CHAPTER III

Commercial Enterprise

1. Introduction:

The historians are of opinion that the agricultural, the forest and the industrial products and other resources helped the growth of internal and external commerce in early Kamarupa. During the Medieval period, the State remarkably advanced in the agricultural and industrial pursuits. From the chronicles, the biographies and other literary works it is evident that there were merchants engaged in both internal and external trade in Medieval Assam. The 'Katha-Guru-Charit' divides the merchants into three classes, viz., the 'Uttama', i.e., the best, who deals with jewels, stones and precious metals such as silver, gold etc; the 'Madhyama', i.e., the middle who deals with all sorts of cloths, such as woollen, silken, cotton etc. and the 'Prakrita', i.e., the last, who deals with salt, alkali, potash etc. Under the patronage of the Ahoms and the Koches, the trade and commerce had made great progress in the country. The chronicles reveal that the Ahoms introduced commercial intercourse with many neighbouring states and tribes. For instance, in one of the chronicles we find three 'Mudais' (traders) named, Sonari, Jaihari and Narahari engaged in trade between Assam and Bengal. Such references are numerous in the chronicles of the Ahom period.

About the attitude of the Ahoms towards trade and commerce, Dr. S.K. Bhuyan observes, "The Ahoms were promoters of trade just like other rulers and their diplomatic relations with the neighbouring states and tribes centred in many cases round the object of introducing free commercial intercourse to the advantage of both the parties". As regards the conception of a trader in those days, Dr. Bhuyan, quoting a conversation between the envoy of the Jayantia and the Barphukan of Gauhati, writes, "The old time
conception of a trader or * Be̓pāri is recorded in a conversation held about
the year 1696 in the court of the Gauhati Barphukan. A Jayantia envoy
compared a Be̓pāri to a black bee which settles wherever honey can be found.
To this the Barphukan replied, 'What you have said is correct. The black
bee settles on a number of flowers with the object of sucking honey from
them. Having extracted honey from these flowers it settles with the same
object on a lotus. But suddenly the sun sets, the lotus folds up its
petals and the bee becomes shut up there. With the rise of the sun next
morning the lotus unfolds itself again, and the bee sets itself on the
wings'. This comment of the Barphukan points to the vicissitudes of
profit and loss which a trader must be prepared to face in his commercial
enterprises and stipulations which are made still more precarious by his
subjection to political changes and unexpected slumps and depressions'.

The Ahom Government gave full protection to the small scale trade
carried on with the frontier tribes only. There were officers, such as
'Dātiyaliā-Biśayā' and 'Duaria' under the Ahom Government to look into this
matter. But in so far as minor trade with other States is concerned, no
such protection was given. They were not in favour of setting up "an
elaborate machinery for the purpose of safeguarding small quan-
tities of articles". This policy of the Ahom Government finds its best
expression in the reply given by king Rudrasāi Singh in 1713, in response
to a request made by the Faŋjadar of Rangamati in which a proposal was
made for despatching only few boat-loads of commodities. King Rudra Singha
said, "Is it called trade if it be limited to the import of a few maunds
of salt from Bengal, and the despatch of two or four boats from our
place? If the Nawab is intent on the establishment of regular commercial
intercourse with us, he should send his merchants (Shah-Mahajans) to
Jogighopa and Goalpara and our leading traders (Bar-Mudais) will proceed to Kandhar choky with large quantities of valuable articles. If matters could be arranged on this line then only they can well deserve the Status of ḥāṭ-bāṭ or trade."

The Ahoms were ever vigilant on the merchants of the foreign countries and never allowed them to settle here permanently lest they may work as secret agents of the enemies and bring disruption in the country." The foreign traders had to transact their business with all possible haste and return to their own land after their commercial activities in Assam." The Ahoms had maintained clear distinction between politics and trade and considered the former more important and serious than the latter. When the fauzadar of the Rangamati pressed the Barphukan for discussing some commercial matters in the court, the Barphukan gently rebuked him by saying," It is an affair relating to trade and it is not a fit subject for being taken up in the Durbar." The Ahom Government neither allowed the merchants of their own kingdom nor of the other countries to dabble with any political matters. During the reign of the Ahom king Pratap Singha the three Assamese traders named Sonari Mudai, Jaifeari Mudai and Narahari Mudai assured the Nawab of Dacca that they would establish friendly relations between the Nawab of Dacca and the Ahom king. Accordingly they conducted envoys of the Nawab of Dacca along with presents to the court of the Ahom king. When the king came to know this, he accused the leader of the merchants and said, "he is a merchant and he should have confined himself to trading activities. What business had he to bring envoys from Bengal." The king ordered for the execution of the merchants along with all the forty oarsmen in their employment. Up to the reign of the Ahom king Gaurinath Singha, this commercial
policy of the Ahom Government had been followed, but during the reign of this king, as a result of an agreement signed between the Ahom king and captain Welsh, the foreign traders, viz., the East-India Company, succeeded in getting all the facilities as well as prominence in the country. This not only effected Assamese traders adversely depriving them of all the commercial benifits but also paved the way for opening up a new chapter of the British rule in Assam.

