

## **Water Communication in Colonial Assam**

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### **Abstract:**

Assam was annexed to the British dominion as it possessed large economic resources. Annexation of Assam was a part of colonial policy of the British as a whole. Hence, tapping economic resources of the region became one of the most important policies of the British. In pursuing its economic policy, communication played a major role in colonial Assam. Prior to the construction of roadways and railways, water communication played a vital role. The role played by water communication continued to be seen till independence in 1947 with varied degrees and intensity. Moreover, improved technology precipitated the expansion of water communication in Assam. Thus, water communication rendered its help in economic exploitation. Most importantly trade was improved to a great extent due to emergence better water communication. On the other hand, simultaneously there was economic transformation in the region. The pre colonial economy was destroyed and a new economic system emerged in the society. This paper attempts to study the role of water communication in economic exploitation under the colonial rule as well as economic transformation in the region.

**Keywords:** Assam, Colonial rule, Water Communication, Technology.

Communication network played a vital role in economic transition in colonial Assam. It was a powerful force for social and economic transformation of the region. Water communication was one of the communication networks which played a vital role in colonial rule in Assam. After the annexation of Assam communication network was to be improved as a part of colonial economic policy. In order to penetrate into the economic resources, communication became an urgent necessity of the colonial rulers. Lack of communication was a hindrance to economic policy of the colonial rulers. As a result first and foremost task was to improve its communication network and water communication was chosen as one of the networks. This would facilitate the British to tap the resources of the region to the fullest from economic point of view. Moreover, another economic policy to be pursued was to create economy of Assam according to the convenience of colonialism. Economy of Assam was to be reduced to subservient economy of colonialism. This would lead to transformation of economy of the region.

Historically, colonialism developed through three stages and henceforth, historians of modern India highlight three stages of colonialism in India too.<sup>1</sup> The first phase is known as

monopoly of trade and revenue appropriation, second stage as exploitation through trade and finally, foreign investment and competition for colonies.<sup>2</sup> The first stage may also be referred to as the period of Merchant capital, from the Battle of Plassey till the end of the eighteenth century. The second stage of exploitation through trade was industrial capital with the beginning of nineteenth century till the end of the same century. The stage of foreign investment was a period of Finance capital.

The annexation of Assam was coincided with the advent of second stage of colonialism in India. In other parts of India, phase of Merchant Capital and colonial exploitation was already completed. There was beginning of Industrial Capital. The second stage of colonialism shows much interest in jute and plantation industry. In fact, the second stage of colonialism was making the colony into a subordinate trading partner.<sup>3</sup> During this stage of colonialism free entry was given to the capitalists to develop plantation, trade, transport, mining and certain extent industries too.<sup>4</sup> The Industrial Capital was invested by the merchants in both plantations and communication. The two companies were the pioneer in steam service India, viz., India General Steam Navigation (IGSN) and River Steam Navigation (RSN). Albert de Hochpied, a Calcutta based merchant and nine others established IGSN in 1844.<sup>5</sup> This was followed by establishment of a rival company RSN in 1862 by J.W. Williamson. These ventures were fully encouraged by both technological improvements and prospect of river borne trade.

As Assam was annexed during this phase of colonialism, capitalists were encouraged for plantation in Assam. On the other hand, plantation was to be supported by communication network and waterways. It is a known fact that discovery of tea in Assam was one of deciding factors of its annexation. Likewise, growth of tea plantation industry led to the improved water communication. Initially, when tea plantation was started different situations grew up. On one side, tea plantation was growing but there was inadequate transport facility on the other. As a result of the discovery of indigenous tea plant, plantation industry emerged in 1830s. Hitherto, China had been enjoying monopoly in tea and she began to have a competitor. With the purpose to cultivate and manufacture tea, Bengal Association was formed in 1838 constituting both Europeans and Indians. This was followed by another company with similar objective in London.<sup>6</sup> But the two companies decided to amalgamate under the title Assam Tea Company for fear of rivalries.<sup>7</sup> Since then the Assam Tea Company continued to monopolise tea in the first two decades (1840 to 1860). But after 1860 was a period of boom and expansion of tea industry in Assam. This became inevitable due to change in colonial policy after the great revolt of 1857.

