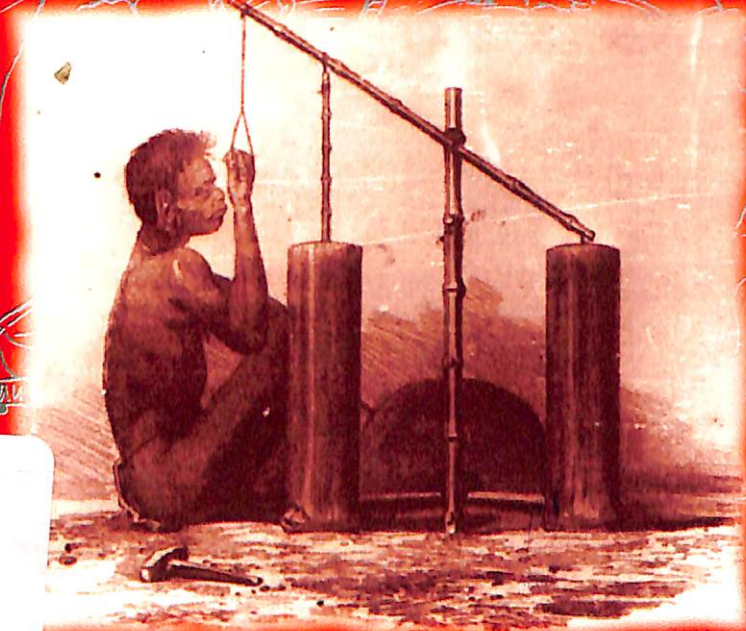


INDIGENOUS INDUSTRIES OF ASSAM (1870-1925)

Sudeshna Purkayastha



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INDIGENOUS INDUSTRIES OF ASSAM : 1870-1925



SUDESHNA PURKAYASTHA

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To
Tamaltarun and Tanusree
(Nephew and Niece)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xiii
<i>List of Diagrams</i>	xv
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xvi
1. Image of Indigenous Industries	1
2. De-Industrialisation in Colonial Assam : A Myth or Reality	21
3. Social Formation of Blacksmiths of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam (Late Medieval to Mid-Colonial Period)	44
4. Social Mobility of an Occupational Group : the <i>Somwals</i> of Assam (18th and 19th Centuries)	58
5. Dynamics of Change in Mode of Production and Technology in 19th and Early 20th Century Assam	79
6. Indigenous and Swadeshi Enterprise in Surma Valley : a Supplementary Note	115
7. Conclusion	124
Appendix I	138
Appendix II	144
Appendix III	147
<i>Bibliography</i>	149
<i>Index</i>	159

Preface

With an interest in Socio-Economic history I have tried in the present study to analyse the non-agricultural production of Assam under the colonial regime. The period has been selected for the study because of two reasons. The year 1870-1901 marks the beginning or the second phase of colonisation in Assam as the period was "One of hectic investment activities on the part of British enterprise in its drive for exploitation of colonial resources." Again, the early 20th Century has been included in the study because of technological changes and rise of indigenous enterprise under *swadeshi* impact.

But an apparent deviation from the period of study has been noticed in this work as two chapters relating to the social formation and the process of social mobility of two different occupational groups, viz. blacksmiths and goldwashers have been included in the revised version. These two chapters are considered necessary to make a socio-economic approach to the indigenous artisans of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The present study considers it necessary to extend the period of study to the late medieval period which was undoubtedly the period of transition from tribal to feudal social formation.

The geographical limitation of the present study deserves mention. It is needless to say that the people of the Valley are of mixed culture. There are different tribes, on the one hand, and the palins people, on the other. The undivided Assam comprised of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo-Hills (modern Meghalaya), the Naga Hills (Nagaland), the Lushai Hills (Mizoram), Manipur, the hills of Arunachal Pradesh, the plains of Brahmaputra Valley and Surma Valley, a major part of which (the District of Sylhet) formed part of former East Pakistan and now of Bangladesh. The present work is mainly concerned with Brahmaputra Valley, but Surma Valley sometimes has made its way into the discussion mostly for a comparative study.

This study seeks to throw light on a rather uncultivated area in research. Still, mention must be made of Amalendu Guha's work on this area. His researches have no doubt been the basis for this work. Eminent historians like S. K. Bhuyan and H. K. Barpujari have also contributed to the field, but their works throw light more on political and social history.

