

## Chapter-II

### BORDER *HATS*- PRE-PARTITION PERIOD:

#### 2.1-Introduction:

The Khasi-Jaintia and the Garo are the three major indigenous tribes of the present day Meghalaya plateau. Meghalaya plateau is situated in between the two great valleys - the Brahmaputra valley<sup>23</sup> in the north and the Surma valley<sup>24</sup> in the south and it is extended till the vast plain areas of Bengal. Prior to the arrival of the British, these tribes were comparatively isolated and due to thick forests and difficult terrains especially in the interior regions, it was not viable for the foreigners to penetrate into their territories. Therefore these tribes were not affected by any of the foreign invasions except when the British invaded and occupied their territories in 1835 and 1873 respectively.

The natural barrier also made these tribes of these hills isolated and unapproachable. There was no connection with the people of the neighbouring kingdoms. The economy of these tribes was more or less self-sufficient based on agriculture and partly hunting. Also, the people of these hills did not have any surplus items/goods to exchange or trade. Therefore the idea of setting up of a regular market in their territories was absolutely absent. However it was until the later parts of Ahom rule that some economic dealings emerged in the form of barter system at periodic markets<sup>25</sup> located at the foothills adjoining the plain areas of the then Bengal and Assam. These periodic/weekly markets were better known as *hats*. These *hats* were also known as the traditional border *hats*/markets. They were situated along the foothills of Khasi-Jaintia

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<sup>23</sup> Brahmaputra valley in Assam.

<sup>24</sup> Surma valley in Bangladesh.

<sup>25</sup> A.C.Mahapatra, "Locational Pattern of Markets in the Early British Period in North East India" in J.B.Bhattacharjee (ed.), *Studies in the Economic History of North East India*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1994, 165.

and Garo sector adjoining the plain areas of the erstwhile Bengal and Ahom Kingdom (Assam). In Khasi-Jaintia Hills these border *hats* were held at a regular interval of seven days while in Garo Hills these border *hats* were held on a fixed day once in a week. These border *hats* /markets were the only centres for the indigenous tribes of these hills to barter or exchange their goods/produce with the people of neighbouring kingdoms.

It is reasonably well accepted to mention here that border *hats* are the only hubs where the tribes came into contact with the people of the plain areas of Bengal and Assam in term of trade dealings. Eventually with the passage of times, these border *hats* became the only centres where by the hill tribes were also exposed to new ideas, culture/skill and expertise of the people of the plain areas. The exposure and contact of the people of both the regions had directly or indirectly influenced their day to day life. The chiefs/rulers of the hills had also some significant political and economic interactions with the Ahom Kingdom (Assam) in the north and the erstwhile Bengal (Now Bangladesh) in the south.

The Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills were famous for the production of horticultural crops like betel leaves, betel nut, orange, pineapples, bananas, etc. Besides horticultural crops, cotton, chilies, ginger, potatoes, maize, turmeric, etc are cultivated by the people. It must be stated here that oranges and areca nut plantations are most carefully maintained and out of which the maximum produces are obtained and the best quality of fruits are produced from the Hills. It was reported that the orchards of the southern foothills of Khasi Hills supplied almost the whole of then Bengal with oranges<sup>26</sup>. Owing to the distinctive topography of the areas paddy cultivation is not very common particularly in Khasi Hills except in parts of Jaintia Hills, Ri Bhoi and Garo Hills.

Besides the above horticultural products, these areas are also very rich in mineral resources such as coal, limestone and sillimanite as well as forest products such as timber, honey, wax, medicinal plants, bamboo, broom sticks, lac, rubber etc.

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<sup>26</sup> Donkumar Roy, *A Configuration of poverty in Border Areas of Meghalaya*, Ph.D Thesis, Economic Department , NEHU, 1987, p.90.

The location of border *hats* along the southern parts as well as northern parts of these hills had provided ample avenues for the people to exchange/sell their locally products. The locally products of the hills found their market in the plains areas of the present day Bangladesh. During that period, there was free-flow of essential products/items including rice, salt, fish, dry fish, kerosene, edible oil and other essential items from the plains of the other side. Minerals such as lime stone and coal of the hills were supplied to the different places of Sylhet and Mymensingh of the Bengal. It was quite natural that the lucrative trade through border *hats* with the people living in the plain areas of Sylhet and Mymensingh of Bengal was not to be replaced by any alternative trade and markets within the State before partition of the country.

For proper understanding, this chapter is again sub-divided into two sections. Section-1: Border *hats* in Khasi, Jaintia Hills: Pre-Partition Period Section-II: Border *hats* in Garo Hills: Pre-partition Period.

