

Patna: The Commercial Hub in the 18th and 19th Centuries

Dr. Arun Kumar

Department of History, Mahila College, Khagaul, Patna, Bihar

ABSTRACT

Patna was a significant manufacturing and trading hub in 18th and 19th century India due to its strategic location on the Ganga river, which facilitated both riverine and overland trade routes. It was a trans-shipment point for goods from across Northern India and a major center for the production of textiles, saltpeter (for gunpowder), and later, opium. European powers like the British, Dutch, French, and Danes established factories to trade in these goods, solidifying Patna's role as a global commercial center. However, the modern city of Patna, formerly known as Pattana meaning a 'martt, is believed to have been established by the Afghan ruler, Sher Shah in 1541, in preference to Bihar or Vihar, 30 miles to the east of modern Patna. Since then Patna became the provincial capital and the main seat of commerce and trade of Bihar.

Key words – Patna, Cities, Ruler, Trade

INTRODUCTION

The most remarkable feature of trade and industry in Patna during the period under review was the participation of foreign merchants, especially the English, both in the internal and external trade. Before the advent of the English, trade and commerce of Patna was generally agro-based. The Company's Government tried to change the pattern, though nothing radical could be done. Ever since the days of Shah Jahan the English had been carrying on trade in Bengal Presidency, which then included Patna also. For the merchants and traders Patna provided a rich hinterland. In some of the items like opium, saltpeter, indigo, salt, textiles, sugar, carpet, betelnut and pepper Patna happened to be the centre of attraction for merchants from far-off parts of the world.

The year 1765 has a unique importance in the trade history of Patna, It was in this year that the English Company established its monopoly over trade and cotton production at Patna after passing through several vicissitudes. Some of the reasons for the varying fortunes of trade and industry were a series of Maratha incursions and destruction of the factories and godowns in Patna. To add to this, there were the invasions of the Afghans and the protracted warfare between the English and the Dutch. But we must remember that with the establishment of the English monopoly the indigenous trade and industries suffered a severe set-back. This led to a sad history of gradual decline of Indian skill, labour and craftsmanship and a penetration of English power into the remotest corner of Bihar.

Tirhut and adjoining regions were the chief rice-producing centres from where rice was sent to Patna and its suburbs. Towards the beginning of the 19th century most of the rice for local consumption at Patna came from Monghyr, where Manohar Mukherjee happened to be a leading tradesman. But Dinapur received a good deal of its required rice from Tirhut, Bhagalpur and Purnea districts. In fact, these areas were rich suppliers of rice for the whole of Bihar. But in times of scarcity Purnea itself, had to import rice from Patna and Bhagalpur.

Besides rice there was regular trade of wheat between parts of Patna. Some amount of wheat also came to Patna from Ramgarh in the present Hazaribagh district. But the European residents of Purnea received their quota of wheat from Patna. On the other hand, Patna including Biharsharif, exported pulses like *Arhar*, *Mung*, *Khesari*, *Masur* and *Bora* to Bhagalpur. In addition to this, rape seed, mustard and castor oil seeds were also sent to Bhagalpur from Patna and Biharsharif." Though Shahabad was the main exporter of sugar to the different districts of Bihar, Purnea had its quota of sugar from Tirhut and Patna. Extract of sugarcane and molasses also came from Patna.

Among the miscellaneous articles, black pepper, sold by Pansaris came to Shahabad from Chapra and Patna. Other Pansari goods including cloves, mace, nutmegs, small cardamoms, camphor, paints, quick-silver, tin-leaf, Sandhap salt and sandal-wood were sent to Patna, and other places from Bhagalpur. But Bhagalpur received its ghee and butter from Tirhut and Biharsharif (in Patna) and pepper from Patna proper. Patna also exported Manihari goods to Shahabad and perfumeries to Purnea.

