



Barter trade between the nyishis of the un-Divided Subansiri area of Arunachal Pradesh with Tibet

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Abstract

Arunachal Pradesh is situated in the North Eastern Part of India having geographical boundary of 84,000 sq. km approximately, and has a long international boundary with Tibet and China in the north, Bhutan in the west and Myanmar in the east. Un-divided Subansiri (Kurung Kumey, Kra Dadi, Upper Subansiri, Lower Subansiri and Kamle districts) is a larger region of the state from where the local people would go for trade to the Tibet. Trade is referred as the process of buying and selling of commodities. It involves the transfer of goods and services from one person to another. It is considered as one of the main economic activity of development for any region. The earliest form of trade considered by the scholars is barter, which involves the direct exchange of goods and services. The people of these regions of un-divided Subansiri of Arunachal Pradesh are known to have maintained the barter trade relation with the Tibetan counterpart across the border since time immemorial. Barter trade is not only considered to be a vital factor for socio-economic development of the people of these regions, but also an important factor for the socio-cultural development of them. It has tremendous impacts on overriding economic and social factors in these regions.

Keywords: Arunachal Pradesh, un-divided subansiri, trade, barter, socio-economic

Introduction

The un-divided Subansiri area is a mountainous tract in Arunachal Pradesh, which is bounded by Tibet and China in the north, Siang belts in the east, Kameng and Papum Pare belts in the west and Assam in the south. The northern region of Kra Dadi, Kurung Kumey and Upper Subansiri district that forms the north western region of undivided Subansiri area at present is still one of the least known parts of the Arunachal Pradesh. These areas are inhabited by the Nyishi, Apatani, Tagin, Puroik and Nah Tribes. They are included in the Indo-Mongoloid racial group, and the language spoken by them belongs to Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. They are animistic in nature and believe in existence of numbers of both benevolent and malevolent spirits and deities. It is noted that Christoph Von Furer Haimendorf as the special officer had visited several villages in the region in the year 1944-45. He had also identified some of the important trade route with the Tibetans. The Colonia administration and the administration of post independent NEFA, and subsequently the Government of Arunachal Pradesh has taken up various measures to connect these regions and to provide all possible facilities for speedy growth and development. In spite of the measures taken and consistent efforts of the government, not much result could be achieved due to numerous constraints like remoteness, high hills and mountains, deep gorges, etc. Keeping all the factors aside, by the conscientious efforts of the people, the area has gradually marched ahead in medical and education sector as well as raised their economy and living standard in a larger way.

It is quite obvious and natural that everywhere the people who lives in the border area has a long and continuous history and tradition of maintaining socio-cultural ties, economic and political dealing with the people of their neighbour. Since time immemorial, the economic activities

between the various tribes like Nyishi, Tagin and Nah tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and the Tibetans in the border area in the past were of barter trade. In trade, 'barter', which is derived from 'baretor' (Wedgewood, 1855) ^[5] is a system of exchange in which participants in a transaction directly exchange goods or services for other goods or services without using a medium of exchange, such as money (O'Sullivan & Sheffrin, 2003) ^[6]. Barter is simply considered as the exchange of goods without the use of money. Barter trade was the earliest basis for developing market. It was the main source of meeting certain commodities in the olden days. Therefore, the social, cultural and economic relation and bond built or developed since time immemorial through the border trade cannot be served with the mere formation of nation state coercively and abruptly.

At present, anyone who intends to visit across the border area for the trade and business has to obtain special permit from the Home Ministry, Government of India, and then enter the Tibet border along with their porters. The route to Tibet almost takes 6-7 days by foot-march, since there is absence of any means of transportation in this border area, people have the only option left to go by foot march. During the summer season, at around the month of June-September, the interested traders of Nyishi, Tagin and Nah tribe would gather and move in caravan carrying their respective loads for the barter exchange. Due to the difficulties that they face in the journey to the Tibet, they never go individually. They will always move in a group or caravan, supporting and helping each other during the entire process of reaching Tibet and returning back to their home. They never go for barter trade in the winter season, as the snow-capped mountain would create hindrances for them and the weather at that time could prove to be threat to their life as compared to the summer season journey.

