



LAC INDUSTRY IN COLONIAL ASSAM

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Abstract

Lac is a complex resinous secretion of a small bug like insect called *Lacciferlacca*. From ancient times people knew the uses of lac in India. As a part of India, people of Assam also had good knowledge about this forest product. During colonial period lac abled to attract the attention of the British due to its diverse uses .Lac was commercialised during this period and commercialization paved the way for development of lac as a minor forest based industry in Assam. This paper is an attempt to study about the cultivation, commercialization, uses and manufacture of shellac and button lac in colonial Assam.

Key word: Lac, cultivation, commercialization, uses, manufacture, colonial Assam

Introduction

The lac insects were recognized as ‘Laksa’(In Sanskrit it means a hundred thousand) in ancient India.. Diverse medicinal uses of lac are indicated in the Atharvaveda. Mahabharata also refers to ‘Laksagriha’ or ‘House of lac’. Mahabharata mentions that the Kauravas tried to kill the Pandavas by asking them to live in a house of lac known as Jatugriha or Lakshagriha, built by Purochana. In Ramayana we can get references to its use as cosmetics to colour hand and feet red. Therefore it is proved that thousands of year back, people used to collect and grow lac and used it by different ways. In Assam also, people had knowledge of lac from ancient times. In ancient Assam, lac was an important item of trade. Tavernier informs us that Assam produced an abundance of shellac of a red colour, which was the best of its kind in the whole of Asia. In Colonial Assam also, lac was cultivated and a considerable amount of lac was exported to Bengal.

Objectives : The objectives of this paper are:

- 1) To study how and where lac was cultivated during colonial Assam
- 2) To find out diverse uses of lac and its importance.
- 3) To study about the commercialization of lac in colonial Assam
- 4) To find out how and where shellac and button lac were manufactured.

Methodology : This paper is mainly prepared by using both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources like archival documents, original reports of the British writers have been used here. Besides secondary sources like articles, magazines, books, internet etc. are also used preparing the same.

Discussion

From the accounts of the British officials like – W.W Hunter, John M’Cosh, William Robinson, Buchanon Hamilton etc, one can get important information about lac in Assam. This also proves that lac was able to attract their attention. Priyam Goswami in her book *Assam in the Nineteenth century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration mentions* that, “The development of the textile industries had stimulated

discoveries in industrial chemistry. The old method of bleaching linen or cotton had been to steep it in sour milk and expose it for some months to the air. This process often took about eight months. The necessity of a faster method was urgently felt and various experiments were carried out with chemical and natural dyes. It was in this context that the lac of Assam attracted the attention of the British”¹

Lac cultivation

During the last part of the 19th century, Kamrup and the northern parts of the Khasi and the Garo Hills bordering on the Brahmaputra Valley were the chief seats of its cultivation. In Kamrup lac rearing was chiefly confined to the south bank of the Brahmaputra. In the Garo Hills, lac rearing was chiefly confined to the north and north eastern parts of the district, comprising the northern range of the Garo Hills Forest Division. The people of the south and south western parts are said to have a superstition against lac cultivation. During the times of last part of nineteenth century Assam, very little lac was reared in any of the remaining districts of the province. In the Goalpara subdivision about 300 maunds were said to be collected annually. In Manipur, the annual collection was reported not to exceed 50 maunds in all. It is not known how much lac was produced annually in the districts of Darrang, Sivasagar and Lakhimpur towards the last part of 19th century². From another archival source, it is known that the two most important lac growing areas in Assam were the Mikir Hills and the Garo Hills. Other lac growing districts are the Khasi and Jayantia Hills, Golapara, Kamrup with smaller outputs in Darrang and North Cachar Hills. Generally most of the lac in Assam was cultivated by the hill people. The lac was sold to the middle men who financed the trade both through cash and kind by the supply of rice and other commodities required by the hill people from day to day. Towards first half of the 20th century, generally lac was purchased by petty dealers who resold it to large middle men with registered godown, who in turn exported the lac from Assam to Calcutta to another set of dealers.³

Lac rearing

The principal lac producing trees in Assam are-

1. *Ficus cordifolia* (Assamese pakri or Jari)
2. *Ficus altissima* (Assamese kanthalu bar)
3. *Cajanus indicus* (Assamese Arhar)
4. *Ziziphus jujuba* (Assamese bagri)

Lac also grows on several other species of *Ficus* of which *Ficus religiosa* (Assamese Ahat) *Ficus bengalensis* (Assamese Bamuni bar), *Ficus elastica* (Indian rubber) and *Ficus infectoria* have been mentioned by name in some of the district reports. The two lac yielding trees of Bengal namely the palas and the kusum are little known in Assam. Lac is also reported to occur on numerous other trees including the following of which the scientific names are known –

- Ricinus communis* (castor oil)
- Albizia lucida* (Assamese Moj)
- Cedrela toona* (Assamese Poma)
- Artocarpus chaplasha* (Assamese sam)
- Terminalia citrina* (Assamese Hilika) etc.