### **Part-I Border Hats in Khasi and Jaintia Hills: The Pre-Partition Period:**

#### **2.2 - The emergence of Border Hats in Khasi and Jaintia Hills:**

The Khasi were known as one of the pioneers of trade and commerce in North East India. They were engaged in trade and commerce with the neighbouring kingdoms of Brahmaputra and Surma valleys for over centuries. The people living in these hills had the advantage of living in a land bestowed with rich mineral resources, salubrious climate, varied vegetations, and located in a geographical area which came to their advantage in trade<sup>27</sup>. Due to favourable climatic conditions of these regions, plentiful of oranges, betel nuts, betel leaves, potatoes, bay leaves were produced in large quantity.

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<sup>27</sup> David R. Syiemlieh “Trade and Markets in Khasi Jaintis Hills- Changed Conditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries” in David R. Syiemlieh and Manorama (eds.), *Society and Economy in North East India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2008.

Most of these produce were exported to the then Bengal. However commodities that the hill people did not produce such as salt, rice, kerosene, dry fish, cloth, etc were imported from the neighbouring kingdoms.

In order to facilitate and enable the people living in Khasi-Jaintia Hills to exchange/barter their locally produce products with the people of neighbouring kingdoms such as Bengal and Ahom kingdom, many important and busy border *hats* had sprung up in due course of time along the foothills of Khasi and Jaintia kingdom such as Tharia, Borkhat, Kharoh, Majai, Phali, Jaintiapur and Pandua<sup>28</sup>. These *hats* were situated in the south along the foothills of Khasi and Jaintia kingdoms adjoining the plain areas of Sylhet District of Bengal. While in the northern part along with Ahom Kingdom, the places that were emerged as important *hats* were Gabha, Bardwar, Boko and others.<sup>29</sup>

These border *hats* were the major centres of trade and commerce in which the sellers and buyers both from the hills and the plain areas bartered or exchanged their produce/goods. Some border *hats* were entrepots in nature in the sense that trade in imported goods or commodities were re-exported without any additional processing or repackaging. These border *hats* also attracted a large number of people from far and near. On market days, people would descent to these *hats* carrying products in conical baskets fastened with straps for exchange and selling<sup>30</sup>. The people in the evening would ascend to their respective villages carrying with them essential articles and commodities which they procured from others in exchange of their produce.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p.164.

<sup>29</sup> H.Bareh, *History and Culture of Khasi People*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1964, p.436.

<sup>30</sup> R.D.Dkhar, *The English and Company and limestone trade in Khasi Hills*, Ph.D Thesis, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, 1989, p.19.

The traders from the plain areas never ventured beyond the border *hats* and so the bulk of trade transaction was entirely in the hands of hill men<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, the profit from trade and commerce, therefore, went entirely to the hill people<sup>32</sup>.

Thus; W.W.Hunter<sup>33</sup> recorded in his book this feature of trade through border *hats*.

*A curious feature in the trade of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is the total absence of Marwari or Jain merchants- an enterprising class, who are found everywhere else in Assam, even to the farthest corners of the Brahmaputra valley. There are few Bengali traders from Dacca, who do not take up a permanent residence in the Hills; but the great bulk of the business remains in the hands of the natives, who themselves reap the profits and are said to be keen at a bargain.*

### **2.2.1 - The products/Items of trade transactions:**

The items of export from Khasi and Jaintia hills were oranges, pan leaves, bay leaves, honey, limestone, smelted iron, cotton, betel nuts and potatoes<sup>34</sup>.

R.B.Pemberton<sup>35</sup> has remarked,

*A considerable trade in cotton, iron ore, wax, ivory, pan and clothes is carried on between the plains and the hills. Jaintiepur the capital is the great emporium in which commercial dealings are transacted between the inhabitants of the plains and the hills.*

The essential commodities such as rice, salt and fish, *mooga* were imported from the plain areas of the neighbouring kingdoms - Assam and Bengal<sup>36</sup>. Certain item of trade such as *mooga* originated in the northern plains of Assam and was taken across

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> P.N.Dutta, *Impact of The West on The Khasis And Jaintia*, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1982, p.171.

<sup>33</sup> W.W.Hunter, *op.cit.*, p.241.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> R.B.Pemberton, *The Eastern Frontier of India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1879, p.15.

<sup>36</sup> Namita Catherine Shadap-Sen, *The Origin and early History of the Khasi- Synteng People*, Firma Publications, Calcutta, 1981, p.244.

the plateau and was sold in the hills and also in the bordering plains of Bengal. In this way trade links emerged between the plains and the hills. This trade relation was the outcome of economic inter-dependence between the inhabitants of the hills and the plains which proved to be mutually beneficial for both the areas. Political contacts were also established between the hill chiefs/rulers of the hills and the plains to strengthen the trade transactions and it continued for many centuries<sup>37</sup>.

