



TRADE AND COMMERCE IN GOALPARA DISTRICT DURING THE BRITISH PERIOD: AN ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

This research paper examines the evolution and transformation of trade and commerce in Goalpara District during the British colonial period, spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries. The study analyses the multifaceted impact of British colonial policies, infrastructure development and the systematic integration of Goalpara into the broader colonial economy of the Bengal Presidency and later Assam. Through a comprehensive examination of primary colonial records, administrative reports and secondary historical sources, this paper investigates the role of local markets, riverine trade networks and the production and export of key commodities including tea, timber and agricultural products. The research reveals that while British rule catalysed significant economic growth through infrastructure development and commercialisation of agriculture, it simultaneously disrupted traditional livelihoods and created profound socio-economic inequalities. The transformation of Goalpara's economy from a subsistence-based local system to a cash crop-oriented colonial economy left lasting legacies that continue to shape the region's economic and social structures. This study contributes to the broader historiography of colonial economic history in Northeast India and highlights the need for further research into the long-term impacts of colonial policies on regional development.

Keywords: Goalpara, colonial economy, trade and commerce, Assam, British India, economic transformation, riverine trade, tea industry.

Introduction

The history of trade and commerce in Goalpara District reflects the broader economic transformation across the Indian subcontinent during British colonial rule. Situated in present-

day Assam, Goalpara has a rich commercial heritage that predates British colonisation, with established trade networks connecting the region to neighbouring territories through the Brahmaputra River and overland routes. However, the advent of British colonialism in the early 19th century fundamentally altered the economic landscape of the district, introducing new policies, infrastructure and trade networks that integrated Goalpara into the wider colonial economy.

The British annexation of Goalpara in 1826, following the Treaty of Yandabo that concluded the First Anglo-Burmese War, marked a pivotal moment in the region's economic history. As the district became part of the Bengal Presidency and later Assam, it underwent systematic economic reorganisation designed to serve colonial interests while extracting resources for export to global markets. This paper examines the dynamics of trade and commerce in Goalpara during the British period, focusing on key economic sectors, trade routes, infrastructure development and the profound impact of colonial policies on local society and economy.

This study is significant for several reasons. **First**, it contributes to the understudied field of economic history in Northeast India, a region often marginalised in mainstream narratives of Indian colonial history. **Second**, it provides insights into the mechanisms through which colonialism transformed local economies and integrated them into global trade networks. **Third**, it put on the long-term consequences of colonial economic policies that continue to influence contemporary development patterns in the region.

Historical Background

Before the establishment of British rule, Goalpara was part of the Koch Kingdom and later came under the sovereignty of the Mughal Empire. The region was renowned for its fertile land, abundant forests and strategic location along the Brahmaputra River, which facilitated trade with neighbouring regions including Bhutan, Bengal and Tibet. The pre-colonial economy of Goalpara was characterised by subsistence agriculture, local handicrafts and a network of markets that facilitated the exchange of goods within and beyond the region.

The British annexation of Goalpara in 1826 fundamentally altered this economic landscape. Under British rule, Goalpara became a district of the Bengal Presidency and later Assam, administered through a hierarchical bureaucratic system designed to maximise revenue extraction and resource exploitation. The colonial administration introduced new land revenue systems, commercialised agriculture and developed infrastructure to facilitate the movement of goods from the interior to ports for export.

The early decades of British rule witnessed the systematic survey and settlement of land, the introduction of the Permanent Settlement and later the Ryotwari system and the establishment of administrative infrastructure that would support colonial economic objectives. These changes were not merely administrative but had profound implications for land ownership patterns, agricultural practices and social relations in the district.

Key Sectors of Trade and Commerce

Agricultural Trade

Agriculture formed the backbone of Goalpara's economy during the British period, employing the vast majority of the population and generating the primary commodities for trade. The fertile plains of the Brahmaputra Valley supported the cultivation of a diverse range of crops including rice, jute, mustard, pulses and various vegetables. Rice, as the staple food crop, was cultivated extensively throughout the district, with surplus production traded in local markets and transported to other parts of Assam and Bengal.

