CHAPTER – V

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE MUGHAL CONTACT ON ASSAM

The Mughals no doubt contributed a lot to the economic life of medieval Assam. Since time immemorial, the economy of Assam was largely based on agriculture. Shihab-ud-din Talish mentioned about the fertility of the soil in Assam in these words, “From Kaliabor to Gargoan houses and orchards full of fruit trees stretch in an unbroken line. Many varieties of sweet scented wild and garden flowers bloom here, and from the rear of the bamboo groves up to the foot of the hills, there are cultivated field and gardens”.1
Amalendu Guha also mentioned that nearly the entire Assamese population were directly or indirectly associated with agriculture. Local traditions maintained that the ‘Mariyas’ being the earliest group of Muslims to have settled in the Eastern Brahmaputra were absolutely ignorant of the system of agriculture prevalent in the region nevertheless their contact with the Assamese people made them attracted towards agriculture. However, Azan Pir in one of his Zikirs mentioned that the Assamese Muslims delighted in agriculture rather than in the culture and knowledge of religion.\(^2\) This goes to prove the fact that with the passage of time the Muslims of Assam became adept in the indigenous system of agriculture, as a consequence of local influences on them. The references to various agricultural terms in the Zikirs and Zaris of Assam also pointed out that agriculture became the means of livelihood of the Muslim settlers in the country. During the period under study there existed what is known as the ‘Paik’ or ‘Khel’ system. The Assamese chronicles mentioned about the establishment of new villages by the Ahom king Pratap Singha in
which he settled Muslim families, thereby showing that Muslim farmers contributed as a ‘Paik’ to the agricultural production in the region. Having adapted themselves to the land in which they were settled they at the same time made agriculture their profession and became well versed in the cultivation of different types of crops, vegetables and fruits and therefore contributed a lot to the agricultural production in Assam. According to Mr. Higgins the former deputy commissioner of Nagaon, the Muslims were more adept in cultivation than the indigenous people and their advent into the region generated some sort of a competitive spirit among the locals.

The contact of the Mughals with Assam also greatly affected the land revenue administration of the country. So far there existed very little information about the revenue system of the Ahoms. Shihabuddin Talish mentioned that the people did not pay agricultural tax but in every family some members would render service to the Raja. This was in a way a system of forced labour
known as the ‘Paik’ or ‘Khel’ system. ⁶ Amalendu Guha maintained that the word ‘Khel’ came from the Arabic–Persian word ‘Kheil’ which means foot soldiers. ⁷ Nevertheless with the coming of the Muslims, this system of revenue administration gradually disappeared. The Mughal occupation of Kamrup brought Kamrup Kamata which extended up to Koch Hajo under the rule of Sultan Hussain Shah of Bengal who thoroughly reorganised the system of revenue administration in the region and introduced his own system of land measurement and survey and land revenue collection in cash which was then prevalent in Northern India. ⁸

The Assamese chronicles mentioned that before the rule of Sultan Hussain Shah, the Bhuyans or the feudal lords ruled in different parts of Assam. However, with the conquest of Kamrup and Koch Hajo by the Mughals we have the introduction of the Mughal revenue administration. The Bhuyans possessed great military strength and exercised considerable influence on the indigenous people. The Assamese chronicles mentioned that
emperor Alauddin Khilji faced severe threats from the Bhuyans therefore he introduced a new system of administration whereby he replaced the Bhuyans by state revenue officers and he was also credited with being the first Muslim emperor to introduce the system of land survey and land measurement. However this Mughal rule over Kamrup was very short lived for in 1682 it came to be occupied by the Ahoms. However, the Ahoms finding the Mughal revenue system more feasible were said to have retained large elements of the Mughal system in their revenue administration.

