

31. The Border Hats in Khasi and Jaintia Hills : The Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The southern parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills are famous for varieties of fruits and horticultural produce such as oranges, pineapples, pan leaves, betel nuts, black peppers, bay leaves, broom, etc. Rice cultivation is also widely grown in the slender strips of flat lands adjacent the plain areas of Bangladesh. These areas are also very rich in mineral wealth such as lime stone, coal, boulders and chips as well as forest products like timber etc. The existence of border *hats*/markets along the southern foothills of Khasi-Jaintia regions has provided opportunities for marketing and exchanging the essential commodities as well as local products both from Khasi-Jaintia hills and the plain areas of the then Bengal. The inhabitants of both these two areas are inter-dependence in term of trade and commerce for mutual benefits. Prior to India's independence most of the local products/goods of Khasi-Jaintia Hills were exported to the neighbouring plains areas of erstwhile Bengal (present day Bangladesh). In the same way the people from the hill areas imported rice, salt, dry, fish, oil, kerosene etc from Bengal. Geographical closeness and shared border between the two regions provided an opportunity for trade and commerce. Due to accessible of these two areas, the cost of transporting of goods is moderately less and the trade linkage was more feasible. During those periods there were free flows of goods between the two areas. The lucrative trade had sustained the livelihood of the people and contributed wealth especially for the people living especially those frontiers villages.

Border *Hats* are the traditional and informal market that are situated along the foothills of Khasi-Jaintia Hills adjacent to the plain areas of Bengal (present day Bangladesh) and Ahom kingdom (Assam). This form of market used to take place at a fixed day and fixed place. Recorded evidence shows that the existence of *hats* dates back to the fifteenth century. In literature, dealing with Mughal rule in Bengal, one finds reference of such *hats*. Prior to that, evidences are difficult to come by. It is also may be due to the fact that the inhabitants of these hills had lived in a relative isolation in the sense that they did not have much interaction with the outside world. They had more or less a self sufficient economy based partly on agriculture and partly on hunting. The Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos have been the traditional inhabitants of the present day Meghalaya. Meghalaya plateau is located in between the two great valleys, the Brahmaputra valley and the Surma valley.

The geographical location of plateau provided as easy access to the people of hills to develop commercial relations both with Bengal and Assam. Trade and commercial transactions emerged as an organized activity in the border *hats* on regular basis since the early part of nineteenth century. *Hats* assumed a significant place in the development of commercial activities of the people of hill areas. Some *hats* were entrepots in nature, in the sense that they provided a base where goods and commodities both from the hills and the plain areas were bought for import and export to different places.

The major border *hats* that has sprung up in due course of time along the foothills of Khasi *hima* (state) and Jaintia kingdom are Tharia, Borkhat, Kharoh, Majai, Phali, Jaintiapur and Pandua¹. These places were situated in the south along the foot hills of Khasi and Jaintia Hills adjoining the plain areas of Sylhet District of Bengal. While in the northern part, along border Ahom Kingdom, emerged *hats* like Gabha, Bardwar, Boko and others² which became active as commercial hubs. These *hats* were the main channels for getting goods and commodities of daily requirements for both the people of the hills and the plain areas. At the same time *hats* attracted a large number of traders from far and near. On market days, traders would descent to these *hats* carrying produce, which they could spare, in conical baskets fastened with straps for exchange and selling³. The traders in the evening would ascend to their respective villages carrying with them essential articles and commodities which they could obtain from others in exchange of their produce.

The traders from the plain areas never ventured beyond the border *hats* and so the bulk of trade was entirely in the hands of hill men. Major share of the profit from trade and commerce, therefore, went entirely to the hill people⁴. The items of export from Khasi and Jaintia hills were oranges, pan leaves, bay leaves, honey, limestone, smelted iron, cotton, betel nuts and potatoes. The items that were in demand in Khasi and Jaintia Hills from the plain areas were rice, fish, salt, spices, cotton, silk and copper. These items were imported from Assam and Bengal

The whole of Bengal was supplied with oranges from Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Lemon, pineapple, bananas, jackfruits and mangoes⁵ 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 a specialty of the Khasi people. 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.

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 established between the rulers of the hills and the plains to strengthen the trade. W.W. Hunter has recorded in his book. "The fruit is known in

Calcutta as 'Sylhet oranges'. The Bengal Registration returns from 1876-77 show the total export from Sylhet of 64,505 mounds of was fruits valued at Rs. 1, 93,575". The trade dealings between the inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills with the plain areas, especially with Sylhet District of Bengal, constituted an essential input in the socio-economic development and prosperity of the people living in Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

Due to immense important of commercial activities between the people of the hills as well as the plains areas, the Khasi Chiefs left no stone unturned in promoting it. They set up *hats* within their territorial limits at the foothills contiguous to the plain areas of Sylhet and Ahom Kingdom. The Khasi Chiefs also took the responsibility for the management of these *hats*. They themselves were also involved in trade practices. Evidences show that they also constructed their residence in the villages in the border areas with a business motive. They also encouraged the people to take necessary steps to improve the production system. Further they took the initiative to sign trade agreements with the rulers of neighbouring states which strengthen the inter-state communications.

