

## **Chapter -V**

### **MEGHALAYA AND BORDER *HATS*:**

#### **5.1 - Introduction:**

Border *hats* are considered as the lifelines of the people living in border areas. In many ways they have sustained directly or indirectly the livelihood of the people especially the producers, workers, sellers, porters etc. These commercial centres are also the major channels which facilitated local products and commodities to exchange and dispose. Apparently, the functions of border *hats* are purely economic in nature; it is the part and parcel of economic activities of the people. Besides economic functions, border *hats* have performed many social and cultural functions as well. Several border *hats* in Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills especially Shella, Majai, Balat, etc have shown that there are close interface and connection between the people of both the hills and the plains. These Border *Hats* also act as channels of innovation, adjustment and a web of inter-relationship between those who are associated with trade dealings particularly the buyers, sellers and producers.

#### **5.2 - Social Implication of Border *Hats*:**

In the border *hats* people hear different languages and people from different ethno-linguistic groups/cultural backgrounds intermingle and interacting each other. In the course of time the people are exposed themselves to new ideas and knowledge which ultimately pave the way for close connections and thus bringing about changes and sometimes even influencing their life style for example in dress pattern and dietary habits. The market also brings new commodities and products and therefore, has a 'demonstrative effect' as well on the lives of the villages<sup>129</sup>.

---

<sup>129</sup> Manjule Thakur, *The Periodic Market System: A comparative Study of Tribal and Peasant Economies with special reference to North East India*, Ph.D Thesis, Department of Geography, NEHU, Shillong, 1993,p. 179.

Border *hats* in the southern border of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills in particular and northern border in general have been performing many useful social and economic functions. The periodic market/*hat* served a variety of social and cultural functions for which it can be thought of as a social institution for the rural folk<sup>130</sup>.

The economic ties between the people of Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills with the counter parts of Bengal influenced their life style and thoughts. For instance the people of *Ri War*<sup>131</sup> allot equal share of parent's wealth for their children which are considered somewhat different from the practice of the people living in the high lands. People of different walks of life used to gather in markets not only for trade transactions but also to exchange views and ideas about families and weekly accounts as well. Therefore both men and women from both sides of the border are coming to the *hats* not only for business motive but also to exchange views on many important social issues which affect their daily life. Caste, sex, creeds, religions and languages could not put any bar as far as social mingling was concerned. Such interactions lead to build up a harmonious and cordial relationship especially between the people of the hills and the plains, which in turn has provided an excellent opportunity for positive socio-economic inter-changes.

**Table 5.1: Border *hats* help to bring the people of the hills and plains closer**

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
<b>Yes</b>	7	100.0	100.0
<b>No</b>	0	.0	.0
<b>Total</b>	7	100.0	100.0

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ri War* refers to those areas of southern parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills facing Bangladesh.

The above table shows that 100% of the respondents responded that border *hats* enabled the people to have cordial relations among the border inhabitants of both the two countries. It enables to bring the people closer to each through their contact in the border *hats*.

As has been discussed above, border *hats* are the meeting centres in which people from far and near villages could meet each other once a week on market day. These border *hats* provide opportunities to the people to meet their friends and relatives who are staying in far flung villages. People exchange news of well beings of kith and kin in the border *hats*. In the past, in the absence of faster mode of communications, border *hat* offered a communication link to people. It is essential to mentioned here that till these days border *hats* in Meghalaya are still considered as the best means of communication. Normally periodic border *hat* creates a platform for acting as medium of exchange of ideas between the people on one hand, and the Government/Non-Governmental Organizations on the other. The chiefs of different villages and political leaders usually used to meet the people in the border *hats* in order to discuss important issues which are related to their personal as well general welfare.