During the first half of the 19th century Patna received most of its requirement of cotton from Shahabad where about a hundred merchants were engaged in this work. Total value of cotton supplied from Shahabad to the Company's factory at Patna amounted to nearly Rs. 20,000. The cloth manufactured here was chiefly coarse, meant for winter clothing and use of the poorer people. Finer and thinner variety of cloth was produced in Biharsharif itself. Therefore, Patna had the privilege of supplying good quality *Chint* to Bhagalpur. For this- purpose Bhagalpur supplied cotton thread to Biharsharif. Cotton wool for Purnea was obtained from Patna. Patna also happened to be a leading supplier of woollen carpets to Bhagalpur and Tirhut which also received gold thread and *Shawls* from Patna." Blankets made at Shahabad were sent to Patna, where a number of travellers purchased them. These blankets were very cheap and durable with the result that they were also sent to the hilly districts of south Bihar. In return, Patna sent sack cloth to Shahabad and Chapra. For the preparation of sack cloth *Pat* or *San* was received from Purnea.

Monghyr was a rich producer of tobacco which was sent to Patna besides other places of south Bihar. But Patna happened to be a good producer of betelnut and betel-leaf which was in great demand in Shahabad. Patan also produced good quality of wax which was sent to Bhagalpur and Shahabad. This Patna happened to be an important centre of trade in Bihar.

The outgoing trade of Patna was carried through Sultanganj Chowki in eastern part of the city situated on the river Ganga. Commodities were sent in the direction of east and north-east.

Costly and luxury articles like broad cloth and Amertees. were imported into Patna during the early part of the 18th century. During 1730's broad cloth was sent from Calcutta to Patna on a regular basis.

Besides Patna imported large quantities of cotton fabrics from Bengal.. The Amenian merchants were also interested in this trade. It has been stated by Bolts that broad cloth was imported in to Patna and in 1777 a total number of 10,333 pieces of cotton cloth including *Cuttani*, *Saris*, *Doriah* and *Malmal* were imported into Patna also from countries outside India and sent to the different parts of the Mughal empire. During the same year Patna imported 1,087 pieces of uotton cloth from Bengal. This included 236 maunds from Dacca Regarding export from Bihar, Manucci narrates that Coja Safar took cloth from various parts of Bihar and despatched it to Surat from Patna, where he personally resided. The value of such cloth has been estimated to be at Rs. 30,000 Carpets and blankets were exported from Patna and Shahabad to the different parts of Bengal province.

Silken goods were exported from Patna, Consignments of silk boats were sent from Patna and Fatwa through Bhagalpur and Colgong to Maricha. Patna silk good were also in demand in Banaras, Akbarabad. Delhi and Lahore. This trade was carried out by the local people.

In the 18th century salt was sent to Patna by the merchants of Bengal. In 1764 the Company servants were permitted to send salt for sale to the factories of Patna after paying duties to the government and the Nawab. Earlier salt used to be imported at Patna from the Deccan and also from the Western Coast, of Persia. But when the English monopolised trade in Bengal and Bihar the foreign imports declined. But with the decline in imports from western India, Madras and Bengal salt began to be imported in large quantities at Patna, both for local consumption and export to western countries.

Patna was an important centre for rice trade but during the Company's involvement in wars with Nawabs of Bengal rice was in great demand for the army. Therefore, import of rice in Patna was prohibited in 1764. The Company decided to purchase 50,000 maunds of rice annually during the season on the Company's account by the factories of Patna and Malda, which were to be imported into Patna by the Company's *Dastaks* and kept in stock against emergencies. Therefore, the Company's servants were prohibited from trading in rice in Patna.

Betelnut was one of the chief items in which English traders enjoyed monopoly of trade. After paying duty of 2% the company's servants were permitted to send betelnut to the factories at Patna. The result was that the English merchants fixed their own price for betelnut. Large consignments of betelnut were imported to Patna by boats.

Sugar provided one of the chief items in which huge quantities of export-import trade was carried on in Patna during the eighteenth as well as nineteenth centuries. In Patna sugar was imported from Banaras during 1772. There are records which show that in May 1773 Patna exported sugar to Calcutta. In the sugar trade of Patna the Dutch traders also took part. In the early nineteenth century 7000 acres were under sugar- cane cultivation in the regions of Patna.

In 1773 Patna also imported pepper from Bengal upto the extent of 1106 maunds. In 1777 the quantity received at Patna from Bengal was 667 maunds 31 seers.

