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THE FRENCH EAST INDIA COMPANY'S TRADING RELATIONS WITH THE AHOM STATE

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ABSTRACT

The 18<sup>th</sup> century has been one of the most debated centuries in Indian history which can be seen as a 'threshold' between two major time-frame: the pre-colonial and colonial period of Indian history. Several political, economic and social developments in regional level made this century historically a dynamic and vibrant century. Colonial powers who were vying against each other for gaining a foothold in areas which was formerly under the control of the Mughal Empire (in theory; if not in reality), were extending their interest towards the uncharted territories in search of newer markets and materials. This paper intends to examine the French East India Company's endeavour to establish trading relation with Assam in the light of the writings of a French official and trader, Jean Baptiste Chevalier who had visited Assam in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. My focus will be to understand the nature of trade and commerce and the economic relationship between the mercantile groups in Assam on the eve of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonialism.

**Summary:** Difficult physiological situation combined with the policy of exclusion followed by the Ahom state made it difficult for the foreign visitors to enter this land. Around this time when the neighboring Bengal was experiencing a flare of economic activities in terms of both inland and overseas trade, and when the influence of these activities was felt in the Koch kingdoms, the policy of strict exclusion and regulation observed by the Ahom State pushed further date for colonial intervention.

I

The geo-political extent of pre-colonial Assam was quite different from that of colonial period. The territory was divided between number of political entities such as the Chutiyas, the Dimasas, the Ahoms, and the Koches etc. The Ahom state was one of the most important political entities of the Brahmaputra valley for around six centuries till coming of the colonial rule under EEIC in the 19th century. The State formation process that was initiated by Sukapha, a prince of the Shan State of Maulung in Upper Burma in early part of the 13<sup>th</sup> century which altered the socio-political landscape of this area. He with his men crossed the Patkai range and entered the tract, which later came to be known as *Asam/Asom* and was earlier inhabited by people of small ethnic groups such as Morans, Barahis, Chutiyas etc. Gradually entire Brahmaputra valley came under the control of the Ahom political system.<sup>1</sup>

Its natural location and terrain made the territory under the control of the Ahom state largely inaccessible and difficult to penetrate. Apart from the river Brahmaputra which was the main artery for trade and general transportation, there were only few inland trade routes passes through this territory. L.A. Waddell, has described Assam as a territory hemmed in between the Eastern Himalayas, southern Tibet, China, Burma and Nepal, the hills and valleys of the Brahmaputra, occupy a somewhat secluded and inaccessible portion of Asia... the upper central valley throws out on either side into adjoining mountains hundreds of rugged glens... Then rounding rocky promontory of the Garo hills, the valley turns at a right angle sharply southern to the delta of Bengal, extending a branch eastwards to the Cachar Hills.<sup>2</sup>

Difficult physiological situation combined with the policy of exclusion followed by the Ahom state made it difficult for the foreign visitors to enter this land. Perceptions about Assam were always shrouded in mystery and the general notion was that it had been a land of black magic. Unlike the rest of India, the policy of seclusion followed by the state, especially the Ahom state did restrict the entry of the foreign travellers.

Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we do not find any definitive accounts left by any European visitor to Assam. It was believed that Among the European visitors to pre-colonial Assam in during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, Ralph Fitch (1586) was one of the earliest, followed by Father Stephen Cacella and Father John Cabral (1626), one Glanius (1662) Jean Baptist Chevalier (1752-1765), Captain Welsh (1792) and John Peter Wade (1792).<sup>3</sup>

II

Jean Baptiste Chevalier was a French agent who visited Assam in

the second half of the eighteenth century. Chevalier, who had became the Governor of Chandernagore in 1767 and stayed in that position till 1778, was an ardent defender of the French cause in Hindustan, maintaining close relations with the Indian princes through French officers like Gentil and adventurers like Madec, with the conviction that the France could still create a sphere of influence in north India.<sup>4</sup>

In the month of April 1755, Renault de Saint- Germain, the Governor of Chandernagaur, entrusted him with the mission to go to Assam and establish a factory there by acquiring some land. He had started his journey from Dhaka in the month of June 1755 and had reached Kandahar chowki that was the accepted frontier between the kingdom of Koch Behar and the Ahom state in November. Thereafter, traversing a distance of almost two months, he finally reached the capital of the Ahoms in February 1756.<sup>5</sup>

