

Chapter-III

CONTEXTUALIZING THE BORDER *HATS*: PARTITION AND AFTERMATH:

3.1-Introduction:

The southern parts of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills facing Surma valley of Bangladesh are famous for the horticultural crops as well as mineral wealth. The orchards of the southern parts of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills are known for the production of best quality of oranges and pineapples. Also Betel nut, betel leave, bay leave, etc are grown widely side by side with variety of fruits. These areas are also rich in mineral wealth such as lime stone, boulders and coal.

It has been discussed in the previous chapter that during the pre-partition periods most of the locally products/minerals of the hills were exported to the neighbouring plains areas of the erstwhile Bengal (present day Bangladesh). Geographical proximity and shared border between the two regions have provided opportunities for cross border trade linkages. Due to reachability of these two areas, the cost of transporting of the local produce/goods is moderately less and the trade dealing between them is more feasible. There were free flows of goods between the two areas.

3.2 - The Economic Conditions of the People prior to the Partition of the Country:

The trade relations through border *hats* between the people living in Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills with the counter parts of Bengal was considered as one of the major sources of earning and livelihood especially for the people living in frontier regions. In many ways it has directly or indirectly impact and also sustained the economic aspects of the people of both the hills and the plain areas. It is significant to mention here that economic ties between the people of frontier regions of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills with the counter parts of Bengal also influenced their life styles

and thoughts. Some sections of the people of Khasi Hills even considered somewhat varied economically and culturally from their brethren living in the highlands.

The lucrative trade through border *hats* between the people of both the two areas have helped the people economically and contributed wealth especially for the frontier dwellers. The pre-partition period was considered as 'the golden age of trade'. The villages of southern foothills prospered and developed mainly because of the existence of free trade through border *hats* with the parts of Bengal. Instances revealed that the great earthquake of 1897 that had brought about a great destruction in Khasi-Jaintia Hills and affected the economy of the people, nevertheless it could not rob the region of its affluence. It indicated that the existence of free trade and markets enabled the people to overcome even in some adverse effects of natural devastation like earthquake.

3.3 - Partition of India:

The partition of the country in 1947 created unnatural border and the aged-old trade ties with the parts of Bengal was suddenly snapped. The border was closed; check posts were set up to prevent trespass across the international border. The shutting down of cross border trade and border *hats* caused untold sufferings to the people. It was an unexpected fall from the period of prosperity to scarcity.

The situation further aggravated in the absence of road connections of the frontier villages with the major trading centres within the State. There were no efforts before partition to develop road communication systems and no necessity was felt to provide markets for products of border areas within the State. While commenting on the impact of closure of trade and commerce, Donkumar Roy⁷⁷ said, "It was a sudden fall from the period of prosperity to the period of depression".

The partition of the country brought immense hardship to the people of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills in general and border regions in particular. Owing to the shutting down of all the trade and frontier markets, the import of essential commodities from

⁷⁷ Donkumar Roy was the former Chief Minister and a representative from Border Area in Meghalaya State Legislative Assembly.

across the plain areas of Sylhet and Mymensingh are stopped abruptly. It is to be noted here that at one strike all famous border *hats* such Shella, Majai, Phali, Balat, Tyllap etc became deserted and insignificant. As a result the people of the hill areas faced acute shortage of essential commodities and the situation compelled them to eat with wild roots and vegetables.

The entire economy of the border region in particular was completely shattered, and the country side which once hummed with activity and abundance was over shadowed with unemployment, poverty and misery. The partition of the country cut off the normal outlets of the locally produce goods of the border areas of Meghalaya affecting about 1500 villages with a population of 1.75 lakhs. These figures mean 36% of the total area of Meghalaya and 23% of the total population. Thus it indicated that the people faced a severe problem. The economy of the region suffered and income and investment declined tremendously.

The locally produced goods/products of the southern parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills in particular perished in the absence of markets and mineral resources such as limestone, coal were dumped unutilized. At that critical situation, businessmen took advantage and purchased the products and goods from the local producers at a very cheap price. In this way the local producers were the losers and had no option but to accept whatever price that was paid to them.

Therefore the people living in the southern parts of the State were in critical situations. They were unable take right decisions - whether to carry on their own traditional agricultural practices or to abandon them which mean no sources of livelihood. In such a serious situation, some sections of the inhabitants of border areas were compelled to leave their own homes and villages. They had to abandon their own villages and leave their own orchards and plantations in search of new lands for cultivations in other villages/places such as the Ri Bhoi area and other places within the state as well as outside the State such as Cachar District and Karbi Anglong of Assam.