From the Kamrupar Buranji we learnt that Viswa Singha the Koch prince who was nominated as a vassal ruler of Kamrup by the Ahoms, tried to increase his military strength by taking a census of his subjects and thereby recruiting all the able bodied men as Paiks or foot soldiers under several officers appointed by him such as ‘Thakurias’, having twenty men under them ‘Saikias’ having over a hundred men, ‘Hazaris’ having over a thousand and ‘Umras’ and
Nawabs’. Accordingly the offices of the heads of revenue administration such as ‘Thakuriya’, ‘Chaudhury’, ‘Talukdar’ ‘Patwari’, ‘Gaon’ Kakati’, were retained by the Ahoms.11

In a way we may say that the revenue administration of Viswa Singha was in a way similar to the Mughal Mansabdari system and the existence, of certain kinds of lands called ‘Mahals’ and ‘Chanua’ suggested that Viswa Singha must have created lands in the form of Mughal Iqtas which he allotted to his officials. Viswa Singha was seen to have been deeply influenced by the Mughal system for we find that an Assamese poet Durgavara Kayastha a contemporary of Viswa Singha was patronized by one Bahubala whom the poet described as a Siqdar.12

The Ahoms also retained the system of paying revenue in cash instead of exacting forced labour as was prevalent in upper Assam, this system was said to have prevailed till the period of British rule for as Hamilton maintained in the early parts of the
19th century the peasant of Kamrup had to pay Rs. 2 each as plough tax annually and half a rupee as hoe tax.\textsuperscript{13}

The Mughals as mentioned earlier introduced their own system of land measurement and land survey in Kamrup. The unit of land measurement introduced by Sikandar Lodhi known as ‘Gaj’ which is equivalent to one metre is widely used till the present day.\textsuperscript{14} The earlier mode of measuring or assessing the land in terms of the quantity of produced, by the people of Assam gradually paled into insignificance and the Mughal system of land measurement came to be introduced and gained popularity in Assam. The Satsari Assam Buranji mentioned that during the reign of Pratap Singha their prevailed the system of land survey and land measurement where the standard unit of measurement comprised of bamboo poles measuring about more than 11 feet long which was fitted with iron rings at the end.\textsuperscript{15} This was very much in line with the system of land measurement which prevailed under Sher Shah and Akbar.
The Kings of Kamarupa were found to have been deeply influenced by the system of classification of land into three categories namely good, middle and bad which was prevalent under the Mughals, for the rulers of Kamarupa were found to have adopted a system of land survey whereby they have classified lands into Ksetra (arable land), Khila (waste land), Vastu (building sites) Apa Kristabhumi (inferior land). This to a great extent confirm the resemblance of the Ahom system with the land system of the Mughals. Ibrahim Karori also mentioned that during the reign of Jahangir, land survey was carried out in Kamrup. Meanwhile the Buranjis mentioned that King Pratap Singha undertook a regular survey of land in upper Assam with the help of surveyors or Kakatis. King Chakradhvaj Singha was also said to have undertook a land survey along with a census of the population of the area. This system of land survey was exercised by Gadadhar Singha whereby the reports were recorded by him known as ‘Perakagaj’ or ‘Perakakat’, this survey came to be completed only during the reign of his successor Pramatta Singha.
Thus the Mughal contact on Assam we can say generated several changes in the agricultural set up of the country. However, besides the contributions made by the Mughal in the realm of agriculture nevertheless their contribution is also seen in the development of several crafts and industries as well as in the flourishing of trade and commerce in the region.

The art of weaving clothes was a known and common practice in Assam and one finds the womenfolk belonging to different classes very well versed in this practice. The Buranjis mentioned that even Phuleswari the Queen of Siva Singha was found patronising the art of weaving whereby she established a training center for Assamese women at Rangpur. The Musalmans in Assam were employed in large numbers in the guilds of weavers most notable among these guilds were the ‘Tantis’ and ‘Jolas’. The latter was said to have comprised of the Muslim migrants who constituted Muslim villages popularly known as Jola Gariya Gaon.
found in Kamrup, Nagaon, Sibsagar and Jorhat. The period of Rudra Singha witnessed an emphasis given to Mughal costumes and dresses and during this period we find that there was large scale importation of Muslim tailors and weavers into Assam and historians like Lila Gogoi believed that it was from this time onwards that Assamese women started weaving clothes in imitation to the style of the Muslim weavers. According to B.K. Barua the Assamese Muslim women were expert in making dresses called Phul-bocha and Dahi Bata worn by women. The Assamese people are said to have been quite expert in the use of needles both big and small and this shows their knowledge of sewing of clothes. Nevertheless tailoring as a profession was largely a contribution of the Muslims notable among the Muslim, tailors who came to Assam was Chand Khan popularly known as Chandsai who was a tailor by profession and at the same time a disciple of Sankaradeva. The Satsari Assam Buranji mentioned about the introduction of certain units of measurement of cloth such as ‘Gaj’, a Persian word meaning ‘Yard’, ‘Gira’ which means one-sixteenth of a yard and
‘Jaib’ or ‘Jeb’ which stands for pocket. Besides this there also existed a class of Assamese Musalmans called Khalifas whose only means of livelihood was from tailoring.\textsuperscript{23}