List of Tables

1.1	Area under cotton cultivation in plains of Assam (in acres)	3
1.2	Area under cotton cultivation in hills of Assam (in acres)	4
1.3	Steps of rearing Muga silk worm in Assam	7
1.4	Estimated number of Mulberry silk worm rearers in each mauza of the Brahmaputra Valley	15
2.1	Artisanal population exceeding 1000 in number (1881)	22
2.2	Population connected with industries (1911)	23
2.3	The changing composition of industrial population with the introduction of machine (1921)	24
2.4	Area under soom trees in each district of the Brahmaputra Valley (1903-04-1912-13)	26
2.5	Export of raw cotton from Assam and import of manufactured cotton goods into Assam (1879-80 - 1924-25)	26
2.6	Export of stick lac from Assam (1885-86-1898-99)	27
2.7	Twentieth century position of the native industries in Assam	30
2.8	Profit of the cotton cloth weavers of four districts of Assam	32
2.9	Import of cotton fabrics into Assam (Brahmaputra Valley, including Naga and Garo hills)	33
2.10	Import of cotton fabrics into Assam (Surma Valley including Manipur and Lushai hills)	33
2.11	Import of yern (European and Indian) into Assam	34
2.12	Imposition of revenue of lac <i>mahals</i> (1877)	35
2.13	Export of silk by rail and river from Assam	37

Abbreviations

- I E S H R* - *Indian Economic and Social History Review*
I I C - Indian Industrial Commission
O U P - Oxford University Press
D H A S - Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies
E P W - *Economic and Political Weekly*
J A S B - *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*

Image of Indigenous Industries

The salient features of the pre-colonial economy of Assam were the abundance of arable land and the existence of *Khel* system. There was no village community, but the *Khel* dominated the socio-economic life of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.¹ *Khel* was a medieval institution of Assam under which the whole adult male population between the ages of 15 and 50 were divided into a number of *Khels* or guilds according to their respective occupations.² The *Khel* was further divided into *gots*, consisting of four and later of three members who were generally known as *pykes*. Each *pyke* was liable to personal service in lieu of produce. It must be remembered in this connection that medieval Assamese society was based on natural economy with very little specialisation.³ The *Khel* was a relic of a semi-feudal society which emerged directly from tribal formation in Assam. Feudal society is primarily an agrarian society of petty producers - a society marked by predominance of natural economy and a low and stagnant condition of technique. The relationship between the two major classes of this society - the landlords and the subordinate peasants is one of exploitation. The surplus beyond the subsistence of the latter is extracted by the landlords in the form of labour, rent in kind or money rent.⁴ Thus the *Khel* system can be taken as a characteristic feature of the feudal system and the system had in it the seeds of forced labour.

But the political consequences following the Moamaria Rebellions (1st Moamaria Rebellion - 1769 ; 2nd Moamaria Rebellion - 1782 ; 3rd Moamaria Rebellion - 1786) and the Burmese War* (1824 - 1826) brought about some changes in the economic condition of Assam. As a sequence to the annexation of Assam by the British (1826) slowly and gradually the *Khel* system was abolished which brought about a major change in the economic field. Earlier, certain quantity of the industrial as well as

* The First Invasion in Assam took place in 1817 A.D. The Burmese invaded Assam for the second time in 1819 A.D. In Assam Burmese rule was established but the Burmese soon fell foul of the British who expelled them from Assam shortly afterwards and by the Treaty of Yandaboo Assam was annexed to the British Territory.

agricultural produce had been used for meeting the consumption need of king and the nobility. But the British administration following the abolition of the *Khel* system had weakened the base of these industries.

So, during the period from 1870 to 1925 the industrial situation of Assam was marked by the weakening of the industrial base and the slow process of penetration of the merchant capital to substitute indigenous production.

In the case of Surma Valley, the economy was more or less agricultural like that of the Brahmaputra Valley though there was the trace of caste-based artisanal life in the region.

The indigenous industries of undivided Assam may be divided into four major groups : (1) The Textile Industry including cotton and silk; (2) the Sylvan Industries or Industries connected with forest, (3) the Industries connected with metal and clay and (4) the Industries directly associated with agriculture. Relying on the available sources the present study attempts to describe the image of the indigenous industries of Assam dividing the discussion into two sections, viz. (i) the Structural features, and (ii) localisation of the indigenous industries.

Structure of the Indigenous Industries

Any production system presupposes the existence of a structural frame work and indigenous industrial production of Assam was no exception. The articles were produced in a series of distinct operations but no particular caste group tended to specialise in and control particular stages of production except in a few specific cases.

Cotton Weaving Industry

Unlike the *tanti, jugi* and *jolahs* of Bengal, a unique feature of Assamese society was the absence of any particular caste reserved for weaving. As such in the Brahmaputra Valley, to use Mahatma Gandhi's words, "Every woman in Assam is a born weaver...and she weaves fairy tales in cloth."^{4a} Describing the local manufacture of the District of Kamrup W.W. Hunter observed that every household possessed a loom and weaving was carried on by women of the family, principally for domestic use.⁵ This observation is true for all the districts of Brahmaputra Valley.^{5a} In Assam there was no division of labour though in some cases the family labour was employed. This is also true in case of cotton weaving industry. Members of the family helped each other but that does not mean that articles manufactured passed through different hands in

different stages of its production. This may also be taken as one of the reasons for the low standard of the industrial produce as Lenin pointed out that "on the basis of hand production no other progress in technique was possible except by division of labour."⁶ The clothes manufactured from cotton were *Dhutis*, *Chadars*, *Barkapar* (wrappers), *Khaniya Kapors* (Shawls), *Gamchas*, *Rihars* and *Mekhlas*.⁷

The production of handloom in Assam (Brahmaputra Valley) supplied home demands to a fairly considerable extent and at the same time an insignificant amount of handloom products were sold in the market.

