

Historical Background of Plywood and Match Industry in Colonial Assam

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ABSTRACT

Assam is an integral part of India. It is well known for its natural beauty and natural resources. Before the arrival of the British, the Ahom rulers ruled here for six hundred years. The British occupied Assam towards the first part of 19th century. The British reign had both positive and negative impacts on Assam. One of such positive impacts is- industrial development. Both major and minor industries like Tea, Oil, Coal, Timber, Match, Plywood etc. were established in Assam under the British patronization. In this paper an attempt has been made to study about the historical background of plywood and match industry in colonial Assam.

1. Introduction

Assam is situated to the north-east region of India. When the Britishers established their permanent power in India after 1757, Assam was quite free from their domination. Only after Yandaboo Treaty, which was concluded in 1826, the Britishers gradually incorporated Assam to their regime. Arrival of the British brought remarkable changes to the politics, society and economy of Assam. The British understood it well that Assam is very rich in natural resources. They discovered tea, coal and oil here. With the development of tea, coal and oil industry, noticeable economic changes entered into Assam. These industries also gave birth to some new related major or minor industries. History of growth and development of plywood and match industry in colonial Assam was also the contribution of the British regime. In this paper an analytical study has been made to trace the causes which led to the growth and development of plywood and match industry during colonial Assam.

2. Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are-

1. To analyse the causes which led to the development of Plywood industry in colonial Assam
2. To study about the growth and development of match industry in Assam during colonial regime.

3. Methodology

The present paper is based on data analytical method. For this paper both primary and secondary sources are used which are collected from various books, journals, news paper, internet etc.

4. Discussion

From the accounts of the British writers like Captain Welsh, W.W. Hunter, William Robinson, Buchanon Hamilton etc. one can get valuable information about natural resources of Assam. British Government tried to utilize these natural resources. As Assam is very rich in forest products, so there was ample scope for developing forest based industries like timber, plywood, match, paper etc. However, British government gave importance on establishment of plywood and match industry in Assam only after First World War. Now

discussion will be made on what led to the establishment of these industries in Assam.

5. Plywood Industry

The term *plywood* is used to describe a combination of several plies or pieces of veneer glued together. Uses of plywood initiated in different European countries towards the first decade of nineteenth century. But growth and development of plywood industry started in India as well as in Assam only after the First World War. In colonial Assam, development of tea industry helped in the growth of plywood industry. The discovery that the tea plant grows wild in the upper part of the Brahmaputra Valley was made by Mr. Robert Bruce, who was a British political agent and visited Garhgaon (a place near present Sivsagar district) for trading purposes in 1823. The earliest cultivation of tea in Assam in the Brahmaputra valley started almost in 1837 and soon many tea gardens were established under the British impetus¹. Gradually Assam tea was started to export to European countries. Initially the tea manufactures of Assam used some tea chests for packaging purposes which were made from sawn wood and known as tea shooks. These tea shooks were much heavier and less convenient for use. So manufacturers and the agency houses in Calcutta searched for suitable alternative. Thus the necessity for light weight tea chest paved the way for using plywood in Assam. Plywood made tea chest weights between 16 to 18 lbs (almost 7-8Kg), whereas a country shook chest weights about 28lbs (almost 12 kg). Besides plywood is relatively stronger than solid cut board and is less susceptible to atmospheric conditions².

Some other reasons also helped in the increasing demand of plywood made boxes in colonial Assam. Arupjyoti Saikia writes in his book *Forest and Ecological History of Assam* that before the establishment of plywood factories in Assam, to create a regular supply of tea-boxes, two sawmills began to function in Assam from 1880 in Lakhimpur and Cachar. Some more sawmills were established towards the last decade of the nineteenth century. But with the increase in the number of tea gardens in Assam the demand for tea-chests increased gradually. Comparative low price of the imported boxes and their durability convinced the tea gardens to continue to rely on imported plywood made boxes³. Initially plywood made boxes

was imported from Britain and other European countries. It is seen that demand of such plywood boxes increased year by year. In 1906-07, the value of such boxes imported into India was not more than 23.5 Lakhs, but by 1924-25 it had risen to 90 lakhs. During the First World War, the price of imported veneer boxes rose rapidly and considerable difficulty was experienced in meeting the demands of the tea industry. It was a matter of great national importance that the shipment of tea should be maintained⁴. Actually no attempt was taken to establish plywood industry in Assam as well as India till the first world war. But during the First World War, the supply of plywood from Europe was interrupted. So, British Government in India thought of developing plywood industry locally in this country. As a result three plywood factories were set up to manufacture plywood to meet the demand of tea manufacturers. Within those, two were established in Assam and one was established in Bengal due to availability of raw materials needed for the plywood industry. Names of these plywood factories were----

- 1) The Assam Saw Mills and Timber Company Limited
- 2) The Assam Railways and Trading company Limited
- 3) The Jalpaiguri Timber and Lead Mills Company Limited.

