



Cross-border trade of Assam with special reference to trade fairs during the colonial rule

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Abstract

Trade and commerce forms an integral part of the way of the people of Assam from the time of yore. Geographical location, natural resources, cultural affinity etc facilitated people of the region to carry out trade with the neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Tibet, Burma (Myanmar) and China. With the establishment of the British rule in Assam, hitherto existed border trade received its momentum. With a view to accelerate their trade interest, the British established trade fairs in the foothill areas in some strategic places of present-day Assam-Arunachal border. The penetration of the British goods swept away the economy of hill tribes. The study reveals the existence of the border trade of the highlanders during the pre-colonial and colonial period in Assam. The study tries to focus on the prospects of trade of the region with South-East Asian countries.

Keywords: Border-trade, colonial, trade fair, North East Frontier Tract, South-East Asia

Introduction

Since time immemorial India has registered a unique chapter in the history of cross-border trade. Border trade received momentum with the formation of guild by the Indian traders. India has an age-old trade relation with the people of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Babylon, Rome, Greece and South-East Asian countries. Indian traders play an important role in establishing a cultural dominion of India in South-East Asia. Along the rest of country north east region of India also had a glorious history of border-trade. This region had a trade contact with the countries like Bhutan, Nepal, China, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand etc. If we look into the history of this region, we will find that it was through the trade routes came hordes of men and their ideas, new cultural elements from the territory of Tibet, Burma (Myanmar) and other neighboring countries to this region. During the Ahom rule, trade relation was established with Bengal, Tibet, Bhutan, Burma and China even with Kabul. For conducting trade with Bengal chaukis or out posts were established at important centers and placed by the Ahoms under the control of officers' call Duaria Boruah or Chakial Boruah. The Duaria Boruah usually pays an amount of Rs. 90,000 (ninety thousand) annually to the Ahom government.

Cross-Border Trade

With the establishment of the British rule in north east India after the treaty of Yandabo in 1826 CE, a new era in the history of this region began. During the colonial rule over Assam and the adjoining areas, the mode of operation of trans-Himalayan trade took a new dimension. The development of trade with Tibet, China and Burma was matter of great concern for the British authorities in north east India. There was lot of trade routes through which cross-border trade was carried out during the British regime. John M'Cosh had mentioned five routes from Sadiya, like the Dibong pass, the Mishmi route, Phungon pass to China, the route via Manipur to Irrawady valley and Patkai pass to Burma, which were used during the Ahom period^[1]. These routes leading from Sadiya into Tibet or China proper. The most important trade route lies in the south-east direction

from Hukong valley, from which the Chinese district of Kakyo wainmo could be reached in eight days^[2]. The Chinese traders frequently used this route. Another route called the Choukhang route was frequented by the traders of Lohit and Dibong valley to reach Burma. The existence of numerous routes and passes to Tibet, China and Burma shows the extent of cross-border trade between the inhabitants of erstwhile Assam and Tibet, China, Burma and other South-East Asian countries. The Tabaquat-i-Nasiri refers to 35 mountains passes between Kamrupa and Tibet, through which horses were brought to Lakhnauti. There was a trade route to Kabul through Bhutan along the mountains. The development of trade with Tibet, China and Burma had a long-cherished ambition of the British authorities in north - east India. From a perusal of the reports of Logan, Bogle, Tuner and Edgar who had been deputed at various times to Tibet, the British authorities came to the conclusion that trade in both European and Indian commodities might be opened on a favourable term with the Tibetans^[3]. The East India company required the supply of gold from Tibet for its China trade. There was a growing demand of Chinese tea in the United States. The problem of financing Chinese tea was a matter of great concern to the British authority because China shows no eagerness to purchase the British goods. With the discovery and beginning of tea plantation in Assam, the problem of financing China tea was solved but by the time the private British and Indian traders under the active encouragement of the East India Company developed lucrative trade in opium with China. The enormous profit earned by the traders demanded continuation of China trade^[4]. Owing to the constant need of bullion, the company found it necessary to encourage private British trade with China. The rigorous restriction of trade as a result of rigid close door policy of the Chinese and the prohibition of importation of opium to China by the Chinese government diverted British attention from maritime to overland route^[5]. Though the import of opium was prohibited by the Chinese govt. in 1800 CE, the smuggling of opium was carried out by bribing the Chinese officials. The piracy on sea and river compelled the British to look into alternative