The petty shops which sold articles to the customers were known as 'Pohār'. The women of the fisherman community who used to go for selling or exchanging fish, lime and other daily necessities from house to house, were called 'Pohāris'. A male 'Pohari' who was sometimes a retail seller, sold articles in retail or exchanged for other commodities by purchasing them from the Mudais or Bepāris or from other places. Those who were whole-sellers or big traders were called 'Bepāri', Mudai', 'Sadāgar' etc. For the sake of systematic discussion we may divide the whole trade and commerce into three categories, viz., the Internal trade, the Frontier trade and the External or foreign trade. Before entering into the discussion of each of these three divisions, let us now discuss first about transport and routes, exchange of medium and currency of the period.

2. Transport and Trade Routes:

Transport - Since early times boats, animals and human careers are known to have been the chief means of transport. Both in internal and external trade boats were the main transport for carrying merchandise. Animals such as elephants, horse and mules were engaged in carrying things between places where there was no navigable river or the places inaccessible. The horses and the mules were used mostly by the frontier traders who had to carry
on through the mountain passes with the people of the plains. For internal trade, besides boats, animals such as elephants and horses, carriages drawn by elephants and human carriers were engaged.  

**Routes** - The land routes, the rivers and the mountain passes were the main routes of communication. All these routes were used for different purposes during the Medieval period. For the immediate disposal of information from Gargaon to Gauhati couriers were sent by horses through the land route. But for trade the water route was the most preferable. According to Shihabuddin, innumerable boats passed through Gauhati from both sides. Of these boats surely many must have been mercantile cargoes. Many of the tributaries of the river Brahmaputra also served as sub-routes. The river Brahmaputra was the main route through which boats were dispatched to different parts of the State. Gargaon and Rangpur are situated on the bank of the river Dikha; so these metropolitan cities could make contact with Sadia, Kaliabar, Gauhati, Goalpara, Jogighopa, Dacca etc. via Dikha and Brahmaputra, by boats. There was a land route in the district of Nowgong at a three-days' boat-journey from Raha to the capital of Tripura. We have said above that during the Ahom rule many roads for internal communication were constructed. But, as said above, Assam had commercial intercourse with neighbouring countries. According to Dr. Bhuyan, there were at least four routes from Bengal to Assam, one by water and three by land. The river route from Goalpara was down the Brahmaputra, and via the Jennai from Jamalpore and then after some distance along the Pabna river, a navigable branch of the Ganges. After proceeding up the Pabna river for two or three days the boats came to the Ganges which they ascended for three or four days more till they came to the mouth of Matabanga or the Jellengi down either of which they proceeded to Calcutta. As these two rivers become almost dry during winter, the boats
follow the route through the Sunderbans. The boats took 25 to 35 days to complete the voyage from Goalpara to Calcutta and from 33 to 43 days from Calcutta to Goalpara. The first overland route from Bengal to Assam lay through Murshidabad, Maldah, Dinajpore, Rungpore, Bagwa and Goalpara and it was the line of the Calcutta dak. The second route was via Dacca, Dumany, Pucuoloe, Jamalpore, Singimari and Goalpara. Both these routes were almost impassable during the rains. The third route passed through Sylhet, Cherra, Moplung, Nungklao, Ranigaon, Khanamikh and Gauhati. The most popular of these four routes were the one by the water and the first overland passage. 16