Although all the communication networks were to be improved for their purposes, initially it confined to water communication network. Thus, water communication was put impetus. In the beginning it was meant for water borne trade. Gradually, it became a major communication network of the people of the region under the colonial rule. When British arrived in Assam the most convenient mode of communication was water. The river Brahmaputra was the highway of the region connecting with others. Trade and commerce was to be carried by waterway. Prior to the advent of the British, country boat was the main mode of communication. As country boat was small in size it was not possible to carry bulky items in large volumes and large passengers at a time. Hence, it was difficult for the British traders to carry trade in Assam due to dearth of communication. This led to the opening of government steam service in 1847

between Calcutta and Gauhati.<sup>8</sup> This was extended from Gauhati to Dibrugarh in 1856.<sup>9</sup> It was in 1860 that IGSN Company entered into a contract to run two vessels every six weeks from Calcutta to Dibrugarh. After one year the Company started regular traffic on the Brahmaputra for the carriage of labour into Assam.<sup>10</sup> By 1869 the Company had extended its steamers to 16, 32 flats and 5 barges. On the other hand, in 1864 RSN Company entered into an agreement with the railway for the traffic in Assam.

Water communication in colonial Assam may be divided between two categories based on its ownership i.e., private and public. Steam and ferry services were owned by private companies and government lessees. Most of the steam services plying between Calcutta and Assam were owned by IGSN and RSN Companies. These steam services were mainly meant for distant passengers and goods of exports and imports. On the other hand, ferry services were mainly for local goods and passengers calling at every ferry *ghats*. With the establishment of Local Boards in 1880 most of the ferry services were entrusted with the local Boards under the Northern Ferries Act of 1878. Some of the government ferry services were under the control of PWD and later made public. The reason for making government ferries public was its financial constraints.<sup>11</sup>

The emergence of modern water communication network was facilitated by several factors. Introduction of steam engine served as a blessing for the colonial rulers in Assam. Steam engine is considered as one of the tools for making imperialism success in Asian countries so as in Assam. In the nineteenth century steamship played a great role in the establishment of colonial hegemony in the region. It was the power of steamship which led to the advent of the British rule in the region. In the year 1824-26, first Anglo- Burmese war was fought in which a British steamship "Diana" brought about victory of the East India Company(EIC) against the Burmese. The steamship was an important piece of technology and a tool without which many colonial conflicts could not have been won by European powers.<sup>12</sup> This victory of the EIC gradually led to the annexation of Assam due to certain economic expediency of the region. Thus the colonial policy of the EIC was served better by the introduction of steam engine.

In the Brahmaputra Valley steamer played a more important role in the nineteenth century than other mode of communications. It is evident from the fact that by the end of the century there was increase in both imports and exports by steamer service. On the other hand, emergence of steamer service was coincided with the coming of railways in Assam. Assam Bengal railway was set in 1891 Chittagong as its head quarter. Eastern Bengal Railway was also set up in Bengal. Both the railway companies wanted to expand railway service in Assam. Thus, there was implicit competition between the two modes of communication. At times it was supported by each other in making its objectives successful.

In 1899, IGSN and RSN companies were combined to form a Joint Steamer Company. This company started services from Calcutta to Sadiya with six feeder routes, viz., river Subansiri (130 km), Dhansiri (40 km), Kapili-Kolong (90 km).<sup>13</sup> Despite the extension of Assam Bengal Railway from Lumding to Gauhati in 1901 most of the trade was carried by river during the period. The most important initiative undertaken in steamer service was the introduction of

the Assam Sundarban Despatch Service in 1904. It was to bring tea direct from Assam to Calcutta without transshipment in Goalundo. Although railway was extended to Assam, trade continued to be carried by river route. In 1906-07, 54 per cent of the registered imports and exports were carried by river.<sup>14</sup> By 1908-09, the river borne traffic equaled 50 per cent of total exports and 41 per cent imports. After the end of the World War I, steamer service continued to play a great role in carrying trade in the region. It was in 1920-21, of the total registered trade by rail and river, 40.3 per cent of the imports and 54 per cent of the exports were carried by river.<sup>15</sup>

It is to be noted that steamer service was not only plied for trade and commerce, it was also to serve certain public service. In 1905 daily steamer service was started between Dhubri and Gauhati<sup>16</sup> at a time when Eastern Bengal State Railway extended to Dhubri in 1902.<sup>17</sup> Apart from carrying goods, people were given opportunity to travel easily.