route for merchandise. Opening of overland commercial routes would have placed the British in better position than their French and American counterparts. The traditional land routes of erstwhile Assam to Tibet, China as well as Burma attract the attention of the British authorities. Trade with Burma was no less importance both for the development of the trade with Burmese as well as with the Chinese who traded extensively with the people of Burma [6]. Bedford, Neufville, Wilcox and Burton was deputed to have the geographical knowledge beyond North East Frontier of India. After the tour, they expressed about the bright commercial prospect of the East India Company in the region. Wilcox was struck by the mercantile potency of the Mishmis who trade with the Zavul valley and Assam [7]. Wilcox also noted the commercial intercourse of the Mishmis with the Khamtis and Bor-Khamtis countries [8]. Captain S. F. Hannay who made a journey to Burma made an exciting report of the position of the district of Bhamo as an emporium of a trade between the Burmese and Chinese in which British merchants were most anxious to share. G.T. Bayfield was given the instruction to induce the governor of Mugoung to adopt effective measures to suppress the tribes so as to ensure free trade intercourse between Assam and the Shan district of Burma.

These survey and researches reveal without doubt to the British authority about the bright commercial prospect of East India Company in Eastern Himalaya. But the major problem was from the hill tribes who refused to penetrate the British to their respective areas. In 1826 CE, Lt. Wilcox was stopped by the Miju Mishmis. In 1828 CE, Lt. Burnet who was sent by David Scott to explore the Patkai pass was checked by the Singphos. In 1836 CE, Dr. Griffith and in 1844 CE Lt. T. Rowlat who were on their way to Tibet was stopped by the Mishmis. Therefore, the British found it necessary to negotiate the hostile tribes by any means before operating commercial intercourse with Burma or China with Assam.

In spite of various impediments, the British cherished the hope of commercial ties with China, Tibet and Burma. To avoid direct confrontation and jealousy of the Chinese and other European counterparts, the British wanted to continue commercial intercourse with China through Indian's North-East Frontier. In 1849CE, with a view to promote the resort of the Chinese merchants into Assam Mr. Lumpin was deputed beyond the frontier of Assam for the period of six months [9]. After the annexation of Burma to the British Indian empire by 1885CE, the British goods passed unmolested to China via Bhamo. The British found it easy to procure cheap labours from Yunan for their industries.

The systematic attempt was made to develop British Indian trade with Tibet. To capture the market of central Asia there were four known trade routes to Lhassa- the Sikkim passes, Dewangir route, the routes through Assam via Tawang and through the Mishmi country. Among them the most popular was Assam-Tawang route. The route through Mishmi country was the shortest route to connect the eastern Tibet with British India. The Governor General in council was very much impressed with the idea of exploring Tawang and eastern Assam routes to approach the market of Tibet and central Asia [10].

There was a considerable demand of English cloth, printed calicos, metal, etc. as well as Indian indigo, tobacco, salt, tea, rice, milk goods and ponies in Tibet [11]. This could be exchanged for the natural products of the country including

gold, silver and other minerals, skin, fur, hair of goat and soft wool. As the trade with Tibet could not develop through Nepal, the British authorities tried to establish commercial link with central Asia through erstwhile Assam. T.T. Cooper's journey to Tibet in 1868 CE and J.F. Needham in 1886CE proved that up the Brahmaputra laid the shortest route between India and Eastern Tibet and thence to the market of China [13].