The Garos living on the northern slopes of the Khasi Hills bordering on the Kamrupa district rear lac on two shrubs which they call “Suktapata” and ‘Kukurhuta’ respectively. Their botanical names are not known.⁴

John M’cosh writes a note on method of rearing lac in his book *Topography of Assam*. Pieces of stick lac containing living insects are tied on the branches of the trees on which the next crop is to be grown. In the course of three or four months, the tree is nearly covered with the family at once they begin to feed and secrete the resin. The secretion of lac is allowed to go on for about six months before it is gathered. Then the branches are broken off and brought to the market as stick lac. There are two seasons for collecting lac- June and October. The latter gathering is the best. The greater part of the lac is exported in the raw state –some is converted into shellac and dye.⁵ B.C. Basu in his *Note on the Lac Industry of Assam* mentions that the lac crop is liable to several kinds of pests, among which the most injurious are a species of ant and the caterpillars of a tiny moth, both of which feed on and destroy the insect. Stormy weather at the time when the young insects are spreading over the tree may destroy them altogether.

Uses of lac :- In India Lac was mainly used in the fabrication of beads, rings and other ornaments of female attire etc. From the book *Historical and Descriptive Account of British India* one can find importance of lac in British India. Lac was exported from India and East India Company was said to have saved in a few months £ 14,000 in the purchase of scarlet cloths dyed with lac colour and cochineal conjointly and without any inferiority in the colour obtained⁶. Lac was mainly used as a dyeing agent in colonial Assam also. The articles usually coloured with lac dye were cotton clothes and thread of every kind of material (cotton, silk, mega or eri). In Sylhet different colours were produced mixing lac and other substances for example (1) sky blue obtained by mixing powdered indigo and sulphur with shellac, (2) red by mixing lac with vermilion, (3) violet with violet powder, (4) grey with white lead (5) brick red with red resin (6) orange with vermilion and orpiment (7) dark green with green powder (8) Green with indigo and orpiment, (9) Black with lamp black and (10) yellow with orpiment.

Besides, the following articles were occasionally ornamented with lac in Assam like stands for trays, legs of wooden seats, circular boxes, shuttles, lamp holders, cylinders of native drums etc. Lac was also used in Assam as a protecting varnish over designs painted on wooden surfaces, like on trays, palanquins and bedsteads Sylhet town was noted for its lac toys.⁷ In Sylhet (In Colonial times, Sylhet was a part of Assam) lac was produced in the lands situated in the police circles of Rajnagar, Hingajia, Parkul, Lashkarpur, Noakhali, and Tajpur. A portion of the lac produced in the district was worked up into bracelets by the females in Muhammadan families, and the remainder was exported to Calcutta and elsewhere. In Pargana Lashkarpur lac was manufactured into a variety of elegant objects known as pukala work, which had obtained a high reputation. In some specimens the lac was tastefully inlaid with the blue feathers.⁸

Commercialisation of lac:-

For the uses of lac, it became an important item for export. Assam used to export to Bengal a considerable amount of lac which was of superior quality. According to a table supplied by Buchanon Hamilton regarding Assam-Bengal Trade

one finds that Assam exported stick lac amounting to 10,000 maunds, valued at rupees 35,000.00 in the first decade of the nineteenth century.⁹ From *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol-2 by W. W. Hunter, one can know that one of the chief articles of trade in Goalpara was lac. Lac was collected by the Garos in considerable quantities and sold by them at the little frontier market villages of Jira, Nibari and Damra. Besides one part of the produce was sold to the Bengali traders.

The following statement exhibits the exports of lac from Assam-

Year	Total(Mds)
1885-86	30,093
1886-87	28,022
1887-88	27,582
1888-89	34,575
1889-90	15,430
1890-91	9,386
18891-92	14,753
1892-93	15,383
1893-94	6,147
1894-95	17,723
1895-96	15,915
1896-97	16,525
1897-98	24,869
1898-99	14,494

(The above table includes the data of both Surma and Brahmaputra Valley) ¹⁰

William Robinson writes in his book *A Descriptive Account of Assam* that the quantity of stick lac annually exported may be fairly computed at about 20,000 maunds. The value of stick lac in this province varies from five to nine rupees a maund.¹¹ If that is, it can be easily assumed that Assam earned considerable profit by exporting lac from Assam.

