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Trade Relation of Manipur with Burma and British India

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Abstract

Manipur prior to her annexation by the British in 1891 was an idyllic closed kingdom unperturbed and unfettered by the outside world except for sporadic Burmese invasions. For centuries isolationisms and protectionism were the order of the day till the white man came to her in the beginning of the 19th century. Since then, the closed economy gradually opened outward for trade and commerce causing widespread changes in her economic structure. Post 1891, the colonial trade policy pursued rendered her the net importer of manufactured goods and exporter of primary product. The end result was the massive deindustrialisation of her economy coupled with the depletion of natural resources. Thus, the colonial trade policy set the foundation of the present state of the economy of Manipur whereby she have to depend on other states of the country even for her basic needs. The purpose of the paper is to analyse the changing dynamics of the trade of Manipur in the 19th and early 20th century by following the approach of economic history. The paper argues that the colonial trade policy while exploiting the rice economy and natural resources made Manipur a market for outside manufacturing products.

Key words: 1.Trade, 2.Colonial, 3.Manipur, 4.Burma, 5.Cachar, 6.Naga Hills.

I. Introduction

The kingdom¹ of Manipur was isolated and self-sufficient of her basic needs for most part of her long recorded history. Apart from short periods under Burmese tutelage in the latter 18th and early 19th century, she remained in her idyllic cocoon of low level equilibrium unperturbed by the outside world. Came 19th century and it heralded an era of close contact with the British which in due course changed the track of her future like never before. The century marked the gradual opening of Manipur to the outside world more so in terms of her economy. Contact with the British resulted in enhanced trade relation with Cachar, the Naga Hills and through it the Assam valley. And, post 1891 after the British annexed Manipur, her association with outside world especially British India heightened with the gradual opening of economy for trade and commerce.

The purpose of the paper is to analyse the changing dynamics of the trade of Manipur in the 19th and early 20th century by following the approach of economic history. The paper argues that the colonial trade policy while exploiting the rice economy and natural resources made Manipur a market for outside manufacturing products. Gradually it gave a death blow to the native industries thereby sowing the seeds of her present condition where she have to rely on everything imported from outside the state. On the other hand, trade with Burma never reached the height as it ought to be due to adverse political circumstances. Data of trade are collected mostly from the annual reports of the political agents of Manipur along with the writings of British historians. Mentions about trade from *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal court chronicle of Manipur is also used whenever necessary. The study is limited by the accuracy of the data as those were not properly maintained during those times. The Manipur authorities were adverse on giving particulars of trade and hence the study suffered from the lack of data in the first half of the 19th century. The paper is divided into six sections. Section two gives a brief outline of the prevailing trade policy of Manipur during the 19th century while section three and four analyses the trade dynamics of Manipur with Burma and British India respectively. The fifth section critically analyses the impact of the colonial trade policy on Manipur while the last section concludes.

¹ Throughout her history, Manipur was an independent kingdom till the British annexed her in 1891. After independence, she merged to the Indian union in the year 1949. It is situated in the north eastern part of India.

II. Economic and trade policy in the nineteenth century

Manipur in the pre-colonial period was an isolated self-sufficient economy having a low level equilibrium. For centuries the successive kings discouraged external trade and commerce with the outside world. The economy was based on agriculture with few small manufacturing units meant for internal consumption. Being a mountain grit kingdom with least connectivity with the outside world for the past so many centuries, isolationism and protectionism was the policy of the successive kings in terms of trade and commerce. Though some traders had long distance trade relations with her neighbours and beyond, it was discouraged by the state as a continuous policy. It was only after contact with the British that her external trade and commerce expanded especially with the west. Nonetheless, despite frequent wars being encountered, she maintained trade relations in the past with Burma, China and some countries of South-East Asia. In the west Manipur had trade and commerce with Cachar and Bengal and the Naga Hills in the north and the Lushais in the south before the nineteenth century.

