rest was normally traded with the neighbouring hill tribes and with Bengal for other goods.

Cotton was another important commodity of Assam. In the plains, patches of cotton were grown mainly in the Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Sibsagar districts for domestic consumption. In some mauzas of the northern frontier cotton was grown extensively on the lower slopes of the Bhutan hills. It was known as Gari cultivation, and the Chapaguri mauza in Kamrup was famous for it. In the Goalpara district some cotton was grown in the hilly portion of Bijni and Sidli parganas. There were two main varieties of cotton viz., the Bor kopah and the Soru kopah. The Bor kopah was the large balled, high growing cotton. It had less seeds and could, therefore, be ginned easily. This type could normally be cropped twice a year. The pods were large, sometimes as much as eight inches in length. The Soru kopah was the small, round-balled species. This species had to be sown annually and could be plucked once a year. The greater portion of the cotton was short stapled.

Cotton was generally grown on forest clearings called jhums. The jungles were usually cut in the cold weather and allowed to dry on the ground. A jungle clearing was rarely cropped for more than one season and owing to the easy availability of land, the same clearing was not normally resumed for ten years.

21 For details see H.Z. Darrah, Cotton in Assam, 1885, Assam Secretariat, 1896; Dr. Watt. Dictionary of Economic Products iv, p 141; Middleton, Agricultural Ledger No.8 of 1895, Assam Secretariat, 1896.
As a general rule, other crops were mixed with the cotton. Although mustard, maize, chillies, brinjals and water melon were all used according to the convenience of the cultivator, Ahu dhan and til were the most common associated crops. The reason for associating a second crop with cotton is said to be that the latter always grows best if shaded in the beginning.23

The whole process of preparing the cotton from plucking to spinning was carried out by those engaged in its cultivation. There was no special caste in the province, like that of the Dhunia of the North Western Provinces or the Pinja of Punjab, whose occupation was to prepare the cotton for spinning. Each household processed as much cotton as it required. Some like the Mikirs, however grew cotton not only for domestic consumption but also for export, and boat loads of it could be seen going down the Kopili and Kollong rivers towards the cold season.24

Related to the production of silk and cotton was the weaving industry. Every household was in possession of a loom. Spinning and weaving of both cotton and silk were carried out by women of the family principally for making clothes for personal use.25 However, like silk, some of it was also exported to Bengal or bartered for other articles with the hill tribes.26 The art of making cotton cloth had reached a high degree of perfection and very often they were daintily prepared, the borders being finely woven with a lace of gold or

23 ibid.,
24 ibid.,
26 W. Robinson, A descriptive Account of Assam, p240.
silver thread. This gold and silver thread (guna) used for embroidery was made by a class of workmen called Gunakati.\(^{27}\) Very often cotton was combined with Muga and Eri to produce material for clothes.

The product of the hand-looms in Assam supplied home demands to a great extent. In the Brahmaputra Valley, Nowgong, Kamrup and Goalpara were the main districts where locally made cloths like gamosa and bor kapor were sold in the weekly markets. Trade in these materials was brisker in the hills. The hill tribes took cotton from the plains, and occasionally sold some cloth made by themselves.\(^{28}\) The main articles woven from cotton for everyday use of the people were: churia, chador, borkapor, khaniya kapor, cheleng, gamosa, riha, mekhela and paridiya kapor.\(^{29}\)

Another important industry prevalent at that time was gold washing and manufacture of jewellery. Nearly all the tributaries of the Brahmaputra were auriferous. Gold was washed from the sands of these rivers and innumerable streams that intersected the land. The Bharaloi, Dikrang and Subansiri in Darrang and Lakhimpur were the largest producers of gold.\(^{30}\) The process of gold washing has been described by Hunter as below:\(^{31}\)

The process by which the gold is extracted appears to be similar to that used by the diggers in Australia and California: the river sand is deposited in a rough wooden cradle by one man, a second operator keeps stirring the sand with his hands, while a third causes a continuous gentle


\(^{28}\) ibid., p7.


\(^{30}\) Gait, op.cit., p 272.

\(^{31}\) Hunter, op.cit., p 380
stream of water to fall on the upper end of the cradle, by which all the lighter particles of sand are washed away, leaving only the heavier atoms of gold.

Gold washing was done by a guild known as Sonowal khel who paid the Government a tax of five rupees worth of gold per annum. Individuals, who washed gold, were required to pay one tola\textsuperscript{32} of gold per head per annum to the royal exchequer.\textsuperscript{33} The Muslim chronicler who accompanied Mir Jumla to Assam calculated that the annual value of gold washed from the sands of the Brahmaputra would come to between Rs. 80,000 and Rs. 1,08,000.\textsuperscript{34} The gold was generally converted into jewellery and thus the goldsmith occupied a prominent place in the village society. The jewellers work consisted of silver and gold bracelets, ear ornaments of various descriptions, beads, necklaces etc. The silver ornaments were sometimes gilt and those made with gold were occasionally enamelled and set with rubies.\textsuperscript{35} The enamel work of Jorhat and the filigree work of Barpeta were the most well known types of purely Assamese jewellery.\textsuperscript{36} A striking feature of the Assamese society of that period was the absence of a professional caste or subcaste of jewellers. As in the case of other trades, this industry was also pursued along with regular agricultural pursuits.

Another notable industrial profession was that of the Marias or braziers. They manufactured cooking and other domestic utensils of various shapes from well

\textsuperscript{32} One tola = 11.66 gms.
amalgamated metal. The Marias did not cast brass into the shapes of the vessels that they manufactured. They used sheet brass of about 1/16 inch thickness and joined various pieces together to produce the desired shape. The metal workers of Assam usually followed two methods for manufacturing their utensils. The first was pita or the hammering method and the second by casting into moulds. The first method was the more popular one. The braziers, beat out the plates into the desired shape with the help of hammers after heating them in the furnaces. The component parts were then soldered together by means of an alloy of copper, zinc and borax known as pan. The rough vessel was then turned in a lathe to be chiselled out.