Export of lac from Assam¹²

<u>Year</u>	<u>Value in Rs.</u>
1890-91	1,13,000
1900-01	1,99,000
1903-04	4,92,000
1904-07	22,49,629

In this regard, it is worthy to mention that Assam was not the only state to produce lac in colonial times. Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal were that highest producer of lac. Assam produced a small part of entire lac production in colonial India. For example during the period 1930-1940 the average production of Lac in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal were 486, 255 and 311 thousand mounds respectively. But Assam produced only 32 thousand mounds. Lac was exported to different countries like UK, USA, Germany, Italy, France, Japan, USSR, Australia, Arzentina, Brazil, Sweden, China, Netherlands etc.¹³

The production of lac in Assam was not steady. Priyam Goswami mentions in her book *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and colonial penetration* that with the introduction of synthetic dyes, lac lay was gradually robbed of its commercial value. But due to different uses of lac, demand of shellac increased in between 1868 and 1900, the value of the exports of lac from India had fallen from 4,45,612 to nil, while that of shellac exported rose from Rs. 18,41,491 to Rs. 92,65,6000.

Production of lac in Assam during the pre-war years
(Figures are in thousand maunds)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount</u>
1930-31	55
1931-31	45
1932-33	28
1933-34	22
1934-35	46
1935-36	37
1936-37	34
1937-38	26
1938-39	22
1939-40	8

*Source- Atlas of Indian Lac*¹⁴

In 1946-47, amount of lac production in Assam was 11,000 maunds. In next year (1947-48) it increased to 16,000.

Lac industry played an important role in the economy of colonial Assam. It was a profit making industry for the Britishers. Revenue was also collected from lac. Duty on lac was abolished on the ground that it was an agricultural crop but was again reimposed in 1922 when it yielded revenue of Rs 151,873.¹⁵

E.P Stebbing writes in his note on the lac insect (1905) that,

“It would seem a pity that the question of lac cultivation is not taken up more seriously in Assam. It would appear advisable for the Forest Department to take up the question with the object of showing what can be done by scientific management and by introduction of better methods..... It is almost inconceivably surprising that the cultivation of lac has been so neglected in the province of Assam. ¹⁶Though it is difficult to justify the opinion of E.P Stebbing, yet from archival sources, it is known that a few factories developed in colonial Assam to produce shellac and button lac.

Manufactured lac:-

Shell and button lac was manufactured in small quantities in Sibsagar and at Mackenzie’s Factory Rajpur Estate, Cachar. The process of manufacture was the same as followed elsewhere. The crude lac was first crushed and sifted to free it from woody matter. It was then subjected to a long course of alternate washing and drying, until the resin thoroughly free from colouring matter. The lac called in this stage seed lac, was then put into a long cloth bag which is held and slowly turned over a charcoal fire, when the resin inside the bag had melted, it was squeezed out by twisting the bag and was brushed off by drawing it over the smooth surface of a pieces of plantain bark, Mackenzie mixes a small proportion of rosin with the crude lac. In Sibsagar the

lac was washed in alkaline water (Kharpani) prepared from the ashes of the plantain tree at one stage of the long course of washing to which it was subjected.

Another preparation of lac used in Assam was what had been called “boiled lac” in some of the District reports. In the Assam Valley it was known as “BhiriLaha”. It was prepared by boiling stick lac for some hours, until it becomes soft, and then pressing the softened mass into cakes¹⁷

From William Robinsons “A Descriptive Account of Assam” we can know that another factory for the preparation of shellac and lac dye had been established at Gowahatti by an enterprising merchant, Mr. Becher. But more information is not found about this factory. Probably lac manufacturing factories were developed under the British merchant’s impetus.

Conclusion:

At last we can conclude that forest based product *Lac* was able to attract the attention of the British during colonial period in Assam and it was commercialized. Raw lac or stick lac were collected by the middleman and then those were exported to Bengal .Besides a few factories developed under the patronization of some British merchants in Assam to manufacture stick lac to button lac and shellac. Though native cultivators of lac couldn’t earn so much profit by cultivating lac, yet lac industry developed as a profitable minor forest based industry for the British Government in colonial Assam.

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