CHAPTER SIX

OVERLAND TRADE WITH CHINA THROUGH ASSAM

Unlike Ladakh and Burma the Company's policy towards Assam in its outset was totally commercial. During the second half of the eighteenth century most of the inland trade of Bengal with Assam was the monopoly of East India Company's servants who were trading privately. Their trade was confined to Assam chowky, also called Kandhar chowky. An agent of the Assam Government, the Duaria Barua, was posted at this chowky and he conducted the entire commercial transactions with the traders from Bengal. On the Bengal side there were eastern outposts like Goalpara, Hangamati and Jogighopa from where the Mughal and later, the European merchants conducted their trade with Assam. The British merchants were not allowed to enter Assam but in Bengal they could move about freely. (1) The result was that in the absence of any official check on their activities they were creating difficulties

(1) Rangpore District Records, Vol. III, No. 217; Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 24 Sept. 1759, No. 131;

for the Nawabs of Bengal. Hence there were complaints and counter complaints against each other. In 1762 Mir Kasim, the Nawab of Bengal (1760-63) complained to Vansittart, the Governor of Fort William, that his loss in the trade with Assam, Rangamati and Kariabari amounted to Rs. 40,000, because there was too much interference in the trade by the servants of the Company. (2)

Similarly in Jan. 1763, John Robinson and Hugh Baillie, the Bengal agents of Johnstone and Vansittart respectively, complained that Mir Kasim's 'foujdar' at Rangamati was obstructing the free flow of trade conducted by the agents of the Company. (3)

Again, in March 1771, Hugh Baillie submitted a memorial to the Court of Directors (4) and explained the commercial facilities required by the traders of the Company. He also gave a detailed account of the resources of Assam, Bhutan and the neighbouring countries. Consequently the Government of Bengal

decided to investigate the possibilities of establishing trade with Assam, and through that channel with China. (5)

**Warren Hastings and Assam trade**

With the advent of Hastings, the tempo of trade with Assam and Bhutan got new impetus. Hastings wrote to the collectors of Cooch Behar and Rangpur to suggest measures by which the sale of British staples might be promoted in Assam, Bhutan and in the adjoining countries. (6) However, both these Collectors, Charles Purling of Cooch Behar and Hebert Harris of Rangpur were pessimistic regarding the prospects of Bhutan (7) and Assam (8) trade. But in sharp contrast

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(5) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 9 Dec. 1771, No. 1.

(6) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 21 June, 1773, No. 10.

(7) Charles Purling, Collector of Cooch Behar, was of the opinion that without concluding a treaty of peace with Bhutan, the trade prospects were negligible: *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 19 July 1773, No. 7.

(8) Hebert Harris, Collector of Rangpur, shared the pessimism of Purling. He observed that 'an exchange of muga-dhutis and stick-lac for salt and a little cloth constituted the whole of their traffic'. Moreover, he affirmed that no European article was sent to Assam by the traders, because there seems to be no profit in the business: *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 13 Sept. 1773, No. 8.
to the pessimism of these Collectors, George Bogle's estimate of Assam Trade with Bengal amounted to nearly seven lakhs of rupees per year. (9) But he regretted that:

... the Assamese were permitted to trade in the territories of the Company without conceding similar privileges to the subjects of the Company by the Assam Government. (10)

Hence Bogle suggested that the Assam Government should be requested to grant to the British merchants the freedom of trade in their country. He reckoned that:

... after having gained footing in Assam it would be possible for the Company to pursue enquiries into the trade of Assam, and the countries lying on its eastern confines. (11)

Thus in 1774, two agencies one under Bogle as a regular employer of the Company, and the other under Baillie as a private aspirant were simultaneously working to collect information regarding Assam trade,

(9) Markham, Narratives, pp. 54-60.
(10) Ibid.
(11) Ibid.
and to suggest methods of its enhancement. (12) As a result the years 1778-79 saw a decided advance in the way of establishing Company's trade with Assam. The enquiries of Bogle, Baillie (13) and of the local officers supplied the Company with useful information about the resources and trade of Assam.