Self-sufficiency rather than relying on import was encouraged by the state. As a result, she could produce her basic necessities and hence not depended on imports except a few non-necessity goods. (Ali, 1988) Further, the mode of appropriation existed during those times in Manipur was also a big hurdle in the way of developing a sound trade relation with the outside world. Though Manipuris used a coin, *sel*² as the medium of exchange, still barter was the common mode of exchange during those times. Taxes as well as tributes were paid in kind and the services and the employees of the king were also remunerated in kind. (Sharma and Singh, 2010) Thus, the economy was not a fully monetized one which is also a prerequisite for development of a sound trade policy environment.

The successive kings had a tight control over the traders, and their efforts to have a monopolistic control over trade and commerce further hampered the growth of the trading class. In fact, restrictions on the Manipuris leaving the country were so vexing that few attempt trading with other countries. (Brown, 1875) During those times, citizens of Manipur could not go outside the kingdom without a pass given by the King which was hard to get by. The system of pass immensely discouraged the traders thereby hampering external trade and commerce enormously. (Singh, 1970) Apart from the state policies, other factors that inhibits external trade and commerce were lack of an organised trading class, inadequate infrastructure especially roads connecting with the outside world, lack of marketing facilities and capital. (Devi, 2015) As a result, trade and commerce of Manipur during the 19th century was miniscule in volume and extent.

Despite the central situation of Manipur, its fine climate and close connection with the British in the 19th century, she could not be the centre pot of trade between the northern provinces of Burma and the north-eastern districts of Assam. The Imphal valley could be the right assemblage point of traders from both British India and Burma. However, due to protective and isolative state policies Manipur failed to reap the benefits of trade and commerce in the 19th century. Her situation could be best summed up in the words of McCulloch (1980)

Even with the great disadvantage of an expensive land carriage, the valley of Munnipore is very favourably situated for the commercial purposes, but the system of government is opposed to the development of commerce, and the insecurity of traders in the Burmese territory is so great, that I fear commerce must for long be confined to the present restricted scale.

III. Trade with Burma

Manipur's relation with Burma in the past was marked by belligerent and frequent wars among each other for most part of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. Nonetheless, there were social and cultural relations among the two neighbours. Moreover, on and off trade link was also maintained among them. (Devi, 2015) Since the conquest of the Kabaw valley in the 15th century, Manipur had regular

² Coin made of bell-metal. According to Brown in 1873-74 the value of one coin was 428 British rupee.

contact with the Shans and the Burmese. Thus, there has been a constant trade and social relationship between the two countries which of course was disturbed frequently by the wars being waged against each other.

KinghChaurjit who ruled Manipur in the beginning of the 19th century encouraged trade with Burma and Yunnan in China. Marjit who succeeded him took the friendly relation forward by furthering trade with Burma. However, the Burmese invasion of 1819-26 and the events that followed completely stopped trade exchange between the two and throughout the century trade and commerce between the neighbours were at its lowestebb. After the treaty of Yandabo³ (1826), the Burmese began to look the Manipuris with distrust as an ally of the imperialist British. The Kabaw valley dispute further compounded the distrust among the two neighbours which inversely affected the trade and commerce between them.

During the 19th century the chief items imported from Burma were buffaloes, ponies, cattle and tea seeds. Few items like gold, precious stones, Burmese boxes, earth oil were also imported rather in small quantity. (Brown, 1870) Here it need to be mentioned that the cattle, buffaloes, ponies and tea seeds were again exported to Cachar and Assam valley from Manipur. (Allen, 2010) During 1868-69, the taxes levied on buffalo imported was 3-4 rupees and 4-5 rupees per pony. (Brown, 1870) The prohibition of trade in cattle and ponies by the Burmese authorities in 1871 seriously affected the volume of import from the country. (Jhonstone, 1879) However, the prohibition affected Cachar more than Manipur due to the want of ploughing cattle there as most of them came from Burma through Manipur.

Silk was the main item of export from Manipur to Burma during the 19th century as well as in the past. That silk from Manipur was so popular in Burma could be understood from the words of Brown (2001)

The Burmese traders who frequent Manipur buy up greedily all the raw silk they can get; this speak well for the quality of silk, as the silkworm is plentiful in or near the Kabo valley.