During the eighteenth century copper was sent to Patna from Bengal for the purpose of minting coins. The Council at Calcutta was asked "to send up all the copper they received from England which they believed would go off in the mint" at Patna. Iron and lead were also among the metals which were imported in Patna.

Cotton manufacture was quite flourishing in Patna in the early eighteenth century. Between 1653 and 1708 fine white cloth was manufactured at Patna and was very plentiful for internal use and export too. The two factories at Patna belonged to the English and the Dutch.

Apart from muslins and calicoes other fabrics like Amertees and *Chintz* were also exported. Baftas, cossaes and *mulmuls* were manufactured at Patna. The weaving of fine cotton stuffs was carried on at Jahanabad in Patna division. Both cloths and towels were a speciality of Biharsharif in Patna district.

The manufacture of silk was not in a flourishing condition in Patna before the battle of Plassey. After the Grant of Diwani the company showed a genuine interest in silk business. On 17 March 1769 the Court of Directors wrote that the silk manufacturers should be made to work as winders in the company's factories and be prohibited from working elsewhere and prescribed penalties for violation of this rule. The famine of 1770 badly affected the silk industry. But during the early nineteenth century Buchanan marked a gradual increase in the manufacture of silk fabrics at Patna. It was perhaps because of the decline in the weaving of mixed stuff of cotton and silk that silk centre of Patna was put under the agency system. At Patna the English and the Dutch factories manufactured cloth of cotton and fine silk during the period. Inferior silk was also made in the Patna division. A cloth called *Bafta* was in great demand both among Europeans and local people.

At Patna three kinds of carpets were produced. One was Shatranji made entirely of cotton. The second kind was a mixture of wool and cotton. The base of the third was made of cotton and the woollen part was neatly piled over this cotton warp and wool. Buchanan stated that some woollen carpets were also manufactured at Patna.

During early nineteenth century in Bihar paper was chiefly manufactured at Patna. *San* (Hemp) and *Pat* (jute) were chiefly used for the manufacture of paper. A considerable quantity of paper was manufactured at Biharsharif in Patna district.

Patna was the most important centre for the soap manufacture in Bihar. Patna soaps were very popular throughout the Bengal Presidency. The total produce of soap per year in Patna and Gaya amounted to Rs. 3,000.

Stone work is one of the oldest arts in Patna. The Gonds carried on stone work in Patna. They made images from fine white marble and common black- stone brought from western India. Besides hand mills, they also manufactured pieces for rubbing curry, mortars of sugar mills, potter's wheels and *Shiva Lingas*. Each house was able to earn between Rs. 17 to 20 per year.

During the second half of the eighteenth century saltpetre was an important commodity of trade in Bihar. Patna occupied the most important position in this industry, both on account of its central location as well as availability of raw material around it.

From Patna saltpetre was sent to Calcutta in boats under armed protection. For this purpose a fleet of boats was sent from Calcutta to Patna known as 'Patna Fleet'. The saltpetre boats were considered to be of great economic and political value. Though there were refineries and factories for purifying saltpetre at Patna, yet the trade was gradually dropping on account of the money-thirst policy of the Britishers. Almost all the refined salt was sent from Patna to Calcutta for export. The Britishers, inspite of several recommendations did not like to invest huge capital and preferred to get their own requirements from other colonies of the British Empire. This discouraged more people to come forward in this trade and gradually the saltpetre industry at Patna faced a virtual closure at the end of the nineteenth century.

Though indigo was cultivated in north Bihar even before the British came to India, the industry grew more rapidly after the British gained control over Bihar. Finding it a profitable crop, the Britishers took interest in its cultivation. In Patna district the manufacture of indigo was relatively unimportant. Buchanan also found that its cultivation was on the decline. Many of the Zamindars were opposed to indigo cultivation. In the first half of the eighteenth century there was a remarkable progress in the indigo trade at Patna. Maximum production was reached in 1843. This was the time when indigo formed the most important item of trade at Patna, and besides the English. many Indian nobles too got engaged in this trade.