According to the Buranjis, the art of brick making had reached a high degree of perfection. It is recorded that in making the bricks, the white portion of the eggs was mixed to render them hard and smooth. They were then burnt almost to the consistency of tiles.

Blacksmithy was also an important industry during the Ahom period. The blacksmith or Kamars were mostly Kalitas and Koches. Household articles such as knives, sickles, spades etc. were made by the blacksmiths. They were also engaged in making weapons of war like hilloi (matchlocks), top and bor top (small and big cannons), swords, spears, dutas (short javelins), tips of arrows etc. Shihab-uddin Talish writes that the Ahoms "cast excellent matchlocks and bachadar artillery and show

37 Hunter, op.cit., p 57.
38 ibid.
40 Francis Hamilton, An Account of Assam (ed S.K. Bhuyan) p 60.
Along with the development of firearms, the manufacture of gun powder had attained considerable importance. In 1662 Mir Jumla is said to have found more than 4260 maunds of gunpowder at Garhgaon and was so impressed with the quality that he ordered the capture of some of the expert gunpowder makers. The use of bows and arrows in war by the Ahom army resulted in the considerable growth of this craft. The bow makers were organised into the dhanu chucha khel and were required to supply a certain number of bows annually to the royal store.

The physical features of the land greatly contributed to the development of the boat building industry in Assam. Since the Valley was intersected by numerous streams, boats formed the most convenient and fast form of communication and transport. The forests of Assam were full of hard and durable timber suitable for boat building and there was a considerable trade in canoes hollowed out from large trees. M'Cosh commented that "a boat is as common to every house as a brass lota or an earthen pot." The common man built his own boat, while the state employed several thousand Naosalias for the purpose.

Tavernier has recorded in his accounts that the lac which was produced in Assam was of a very superior quality. Large quantities of lac were exported to China.
and Japan where they were used for lacquering cabinets and other furniture.  

It is apparent from the above that the economy of Assam was more or less self-sufficient. Even as late as 1872 the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong district commented:

Whenever I go, even in the heart of the Mufassal and away from the public thoroughfares. I am struck with the look of real comfort about the homesteads of the ryots. The appearance of their villages and baris, with the herds of cattle and with poultry roaming about, confirms me in the belief that the peasantry are well-to-do and in the possession of a goodly stock of this world's goods, as far as their own wants and requirements are concerned.

The little deficit that was present in any area was made good through trade with neighbouring hill tribes and Bengal.

TRADE WITH THE HILL TRIBES

For reasons of practical expediency the Ahom rulers maintained commercial relations with the tribes of the neighbouring hills. In fact the extensive trade was the basis of the plains-hills contact in the entire area. This was accomplished through an organised market system in the adjoining plains and foothills to the mutual benefit of the people on both sides as the

surplus generation in an area balanced the deficit in
the other. Protection was given to traders by
frontier wardens known as Datiyalia Baishyas or Duarias.
Although politically exclusive and generally self
sufficient, these frontier tribes, viz. the Bhutias, Akas, Miris, Abors, Daflas, Mishmis, Khamtis, Singphos
and Nagas, maintained a long tradition of trade with
Assam. They also provided the route for free trade with
Tibet, China and Burma. These tribes generally bartered
pepper, ginger, wax, ivory, cotton, wool, yaktails,
rubber and elephant tusk for glass, beads, eri cloth,
salt, utensils and agricultural implements. The
entire volume of trade with them passed through the
Duars or passes in the North-Western and North-Eastern
borders of the Brahmaputra Valley. A market was
appended to each Duar through which extensive trade was
carried on. Besides the periodical markets, annual
fairs were held at important Duars like Udalguri and
Doimara. The former held the distinction of conducting
the entire Tibeto-Assamese trade. Silk, rice, iron, lac
and pearls were traded for rock salt, gold dust, Chinese
silks, woollens and horses. Trade with Tibet was of
great importance as it imported more than it exported
and the balance was made up in gold and silver. The
Assamese used to receive from Tibetan merchants silver
worth nearly Rupees one lakh and gold to the value of
over Rs. 70,000.

Although the trade was to mutual advantage, the
predatory character of some of the hill tribes was
extremely disadvantageous to the people of the plains.
The Ahom monarchs, therefore, sought to combat this
menace by resorting to a system called Posa. Under this

50 ibid.
53 ibid.
54 A Lamb, Britain and Chinese Central Asia: A road to Lhasa, p 5.
system the Chiefs were entitled to a certain income from the plain in return for the maintenance of law and order in their respective Duars as most of the raids were carried out through these passes. The Ahoms thereby looked upon these tribal chiefs as some sort of agents while the chiefs, on their part, were happy with the commission that they received. It should, however, be noted that any arrangement under this system was always preceded by a show of Ahom military strength. These Duars served as important commercial centres not only with regard to trade with the frontier tribes but also with the kingdom beyond. For the Ahom Government, the frontier trade meant much more than a source of revenue. It was a symbol of the assertion of their power beyond the physical limits of their kingdom.

TRADE WITH BENGAL

Apart from commercial relations with the hill tribes, the Ahom also carried out trade with Bengal to a limited extent. This was necessary because of the low availability of salt in the region. There were brine springs in Sadiya and Borhat, but the local salt, though of a better quality than the imported variety, was much more expensive. It appears that the Assamese could not work these mines efficiently with the result that salt was in scarcity. This compelled them to depend on Bengal for salt. Almost 1,00,000 maunds of salt used to be annually imported from Bengal. Copper, jewels and spices were the other items imported from Bengal. The exports from Assam to Bengal consisted mainly of Muga silk, lac, munjit (a creeper used for dying cotton cloth), elephant tusks, cotton, pepper, mustard seed and