### **5.3 - Political Implications of Border *Hats*:**

These border *hats* are used by the rulers, political parties, religions and non-governmental organizations as centres in which important announcements as well as common issues which affect all the people are deliberated and transmitted. The people who came to border *hats* from every nook and corner of the hills and the plains transmitted those news and information to their respective villages. As a matter of fact, it is not always possible for the Government officials to reach out to each and every village and convey messages.

Prior to the partition of the country in 1947 the hill chiefs and the officials from the plains used to meet together in these *hats*<sup>132</sup>. They discussed among themselves about the conditions of their respective villages, how to bring out a new development scheme or alter the existing ones. They made use of the *hats* to deliberate on new rules, regulations and orders. Even to seek the advice and consent of the people on important issues and the people were asked to assemble in *hats* on market day. Many important decisions concerning the society as well as the polity of the kingdoms were taken up by the chiefs in consultation with the people in these market places. In the past important declarations and announcements are made known to the public by the beating of drums in the markets. Thus, border *hats* turned out to be an important link for the administration for conveying political and social messages to every nook and corner of the hills. In the recent past, important political issues or any new political development such as the introduction of a new tax, abolition of an existing one were declared in the market places by the beating of drums and thus the news was carried by people to their respective villages. It must be noted here that with the introduction of the new system of mass communications like News Papers, Radios, Televisions, etc the importance of *hats* as instruments of communications become less popular. But in spite of its declining, *hat* still continues to act as an important link of communication.

It is the common phenomenon that in Meghalaya public meetings, demonstration, election campaign and debates, processions etc are held in the market places. It is through these *hats*, that people who were living in the interior and inaccessible villages of the hills got exposed to the outside world which in turn influenced their habits, customs and their way of life.

---

<sup>132</sup> Angira Deb, The Garo Frontier Markets in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, M.Phil Dissertation, Department of History, 1992, p.83.

David Syiemlieh<sup>133</sup> has observed, *some expressions of these interactions are found in the institutions of Wahadadar among the Shella people, acceptance of Hindu faith and customs among a section of Khasis in the War.* Thus border hats have provided communication links to people. They are avenues for exchanging and transmitting new ideas and expertise in which the people of both the hills and the plain areas benefited most.

*Hat* provides an ample scope and opportunity for discussion, enjoyment, gossiping, and marry making. Many young men had the occasions to choose their life partners in the hats. Hats turned out to be a kind of institutions with immense political and social significance.

K.Alam<sup>134</sup> has mentioned, *For the Garos, the weekly hat/market was not only a place for buying and selling of things, it was the living institution which formed a part of social life - a place for meeting, gossiping and entertainment after a week of hard labour. It was an oasis of love, a place for expressing views and ideals.*

Border hats are also meeting places for friends and relatives and sharing information- pleasantries and sorrows. Border hats are also meeting places for the people coming from different backgrounds. The contact that they developed over transactions in the hats helped them to learn about each other's culture and language. Its reflection can be found in the writings of many British Officers posted in Sylhet. Robert Linsay, John Willes and many others have frequently used the term *Bengalee Cosseahs, the mixed race, etc*<sup>135</sup>.

---

<sup>133</sup> David R.Syiemlieh, "Control of the Foothills; khasi and Jaintia Trade and markets in the late Eighteenth Century" in Fozail Ahmad Qadri (ed.), *Society and Economy in North East India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi,2006,p.31.

<sup>134</sup> K.Alam, "Markets of Garo Hills: An assessment of their Socio-Economic Implication" in Milton S Sangma, *Garo Societies*, Omson Publications, New Delhi, p.111.

<sup>135</sup> David R.Syiemlieh, *op.cit.*,p.18.

In the border *hats*, people could hear different languages such Bengali, Khasi, Garo and others spoken by different communities. It is not very uncommon to find local people of border areas speaking Bengali language.