**Table 2.1 - W.J Allen's Report on the administration of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, 1858 has provided the following information about the export items from Khasi and Jaintia Hills:**

SL.No	Articles.	Quantity of export in <i>maund</i>	Value of exports in ( in Rupees)	Estimate profits obtained of export in Rupees
1.	Limestone	17,00,000	3,06,000.00	1,02,000.00
2.	Smelted iron	45,000	67,500.00	5,625.00
3.	Coal	5000	12,500.00	3,125.00
4.	Bee's wax	20	700.00	100.00
5.	Potatoes	50,000	1,25,000.00.	25,000.00
6.	Bay leaves	2,000	1000.00	250.00
7.	Betel nuts	3,00,00,000.00	37500.00.	9375.00
8.	Betel Leaves	10,00,00,000.00	12580.00	3,125.00
	<b>Total</b>		<b>Rs.5,62,780.00</b>	<b>Rs,1,48,600.00</b>

<sup>37</sup> Tammy Bhattacharjee, *op.cit.*, p.252.

**Table 2.2 - W.J Allen's Report provided the following information with regard to the Import items of Khasi and Jaintia Hills:**

<b>SL.No</b>	<b>Articles.</b>	<b>Quantity of export in <i>maund</i></b>	<b>Value of exports in ( in Rupees)</b>	<b>Estimate profits obtained of export in Rupees</b>
<b>1.</b>	Rice	1,50,000	2,25,000.00	28,125.00
<b>2.</b>	Salt	2,000	10,000.00	1,000.00
<b>3.</b>	Oil	800	8,000.00	1,000.00
<b>4.</b>	Tobacco	1,000	6,000.00	1,000.00
<b>5.</b>	Ghee	100	1500.00	750.00
<b>6.</b>	Treacle	1,000.00	4,000.00	250.00
<b>7.</b>	Sugar	500	5,000.00	750.00
<b>8.</b>	Dholl	800	2,000.00	400.00
<b>9.</b>	Fresh and dry fish	-	20,000.00	3,000.00
<b>10.</b>	Clothes of sorts	-	25,000.00	4,000.00
<b>11.</b>	Cows and oxen	-	4,000.00	500.00
<b>12.</b>	Pigs	-	10,000.00	1,500.00
<b>13.</b>	Goats	-	2,500.00	400.00
<b>14.</b>	Poultry	-	8,000.00	800.00
<b>15.</b>	Brass pots and pans	-	5,000.00	500
<b>16.</b>	Coral beads	-	2,000.00	400
<b>17.</b>	Gold	-	4,000.00	300
<b>18.</b>	Silver	-	8,000.00	500
	<b>Total</b>		<b>Rs.3,50,000.00</b>	<b>Rs.44,325.00</b>

The whole of Bengal was supplied with oranges from Khasi and Jaintia hills. W.W.Hunter<sup>38</sup> has recorded in his book that the fruits was better known in Calcutta as 'Sylhet oranges'. The Bengal registration returns from 1876-77 show the total export from Sylhet of 64,505 mounds of fruits valued of Rs.1, 93,575. Lemon, pineapple, bananas, jackfruits and mangoes<sup>39</sup> were also considered very important items of export from Khasi and Jaintia hills. Trade in honey assumed utmost important as preparation of honey was considered as specialty of the Khasi people<sup>40</sup>. Goods and commodities imported from Khasi and Jaintia hills such as iron, timber were used particularly by the boat industries of Sylhet district of Bengal, while limestone and oranges were consigned particularly to Calcutta. There were great demands for these two items in western part of Bengal.

The Ahom Kingdom (Assam) was another major trade partner of the people of Khasi and Jaintia hills. The different kind of clothes particularly silk<sup>41</sup> from Assam was in great demand in the hills. Most of the *jainsem*<sup>42</sup> were weaved by the weavers of Assam. Besides clothes, some essential commodities such as rice, dry fish, salt, etc were also exchanged regularly between the people of Assam and the hills through these border *hats*.

### **2.2.2 - The management of border *hats*:**

After recognizing the significance of trade and commerce between the people of the hills as well as the plains areas, the Khasi chiefs left no stone unturned in promoting

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<sup>38</sup> W.W.Hunter, *op.cit.* p.240.

<sup>39</sup> J.N.Chowdry, *The Khasi Canvas*, Jeetray Offset Publications, Calcutta, 19. p.71.

<sup>40</sup> Namita Catherine Shadap-Sen, *op.cit.*p.245.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> The traditional attire of Khasi ladies.



it<sup>43</sup>. They set up border *hats* within their territorial limits at the foothills contiguous with the plain areas of Sylhet and Ahom Kingdom. The Khasi chiefs took the responsibility for the management of these *hats* and they were also involved in trade and commerce. Evidences showed that they had constructed their residence in the villages in the border areas with a business motive. Furthermore they also encouraged the people to take necessary steps to improve the production system and take initiative to sign trade accord with the rulers of neighbouring states which provided inter-state communications<sup>44</sup>.