The location of a border *hat* became an essential factor for the smooth functioning of commercial activities. Management of *hats* which were located within the territories of the hill chiefs fell within the jurisdiction of that *hima* (state). In such *hats*, trade transactions remained stable and prospered to a great extent. At the same time it recorded a huge profit for the people who were involved in trading activities in such *hats*. Some *hats* were located in disputed territory very often leading to tensions and clashes which disrupted regular trade transactions. This was due to the fact that both the British and the hills chiefs made claim and counter claim over the jurisdiction of some *hats* such as Pandua, Sonamgunge, Chattak, etc which fell on plain areas. With the establishment of direct British administration in Sylhet the company took the responsibility of defense on frontier. The new revenue and administrative arrangement in Sylhet following the grant of *Diwani* right of Bengal had affected the Khasi *hima* and Jaintia kingdom to a great extent.

The boundary between the British possessions and those of those of the Khasi and Jaintia states was not well defined⁷. The British Officials then decided to bring necessary legislation. A regulation of 1790 prohibited Europeans and non-hill men from going beyond the north west of Surma River⁸. Nine years later it was decided to survey and demarcate the border between Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Sylhet. This new demarcation of boundary indicated which market would fall within Khasi *hima*. The boundary that was demarcated 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 commercial interests followed the policy of interference in these age old commercial ties of the native races, which had severely damaged the close ties which the people of hills and the plain areas shared. Therefore, the British had done an irreparable damage to people of Khasi and Jaintia hills and the plain areas of Sylhet by cutting off their relations. With

the motive of capturing the trade transactions in the *hats* and facilitate the British traders by eliminating the native traders and to monopolize lime trade, the British came with such proposal of demarcation of boundary between Sylhet and hills areas. It has to be noted here that Sylhet came under the British rule in 1765 and Assam fell to British control in 1926. 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.

The situation worsened further when the colonial authority claimed control over all plain areas which fell within Khasi and Jaintia *hima*. The British justified their claim by arguing that the areas of Sylhet goes beyond the Sylhet town and extends to the plain areas up to the foot hills of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, as only hill areas belong to the tribes of Khasi and Jaintia. The Khasi Chiefs and Jaintia Raja registered protest over such encroachment but without much success. Then resentment found expression in acts of looting and plundering by the hills men. The *hats* which happened to be in such disputed areas were the main targets of raids. The claims and counter claims of jurisdiction over these *hats* both by the British and the hills chiefs stemmed from the issue of collection of taxes levied on goods and commodities which came to these *hats* for transactions. Another problem encountered by the East India Company was the looting and plundering of boats plying in the upper reaches of the river Surma carrying goods for transactions. This occurred frequently and the East India Company also registered complaints of encroachment over the plain areas of Sylhet by the hill chiefs. The British East India Company also drew attention towards incidences of looting of some of the warehouses to the Chiefs and Raja of Jaintia.

The British East India officials then decided to take precautions against these raids by raising a militia in Sylhet to prevent such actions⁹. 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 understood by the British officials that a mere fortification or maintaining a militia would not be enough to prevent such raids by the hills' men, so they decided to grant the Khasi Chiefs rent free land in the plain areas of Sylhet for source of revenue. When the Khasi resistance to the British expansionist policy was at the peak, the British used the *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 the *hats* and even could enforce blockade on trade and commerce. For the British, the control of border *hats* was like control of the hill men.

The advent of the British rule resulted in administrative and political changes in the hilly regions of the Khasi-Jaintia hills. They set up uniform administration in the Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills along with Sylhet District of Bengal and Ahom state. The uniform administration under the British further led to the development of the trade and commercial activities in the *hats*. Many European nationalities including the

British traders¹⁰ 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. Not only trade increased in volume but also entered into a new phase – the phase of monetary economy. Goods began to be exchanged in terms of currency.

The British rule also led to the development of road communication networks. Water ways through some navigable rivers such as Lukha, Kupli, Jadukata were developed. Many roads, bridle paths, bridges, etc were constructed¹¹ in order to connect the important towns and villages of both of the hills and the plains. Thus, trade transactions in these border *hats* increased not only in terms of volume but also in term of variety because of the improved facilities and infrastructures. Border *Hat* system is very old in this part of the world which served people's interest for ages. *Hats* occupied an important place in the socio-economic life of the people of both the hills and the plain areas. *Hats* became an integral part of the people. Established trade ties through traditional *hats* became the source of livelihood for the people and for a few a source of wealth for many years. These *hats* continued to flourish till India's independence in 1947.