**Table 5.2: The languages used in Border Hats**

Languages	Countries					
	India		Bangladesh		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
<b>Bengali</b>	25	50.0	34	68.0	59	59.0
<b>Hindi</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Others</b>	5	10.0	4	8.0	9	9.0
<b>Hindi and Bengali</b>	10	20.0	0	0.	10	10.0
<b>Hindi and others</b>	2	4.0	1	2.0	3	3.0
<b>Bengali and others</b>	0	0	2	4.0	2	2.0
<b>Hindi+Bengali+Others</b>	8	16.0	9	18.0	17	17.0
<b>Total</b>	50	100.0	50	100.0	100	100.0

The above Table shows that 59% of the total respondents from both India and Bangladesh used Bengali, 17% used Bengali, Hindi and others languages such as Khasi, Garo and others. This figure shows that Bengali is used more in the border *hats*.

Apparently people from diverse races could learn and communicate different languages through interaction with each other. Thus border *hats* also helped in inculcating new ideas and new outlook in the minds of the villagers and thus bringing changes in their way of life, dress pattern, food habits, etc.

#### 5.4 - Entertainment aspects of Border *Hats*:

In Garo Hills, border *hats* served as the entertainment centres where various sort of amusement programmes are performed<sup>136</sup>. Before the commencement of these festivals and entertainment programmes as a rule it was made known and widely publicized to all the people in their respective jurisdictions of their villages so that they could participate and witness these special events. In Khasi Hills also regular fairs and festivals were organized in these border *hats* from time to time in different seasons. The expenditure for that purpose was incurred from the state exchequer. During festivals, dances were performed regularly in the *hats* to entertain people and people used to take part in these festivals with family, near and dear ones to mark the occasion.

During these events, all trade and commercial transactions in the *hats* used to be closed so as to provide an opportunity for all the people to take part in these festivals. As the people in the villages have little opportunities for entertainments, these kinds of festivals brought a fresh air in the daily routine and monotonous life<sup>137</sup>. On many occasions of religious festivals, *hats* were also used as a place by the priests and the high dignitaries of the kingdom concerned, prayers and observe rituals<sup>138</sup> and sacrifices were offered for the welfare of the state and also for the prosperity of trade and commercial activities etc.

Some border *hats* are the venues of coronations<sup>139</sup> of the chiefs as well as the headquarters of the *hima* (States)<sup>140</sup>. For instance, the Court of *Wahadadar*, the administrative head of Shella Confederacy is situated in the *hat* area, and the people from different villages could easily meet him on every market day and discuss the important issues relating to administrative and judicial problems.

---

<sup>136</sup> Milton S Sangma, *op.cit.*, p.110.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> H.Bareh, *History and Culture of the Khasi people*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, p.435.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> For instance in Shella, the office of the *Wahadadar* (Traditional Head) of Shella Confederacy is situated in market/*hat* area.

### 5.5 - Economic aspects of Border *Hats*:

Border *hats* are also very important from the economic point of view as well in the sense that they served as entrepots for goods and commodities both from the hills and the plains. For the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos, there was no alternative market for selling or exchanging the perishable items such as oranges, potatoes, betel nuts, betel leaves, bay leaves, cotton, rubber, timber, chilies, tezpat, etc except to take recourse to these *hats*.

Hooker<sup>141</sup> commenting on the extensive trade in potato wrote, *potato sold along with Khasi lime was exported in great quantities. Potato and lime were in great demand in Bengal. Potato produced in the hills enjoyed great reputation for its superior quality in comparison to other produce in parts of India, Admittedly, it was a late introduction to the Khasi Hills where it found a natural habitation, and was jhummed widely in Khasi uplands and potatoes in Khasi Hills became very famous both in Bengal and Assam.*

Apart from potatoes and lime, the southern slope of Meghalaya as mentioned earlier was famous for the production of different kinds of horticultural products such oranges, betel nuts, betel leaves pineapples, bananas, jack fruits, etc. Besides these, mineral resources such as lime stones, coal, sillimanite and other minerals<sup>142</sup> as well as forest products like timbers, ivory, various aromatic herbs, medicinal plants and lac were richly endowed by nature. Cotton was another important article of internal trade in Eastern India. It was the staple produce of Garo Hills. Garo cotton was in great demand in the plains. Thus the products of the hills found their market in the plains areas of present day Bangladesh and there was free-flow of items of daily requirements

---

<sup>141</sup> J.N.Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas: A Cultural and Political Economy*, Jeetraj Publications, Calcutta, p.72.