Things were, however, different in the Surma Valley where the ethnological and industrial conditions were more allied to those of Bengal. In the region, therefore, weaving was never a household industry, but was confined only to the *Tantis* and the *Jugis* or *Naths*.⁸ Unlike Brahmaputra Valley in the Surma Valley i.e., in the District of Sylhet and Cachar the weaving was carried by male members of the family who used thread imported from Dacca. The Sylhet products were regularly brought to the market for sale. But the supply was not sufficient for local demand.

TABLE 1.1 AREA UNDER COTTON CULTIVATION IN PLAINS OF ASSAM
(IN ACRES)

<i>Brahmaputra Valley</i>	
Goalpara	1,622
Kamrup	248
Nowgong	3,286
Darrang	388
Sibsagar	88
Lakhampur	100
Total	5,732
<i>Surma Valley</i>	
Sylhet	900
Cachar (Sadar Subdivision)	500
Grand Total	7,132

Source : *Notes on some Industries of Assam (1884-1895)*, Shillong, 1896, p.30.

The production of cotton cloth in Assam was divided into a number of processes carried out by the artisans in their houses. The artisans had no scope for utilising merchant capital for raw materials because there was no demand at all outside the region. The raw material was supplied from the locally cultivated cotton.

The table 1.1 gives approximate estimates for the area under cotton cultivation in Assam .

The table 1.2 may be taken as approximations to the actual area under cotton in the hill districts.

Adding together the figures for the plains and hill districts, we obtain as the total area under cotton in the province, 38,815 in 1884-1885. The locally grown cotton more or less supplied the local needs. So, there was no involvement of *dadni* merchants.

TABLE 1.2 AREA UNDER COTTON CULTIVATION IN HILLS OF ASSAM (IN ACRES)

Garo Hills	22,933
Khasi Hills	1,250
Jaintia Hills	3,500
North Cachar	4,000
Total	31,683

Source : *Notes on Some Industries of Assam (1884-1895)*. Shillong, 1896, p.31.

The processes involved in the manufacture of cotton cloth in Assam was very simple and there was no sign of specialisation in any stage of production. The looms used were very simple. Eight stages were distinguishable in the manufacture of cotton cloth in Assam.

The first step was ginning or separating the fibre from the seed. This was usually done in Assam by an instrument called Neathani in Upper Assam and Neotha in Lower Assam. In Surma Valley of the yarns used in manufacturing cotton cloth were imported from Dacca.¹⁰ The Neathani or Neotha consisted of two horizontal rollers, one close above the other and mounted on an upright stand. The tool was generally made of wood. Sometimes a comb made of the teeth of the Bharali fish was used to clean the cotton.

Then the cotton was to be separated from fibre so that it should become loose enough to be spun into thread. This process was called 'Stutching or *Dhuna*'. The tool used in this step was a bowstring.

After stutching the cotton was made into little rolls (*Panji*) about 3 or 4 inches long. This was done by means of a slip of bamboo 4 inches long. When the roll was prepared it was ready for use.

The third step was spinning. The spinning wheel (*Jatar*) consisted of a frame supporting 2 long uprights at one end and two small ones at the other. Each revolution of the wheel involved 8 to 12 revolutions of the spindle.

The fourth step was weaving the thread into cloth. This was an elaborate process and like stutching and spinning (*kata*), weaving (*buu*) was confined to the female members of the family. The smaller instruments used in spinning besides the loom were (i) *latai* or *hat latai* (ii) *chereki* (Kamrup *chakri*, Upper Assam *cheraki*), (iii) *ugha*, (iv) *bhauri*, (v) *karhani* and (vi) *ras*.

The next stage was sizing, reeling and winding. This was performed when the weavers used home-spun thread.

The next step was the preparation of the warp. This long process has been elaborately narrated by H. Z. Darrah in his 'Cotton in Assam' (1885). For this purpose a number of *ughas* were "stuck upright in the ground at a convenient distance from 5 bamboo pegs". These were described as follows and these were indicated "by the first five numbers".

- 1 and 5 = *Bata Kara Khuti*
 2 and 3 = *Khuti Chiri*
 4 = *Kutani Chiri*

No. 1 and 2 were close together, and so were 3, 4 and 5. Pegs 4 is usually shorter than the others. Pegs 1 and 5 were heavy and strong, about 3 feet high and 1 and ½ inches wide.¹¹

The next step of production was the manufacture of the *ba û* or series of looms by which the threads were "alternatively raised depressed to allow the shuttle to pass."¹²

Just before weaving starts, the warp was frequently smoothened with a brush (*Kuchi*) steeped in a glutinous substance made of boiled rice (*Kochu*) and the leaves of certain plants. Then everything was ready for weaving.¹³

Silk Industries

Sericulture and weaving of silk was one of the most important industries in Assam. This was carried on only in the Brahmaputra Valley. This industry was carried on for both domestic consumption as well as for supply to the royal house and nobility during the Ahom rule.