Cross- border trade of the frontier hill tribes

Apart from the British traders, the hill tribes of erstwhile Assam had their traditional trade connection with Tibet, Burma and China though the volume of trade was comparatively lower than the British merchandise. The Khamtis and the Singphos had socio-political and cultural ties with the Kachin and Shans of upper Burma. They dealt in ivory, elephant and opium. The survey of literature reveals that the articles such as amber (Jangphai), gum, Chinese cloths, lacquered boxes, Nora clothes, silver etc. were brought from Hukong valley and some others parts of Burma [14]. The Khunungs who inhabited the lower mountains, beyond the Irrawady valley used to supply the Khamtis with daos and salt in late 19th century indicating economic interaction [15]. A great trading centre at Bhamo on the Irrawaddy region of Burma attracted a large number of traders from hilly area of upper Assam. In exchange for handloom products, tea leaves, salt, beads etc. the people of this area imported dao, iron implements, fishing nets, spears, pen knives and Burmese garments from Burma. However, the opium trade was current mainly between the Singphos and the Kachin of upper Burma. Miles Bronson, a Christian missionary from Namchang area in 1840CE, reported extensive trading relations of the Nocte people with the Burmese and the Chinese [16]. The Kaman Mishmis also had trade relations with the people of Khamti-long in Burma and visited the place through the old routes [17].

During the colonial rule, attempts were also made to open trade routes to Tibet through the area designated North Eastern Frontier, present day Arunachal Pradesh. The tribal peoples of the hill areas had trade relations with the Tibetans and the Chinese. Some of the tribes acted as the linkman between the Tibetans and the people of Assam to facilitate the exchange of their products with each other.

The Mishmis had a trade relation with the Tibetans who used to procure goods brought by the Tibetan traders, which includes also goods brought by Tibetans traders from China. William Griffiths, a botanist who visited the Mishmi hills in 1836CE after 10 years of the occupation of Assam by the British noticed that the staple articles of trade of the Mishmis was Mishmeeteeta for which Mishmi hill was known in Tibet and Assam [18]. Among the items imported by the Mishmis from the Tibetans includes lama sword, gong, flint and steel, copper, pots, woolen caps, woolen cloths, beads, Tibetan mask, salt, musk deer skins, various kinds of cattle etc. The Kamans and the Terons went across the Indo-Tibetan border in groups from time to time used to exchange mask, pots, aconite (poison), hides, skins furs, Mishmi coats, and roots for dye, clothes, various kinds of barks and drugs such as getheen (an odoriferous root) manjeet (mudder) and mishmitteeta. In return, they brought back from Tibet brass-pipes, cattle, gongs, woolen- goods, and copper- vessels, beads etc. Due to proximity to Tibet, the hill tribes like Bori, Adi, Galong, Zakhing, Membas, Mayor etc. had a trade relation across the border and passed

through Gastreng Paying, Kontheng, Dobong, Mango, Tungkur, Lego pass and Elling to a market in Tibet called Nayi Lube. Their main articles of barter were raw hide, chillies, cattle, spears etc. in exchange they bringing down rock salt, woolen cloths, raw wool, Tibetan swords, copper and brass vessels, earring, sweet fruits like walnut and peaches, dry meat, religious manuscripts, images of gold, precious stones, and silver ornaments. The Tagin, Nyishi and the Apatani traders carried animals' skins, mask, rice, salt, Assamese silk etc. to Tibet and brought wool, blanket, bronze and brass vessels, baskets, bee-wax, beads, rock-salt, swords, bell and cymbals etc. The Akas, Monpas and Sherdukpens had an age-old trade relation with Bhutan and Tibet which continue to the end of the British rule. Lucrative trade was carried between Tibet and Assam via Kameng and Tawang along the Trans-Himalayan routes. The goods from Assam include rice, coarse milk, iron, lac, skins, buffalo horns, pearls, and carols etc. The major imports items consisted of wools, gold, dust, salt, mask, cowries and Chinese silks. Lt. Rutherford who was the in charge of Darrang in Assam in 1833CE tried his level best to augment the Assam-Tibet trade the Kuriapora duar. It was through the duars or passes like Kuriapara duar, Charduar, Chaiduar, Na-duars, etc. the goods of Assam carried to Tibet. The influence of Tibet and Bhutan can be seen in the Monpa textiles and ornaments, arts and architecture and iconography. Indigenous paper industries (made from the pulp of a tree called shock-shock)^[19] in Tawang, Kalaktung, Morshing received a good outlet in the market of Lhasa.