Besides, the steamer services of the companies and government, ferry services were also run by the governmental departments and private proprietors. There were about 275 ferries in the districts of Assam Valley Division.<sup>18</sup> Deputy Commissioner was the head of the management of the ferry service from the year 1882. For the convenience of services there was distribution of divisions of ferry services. Assam Valley was divided into 5 divisions viz., Lower Assam Division, Sibsagar Division, Golaghat Division, Central Assam Division and Western Assam Division.<sup>19</sup> Further, divisions were divided into different sub divisions. Thus, several number of ferry services were started in Assam Valley Division by the end of the nineteenth century. This resulted in good communication between the two district headquarters. Ferry services served mainly local traffic connecting both provincial and Local Board roads and also connecting Local Board to Local Board roads.<sup>20</sup> Example may be cited of three ferries maintained by PWD in 1926 for crossing the Brahmaputra.

1. The "Egret" was maintained at Gauhati for connecting both provincial and Local Board roads.
2. The "Curlew" was at Dhubri to connect the roads of Local Boards.
3. The "Nelly" was maintained Kokilamukh connecting both provincial and Local Board roads.<sup>21</sup>

Government possessed steamers to serve their purposes when necessary. But due to the reasons of old age of steamers and recurring losses, government decided to sale steamers. By 1926 most of the government steamers were sold at a very lower price. This resulted the government left without any steamers in the Brahmaputra. But the government was left with ferry steamers.<sup>22</sup>

Despite a good service provided by ferry, it started to decline in the second decades of the twentieth century. The reasons are many. First of all it was the expansion of railway and road ways led to the decline of ferry service in Assam.

Secondly, it was the recurring losses that led to the decline of ferry service in Assam. From 1921-22 to 1925-26 ferry services in three sub divisions of Gauhati, Kamalabari and Dhubri faced mostly losses. Rai Bahadur Chandra Ketu Narayan Sinha (Lessee in the steam

ferries Assam Valley Division) confessed in October 1930 in a letter to the Commissioner, Assam Valley Division that the ferry services were running at a heavy loss.<sup>23</sup>

After the Great Depression of 1930, it was found that 700 miles of steamer routes had been covered in the Brahmaputra valley.<sup>24</sup> This proves that trade was still carried by river route in spite of extension of railway and roadways. Total length of road was lesser than river route and railway also did not exceed much. But the beginning of World War II saw congestion in steamer *ghats* due to huge volume of inward traffic. During the war traffic was diverted to river route. The normal trade and commerce suffered due to this diversion. Steamer services of Amingao- Kokilamukh, Dhubri- Goalpara were closed during the war. Moreover, Bordutti Feeder Service was converted from daily to alternate day service to meet military and other state requirements. Thus, during the World War II steamer service suffered to certain extent. This suffer was economic only. After the end of the war steamer service was about to rise high, but India was granted independence with partition.

At a time when India was granted independence, Assam had to face trouble in its relations with other provinces of India. Most of the links either water or railway, people of Assam had to go through newly created Pakistan. For nearly two years people of Assam had to face trouble. In between 1947 and 1951, Joint Steamer Company of IGSN and RSN obtained virtual monopoly of traffic especially of tea and jute between Calcutta and Assam. Before the completion of the Assam Rail Link in 1949 the river services had their most busy years. The Joint Steamer Company continued to carry about 80 per cent of tea and 90 per cent of jute. Although Joint Steamer Company was given monopoly, they had to face certain problems. In 1949 barges with Assam jute was held in the territory of Pakistan as it had to cross through that territory. The most crucial problem of the steamer company was that it had to purchase coal from railway at a high rate. Besides, there were numbers of check posts which delayed the journey.<sup>25</sup>

## Impacts:

The emergence of water communication was with certain objectives. These objectives were to fulfil the colonial designs of the British. Hence, there was expansion of trade in Assam due to emergence of improved water communication. The colonial rulers realised that Assam possessed potentialities and these could be extracted only through better mode of communication. Gradually, with the expansion of water communication trade was also expanded. Similarly, new markets were opened in different districts of the region. Despite the introduction road and railway communication networks, water communication was also continued for water borne trade by the British till attainment of independence. The accepted notion is that expansion of trade and market due to improved water communication was beneficial for the colonial rulers, merchants, planters and traders. It was not at all beneficial for the people of the region. On the other hand, people of Assam did not have capital that the European enterprises had invested. Despite the prevalence of economic potentialities, lack of capitalist class of people handicapped them. But the Europeans accumulated capital from the mercantilist phase which prevailed in between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century. Due to lack of this kind of economic ideology people of Assam could not accumulate capital and capitalist class of people did not emerge. The people of Assam became victim of those accumulated capital of the Europeans. Thus, Assam and its economic potentialities would have

remained unused without interference of the colonial enterprises. It was the colonial policy of communication that opened the region. It was an important venture on the part of the colonial rulers because the people of Assam had the opportunity to blend themselves with the modernity and western civilisation. The improved water communication had no doubt negative impacts but it was subsided by emergence of new class of people in the region due to improvement of economy of the region.