The location of a border *hat* became an essential factor for the smooth functioning of commercial activities. Those border *hats* which were located within the territories of the hill chief, management of these *hats* were automatically under the jurisdiction of that *hima* (state). In such *hats* trade transactions remained stable and prospered. At the same time it recorded a huge profit for the people who were involved in trading activities in such *hats*.

### **2.2.3 - The conflict over the jurisdiction of border *hats*:**

Some border *hats* were located in disputed territory very often leading to tensions and clashes that disrupted regular trade transactions in the border *hats*<sup>45</sup>. In such a situation both the British and the hills chiefs asserted and claimed over the jurisdiction of those border *hats*. At that juncture the British even questioned the authority of the hill chiefs over the toll and tax on the goods/commodities sold in the border *hats*. This proved to be a serious issue between the hill chiefs/rulers of Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the official of the British East India Company. Prior to the annexation of Sylhet in 1765, the Khasi *hima* (states) and Jaintia Kingdom extended their territorial limits till the northern portion of Sylhet in the upper Surma valley.

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<sup>43</sup> R.D.Dkhar, *op.cit.*, p.18.

<sup>44</sup> H.Bareh, *op.cit.* p.437.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Alexander Mackenzie<sup>46</sup> has recorded in his writings,

*The boundaries of this State are formed, on the east, by the Keeroowah and Kopili Rivers, which separate it from Kachar; the former flowing from the southern face of the mountain chain into the Soormah; and the Kopili, into the Kullung, which latter river separates Jynteeah from Assam, on the north: on the west it is bounded principally by the hill district of Kyrin Rajah, from whence the line run south along the Pian nullah, and, on reaching the plains, is deflected in a south-easterly direction, crossing and skirting several other streams, until it reaches the Soormah, which river, with the exception already mentioned, forms the southern boundary of the whole district.*

The situation became strained particularly when the colonial authority claimed control over all the plain areas which used to be under the Khasi and Jaintia *hima*. The British justified their claim by arguing that the areas of Sylhet extended beyond the Sylhet town till the plain areas adjacent with the foot hills of Khasi and Jaintia *hima*. According to the British, only hill areas belonged to the tribes of Khasi and Jaintia kingdoms.

The Khasi chiefs and Jaintia Raja protested over such claim and encroachment into their kingdoms but without much success. Some manifestations of their hatred and anger include looting and plundering of villages under the British jurisdiction adjoining Khasi hills. Therefore the border *hats* which happened to be in such disputed areas were the main targets of raids by the hill men. In fact the claims and counter claims of jurisdiction over the border *hats* both by the British and the hills chiefs emerged from the issue of collection of toll and tax levied on goods and commodities which used to bring into the border *hats* for trade transactions. Due to these conflicts and claims by both sides - the rulers of the hills and the British East India Company, consequently it led to looting and plundering of boats plying in the upper reaches of the river Surma

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<sup>46</sup>Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, Reprint 1979, p.220.

carrying goods for transactions. This occurred frequently and the British East India Company also registered complaints against the encroachment over the plain areas of Sylhet by the hill chiefs. The British East India Company also paid attention towards the incidences of looting of some of the warehouses by the chiefs and Raja of Jaintia.

#### **2.2.4 - The measures under taken by the British:**

The British East India officials then decided to take safety measures against those raids committed by hill men by raising a militia in Sylhet to prevent such actions<sup>47</sup>. The situation remained tense and raids and plundering continued unabated, transaction could not take place in a smooth manner. The British officials tried their level best to find out ways and means to prevent such frequent occurrence of raids. Some European merchants by their power and wealth could fortify their warehouses. At the same time it was realized by the British officials that a mere fortification or maintaining a militia would not be enough to prevent such raids by the hills' men, therefore they decided to grant the Khasi chiefs, rent free land for cultivation to be the source of revenue in the plain areas of Sylhet. These types of lands came to be known as *Tuncaws*. The main intention behind was to act as deterrents against such raids by local hills people. *Syiem* of Mawsmal, Sohra, and Shella were granted such free lands in the plain areas of Sylhet. But in spite of all these precautionary measures, raids and plundering continued though the intensity and frequency of such activities was decreasing.

The East India Company was granted the *Diwani* right of Bengal in 1765<sup>48</sup> and by virtue of that right, Sylhet was under direct control of the East India Company. With the establishment of British administration in Sylhet the company also took over the responsibility of maintaining law and order in the district and also responsible for patrolling the frontier region.

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<sup>47</sup> Joycy Lyngdoh, *Trade and Markets in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, M.Phil Dissertation, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, 1990, *op.cit.*, p.46.