There was much mystery regarding the work of Jean Baptiste Chevalier. James Rennell, the English geographer, who made the survey of the Brahmaputra in the 19th century, had said that "Mr. Chevalier, the late Governor of Chandernagore, by permission of the king, went as high up as the capital of Assam, about the year 1762, but was under considerable degree of restraint, with respect to making remarks either on the course of the river, or on the country..."<sup>6</sup> J.P. Wade in his *Geographical Sketch of Assam* talks of Chevalier of having "left some information relative to the geography of the country; or more probably the banks of the river, which lay in his course..."<sup>7</sup>

His works were discovered in *Bibliothèque de l'institut* in Paris in 1926 and his journal was edited by Jean Deloche and was published by EFEO, Paris only in 1986. This journal combines two manuscripts from the papers donated by Mrs. Henri Cordier who had the papers of the Chevalier de Conan's family who was a descendent of Jean Baptiste Chevalier. The English translation under the title of *Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India (1752-1765): Historical Memoir and Journal of Travels in Assam, Bengal and Tibet* had come up only in 2008.

Comparing these available texts, the editor was able to find the missing information of his journal about Assam as the last pages of the journal was missing. But as the editor has suggested though the dominant theme of both the texts was that of adventure, the *journal* was more spontaneous which have not been edited or corrected for the purpose of being published or due to an official order<sup>18</sup> The *Memoir*, on other hand, was the result of long thinking: a skillful plea, where the writer shows his faithfulness and devotion to the Company, but cleverly omits some of his

activities-significant oversights in order to hide some of his weaknesses. At the very beginning of his memoir Chevalier had stated that his mission as "It is neither for vanity nor for self-interest that I am writing this account. I state the truth when I say that the sole cause for writing this report is for my own justification against those enemies who, ignited by jealousy or covetousness, accused me falsely".<sup>9</sup> The apologetic tone of his memoir was perhaps can be seen in the context of an unfruitful adventure on the part of a diplomat who was expected to bring good news during the hours of need.

This brings us to the background in which we can contextualize Chevalier's adventure to an unknown and mysterious land. When the *faujdar*<sup>10</sup> of Rangamaty expressed his suspicion that Chevalier might be carrying ammunition to the country of Assam, Chevalier declared that his only objective was simply to extract information on Assam, Tibet and Bhutan. He writes "Although the picture we had of the kingdom of Assam was vague and confusing, the land was fabled as being famous for its riches and abundant trade opportunities. An establishment there (if it was possible to enter the country) would bring a number of advantages to the company. The kingdom's proximity with China, Tibet, the kingdom of Ava and other adjoining countries would offer an unprecedented market for the French manufactures and also open big markets for other European goods."<sup>11</sup> His adventure needs to be seen in the broader context of colonial policy of the *La Compagnie des Indes* (the French East India Company). The Company was created in 1664 "to procure for the kingdom the advantage of Asian commerce and to prevent the English and the Dutch alone from profiting from it as they have up to now. The principal French settlement in Bengal, Chandernagor had become a great commercial centre under Dupleix during 1731 to 1741. Company's sales of Indian goods increased for a period between 1740 to 1755 during the Austrian War of Succession to rival those of the English East India Company. Aftermath of the treaty of Paris of 1763, in which France had to give up her territories in mainland North America to Great Britain compelled France to look up fresh territories elsewhere."<sup>12</sup> In this context of mounting competition, the unexplored lands of Hindoostan, China, Tibet etc became perspective lucrative markets for the French company. Chevalier states, "the new mission I had been chosen for was to go and discover this new source of riches. My instructions were that, in case Assam happens to be as rich as it is believed to be, then I should leave no stone unturned to get an allowance for a plot of land from its prince in order to build a lodge there".<sup>13</sup>

Chevalier was a brave traveller and seasoned diplomat too. On one occasion when the *faujdar* of Rangamaty had asked him to declare his cargo, he very cleverly avoided the situation by stating that he had very few cargos with him as the purpose of his trip was not much related to business as it was to his passion for travel. On the eve of Chevalier's visit to the Ahom State there was a rumour, allegedly spread by the Muslim and Bengali merchants, who perceived Chevalier as a threat to their commercial interest, that Chevalier had come to annex the kingdom of Assam on behalf of the nabab of Mouxoudabad (*faujdar* of Murshidabad). The Ahom king was extremely cautious and assigned a man to find out the background and exact purpose of Chevalier's visit.<sup>14</sup>