Commodities exchanged or bartered in the trade

In the ancient past, the indigenous people of this area maintained trade links with the neighbouring country Tibet as well as neighbouring state Assam to meet their needs through barter system. The Tibetan commodities or goods that are bartered or exchanged by the people of these regions of un-divided Subansiri from the Tibetan counterparts are Rainbow sword or Tibetan sword, machete/dao, brass Plate, brass Bowl, cymbal like metal disc, beads of various kinds like jade, cornelian, coral, large beads of white stone and deep blue lapis lazuli, large size beads of conch shell, etc., bracelets, head gear, Ear-ring, brass pipe, woollen cloth, salt, gun and many more. It is noted that the value of the imported articles was much more in comparison to what they exported from other side of the border. Although every commodities that they used to exchange from Tibetan people was very important for the local people of the regions of the un-divided Subansiri as those imported items has socio-cultural importance in the society, however, among the different imported commodities, salt was considered as the most important commodity, because of its need in the daily consumptions. Loads of salt were carried by the local people of these regions for their self consumption as well as for trading or exchanging it to the people of the nearby neighbouring communities. The people of these regions used to procure salt not only from Tibet, they also used to travel to the plains of Assam and would avail it at any cost as it was the basic need for their regular consumptions.

The goods from the Nyishi, Tagin and Nah people that were bartered with the Tibetan people are Skins and Hides of wild animals like Otter, Leopard and Tiger, musk pod, bear gall bladder, dyes like Madder and Manjith (*rubiacae* family), chilly, cane, different food cereals grown in the hilly areas like rice, millet, maize, chillies, ginger, bamboo-tubes, etc. There was no fixed system of valuation or the fixed medium of the above bartering articles and commodities. The commodities and goods were sold to the persons who offered them more goods in exchange. The exchange of commodities between the people of un-divided Subansiri area and Tibetan counterparts was purely on needs or the necessity level of the individual. Since there was no fixed system of the value of the commodities that they own, so the barter of those commodities was most of the time depended on the rapport building between the traders. The barter used to be carried out in a mutual understanding and cordial relationship.

Early trade relations

In the olden days, the people of un-divided Subansiri areas had trade relations with Tibet and plains of Assam. With the restrictions and sealing of some border area, trade with Tibet has somehow now come to standstill. However, there are still some routes in the un-divided Subansiri area, from which the Nyishi, Tagin and Nah people of the state still visit Tibet. Lack of regular communications and transportation between the hills people and the plains, and isolation of the people in their remote hilly abodes were the main barrier to the normal growth of trade and commerce. Since there was no regular as well as systematic trade and commerce, and there was absence of monetized economy, the barter trade was the only option left with the hilly people of the region to totally depend on their economic apart from some of the agricultural activity like jhum cultivation.

The border trade between the people of these regions and Tibetans has gone on for generations since time immemorial. The people of these regions used to go there for trade before the imposition of restrictions in 1961-62 on a regular basis, but later on, the movement of the people towards Tibet was restricted after the Chinese aggression of 1962. Barter trade was considered a good subsidiary vocation because of which many industrious as well as normal trading persons could improve their economic status in the society. Each village and communities used to jealously guard its trade zones routes and would not allow others to use it so that they could purchase or barter goods by themselves from one community and sale or bartered it at a good profit to the members of another community or even to the fellow members in need, those who have no direct access to the producers of the goods. There was no trading class as such in the ancient period of these regions. It was the rich people who mostly used to engage themselves in trade. In the past, when the inter clan feud was so rampant, it was always a risky affair to move out of one's safe confined area. However, this risk could be minimized through the network of ceremonial friendships and matrimonial relations amongst each other. So under the aegis of the ceremonial friendship and matrimonial relationships, those communities and tribes engaged in trade used to flourish.