The British colonial administration introduced significant changes to agricultural practices in Goalpara, most notably the promotion of cash crops for export. Jute emerged as a particularly important commercial crop, with Goalpara becoming a significant producer for the Calcutta market and international export. Mustard cultivation also expanded, providing oil for both local consumption and external trade. The commercialisation of agriculture transformed farming from a subsistence-oriented activity to a market-oriented enterprise, integrating Goalpara's rural economy into broader colonial trade networks.

The agricultural produce of Goalpara was traded through a hierarchical network of markets, ranging from local village *haats* to larger regional trading centres. These markets served as collection points for agricultural surplus, which was then transported via river or road to processing centres and export hubs. The colonial administration regulated these markets, establishing standardised weights and measures, imposing taxes on transactions, and granting licences to traders, thereby extending state control over commercial activities.

Tea Industry

The tea industry played a pivotal role in transforming Goalpara's economy during the British period, representing the most significant example of colonial commercial agriculture in the district. Following the discovery of wild tea plants in Assam in the 1820s and the subsequent establishment of the Assam Tea Company in 1839, the British systematically developed tea plantations across the region, including Goalpara.

The establishment of tea plantations in Goalpara was facilitated by favourable climatic and soil conditions, as well as the availability of land and labour. The colonial administration granted large tracts of land to European planters on favourable terms, often displacing local communities from their traditional lands. The tea plantations operated as enclaves of commercial agriculture, importing capital, technology and management from Britain while relying on local and migrant labour for cultivation and processing.

Goalpara's tea was exported to markets in Europe, particularly Britain and other parts of the world, contributing significantly to the colonial economy and generating substantial profits for British planters and investors. The tea industry stimulated related economic activities including transportation, warehousing and processing, while also creating demand for goods and services in plantation areas. However, the benefits of the tea industry were unevenly distributed, with local communities often receiving minimal returns while bearing the social and environmental costs of plantation agriculture.

Timber and Forest Products

The dense forests of Goalpara constituted a valuable resource for the British colonial administration, which systematically exploited timber and other forest products for commercial purposes. Timber, particularly sal (*Shorea robusta*) and teak (*Tectona grandis*), was harvested on a large scale and used for construction, ship-building and railway sleepers. The expansion of railways and urban infrastructure in colonial India created substantial demand for timber, driving intensive logging operations in Goalpara's forests.

The colonial administration established a Forest Department to manage and regulate forest resources, introducing scientific forestry practices designed to maximise sustainable yield while ensuring state control over valuable timber. Forest products including bamboo, cane, resin and various non-timber forest products were also harvested and traded, providing raw materials for construction, handicrafts and industrial processes.

The commercialisation of forest resources had profound implications for local communities who had traditionally depended on forests for their livelihoods. The imposition of state control over forests restricted traditional access rights and practices, often leading to conflict between local communities and the colonial administration. The forest policies introduced during the British period established patterns of resource extraction and management that continued to influence forest governance in the post-colonial era.

Riverine Trade

The Brahmaputra River served as the primary artery of trade and commerce in Goalpara during the British period, facilitating the movement of goods, people and information across the region. The river connected Goalpara to major commercial centres in Assam, Bengal and beyond, enabling the export of tea, timber, and agricultural produce while facilitating the import of manufactured goods, salt, and other commodities.

The British invested significantly in improving river transport infrastructure, including the construction of ports, landing *ghats* and warehouses along the Brahmaputra. Steamboats, introduced in the 1840s, revolutionised riverine trade by providing faster, more reliable and higher-capacity transportation compared to traditional country boats. The Assam Steam Navigation Company and other private operators established regular services connecting Goalpara to Calcutta and other major ports, integrating the district into wider colonial trade networks.

Riverine trade in Goalpara was characterised by a complex network of intermediaries, including boatmen, merchants, brokers and agents who facilitated the movement of goods from producers to consumers. The colonial administration regulated riverine trade through licensing, tolls and customs duties, generating revenue while extending state control over commercial activities.