In 1868-69, a total of Rs. 100 was obtained as tax for the export of Manipuri silk to Burma. (Brown, 1874) Apart from silk, finished clothes, leaves which cover the cob of maize used in making cigarette were other exported commodities to Burma. (Devi, 2015) Overall, during the 19th century trade between Manipur and Burma was limited and stationary. One of the main reasons for this unsatisfactory trade relation was the respective economic policies of both countries which discouraged trade at all cost. The frequent skirmishes at the border is yet another factor which put hindrance on the expansion of trade relation. As an example, the Burmese attack on Manipuri outpost at Kongolthana⁴ in 1877 disturbed and stopped trade between them for several years until the matter was settled amicably. (Allen, 2010)

Thus, trade between Manipur and Burma during the 19th century was unsatisfactory mostly due to protective trade policies and strained political relation for most part of the century. The volume as well as the dimension of the items of trade were miniscule and stationary. However, after the annexation of both countries by the British, both the dimension and nature of trade underwent a complete overhaul change whereby European goods were mostly traded at the cost of goods originating from either countries. (Ali, 1988) Nonetheless, the import of Burmese cattle continued unabated till the beginning of the 20th century and were further exported to Assam and Bengal.

³ A peace treaty signed between the British and Burmese after the first Anglo- Burmese war of 1824-26.

⁴ Police station

Table 1. Import of cattle and pony from Burma

| Year | No. of Cattle | No. of pony | Total |
|---------|---------------|-------------|-------|
| 1906-07 | 4221 | - | 4221 |
| 1907-08 | 3240 | - | 3240 |
| 1910-11 | 847 | - | 847 |
| 1911-12 | 1280 | 4 | 1284 |
| 1912-13 | 2331 | 32 | 2363 |
| 1913-14 | 3683 | 39 | 3722 |
| 1914-15 | 2000 | 77 | 2077 |

Sources: Administration Report of the Political Agency, Manipur (Corresponding Years)

The trade in cattle was carried by the Muhammadans of Sylhet and Cachar while Manipur levied a transit tax on them. However, the import of cattle and ponies from Burma declined tremendously after 1916-17 and only 297 cattle and one pony were imported next year. Nonetheless, their import continued till the first half of the 20th century.

IV. Trade with British India

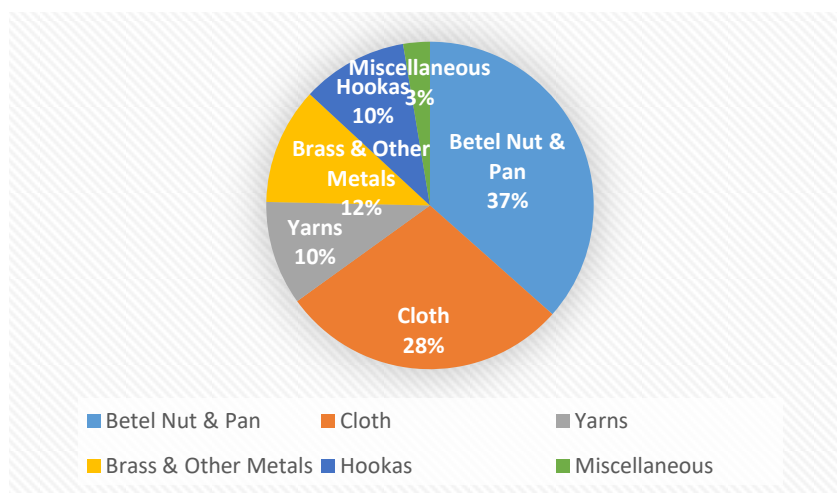
With British India, Manipur mainly traded with Cachar, Bengal, Assam valley and the Naga Hills. Statistics of trade with Cachar and Bengal were maintained at Jirighat in Jiribam whereas for Assam valley and Naga Hills it was maintained at Mao. Manipur had trade relation with them before their annexations by the British, however it was mostly unaccounted and of little value. It was only after the British took hold of the administration of all of them that the trade relation among them flourished immensely.