The important silk worms cultivated and silk manufactured in Assam were Eri, Muga and Pat. As early as in March 1887, the "Director of Land Records and Agriculture was instructed to forward to the Superintendent, Indian Museum, Calcutta, specimens of silk-worms of Assam, in accordance with which a list had been prepared by the Government of India. According to that list there were four domesticated varieties of silk worms in Assam viz. (1) The *Eri*, (2) The *Muga*, (3) The Univoltine *Pat*, (4) The Multivoltine *Pat*.¹⁴ Besides these varieties there were two other special kinds of silk viz. *Champa* and *Mazankari*. Among these two varieties of *Champa* silk seemed to be quite forgotten during the 19th century. It was a very fine white silk, which was worn only by the Ahom Kings and their nobles.¹⁵ Besides, there were some other kinds of wild silkworms in Assam which were not commonly used. These were the

Ban Muga. (*Attacus cynthia*) closely allied to the *eri* worm. *Petogore Muga*. (Wild Pat Worm) *Kutkuri*. (Assamese *tusser*). *Deoruga*. *Salthi*. *Amuluri* or *Ampatoni*. (*Actias Selene*) etc. But the present study is going to discuss the indigenous process of manufacture and structural features of the three important varieties of silkworm, viz., the *Eri*, *Muga* and *Pat*. Though there were some professional silk weavers in some parts of Kamrup District the Chief manufacturers of silk were women. The finer cloths were prepared by the respected women of position.¹⁶

History as well as tradition are silent as to the origin and date of introduction of the culture of the *Eri* and *Muga* silkworms in the Brahmaputra Valley. Both were probably of indigenous origin, since neither of them was known to be cultivated outside the province.¹⁷

The Structural features of silk manufacturing process in Assam may broadly be divided into three steps (1) Rearing, (2) Reeling or Spinning and (3) Weaving which was common in each kind of silk.

REARING

Eri: Rearing the *eri* worms was a simple process. The worms were fed on castor oil plant. The rearing house was nothing more than a portion of the dwelling house of the rearers.¹⁸

The first step towards rearing was to spread out the seed cocoons in a thin layer in a bamboo basket or threaded on a string and these were kept suspended from the roof until the moths emerged and paired.¹⁹

The next step was to place the paired moths on reeds of stick (the thin bamboo ribs of the '*ugha*' or warping reel being commonly used for this purpose).²⁰

The third step of rearing was the collection of eggs and then the collection of worms like butterflies. Next these were fed on leaves of castor oil plant.

The next step was the casting off the skins four times by the *Eri* Silk Worms.²¹ The time for producing cocoons arrived when the worms cast off their skin for the fourth time.

Muga: The rearing of *Muga* silk worms was carried on "In a very primitive and haphazard manner."²² The *Muga* moth was reared on *soom* trees in the open air. The elaborate description of the rearing of *muga* silk has been found in the reports of Deputy Commissioners of Kamrup, Nowgang, Darrang and Sibsagar on sericulture in Assam. The *Muga* silkworms produced five broods in the year. The cycle steps of rearing *Muga* silk were hatching of eggs, as a worm, spinning cocoons, in the cocoons and as a moth.²³

TABLE 1.3 STEPS OF REARING MUGA SILK WORM IN ASSAM

	Minimum Days	Maximum days
Hatching of eggs	7	15
As a Worm	15	32
Spinning Cocoon	3	6
In the Cocoon	15	30
As a moth	3	3
Total	43	86

Source : E. Stack, 'Silk of Assam' in *Notes on Some Industries of Assam (1884-1895)*, Shillong, 1896, p. 9.

Pat : The origin of the *Pat* Silk Industry in Assam seemed uncertain. In the words of E. Stack, "The breeding of the Worms is restricted by custom to the jugi caste who used to supply the requirement of the Ahom Kings and their courts". This fact promoted B.C. Basu to observe the *Pat* Silk Industry in Assam as an introduction from outside the state. In an Assamese pamphlet entitled '*Jugi ba Katoni Jatir Itihash*' the author Madhavaram Das claimed that the *Katonis* of Assam were the descendants of *jugis* who were driven out of Bengal by the persecutions of Ballal Sen and his successors. These people brought with them from Bengal the knowledge of mulberry silkworm to Assam. Their descendents came to be known as *Katonis* or reelers. According to Madhavram Das the *Katonis* entered Assam in the 12th Century A.D. During the period, of the Assamese poet Sri Chandra Bharati, a contemporary of King Naranarayan of Cooch Bihar (1540-84 A.D.), the weaving of *pat* silk was an established industry at Sualkuchi, a village which till remains the most important seat of silk weaving in Assam. The culture of mulberry silk was introduced from Bengal seemed very likely from the fact that most of the technical words used in *pat* rearing in Assam were identical with those used in Bengal.^{23a}

According to E. Stack, the *Pat* silkworm was akin to the silkworms of Europe. Under this name there were two distinct species the '*bar palu*' and the '*haru palu*'. Both kinds were reared indoors on the leaves of the mulberry, called '*nuni*' in Upper Assam and '*meshkuri*' in Lower Assam.²⁴

