

Chapter 19

LIBERALIZATION, ETHNIC IDENTITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT : A CASE STUDY OF KHASI AND JAINTIA HILLS

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The two oft quoted terms, globalization and liberalization, may not have much serious impact on North-East India as a whole and Meghalaya in particular until very recently. As far as Meghalaya's economy is concerned, the two terms have yet to strike their firm roots. This is due to the fact that industrialization, in the true sense of the term, cannot be said to have its impact on the state and its people. But then, when one analyzes the situation, the experiences, the ups and downs of the tribal economy and trade relations at the grass-root level of the trans-border people, we do find an impact of globalization, though at a different footing.

The necessities of life sometimes know no man-made political boundaries. Partition of the Indian sub-continent had taken place and political boundaries drawn; official movement of people across the border was not permitted. Trade and commerce was also stopped or if allowed, it has to be performed only on the basis of the official trade treaties signed between the two parties—any act beyond the official sanction may be treated as illegal. Against this background, many

perplexed issues and questions may emanate as to the condition of the trans-border people. This paper seeks to analyze the issues relating to the questions of liberalization, ethnic identity and economic development with special reference to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya.

The first part of the paper proposes to deal with the historical background of the close link and relationship between the people of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and that of the plains across the international border of the present nation of Bangladesh. The contact between the Khasi-Jaintia people and that of the plains of Sylhet can be said to have started many centuries back. Regular border trade or 'frontier traffic' was conducted through those *hats* on specific days in a week. During those market days, the population living on both sides of the international border are able to exchange and trade their various products.¹ This contact was easier during the pre-British days as there was no restriction of the movement of the people. Moreover, this earlier contact was possible because the Jaintia kingdom itself extended deep into the southern plains of Sylhet known as the 'Jaintia Parganas'. The Jaintia Rajas (Raja to his subjects in the plains, *Syiem* to his people in the hills) had their personal authority and control over their subjects in the plains. As such, maximum revenue of the kingdom was imposed and collected by the Jaintia *Syiems* from their subjects in the plains. This southern plain territory of the kingdom was annexed by the British in 1835 and the British Political Agent took over the administration of the hills also on the 15th March 1835. The same year, the British abolished the office of the Jaintia *Syiem* but retained the offices of the other traditional chiefs like the *Doloi*, *Pator* and village headman. Like the Jaintia kingdom, certain areas in the plains of Sylhet were also under the jurisdiction of some of the Khasi States.

The British colonial rule accelerated the process of extraneous domination through the markets that had emerged as the sensitive pressure points in tribal economy. The colonial restructuring of the socio-economic institutions in the hills of the area under study, was intended to serve the British interests by ensuring the regular flow of income. But the trade

relationship between the hills and plains had at times been adversely affected by the retaliatory challenges of both the Khasis and Jaintias who had been known by the British as troublesome marauders upon the plains of Sylhet where they were much dreaded. It was reported that because of these ravages, a line of forts was kept under the hills to check these incursions.²

Although occasional raids and skirmishes in the frontier took place between the fierce tribes from the Hills and the plainsmen, business transactions were however carried on when a peaceful atmosphere prevailed. With regard to the Jaintia kingdom, Jaintiapur was its capital in the plains. Jaintiapur also served as an entrepot between the hills and the plains which led to an extensive trade and commercial relationship. Pemberton was of the opinion that a considerable trade in cotton, iron ore, wax, ivory, *paan* (betel leaf) and clothes, was carried on between the plains and the hills... The articles specified were bartered for salt, tobacco, rice and goats.³ This account gives a clear picture of the trade and commercial dealings transacted between the inhabitants of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and that of the plains of Sylhet during the period as far back as 1834.

The Khasi-Jaintia economy depended much on the markets along the foothills. The increasing dependence on these markets in later years was particularly due to the absence of professional social groups of artisans and craftsmen which stood in the way of effective social formation. It was reported that in the hill districts there were considerable differences in extent in which the tribesmen engaged in trade. Further, in most of these tracts, frontier traffic was a necessary of life, the hills not producing sufficient food for the people to live upon; but in most also it took the simple form of barter, the exports consisting chiefly of cotton, wax, ivory and forest produce, and the imports of rice, salt, dried fish and clothes.⁴ But in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, there was a much more active commerce, and the trade in the commodities like limestone, iron ore, wax ivory and forest produce was kept by the people almost entirely in their own hands. Many of them were adventurous merchants, travelling as far as Dacca (Dhaka),

or even Calcutta during the cold season.⁵ In particular, the Jaintia traders were adventurous enough in extending their areas of trading as far as Calcutta, Udalguri and Bhutan.⁶

The presence of vast reserves of coal and limestone in Khasi and Jaintia Hills, encouraged the local people to engage themselves in exploiting these minerals even in the past, though it was done in a very primitive way and essentially for their domestic consumption and local supply. Even then, it is well known that individuals had embarked on mining and quarrying with the expectations of large profits, which in some instances at least have been realized.⁷ The British authorities right from the time of the East India Company had realized the abundant reserves of coal in the area and with their astute administration and farsightedness, soon embarked themselves on commercial exploitation of it. The coal mines of Khasi and Jaintia Hills were then leased out to Messers Inglis and Company, and others as well, out of which a huge amount of revenue was received annually by the East India Company.