IV. (A) Trade through Cachar route

During the 19th century, Manipur carried on most of her trade and commerce with Cachar and Surma valley which has been under the British rule since 1832. Through Cachar, traders from Manipur used to exchange products of other states in British India. (Devi, 2015) Silchar, the headquarter of Cachar was the meeting point of the traders of Manipur, Bengal, Cachar and the Lushais. (Ali, 1988) Further, the largest number of traders coming to Manipur were also Bengalis from the Cachar and Sylhet districts of the British territory. (Brown, 1875)

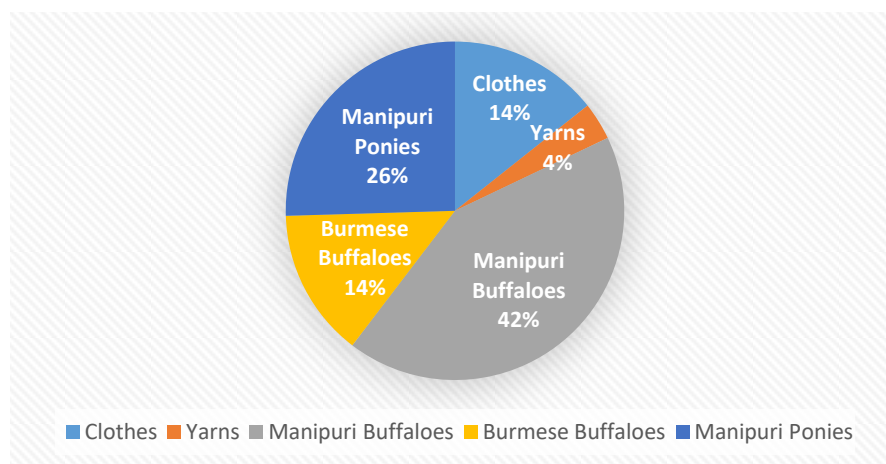
During the century, betelnuts, broad clothes, brass wire, *hookas*, spices, tools and implements, items of luxuries were the main import items from Cachar while ponies, cattle, clothes, silk, tea seed, ivory etc. were exported from Manipur. (Jhonstone, 1879) On every traded commodity, a duty is levied by the king of Manipur. In 1868-69, a total of Rs.5508 was collected as taxes from trade with Cachar. Out of it, Rs. 1975 was collected as taxes on import while Rs. 3533 was collected as export duty.

Figure. 1: Percentage of taxes collected on imported commodities, 1868-69



Source: Brown, 2001

Figure 2: Percentage of taxes collected on export commodities, 1868-69



Source: Brown, 2001

Thus, from the amount of tax collected, we could assess the nature of trade as well as the economy of Manipur during the century. From the amount of tax collected per commodities, it could be observed that Manipur had a favourable balance of trade with Cachar. The largest commodity of import was betel nut and *pan* which constituted 37 % of the total tax collected. Betel nuts are not grown in Manipur and hence it had to be imported in huge quantity as Manipuris are avid chewers of *pan*. The trend of importing betel nuts and *pan* continues even today. The fact that the main commodities of export of Manipur consisted of buffaloes and ponies shows the fact that her economy was a primitive one which depends on its natural resources especially animals and livestock for earning. In 1858, a total of 300 buffaloes and 100 ponies were exported to Cachar. (Bihari, 2012)

Elephants were also exported occasionally to Cachar. In 1858, 63 elephants were caught from Jiri and 48 of them were sold to Cachar. (Bihari, 2012) In 1872 also, 21 elephants were caught from Leimatak river valley and sold mostly of them to Cachar. (Jhonstone, 1879) Tea seed trade which was the monopoly of the King was another major item of export although almost all of it came from Burma. In 1894-95, 962 *maunds*⁵ of tea-seeds worth Rs. 57720 were exported to Cachar. (Porteous, 1895)

⁵ One maund is equal to 37.3242 kilograms

The British annexation of Manipur in 1891 marked a turning point in the external trade of Manipur especially with the states within British India including Cachar. The gradual improvement of the Cachar to Imphal road also gave a big push to the overall trade relation among the two. Drastic increase could be seen both in terms of volume and composition of trade in the closing decade of the century between Manipur and Cachar. Removal of trade restrictions coupled with reduction in the cost of transportation resulted in huge expansion in the volume of trade.