<sup>48</sup> W.W.Hunter, *op.cit.*, p.205.

The new revenue and administrative arrangement introduced by the British in Sylhet following the grant of *Diwani* right of Bengal had affected the Khasi and Jaintia *hima* (states) to a great extent. It has to be mentioned here that Chandra Singh, the Raja of Jaintia Kingdom who used to collect tax on goods and commodities as well as on boats plying on the upper reaches of Surma River<sup>49</sup> could not continue as before on account of the obstruction of the British officials of the East India Company. It was over the issue of tolls and control of upper Surma valley that led to a dispute between the British officials and Raja of Jaintia Kingdom. As a result, the Calcutta Council decided to exert military pressure on the Raja of Jaintia kingdom.

### **2.2.5 - The invasion of British East India Company:**

Eventually the first military expedition was started by the British East India Company under the supervision of Captain Henniker against the Jaintia Raja on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1774<sup>50</sup>. However peace was finally restored between the Raja of Jaintia Kingdom and the East India Company when both signed a treaty on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1774<sup>51</sup>. At the same time Chandra Singh promised the British to pay a sum of Rs.15, 000.00 as a compensation incurred by the East India Company for the cost of expedition<sup>52</sup> and also assured an unimpeded and free navigation in the river Surma. This treaty was significant in the sense that it was the first ever treaty that was signed between the British East India Company and an Indian ruler of North East, which paved the way for the British expansion policy in North East India.

The boundary between the British possessions and those of the Khasi and Jaintia states was not well defined<sup>53</sup>. Thereafter the Officials of the British East Company decided to bring necessary legislation to deal with boundary issues such as surveying

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<sup>49</sup> David R.Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern*, Heritage Publisher, New Delhi, 1989, p.16.

<sup>50</sup> R.B.Pemberton, *op.cit.*, p.219.

<sup>51</sup> David R.Syiemlieh, *op.cit.*, p.17.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p.18.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*.

border regions as well as demarcation of boundary. However the Regulation of 1790 prohibited the Europeans and non-hill men from going beyond the north west of Surma River<sup>54</sup>. Nine years later it was decided to survey and demarcate the border between Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Sylhet. The boundary between the hills and the plains where previously there was none, indicated the expansionist policy of the British.

The British in order to pursue their selfish interests followed the policy of interference in these age old commercial ties of the native races, which had severely damaged the close ties that the people of the hills and the plain areas shared for many centuries. Therefore, the British had done an irreparable damage to the people of Khasi and Jaintia hills and the plain areas of Sylhet by cutting off their relations. With the motive of monopolizing and capturing the trade and business in the border *hats* and facilitating the British traders by eliminating the native traders, the British came with such plan of demarcation of boundary between Sylhet and the hills areas.

When the British administered direct control over Assam, they also started to control over the management of the affairs of all border *hats* even those which were under territorial limits of Khasi kingdoms along Kamrup and Nowgong districts. The consolidation of British rule in Assam resulted into the loss of all border *hats* which belonged to Khasi chiefs as well as Jaintia ruler. Eventually the relations between the hills chiefs and the British got strained. But the British officials were very clever not to upset the hill tribes beyond a point so that commercial transactions could be carried out uninterrupted.

In order to reduce the distance between Sylhet and Assam, the British also realized that construction of a road through Khasi Hills was a necessity. Thereafter a plan for construction of road links between Sylhet and Assam was considered as the top priority of the British. The British officials of the East India Company also initiated for

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<sup>54</sup> Joycy Lyngdoh, *op.cit.*, p.47.

an accord with the hill chiefs. David Scott<sup>55</sup> was entrusted with the job of negotiating with the hill chiefs. The result was that the hill chiefs accepted the proposal for construction of a road through their territories linking Sylhet and Kamrup.

#### **2.2.6 - The annexation of Khasi and Jaintia Hills by the British and its effect on border *hats*:**

As part of the negotiating process, the hill chiefs also agreed to give permission for the construction of sanatoria at Nongkhlaw and Sohra for the rehabilitation of invalid European soldiers. These two centres in the hills also turned out to be the stations of the British officers. The *Syiem* of Sohra in addition to the provision of the treaty further allowed the construction of road through his territory. In return the British provided a small tract of land near Pandua in Sylhet. The British also provided a track of land to Tirot Sing, *Syiem* of Nongkhlaw to be used as a market, for his permission for construction of road through his kingdom<sup>56</sup>. The British control and consolidation over the foothills which were under the jurisdictions of the Khasi and Jaintia states was completed in 1830.

When the Khasi resistance to the British expansionist policy was at the peak, the British used these border *hats* in the foothills as their penetrating points to enter into the hills. The British by virtue of their strength, wisdom and power could take complete control of the border *hats* and even could enforce blockade on trade and commerce. For the British, to control over border *hats* was like control of the hill men<sup>57</sup>. This is the method that the British had employed to capture and annex one kingdom after another till the consolidation of all Khasi and Jaintia *hima* was completed.