57 Ibid.
aggar. The following table shows the exports of the two states in 1808-09:

**TRADE WITH BENGAL 1808-09**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPORTS FROM BENGAL</th>
<th>EXPORTS TO BENGAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ITEM</td>
<td>VALUE (Rs.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALT</td>
<td>192,500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GHEE</td>
<td>1,600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PULSE</td>
<td>800.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUGAR</td>
<td>1,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEADS</td>
<td>2,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORAL</td>
<td>1,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEWELS</td>
<td>5,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUROPEAN GLASS</td>
<td>500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; CUTLERY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFETAS</td>
<td>2,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPICES</td>
<td>1,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHELLS</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAINTS</td>
<td>500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPPER</td>
<td>4,800.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED LEAD</td>
<td>1,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGLISH WOOLLENS</td>
<td>2,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BENARAS KHINKOBS</td>
<td>500.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SATIN</td>
<td>1,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOLD &amp; SILVER</td>
<td>1,000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOTH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSLIN</td>
<td>10,000.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TOTAL               | 2,28,300.00       | TOTAL               | 1,30,900.00 |

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58 *ibid.*
The balance of trade of Rs.97,400 against Assam was paid in gold and silver. The possibility of obtaining gold from Assam was an additional inducement to the Bengal merchants to engage in trade with that kingdom. J.P. Wade wrote to a friend in 1792 saying, "Assam is not a country for diamonds, but it is for gold dust. I think I shall do well in it." 59

The Ahoms made a very clear distinction between politics and trade and the merchants were explicitly prohibited from meddling in politics. They were wary of the foreign merchants and did not allow them to settle in Assam. They feared that, as secret agents of some conspiring state, they might create disruption. The foreign traders therefore had to transact their business hurriedly and return to their own countries. 60

For the efficient functioning of trade and commerce, government protection of traders and the supervision and control of the frontier officers and tax collectors was necessary. The Ahom rulers, therefore, established some trade centres. 61 The Agent of the Government, known as the Duaria Barua, resided at the Assam Chokey located at the mouth of the River Manas. He enjoyed the exclusive privilege of trade with Bengal for which he paid the Ahom Government an annual rent of Rs.90,000. 62 Occasionally, this privilege was granted

60 Ibid, p 50.
61 Ibid, pp 50-52.
to two men at the same time. The administration of the
district around the Assam Chokey, also known as Hadira
Chokey, was entrusted to an officer known as Kandahar
Barua. The Duaria Barua received the goods of the Assam
merchants and exchanged them for the products from
Bengal. They realised the duties, which were fixed by
the Government, on all exports and imports. However,
depending on the quality of the administrative control
at the centre, very often the rates fluctuated at the
hands of the Duaria Baruas. The high rates of duties
imposed by the Duaria Baruas, non-fulfilment of their
contracts or their refusal to carry on trade with
particular individuals, led to constant friction with
the Bengal merchants. 63

There were four main trade routes from Bengal to
Assam: One by water and three by land. The river
route from Goalpara was down the Brahmaputra and then
along the Pabna River to Calcutta. The boats took
twenty-five to thirty days to complete the voyage from
Goalpara to Calcutta and between thirty-three and forty-
three days from Calcutta to Goalpara. The first
overland route from Bengal to Assam lay through
Murshidabad, Malda, Dinajpore, Rungpur and Goalpara —
this being the line of the Calcutta mail. The second
route was via Dacca, Dumary, Singimari and Goalpara.
The third passed through Sylhet, Cherra, Nungkhlaa,
Ranigaon and Gauhati. 64 During the rainy season,
however, communications were severely disrupted.

From the above account we can conclude that under

the Ahom rulers, Assam was on the whole prosperous. There was almost complete self sufficiency except in certain articles like salt. Exchanges were generally effected through barter and money was seldom used by the Assamese peasant. The little transaction that took place in this respect passed through in small amounts for the purchase of salt or, now and then, a cooking utensil or a piece of ornament. The currency of Assam consisted of gold and silver coins although they were not much in circulation. These were probably in addition to those coins that were brought from neighbouring Bengal and Bihar in connection with trade and commerce and as political payments. It appears that cowries or conch shells were also used as an equivalent of money. Copper coins were not known in Assam which is another proof of its stable and well balanced economy.

EUROPEAN INTEREST

Assam received wide publicity among the Europeans and within the country as a result of Mir Jumla's invasion in 1662. Mir Jumla is said to have been accompanied by a number of Dutch, Portuguese and English sailors and gunners who returned home to give reports of

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67 The standard coin of the Ahoms weighed one tola or 96 rotis. Instead of being circular, the coins were octagonal in shape in accordance with the sloka in the Yogini Tantra which describes Assam as having eight sides.
68 J.P. Singh, Monetary Development in Early Assam, p 20.
69 ibid., p 16.
the rich economic potential of the region. 70

The first official of the English East India Company, who surveyed the frontier of Assam and collected some information about the country, was Major James Rennell, the "father of Indian Geography." He recognised the identity of the River Brahmaputra with that of the Tsangpo of Tibet and would have perhaps been able to gather more information had he been permitted by the Ahom Government to enter the kingdom. 71 It is interesting to note that the majority of the early European merchants trading in Assam were originally army men. Colonel James Mill, who had joined the Ostend East India Company, had taken to trading when the company became bankrupt. Jean Baptiste Chevalier, Commander-in-chief of the French Settlements in Bengal, was deputed to carry on trade in Assam. Paul Richard Pearkes, an officer in charge of the English settlement at Patna, had established a factory at Jugighopa. In 1759 he wrote to a friend: 72

I am at present on my voyage to Assam, a country that only two Europeans have visited besides myself, and where a trade may, I am certain, be carried on greatly to the advantage of the Company and their servants, and doubt not I shall make it turn out to my present profit.