Table 2: Composition of imported commodities, Cachar route (Value in Rs.)

| Commodity | 1897-98 | 1899-00 | 1903-04* | 1906-07 |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| Mineral Oil | 24318 | 12802 | 1111 | - |
| Betel Nuts | 26414 | 56983 | 57532 | 62670 |
| Dried Fish | 15367 | 5490 | 19636 | - |
| Salt | 1889 | 2445 | 1418 | 976 |
| Cattle | - | - | 3735 | 5023 |
| Piece Good | 27827 | 40865 | 5850 | - |
| Yarn | 6477 | 25001 | 3837 | - |
| Metals | 5440 | 2098 | 3092 | - |
| Miscellaneous | 6642 | 20374 | 7690 | 18866 |
| Total | 114374 | 166058 | 103901 | 87535 |

Sources: Annual report of the native states and frontier tribes of Assam, 1897-98, Administration Report of the Political Agency, Manipur (Corresponding Years) & Allen, B.C. (2010)

*Data for the year 1903-04 is the average value of the three years ending 1903-04. The same is used henceforth in the paper.

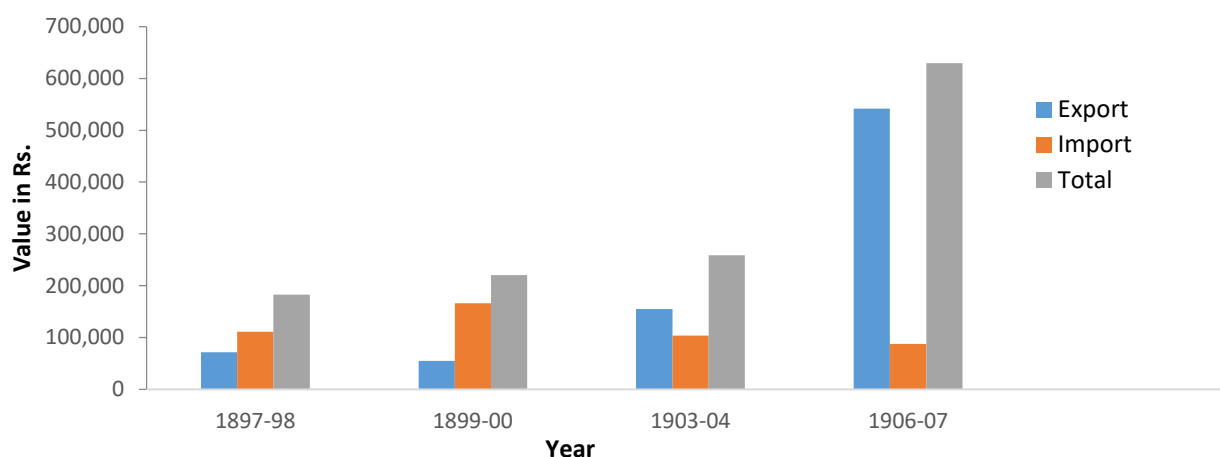
Betel nuts was the main item of import. Other items coming on this route include dried fish, piece good and yarn though by the beginning of the 20th century some of their imports had shifted through the Imphal-Kohima route. In terms of export, the main commodity was cattle mostly coming from Burma. Forest product which accounted for a sizeable portion of export have reduced in 1906-07. The tea seed trade which was the monopoly of the King and a source of considerable revenue for the state also took a hit when depressed state of tea industry in Assam resulted in its stoppage. (Allen, 2010) After 1891 importance of Cachar as the main trading partner of Manipur diminished with the opening of the Imphal Mao cart road.