The major stages of rearing *Pat* Silk in Assam were (1) Placing the worm on a cloth, (2) The eggs were transferred to a new earthen pot, (3) The worms were than led on mulberry leaves on the feeding tray, (4) The matured worms were placed on the spinning tray and kept out in the sun, (5) After three days the cocoons were removed from the spinning tray, (6) Then the common practice was to reel them off as fast as they were plucked off the spinning tray.²⁵

REELING OR SPINNING

Eri : *Eri* silk could not be reeled but spun into thread in the same fashion as cotton. B.C. Basu has narrated three distinct processes of spinning *eri* silk. In two of these processes, the spindle (*takara* or *takuri*) was used for twisting the thread. In the first technique a number of cocoons were arranged, moistened with water and attached to the top of the spindle while the spindle was turning round, the spinner drew out a fresh length of thread.

In the second technique, the spindle was used and the cocoons were spun dry. A number of cocoons were taken and carded by hand. Then the carded *eri* was arranged into a bunch which was tied to a post. The fibre was then drawn off and spun with the spindle in the same way as in the first process.

In the third step, the cocoons were placed on a distaff and moistened with water as in the first process. The fibre was "drawn off as a long continuous strand which was allowed to fall into a cup of water in which it accumulated and formed a clad (*Chapari* or *Chapora*)". The clad of thread was removed from the water and twisted on a spinning wheel. Thread prepared by this process was known as *Chapori - Kata*.

The reeling apparatus in Assam was much simple machine which was called *bal* or *bheer*. Its component parts were an earthen basin, a thin stick, two bamboo uprights, two more placed about 2 feet from the basin, a horizontal wooden shaft with pivots at the ends and a wooden wheel about 7 inches in diameter or a piece of wood cut in bamboo to the shape of a figure of 8. It was mounted on the left hand side of the shaft and served the purpose of a fly wheel.²⁶

There was another kind of reeling apparatus used by the reelers of Sipajhar in the Mangaldai subdivision. This was called '*Uni*'.^{26a}

Muga and *Pat* : The process of reeling *Muga* and *Pat* Silk was the same. The only difference was that the *Muga* was not boiled. (1) The cocoons were put in boiling water and (2) several filaments were united into a single thread. (3) Then the threads were nipped off and the end of the thread was passed on to another reeler. (4) "The latter tied the end of the thread on to the shaft, pulled out a fresh length of thread, let it pass down the underside of forearm from the elbow to the thumb, and then gathered it on to the reel." As soon as one length of thread had been wound another was pulled out and treated in the same way.²⁷

WEAVING

The last step of silk manufacturing was weaving. Various processes through which the yarn had to pass before it was fit for weaving were the following :

Sorting, Dyeing, Doubling, Sizing, Twisting, Warping Degumming, Pining, Washing and Bleaching.^{27a}

Sylvan Industries or Industries Connected with Forests

Lac : The structural features of the lac industry in Assam was more or less simple. The chief lac producing centres in Assam were Kamrup, Sibsagar, Sylhet and the northern parts of the Khasi and Garo Hills bordering on the Brahmaputra Valley. A small quantity of lac was reared by a few *Kachari* families in Mauza Jhargaon. It should be pointed out in this connection that most of the lac exported from Assam were in its natural form which was called Stick lac. The only processing centre were in Kamrup and Sibsagar. The method of rearing lac in Assam was particularly the same as in Bengal. The worms were tied to the branches of trees (particularly Banian trees in Sylhet District). In Sylhet, the chief lac rearing places were Kushiarkul, Bhatara, Baramchal, Langla, Indeswar and Kanihati.²⁸

Lac was manufactured in two ways in Assam. One was by washing the lac in alkaline water (*Kharpani*) and the other by boiling it for some hours until it was softened and formed into cakes. The latter was called "Bhiri Laha".²⁹

The commercial product known as lac dye had to be prepared by extracting it from crude or boiled lac. This was used for dyeing clothes and yarns.³⁰ Among the lac wares, wooden toys deserve mention. These were the only wares ordinarily ornamented with lac. In Sylhet District lac bracelets were manufactured by the Muhammadan womenfolk. In Pargana Lashkarpur lac was manufactured into a variety of elegant objects known as *pukala*, which obtained a high reputation.³¹

Timber : The use of timber was mainly confined to boat making. It was a flourishing industry.³² According to Buchanan Hamilton many carpenters in Assam were of *Kalit* caste and others belong to some other tribes and they were chiefly employed to construct boats and canoes. They also made "oarse chests and bedsteads" and the posts, beams and doors of the house.³³ In Barpeta, Sylhet and Cachar districts boats were manufactured.³⁴

Bamboos and Canes : There were also industries connected with bamboos and canes. A kind of superior soft mats, known as *Sitalpati*, was manufactured in Sylhet District which was "much appreciated for its coolness and smooth glazed texture."³⁵

In North Lakhimpur, the barks of a tree '*Udal*' were used in rope making.³⁶

Ivory Work : Ivory works of Assam were praise worthy. Since the time of the Mahabharata Assam presented herself as a good manufacturer of ivory works. In Sylhet the workers, though few made ivory mats.³⁷