The use of the needles for the purpose of embroidery was brought to Assam with the coming of the Muslims, for even today Hindu weavers of Assam are more familiar with the use of the loom for the purpose of weaving rather than the use of needles. The Muslims being well versed in the art of embroidery were said to have introduced the use of Guna or embroidery materials in decorating garments.\textsuperscript{24} Chronicles mentioned that during the reign of Rudra Singha Muslim artisans known as ‘Guna Katiyas’ were employed from Mughal India for the purpose of embroidering clothes by the use of gold and silver threads. Hence in course of time, embroidery develop into an art in Assam. Notable among such embroidered clothes to have gain popularity in Assam is the ‘Kingkhab’ commonly used by the ladies of Assam. At the same time Assamese chronicles mentioned the existence of the guilds of
weavers which produced clothes for the royalty whereby the king would then grant the weavers 2 puras of revenue free lands.

The Mughals were seen to have made their impact felt in the various crafts of Assam. A very good instance is seen in the wood carving industry. Wood carving industry as an art was very much prevalent in Assam since early times. Nevertheless it seems to have reached its highest point during the medieval period. Shihabuddin Talish the Persian chronicler of Mir Jumla has mentioned about the excellence of wood carving in Assam while describing about the wooden palace at Gargaon. Assamese chronicles also mentioned about the importation of Muslim artisans who also comprised of carpenters and masons and they were incorporated into a guild of masons known as the ‘Khanikar Khel’ placed under the charge of a Khanikar Baruah. The main function of this department was the construction of boats, agricultural implements, posts, beams, doors of houses and other furniture items. Influences of Islamic art and architecture can be traced in the buildings and temples of Assam,
for instance, the carved doors and windows, the geometrical
designs, the domes and minarets. These influences were also seen
in the Kamakhya Temple which was constructed during the 16th
century by the Koch king. King Rudra Singha is also said to have
imported Muslim artisans for the construction of Hawalighar or airy
castle, Talatal Ghar and the Temple of Ranganath in Sibsagar.28

A similar influence of the Mughals could also be seen in the
realm of Assam’s ivory industry. Ivory works were no doubt
prevalent in Assam since time immemorial. Nevertheless during
the medieval period most of the ivory workers were Mussalmans.
As mentioned earlier Muslim artisans were imported in large
numbers into Assam and were constituted into a guild known as
‘Khanikar Khel’ which also included a guild of ivory workers
called Baktar Khanikar.29 J. Donald in his work ‘Ivory Carvings of
Assam’ mentioned that the Muslim ivory workers were required to
supply carved ivory items to the royalty for which in exchange
revenue free lands were granted to them.30 The important centers of
ivory works in Assam were Barpeta, Jorhat and Sylhet and J.
Donald has mentioned about Fiznur Mussalman as being one of the
famous ivory carver of Jorhat in Assam. Many scholars believed
that the various articles made of ivory during the period of Ahom
rule in Assam comprised of ‘Gachora’ and ‘Kakai’ a comb like
implement ‘Phani’ or stands of furniture, pots, chandeliers, chests,
dice, weaving implements, household items and many other.
Export of Assam’s ivory works to other parts of Mughal India was
said to have been facilitated from the Hadri Choki Check post
nevertheless after the decline of Mughal rule and with the coming
of the British, the ivory works were no longer patronised and hence
gradually the ivory industry in Assam began to decline.

Prior to the 17th century the use of shoes or footwear was
unknown to Assam. King Rudra Singha was credited to have
introduced the use of footwear or shoes for Ahom autocracy. At the
same time he also imported from Mughal India families of shoe
makers called 'Muchiyars'\textsuperscript{31} who remained in Rangpur till it was occupied by the British.