Pearkes was followed by several other Europeans and soon the Company's servants in Bengal were engaged in a highly profitable inland private trade. Matters came to a head when Mir Kasim, the Nawab of Bengal, complained

to Vansittart, the Governor of Bengal, of losses of over Rs.40,000 to the trade with Assam, Rangamati and Karaibari owing to the monopoly of the whole trade by the Company's servants.\textsuperscript{73}

Alarmed at the notorious corruption of the English officials in Bengal, the court of Directors sent out Clive again as the Governor of Bengal with full powers to reform the abuses in the Company's administration. In 1765, Clive set up a Society of Trade to compensate the chief officers for the losses sustained by them resulting from the restrictions he had imposed on the practice of private trade and the acceptance of presents. The Society was granted the monopoly of the trade in salt, betel nuts and tobacco. The profits were to be distributed in predetermined shares. It was suggested that the Committee of Trade should appoint certain European agents to transact the business in different parts of the country. Of the eleven agents approved in November 1765, three were to reside in the district of Rungpur: Hugh Ballie at Goalpara, Tom Lewis in the town of Rungpur and Hargreave at Chilmari \textsuperscript{74}. It was soon apparent, however, that as betel nuts and tobacco were locally grown in Assam there, was no demand for them from Bengal. Therefore, in 1767, the Company relinquished its trade in betelnut and tobacco and confined itself to salt, the most important item of inland trade. The Council of Directors being unhappy with the functioning of the Society of Trade declared the monopoly as "our intrusion upon the natural right of the natives of the country"\textsuperscript{75}. Accordingly, the Society of Trade was abolished and the inland trade was thrown open

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{73} S.K. Bhuyan, \textit{Op.cit}, p 65. \\
\textsuperscript{74} ibid \\
\textsuperscript{75} ibid, p 69.
\end{flushright}
to all persons, Indians and Europeans. Trade with Assam now acquired a new interest.

Goalpara, on the south bank, and Jugighopa and Rangamati on the north bank, were the three eastern outposts of Bengal from where merchants conducted their trade with Assam.

The revenue from salt alone, which contributed a duty of 35% payable to the Company, justified the establishment of a centre at Goalpara. Rangamati was a Moghul outpost of considerable importance. It was the head quarters of a Faujadar who administered the territory adjacent to Assam. He was invested with powers to conduct commercial and political relations with the ruler of Assam on behalf of the Nawab of Bengal. As such Rangamati was of considerable importance. The company's representative in the district of Rungpur, in which Goalpara, Jugighopa and Rangamati were situated, was the channel of correspondence between the governments of Bengal and Assam. Rungpur was administered by a Collector.

The year 1771 witnessed the foundation of the Company's commercial relations with Assam. In that year, the Court of Directors officially considered seriously the possibility of a profitable trade with that kingdom. As a consequence of the memorials presented by Ballie, the

76 The Company had acquired the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765.

77 Hugh Ballie presented three memorials to the Company in 1771, 1773 and 1776, in which he repeatedly pointed out the advantages which might be expected to result from a trade with Assam. He was convinced that if properly conducted, the trade in Assam (mainly in salt and broad cloth) would give an annual profit of Rs.200,000 to the Company.
Court of Directors felt "that a very beneficial trade in the article of salt might be prosecuted with the kingdom of Assam for which returns might be made in gold dust and other articles." The Director also felt that trade with Assam would open up new markets for European commodities in the hilly regions of the North-East. The returns were expected in Muga silk, black pepper and specie. The Court accordingly decided to nominate one of their convenented servants to Assam. The choice fell on Bailie for several reasons. First, he was the original proposer of the scheme for the opening of trade with Assam. Secondly, he had had eighteen years of residence in that kingdom and thirdly, Bailie was supposed to have suffered considerable losses when he had been earlier recalled from Goalpara as a result of the annulment of Killican's grant. Hugh Bailie was therefore considered to be the most suitable person to be the Company's resident at Goalpara.

Bailie was directed to obtain a general knowledge of the extent, Government and products of Assam and its probable communication with China. He was further directed to look into the possibilities of forming a commercial treaty with the King of Assam "Upon mercantile principles without any appearance of power or assumption of superiority that might give offence or alarm to the Assamese." Ballie was entrusted with the collectorship of Rangamati, Bijni, Bahirbund, Karaibari and Bhitarbund. He was now the Company's official representative on the frontier of Assam with full powers to adopt measures for

78 Home Department, Revenue, 1787, File No.23, Letter dt. 14th March, 1786.
79 Ibid
80 Ibid
81 Ibid
the promotion of commercial intercourse between the two
countries. The Directors hoped that he would be in a
position "to conciliate the inhabitants of these
mountainous countries, hitherto not much explored and
eventually, without any injustice, be the means of
increasing our revenue."\textsuperscript{82}

Ballie, however, failed to achieve any positive
result owing to the disturbances in Assam\textsuperscript{83} which
ultimately led to his appointment at Goalpara. These
disturbances which continued for more than three decades
changed the whole character of the relations between the
East India Company and Assam. In order to quell the
internal disturbances, the King and his officers made
repeated applications to the Company for assistance.
These requests eventually led to Captain Welsh's
expedition in 1792 which saw a definite shift in the
relations. The hitherto purely commercial motive
gradually began to assume a political form.

In spite of his military pre-occupations, Captain
Welsh did not forget the commercial object of his
deputation to Assam. The East India Company was primarily
a commercial concern, and Lord Cornwallis had instructed
Welsh to enquire into the economic prospects of the
region. In fact one of the main motives which had led the
British to consider favourably Gaurinath's appeal for
assistance was the prospect of commercial relations
between Assam and Bengal.\textsuperscript{84} The Governor General had

\textsuperscript{82} ibid
\textsuperscript{83} ibid
\textsuperscript{84} B.P.C., 22 February 1792, No.13.
admitted later that with the restoration of internal peace, he had hoped "to establish a free commercial intercourse that might be beneficial to Assam and the Company's province." Welsh had written back to Cornwallis of his confidence that with restoration of peace and order in Assam "a new source of wealth and riches must flow to the Company." He further informed Cornwallis that he hoped that the Company would then be able to sell 100,000 pounds of salt in Assam.

On 28th February 1793, an Anglo-Ahom Commercial Treaty was arrived at with the object of establishing "a reciprocal and entire liberty of commerce between the subjects of Bengal and Assam for all singular goods and merchandizes." By the terms of the agreement two customs outposts were to be set up at Kandahar Chokey and Gauhati. The agents at the former place would collect the duties on all imports into and exports from the territory west of Gauhati. The customs outpost at Gauhati was responsible for the collection of duties for the region eastwards as far as Nowgong. The remuneration of the agents was fixed at 12% on their collections. No European merchant or adventurer would be allowed permanent residence in Assam without the permission of the English Government and the Ahom Government.