<sup>142</sup> Dhiren Bhagawati, *Meghalaya: Issues and Legacies of Its Early Years*, DVS Publication, Guwahati, 2007, p.132.



including rice, salt, fish, eggs, etc from the plains of the other side. It was from *hats* that people of both sides of the border used to obtain the commodities of basic requirements.

The contribution of border *hats* towards the socio-economic life of the people is enormous. When the people got the opportunity to sell their own products they can buy other essential items/commodities. The people of border areas in particular earned their livelihood by selling their local perishable items in the border *hats*. The southern villages of Khasi such as Nongwar, Tyngnger, Dewshaw, Nongtra, etc primarily depend on the planting of betel leaves. The existence of border *hats* or markets along these areas has helped for marketing this product.

The inhabitants of the hills would rush into these border *hats* on market day to exchange their products for getting rice, salt and dry fish for the entire week following that *hat* and would wait for the next *hat* to take place to repeat the same. These items were scarce in the hills. Therefore people had to depend on *hats*. In fact, people obtained their daily requirements from the *hats*, if local produce was not enough.

It has been discussed in the previous chapter that border *hats* used to be one of the principal sources of income of the hills chiefs. It should be noted here that in Khasi and Jaintia Hills land belonged to the people<sup>143</sup> and therefore, the hills chiefs could not levy any tax on land. In the absence of such source of revenue, the hills chiefs were in need of resources. Taxes were levied on goods and commodities that were sold in *hats*. *Hats* therefore constituted the main source of income<sup>144</sup> for the chiefs as well as common people. As a matter of fact, *hats*/markets in Khasi and Jaintia Hills used to be the source of income of all the traditional heads. With the money they obtained from tolls and taxes, the traditional heads managed and maintained these *hats*/markets. In *Hat Shella*, *Wahadadar* (Traditional Head of Shella Confederacy) used to collect tax from the people of other area. However tax was exempted for the people of *Hima Shella*.

---

<sup>143</sup> Joycy Lyngdoh, *op.cit.*,p.45.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

In Garo Hills, since the time of Mughal regime, *hats* which were located both in the northern and southern borders were under the control of a host of Bengali estate-holders<sup>145</sup>. These estate holders levied taxes on goods and services. Through transit and market dues levied on trade transactions the Zamindars of each estate-holder could be administered and developed these *hats*. Moreover, the zamindars were obligatory to maintain peace and security to prevent any untoward incidents in the *hats*. The estates, therefore maintained mercenary forces<sup>146</sup> in order to check any thread or raids by the hills people. The *Hats* therefore constitute the main source of income for the estate-holders and the people of Garo Hills.

Tolls and taxes levied on goods and services formed an important source of loyalty for the *hima* (Khasi states). Border *hats* therefore played vital roles in affecting the growth of the state economy. They formed strong and stable centres for transactions and exchange of goods<sup>147</sup>, thereby creating a base for generating revenue for the Khasi States.

The significance of border *hats* to the socio- economic life of people can be pondered from Hutton's observation<sup>148</sup>,

*There is hardly a Khasi village which does not have a market or hat in its neighbourhood or located within easy distance from it. Among all the hill people in India's north east, the Khasi are perhaps the most trade-minded. In fact, going to market either in quest of business or merely for the pleasure of it, has almost acquired the character of a social compulsion which any visitor to the Khasi Hills cannot failed to notice.*

Besides generating revenue, the chiefs used to receive *bainguh* (a token of respect and acknowledgement which used to be offered by the subjects to the chiefs)

---

<sup>145</sup> P.C.Kar, *The Garo in Transition*, Cosmos Publications, New Delhi, 1982, p.70.