The Bell metal industry is no doubt quite ancient in Assam. The 'Mariyas' according to E.A. Gait were the section of Muslim engaged in bell metal works. Nevertheless his explanation was not accepted much since the artisans producing articles of bell metal were invariably called 'Kahars' which was derived from the Assamese term 'Kah' which means bell metal.\textsuperscript{32} During the period of Ahom rule, bell metals were made by mixing copper and another alloy namely tin known as 'Rang'. The articles of bell metal comprised a 'banbati' or ornamental cup furnished with a stand, 'Kahi' or a rice dish, 'Banbora Kahi' a dish furnished with a stand, 'Bati' or a cup for retaining or holding curry, 'Lota Ghati' or a water jug and many others. Important centres of bell metal works were Sarthebari in Kamrup and Titabari in Eastern Assam.\textsuperscript{33}
Similarly the medieval period in Assam witnessed the importation of Muslim brass workers into Assam. The Assamese chronicles mentioned that the war captives captured during the period of Dihingia Raja were engaged into the manufacture of brasswares. This group of Muslims who undertook this job were the Mariyas. Among the articles produced by the Mariyas the most popular were, water jug or ‘Lota’, Bhogjara, ‘Badna’ etc., an implement for grounding Pan and betel nuts called ‘Khundana’, ‘Sarai’ or a tray with stands for meals known as ‘Bera Kanhis’, small plates with cover called ‘Dhunari’, a large drum called a ‘Daba’, ‘Dhunari’ or a stand used for burning incense sticks. These articles were used as household items. Nevertheless articles of brass were also known to have been produced by the Mariyas for religious and ceremonial purposes. Chronicles mentioned that the Mariyas in Kamrup manufactured brasswares for use in the Hayagriva Madhav Temple at Kamrup. The Mariyas at Hajo were also granted revenue free lands belonging to this Temple. Other important centres of production of brasswares during the period of
the Ahom were Amingaon in Gauhati, Kaliabor and Silghat in Nagaon, Mangaldoi in Darrang and Jorhat and many other places in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur.35

The Assamese chronicles mentioned that the Ahoms acquired the knowledge of the use of firearms from the Muslims in the first part of the 16th century.36 During the long period of the prolonged wars between the Mughals and the Ahoms many Muslims were taken as war prisoners by the Ahoms and these captured soldiers were put to work in the royal workshops by the Ahom rulers for manufacturing of cannons, guns and gun powder.37 S.K. Bhuyan mentioned that because of their efficiency these Muslim war captives were designated as ‘Hilaigharia’ (in-charge of the royal arsenals). These Muslim war captives came to serve under the Ahom rulers as personal bodyguards, for instance, Rupai Dadhora an influential Mussalman popularly known as Rupai Gariya was appointed as the armour bearer of Gadadhar Singha the Ahom ruler.38 E.A. Gait in his History of Assam mentioned that the
manufacture of cannon and gun-powder reached a very high degree during the period of the Ahoms in Assam and the various cannons and guns belonging to the Ahom period and which were found in different parts of the country should be credited to have been the work of the Assamese Muslims. During the reign of Chakradhwaj Singha the Ahom ruler one of the strongest cannons was manufactured by a Muslim by the name of Gendhela Gariya which remained till today in Sibsagar.³⁹