In 1780 the Company's Government placed Assam trade under its direct control and took certain measures to safeguard the interests of British merchants. (14) Firstly, Hugh Baillie was appointed as Resident at Goalpara in March, 1780 to regulate the trade and to receive the revenue. Secondly, Killican, a British merchant, was granted the exclusive privilege of trading with Assam, (16) and all other merchants were ordered to close their

(12) Bengal Past and Present, Vol. XII (1917), p. 73.
(13) Baillie was appointed Writer in Bengal Establishment in Feb. 1777: Ibid, p. 74.
(14) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 13 June 1780.
(15) Ibid.
(16) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 15 Sept. 1780.
Thirdly, in order to obtain cooperation of Lakshmi Singha, the ruler of Assam, Warren Hastings informed him briefly of the circumstances which led the Company to take the trade of Bengal and Assam into its own hands. He assured the ruler that the appointment of Baillie was to protect the Assam and Bengal traders from the free booters, so that commerce might be carried on for the mutual advantage of both the countries.

Despite all these efforts, however, the trade did not prove beneficial to the Company for some time as was hoped by the planners like Killican and Hugh Baillie. May be it was due to the frequent internal disturbances in Assam. Consequently, the grant of monopoly in trade was withdrawn from Killican in April 1783, and Hugh Baillie was immediately recalled.

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(17) Ibid.

(18) Calendar of Persian Correspondence, Vol. V, No. 1911.

(19) Ibid.

(20) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 8 April, 1783.

(21) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 25 April, 1783; and also Ibid., 25 July, 1783.
This step resulted in the revival of the same old problems, i.e., the oppressive conduct of Company’s underlings towards the merchants of Assam, and the evasion of the latter to pay their dues regularly. (22)

Cornwallis and Assam Trade

The tenure of Cornwallis in Bengal (1786-93) manifested a vigorous activity to develop the Bengal trade with Assam. Efforts were already being made by Henry Lodge, Collector of Rajshahi to negotiate a commercial treaty with the ruler of Assam. (23) In March 1786 the Court of Directors issued orders to the Bengal Government to reexamine the whole problem of Assam trade, based on the representations of Baillie, Killican and Lodge. (24)

Thus the result of all these enquiries was that Baillie, ‘the author of original proposal’ was again appointed as Company’s Resident at Goalpara. (25)

(22) Rangpore District Records, Vol. VI, p. 72.
(23) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 16 Feb. 1785.
(24) Court’s letter to Bengal, 14 March, 1786.
(25) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 4 July, 1787.
and Assam trade was thrown open to all merchants reserving the trade in salt to the Company. As it was, Baillie reached Calcutta in July 1787 (26) in order to investigate the causes which stood in the way of beneficial commerce with Assam (27) and to conclude a commercial treaty with the ruler of Assam (28). After one year of his arrival at Goalpara, Baillie sent a report to Cornwallis regarding the trade conditions of Assam (29). He regretted that due to


(27) Baillie was also instructed to obtain the knowledge of Assam's probable communication with China. Moreover, appointed on a fixed allowance of Rs 1000/- per month, Baillie was forbidden to conduct any private trade, directly in his own account, or indirectly on the part of any other person; Bengal Revenue Consultations, 13 July 1787.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 27 July, 1787.
Mao marias and Burkendazes's risings, ravages of civil war, intrigues in the palace and the calamity of dreadful famine, the trade of Assam with the Company had not had a fair trial during that year (1788). Moreover, these 'calamities which could neither be foreseen nor prevented', considerably reduced the purchasing power of the Assames. (35)

(30) Mao marias were a sect of Vaishnava religion. Their Guru, Mayamara Mahanta was ruthlessly killed by the Ahoms in 1642. Hence they were always seeking excuses to avenge the murder of their Guru. For more details about their activities in Assam see Capt. S.O. Hannay, 'A Short Account of the Maoamaria Sect', JASB (1838), pp. 128-43.

(31) The Burkendazes, the professional marauders from Bengal constituted the army of Krishnанaryan, the prince of Darang: For more details about these Burkendazes see: S.K. Bhuyan, op. cit., (1949), pp. 258-99.

(32) The local chiefs and the frontier tribes, taking advantage of the commotion in the land, assumed virtual independence and plundered the outlying villages of Assam. Ibid., p. 189.

(33) There were conspiracies and intrigues in the palace because Gaurinath Singha, the ruler of Assam, 'was the most incompetent, blood-thirsty, disreputable and cowardly of all the Ahom Kings.' Edward Gait, A History of Assam (3rd Edn, Calcutta, 1963), p. 220.