Footnotes :

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8. The Effects of Partition of India on the Frontier Markets along the Southern Parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills: The Historical Perspective

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An Abstract

In the pre-partition periods, the villages of southern parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills developed mainly because of the existence of free trade between the inhabitants of the hills and the plain areas of the erstwhile Bengal. Trade relations between the inhabitants of Khasi-Jaintia hills and the plain areas had sustained the livelihood of the people. However the partition of the country created an unnatural border and the aged-old trade relations was suddenly closed. The frontier markets were sealed and the trade ties between the hills and the plains were snapped suddenly. The situation further aggravated due to lack of road connections between these far flung frontiers villages with the rest of the state. The cost of bring in local needed items as well as transporting of local produce such horticultural and perishable items was very high in the absence of transportation facilities. Consequently the produce of the southern parts of the state became non economic and the people living in the southern parts of the state suffered untold despair. Therefore this study will dwells primarily on the effect of partition of the country on trade and markets of the southern foothills.

Key Words: partition, villages, trade, close, items, despair.

Prior to India's independence most of the products of Khasi-Jaintia Hills were exported to the neighbouring plains areas of erstwhile Bengal (present day Bangladesh). At the same time the people from the hill areas imported rice, salt dry fish, etc from Bengal because of geographical proximity and more accessible in term of transport and communication.

There was free-flow of goods and other essential items from both Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Bengal. Minerals of the hills were supplied to the different places of Sylhet and Mymensingh of

Bengal. It was quite natural that the profitable border trade through border markets with the people living in the plain areas of Sylhet and Mymensingh was not to be replaced by alternative trade and markets within the state. The trade dealings between the inhabitants of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills with the plain areas especially Sylhet was very important and therefore constituted an essential key for the socio-economic development and prosperity of the people living in Khasi- Jaintia Hills.

In the pre-partition periods, the villages of southern foothills in particular and the high lands in general thrived and flourished mainly because of the existence of border markets. Cross-border trade relations between the inhabitants of the hills and the plains contributed wealth for the people of both areas. The pre-partition period was considered as the 'golden age of trade'. It must be remembered that the devastation of great earthquake of 1897 in Khasi-Jaintia Hills had greatly affected the economy of the people living in the hills in general and the border areas in particular, but it could not rob the area of its affluence. It indicated that the existence of free trade in the border markets enabled the people to overcome even in some adverse effects of natural catastrophe like earthquake.

4. Impact of Partition

But after India was divided into Hindustan and Pakistan in 1947, the connection between the people of hills and plain areas was suddenly separated. New international border was created; the movement of the people of both the border areas got restricted. The partition of the country created an unnatural border and the aged-old trade ties with the part of Bengal were snapped. The border was closed; check posts were set up to prevent trespass upon international border. The shutting down of cross-border trade and markets caused untold sufferings to the people. It was an unexpected fall from a period of prosperity to the period of poverty.

Due to the closure of markets, products of the border areas perished and products and minerals were dumped unused. At that critical situation, businessmen took advantage and purchased the products and goods from the local producers at a very cheap price and selling in another places at a very high price. In this way the local producers were the losers and have no alternative way but to accept whatever price that was paid to them. In the absence of cold storage and other facilities to preserve the perishable items, the local producers were at disadvantage position where as the businessmen can monopolize trade transactions freely. The situation further aggravated due to lack of road connections with the important towns of the State. In the

absence of road communication networks, for transporting the agricultural products especially the perishable items became non-economic.

The partition of the country brought immense catastrophe on the people of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Owing to the shutting down of all the border markets, the essential commodities which they used to be obtained from across the plain areas of Sylhet and Mymensingh were stopped abruptly. The people of these areas also faced acute shortage of essential commodities. The whole economy of the region was completely shattered, and the countryside which once hummed with activity and abundance was over shadowed with unemployment, poverty and misery.

Efforts to Open Trade and Markets

After partition of the country some efforts were made by the Indian Government and Pakistani Government to restore back what was one time free and unified trade within the undivided India. Both India and Pakistan recognized the necessity of forging trade and commercial relations between the people of both regions. They also understood the need and requirements of bilateral exchanges in the context of growth and development of their economies. Thus, they undertook to explore all possibilities of expansion of commercial relations on the basis of mutual advantage. It was decided, that until 29th February, 1948, there would be no restrictions on free flow of goods between the two dominions and custom barriers would not be set up. This arrangement is known as the Standstill Agreement 1947. But this arrangement proved to be temporary and short lived. Several other accords were also concluded from time to time.