Assam had commercial relations not only with other States of India but also with Tibet and China, since the early period. During the Medieval period, Assam maintained commercial relations with all the frontier tribes. That there were both land and sea routes from Assam to China is indicated by the 'Life of Yuan Chawang'. 17 According to P.C. Bagchi there were two overland routes from India to China and he names one of them as 'Assam-Burma' route. Dr. Bagchi writes, "The Assam-Burma route to China started from Pataliputra (Patna) which was the ancient capital of India, passed by Champa (Bhagalpur), Kajangala (Rajmahal) and Pundra-Vardhana (North Bengal) and proceeded up to Kamarupa (Gauhati) in Assam. From Assam the routes to Burma were three in early times as now. One by the valley of the Brahmaputra up to the Patkoi (Pātkai) range and then through its passes up to upper Burma; the second through Manipur up to the Chindwin Valley; and the third through Arakan up to the Irrawaddy Valley. All these routes met on the frontier of Burma near Bhamo and then proceeded over the mountains and across the river valleys to Yunnanfu, i.e., Kunming, which was the chief city of the southern
province of China. During the Ahom rule, the first one of these three routes was the most popular one. According to Robinson, this is an open road from upper Assam into Burma, and thence to China by which a considerable trade in Chinese and Burmese manufactures was carried on at one time. The Burmese while invading Assam entered by this route. The line of trade after leaving Sadia passed by Bisa, across the Patkai range of mountains, and through the valley of Hukong to the town of Mungkong which was situated on a navigable tributary of the Irrawati called Namyang. The merchants proceeding from Mungkong to Ava, at once descended the Irrawati to the capital, while those to China ascended the Irrawati for many miles to a place called Katemow, where they unloaded their goods, and thence conveyed them on mules over a range of mountainous country inhabited by Shyams in to the Chinese province of Yunnan. Robinson mentions another short water route, tracked by Lieut. Wilcox through Moadihing ( Noadihing ? ) and then entering in to the Lohit proceeding up to Mungkong on the Irrawati.

From a number of sources it is learnt that there were numerous mountain-passes leading to Tibet, Afghanistan, China, and Bhutan. According to Tabaquat-i-Nasiri, there were as many as thirty five passes between Assam and Tibet. From a later-day source it is gathered that Tibet was open to travellers on foot from the extreme east of Assam. The route ran across the Himalaya mountains, parallel to the course of the Brahmaputra. The journey from Sadia to Bhaloo, the first town met with in Tibet, was performed by pilgrims in about sixteen days. The following were the towns in the line of march in succession: Sadia, Kudgin, Luckquee, Galoom, Namanoo, Dullee, Omono, Hullee, Sumlay, Hanay, Kumday, Rhee-shah, and Bhaloo. At a distance of four days' journey beyond Bhaloo stood the Resheemah containing fine stone buildings, a large population and a Chinese Government. This route was a
very arduous task; the rugged nature of the snowy country made it insurmountable and the hostility shown by the tribes on the road to the strangers, was very difficult to encounter. Among the numerous passes into Bhutan, along the northern frontier of Assam, some had direct connection with the capital. These passes were called 'Duārs', i.e., doors. Amongst the many passes the Bijni Duār, the Bingā Duār, the Na-Duār and the Chār-Duār were noteworthy.

There was a route between Bibrampur pass in Cachar and Raha chaki on the Kallang in Central Assam. Another best known route which connected Assam with Sylhet and Cachar was that leading from the town of Sylhet via Cherapunji to Gauhati.

During the Ahom rule, the Ahom Government assigned the routes to each of the frontier tribes through which they had to come down and return. From the chronicles of the Ahom period, it is learnt that at different times, the Ahom Government constructed many roads and dams within the country for internal communication.

3. Medium of Exchange :-

In early times the value of the articles was measured in terms of commodities and the business transactions were carried on by a system of barter. During the period under review, the barter system was prevalent among the hill tribes and to a certain extent among the people of the plains. Till today the hill tribes determine the value of their property in terms of Methon (bison). The practice of exchanging commodities is still in vogue among the hill peoples. They exchanged their products for the necessary articles produced in the plains. But sometimes before making such exchange
they determined the value of the commodities in terms of price. When the value of the commodities of one of the parties was estimated to be more than the value of the other's then the other party had to pay the excess either in coins or in gold. Hunter in his 'Statistical Account of Assam' gives an account of articles exchanged between the Assamese merchants and the Bhutias, in the fair of Odalguri, in the district of Darrang, in the year 1857. From his account it is apparent that the Bhutias exchanged ponies, sheep, dogs, salt, gold, blanket, yak-tail, musk, wax, lac, wal-nuts, bundle dye, needles, turnips, onion, garlic, chillies, and spice, for paddy, rice, silk, cotton and cloths, brass pots, iron bars, pan and tamol, cotton threads, dried fish, meat, tobacco etc. from the Assamese merchants. But the total value of the commodities of the Bhutias merchants became almost twice the value of the commodities taken from the Assamese merchants. The Assamese merchants had to pay some money to cover the excess value. The petty female shop-keepers, known as Pohâris, who used to ferry commodities from house to house, even now, exchange their articles for other commodities. In case of business transaction with other countries the value of articles was determined in terms of money, although exchange of articles between the merchants of Assam and those of other countries was not uncommon. In general, it may be said that among the village people and hill tribes the system of barter was prevalent to a great extent during the Medieval period. But in case of business transactions on a large scale although articles had been exchanged between the two parties, yet the value of the articles was determined in terms of money, i.e., gold or silver coins. When the value of the imported articles exceeded the value of the exported articles,
the balance had been paid either in gold or in silver. 29