There was also economic transformation with the introduction and improvement of water communication. Its emergence facilitated trade and commerce. Most importantly plantation industries grew up in large scale. This was the most significant feature of colonial rule in Assam. Besides, commercialisation of crops also emerged in the region. These could happen due to better water communication and other communication networks. As a result traditional economy was totally destroyed and a new economy emerged. It was neither capitalist mode of production nor feudalistic. There was lack of capitalist class of people in the region for which it could not be a completely capitalist mode of production. Economy of Assam was transformed into a new economy. This economy was colonial economy serving the purposes of the colonial rulers which used to be termed as transformation of economy of Assam.

Moreover, improved water communication led to the influx of peasant and labour immigrants. The steam ships were used for the purpose of transporting labourers from Chotanagpur area and other adjacent to Chotanagpur. They were transported to Assam for the purpose of clearing the jungles and settle the land for tea plantation. Moreover, procuring heavy machinery for manufacturing tea was also made possible by steam ship in the region.<sup>26</sup> During the period the steamers carried food grains, salt, tea, forest products, coal and rocks as well as limited amount of petroleum products between Calcutta and Assam.<sup>27</sup>

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## Notes and references:

<sup>1</sup> Chandra,Bipan, *Essays on Colonialism*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2000 (Reprint), p. 62

<sup>2</sup> Chandra,Bipan, *Ibid*, pp. 62-70

<sup>3</sup> Chandra,Bipan, *Ibid*, p. 65

<sup>4</sup> Chandra,Bipan, *Ibid*, p. 66

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Jones, *Two Centuries of Overseas Trading: The Origin and Growth of Inchope Group*, p. 15 (Palgrave, UK, 1986)

<sup>6</sup> H.K. Barpujari (Ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.V*, Guwahati, 1993,p. 40

<sup>7</sup> H.K. Barpujari (Ed.),*Ibid*. p. 21

<sup>8</sup>ShyamBhadraMedhi, *Transport System and Economic Development in Assam*, Guwahati, 1978, p.19

<sup>9</sup>ShyamBhadraMedhi, *Ibid*. p. 20

<sup>10</sup>ShyamBhadraMedhi, *Ibid*. p. 20

<sup>11</sup> ASA, File No. XVI – 60, *Control and Management of Steam Ferries in Assam*, 1926

<sup>12</sup> Mathew Mclin, *Building Up Steam: Steamship Technology in 19<sup>th</sup> Century East Asian Colonial Warfare*, A Thesis submitted to the Programme in Asian Studies in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Florida State University, 2012, p. 2

<sup>13</sup>History of IWT, Assam available at <http://www.iwt.assam.gov.in/wp/history-of-iwtassam> accessed on 23rd March, 2016 at 11.55 am

<sup>14</sup>ShyamBhadraMedhi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 26

<sup>15</sup>Report on the administration of Assam for the year 1920-21, p. 19, para- 149

<sup>16</sup> B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteer*, Vol. IV, 1905,p. 77

<sup>17</sup>ShyamBhadraMedhi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27

<sup>18</sup>Suchitra Devi, *Impact of transport system on commodity movement: A case study of Sonitpur District*, submitted to the Department of Commerce, Gauhati University, 2002, p. 35

<sup>19</sup>See ASA File No. XII-16 of 1931, Finance Department and Ferry Branch for details

<sup>20</sup>See ASA File No. XVI- 60 of 1926, Department- Finance for detail

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>ASA, File No. XII- 1 of 1930 Dept- Finance, Branch- Ferry, Government of Assam

<sup>24</sup>ShyamBhadraMedhi, *Op.cit.* p. 27

<sup>25</sup>ShyamBhadraMedhi, *Ibid.* p. 29 for details

<sup>26</sup>NTDPC, *Vol. 03, Part 02*, Ch. 6, p.126

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.* p. 127