Industries Connected with Clay and Metal

Pottery : The indigenous pottery of Assam was very inferior and E.A. Gait has pointed out that this inferiority was due to the absence of occupational sub-castes. The potters of the Brahmaputra Valley were of two castes - *Hiras*, and *Kumars* (Persons of the *Kalita*, *Kewat* and *Koch*).³⁸ In the Surma Valley (Sylhet and Cachar) there was a separate potter caste as in Bengal. In Sylhet there were some Muslim potters known as *Khuskis*, who prepared '*sanaki*', used by the Muslims only.³⁹ In Assam Pottery was a secondary occupation as almost the entire number of potters combined agriculture with the profession.⁴⁰

The process of manufacture was very crude. The wheel used was the old solid wheel, which did not revolve so fast as the Bengal wheels.⁴¹ The implements used were of very crude nature. The District of Darrang was an important pottery manufacturing centre. W.W. Hunter had observed Basgora as "the seat of considerable pottery manufacture, which commanded an extensive local sale."⁴² The other principal centres of the industry were at Tezpur, Bishnath, Becheria and Haleswar and at Salmara at Mangaldai.⁴³

Brass and Bell Metal : In Brahmaputra Valley there were no special castes or sub-caste engaged in the manufacture of brass and bell metal. According to E.A. Gait, "They were mostly persons of the *Kalita*, *Koch* and *Kewat* castes and the word '*Kashar*' tacked on to their proper caste name as an indication of the occupation they follow."⁴⁴ In the Surma Valley, the brass and bell metal manufacturers belonged to a professional caste called the *Kansari*.⁴⁵ The important centres of Brass and Bell metal works in Surma Valley were Zindabazar, Brahmachal, Badarpur, Madhabpur, Akh Hkura and Srimangal. These were all in the district of Sylhet.⁴⁶ In Brahmaputra Valley besides the royal *Karkhanas*, there was one village of metal workers in Kamrup, Sarthebari, that was known for

its skill in metal casting.⁴⁶

But the manufacturer of brass utensils enjoyed some distinctions in the hands of a particular caste called the Morias. According to the *Buranjis* they were the off shoots of the prisoners captured by the Ahoms during Turbak's invasion of Assam about 1506 A.D. They were employed in various activities but proved unsatisfactory and then finally adopted brass - working as a means of livelihood.⁴⁷ Sometimes the Morias travelled about the several districts in batches and stayed in villages that gave them occupation.⁴⁸ The process of manufacture was simple and consisted of beating the brass into a shape required or of uniting portions equal of it. The instruments used by the Morias were mainly made of iron.

Gold and Silver : During the pre-colonial period gold washing was an important industry in Assam particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley. The persons engaged in this industry formed a separate *khel* which was called *Sonwal*. But since the consolidation of British rule this industry began to wane and since then gold began to be imported from Calcutta by usual commercial channels.⁴⁹

During the period under review the industries connected to gold and silver formed only the ornaments and jewelleryes. Unlike Burma and Kashmir Assam could not show her skill in any specialised art in gold and silver. Both in the Brahmaputra and Surma Valley none of the articles of gold and silver (like Sylhet silver vase for 'atar'), silver buttons, silver jugs and the Assamese 'tema' (silver box for keeping betelnut), 'bata' or plate and 'bati' or silver bowl showed any artistic design.⁵⁰

The centres of this industry were Kamrup, Barpeta, Goalpara, and Sibsagar, Jorhat in Brahmaputra and Sylhet district in Surma Valley.

It should be mentioned in this connection that the industry was formerly limited to a particular caste group i.e. *Kalita*. Earlier, there were goldsmiths in Assam but their work was not fine. Raja Rudra Singh of Assam imported goldsmiths from Benares to teach Assamese goldsmiths the better process of manufacturing gold and silver ornaments. The Raja selected certain *Kalitas* to learn and to do the work and so, the *Sonaris* were formerly only *Kalitas*. But when the business proved lucrative, people of other castes, as *Keots* and *Koches* and *Hiras* learnt the work and became *Sonaris*. So, in Assam the *Sonaris*, in later times, was not limited to a particular caste group.⁵¹

Gold enamelling (*mina*) was particularly practised at Jorhat in Sibsagar District. There were three kinds of enamelling i.e. dark blue, dark green and white but red and yellow were sometimes used. It was bought by the craftsmen in blocks from Marwari merchants.

The tools used were small hammers, files, pincers and anvils. The particular tools which were only used for enamelling were Hola, Ghar and Khan.

Sylhet had the largest number of persons engaged in or dependent on the manufacture of the precious metals of any districts in the province—but it was not noted for its gold or silver ware.⁵² The goldsmiths of Sylhet were mostly Manipuris. Some were North Indians, a few were natives of the district and others were from Dacca. The Dacca men were said to be the most skilful. Besides articles of jewellery, they made vases, cups and trays and exhibited considerable skill in embossing and chasing gold and silver.

