

**THE EASTERN HIMALAYAN TRADE OF ASSAM
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY : A STUDY
OF BRITISH POLICY**

ABSTRACT

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The eastern sub-Himalayan regions on the northern and north-western borders of Assam are inhabited by the people of Indo-Mongoloid stock. On the western frontier there is the state of Bhutan while the areas east to it in succession covered the present Indian Union territory of Arunachal Pradesh and is peopled by various tribes now known compositely as 'Arunachali' tribes. The Eastern Himalaya denotes the region covered by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh while Assam for the present purpose is essentially the vally of Brahmaputra.

Our analysis of socio-economic structure in Eastern Himalaya at the time of colonial penetration during early nineteenth century reveals that ^{the} region produced little agricultural surplus. In Arunachal Pradesh, for most of the tribes, the method of cultivation was jhum or shifting. The main input in shifting cultivation is the human labour. The hill-tribes prepared jhum land with such primitive implements such as dao, iron-hoe, pointed bamboo etc.. The method of cultivation was strenuous and less productive. Khamptis and Singphos who

practised wet rice cultivation could produce a fairly good amount of agricultural surplus. While in case of other tribes slavery was a nascent factor, it advanced among the Singphos by the enslavement of Assamese people from plains. Even among Singphos the slavery was of 'nominal type'. The only tribe that could generate a fairly good amount of agricultural surplus was Apatanis. The Apatanis were particularly blessed with an extensive area of flat land ideally suitable for permanent and sedantary method of cultivation.

The hills of Arunachal were blessed with extensive forest resources. The chief forest resources of the Arunachalis were the poisonous root Aconitum ferox, valuable medicinal plant mishmiteeta, rubber and timber plants that grew wild in the fields. The limited surplus output of agriculture, cottage and industries and forest products could fill up the gap in economy by exchanging these with the other necessities of life that were procurable both from the neighbouring regions of Tibet, China and Burma as well as the Brahmaputra valley.

At the other end of the scale, there was the state of Bhutan. Although Bhutan had been united under one Government since the seventeenth century, it was not under an absolute centralised administration that could extend

its authority over all parts of country. The country was parcelled out into a number of smaller divisions. At the apex of the administration was the dyarchical rule of Dharma and Deb Rajas who exercised spiritual and temporal authority respectively. Below the Deb Raja were the Penlops who were in charge of Eastern, Central and Western Bhutan to which Bhutan was divided. Each region included one or more dzongs (districts) within its jurisdiction, each under an administrator called dzongpen (district officer). Below the dzongpens there were a number of subordinate officials, for example, Soubah, Kuttam, Zinkaff etc.

The system of cultivation comprised of laying the land in levelled terraces and for irrigation purposes water was brought to the fields from long distances by stone and wooden aqueducts. Agriculture was also supplemented by animal husbandry and weaving.

The reports of Bhutan give different pictures of raising revenue by the Government. Though nowhere is the basis of assessment clearly described, it seems state took considerable share. The peasant-landholders also contributed blanket at a low price, provided usual transportation services of animals and supplied fire-wood and

husk and straw for cattle to Government officials, gave other kind of labour and subject to military service. The people of duar also contributed a very important proportion of the total revenue of Bhutan. Officials extorted as much as they could from the cultivators. Further a major portion of the surplus extracted was spent on feeding the priests or gylongs. Whatever might be the actual size of the surplus generated in agriculture and industry its mode of extraction and distribution reflects a situation in which there could be less incentive to trade and commerce. Moreover, the external trade of Bhutan was controlled by Government. It was only at the duars that a subject could acquire the right of trade by paying a tax. Bhutanese carried commercial intercourse with Tibet from Paro, Punakha and Tashigong.

The old time trade-routes descending from the hills in plains of Assam passed through dense forests, passes and rivers. Some of the tribes maintained extensive commercial intercourse with the plains of upper Assam and provided routes to Tibet, China and Burma through their territories often acting as intermediaries. Although there was no fixed routes for descent from the hills, trade in plains under the Ahom rulers of Assam was conducted through an organised market system at the duar. From

Assam, Bhutanese imported cattle, betel-leaf, betel-nut, tobacco, cotton-cloth, silk, dried fish and rice in exchange for yak-tails, blankets, walnut musk, cowrie, orange, madder, chinese silk, rock salt, chilly, tea, bee's wax, gold-dust and silver ornaments. The Arunachalis bartered pepper, ginger, Mishmiteeta, wax, ivory, musk, Tibetan sword, spear, rubber etc. for glass bead, cloth, salt, utensil, and agricultural implements.

The British established its foothold in the Brahmaputra valley in 1826 and lost no time in penetrating into neighbouring Himalayan region. The question follows what could be the interest of British capitalism in Eastern Himalaya considering the undeveloped nature of economies in Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh?