(35) Bengal Revenue Consultations, 18 March, 1789.
Hence Baillie could not achieve much as the promoter of Company's trade in Assam. Inter alia, the ruler Gaurinath Singha was fugitive at Gauhati, and Baillie could not negotiate for the commercial treaty, the primary object of his appointment.\(^{(36)}\) To add to his disappointment the climate of Goalpara seriously affected his health. Hence in Nov. 1789, he himself suggested the abolition of the Goalpara Residentship\(^{(37)}\) and the appointment was abolished in April 1790.\(^{38}\) But the disturbances responsible for the abolition of Baillie's appointment continued for more than three decades. These disturbances eventually changed the whole character of the relations between the Company and Assam Government. The Company hitherto seeking friendship and cooperation of Assam Government for promoting commercial intercourse, assumed political role after 1789 due entirely to the internal disturbances and weak administration of Assam rulers.\(^{(38)}\) Ultimately Captain Welsh had to be sent with a detachment of troops to help the Assam ruler to

\(^{(36)}\) *Bengal Revenue Consultations*, 21 July, 1788.

\(^{(37)}\) *Bengal Revenue Consultations*, Dec. 1789.

\(^{(38)}\) *Calendar of Persian Correspondence*, Vol. V, No. 1911.

\(^{(39)}\) For a copious account of Captain Welsh's expedition to Assam see Sir James Johnstone, *Captain Welsh's Expedition to Assam, 1792-94* (Shillong, 1912); Also see L.W. Shakespear, *History of Upper Assam, Upper Burmah and North Eastern Frontier* (London, 1914), pp. 56-60.

\(^{(40)}\) *Foreign Department Political Consultations*, 10 Sept. 1792, No. 49; and *Foreign Department Political Consultations*, 19 Sept. 1792, Nos. 13, 17; and *Foreign Department Political Consultations*, 3 Oct. 1792, No. 18.
quell the disturbances. (41) He was instructed that:

no pains or attention should be spared to avail ourselves of so favourable an opportunity to obtain good surveys and to acquire every information about the trade, manufactures, and natural products of the countries with which it must be our interest to maintain the most friendly communications. (42)

Accordingly, Captain Welsh besides helping the Assam ruler in quelling the internal disturbances, (43) managed to enter into a commercial agreement (44) with him for free and reciprocal trade between Bengal and Assam. Two custom-houses were established at Assam Chowky (Kandhar Chowky) and Guhati. The agents of Assam Chowky were to collect the duties on all exports. In order to ensure security to the merchants and to the collections, Cornwallis placed the management of Assam Chowky under the direct administration of the Company. (45) Unfortunately, the arrangements made by Welsh could not last long. Cornwallis, whose

(41) Captain Welsh was accompanied by Thomas Wood, the Surveyor and Dr. John Peter Wade, Assistant Surgeon, Foreign Department Political Consultations, 3 Oct. 1792, No. 17-A.

(42) Cornwallis’ Minute, Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 3 Oct. 1792, No.17.

(43) Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 17 Jan. 1793, No.10; Foreign Department, Political Consultations 15 Feb., 1793, No.15.

(44) Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 11 March, 1793, Nos.15 and 18; For the text of the Treaty see C.J.Aitchison, Treaties, Vol.XI(1931),pp.112-115.

(45) Foreign Department Political Consultations, 22 April. 1793, No. 14.
intervention had introduced improvement in Anglo-Assam commercial relations, retired in Oct. 1793. The succeeding Governor-General, Sir John Shore, (46) was totally averse to this type of armed intervention in the affairs of native powers. He said:

> I sincerely regret this Government ever interfered in Assam business, and my present wish is to extricate ourselves from prosecuting our interposition as speedily as possible. (47)

Hence, just when the commercial arrangements with Assam were being given a fair trial and would have proved beneficial to the Company, Shore penned the fateful minute (48) to recall the detachment. Welsh reached Goalpara on 3rd July 1794. (49) By the sudden withdrawal of the protection afforded by the detachment, the Bengal merchants became panicky and despite their repeated demands, they could not obtain payments of

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(48) Shore undoubtedly was willing to have some commercial footing in Assam and in March 1794, he directed Welsh to enter into commercial stipulations if the chiefs could unite in establishing a regular Government; *Foreign Department Political Consultations*, 19 March 1794, No. 16.