In 1793 the office of Judge and Magistrate was separated from that of Collector and the relations with

86 B.P.C., 17 December 1972, No.47.
87 ibid, 11 March 1793, No.15.
Assam were conducted by a new officer. On behalf of the Assam Government, the Barphukan, stationed at Gauhati, was in charge. The Ahoms realised that harmony and goodwill between the two states was essential for a smooth commercial intercourse. Hence, the Bar-phukan and Duaria Baruas were selected with great care and much depended on their discretion and judgement.

Captain Welsh's expedition and the consequent Anglo-Ahom treaty was a landmark in the Company's changing relations with Assam. The recall of Welsh resulted in a deteriorating political condition of the Kingdom which eventually led to the Anglo-Burmese War in 1824 and the subsequent annexation of the kingdom by the British. This had very important far-reaching consequences.

The primary concern of the East India Company was commercial gain. Therefore, from the outset, the Company set about extending their trade into the interior of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Charter of 1833, which marked the ascendency of industrial interests over the mercantile interests, had its full impact on the settlement of newly conquered Assam. For the first time, Europeans were allowed to hold land outside the Presidency towns on a long term lease or with free-hold rights. This paved the way for the setting up of a new industrial economy.

89 The Commissioner of Cooch Behar, a tributary state of the North-Eastern Frontier of Rungpur, remained occasionally in charge of the Company's relations with Assam.

90 Sir John Shore, who succeeded Lord Cornwallis, followed a policy of strict neutrality and non-interference.
DE- INDUSTRIALISATION

The British colonial rule inaugurated a process of de-industrialisation in India, a process in which the traditional Indian industries suffered so greatly that most of these either decayed beyond recovery or were on the road to ultimate ruin. This de-industrialisation was the result of a conscious policy of the British to extract the raw materials from India in order to feed the growing industries in England and to promote the market for English goods in India. The role of the East India Company was merely that of an agent for the implementation of an economic policy formulated in England.

Assam was no exception to this general process. In her case, the additional factors which augmented the deindustrialisation process included the internal disorders prevailing in the kingdom and the Burmese occupation which preceded British occupation. The first task by the British after the annexation of the kingdom was to revive the efficiency of the system of Government in order to create an atmosphere conducive to the growth of trade and commerce. The Burmese reign of terror had totally disrupted and dislocated the normal life of the people. Commenting on the situation Lt. Col. Francis Jenkins wrote:

91 One of the main factors of internal chaos had been the challenge of the Hoamarias, a socio-religious sect.

When we assumed the charge of Assam nothing could possibly be more unpromising than the state of the country. The small remnant of the people had been so harassed and oppressed by long civil and internal wars.... that they had almost given up cultivation, and lived on jungle roots and plants, and famine and pestilence carried off thousands that had escaped the sword and captivity.

In such a situation, the Assamese had looked upon the advent of the British as a god-send. Voicing these feelings, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan wrote:93

Our countrymen hailed the day on which British supremacy was proclaimed in the Province of Assam, and entertained sanguine expectations of peace and happiness from the rule of Britain.

The Company was fully aware of this sentiment of acceptance by the Assamese people and they exploited it to their maximum benefit while reconstructing the administration.

For centuries, Assam's agricultural economy had had a leavening of manufactures. However, within a few years, British policy, capital, skill and enterprise brought about such a commercial revolution in the province that a new economy completely displaced the old one, and bound her economy to the heels of the British economy 94. As a result, Assam lost not only her self-sufficiency but also her external markets. The balance of trade totally shifted in favour of the East India Company. Once an exporter of finished products, she soon became a large importer of foreign manufactures. In an all-India context, R.C.Dutt has commented that this displacement of Indian

93 ibid, Appendix J.

manufactures by foreign products formed "one of the saddest chapters in the history of British India" for it indicated that the "sources of wealth in India have been narrowed" and the livelihood of the people had been made more precarious. From the outset, the British aimed at discovering ways and means of suppressing native handicrafts and replacing them with British goods. One important method of achieving this was the discriminatory customs duties which narrowed the English market for Indian goods through prohibitions and extra-high tariffs. At the same time, the Indian market was opened up for British manufacturers by the imposition of Free Trade in India.

The general British attitude was similar to that expressed by Doyle and Parkins, two officers of the Department of Customs in India. They wrote:

As in all semi-barbarous countries, the manufacturing industry of India will decline in proportion as its intercourse with a civilised manufacturing country increases, and the attention of the people will rather be turned to the improvement of raw produce exchangeable for the manufactured goods of England.

The Company felt that in order to meet their growing expenses, the wisest plan would be to encourage the increase of capital investment in India, Channelising it "to promote the cheapest cultivation of Indian produce." Therefore, the Company systematically set about implementing this policy.

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In Assam, one Industry which suffered tremendously as a consequence of British policy was the cotton industry. Initially, however, manufactured English cotton articles met with certain obstacles in Assam. The reasons for this were many. The dress of the Assamese women, which consisted of the mekhela, chadar, riha and knania kapor were peculiar to the region and not initially manufactured outside the state; secondly, silk competed very largely with cotton in supplying the wearing apparel of the people, especially of the high classes; thirdly, weaving in Assam was not confined to any particular caste but was part of every woman's household duties; and fourthly, the sizing of English cotton goods and the pressure applied to cloth was said to make it less durable than home-made cloth. Therefore, the efforts of the British to put wedges in the local handloom industry were delayed. Even as late as 1897, Samman wrote that among the Assamese weaving was an important occupation and that it would "probably be long before these are altogether superseded by imported fabrics." In course of time, however, stress of competition and the advancement of new ideas slowly broke down barriers and both the Assamese male and female population began to use the cheaper Manchester cloth. As rapid advances were made in improvement and invention of machinery, British manufacturers were able to push their products in the


103 ibid, p 1.
local piecegoods. The following table shows the import of cotton, both European and Indian, into the Brahmaputra Valley:

**IMPORTED COTTON**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>EUROPEAN YARN (CWT)</th>
<th>INDIAN YARN GOODS (IN Rs.)</th>
<th>EUROPEAN PIECE GOODS (IN Rs.)</th>
<th>INDIAN PIECE GOODS (IN Rs.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>3925</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>43,07,603</td>
<td>45,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>4868</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>46,63,274</td>
<td>19,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>4528</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53,56,010</td>
<td>26,064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>4088</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>47,33,477</td>
<td>68,372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>9467</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>82,81,020</td>
<td>61,040</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above figures reveal the tremendous influx of imported cotton into Assam during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1885, the import of cotton yarn and piecegoods almost doubled over that of the previous year. This was in conformity with the general policy of the East India Company whereby the local industries were deindustrialised to make way for British manufactured goods. At the same time, almost the entire quantity of the raw material was taken out of the province. Hence Assam, which was at one time self-sufficient in cotton products, had now to resort to importing yarn even to meet her own needs.