Table 3: Composition of exported commodities, Cachar route (Value in Rs.)

| Commodity | 1897-98 | 1899-00 | 1903-04 | 1906-07 |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Cattle | 40570 | 3049 | 27022 | 468567 |
| Tea Seed | 25800 | 475 | - | - |
| Piece Good | - | - | 7534 | 42935 |
| Rice | - | 109 | 731 | - |
| Cotton and Yarn | - | 483 | - | - |
| Forest Product | - | 43800 | 102532 | 15287 |
| Miscellaneous | 5204 | 6893 | 17128 | 15102 |
| Total | 71574 | 54809 | 154947 | 541891 |

Sources: Annual report of the native states and frontier tribes of Assam, 1897-98, Administration Report of the Political Agency, Manipur (Corresponding Years) & Allen, B.C. (2010)

Figure 3: Export, import and total value of trade at Cachar route



Sources: Table 2 and 3

IV. (B) Trade through Kohima

Trade with the Assam valley and Naga Hills through the Kohima road picked up in volume and expanded in terms of composition only in the quarter of the 19th century after the construction of the cart road from Imphal to Mao in 1881 which ultimately connected it with Kohima, the head quarter of the Naga Hills. Earlier, few Naga traders ventured into the valley of Manipur to buy ponies. They also bought salt and spirits. In winter they bought good many clothes and yarn. (Grimwood, 1890) In return, their main items of sale were brass vessels from Assam and cornelians. They also brought little for sale except bee wax, oil seed, cotton and cloths. (Jhonstone, 1879). After the completion of the Imphal Mao road, gradually items for use by the troops like *ghee*, *dal*, and salt were began to be imported through Kohima by this road.

However it was the British annexation of Manipur in 1891 which increased the volume and composition of trade with the Naga Hills and beyond. Rice which was restricted to be exported before could now move freely to Kohima and several *maunds* of it were exported subsequently. (Jhonstone, 1879)

Table 4: Composition of imported commodities at Kohima route (Value in Rupees)

| Commodity | 1897-98 | 1899-00 | 1903-04 | 1906-07 |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Mineral Oil | 4380 | 3445 | 18678 | - |
| Salt | 745 | 115 | 19353 | 23,600 |
| Betel nuts | - | 335 | - | 114320 |
| Piece Good and Yarn | 15848 | 22750 | 54161 | 46720 |
| Metals | 3870 | 200 | - | - |
| Miscellaneous | 26110 | 14130 | 46545 | 72765 |
| Total | 50953 | 40975 | 138737 | 257405 |

Sources: Annual report of the native states and frontier tribes of Assam, 1897-98, Administration Report of the Political Agency, Manipur (Corresponding Years) & Allen, B.C. (2010)

By the beginning of the 20th century the composition of imports coming through this road underwent a drastic change. Goods which were hitherto coming mostly from the Cachar road like mineral oil, salt, betel

nuts, piecegoods, metals etc. have come in large quantity on this road from the Assam valley. Thus, the beginning of the century marked the importance of the Imphal - Kohima road as the lifeline for basic needs products coming from outside the state.

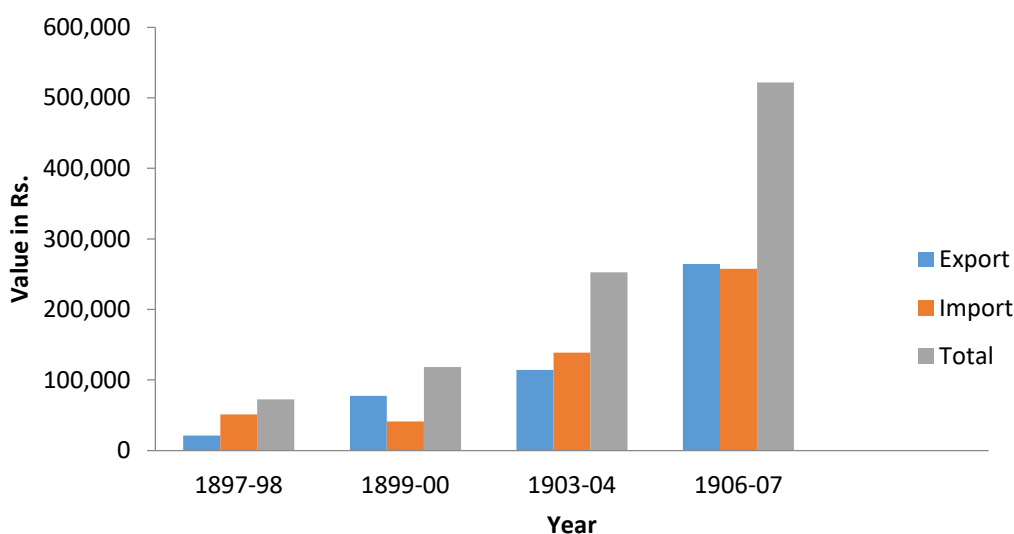
Table 5: Composition of exported commodities at Kohimaroute (Value in Rupees)