Infrastructure Development

The British colonial administration invested substantially in infrastructure development in Goalpara to support trade and commerce, facilitate resource extraction and integrate the district into the colonial economy. These infrastructure investments transformed the physical landscape of the district and created new patterns of economic activity and settlement.

Railways

The introduction of railways in the late 19th century represented a transformative development for Goalpara's economy, connecting the district to other parts of Assam and India and significantly reducing the time and cost of transporting goods. The Assam Bengal Railway, extended to Goalpara in the early 20th century, provided a reliable and efficient means of transporting tea, timber, and agricultural produce to ports and markets, while also facilitating the import of manufactured goods and other commodities.

The railways stimulated economic growth by reducing transportation costs, expanding market access and enabling the commercialisation of agriculture and resource extraction. Railway stations emerged as new centres of economic activity, attracting traders, warehouses

and processing facilities. However, the benefits of railway development were unevenly distributed, with areas served by railways experiencing faster economic growth than those remaining dependent on traditional transport modes.

Roads

The construction of roads improved connectivity within Goalpara and facilitated the movement of goods from interior areas to markets and transportation hubs. The colonial administration built and maintained roads connecting major settlements, markets and river ports, enabling the movement of goods during the dry season when river transport was less reliable. Road development also facilitated the movement of troops and administration, serving both economic and strategic objectives.

The road network in Goalpara expanded significantly during the British period, although the quality and extent of roads varied considerably across the district. Major trunk roads connected Goalpara to neighbouring districts and provinces, while feeder roads linked rural areas to markets and transportation hubs. The colonial administration invested in bridges and culverts to improve road connectivity, particularly across the many streams and rivers that intersected the district.

Ports and Ghats

The development of river ports and landing *ghats* along the Brahmaputra enhanced riverine trade and facilitated the movement of goods between water and land transport modes. The colonial administration constructed and maintained *ghats* at strategic locations along the river, providing facilities for loading and unloading goods, storing commodities, and accommodating traders and travellers.

Major river ports in Goalpara, including those at Dhubri and Goalpara town, emerged as important commercial centres, handling substantial volumes of trade in tea, timber, agricultural produce and imported goods. These ports served as collection and distribution points for the district's trade, connecting local markets to regional and international trade networks. The colonial administration invested in port infrastructure, including wharves, warehouses, and customs facilities, to facilitate trade and generate revenue through customs duties.

Impact of British Policies

British colonial policies had a profound and lasting impact on Goalpara's economy, transforming traditional economic structures and integrating the district into the global colonial

economy. These policies were designed primarily to serve colonial interests, extracting resources and generating revenue while creating markets for British manufactured goods.

The introduction of land revenue systems, including the Permanent Settlement and later the Ryotwari system, fundamentally altered land ownership patterns and agricultural practices in Goalpara. These systems established private property rights in land, created new classes of landlords and tenants and imposed cash-based revenue obligations on cultivators. The commercialisation of agriculture, driven by revenue demands and market incentives, led to the expansion of cash crop cultivation at the expense of food crops, increasing the vulnerability of local communities to market fluctuations and food insecurity.

The focus on cash crops and resource extraction led to the systematic exploitation of Goalpara's natural resources, including forests, land and labour. The colonial administration granted large tracts of land to European planters and timber merchants on favourable terms, often displacing local communities and disrupting traditional resource management systems. Forest policies restricted local access to forest resources, criminalising traditional practices and undermining local livelihoods.

While these policies boosted trade and commerce and generated economic growth, they also created profound socio-economic inequalities. The benefits of colonial economic development were concentrated among British planters, merchants and a small class of Indian intermediaries, while the majority of the local population experienced declining living standards, loss of land and exploitation of labour. The colonial economy was characterised by extractive relationships that transferred wealth from Goalpara to Britain and other colonial centres, contributing to the underdevelopment of the region.