Industries Connected with Agriculture

Among the industries connected with agriculture the most important were jaggery or gur and mustard oil. The opening up of communications in the interior of the country, had greatly increased the demand for jaggery, and also for refined sugar. The process of manufacturing *gur* in native way needed *ghani* or wooden mortar and pestle mill, the same device was used in crushing oil seeds. Hand pounding of rice with the help of simple *ghani* was also practised in Assam.⁵³

Iron : Smelting of iron was once common in upper Assam. Firearms were manufactured during the Ahom rule.⁵⁴

Unlike the smelting of the raw material forging was spread over practically the whole province. The materials used was chiefly pig iron and iron steel bars brought by the local traders from Calcutta. Char coal was used as fuel.⁵⁵

Paper : Paper was introduced in India by the Muhammadans, who had learnt its use from the Chinese. Among the Indians, the earliest writing materials were palm leaves and birch bark. Prior to the introduction of mill-made papers, bark paper was used as writing material throughout Assam. But due to high price of the bark paper, in comparison with that of the mill-made paper, the industry began to decline and became almost unknown.⁵⁶

As there was no paper mill in Assam during the first decade of the 20th century, paper made at Balli and Serampore near Calcutta was extensively used.⁵⁷

But it was the paper-mache work which was confined to two or three places in the province. The art was still known only to less than half a dozen persons. So in the opinion of J. N. Gupta "it can hardly be said

to constitute an industry".⁵⁸ The paper locally known as *Sach pat* was formerly used as a writing material in Assam and the *Buranjis* or chronicles of the Ahoms were usually made of it.⁵⁹

In the District of Sylhet paper-mache work was known to only one person. He was Prakash Chandra Ray of Habiganj. Prakash Chandra Ray was an adept in the art. He would make various sorts of toys and figures of paper-mache, such as dogs, cats, cows, elephants, tigers, lions, etc. The price of each varied from annas 2 to Rs. 25. People bought these articles for show and ornamental purposes. He manufactured these articles at his house at the village Chatian at Habiganj Subdivision and also near Itakhola Railway Station. The materials used by him were :

1) Paste prepared by dissolving waste paper ; 2) Clay moulds 3) Plaster of Paris and 4) Waste Papers.⁶⁰

Localisation of Indigenous Industries

The lack of regional specialisation coupled with the want of an extensive market and foreign demand more or less prevented the tendencies towards localisation of different industries of Assam. As for the textile industries there was not a single place in Assam where any special superior textiles were manufactured. The weavers were all coarse cloth weavers. In a word, there was no regional specialisation nor trade in home-made picegoods.⁶¹ The markets of locally manufactured goods centered round the interdistrict trade with the neighbouring hill tracts of Bhutan and Twang. There was no demand of the locally manufactured articles among the foreign countries. The product of handloom in Assam supplied home demands to a fairly considerable extent ; but did a very insignificant amount of work for sale in the market.⁶² This was true in almost all cases.

Nevertheless, in some parts of Assam some articles were manufactured which had a mark of regional specialisation.

With regard to the cotton weaving the districts of Nowgong, Kamrup and Goalpara can be mentioned. These were the only districts in the Brahmaputra Valley where locally-made cloth came to the weekly markets or '*hats*', or several *melas* or *sobhas*.⁶³ The stuff sold was of the roughest make, such as '*barkapar*' and '*gamchas*', and the purchases were chiefly Garos. In North Lakhimpur the Kacharis of the Kadam Mouza were considered the best weavers. In Golaghat and Jorhat the Miris were celebrated for weaving a kind of rug called '*Mirigin*'. In Jorhat, the Noras

made a sort of bag called 'thung', and some Muslims of Jorhat town made a special kind of embroidered shawls.⁶⁴ In Kamrup, Sualkuchi and Kamarkuchi of Hajo, Lashkarpara of Rangri and Barpeta were famous centres. In Surma Valley the Manipuri settlers of Rupasibuli and Lakshmpur in Cachar, made *faneek* which had signs of regional specialisation. In the Sunamganj Subdivision in Sylhet plain *gelap* was made chiefly in Budhrail and *gelap* striped with red in Dehotia.⁶⁵

As regards the silk industry some particular places were important centres of production which had the sign of regional specialisation. As for the *endi* fabrics the places like Nalbari, Mangaldai, Sualkuchi, Tambulpur and Panchnirasoat and Rangia in North Kamrup and Palashbari in South Kamrup proved important centres of production. The *eri* silk had a good demand outside Assam. Over 80% of the eri cloth was exported for use outside Assam and only about 20% was consumed locally.⁶⁶

Muga silk was grown more or less in almost every mouza in Assam proper. Pargana Habraghat (Bijni) on the eastern border of the Goalpara district was the extreme western limit of the *Muga* growing area.

It has been recorded in Report of Bhupal Chandra Basu on the Silk Industry of Assam that Pargana Habraghat and the South Western mauzas of Kamrup-Luki, Bongaon and Boko—constituted one of the most important *muga* growing areas in Assam, since it was this limited area which directly or indirectly supplied seed *muga* to all parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. The population of this area was composed mainly of Kacharis, Rabhas and Garos. These people were unacquainted with the art of reeling and disposed off the whole of their cocoons to traders coming from Palasbari and its neighbourhood.