Early in the eighteenth century opium was manufactured abundantly in several places in Bihar. Patna produced so much of opium that it was sent to all parts of the country. From 1640 to 1750 the Dutch had their factories in Patna and they produced a large quantity of opium. But after the battle of Plassey the English factories produced opium freely at Patna for their commerce. After 1757, an English chief came to Patna and bought opium at Rs. 75 per maund. Within a few years the company's servants brought the bulk of opium trade under their control. And by 1761 they were able to establish their monopoly over this trade in Patna. The Patna merchants: had a monopoly right to purchase the opium from the peasants. The Dutch and the French were deprived of their right and were made to pay duty to the English Company for opium trade. The Patna monopoly was ended by Warren Hastings who gave the right to the Dutch and French to purchase a stipulated quantity of opium at cost-price from the English company. Hastings also introduced the

contract system for annual provision of opium. After 1785 the public competition system was introduced. This system led to over-production as a result of which the cultivation declined. From 1797 a new system, known as agency system was introduced. Under this system the condition of the peasants improved. The agents were generally the close relations of the peasants. Everything was done by the *Gomastas* of the factory. The agents were called *Mahtos*. They were of two types. One was known as *Sadar Mahto*. They acted as security to government for the fulfilment of the *Ryots'* engagement and advances. The second was known as *Gayu Mahtos*. They were the agents appointed by the *Ryots* to tender their engagements and receive their advances. The opium was generally delivered by them to the *Gomastas*. With the introduction of the agency system a new phase started in the history of the company's opium monopoly. In 1803 Valentia found a thriving trade of opium at Patna. The price at Patna in February 1810 was from 1525 to 1565 Sicca rupees per maund.

In the year 1772 a good deal of sugar was manufactured at Patna. The commercial resident of Patna established a factory to increase the production of sugar. In Patna nearly 1200 *Bighas* of land were brought under sugarcane cultivation in 1793. The Commercial Resident at Patna procured sugar from two sources. Firstly, it was produced in the Commercial Resident's factory, and secondly, it was obtained by the agency system. The Commercial Resident at Patna supplied a smaller quantity and sent agents to interior places for obtaining Roab (a product of sugarcane) from the indigenous dealers. After 1801 the sugar market became rather dull for some years. 'A small quantity of sugar was manufactured in the company's factory at Patna, However, after few years the sugar market became favourable and the company's factory at Patna carried on a great trade in sugar. The Danes also manufactured sugar at Patna and here they had an extensive range of godowns for this purpose.

The shifting of political power in the hands of English led the indigenous producers and consumers suffered immensely and also affected the rivals trade- The Dutch, the French to shift their trade elsewhere. Thus within a short span of time the English company totally monopolised the trade of Patna.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bhattacharya, S., *op. cit.*, p. 135.
- [2] Birwood, C.M., *The Industrial Arts of India*, pp. 248-249.
- [3] Board of Trade (Commercial) Progs. 11 November, 1793.
- [4] Buchanan, F., *Bhagalpur Report*, p. 425.
- [5] Buchanan, F., *Purnea Report*, p. 556.
- [6] Buchanan, F., *Shahabad Report*, p. 419.
- [7] Datta, K.K., *An Introduction to Bihar*, p. 49-50.
- [8] Foreign Department Secret Consultation, 17 October, 1764, p. 571.
- [9] Ghosal, H.R., *op.cit.*, p. 34.
- [10] Ghosal, H.R., *The Office of the Commercial Resident Under the English East India Company*, Indian History Congress, 1955, p. 234.
- [11] Mortin, M, *Hitory, Antiquities Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*,
- [12] Naqui, H.K., *op. cit.* pp. 107-108.
- [13] Naqui, H.K., *Urban Centres and Industries in Upper India*, p. 109. p. 972.
- [14] Samadar, J.N., *op.cit.*, pp. 26-27.
- [15] Samadhar, J.N., *Notes on Economic History of Bihar*, Bankipore, pp. 26-27.
- [16] Sanyal, S., *Ram Chandra Pandit's Report on opium cultivation in the eighteenth Century, Bihar, Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. 88, Part II, July- December, 1968, 181.
- [17] Sinha, N.K., *Economic History of Bengal*, Vol. I, p. 105.