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104 Compiled on the basis of information in H.Z. Darrah, *Cotton in Assam, 1885*. 

requirements. The following table gives an idea of the quantity of imported cotton yarn into the Brahmaputra Valley:

**IMPORT OF COTTON YARN INTO THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AVERAGE 1881-1890 (IN MAUNDS)</th>
<th>AVERAGE 1891-1905 (IN MAUNDS)</th>
<th>1906-1907 (IN MAUNDS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7,996</td>
<td>19,020</td>
<td>20,485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For about 70% of the cotton fabrics woven in Assam, the coarse cotton was used. It was in the production of such coarse materials that home spun thread or yarn from Indian mills competed with foreign yarn. All the finer cotton yarn was imported from Europe.

In reply to a circular issued by the Board of Revenue to all Commissioners to submit reports on the extent of the cotton crop, the Commissioner of Revenue, Assam filed the following report:

**EXTENT OF COTTON CULTIVATION IN ASSAM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>ACRES CULTIVATED</th>
<th>OUT-TURN (MAUNDS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1863-64</td>
<td>1864-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KAMRUP</td>
<td>3,250</td>
<td>4,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARRANG</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOWGONG</td>
<td>7,000</td>
<td>8,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIBSAGAR</td>
<td>1,350</td>
<td>1,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAKHIMPUR</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>12,871</td>
<td>16,078</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- 106 *ibid.*, p 4.
The average produce of cleaned cotton per acre was estimated at 150 lbs. The proportion of cleaned to uncleaned cotton was in the ratio of 2 to 5. This proved that Assam cotton gave both a larger out-turn per acre and a larger proportion of fibre to seed when compared to the cotton from other parts of India.

Most of the cotton was exported in an unginned state to England through Chittagong and Calcutta.

The following table shows the export of raw cotton from Assam between 1881 and 1885. It is important to note here that the figures given below represent the quantity that was registered. A large quantity of cotton went out unregistered.

**EXPORT OF RAW COTTON FROM ASSAM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>WEIGHT IN MAUNDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>20,027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>18,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>14,199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>17,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>20,277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>90,038</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above figures confirm the view of A.E. Campbell, Deputy Commissioner of Revenue, Nowgong, that "the

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109 *ibid*.
110 *ibid.*, p 61.
111 *ibid*.
quantity of cotton exported is yearly increasing". One very important reason for such a rapid increase in the export was that almost all the varieties of Assam cotton had short, coarse staples which were in great demand in Europe for mixing with wool. The only other country which produced these varieties was China. Hence it was important for England to have a source under her exclusive control. The manufacturers in England valued the article as it could be blended with wool or endi to make a variety of products like suitings, dress materials and blankets. These were assured a ready market in Assam, especially among the tea garden labourers. The Company also needed Assam cotton to trade with China. However, its market in China was rather uncertain and varied according to the production of cotton in China.

All the weaving in Assam was done by hand. Naturally, therefore, "the cheapest of labour could not compete either in quality or quantity with Lancashire mules or throstles". Finding no market for their goods, the local people gradually gave up the pursuit. Only in those places where communication was difficult did the local industry survive.

One other aspect of this industry deserves attention. In the earlier days, the gold and silver wires used for embroidery were made within the province by a class of workmen called Gunakati, but the import of gold

114 ibid.,
115 ibid., pp 7 - 8.
and silver wires from Europe completely extinguished that industry as well 119.

The situation had deteriorated to such an extent that even the Board of Trade admitted, 120

Were the Indian weavers able to readily procure thread of suitable quality at the European rates or even at the Indian market rates of such thread, they would maintain a successful competition with imported cotton goods from Europe.

The increasing demand for raw cotton led to a series of unsuccessful experiments to introduce superior varieties of cotton in Assam 121. Eventually it was decided that "the wisest course would be to develop and improve our own short stapled hill cotton for which there is growing demand in Europe and also in other parts of India." 122 The unequal nature of the competition between British fabrics and locally made cloth led to the ultimate ruin of this once flourishing industry 123. Thus in a deliberate and systematic manner, the British had throttled the cotton industry of Assam.

Closely related to the cotton industry was the silk industry of Assam. Napoleon's Continental System had prohibited the entry of British goods into France. However, he was unable to manoeuvre the commerce like his

122 ibid.
123 In this context, an interesting comment was made by Charles Majorbanks in 1830 on the China trade when he compared it to the Indian trade. He said, "We do not possess the same power over China. We may exclude their manufacture by high duties, but we cannot compel the Chinese to receive ours on our own terms". Quoted in Sinha. Op.cit., p 11.
army, and openings presented themselves through which considerable supplies found their way in. There were almost a hundred thousand smugglers operating along his extensive frontier 124. On the other hand, Italy was more completely subject to Napoleon's decrees and the silk of Italy was withheld from the British market very effectively 125. Consequently the demand for Indian silk increased rapidly. Assam silk, especially eri and muga, played a significant role in the Company's export of silk into England. In 1884 Stack wrote:

Looking simply at their commercial potentialities, these three species of silkwork (eri, pat and muga) may at once be reduced to two by striking off the mulberry worm (pat) on account alike of the costliness of the silk, the scantiness of the present supply and the difficulty of extending its cultivation. The two remaining species present a much more hopeful enterprise. The eri is more promising of the two, both because it is cheaper and more abundant, and also because being reared indoors its cultivation does not entail that troublesome necessity of watching by day and night which is imposed upon the muga breeder. The muga, indeed, yields a finer silk, but as it is only in the roughest shape that Assam silk can hope to become an article of demand in the English market, the difference of quality will perhaps prove to be a matter of secondary importance.