### III

Though quantitative references about trade of Assam prior to the nineteenth century is quite limited, Buchanan-Hamilton's account of 1807-14<sup>15</sup> gives us some idea about the items of trade and its quantitative value. It says that the annual trade between Assam-Bhutan alone was estimated at rupees two lakhs. Assam bartered lac, dried fish, muga and edi silks for Bhutan's woollens, gold dust, salt, musk, ponies, yak tails and Chinese silk. Similarly, trade was carried on with Tibet and, to some extent with upper Burma. Assam received a part of her supply of bullion from these sources, which was partly used to pay for her trade with Bengal... .. The Bengal trade was mostly limited to bartering a single import, salt, for assorted products of Assam. The trading capital and initiative were mostly in the hands of merchants from outside Assam.<sup>16</sup> At the Chowkis or check-posts/ custom posts custom duties were collected by civil and military officials. One such chowki was

Kandahar or Hadira chowki which was placed under one *Duaria Barua* who used to collect custom duties on all exports and imports. It was believed to be the biggest chowki of Assam border.<sup>17</sup>

Talking about trade in Assam-Bengal border post Chevalier states that the business done in Canar Choqui (Kandahar Chowki) is not very considerable. The merchants of Assam bring few goods; the greatest part consists mainly of brayed cotton with its seeds and lacure. They also carry *morphile*(?) in small quantities, but nobody can buy them for the *nabab* of Rangamaty keeps this trade to himself.<sup>18</sup>

Merchants from Bengal also brought salt after paying 20 percent duty at Alomgonge (Alamganj) and Rangamaty that was sold in Jouguigoupat (Jugighopa). There, they sell it to the Boutouas or the people of Assam at a rate of 4 rupees a *man*, in exchange of other goods such as cotton, wood etc. The trade was not as profitable as it was thought to be as there was multiple duties a trader had to pay at every chowki or check posts/custom houses. Chevalier states the hindrances made on everybody by the heads of chowkis, of towns or villages the trade was ruined in the whole Bengal.<sup>19</sup> He himself had to face lots of bureaucratic red-trapism on his journey.

Chevalier's perception about the Ahom state and its people was not very favourable. He says, "Nothing is more treacherous, corrupt and at the same time nastier than the people of Assam. I already had many occasion to think so, but finally this confirmed me in my idea as it was my first trip in the country".<sup>20</sup> This irk was resulted out of his frustration when his repeated attempt to establish a foothold for commercial purpose had seemed futile. He wrote, "They (officials) did their best to remove from me all the people who could have given me some information on the prices of goods. People of the country were forbidden to have even the slight communication with me and for the merchants to approach me until the king supposedly had himself fixed the prices of what I would sell or buy".<sup>21</sup> Market and money economy was not well developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Ahom kingdom. Barter system was more common and periodical markets had came up in areas where traditional routes of exchange between neighbouring hill people existed. Rules framed for regulating and collecting state's share were first introduced by king Pratap Singha (1603-1641). It was regulated that the state's share from any market place was L of each kind of goods brought for sale. Moreover, there was a strict regulation on buying and selling of goods. Chevalier notes that it was the tradition in the country that nobody can buy from a newly arrived merchant until the king had previously been provided with what he wants. Following this, the King calls other merchants and orders them to take the surplus at the price fixed by him and his ministers. Chevalier also talks of an incident which angered him very much was that he was provided with a list containing the prices of local goods at an inflated rate (150 percent more) by the 'second vizier'.<sup>22</sup>