It has been reported that some people of border areas also risked their own lives and cross over the international border illegally to sell their locally produce. The closure of border *hats* also compelled the people of border areas to take recourse to illegal trade practices through porous border which was absolutely unknown before the partition. Due to poverty, unemployment, limited sources of livelihood, more so generated after partition, many people on both sides of the international border, at the risk of their of their own life, continued illegal trading business to survive. This kind of practice still continues till these days even though not very successful.

Those *war*⁷⁸ who had left their own border villages; they had taken with them the quality of hard labour and business expertise to transform the economy of the Ri Bhoi area. In fact, it takes many years for the people to resume again their groves and plantations and till these days, it still seems to be a far-away target to achieve the level of pre-partition prosperity.

Table 3.1 Impact of Partition on border *hats*

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Yes	6	85.7	85.7	85.7
No	0	0	0	0
No response	1	14.3	14.3	14.3
Total	7	100.0	100	100

The above table indicates that 85.7 % of the respondents responded that partition of the country has led to the closure of all border *hats*. It has severely affected the economy of the people of the hills areas especially the economic aspects of the people living in the border regions. While 14% of the respondents did not responded to the question asked for.

⁷⁸ *War* refers to Khasi people living in the southern parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills

3.4 - The Efforts of the Government to restore the shatter Economy:

Consequently the Government of India tried to explore ways and means to help the people. Finally the Government came with a proposal for alternative sources of livelihood for the people of border areas. Though, some provisional steps and experimental measures were taken up by the Government such as an air lifting of oranges from Shella to Calcutta in the early fifties. However, the air lifting proved to be temporary and inadequate and fail to cover even an appreciable fraction of oranges produced in the area. In such a situation, it had to be abandoned only after a few years of operations⁷⁹.

Some efforts were attempted by the Government of Assam to restore the shattered economy of the southern parts of the State. The Government of Assam appointed three committees for the Garo Hills, Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills and Mizo Hills separately to enquire into the prevailing economic conditions of border areas and make recommendation of suitable measures⁸⁰. The Committees for the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills submitted their reports in 1958. The Committee for the Garo Hills in its report observed that the main reason of the present economic crisis of the border people was their dependent on cash crops. Cultivation of food crops was not possible for distinct conditions of soil of the border areas.

The Committee had recommended some measures to the Government such as construction of roads, subsidizing transport of food-stuff to the border areas, test-relief works and allocation of funds for intensification of various agricultural programmes. The committee also realized that the solution of the problem lay not in transferring of border people for rehabilitation to other places and changing their pattern of cultivation but in providing adequate transport and marketing facilities for the local products of the border areas. The committee strongly recommended for the construction of roads,

⁷⁹ Donkumar Roy, *op.cit.*, p.92.

⁸⁰ Dhiren Bhagawati, *op.cit.*, p.133.

provisions for transporting border products and for bringing food to the border people and organizing of co-operative marketing societies in border areas.

Both the Iyenger Committee and Lal Singh Committee recommended some important measures such as construction of roads for marketing of products of the border areas, subsidizing food stuff to the inhabitants of border areas, setting up of fruit preservation-cum-canning factories in border areas. The Committee for the Khasi and Jaintia Hills had recommended measures such as subsidy for border products and opening of fair-price shops in the border areas and it found that there was scope of improvement in administration of these measures.

The Committee for the Khasi and Jaintia Hills also felt that the problems of the people living in the border regions could not be solved merely through rehabilitation of the people. Therefore the Committee emphasized that self-reliance of the people should not be undermined. Despite best efforts of the Assam Government to handle and tackle the problems of the people of the border areas, conditions remained static and cause a big challenge to the leadership of the Autonomous State of Meghalaya in 1970⁸¹. Another option was to be sought in finding out markets for the local products of the border areas within the state and other parts of the country that too depend very much on the expansion and connection of road communication networks of border areas with the important towns of the State.

As a matter of fact, the problems of the border areas were approached from the point of encouraging alternative crops and plantations which has better market within the State and which were less perishable compared to traditional products of the border areas.

The Committee put forward another proposal to the Government to set up certain small/medium industries so that the minerals of the southern foothills of can be utilized. Apparently it would open avenues of employment opportunities to the

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

inhabitants of the border regions. Definitely the economic conditions of the people will be improved to some extents. However, the committee reiterated the urgent need for relieve measures like assistance in cash and kind to the inhabitants of border areas as deemed necessary.