After the British annexed Khasi-Jaintia Kingdoms, it resulted into administrative and political changes in the hilly regions of the Khasi and Jaintia *hima* (state).

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<sup>55</sup> David Scott was a Political Agent of the Governor General of the East India Company in North East India.

<sup>56</sup> C.U.Aitchison, *A collection of Treaties, Sanads and Engagements*, Vol.XII,pp.122-123,

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.49.

Thereafter the British set up a uniform administration in the Khasi and Jaintia hills with Sylhet district of Bengal and Ahom state. The uniform administration under the British facilitated for the expansion of trade and commercial activities in the border *hats*. Many European nationalities including the British traders<sup>58</sup> decided to station in and around Sylhet to take full advantage of the flourishing trade in and around the *hats*. Pandua village situated in the south of Khasi Hills became a great emporium of trade. During that stage, trade transactions in the border *hats* also increased not only in quantity and also entered into a new phase – the phase of monetary economy. Goods were also exchanged in terms of currency. So from primitive form of barter system it entered also into a modern system.

The British rule also facilitated for the development of road communication networks and also the constructions of bridle paths. Many new roads, bridges were constructed<sup>59</sup> in order to connect the important towns and villages of both of the hills and the plains. The water ways through some navigable rivers such as Lukha, Kupli, Jadukata etc was started. Thus, trade transactions in these border *hats* increased in volume and in variety much more than the previous years because of the improved facilities and infrastructures. Thus we see that border *hat* assumed an important place in the socio-economic life of the people both of the hills and the plain areas. Such established trade ties through traditional border *hats* has been the source of livelihood for the people and for a few a source of wealth. These border *hats* continued to flourish till India's independence in 1947.

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<sup>58</sup> P.N. Dutta, *op.cit.*, p.78.

<sup>59</sup> L.S.Gassah, “ Effect of Partition on the Border Marketing of Jaintia Hills “ in J.B.Ganguly (ed.), *Marketing in North East India*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1984,p.65.

## **Part-II Border Hats in Garo Hills: The Pre-Partition Period:**

### **2.3 - Introduction:**

The grant of the *Dewani*<sup>60</sup> of Bengal by Shah Alam II, the Mughal emperor, to Robert Clive, in 1765, secured for the East India Company the exclusive superintendence of all lands and the collection of all revenues of the Presidency of Bengal. During the Mughal regime the entire north-eastern parts of Bengal were divided into great estates<sup>61</sup>. The estates bordering Garo Hills came under the partial regulation of the authorities at Fort William. But due to geographical and ethnological reasons, the Mughals as well as the English did not plan and prepare to bring these areas under their direct control.

The estates adjoining Garo Hills were held by powerful landholders of Hindu blood or possibly of mixed Hindu and Garo Blood<sup>62</sup>. It was due to the fact that these landlords had succeeded a long course of origin in the habit of constant interaction with the hill tribes and many of them were even allied to these tribes by birth or inter-marriage. This bond gave powerful influence to the Garo chiefs to control the tribes from committing their savage activities. To these estates holders, the Mughals on invading Eastern Bengal gave the title of Choudry and not Zamindars.

With the passage of time, the Choudrys were better known as Zamindars. They were semi-independent and exercised some political control and also in charge of the internal management of all those estates. These Choudrys were bound, in fact, merely to supply a certain number of elephants, or a small quantity of *aghur* (a precious wood), to

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<sup>60</sup> Dewani refers to the right to collect revenue granted to the British East India Company.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander Mackenzie, *The North East Frontier of India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, Reprint 1979, p.245.

<sup>62</sup> Angira Deb, *The Garo Frontiers markets in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, M.Phil Dissertation, Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, 1987, p.38.



support certain petty garrisons, and to contribute to the maintenance of the Dacca Artillery park. Moreover, the Choudrys of the estates were permitted to establish mercenary forces in order to repress the incursions of the Garo Mountaineers who used to be the cause of fear to the people of the plains. As a matter of fact, all the estates of the Garo frontiers served as buffer estates. The major source of income of these estate holders was derived from lion portion of their income from the hills through piloting trade<sup>63</sup>.

The major estates situated adjoining Garo Hills were Karaibari, Kulumalupara, Mechpara and Habraghat in old Rangpur of Susang and Sherpur in Mymensingh District of the erstwhile Bengal. The estates of Karaibari, Kulumalupara, Mechpara and Habraghat were separated from Rangpur in the early parts of the nineteenth century and eventually included in Goalpara District. Susang and Sherpur are now in Bangladesh while Sindli and Bijni are now in Goalpara District of Assam. In fact at one time these tracts of lands were under the control of Garo Chiefs which they had occupied a large portion of the valley of the Brahmaputra river but gradually they were driven from plain areas into the hills by early invaders from Bengal<sup>64</sup>. The earliest records mentioned that the Garos used to be in a state of intermittent conflict with the neighbouring Zamindars of the estates. In fact the Zamindars had advanced beyond Garo Hills and brought to some extent the Garos inhabiting the outer ranges under their authority, but the villages in the interior regions were entirely independent.