4. Currency :-

According to Sir Jadunath Sarker, "The currency of Assam consisted of gold and silver coins. Copper coins were not current in Assam." 30 Cowries were in use since the early period. The earliest reference of cowries is found in Bana's 'Harsa Charita'. According to 'Harsa Charita', Bhaskarvarman sent "heaps of cowries, both black and white, to Harsa". 31 References to cowries used as price for commodities are found in the biographies and the chronicles. The literary works composed during the Medieval period, also mention the use of cowries as price. From the chronicles it is learnt that the value of an earthen utensil called 'Charu' in Assamese was two cowries. 32 In one of the 'Bargits' of Madhavadeva, it is found that the price of an earthen pot called 'Kalasi' was two cowries only. Another biography contains a reference to sale of betel leaf in retail at two or four cowries to the poor customers. 33 Robinson throws ample light on the subject. According to him, at the time of annexation of the province by the British Government, varieties of coins were found current in Assam. They were, the Rajmohar or the coins of the Ahom Rajas, the Nārāyani or the coins of the Kochbehar kings, the Company's Sicca rupee, the Debo Mohar of the Bhutan kings and the Arcot (?) rupee. Amongst these coins, the Rajmohar and the Nārāyani rupee were the most extensive currencies - the Rajmohar in Upper Assam and the Nārāyani in Lower Assam. Robinson also mentions the currency of cowries or small shells in petty transactions. 34

Besides the Ahoms, other people who struck coins in the Medieval period, were the Koches, the Kacharis, the Jayantias, the Manipuris and the Nagas. The coins of the Koches were called 'Nārāyani' rupee; those of the
Jayantias’ ‘Katra-taka’ (word rupee) and those of the Nagas were called ‘Jabily’. The ‘Jabily’ is an arrow shaped 8 inches long copper coin. Whether the Chutias had their own currency or not, nothing can be said owing to the paucity of informations. From the chronicles it is learnt that it was the convention of the Ahom kings to strike coins while ascending the throne. Although the earliest Ahom coins so far discovered are those of the king Suklenmung issued in 1543, yet historical records show that it was the Ahom king Sudangpha, alias Bamuni Kanwar (1397-1407), who first struck coins while ascending the throne. In this connection, it is worth mention that in England the first gold coin, the gold Noble, was initiated during the time of Edward I, in 1344 A.D. The English coin was fifty three years older than the Ahom coin of king Sudangpha. It is very unfortunate that numismatic evidence of kings, prior to Suklenmung has not yet come to our hands. From the evidence supplied by the collection in the State Museum of Assam it seems that from the reign of king Sudangpha up to the reign of king Gadadhar, the coins were not regularly struck. According to Edward Gait, until the reign of Rudra Singha the mint was not kept constantly at work. Further, smaller coins weighing 48 and 24 ratis were also issued during his rule. Still smaller coins weighing 12 and 6 ratis were first issued by the Ahom king Siva Singha and coins weighing even 3 ratis were issued by Gaurinath Singha.

The Ahom coins were octagonal in shape. As to its octagonal shape, there are different explanations in the chronicles. According to one, the shape of ancient Assam, as narrated in the ‘Yogini Tantra’, is octagonal and hence the Ahom kings adopted the octagonal shape for their coins. According to another version, King Pratap Singha (1605-1641), as a mark of his victory over eight kingdoms, used to strike coins in octagonal shape.
Gait accepts the 1st interpretation. The second interpretation is not convincing; because octagonal coins are found struck from the reign of king Suklenmung, earlier to king Pratap Singha. In the last part of the Ahom rule, the Moamarias occupied the throne for a short period. During this short period of their rule, the Moamaria kings Bharat Singha and Sarbananda struck coins having nine sides, differing from the Ahoms. We have such coins preserved in the State Museum. The Koch king Naranarayana first opened mint in the Koch kingdom. But after Naranarayana, as a result of a fratricidal war, the kingdom was divided into two; one portion became subordinate to the Moguls and the other to the Ahoms and thus they have lost the right of striking coins as sovereign authority.