In spite of the fact that Assamese people used certain materials such as bark of trees or ‘Sanchipat’ for writing purposes nevertheless in early times the use of paper was very much unknown to the people of Assam. The word ‘Kagaj’ standing for paper in Assamese being a Persian word, corroborates the opinion of some scholars that the Muslims were the first to introduce paper in India as well as in Assam as writing materials.⁴⁰
During the early part of Ahom rule, Assam was said to have possessed a self-sufficient economy, since the basic requirements of the people were met from within the region itself. Nevertheless some internal trade was said to have existed for we know of the existence of ‘hats’ or market places conducted by the Ahom rulers once or twice a week to facilitate the exchange of goods.\textsuperscript{41} The Ahom ruler Pratap Singha was said to have established two market places at Dopdar and Borhat respectively.\textsuperscript{42} Rudra Singha was also said to have established a market at Gobha.\textsuperscript{43} However these market places were very few in number and according to Shuhabudding Talish there was only one market place at Gargaon the Ahom capital and that the item of trade comprised solely on betel leaf. However, the advent of the Mughals into Assam enabled Assam to partake in trade relations with the rest of India. This was brought about by the Mughal occupation of Kamrup in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. The Assamese Buranjis mentioned that Pratap Singha, the Ahom ruler, issued an order, directing the traders in his kingdom to trade with other kingdoms of the North East and Bengal.\textsuperscript{44} It is also
mentioned that about three traders known as Narahari, Joyahari and Mudoi Sunari were executed for trading without the king’s consent.\textsuperscript{45} Shihabbudding Talish mentioned that the items of trade from Assam comprised of gold musk, aloe wood, pepper and silk for which the Mughals gave in exchange salt, sulphur and saltpetre.\textsuperscript{46} This increased trade relations thus facilitated the transformation of Assam’s economy into a monetised one which thus came to replace the barter system. This increased external trade also facilitated the emergence of new trade centres in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century comprising of Goalpara, Hajo, Gauhati and Rangamati. H.K. Barpujari was of the view that the main trade centre between Assam and Mughal India was Qandahar or Hadira Choky which he referred as the ‘Emporium of trade in the Assam frontier’.\textsuperscript{47}

Prior to the advent of the Mughals in Assam, there existed a barter economy whereby cowrie shells were used as the medium of exchange. But from the 17\textsuperscript{th} century with the advent of the Mughals into the region, we have the influx of Mughal coins into Assam.
During the initial period of Ahom rule, no doubt the Ahom rulers issued a few coins, for instance, the first Ahom ruler who was credited for being the first one to issue coin was Sukhengmung alias Gargaya Raja in 1543 AD.\textsuperscript{48} These coins were distinct in character no doubt, but the practice of issuing coins on a regular basis was not present in Assam until the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. However as a consequence of their contact with the Mughals, the Ahom rulers from the period of the mid 18\textsuperscript{th} century, they began to issue coins in large quantity than before, thereby enabling money circulation in the economy and thus replace the barter system. The Ahom coins in general were octagonal in shape. Nevertheless, during the reign of Siva Singha, Ahom coins bearing different shapes and designs began to appear in Assam. In 1651 Saka Pramatheswari, the wife of Siva Singha issued square coins bearing Persian scripts.\textsuperscript{49} Rajeswar Singha was also said to have issued different kinds of coins in which he also used Persian scripts. During the period of Rudra Singha he was said to have imported into Assam several Muslim families, one of which he employed for
the purpose of inscribing scripts on coins. They were known as the 'Akharkatiya'.\textsuperscript{50} Thus with the passage of time there appeared in Assam various coins having different denominations such as a rupee, half a rupee, one-fourth of a rupee, etc., which came to be circulated throughout the 18\textsuperscript{th} and the 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{51}

Thus to conclude we may say that the Mughal contact on Assam definitely was responsible for modifying and developing Assam’s economy during the period under study. Hence the Mughals contributed greatly to the economic life of medieval Assam.

\textsuperscript{2} A. Malik, \textit{Zikir Aru Zari}, Gauhati, 1958, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Deodhai Assam Buranji}, S. Bhuyan (ed.), 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition, Guwahati, 1987, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{5} Census of India - Assam 1921, Vol. III, 1923, Shillong, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{6} E.A. Gait, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 143.
\textsuperscript{7} S.K. Bhuyan, \textit{Anglo-Assamese Relation}, Gauhati, 1948, p. 11.
10 E.A. Gait, *op.cit.*, p. 46.
12 M. Saikia, *op.cit.*, p. 163.
17 Satsari Assam Buranji, *op.cit.*, p. 77.
18 E.A. gait, *op.cit.*, p. 156.
27 *Tungkhungia Buranji*, S.K. Bhuyan (ed.), p. XXX.
34 Census of India, 1981, Part X (D) Series 3, Assam, p. 3.
35 E.A. Gait, op.cit., p. 114.
37 M. Saikia, op.cit., p. 146.
38 Ibid., p. 146.
41 D. Nath, History of the Koch Kingdom, 1515-1615 AD, Delhi, 1989.
44 Ibid., p. 110.
45 Ibid., p. 120.
46 E.A. Gait, op.cit., p. 144.
48 E.A. Gait, op.cit., p. 42.
50 E.A. Gait, op.cit, p. 181.