In the pre-independence period and during the prior period of 1962 Chinese aggression, there were no motorable roads in these regions of the un-divided Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. Foot-tracks were the only means of inter-village communications and to do trade with Tibet and the plains of Assam. In the olden days, there were several trade routes to Tibet. Some of them originated from the Nah settlement of the Taksing area of Northern Subansiri area to the different villages of Tibet. From Mara in Limeking area followed the course of the Golen River, which was also an important trade route to reach Tibet. Regular trade routes also existed from the Kamla and Khru valleys of the Kurung Kumey region in the western part of Subansiri area. These were the regular routes from the un-divided Subansiri area, from where the regular barter trade used to takes place. During the ancient period, the movement of traders were frequent and it was like a day to day activity for them. Although these routes still exist today, but the movement of the traders from these sides of the Subansiri region to Tibet has lessened very much. After the Chinese aggression in 1962, the government has put some restrictions in the movement of the local traders to Tibet; hence the trading movement takes place just once or twice in a year depending upon the availability of the traders ready to go to Tibet for barter.

The people of these regions also had trade relations with the plain people of Assam since the ancient past. The local people of the area used to foot-march for 2-3 days and used to reach places like Tezpur, Charduar, Biswanath Chariali, Rangapara, Lakhimpur, Doimara in Assam. There, they would sometimes attend the fairs or melas that takes place and would barter goods with the plain people of Assam depending upon their needs and necessity. They would bring chillies, ginger, bamboo-shoots, cane, rope and other products of the jungle and would exchange with the goods like brass bowl, metal bowl, utensils, clothes, daos/machetes, axes, eri-silk, salts and so on.

Significance of Tibetan goods among the communities of the regions

The cultural materials and religious objects of the Tibetans that are bartered with the Nyishi, Tagin and Nah people of the un-divided Subansiri regions have assumed certain roles and special function in their society. The precious objects like *maje* (tongueless bell), *ryoku/aryo* (swords/machete), *tassang* (beads), *taloh* (brass plate), *kojee* (bracelet/bangle), etc. are considered as movable properties and usually attached these as a symbol of wealth, to redistribute in marriage, inter-clan political alliance, etc. in early days without slightest notion as capital asset. Now a days, in the modern period, such valuable items have dual nature-as property and currency/capital asset, in other word as goods and non-goods, and uses these items for various purposes during any festival or rituals of the societies, and also as a medium of exchange and gift during any celebration or rituals like marriage.

The social and cultural function of *maje* (Tibetan prayer bell) and *taloh* (brass bowl or plate) among the society of these regions is intense and unique in many ways. The whole ideas and spectrum associated with *maje* and *taloh* is so intricate and complex. They are creatively placed and used to bind family lineages, clans and the tribes. Apart from *ryoku* (Tibetan sword), they are the most precious possession and property of the communities of these regions. They are regarded equally in the similar manner among different communities of Tagins, Apatanis, and even to some extent among the Adis. Subsequently, it is noteworthy that here the Tibetans are the producers, the craftsmen, while the communities of these regions like Nyishi, Tagin, Nah and the cognate tribes of Arunachal Pradesh are the main consumers, the users. A very significant feature in the *maje* and *taloh* is that even after devoid of the tongue, they are used as prayer bell or gong during the rituals and ceremonies. Therefore, it is possibly and quite apparent that the bell has been part and parcel of the Nyishi, Tagin and Nah culture for quite a long time before they migrated into the present country. The pattern and design of *maje* and *taloh* will be discussed brief subsequently.

As mentioned, for the communities of these regions, *maje* and *taloh* are used as property and it was used as currency. Christoph Von Furor Haimendorf stated that these Tibetan bells, known to the communities as *maje* and *taloh* has played partly the function of a currency and partly that of valued pieces of art used in socio-cultural and socio-religious practices.