Though the volume of trade during the 18<sup>th</sup> century Assam was not as large as that of Bengal, there was some semblance of organization in the system of trade. The entire trade with outside states like Bhutan and Bengal was carried on by some big merchants (*mudoi/saaud*) who used to collect goods through smaller traders from various parts of the kingdom and finally exported them to outside the state. It appears that the traders from the Koch kingdom, which had a closer connection with Bengal than that of the Ahoms, played an important role as they used to collect goods at a cheaper rate and sold them in other places with much profit. Moreover, there was a nexus between the officials who were involved in the regulation of trade and commerce and the merchants. Chevalier had initially find it difficult to penetrate this network and laments, "It was not an easy task to find some way of sending my letters to the raja and his ministers to ask him for permission to enter the kingdom ... .. I had a great difficulty finding a reliable person willing to carry my letters. One man, however, came forward who had permission from the king to go freely in his land. In return for the services he offered to me, I promised him a good reward if he informed the king of my arrival

and obtained his permission to allow me to go and greet him”<sup>23</sup>He also mentions a group of *boiraguy* who had access to and influence in the Ahom court and who took considerable interest in the commercial activities. The activities these *Bairagis* were perhaps similar to those of *Sanyasis*<sup>24</sup> who were actually the mercenaries operating with the patronages of local zamindars or big merchants in Bengal. They had played an important role in subsequent 1857 rebellion or India’s first war for independence. In pre-colonial Assam, these *bairagis* were member of a professional group (*khel*) created by the Ahom king Rudra Singha who started five *khels*: *bairagi*, *khaund*, *doloi*, *kakoti* and *kotoki*.<sup>25</sup> Their main purpose the *bairagi khel* was to gather intelligence and to work as informers. It was also mentioned in one buranji that king Pratap Singha had created a *khel* of *langta* (naked) *bairagis*. They were called *bairagis* or wandering ascetics who supposed to have no ties with their kith and kin. But in reality these *bairagis* were spies and informers who were mainly operative in the areas near the border check posts and as Chevalier has mentioned played significant role in negotiating commercial deals in return for a reward.

After waiting for long months to obtain audience with the Ahom king Chevalier was successful in entering the capital city of the Ahoms in Upper Assam as a state guest. He was also successful in obtaining a piece of land for constructing a residence. But what happened to his bigger dreams of obtaining markets for his company or what about finding trade routes to China, Tibet or other neighboring countries? Due to extreme cautiousness and apprehension of the Ahom state Chevalier’s goals of markets and trade routes remained unfulfilled. He was not allowed to freely sell or buy in Assam nor was he allowed to embark in the journey to explore perspective trade routes. Frustration was evident in his journal when he was kept in sort of house-arrest<sup>26</sup>. He had used all available tactics ranging from pleading, diplomatic correspondence, forging friendship to bribing the high officials and even threat of arms. In the meantime, the increasing Anglo-French rivalry which resulted in the war gave the ruler of the Ahom state a valid ground to ask Chevalier to leave the Ahom state.<sup>27</sup> The extent manuscript of Chevalier’s journal does not contain the pages which talks about his last days in Assam but the missing pieces of puzzle can be gathered from his memoir. About debacle of the French in Chandernagore and his subsequent course of action, Chevalier writes, “ I learned that they (EEIC) had taken back Calcutta from the Moor who had defeated them the previous year, that they have declared war on the *nabab* Surajah-[dolat] and defeated him, to finally take control of Chandernagore. All these unfortunate events put me in great embarrassment. I was in dilemma regarding the decision that I should take on my next course of action. Going back to Bengal represented for me the risk of being arrested, looted and jailed by the English. I told the king about my position. ... .. he declared, with honesty he always had with me, that he could not offer me refuge in his country despite his affection and special consideration. His principal concern was the peace of his kingdom and the safety of his crown.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, in May 1757, Chevalier left the Ahom territory and proceeded towards Dhaka.

IV

Though Chevalier was neither successful in his mission of gaining foothold for *La Compagnie des Indes* in Assam nor in exploring new routes to China, Tibet or other neighbouring states, his personal career was not insignificant. He eventually became the Governor of Chandernagore in July 1767. His experience of the realities of Indian life had been decisive and it heavily influenced him in elaboration of his future diplomatic projects.<sup>29</sup> *Adventures of Jean-Baptiste Chevalier in Eastern India* is an invaluable source to understand the economic processes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Assam. Around this time when the neighboring Bengal was experiencing a flare of economic activities in terms of both inland and overseas trade, and when the influence of these activities was felt in the Koch kingdoms, the policy of strict exclusion and regulation observed by the Ahom State pushed further date for colonial intervention. It was only in the year 1826 after the treaty of Yandaboo, the British were able to enter the territory of the Ahom state.

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