In an account of early nineteenth century it is found that major part of the cross-border trade through the Monyul (Tawang area) had been carried by the pilgrims, who used to come down on pilgrimage to Gopeshwar temple near Singri, Bhairabkunda and Mahamuni temple at Mazbat^[20]. The pilgrims brought down luxury goods and bullion to exchange ivory, mask and other items. Direct participation of the Tawang monastery in this cross-border trade between Tsona and Tongsa is clearly attested by some archival records of early British period and it is said that Tawang monastery used to monopolized the trade in salt and rice.²¹ Although direct trade with Tibet could not be developed through present day Arunachal Pradesh, however, the Monpa and Sherdukpen of Kameng, the Membas of Upper Siang, the Mishmis of Lohit, the Adi of Siang and the Tagins of Subansiri continued to have traded with Tibetan merchants till end of British period^[22].

Trade Fairs

The British encountered resistance from the hills tribes like the Mishmis, Adis, Singphos, and Khamtis in opening trade routes through their respective areas. Therefore, they followed policy of fostering friendship with the sturdy hill tribes. The British govt. encouraged the already existing trade relations between the people of Assam and present-day Arunachal. The British organized trade fairs in Sadiya, Udalguri and Doimara in the foothills of Assam on the pretext to cater the needs to the hill people. The reasons behind organizing the trade fairs by the British were manifold. The North East Frontier Tract (present day Arunachal Pradesh) was an important region for the British from the defense point of view. As the inhabitants of this region lived close to Tibet, China and Burma, the British did not intend to bring these tribes under direct administration.

At the sametime, they were anxious to hold their political influence over them. The British authority thought it prudent that well-organized trade fairs would be highly appreciated by the hill people as it would provide them the opportunity to dispose their hill produces and procure their daily necessity. These fairs could enable the British officers to exert political control over them and helped in cultivating friendly relations with the hill tribes. The hill people mostly engaged their time and energy in mutual clash and in raids. The trade fairs would provide them a new outlet of activities and protect the British subjects from frequent tribal inroads. Commercial interest also encouraged the British to organize the trade fairs. In 1835CE, Captain Charlton wrote "What a pity there is no means of communication between Sadiya and Yunan. A good land road and there are no natural obstacles of any consequence to prevent it, would offered an outlet for British merchandise into the very heart of China^[23]. There was a need of additional trade route to China and Burma through Khamti-Singpho territory. So, they started appeasing the tribes by establishing trade fairs in places like Sadiya, Udalguri and Doimara. The trade fairs officially held in winter season from December to April. The trade fairs cater to the needs of the different tribes of the frontier. Basic facilities were provided to the people who gathered in the fairs. Long sheds were constructed by the Govt. military and police guards were kept to provide security. Sometimes to attract the attention of the people magic show, popular games and sports were arranged by the Govt.

The Udalguri fair was held in Kuriapara duar 25 miles north from Mongaldoi. The Manpas from Tawang, Bhutias and Tibetans came to Udalguri fair with their merchandise. The Doimara fair was held at a place three miles beyond Assam frontier and about twenty-five miles in a straight line north-east of Udalguri^[24]. The Sherdakpens in large number took part in the Udalguri fair. The Sadiya fair catered to the needs of the Adis, Mishmis, Singphos, Khamtis, Duanias and other neighbouring tribes. The items offered by the Tibetans, Bhutians and these tribes men for sale in these fairs included pony, sheep, yak's tail, rock salt, blanket, mask, peeper, spice, dye, lac, wax, ivory, spear, dao, basket, bag, mat, amber, honey, rhinoceros-horn, rug etc. goods purchased by the highlanders from the fairs included paddy, rice, eri cloth, cotton cloth, brass pot, betel leaf, betel nut, molasses, dried fish, tobacco, rapeseed iron, silver, muslin, broad cloth, opium, buffalo, bell metal, pots, cotton, yarn, eriya, English yarn, Assamese gamocha, American drill, tea, sugar, cambric, tea cup, etc. Some of the items brought by the tribesmen for sale were not produced by them but procured from the Tibetan and Chinese traders in exchange of goods obtained from the trade marts. In this manner trans-Himalayan trade flow still continued though of a much reduces volume^[25].