The issue of re-opening up of border markets and cross-border trade was the most intricate and complicated matter and depended very much on the good response of a foreign country that was not too friendly i.e Pakistan.

As far as informal trade was concerned, both the Governments understood the need of providing special treatment to the people of border areas, residing around the Indo-Pakistan border, adjoining East Bengal on the one hand, and West Bengal, Assam and Tripura on the other hand. Certain principles to sustain and regulate such informal trade was formulated and approved by the Governments in 1953 in a conference held in Delhi.

In 1953, in conference which came to be known as the Indo-Passport Conference was held in New Delhi between India and Pakistan. In the conference discussion were held regarding smooth transit of people and goods between two countries. As per the 'Agreed Decision' at the

Indo-Passport Conference, 1953, it was decided that the Government of Pakistan will set up two additional Branch of **Visa Offices** in India one in Bombay and the other at **Shillong**; while the Government of India will set up two additional Branch of Visa Offices in Pakistan; one in Hyderabad, in Sind province of Pakistan and the other at Rajshahi, in East Bengal. That meeting contained a schedule (Schedule-D) which specified the goods to be transacted. It was decided that the Governments of both countries will be responsible for the overall management of the carriage of goods covered by the schedule 'D'. It was furthered outlined that the goods listed in 'D' shall be free from import, export and exchange control, restrictions, and custom duties and custom formalities.

It was agreed by both countries, that the export items from Khasi-Jaintia and Garo Hills will include fresh fruits, vegetables including potatoes, ginger, turmeric, tezpatta, lime, forest products such timber, cane, thatching grass, firewood and bamboos and limestone. It was allowed to be carried on head load only where as betel leaves and milk was allowed to be carried not more than five seers per item per head. The items of export from Sylhet and Mymensingh Sector which was allowed to enter into India included fresh fish, dry fish, poultry, eggs, milk, milk products, spices, betel nut, and betel leaves according to the quantities prescribed by the Government. The vegetables and fresh fruits were allowed to be carried on head load.

The provisions relating to border trade referred to in the Article VIII of the agreement indicated that in order to meet the day to day requirements of the people living within a ten mile belt of the border between West Bengal, Assam and Tripura on the one hand and East Pakistan on the other, and with a view to provide facilities to the people, to dispose their goods, border trade shall be allowed in accordance to the agreement. The agreement specified that such facilities shall be available to persons holding 'A' category visa. The expiry period of such visa holder will be six months from the date of the enforcement of the Agreement. At the same time it was also stipulated that, such visa holder may cross the border for trade purposes, only once in a day, through land customs frontiers between West Bengal, Assam and Tripura on one hand and East Pakistan on the other, on specified routes.

The Government of Pakistan agreed to open one check-post near Chhatak to cover the routes from a) Assam via Dhalai River, b) the bridle path from Bholaganj to Companyganj, c) the Shella river route and d) the route from Borsora. As an experimental measure, Pakistan traders were allowed temporarily to come to Shella market/hat in boats for four days in a week

for the purpose of collecting shingles, boulders and limestone. Besides, on bazaar day, twice a week, Pakistan traders, were allowed to come in boats to collect those permitted commodities authorized under the agreement.

Such cross-border trade and markets were permitted only on specific days and the Government of India had moved to open up twelve more such markets in some places on the border. It was proposed at that time, to extend this scheme to some other border markets also, if proved to be a success in Shella. In addition to this, a coordinated development programme for border areas was also taken up at the bilateral level to cover many other sectors of development taking into account the need of border areas.

However this arrangement could not continue for long as the political situation between India and Pakistan started deteriorating. Commercial activities were totally stopped between East Pakistan and India in the Eastern Sector. The 1948 attack of Pakistan in the Western Sector, growing demand of liberation movement in Eastern part of Pakistan made the situation not conducive to continue trade relations. From 1966 onwards, there were absolutely no cross-border trade relations as a trade embargo was imposed on Indian goods due to the Indo-Pak war.

Conclusion

As has been discussed above that revival of traditional border markets along the international border with Bangladesh in Meghalaya sector is vital for the development of the people of both regions especially the border inhabitants. Apparently revival of traditional cross-border trade and markets is seen as an instrument of improving the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh. No doubt, the opening up of two border markets in Meghalaya sector could be materialized due to close cooperation between India and Bangladesh. The historic event of opening of border markets marked the turning point particularly for the border inhabitants after waiting for about a half century. Now the inhabitants of the hills and plain areas have come together to carry on trade transactions as in the past. This exhibited the close connection and mutual dependent among them. The political leaders of both the countries have reiterated their commitment to look into the possibility of opening more border markets so as to fulfill the long standing demands of the people and non-governmental organizations of the state.

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