In the coins of the Ahom kings we find the use of Ahom, Assamese and the Devanagari scripts. King Suklenmung used Ahom language and Ahom script in his coins. King Jayadhvaja Singha and his successor Chakradhvaja Singha used sanskrit script in place of Ahom. According to Harakanta Sadaramin, prior to Jayadhvaja Singha, king Pratap Singha also used Sanskrit script in his coins. Again, king Gadadhar Singha introduced Ahom script and king Rudra Singha used Assamese script in the coins. It is evident from the chronicles that king Jayadhvaja Singha and Chakradhvaja Singha were more inclined towards Hinduism, while Gadadhar was more inclined towards his own tribal faith.

The most interesting coins of the series which come to our hands, are those minted during the reign of king Siva Singha, his consort queen Pramatheswari and king Rajeswar Singha. Queen Pramatheswari first deviated from the old tradition of minting octagonal coins and struck square coin with Persian inscription in it, at Gargaon in 1651. It is believed that the
shape of the coin was perhaps derived from the square Manipuri coins issued shortly before Chairamba. King Rajeswar Singha experimented different forms of coins almost throughout his reign. Besides the ordinary octagonal coins in Assamese script, he issued coins of the same design in Ahom script and also square coins in Assamese script. In addition to these, he issued octagonal coins with Nagari inscription and Persion script. 42

"The rupees and gold muhars of the Ahom kings were struck to the Indian standard of about 170 grains. Rudra Singha appeared to have introduced half and quarter rupees. An eighth and sixteenth both of the rupee and of the muhar were introduced by Rajeswar Singha and a thirty second by Gaurinath. There was no copper currency - its place being taken by cowries." 43

5. Weights and Measures :-

It is difficult to give an accurate picture of the standard of weights and measures of the period. Scanty references are found in the chronicles, the biographies and other 'Accounts' left by the foreign writers. The Assamese people used different standards of weights and measures of liquid things, articles, such as pulse, rice etc. and of metals, such as gold, silver, copper etc. which were in use till very recent times. Hunter, in his 'A Statistical Account of Assam', attempts to show the different standards used by the Assamese people in weighing and measuring different articles. 44

Hunter says that there was no measurement of distance; it was expressed in terms of time conveyed by a journey. 45 Hunter is partially true. The chronicles and the biographies also give us such idea of the measurement of distance. For example, reference to the distance of "one day's
journey, "three days' journey" or the distance of a "cry's reach" are found in the chronicles and the biographies. On the other hand, references to the measurement of distance as well as of land are also found in our sources. Under the rule of different Ahom kings the distance from one place to another is found measured in the chronicles by the standard of a long pole known as 'Tār' in Assamese. Such descriptions are found specially in the chronicles written under the Changrung Phukan, who held charge as the head of the architecture and public works department during the Ahom rule. The distance from Gauhati to Rangpur was expressed in the following way. "From Rangpur to the steps (bathing steps) of the river Sonari is 7500 'Beo', from there to Gajpur 7500 'Beo'; from Gajpur to Dergaon 6400 'Beo'" etc. For the measurement of distance or to find out the area of a certain plot, a pole, known in Assamese as 'Tār' or 'Nal' or 'Beo', was used. The length of the pole used for such measurement in different places was not uniform; of course the difference is negligible. The length of the pole is generally 7 hāt (cubit) one beget (½ cubit) and four ānguls (four fingers). In case of a plot measuring 20 poles in length and 20 poles in breadth, the plot will be recognised as having one 'pura' or 4 bighās of land in total. Measurement of dug out soil are also found mentioned in the chronicles.

Like distance, the sense of time was also indicated by natural phenomena and other habits of the people. For example, "Puwa puhari puhari haote" or "Dhalphāt diote" means hardly at the break of the day; "Beli pātatbahā samayat" means at the setting of the sun; "Rāndhani somowā samay" means the time when the cook enters into the kitchen etc. Such calculations of time are generally done by the common people.
There are other accurate standards of the measurement of time, such as 'Pal', 'Danda', 'Bipal', 'Din' etc. A 'Danda' is equal to 24 modern minutes. Again the whole day, i.e., both day and night is divided into 8 'Praharas'. A 'Prahar' therefore, is equal to three hours. The 'Sakabda' introduced by 'Salivahana' was used in astronomical calculation and for the purpose of casting horoscopes. The Ahoms had their own era for their calculation and other purposes; but later on they came to use both the Hindu era and their own tribal era.