A large number of Marwari trading community and Assamese, European planters from Tezpur and Mongoldoi attended the fairs. Traders from Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur attended Sadiya fair. A large number of Kacharis frequented Udalguri fair.

The major export items of the hill people at the fair consisted mostly of forest resources and their handlooms and handicrafts. The Sherdukpens and Monpas brought domesticated animals in a large number. Agricultural produce of the highlanders was low in volume due to the lack of surplus production. It was only the Khamtis who practiced settled wet rice cultivation could bring down

considerable quantity of surplus rice in the Sadiya fair. The Monpas and Sherdukpens exported rock salt which they brought from the trade with Tibet. As far as the import was concerned salt was prominent items of the trade fairs.

The hill people sold their surplus product and purchased their annual requirement from the fairs. The lack of outside technological aid, poor use of tools and implements leads to the small-scale production of hill tribes as a result of which they could not bring much merchandise at the trading fairs. Therefore, their purchasing capacity was low for want of money and sufficient goods to barter. The Khamtis and Singphos were the exceptions who were principal exporters of rubber and rice purchased luxurious articles such as tea, sugar, molasses, handkerchief, oil etc. The production being less among the highlanders the features of modern market like trade competition and monopoly were also absent in these fairs.

The British had some political motives in organizing the fairs. Therefore, they left no stone unturned to make them attractive. They organized games and sports, processions of the chiefs on elephants back accompanied by attendants with drums and other musical instruments and sometimes with tribal dances and songs ^[26]. The government official used to conduct Durbar at the place of the fair where gifts were exchanged. The British officials were very cautious in their dealing with the important chiefs and were careful not to offend tribal sentiments. Mutual exchange of gifts served as diplomatic instruments on the part of the British to achieve sympathy and good feeling of the hill people. The British officials used to present the hill chiefs British product like wine, broad cloth, handkerchiefs, scissors, glass porcelain, ware etc. M.L. Bose correctly points out that this policy had its effects in popularizing European manufactured goods among the hill people and through these fairs imported cloth metal wares etc. along with other articles of plains of Assam poured into the hill areas ^[27]. The trade fairs served as the meeting place of different tribes, it was a sort of cultural emporium of the various tribes. The fairs had a dark side also. The distribution of wine by the British and sale of opium to hill tribes by the British subjects had adverse effects. Huge money was spent from the district and provincial fund. The fairs catered more to the interest of the business communities than the local people of Assam. The imported items like mill made cloth and dye led to the destruction of indigenous productions. The trade fairs served as a link between the traditional economy characterized by barter, measurements of volume rather than weight with modern economy marked by monetary scale, fixation of price by the laws of demand and supply. It also plays important role in facilitating socio-cultural exchange between the plains and hills.

Conclusion

Growth of cross-border trade during colonial period was result of the ambitious project of opening of trade routes to eastern Himalayas by the British. The Burmese phobia shaped the early British policy in north-east and an alternative trade route was the call of time. But after the annexation of Burma to the British empire of India she could establish her market in Burma itself. The promotion of direct trade with China through North East Frontier Tract was however checked due to the Chinese hostility. The commercial interest of the British in Tibet as a source of raw wool and market for Indian tea could not be the ruled out.

The Dewsbury and Bradford chambers of commerce tried their level best to persuade the Tibetans to acquire a taste for Indian tea.

The cardinal hope of expansion of commerce to eastern Himalayas through North East frontier of India however, did not fade away during the course of study. The exploratory tour of Noel Williamson, the then Assistant political officer of Sadiya to south eastern Tibet, focused on the importance of Lohit as the natural highway to Tibet. A rail link from Saikhowaghat of Assam to Szechuan province of China as advocated by Thomas Holdrich, occupied the attention of the British authority. Though small in volume, the Indian and European manufactures found an outlet to central Asia by hill tribes who used to trade with neighbouring countries till the end of the colonial rule. The historicity of the cross-border trade during the colonial and pre-colonial days indicate the potentiality of the trade of north-east India with the South-East Asian countries. It will definitely help us in cultivating political relations with our neighbouring countries as well as go a long way in bringing down the secessionist tendency and help a lot in the economic development of the people of this region.

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