(49) *Foreign Department Political Consultations*, 25 July 1794, No. 38.
their balances from the Assam traders.\(^{(50)}\) For thirty years after the withdrawal of the detachment, the Anglo-Assam relations were confined to the petitions made by the Assam Government for armed assistance\(^{(51)}\) and by the private merchants for help to promote their trade and to recover their last possessions.\(^{(52)}\) But the Company's Government followed the policy of non-intervention and neutrality. In 1817 and again in 1819 the Burmese invaded and occupied some territory of Assam. Lord Hastings did not respond favourably to the appeals of the Raja of Assam for help against the Burmese.\(^{(53)}\) He merely instructed David Scott, the Commissioner of Cooch-Behar, to inform the Government of the existing state in Assam.\(^{(54)}\) Nothing more was done. In 1822 Maha Bandula, the Burmese

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\(^{(50)}\) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 29 July 1796, No.13; *Foreign Department, Political Consultations* 4 Nov. 1796, No.55.

\(^{(51)}\) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 31 March 1803, Nos. 71-73.

\(^{(52)}\) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 17 July 1806, No.110.

\(^{(53)}\) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 29 July 1820, Nos. 73-84.

\(^{(54)}\) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 12 May 1821, Nos.88; *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 16 June 1821, No.69.
Commander, occupied Assam Chowky, and Minghimaha Tilwa was declared Raja of Assam. But Lord Hastings' Government still insisted on amicable settlement with the Burmese by negotiations and not by force.

Lord Amherst (1823-28) unlike his three predecessors embarked upon an active policy with regard to the Company's relations with Assam and Burma. He declared war against the Burmese on 12th March 1824 and by May 1825 the tract up to Sadiya in Assam was liberated by the Company's forces. The war ended on 24th Feb. 1826, when

(55) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 5 July 1822, No.104.

(56) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 26 July 1822, No.50.

(57) *Foreign Department, Political Consultations*, 27 Sept. 1822, Nos. 67, 69.

(58) *Foreign Department, Political and Secret Consultations*, 20 Feb. 1824, No.7.

(59) *Foreign Department, Political and Secret Consultations*, 12 March 1824, No.4.

(60) For details of the Anglo-Burman war see W. White *A Political History of the Events which led to the Burmese War* (London 1827); Also H.H. Wilson, *Narrative of the Burmese War, 1824-26* (London, 1852); Also by the same author *Documents Illustrative of the Burmese War* (Calcutta, 1827).
a peace treaty was signed at Yandaboo. (61) Later, a commerce treaty was also formulated with the Burmese on 23 Nov. 1826. (62) According to these treaties the Burmese relinquished all claims to Assam. David Scott was appointed Agent to the Governor-General having the charge of whole territory upto Sadiya. Sadiya was left to the jurisdiction of a native known as 'Khowa Gohain' and Adam White was appointed as political Agent at Sadiya. (63)

Unfortunately, peace did not last long in Sadiya. In 1828 the Ahom Prince revolted but surrendered twelve days later. (64) In 1830 there were reports about the hostile preparations of the Singhphos and Khampatis and another Ahom Prince was preparing for revolt. (65) Thus the events of 1828 and 1830 convinced Scott of the deep-rooted discontent of the Ahom nobles and of the insecurity of Sadiya.

(62) Ibid., pp. 218-20; Also see infra, Appendix B, pp. 261-264.
(63) Foreign Department, Political and Secret Consultations, 5 April 1828, No. 24.
(64) Foreign Department, Political and Secret Consultations, 12 March 1830, No. 15.
(65) Foreign Department, Political and Secret Consultations, 25 June 1830, No. 4.
Hence Scott suggested to his Government to appoint an officer to reside permanently at Sadiya with some force. He also suggested that upper Assam should be restored to a native Prince.

In Oct. 1832 Lord William Bentinck (1828-35) passed formal orders that Upper Assam should be restored to Purandar Singha and that Sadiya must be maintained as a British Post which should be well fortified.

Accordingly, Purander Singh was formally installed on 24th April 1833 and Major Adam White remained the Political Agent to the Company at Sadiya.

During all this period the desire on the part of Company's Government to promote peace in Assam and to have friendly relations with the rulers of Assam was actuated by the possibilities of a beneficial commercial intercourse with that country, and through it with Tibet and China. But they realised that the tribal belt beyond Assam was a great barrier for the

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(66) Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 10 June 1831, No.50.

(67) Ibid, No.58.

(68) Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 5 Nov. 1832, No.4.

(69) Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 30 May 1833, No.112.
security of Assam and to the commercial intercourse with Tibet and China as well. Hence from 1826 onwards, the history of the British relations with Assam is almost a narration of their struggle to subordinate the hill-tribes around Assam. The struggle continued till the enactment of Inner Line Regulations, on 8th March 1873 under which these tribes were practically isolated and separated from Assam. The following chapter will, therefore, relate the story of British struggle against the tribes and the final enactment of the Inner Line Regulations.