In Darrang district important *muga* growing areas were Sipajhar, a few miles to the west of Mangaldai. The Sibsagar District was the most important *Muga* breeding area in Assam as it contained three fourths of the total area under soom trees. The chief *Muga* growing areas in that district were the comparatively backward mauzas inhabited chiefly by Ahoms in the south of Jorhat,⁶⁷ and South-east of the Sibsagar Subdivision. The District of Lakhimpur also contained two *muga* breeding tracts. One of these was Jamira. It returned, in 1912-13, a total area of nearly 1,600 acres under soom. The other tract was mauza Dhemaaji on the right bank of the Brahmaputra. In this place also the rearing of *muga* was chiefly in the hands of the Ahoms.⁶⁸

Stack in his Notes on Assam Silk said, *Pat* rearing industry was hardly known out of the District of Sibsagar, the ancient centre of Ahom rule. But it can be seen from the following table that the number of rearers in

the Nowgang district was far greater than that in Sibsagar or in the rest of Assam put together.

There were many villages in Nowgang such as Digholdari and Kakotigaon in mauza Charaibahi, where the industry retained considerable importance even in the second decade of the 20th. century.⁶⁹

TABLE 1.4 ESTIMATED NUMBER OF MULBERRY SILK WORM REARERS IN EACH MAUZA OF THE BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

(1)	Number of families rearing mulberry silk (2)
SIBSAGAR DISTRICT	
<i>Jorhat subdivision</i>	
Mouza Kotohagar	84
Mouza Parbatia	4
Mouza Khangia	15
Mouza Salmora	117
Mouza Simaluguri	62
Mouza Katonigaon	44
Total	326
<i>Golaghat subdivision</i>	
Mouza Dakhinhengra	1
Mouza Kacharihat	2
Mouza Athgaon	59
Mouza Dhekial	53
Mouza Gurjugonia	54
Mouza Nahorani	2
Mouza Dergaon	8
Mouza Kumargaon	13
Mouza Misamara	246
Total	3
<i>Sibsagar subdivision</i>	
Mouza Jukaichuk	124
Mouza Morabazar	5
Mouza Solaguri	36
Mouza Bakota	26
Mouza Joktoli	3
Mouza Athkhel	197
Total	769
Total for SIBSAGAR DISTRICT	
DARRANG DISTRICT	
<i>Tezpur subdivision</i>	
Mouza Behaguri	35
Mouza Borchula	6
Mouza Chatia	17
Total	58

continue

(1)	(2)
<i>Mangaldai subdivision</i>	
Mouza Hindughopa	140
Mouza Lokrai	180
Mouza Sipajhar	64
Mouza Rangamati	32
Mouza Kalairgaon	11
Total	427
Total for DARRANG DISTRICT	485
NOWGONG DISTRICT	
Mouza Pubghoria	110
Mouza Bhelowguri	12
Mouza Khatowal	23
Mouza Singhiapatoni	82
Mouza Juria	44
Mouza Borkondofi	72
Mouza Kampur	96
Mouza Garubat	32
Mouza Pakhimora	263
Mouza Kachomari	140
Mouza Hatichong	263
Mouza Jagial	140
Mouza Baropunjia	704
Mouza Mkrirbheta	175
Mouza Charaibahi	417
Mouza Dandua	181
Mouza Ghagua	72
Mouza Mayang	42
Mouza Uttarmesa	42
Mouza Sohori	86
Total	2,752
Total for NOWGAON DISTRICT	2,752
KAMRUP DISTRICT	
Gauhati subdivision	
Mouza Borbangahar	10
Mouza Karara	6
Mouza Pubkachari mahal	2
Mouza Pub Barigag	2
Total for KAMRUP DISTRICT	20
Total for ASSAM VALLEY	4,026

Source : B. C. Basu, *The Silk Industry of Assam*, Shillong, 1915 (Appendix-III) pp. 63 and 64.

With regard to the localised industries of Assam, Ivory carving deserve mention. Jorhat, Barpeta and Sylhet in Assam were the only districts

where ivory carving was done. The official reports of the period shows the existence of only one old man in Jorhat who knew the art of ivory carving. His name was Fiznur Musalman. But the samples of his handiworks—spoons, paper-cutters, forks and back-scratcher did not “display much skill”.⁷⁰ In Barpeta the only craftsman in ivory carving Radhanath Das carried on his business and some of his products like pen-holders, combs, dice, sticks etc. found a sale even in Calcutta.^{70a} In Sylhet ivory fans and ivory *sitalpatis* were manufactured by one family.⁷¹

Hand fans made at Auniati Satra in Majuli testified the craftsmanship of the artisans who made them. The Manipuris of Sylhet District also made beautiful hand fans with palm leaves which can be included in the list of localised industries of Assam.

A special kind of mats called *Sital Pati* which was made from a special kind of cane viz., ‘*Murta*’ was localised in the district of Sylhet.⁷²

The industries connected with metals like brass and ballmetal, timber and sugarcane were dispersed like the cotton-weaving industry in Assam.

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