

The Amazon area up to the rubber period

Under the Treaty of Tordesillas, only the mouth of the Amazon belonged to the territory to which the Portuguese crown could lay a claim. All the territory west of it fell to Spain. The Spaniard Orellanos was the first to explore the river in 1541. However, he did not go further. The Spaniards soon became so preoccupied with the Andean and Pacific coast that they had little or no interest in the Amazon basin, which was difficult to reach from the western side of the continent. The Portuguese, too, initially showed little interest in the dense jungle with its flooding during the rainy season that stretched beyond the mouth of the river. The Indigenous peoples who mainly lived near the rivers depended on hunting, fishing, gathering and practising shifting cultivation. They had reached a relatively low level of civilisation. In any event, states had not been formed and great riches were not to be had. Portugal nevertheless, thanks to a lack of interest on the part of the Spanish, gradually laid an increasingly clear claim to the area. They did not want to lose it to the Netherlands, England or any other European power. A small number of Portuguese from São Luis therefore settled in Belém in 1615 and founded a mission post near this place in 1616.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the settlement of immigrants from the Azores was promoted in the vicinity of Belém. After the foundation of Belém, the expeditions to collect cocoa, medicinal plants, macaws, parrots and the like increased, and with them the contacts with the natives. Especially from then on, the latter also experienced the ill effects of infectious diseases and slave hunts.

The attempts of missionaries to further develop the Amazon region with the involvement of the Indigenous population testified to a more constructive approach. In the seventeenth century, the Jesuits managed to gather many Indigenous people along the rivers in mission stations, where they taught them, converted them to Catholicism and led them to a more sedentary existence. Places such as Santarém, Obidos and Manaus owe their origin to the fact that they were once mission posts. The fathers not only encouraged the cultivation of crops for which there were markets in Europe, but also the collection of various forest products. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Jesuit missions exported significant quantities of cocoa, vanilla, cloves, indigo, wood and aromatic resins. The activities of the Jesuits were so successful that Pará managed to acquire a large degree of autonomy within the Portuguese colony.

Missionary activities also had drawbacks, such as a faster spread of infectious diseases and the fact that the Indigenous people could more easily fall into the hands of slave hunters. This last danger became real especially after 1759, when the work of the Jesuits throughout the Portuguese Empire came to an end and the Indigenous peoples had to do without their protection. Many mission stations fell into decay or even completely ceased to exist. In the eighteenth century, more than 100 000 Indigenous people are said to have lived in mission stations in northern Brazil, but in 1825 the total population of the Brazilian Amazon was estimated at less than 40 000 people.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, agriculture was stimulated not only in Maranhão, but also in the area near Belém, to compensate for the declining gold mining in Minas Gerais. The trading company founded by Pombal was also active. Near Belém plantations were established that produced crops such as sugar cane, cocoa, rice, cotton and coffee. At the end of the eighteenth century, no less than 30 000 slaves of African descent were brought in for plantation agriculture. Many died as a

result of diseases and ill-treatment. In the longer term, commercial agriculture proved unable to compete with that of the better organised farms elsewhere in the colony. As a result, agricultural activity gradually became increasingly limited to some shifting cultivation, mainly for self-sufficiency, and to a rather irregular gathering economy. In the mid-nineteenth century there were only a limited number of plantations of coffee, tobacco and citrus near the mouth of the Amazon, which did not provide great prosperity for their owners. The island of Marajó opposite Belém was used for cattle breeding. The cattle grazed there on the moist savannas and had to survive in the wet season that flooded part of the island. Elsewhere in the Amazon, savannas were also used for livestock farming during the dry season.

After 1875 new attempts at colonisation were made in the area east of Belém to near the border of Maranhão. The main intention was to create a zone of nurturing agriculture and livestock for the city of Belém, which was experiencing a strong population growth thanks to the rise of rubber gathering. In view of this, the construction of a railway to Bragança was started in 1883 and completed in 1908. Most of the state-established colonies did not flourish. Many settlers (partly from abroad) left because the colonies were poorly governed and insufficient guidance was given.

After the severe drought that occurred in Northeastern Brazil in 1915, the area experienced spontaneous colonisation of *nordestinos* who tried to find a more favourable habitat. In the area of Belém–Bragança, they not only found land on which to practice subsistence farming, but also an environment that still showed a certain resemblance to the Northeast (at dry season). The local population growth also stimulated colonisation. As a result, the area between Belém and Bragança became a relatively densely populated zone. In the 1960s, densities of between 15 and 20 per km² were to be found. It was then one of the few regions where activity was not limited to collecting forest products, but where arable colonisation had taken place on a relatively large scale in the past. The area had benefited greatly from its proximity to Belém, which had been a collection point for all kinds of Amazon products from its foundation and also functioned as a distribution centre, from where the settlements upstream were supplied. Particularly after 1870, the city saw a sudden growth in its function as a collection and distribution centre as a result of the rubber boom. This created an urban market for the sale of agricultural surpluses.

The rubber period

In the second half of the nineteenth century it seemed as if Northern Brazil would play an important role in the world economy. After the invention of vulcanisation, rubber got more and more applications and the Amazon region turned out to be the only area where the *Hevea brasiliensis* (rubber tree) occurred. Rich extraction areas were mainly located south of the main river and to the west. A monopoly position seemed assured. This was all the more true since Brazil had the advantage that the Amazon was navigable all year round for seagoing vessels as far as Peru and that many tributaries could also be used by shipping.

The growing demand for rubber awakened the entrepreneurial spirit present in many Brazilians. Speculators, in possession of capital, managed to purchase large areas of forest in the Amazon region or acquired the right to exploit the existing rubber trees. Gradually they organised the tapping of rubber trees on an increasingly large scale.