<sup>146</sup> Anjira Deb, *op.cit.*, p.40.

<sup>147</sup> H.Bareh, *op.cit.*, p.436.

<sup>148</sup> J.N. Chowdhury, *op.cit.*,68.

either in cash or kind and *pynshok* – a protection fee which was obtained for providing a conducive environment to conduct business and also for ensuring security and maintaining law and order in the border *hats*. Other sources of revenue came from leasing of limestone quarries. The loyalty and income obtained from all these sources was intended to meet the state expenses. The importance of markets in Khasi and Jaintia economy is illustrated in the tribes naming the days of the week after the weekly markets<sup>149</sup> for instance Tuesday was known as *Hat Majai* in *Hima Sohra* (Sohra State) as *hat* used to take place every Tuesday in Majai.

Ever since the inauguration of Kalaichar Border *Hat* and Balat Border *Hat* in 2011 and 2012 respectively along the India-Bangladesh border in Meghalaya sector, the people living in the border regions of both two countries are able to sell and buy goods from each other. The items of exchange from Bangladesh side include vegetables, sugarcane, cotton garments etc whereas ginger; betel nut, bananas, black pepper, fruits, etc are the items from Indian side. All the items of trade were duty free.

**Table 5.3: Goods/Commodities purchased by customers**

Respondents	Location					
	India		Bangladesh		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
<b>Yes</b>	46	92.0	44	88.0	90	90.0
<b>No</b>	4	8.0	6	12.0	10	10.0
<b>Total</b>	50	100.0	50	100.0	100	100.0

The Table shows that 90% of the total respondents buy goods other than their own country and 10% respondents buy goods mostly belong to their own country. One interest finding is that people from both the two countries will buy products from each other in the sense that they will buy those products which are not available in their own

<sup>149</sup> D.R.Syiemlieh, *op.cit.*, p.329.

country. The commodities traded in these two border *hats* are exempted from the payment of customs duties.

**Table 5.4: Any tax or custom duty imposed on sellers/buyers**

Respond	Location					
	India		Bangladesh		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
<b>Yes</b>	0	.0	0	.0	0	.0
<b>No</b>	50	100.0	50	100.0	50	100.0
<b>Total</b>	50	100.0	50	100.0	100	100.0

Table above indicated that 100% of the vendors from both India and Bangladesh are free from any kind of taxes. This implies that trading in the border *hat* is strictly adhered according to the MOU signed between India and Bangladesh.

The main objective is to up lift the economy of the border regions of both the two countries. The new system and modalities was also introduced for the sellers and buyers for trade transaction in these two border *hats*. The goods/products to be traded in the border *hats* must be adhered according to the MOU signed between India and Bangladesh in 2010. Though the list of the commodities allowed for trade in the border *hats* is not much diversified, but the people are happy to purchase commodities from border *hats*. The price of goods is comparatively cheaper in comparison with other markets in other places.

**Table 5.5: Buyers who preferred to buy commodities from Border *Hats***

Respondents	Countries					
	India		Bangladesh		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
<b>Yes</b>	50	100.0	49	98.0	99	99.0
<b>No</b>	0	.0	1	2.0	1	1.0
<b>Total</b>	50	100.0	50	100.0	100	100.0

Table above indicates that 99% of the respondents of the total respondents answered that buying goods from border *hats* are more advantages. This shows that buying goods from border *hats* is more preferred.

Thus we see *hats* performed multiple roles in the life of people of Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills of Meghalaya. The close ties between the inhabitants of the hills and plains paved the way for flourishing trade in these border *hats* and thereby giving birth to a cordial relationship between the hills and the plains. The *hats* served variety of purposes and people from all strata of society benefitted immensely. Therefore, border *hats* with the passage of time became an indispensable institution of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo economy.