In the markets, articles were either sold or exchanged by making packages or bundles of equal weight or magnitude. In Upper Assam salt was sold by making packages, each of which contained only three lumps. The lumps were bounded into packages in leaves and each of these packages was called 'Kak'.

6. Price of Commodities:

The price of commodities was not static, it was always changing. So it is not possible to give a fixed price list of the commodities of the Medieval period. On the other hand, the commodities were generally bartered in case of internal trade but in case of external or foreign trade, the value of the commodities was determined by the standard of gold or silver. E.Gait in his 'A History of Assam' reproduced in a foot-note, the prices of commodities mentioned in a copper-plate grant issued in the last part of the Ahom rule. In the writings of other writers also, now and then, we come across prices of things. The following is the list of prices of commodities as revealed by a copper plate grant of 1661 Saka, i.e., 1739 A.D. as referred to by Edward Gait:
... rice 2-1/5 annas per maund; Milk 2 1/4 annas; Gram 4 annas; Salt and oil 4 1/4 annas and black pepper Rs. 20 per maund. Betel leaf was sold at 40 bundles for 1 anna; earthen pots or 'Kalasis' at 643 per rupee and areca nuts at 5,120 per rupee. In other similar records of the same period, the price of rice is quoted at 4 annas per maund, Gur Rs. 2 1/4; Mati Kalai 5 annas; pulse and ghi 10 annas and oil Rs. 3-1/3 per maund. Elsewhere again rice is priced at 8 annas, Mati kalai at 10 annas per maund; earthen pots at a rupee for 224 and betel leaf at an anna for 20 bundles of 20 leaves each. Amongst other articles of which prices are given may be mentioned goats Rs. 1 each, ducks 1 anna each, pigeons 1 pice, dhutis 5 annas and gamchas 6 pice each. The price of salt appears to have ranged from 5 to 10 rupees per maund; it stood at the latter figure in Captain Welsh's time. 53

It is stated by Captain Welsh that after the Moamaria insurrections "At the sale of the loot taken at Rangpur, rice in the husk (paddy) was sold at the rate of six hundred pounds per rupee, while buffalos fetched five rupees and cows two rupees each." 54

7. Internal Trade :-

It has been said above that there were petty dealers called 'Pohari' who either used to go from house to house to sell or exchange necessary articles of every-day use or to take their seat in a market place for the same. The 'Mudais' or 'Beparis' were whole-sellers. The petty dealers purchased the commodities from the Mudais or brought it from other places and sold them in retail to the public in the town or in the villages, or in the market places. 55 References to such petty dealers or retail sellers are found in our sources. There were places at different parts of the State where markets or fairs called 'Hat' were held at regular intervals. Traders and customers assembled in these places for exchanging and buying of commodities. In this connection the words 'Chakki', 'Phat' and 'Dan' also deserve mention. The word 'Hat' means a fair or a market. 'Chaki' means
an out-post of the Government and 'Phat' means a place where the traders assembled to give the 'Dan' i.e., the duty levied by the Government on the merchandise. 56 In the 'Katha-Guru-Charit', we find that Narayan Thakur, the most favourite disciple of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva and who was also a renowned merchant, once, had to earn his livelihood as a petty shopkeeper in a market place. 57 Again, Bhawanipuria Gopal Ate's mother also had to earn her livelihood as a petty shopkeeper while she was at Nazira. 58 Shihabuddin mentions about the existence of a bazaar near the palace of the Ahom kings where betel-nut and betel leaf were mainly sold. 59 According to Gunabhiram, among the petty shopkeepers, there were Mohammedan women who used to sell articles by establishing shop in their own houses. 60

During the whole period of the Ahom rule many market places had been established throughout the country. Much stress was laid in establishing market places and holding fairs perhaps during the rule of the Ahom king Pratap Singha. This king highly encouraged the commercial intercourse with the frontier tribes. A large number of markets were established within the country for internal trade. 61 The Mudais or the Sadagars traded in valuable commodities in different parts of the State and they generally traversed the country in boats through the river-ways. 62 There were places known for the production of particular commodities and these places generally supplied their own products both for internal and external trade. For example, from the 'Katha-Guru-Charit' it is gathered that Upper Assam was famous for the production of gold, silk-cloth, elephants' tusk, black pepper etc. 63

As a result of a trade agreement signed between Ahom king Gaurinath Singha and Captain Welsh, along with British merchants, merchants from other
parts of India began to come to Assam. Of these traders special mention may be made of the Agrawallas and the Osowals of Marwar and the Mohammedan traders from Dacca. During the reign of king Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1810) some Bengali and Marwari people began to establish shops in some parts of the State. During the reign of king Chandrakanta Singha there were four shops in the town of Jorhat, of which two belong to the foreigners. The shops of the Marwari merchants were called 'Golā' and those of the others were called 'Dokān'; of course these are comparatively modern terms.