In order to revive cross border trade to some extent, the Government of Meghalaya in 1971 has taken vigorous efforts to open up trade by permitting Pakistani traders to come to certain specific *hats*/markets on the Indian side of the international border⁸². At that time there were fourteen border *hats* which were permitted on specific days and the Government of India has made efforts for opening up twelve more markets in different parts of the border areas. As an experimental measures, Pakistani traders was allowed temporarily to come to Shella market (*Hat Shella*) in boats four days a week for the purpose to collecting shingles, boulders and limestone.

The re-opening of few border *hats* for a short time, gave the impression about the fact that the people living in both sides of the international border shared the same suffering arising out of the closure of *hats*⁸³. It must be stated here that numbers of border *hats* were limited for trade transactions with East Pakistani traders.

The people of border areas were demanded for activating more border *hats* so that the perishable items/products from both sides the international border can be exchange easily. In this way, it would be able to resolve and strengthen the deteriorating economy of the people living in the border regions. As a rule, to conduct trade transactions with a foreign country, it was the prerogative of the Union Government to frame rules, regulations and convince the foreign country for trade dealings. In case of opening up of more border *hats* and reviving border trade in the southern border of Meghalaya, it depend much on the wisdom and farsightedness of the leaders of the Union Government. The dealings with Pakistan Government were complicated affairs

⁸² Meghalaya Assembly Debates, 22nd March, 1971, no.7.

⁸³ L.S.Gassah, *op.cit.*, p.68.

and need to be handling carefully. In spite of the Union Government best efforts to convince and impress on the Pakistani Government to revive border trade through border *hats* the response was not positive.

When Meghalaya became a full- fledged State in 1972, it was realized by the Government that development of road communication networks is a pre-requisite condition for restoring the economic conditions of the border areas⁸⁴. The produce of the border areas which used to flow southwards to Sylhet and Mymensingh of Bangladesh has to be diverted to northwards to Shillong then to the plain areas of Assam as well as to the other part of the country.

Despite this urgent need and necessity, the construction of roads that links the southern border areas was not up to the mark or level of expectation. B.B. Lyngdoh⁸⁵ Chief Minister of Meghalaya in the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly stated, “The State Government is keenly aware of the suffering and distress prevailing in the border area due to the suspension of border trade. It is an act of knowledge and fact that the developmental programmes in the area have not kept pace with the requirements. The economic conditions of the border areas showed deterioration in spite of all out efforts of the Government.

Another major measure under taken by the State Government was the introduction of a crash scheme for marketing of products of border areas. This scheme was under taken with a view to facilitating the disposal of the locally products/items at reasonable prices both inside and outside the State. The relief measures were also under taken in the different areas with a view to ease distress among the people. The programmes for development of border areas submitted to the Government of India include the schemes for setting up of a corporation for marketing of border produce as well as the scheme for improving communications and infra-structure decided in the light of the special prevailing conditions in border areas.

⁸⁴ Donkumar Roy, *op.cit*, p.92.

⁸⁵ Meghalaya Assembly Debates, March 1973.

The extent of the problem can also be observed from what the Governor had stated in his speech in 1974. L.P.Singh⁸⁶ Governor of Meghalaya in his address to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly stated,

The honourable members will share's my Government concern at the economic condition of the border people. My Government has set up separate department exclusively to deal with the problems of border areas. This is a measure of my Government's anxiety to step up the tempo of developmental activities in the border areas.

The effort of the Government to contain the deteriorating economy of the people of border areas as a result of the closure of trade and border *hats* was manifested in different ways. The government felt that the developmental programmes in the border areas have to be taken up on both short term and long term basis. The most important ones were alternative crops to be grown, alternative markets for the border products, development of communication, provision of subsidy to the transport of border products and supply of essential commodities, cash crops, marketing and social services, etc. The Government has work for speeding up of developmental works in the fields of road communication system.

In spite of the Government's best efforts to uplift the shattered economy of border areas, nothing much could be achieved. Ever since Meghalaya became a full-fledged State, there has been a rapid expansion of road communication networks connecting border areas with other commercial centres within the State. Even though road communication networks were develop to some extent, but the demand for the horticultural products of the border areas within the state was not much as compared with the demand by the people of plain areas of Sylhet and Mymensingh of present day Bangladesh.

⁸⁶ Meghalaya Assembly Debates, March, 1974.

It must be stated here that due to long distance of the border areas from the commercial centres of the State, the cost for transporting of the agricultural products was very high and not feasible economically. Therefore the people of border areas are still facing trouble in selling their agricultural produce especially perishable items in the absence of nearby markets.