

The Border Markets in The Southern Parts of Khasi-Jaintia Hills Prior To The Partition of India: Some Reflections



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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. 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.

Keywords: Horticultural, Produce, Existence, Border, Market, Opportunity.

Introduction

Border markets are the traditional and informal market. They 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 border market dates back to the fifteenth century. In literature, dealing with Mughal rule in Bengal, one finds reference of such markets. 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 Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the emergence of border markets and its significant in the economic aspects of the people.
2. To examine the disputes between the Khasi Chiefs/rulers and the British East India Company over the jurisdiction of border markets.

Geographical Location

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 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 markets on regular basis since the early part of nineteenth century. Border markets assumed a significant place in the development of commercial activities of the people of hill areas. Some border markets 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 markets 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 parts, along border Ahom Kingdom, emerged border markets such as Gabha, Bardwar, Boko and others² which became active as commercial hubs.

The Significance of Border Markets

These markets 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 border markets attracted a large number of traders from far and near. On market days, traders would descend to these markets 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 markets 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 border markets 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 border markets. 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 market became an essential factor for the smooth functioning of commercial activities. Management of border markets which were located within the territories of the hill chiefs fell within the jurisdiction of that *hima* (state). In such market, 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 market. Some border markets 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 Disputes over The Jurisdiction Of Border Markets

The boundary between the British possessions and those of those of the Khasi and Jaintia states was not well defined⁶. 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 River⁷. 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 markets 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 contro 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 actions⁸. 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 border markets 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 markets and even could enforce blockade on trade and commerce. For the British, the control of border markets 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 market. Many European nationalities including the British traders⁹ decided to station in and around Sylhet to take full advantage of the flourishing trade in and around border markets. 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.

Conclusion

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 constructed¹⁰ in order to connect the important towns and villages of both of the hills and the plains. Thus, trade transactions in these border markets increased not only in terms of volume but also in term of variety because of the improved facilities and infrastructures. Trade link is very old in this part of the world which served people's interest for ages. Border market occupied an important place in the socio-economic life of the people of both the hills and the plain areas. It became an integral part of the people. Established trade ties through traditional markets became the source of livelihood for the people and for a few a source of wealth for many years. These border markets continued to flourish till India's independence in 1947.

End notes

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