8. Frontier Trade

Much importance was attached to frontier trade during the Ahom period. The Ahom kings had been maintaining a sound trade-policy with the different frontier hill-tribes, such as Bhutia, Abor, Miri, Mishimi, Daflā, Naga, Khasi, Kachari, Garo etc. Amongst all these frontier tribes the business transactions with the Bhutias, Khasis and the Garos were of much importance.

During the Ahom period, the trade with Bhutan was conducted by an Agent of the Ahom Government called Uair Barua. He resided in a place called Simlabari situated at a distance of one day's journey, to the north of the residence of the Raja of Darrang. He levied no duties, but received presents, and was the only broker employed by the Bhutias and the Assamese in their mutual exchange or purchase of goods. According to Robinson, in 1809, the trade between Bhutan and Assam was said to have amounted to two lakhs of rupees per annum, even when the latter country was in a most unsettled state. The exports from Assam to Bhutan were lac, manjit (Indian madder), silk, muga and edi and dried fish. The imports from Bhutan were woollen cloths, gold dusts, salt, musk, ponies, the celebrated Tibet Chowres (tails of Yak) and Chinese silks. In connection with the medium of exchange we have given above a list of articles exchanged between the Assamese merchants and the Bhutias in the fair of गोलां
Odalguri, in the year 1857. The list includes a large number of articles exchanged between them. The intercourse between the two countries was much more extensive prior to the Maamaria insurrections; after the Maamaria and the Burmese disturbances it began to deteriorate. In spite of all disadvantages the intercourse between the two countries was going on till the beginning of the British rule; but it had gone down to such an extent that in the year 1833, only two Bhutia merchants came down from the hills.67

The Mishimis, who live in the hills, to the north of Sadia frequented the market places near Sadia. They brought with them Lama swords, spears, Mishimi Tita, a considerable quantity of herbal poison known as 'Barbik', musk, a few musk-deer skin and ivory, which they obtained from Tibet. These articles they exchanged for glass, beads, cloths, salt and money. When they collected sufficient amount of money, they purchased buffalos and cows with that money. The Abors and the Miris brought with them pepper, ginger, manjit and wax and exchanged them for the produce of the plains. The Singphos brought a considerable quantity of ivory.68 The Nagas of the different hills frequented the markets adjoining their hills along the southern border of modern Sibsagar and south-east border of the Lakhimpur district. Of these markets, the Nagura (Naginimara?), Kachari-hat, Dhopabor, Lahing, all Dopdar, Geleki (in the modern Sibsagar district), Makumduar, Namchang, Barduar and Taratali (all in the modern Lakhimpur district) were important. In these markets, they generally exchanged their own produce, such as cotton, salt, ginger for the produce of the plains.69 The intercourse with the Khasis and the Garos was more extensive as well as very friendly. With the Garos, extensive cotton trade was carried on. The Khasis exported iron, potatoes and honey; these they exchanged mainly for cloths, silks and other products of the valley.70
There were many market places, both along the southern and northern borders of the valley. Selling or exchanging of articles between the people of the plains and frontier tribes were occasionally held in these market places. Besides, there were many fairs, held occasionally during the winter season where a large number of frontier and plains people gathered for business transactions. Hunter, in his *A Statistical Account of Assam* and Sri B.Sarma in his *Durbin* mention a number of such fairs and market places. Under the Ahom Government, at every place of such a fair and market there was a customs officer, viz., a Barua to receive levy or presents on the goods exchanged or sold or on articles that passed between Assam and other States. For example, at Salalhat there was a customs house on the Brahmaputra, where duties were taken on all goods that passed between Kamrup and Assam proper. This was farmed to a Barua at 500 rupees a year. The Rahiyal Barua, posted at Raha was entrusted with the charge of collecting duties on the transit of goods. He also paid the Assam Government annually a fixed rent. There were other customs officers at Darrang, Batakuchi, Gauhati, Hadira, Howraghat, Kandhar etc.