| Commodity | 1897-98 | 1899-00 | 1903-04 | 1906-07 |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Rice | 20716 | 63750 | 93998 | 249296 |
| Dried Fish | - | 3570 | 1765 | - |
| Cattle | - | 1475 | 2610 | 445 |
| Miscellaneous | 568 | 8446 | 15576 | 14701 |
| Total | 21284 | 77241 | 113949 | 264442 |

Sources: Annual report of the native states and frontier tribes of Assam, 1897-98, Administration Report of the Political Agency, Manipur (Corresponding Years) & Allen, B.C. (2010)

Exports rises tremendously due to free export of rice. The export of rice continued and the resulting scarcity arising of it sowed the seeds of the 'Women Agitation'⁶of 1939 whereby women rose against the artificial scarcity of rice. In fact, it became the major item of export through this route comprising more than 90 % of the total export in 1897-98 and 1906 -07. In 1899-00 and 1903-04 also it comprised more than 80 % of the total export value. Other items of export were of insignificant in value.

Figure 4: Total import and export atKohima route (Value in Rs.)



Sources: Table 4 and 5

⁶ Known as *NupiLan* in the history of Manipur. Artificial scarcity of rice due to rampant export was the cause of the agitation.

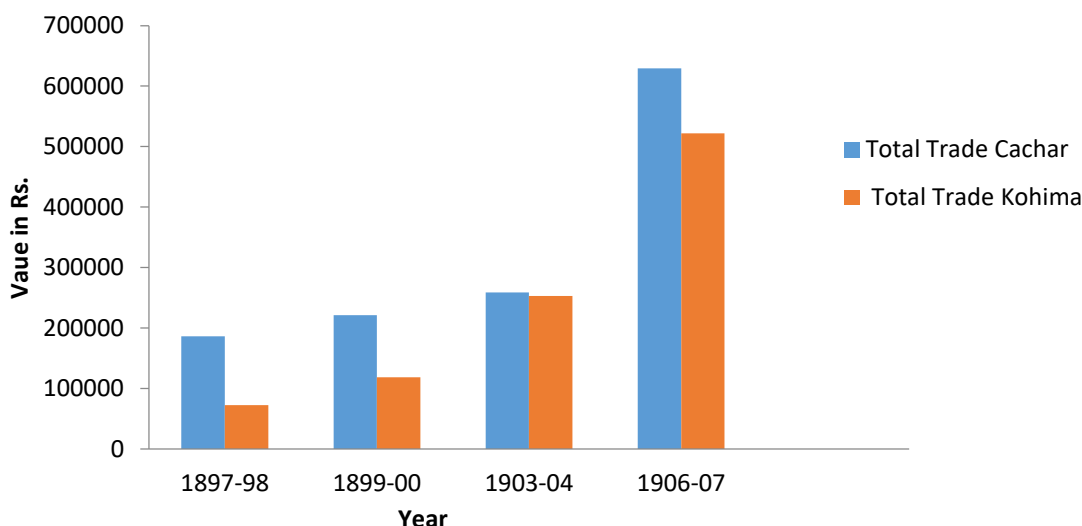
**Table 6: Export, import and total value of trade, Cachar and Kohima routes combined
(Value in Rs.)**

| Year | Export | Import | Total | BOT |
|---------|--------|--------|---------|--------|
| 1897-98 | 92858 | 165327 | 258185 | -72469 |
| 1899-00 | 132050 | 207033 | 339083 | -74983 |
| 1903-04 | 268896 | 242638 | 511534 | 26258 |
| 1906-07 | 806333 | 344940 | 1151273 | 461393 |

Sources: Annual report of the native states and frontier tribes of Assam, 1897-98, Administration Report of the Political Agency, Manipur (Corresponding Years) & Allen, B.C. (2010)

The volume of trade has increased considerable since the onset of the 20th century due to improved road infrastructure as well as the new colonial trade policy which encouraged free trade. The negative balance of trade (BOT) which was seen in the 19th century was reversed mainly due to large scale export of Burmese cattle for which Manipur received only a transit tax.