Report of the Employment Review Committee on Plywood Industries in Assam has mentioned that the history of plywood industries in Assam dates back to 1882 when the first plywood industry was started by the Assam Frontier Tea Company⁵. But From other archival sources, it is known that no attempt was made to establish plywood industry in India before the First World War. B.K.Sarma in his book *Industrial Landscape in North-East India* mentions that a British firm namely M/s Bird & Co had establish the first plywood factory at Kobo at Sadiya in 1920 under the name of Assam Saw Mill & Timber Company on the basis of a lease for 20 years of virgin forest of plywood species⁶. From archival sources, it is also known that the Assam saw Mill and Timber Company was situated at Murkongselek on the river Brahmaputra in the Sadiya Frontier tract of Assam some 30 miles to the north east Dibrugarh and supplies of timber were obtained from the forests in the direction of Pasighat and also from the Poba area portions of which have been leased to the company for a period of thirty years⁷. The second plywood factory was established at Margherita in 1925 by the Assam Railways Company on a lease for 10 years in Upper Dihing Reserved Forest. The raw materials required for the manufacture of plywood are- Timber and Glue or cement. In colonial Assam mainly three trees was proved most suitable for the manufacture of plywood. They were- Hollock (*Terminalia myriocarpa*), Hollong (*Dipterocarpus pilosus*) and Simul (*Bombax malabaricum*). Assam Saw Mills and Timber Company Limited mainly used Simul and Hollock . On the other hand Assam Railway and Trading Company Limited used a variety of woods for the manufacture of panels for railway carriages and for the walls and ceilings of houses. Both these plywood factories of Assam were British Company and they were not able to fulfil the demand of tea industry by manufacturing plywood boxes. The Indian tea trade required almost 33 lakhs of boxes annually. Assam Saw Mills and Timber Company produced approximately 3 lakhs, the Assam Railways and Trading Company manufactured about 40,000 and the Jalpaiguri Timber and lead Mills Company

about 16,000 boxes⁸. During colonial period only a few plywood factories were set up in Assam. In 1941 the first Indian owned plywood factory was installed by late Rameswarlal Saharia at Jeypore (Dibrugarh District, Assam) and the very next year in 1942 Sri M.D. Jalan put up the veneer Mills Ltd. The machinery used in these two factories was also made indigenously by M/s Varat Machinery Calcutta⁹. Plywood Industry flourished in Assam only after independence. From 1950 onwards the industry had grown with the encouragement extended by the State Government.

6. Match Industry

From historical sources it is known that modern kind of safety matches were invented around 1885. Match industry initially developed in different European countries like USA Sweden Japan etc. during the period of 19th century. But in India no profitable match factory was developed till 1921 due to lack of suitable localities or sufficient capital and proper management. Before the development of match industry in India, matches were imported mainly from Sweden and Japan. Between the years 1900 and 1910, there was a steady increase in the imports of matches into India, the value rising from about Rs 40 lakhs to Rs. 81 lakhs. By 1913-14 the value of imported matches increased approximately by Rs 90 Lakhs¹⁰. Before 1921 only one match factory gained success in maintaining its position. It was Gujrat Islam Match Factory. In 1922 a high level revenue duty was imposed on imported matches to protect India's native match making industry. Actually after First World War the British Government felt the necessity of establishing some industries locally. So match industry obtained their importance. This helped in the growth and development of match industry in India. In 1923, the Esavi India Match Manufacturing Company with an outlet 3,000 gross matches a day was established in Calcutta. Early in 1924 M/s Adamjee Dawood and Company commenced manufactures in Rangoon with a capacity of 6000 gross a day. In 1925-26 the Mahalaksmi Match Factory at Lahore and the Bareilly match works equipped with the most up to date machinery commenced work. With the development of native match industry in India, import of matches decreased. As Sweden was the largest importer of matches into India, so it did not want to lose its market and decided to establish some factories in different parts of India. These were-

- 1) Swedish Match Company (Ambernath, July, 1924)
- 2) Swedish Match Company (Calcutta, September 1924)
- 3) Swedish Match Company (Parel, September 1926)
- 4) Assam Match Company, (Dhubri, July, 1926).
- 5) Burma match Company (August, 1925)
- 6) Mandalay Match Company (October 1925)¹¹.

Thus under the patronization of Swedish Match Company, a match factory named Assam Match Company (AMCO) was established in Assam at Dhubri. While the other five factories (except Dhubri) became the part of Swedish controlled Western India Match Company (WIMCO), the Dhubri factory was commissioned as Assam Match Company. However, some other historical sources, it is known that the year of establishment of AMCO was 1925. The Swedish entrepreneurs had all the justification for setting up the match factory of Dhubri as Dhubri had the required raw material for the then wood based match factory enterprise. The Swedish

entrepreneurs acquired 132 bighas of land to set up the factory¹². When the factory was established in 1925 the total manpower employed in the factory was about 500. Most of the workers were unskilled. The match industry required three classes of labour-skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled. While the unskilled labours were collected locally, the semi-skilled labour had to be brought from Bihar and Bengal. Skilled workers included were entirely recruited from outside Assam¹³. AMCO was the only match factory during colonial Assam and later it was taken by the western India Match Company (WIMCO).

7. Conclusion

From the above discussion one can understand that both plywood and match industry developed in Assam during

colonial regime. Plywood made boxes is closely related with the tea industry. As Assam is the largest producer of tea in India, so plywood made boxes were essential for transportation of tea. On the other hand match is also an urgent need of daily use. Though Assam had sufficient raw materials for these industries yet before the British regime no idea was evolved for the uses of plywood or safety match box. Initially, plywood and matches were imported from European countries. But after the First World War the British Government felt the necessity of establishing these industries locally as the war interrupted import of these products. Availability of natural resources and British impetus helped in the development of plywood and match industry in colonial Assam.

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