9. External Trade :-

Assam's cultural and commercial relations with the neighbouring countries such as China, Tibet, Burma and also with the rest of India have been in existence from the very early times. During the Medieval period, Assam has been carrying on commercial relations with China, Tibet, Burma, Bengal and other parts of India. The *Katha-Guru-Charit* indicates that the Assamese merchants on business purpose had traversed lands like Assam, Garo, Bhutan and Bengal. It has been said above that during the reign of Pratap Singha, three Assamese merchants who had commercial intercourse with Dacca, were sentenced to death for their undue interference in political matters.
During this period, Assam had carried on trade with China, Burma, Tibet and Bengal. The trade with Tibet amounted to 200,000 rupees a year. The Assamese merchants used to receive smoking pipes of Chinese manufacture, woollen and rock salt. A caravan consisting of nearly 20 men used to meet the Assamese merchants at a place near 'Chouna', at a distance of two months' journey from Lassa. The Assamese used to receive from the Lassa merchants or Khumpa Bhutias as they were called, Silver in bullion to nearly a lakh of Rupees and gold to the value of upwards of 70,000 rupees. Assamese merchants also went to Yunnan in China...Assam having no silver mine depended for that metal on supply from China, Tibet and the Barkhampti country, near the sources of the Irrawady. During the reign of king Rudra Singha, considerable quantities of vessels made of bell-metal, brass and copper, were exported to Tibet and China. Trade relations were also maintained with Bengal. The main centres of trade or transactions were Hadira, or the Assam Chaki, Goalpara, Jogighopa and Rangamati. The Agent of the Assam Government known as 'Duaria Barua' resided at the Assam Choky situated at the mouth of the Manas (Manah) river. He enjoyed the exclusive privilege of the trade with Bengal for which he paid to the Assam Government rent of 90,000 rupees. Occasionally the privilege was granted to two men at the same time...The Duaria Barua or Baruas received the goods of the Assam merchants and exchanged them for Bengal products. They realised the duties on all exports and imports. Goalpara on the south bank and Jogighopa and Rangamati on the north were the three eastern out-posts of Bengal from where its merchants conducted their trade with Assam. Goalpara and Jogigopha were populous towns and had streets and shops. There was a numerous Christian population at both the places consisting mainly of Topazes (?) of questionable character...Rangamati situated at a distance of two miles from the bank of the Brahmaputra was a Mogul out-post of considerable importance. It was the head quarter of a Fauzadar who administered the adjacent territory and conducted the relations with Assam on behalf of the Nawab of Bengal.

The exports from Assam to Bengal mainly consisted of various silk cloths and silk threads, stick lac, manjit, Agar or alae wood and elephants' tusks. The other minor articles exported from Assam were rice, paddy, wax, black pepper, betel nuts, ou-tanga, thaikal fruit, jack fruit etc.
An idea of the exports of the two countries, that is Assam and Bengal, of the last part of the Ahom rule (1808-1809), can be formed from the following figures:

Exports from Assam - Stick lac, 10,000 maunds Rs. 35,000; Muga Silk, 65 mds Rs. 11,350; Muga-cloth, 75 mds Rs. 17,500; Manjit, Rs. 500; Black pepper, 50 mds Rs. 500; Cotton with seeds, 7000 mds Rs. 35,000; Ivory Rs. 6,000; Bell-metal vessels Rs. 1,500; Mustard seeds 15,000 mds Rs. 20,000; Iron hoes Rs. 600; Slaves, 100 Rs. 2,000; Thaikal fruit, 50 mds Rs. 150.
Total Rs. 1,30,900.

Exports from Bengal - Salt, 35,000 mds @ 5½ rupees per md. Rs. 192,500; Ghee, 1000 mds Rs. 1,600; Fine pulse, Rs. 800; Sugar Rs. 1,000; Stone beads Rs. 2,000; Coral Rs. 1,000; Jewels and pearls Rs. 5,000; European cutlery and glass ware Rs. 500; Copper Rs. 4,800; Red lead Rs. 1,000; English woollen cloth Rs. 2,000; Tafetas Rs. 2,000; Benaras Khinkobs Rs. 500; Satin Rs. 1,000; Gold and Silver cloth Rs. 1,000; Shells Rs. 100; Muslin Rs. 10,000; Total Rs. 2,28,300.

The balance of trade amounting to Rs. 97,400 against Assam was paid in gold and silver.

From the literary records we can prepare a more elaborate list of exports to Bengal and other countries from Assam. From the literary works, further it is gathered that the Assamese merchants, with their cargoes, in those days, went as far as Lanka.

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