Figure 5: Comparison of trade value (In Rs.), Cachar and Kohima routes



Sources: Table 2, 3, 4 and 5

V. Colonial trade and economic disruption

The colonial trade policy pursued in Manipur post 1891 had a disruptive effect on her overall economic structure. The gradual opening of the economy and the resulting inflow of manufactured goods gave a death blow to the existing small scale manufacturing units that had flourished over the years. Among them, traditional weaving and salt industries bore the maximum brunt of the onslaught. (Singh, 2016) Increased import of piece goods resulted in the gradual extinction of the native handloom and handicraft industries which for so long took care of the local demand. The salt industry which flourished in the hands of the *Loi*⁷ population also met the same fate. By the beginning

⁷ A group of subdued people of Manipur in the past who paid tributes to the king.

of the 20th century some 7000 *maunds* of Liverpool salts were imported yearly to Manipur. (Higgins, 1912) Unable to compete with the cheaper imported salt, the local salt brines had to close one after another. Those few remained had to survive by producing for religious purposes of which the imported salt cannot substitute. (Nameirakpam, 2015)

The adverse effect of the changing trade policy was also felt on the native metal industries. Unable to withstand the onslaught of increasing imports, the manufacture of traditional iron had fallen off and most of them were on the verge of extinction by the first decade of the 20th century itself. (Shakespeare, 1907) Glass and paper industries met the same fate. As a result, deindustrialisation sets in with workers from industries who were left unemployed with the close of industries falling back to agriculture. (Nameirakpam, 2015)

On the other hand, increasing export of animal and forest product overly depleted the natural resources of the state. By the end of the colonial rule in the middle of the 20th century, forest resources of Manipur had been depleted. (Singh, 2005). Export of cattle and pony had to stop time and again as their numbers dwindled. The increasing outflow of rice to Kohima route continued unabated for most part of the beginning of the 20th century causing at times skyrocketing price for the people of the state. It also sowed the seed of the Women Agitation of 1939 which was caused by scarcity of rice due to export. The period also led to the emergence of a new Marwari trading class at the cost of native traders which took total control of both internal and external trade of the state. (Singh, 2016)

Overall, the colonial trade policy totally disrupted the economy of the state. From being a self-sufficient closed economy in the beginning of the 19th century, the state gradually became a dependent on outside products even for her essential needs. Natural resources of the state were left depleted and the process of deindustrialisation started during those times continued throughout the first half of the 20th century.

VI. Conclusion

The 19th century brought far reaching changes in the economy of Manipur like never experienced before. Contact with the British led to the opening of her economy hitherto closed by engaging in external trade and commerce with both the east and west. However, in the beginning of the century the volume as well as the composition of trade was limited due to certain factors like restrictions imposed by the King, poor connectivity with the outside world and primitive and self-sufficient nature of her economy. Trade with Burma was the victim of political circumstances and never reached its true potential.

After her annexation by the British in 1891, the volume as well as the composition of her external trade underwent a drastic change. Before 1891 her export consisted of primary products and livestock like cattle, buffalo and pony. But post 1891, apart from cattle, forest products and rice became the main exported items. In terms of import, apart from betel nuts which was in high demand, goods which were needed as the economy changes like mineral products, metals, piece goods became the primary items demanded. The changes in the economy manifested by the altered volume and composition of trade resulted in giving a serious blow to the hitherto self-sufficient village economy which had been in existence for century's altogether. Traditional villagebased industries like handloom and handicrafts, salt, metal among others were given a death blow unable to face competition with the imported goods. The emerging contours of external trade also resulted in the emergence of a trading class controlled by the outsiders at the cost of the natives which will have implications in the following centuries.

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