Traditionally the societies of these regions have been using various kinds of *maje* and *taloh*. Haimendorf had mentioned that first kind of *maje* is of a value of ten *mithuns* or more than that, which are known under a particular name just like any famous statue. Second kind of *maje* and is of a value of one and two *mithun*, and the third kind, a small and comparatively poor *maje* worth only the equivalent of Rs. 5 or of Rs 10 in the year 1944-45. At present, the first category of *maje* and *taloh* are equivalent to 5 to 20 *swbe* or *mithun* (*bos frontalis*). This type of *maje* is distinguishable with unique image of *Yane Pumlo*, an insect *Cicade*. The second type is known as *makh maje*, which is now equivalent to 3-10 *swbe* or *mithun* which has distinct engraved marks of *Makh Nyaglo Pumte Kopik*. The third category is the *lwme maje* and it is now worth one cow to one *swbe* or *mithun*. The purchase of *maje* and *taloh* are like

a bride price and are paid usually in instalments and in a ceremonious way. Some of the valuable *maje* and *taloh* are considered as male and female, some are thought of as adult, others as boys and girls; not only their names are like those of human beings, they are treated not as dead pieces of wealth but virtually as animate beings as such the owner has been treating them jealously and affectionately as his/her prized possession. At times, the owners are so obsessive and passionate about their possessions that the *maje* and *taloh* could not be handed over to their son or daughter, even at the stage of dying. In this way, *maje* and *taloh* are always inter related with the past and present, it creates meaning and value in the owners social and personal life.

The *maje* and *taloh* virtually creates a space for promoting intercultural and inter-generational dialogue within the heritage communities as well as inter-ethnic relations. It helps to reinforce, perpetuate and permeate the fabric of the societies of these communities inhabiting the un-divided Subansiri. The assimilation of material culture, in a way is destined to testify the dynamic of cultural relation between the societies of these regions and the Tibetan, and help abridge the abyss between India and Tibet too. Moreover, the border trade though very small in terms of goods transactions, it has been bringing success to the economy of the area as well as the people and has been playing vital role in improving the socio-economic scenario of these regions. And most importantly, such border trade will bind together different ethnic groups living in the border area and would play pivotal role to renew their age-old social and cultural linkage, and ultimately it will create a better world.

Conclusions

The tribal societies in the regions of un-divided Subansiri are at present undergoing through process of transformation from their erstwhile seclusion and backward economy towards multifaceted development in social, cultural, political and economic spheres. Due to modern impact, well educational facilities, life style of these regions has been found in remarkable changes. The trade links are now firmly established with the trading centre in the plains of Assam, Itanagar and other states with the establishments of road connectivity due to which the local traders nowadays do not prefer to go to Tibet for the barter trade. However, some sections of the people of these regions still go to Tibet for procuring commodities because those commodities has socio-cultural and socio-economic importance in their society. Although the commodities or items which have socio-cultural and socio-economic importance are nowadays available in the nearby market of Assam, but they are not considered as valuable or original, only the commodities or items brought from Tibet are considered original and are highly valued in the societies of these regions.

The people are moving forward and keeping pace with the fast-changing socio-economic conditions. The old-time barriers have disappeared, and the needs of life ever-growing under the impact of developments, have impelled the people to cross the limits of their hills. The spheres of occupational activities of the people are far wider today than ever before. In the private and co-operative sectors there are a number of enterprising tribal businessmen and industrial entrepreneurs besides shopkeepers, retail traders, contractors, etc. The monetization of economy has revolutionized the internal economic system by facilitating trade and commerce, investment and production. However,

even after the advancements and progressions of the societies of these regions, there is always a phase where the tribal people has to rely on their indigeniety, traditions and cultures. They cannot be ignorant towards their traditions and cultures, does not matter how wealthy a person becomes. Being a tribal society, they have to value their cultural practices and traditions which depict their identity. Therefore, it does not matter whether they still practices barter trade with Tibet or not, but they always try to procure commodities and items that have been brought from Tibet. It does not matter whether a person is rich or poor, it does not matter whether a person is an indigenous or follow any religion, and he/she would always look for the items and commodities that are brought from Tibet. The commodities like brass bowl, brass plates, head gear, swords, cymbals, beads, etc. are highly valued and are essential parts of the socio-cultural life of the societies of these regions. The possessions of such traditional items or commodities in the societies are not only important in socio-cultural views, but its possessions are consequential to the economic life of the people of these regions.

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