The estates held by the Zamindars were never subjected to a land revenue assessment. The revenue that they paid to the Mughal Government was from 'Sayer' or miscellaneous cesses and not from 'Mal' or land revenue. The 'Sayer' dues that the estate holders paid to the Government were obtained from lucrative trade in cotton carried on by them with the Garos. The estates holders were also allowed to levy duties

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<sup>63</sup> Dutta, Sushil Chandra, *The North-East and the Mughals*, D.K.Publications, 1984, p.225.

<sup>64</sup> Mihir. N, Sangma. *Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs*, Scholar Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993, p. 24.

at the *hats* and border markets. It must be noted that cotton produced from Garo Hills was considered as the most important article of internal trade in Eastern India during those years. It was the staple produce of the people of Garo Hills.

### **2.3.1- The emergence of border *hats* in Garo Hills**

The Garo Cotton was in great demand in plain areas of the then Bengal. In the neighbouring plains, millions of *ryot* made their clothes, thread and quilts from the cotton grown in Garo Hills. The Bengali and other merchants were ready to buy Garo cotton. It is necessary to mention here that the Garo brought their cotton into the *hats* in order to barter with other items of their daily needs. In the process the estate holders such as Susang, Sherpur, Karaibari, Mechpara and Habraghat in order to facilitate trade and commerce with the Garos, had established at the principal passes border *hats* or border markets in their respective jurisdictions wherein the Garos and the merchants of Bengal bartered their commodities<sup>65</sup>.

There were 24 *hats* (weekly markets) in the Garo frontiers with Bengal and Assam, 14 on the Goalpara border and 10 on the border of Mymensingh<sup>66</sup>. The important *hats* located in the southern parts of Garo Hills adjoining Mymensingh of Bengal were Habraghat, Naluabari, Phulbari, Ghospur and Nazirpur<sup>67</sup>. While in the northern parts of Garo Hills adjoining Goapara District of Assam were Damra, Jira, Nibari, Lakshmipur, Bengal Khata, Tikrikilla, Singimari, Mancachar and Putimari<sup>68</sup>. Noticeably the establishment of border *hats* in the ancient periods signaled the end of simple and self-sufficient tribal economy and the beginning of economic interdependence in term of trade and commerce between the people living in the hills in particular and the plains in general. As a matter of fact, it was through these *hats* that the Garos from the interior and inapproachable regions were opened to the outside

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> P.C Kar, *The Garos in Transition*, Cosmos Publications, New Delhi, 1982, p.213.

<sup>67</sup> W.W.Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Spectrum Publications, New Delhi, 1879 p.168.

<sup>68</sup> A.C.Mahapatra, *op.cit*, p.165.

world which ultimately paved the way for inter-dependent in terms of trade and commerce between the people of both the hills and the plains.

### **2.3.2 – The method of trade transaction in the border *hats***

Barter system was the primary means of trade transactions in the border *hats* but subsequently, money-based economy was also introduced like ‘Naryani Rupees’ (currency issued by Koch behar kings) and Mughal currencies<sup>69</sup>. Apart from these weekly markets, a few fairs are also organized every year in these *hats* in order to facilitate exchange of goods<sup>70</sup>.

### **2.3.3 – The articles/items of trade**

The principal articles exported from Garo Hills were cotton, timber, boat, bamboos, firewood, vegetables, rubber and lac<sup>71</sup>. Besides, these items of exchange, captured elephants, falcons, agar, mynas and parrots were obtained from them<sup>72</sup>. In return, the Garos purchased iron implements, brass utensils and pottery as well as salt, dry fish, ornaments, cotton clothes, cattle, goat, pig, weapons and other items of daily use<sup>73</sup>.

In the border *hats* people from far and near were meeting together for trade transactions, the Garos exchanged locally produce goods particularly with the Bengali Hindus, Muslims and Koch traders from the plains only<sup>74</sup>. It must be noted that the estate-holders and the traders from the plain areas used to charge excessive price in cash or kind on multiple pretexts from the Garos. By manipulating and deceitful acts such as faulty weights and measures, lack of proper gradation of the products, lacks of good transport system, perish ability of some products, absence of storage facilities etc the

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<sup>69</sup> Milton S Sangma, *Garo Societies*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1995, p.113.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p.110.

<sup>71</sup> W.W. Hunter, *op.cit*.p.168.