Darrah was of the opinion that eri silk had the greatest potential and that it "would one day form one of the most important staples of Assam" 127. He further felt

124 ibid, p 2.
125 ibid.
127 H.Z. Darrah, Note on Eri Silk.
that since the silk required no skill in handling, it was difficult to imagine a combination of circumstances which promised greater success for any other commodity.128

There were two forms in which a silk trade was conceived between Assam and England. First, the export of thread, and secondly, the export of cocoons. Of the two, the latter was preferred because indigenous reeling was in a fairly crude form and was "regarded by English manufacturers as unfit for employment for any purpose".129 Hence, it was believed that a profitable trade could be set up from the export of cocoons. The manufacture of silk pluses and similar fabrics out of waste cocoons imported from India and China was already a flourishing branch of the silk industry in England 130.

So far China had been the principal source of supply of silk,131 which meant that the English manufacturers were largely dependent on the Chinese suppliers. The general belief gained ground that if an alternative source could be found, there was no reason why it should not be exploited. The prospect that Assam could "contribute large quantities of an article which is produced with so much ease in the Valley of the Brahmaputra" roused the interest of many.132

Thus with the object of capturing a portion of the growing demand for silk in England, various experiments

128 ibid
130 ibid
were made in different parts of Assam since 1834 to grow *eri* and *muga* on a large scale. As early as 1831 David Scott had written to the Government that he felt that of all the commodities available in Assam, silk was the most profitable. It was one produce that did not necessarily require continued European supervision. Moreover, the Assamese were universally acquainted with the preparation of the article unlike in other states where production was confined to a particular class. 133 Under the circumstances he felt that many of the inhabitants would engage in the preparation of silk if it could be shown to be highly profitable. 134 Moreover, the export of raw silk would largely enhance the revenue. 135

Campbell, who was in charge of one of the most extensive experiments, remarked that the only way of successfully developing the industry and embarking a large capital in it was to work on a system analogous to the indigo advances and getting the villages over large tracts of country to undertake the cultivation in small patches so as to avoid the fearful result of epidemic," which was an important deterrent to silk cultivation in Assam." 136 In 1870-71 a survey was conducted to determine the actual amount of land under sum cultivation. All Deputy Commissioners were instructed to submit the reports for

133 F.P.C., 7 May 1830, No.52.
134 *ibid.*
135 F.P.C., 29 Oct. 1830, No.36.
their districts to the Commissioner's office. The following table has been prepared based on these reports:

**STATISTICS OF SILK CULTIVATION IN THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>AREA (IN BIGHAS)</th>
<th>REVENUE (IN RS.)</th>
<th>NUMBER EMPLOYED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KAMRUP</td>
<td>4,960</td>
<td>2,480</td>
<td>19,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARRANG</td>
<td>1,100</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOWGONG</td>
<td>1,826</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>1,869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIBSAGAR</td>
<td>47,722</td>
<td>23,858</td>
<td>21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAKHIMPUR</td>
<td>2,793</td>
<td>1,397</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>58,401</strong></td>
<td><strong>29,273</strong></td>
<td><strong>46,839</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The price of muga yarn, on an average, was Rs.8 per seer and that of cloth around Rs.2 per yard. The major portion of the muga and pat produce was consumed locally and only around 20% of it was exported. Most of the muga yarn that was exported went to Bombay, Dacca and Calcutta and then to the Persian Gulf via these ports.

Letter No.447 C, 2 Nov.1871 from D.C. Kamrup.
No.800, 24 Nov. 1871 from D.C. Darrang.
No.323, 8 Jan.1872 from D.C. Nowgong.
No.1063, 1 Dec. 1871 from D.C. Sibsagar.
No.795, 20 Feb. 1872 from D.C. Lakhimpur.

138 ibid


The *endi* on the other hand was mostly exported and only around 20% retained for local consumption. Endi fabrics found a ready market in Australia and for some time trade in *endi* was very brisk. Unlike *muga* and *pat*, *endi* was used by both Europeans and well-to-do Indians for making suits. As such the material was largely in demand. The following table shows the increase in the value of silk, raw and piece, that was exported from Assam.

**EXPORT OF SILK FROM ASSAM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Value (in Rupees)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882-83</td>
<td>2,04,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-98</td>
<td>3,66,310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Trade Report of the province for 1906-07 shows that altogether 643 maunds of raw silk were exported from the Brahmaputra Valley. It is significant to note here that the report does not show any export of silk piece goods at the same time. Stack reported that the *endi* cocoon had been successfully reeled in Italy and believed that if the method could be followed in Assam, the produce could be sold at a much cheaper rate.

Thus it can be seen that within a few years of the occupation of Assam by the British, the local silk industry suffered a severe setback. The reasons were apparent. In the first place, the large portion of the coarse material which sold from Rs.6 to Rs.12 per seer were mostly bought by the hill people.
available raw silk was diverted out of the state. Secondly, although silk was locally produced and worn to a certain extent, it was gradually ousted by the imported cotton goods which were cheaper and easier to obtain. Allen commented that "in spite of the high price at present obtainable for silk thread, the villagers find that it pays them better to grow produce for the market than to rear broods of silkworm." Moreover, the cheaper silk material from other parts of India and the imported fabrics from foreign countries soon supplanted the local silk in the markets. Thus, like the cotton industry, the indigenous silk industry was also gradually but deliberately stamped out.