The Industrial Revolution is the most remarkable phenomenon which generated a great stimulus to the whole economic system ultimately turning Great Britain into the workshop of the world. The need for seizing new markets and raw materials set the pace in forging new link between inner and outer zones. The process led to the rise and consolidation of British rule in India which extended its jurisdiction to Brahmaputra valley following the treaty of Yandaboo. The British interests in Eastern Himalaya stemmed up from Britain's growing trade interests

in Tibet, China and Burma. The existence of numerous overland trade-routes to Tibet, China and Burma through Eastern Himalaya naturally attracted British attention to the north-east frontier of India. Added to this was the possibility of collecting raw products of hills through the frontier markets and introducing European finished goods among the hill tribes.

For smooth operation of capitalism, it was necessary to administratively systematise relations with the hill tribes. The fact that the tribes from the bordering regions of Assam created a serious problem of internal security through predatory raids called for effective measure. The immediate concern was to dislodge the hill tribes from the foothills as the land was required for settlement of cultivators and ryots. In case of Bhutan frequent disputes took place on the issue of tribute which the Bhutan Government paid for the possession of Assam duars. The Bhutanese raids in the duars disturbed peace in the frontier. While the British policy in Bhutan frontier culminated in the annexation of Assam duars in 1841, a different policy was pursued in case of Arunachali tribes where the tribes right to direct collection in the duars was replaced by cash payments. The money allowance given in lieu of the duars besides increasing the purchasing power of the hill tribes placed a powerful lever in the

hands of the British which could be "turned to good conduct". The treaties concluded with tribal chiefs inhabiting the region covered by present Arunachal Pradesh from time to time regulated hill-plains trade to establish market places in the foot-hills. Trade inside the hill areas conducted by the agencies operating from the plains, was also brought under the control of colonial rulers through the Inner Line Regulation of 1873. The regulation did not retard the trade but regulated it through a pass system under which commercial intercourse was controlled by the Colonial rulers with the help of the ruling chiefs.

In Eastern Himalaya, the organisation of economy was in response to internal demand. There was little demand for foreign goods. The task of capitalism was therefore to create such demands forcefully. From the very beginning a deliberate policy was pursued to popularise manufactured goods among the hill tribes. For that purpose in the annual trade-fairs, the Government officials used to present the hill chiefs goods like wine, broad-cloth, handkerchiefs, scissors, Porcelain wares etc. It is interesting to note that such Durbar was not a part of the fairs held ^{for} ~~in~~ Bhutias of Bhutan proper. Bhutan being a State, the mode of payment was different. Moreover, the East India Company's Government entered into commercial relations with Bhutan long before it did so with the tribes

of Arunachal. Through the fairs and market held in Bengal-Bhutan border, the policy of popularising manufactured goods was already in operation. The policy achieved its objective. For once the hill people became accustomed to use such articles they purchased these and other items from the markets.

The hills-plains trade passed through the twin channel of trade-fairs and agencies that worked inside and outside the Inner Line throughout the year. The periodical fairs held in submontane areas served as the arteries of hill economy. Through these fairs manufactured goods were pushed into the interior and inreturn raw materials were extracted from the hills.

With the passage of time the transaction at fairs fell far short of annual requirements. As the hill people became more and more dependent on imported goods, they became frequent visitors to the marketing centres in plains and shops that were opened by enterprising Marwari dealers beyond the Inner Line. Rubber plant grew wild and uncultivated in the hills of Arunachal and a lucrative trade developed in rubber. Trade also went on in timber and elephant. There was, however, no shops in the interior of Bhutan. The reason being in Bhutan, trade was controlled

by the rulers and they did not entertain the idea of permitting Marwari traders to open shops in the interiors of Bhutan. It was more profitable to deal directly with the Assamese villagers than the professional Marwari traders.

Though the hills-plains trade flourished under the active encouragement of the British the prospect of a flourishing commerce extending to Tibet, China and Burma was narrowed down due to the changing political circumstances. With the integration of Burma into the imperial empire the question of an alternative route to Burma lost its importance. The hostile attitude of the Chinese stood on the way of promotion of direct trade with Tibet and China through Eastern Himalaya. Although the British and Indian manufactures found an outlet into central Asia through Eastern Himalaya, the volume of trade was insignificant. However, in the process, capitalism discovered the worth of Eastern Himalaya itself as a source of raw material and the colonial scheme led to the growth of extensive hills-plains trade during the nineteenth century which left its imprint on the hill economies.

The colonial market structure destroyed the indigenous cottage industries and crafts of Eastern

Himalaya. This destruction of handloom and handicrafts was more profound in Arunachal Pradesh than Bhutan because commercial penetration was more forceful in the former region. The introduction of manufactured goods into the hills reduced the demand of local handloom and handicrafts. The hill people became more and more dependent on imported goods. The colonial market structure brought alien trends such as indebtedness and moneylending in the hills. While indigenous cottage industries were destroyed, capitalism could not install itself in the region. The area underwent a colonial subjection that was crude and simple providing no opportunity for the appearance of capitalist structure. There was only an expansion of colonial trading system. The whole development put accumulation pressure of metropolis without generating any corresponding growth in the production process. Since capitalism could not stimulate commodity production in the region trade declined by the end of the century.

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