<sup>72</sup> Caroline R.Marak ‘Pre-Colonial Economy and Society of the Garos’ in Fozal Ahmad Qadri (ed.), *Society and Economy in North East India*, Vol-2, Regency Publications, 2006. p.195.

<sup>73</sup> S.K.Singh, *People of India- Meghalaya*, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1994, p.97.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*.

estate-holders, officials as well as the traders from the plain areas were benefitted and became very rich.

As already mentioned above that the conditions of trade transaction in these border *hats* were extremely against the advantages of the Garos. In this way the Garos were deprived of getting better remunerative prices of their local products sold/exchange in these border *hats*. It is pertinent to mention here that these estate-holders used to fight with each other in retaining and controlling different *hats* and passes especially in the undefined jurisdictions. Eventually due to constant fighting among the estate holders then they used to prevent the Garos from visiting border *hats* of neighbouring estate-holders. Due to that reason the Garos used to react in revenge. Their retaliatory raids, murder, arson and looting and the repulse of the estate-holders made life of the ordinary *ryots* miserable.

#### **2.3.4 – The disputes between the Zaminars and the Garo**

Due to occasional raids and plunders in the border *hats* as well as disturbances in the estates contiguous to Garo Hills, it compelled the British officials to inquire about the causes behind all those problems. Consequently in 1816 David Scott<sup>75</sup> was deputed by the British authority to enquire into these incidents in the border *hats*. After careful enquiry it was found that the main cause of disturbance was due to oppression and exorbitant exactions upon the Garos by the Zamindars of the estates. The claim on the part of the Zamindars that they have a sort of right to rent from the Garos were entirely baseless, and they had no sort of propriety right to exercise any interference with the Garos and none of the tributary Garo villages appeared in the Collectorate Register of the said Zamindars.

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<sup>75</sup> Mihir. N Sangma, *Unpublished Documents on Garo Affairs*, Scholar Publishing House, New Delhi, 1993, p. 24.

In order to complete the subjugation of Assam Hills between the Brahmaputra Valley and Bengal plains and restrain the Zamindars' over their increasing power and influence in the border areas as well as to restrict the head-hunting tradition of the Garos and set them free from the Zamindars, the British authority passed the 'Regulation X of 1822'. Under this Regulation, the authorities could prevent the entry of the non-natives into the Hills for trade or other purposes without permission. The aim of the Regulation was to separate all the tributary villages and the independent interior of the Hills from the clutches of the Zamindars and bring them under the direct control of the British authority, and also compensate the former for their claims and losses. The Regulation exempted some tracts in part of Goalpara, Dhubri and Karaibari from its operation.

#### **2.3.5 - The British occupation of Garo Hills and its effect on border *hats*:**

The British occupied Garo Hills excluded the estate holders from their privileged position and administered the hills first as an excluded area. Under the provision of 1935 Act, Garo Hills falls under the category of a 'Partially Excluded Area'. With the beginning of new administration in Garo Hills by the British authority, numerous raids, looting, murder in the estates was stopped. An era of peace and tranquility prevailed in Garo Hills. Trade transactions in the border *hats* were free from all sorts of disruption and uncertainty. Both the inhabitants of the hills and the plains were free to exchange locally items which eventually paved the way for the flourishing trade in the region. The British Government also introduced and circulated its own currency in Garo Hills which gradually ushered in the monetary system of economy. With the introduction of money in the *hats*, the prices commodities rose steadily and the traders were blessed with enormous profits.

The British authority also brought and administered all the border *hats* which were located in the frontiers of Garo Hills under their direct control and abolished tolls and all sorts of collection in these border *hats*. The Zamindars were prohibited to collect tax of any form from the Garos. At this stage the Zamindars were deprived of their

usual income which they used to be obtained from frontiers *hats*. The British Government took over the responsibility of maintaining peace and security as well as management of all frontiers *hats*. However the Government did not introduce a uniform system of revenue collection in Garo Hills. The collection of revenue in the Hills areas varied from one place to another place.

The replacement of the Zamindars by the British Officers and the direct control of all the markets in the Garo frontiers were indeed the results of the policy to benefit economically from the trade transactions in the frontiers. In fact the economic intention and motivation were the basic objectives of the British Government. Even though the Garos were free from the perpetual control and oppression of the Zamindars, they were asked to pay a nominal tribute in return for the protection provided by the Government. With the introduction of the British administration in Garo Hills, new border *hats* were established in different places. The devastation of one of the biggest border *hats*, Pootimari, by the earthquake of 1897, Garobadha was developed as a major border *hat*<sup>76</sup>. There have been an increasing and trading mobility of the Garos into these border *hats* till the advent of the partition of the country in 1947.

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<sup>76</sup> P.C Kar, *op.cit.*, p.214.