Local Markets and Trade Networks

Local markets, known as *haats* or *bazaars*, played a crucial role in Goalpara's economy during the British period, serving as hubs for the exchange of agricultural produce, handicrafts and other goods. These markets were held at regular intervals in villages and towns across the district, providing opportunities for producers and consumers to exchange goods and for traders to assemble commodities for export.

The colonial administration regulated local markets, establishing rules for their operation, imposing taxes on transactions and granting licences to traders. Market regulation served multiple purposes, including revenue generation, quality control and extension of state authority over commercial activities. The colonial administration also established new markets

in strategic locations, particularly along railways and roads, to facilitate the collection and export of commodities.

Goalpara's trade networks extended beyond the district to neighbouring regions, including Bhutan, Bengal and Tibet. Trade with Bhutan involved the exchange of agricultural produce, handicrafts and manufactured goods for timber, medicinal herbs and other forest products. Trade with Bengal, facilitated by river transport, involved the export of tea, timber and agricultural produce and the import of manufactured goods, salt and other commodities. Trade with Tibet, conducted through mountain passes, involved the exchange of tea, textiles and other goods for wool, salt and precious metals.

These trade networks were characterised by complex relationships between producers, traders, brokers and consumers, with multiple intermediaries involved in the movement of goods from production to consumption. The colonial administration sought to regulate and tax these trade networks, extending state control over commercial activities while generating revenue for the colonial state.

Discussion

The transformation of Goalpara's economy during the British period exemplifies the broader processes of colonial economic integration and extraction that characterised British rule in India. The findings of this study reveal several key themes that warrant further discussion.

First, the commercialisation of agriculture and the promotion of cash crops represented a fundamental shift in the economic orientation of the district. While this shift generated economic growth and integrated Goalpara into global trade networks, it also created new vulnerabilities. The dependence on cash crops exposed local communities to market fluctuations and food insecurity, while the extraction of resources transferred wealth from the district to colonial centres.

Second, the development of infrastructure, including railways, roads, and river ports, played a dual role in Goalpara's economic transformation. On one hand, these developments facilitated trade and commerce, reduced transportation costs, and expanded market access. On the other hand, they were designed primarily to serve colonial interests, enabling the extraction of resources and the penetration of British manufactured goods into local markets.

Third, the social and economic inequalities that emerged during the British period had lasting consequences for Goalpara's development. The concentration of land and resources in the hands of European planters and a small class of Indian intermediaries created structural

inequalities that persisted beyond the colonial period. The displacement of local communities from their traditional lands and the restriction of access to forest resources undermined traditional livelihoods and contributed to poverty and marginalisation.

Fourth, the migration of Muslims from East Bengal to Goalpara, encouraged by British land policies, added a new dimension to the district's demographic and socio-economic landscape. While this migration contributed to agricultural expansion and economic growth, it also created tensions over land and resources that had long-term political implications.

Conclusion

The British period marked a significant transformation in Goalpara's trade and commerce, fundamentally altering the district's economic landscape and integrating it into the global colonial economy. The commercialisation of agriculture, development of the tea industry, exploitation of forest resources and expansion of riverine trade generated economic growth and created new opportunities for trade and commerce. Infrastructure development, including railways, roads and river ports, facilitated the movement of goods and integrated Goalpara into wider trade networks.

However, the benefits of colonial economic development were unevenly distributed, creating profound socio-economic inequalities and disrupting traditional livelihoods. The extraction of resources and transfer of wealth from Goalpara to Britain and other colonial centres contributed to the underdevelopment of the region. The legacy of British policies continues to influence Goalpara's economy and society, shaping land ownership patterns, agricultural practices, and resource management systems.

This study highlights the need for further research into the region's colonial history and its long-term impacts. Future research should examine the social and environmental consequences of colonial economic policies, the resistance and adaptation of local communities, and the continuities and changes in the post-colonial period. Understanding the colonial roots of contemporary economic and social challenges is essential for developing effective strategies for sustainable and equitable development in Goalpara and the broader Northeast Indian region.

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