Silk and cotton were two major industries to be affected by the British policy of de-industrialisation. A few smaller industries also suffered from the brunt of colonial exploitation. Of these mention may be made of the brass, copper, bell metal, pottery and earthenware crafts along with production of sugar and mustard oil. In the case of the metal handicrafts, the local products, which were largely dependent on raw materials imported from England, gradually declined giving way to imported tin vessels and enamelware. Thus the once flourishing centres of Sarthebari, Hajo, Gauhati and Titabar, lost their importance in course of time. Clay pottery similarly was replaced by imported Chinaware. Although earthenware had considerable demand among the tea garden labourers,

148 B.C. Allen, Monograph on the silk cloths of Assam, 1899.
149 Like the Benaras endi, Bhagalpur bafta and Bishnupur garvashuti.
151 ibid
the local potters failed to take advantage of the demand and the vacuum was filled up by imports from East Bengal or by the products manufactured by immigrants.152

The other industries mentioned above suffered a similar fate. The sugar industry of Assam was largely linked with the Indian sugar industry as a whole. When the East India Company first began to export the fine quality crystallised sugar, transactions were originally confined to Bengal through favourable tariffs. However, when Britain started acquiring sugar from the West Indies, an import duty was imposed on Bengal sugar at such a high rate that the Indian produce was no longer profitable.153

In the meanwhile, several large sugar mills had been established in Britain which naturally created a demand for raw sugar. So once again, in the typical colonial economic pattern, Assam was brought into the scene. The cultivation of sugarcane in Assam had been carried out in small patches, the area of the field being determined by the amount of labour at the command of the cultivator. The manufacture of jaggery or gur was the only industry connected with sugarcane. The local produce was sufficient to meet the local demand and as such no sugar was imported. However, the situation rapidly changed in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Government encouraged the cultivation of sugarcane "especially in the backward tracts" and exported almost the entire quantity produced, in a raw state, to be refined in the British Mills.154 By 1904-05 imports of sugar into India had


swollen from 15,23,890 (average from 1882-92) to nearly 79,00,000 cwt. This all India phenomenon was also reflected in Assam. The following figures show the annual import of sugar into the Brahmaputra Valley:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RAW SUGAR (MPS)</th>
<th>REFINED SUGAR (MPS)</th>
<th>TOTAL (MPS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>101,409</td>
<td>80,514</td>
<td>1,81,923</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The different classes of refined sugar imported into Assam were (i) country sugar which came from U.P. and Bihar; (ii) foreign sugar imported through Calcutta; (iii) date sugar from Bengal; and (iv) Cossipore sugar from Calcutta. It is important to note here that 80% of the imports consisted of foreign sugar. 156

The growing of mustard seed suffered the same fate as that of sugar. In earlier times, the production of mustard oil was not only sufficient to meet the local demands, but it was also exported through Bengal in considerable quantities. By the middle of the nineteenth century a distinctive change had occurred in the trade pattern of this product. The area under mustard cultivation in Assam was nearly 15,000 acres and the average out-turn 4 cwt per acre. Nevertheless trade reports reveal that Assam had to import large quantities

155 ibid, p 66.
156 ibid
of mustard oil. This was because the bulk of the seeds were sent out of the province to be milled elsewhere. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were only seven oil mills in Assam.\textsuperscript{157}

The above account clearly shows, how in a short span of half a century, the economy of Assam was totally torn apart. She lost her autonomy and self sufficiency. Her economy, along with the rest of India, was gradually integrated into the world of modern capitalism, though in a subordinate colonial position. The significant fact is the ease with which she capitulated without any resistance. Edward Gait ascribes this to the absence of occupational sub-castes among the Assamese. He believed that it was because of this that the imported articles could supplant the indigenous crafts so easily.\textsuperscript{158} This may have augmented the process to a certain extent. However, it cannot be regarded as the sole or even the main cause. The case of Assam was merely an extension of the process of the colonial integration of India as a whole. This pattern inevitably led to the underdevelopment of India, or "the development of underdevelopment" in the words of Andre Gunder Frank.\textsuperscript{159} The official report on the industries of Assam for 1907-08 reported that "it was no exaggeration to say that Assam has once more been thrown back to the agricultural stage of material

\textsuperscript{157} Reports on the River-Borne Trade of Assam 1881-82 to 1905; Reports on the Rail and River Borne Trade of Assam 1889-90 to 1905.

\textsuperscript{158} E. Gait, Notes on some Industries of Assam from 1884-95, p 124.

\textsuperscript{159} Cited in Bipan Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, p 3.
civilisation." The balance of trade was totally reversed and the major portion of the exports of the province was in the form of raw materials. The following table gives an idea of the transformation that occurred in the economy of Assam by the end of the nineteenth century.

**EXPORTS AND IMPORTS OF ASSAM 1890**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPORTS</th>
<th>EXPORTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article</td>
<td>Value (Rs. in lakhs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Piece goods</td>
<td>493.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Twist &amp; Yarn</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice not in husk</td>
<td>273.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice in husk</td>
<td>100.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron &amp; Steel</td>
<td>140.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar (Refined)</td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar (Unrefined)</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustard oil &amp; Rape oil</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grain &amp; Pulse</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betel Nuts</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat Flour</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chillies</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The aim of British rule was to derive the maximum amount of profit from Assam while at the same time incurring the minimum possible expenditure. Hence, they were reluctant to set up the necessary infrastructure. The local Assamese were either content to continue with their


161 Complied from information in Reports on Industries of Assam and Bengal 1890 and 1907-08.
agricultural pursuits or to take up the few Government jobs that were offered. Owing to the sparseness of the population and the existence of vast tracts of fertile land, the urge to find out new openings was not there. As a consequence, the vacuum was filled by the Marwari middleman who "like an octopus, is omnipresent, and has filled up all the profitable avenues of trade and commerce throughout Assam" 162

As Britain systematically converted Assam into a raw material producing hinterland, the ryots were compelled to depend more and more on agriculture. With the decline of the indigenous industries, they lost the subsidiary income which they had formerly earned when they were able to combine industry with their agricultural pursuits. Under such circumstances, the condition of the common man deteriorated considerably. Tied as she was to the heel of Britain's economy, Assam could no longer hope to regain her self-sufficiency. The basic fact was that the same social, political and economic process that produced industrial development and cultural and social progress in Britain, the metropolis, also produced and then maintained economic underdevelopment in India, the colony. 163 In Assam this process became all the more apparent with the establishment of the tea, coal and oil industries.