Besides coal, limestone of excellent quality was also found in abundance both in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The need and demands of the people in the neighbouring area of the plains were therefore provided and immediately fed through the supply of limestone from the hills. The earlier records indicated that lower Bengal obtained nearly the whole of its lime supply from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The lime was known as 'Sylhet lime', and obtained by quarrying from the beds of stone which line the base of the mountains along the whole length of the Sylhet boundary. The supply was literally inexhaustible and the wants of Calcutta and of the whole of lower Bengal had been satisfied from these hills from time immemorial.

There were many other essential items produced by the Khasi and Jaintia people which found a great demand and ready markets in the southern plains. The border markets bordering Khasi-Jaintia Hills with that of Sylhet were actually fed by the produce of the hills. Essential items like oranges, betelnuts, betel-leaves and other horticultural crops found ready markets in Sylhet and other border *hats*.

The Khasi-Jaintia people are believed to be the first to have started trade and commerce with the people of the then East Bengal (now Bangladesh) especially that of Sylhet district in the pre-partition period. On the basis of the accounts relating to trade relations and commercial dealings between Sylhet and its highland neighbours, two important features are explicitly noticeable in which the Khasi-Jaintia people contributed to their neighbours in the southern plains; firstly, that they were 'the first from the hills to put their feet on the soils of Sylhet' and secondly, they were 'the first customers of all products' in the plains of that district. This, therefore, explained and confirmed the extent of trade relationship between the people of the two different areas. Moreover, trading between them was not a one sided affair but rather there was an equal exchange of goods and commodities from both sides. Thus, besides trade in coal, limestones and oranges, the natural outlet for the latter being the markets in the plains, there were hosts of things supplied to the plains which included big stones for embankments, *silbatas* (grinding stones), potatoes, fresh vegetables and fruits, the hot favourites of Sylhetees, the *satkoras*, *tezpata*, timber for boat making. In return, the people of Sylhet supplied coarse rice, dry fish, the hot favourite of every home in the hills, fish and a lot of other essential commodities. At one time, the markets of Sylhet were the base for almost all the consumer's goods that went to at least the southern side of Khasi and Jaintia Hills.⁸

During the British rule, the fast development of trade and commerce between the Khasi-Jaintia people and that of the plains of Sylhet was possible and encouraging because of the presence of different means of communication like bridle paths, the use of navigable rivers up to certain points and roads. Though some of these means of communications were in a crude form, they served a useful purpose in transportation of goods and materials to and fro the hills and plains. For example, the road which was declared open by Sir Michael Keane, then Governor of Assam, in 1933, linked Sylhet-Shillong-Gauhati. Since then, this road became the life-line of trade and commerce and a major important link between the hills and plains. Besides this, it also played an important role because of the fact that it connected all the major and

important administrative centres, both in the Surma and Brahmaputra valleys. Shillong, then the capital of the province of Assam, as well as the other hill areas were also linked up with both the northern and southern plains of the province. With the opening up of the above mentioned road, communication was easy and saved a lot of time and trouble of traveling between the hills and plains.

The transfer of power in 1947, and the change of administration thereafter, brought a heavy burden and an immense impact on the economic life of the people living in the border areas of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Their relation in trade and commerce with their counterparts in the plains was drastically disturbed and a severe setback in the exchange of goods and essential commodities took place. There was also a setback of marketing facilities soon after the partition of the country into India and Pakistan and later Bangladesh in 1971.

While trying to analyze the immense impact of the partition of 1947, one writer was of the opinion that the ultimate halt of the entire trade between the hills and the plains in Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Sylhet, was due to the shortsighted policy of the erstwhile government of Pakistan, the policy which was to starve the neighbouring area in India, their avowed enemies, of their normal and legitimate facilities.⁹

The after-effect of partition of 1947 brought untold miseries and hardships to the people living in the Border Areas of the two neighbouring countries who were actually the worst sufferers due to the sealing off and the closure of the border trade and commerce immediately after 1947. This led to a total dislocation of trade and commerce. At a particular period of time, an agreement was arrived at between the Government of India and Pakistan. According to this agreement, certain commodities were allowed for export to East Pakistan by the people of Meghalaya. The items agreed upon for export were candle, Indian ware, earthen ware, turmeric, vegetables of local produce, fruits of local produce, limestone, ginger, spices, hardwood, durgents, betel-leaves, pots, fuel, thatching grass, bamboos, stones, boulders and shingles.¹⁰ From the number of items included under the agreement for export, it looked very promising and encourag-

ing and could surely bring once again the lost grounds and contact. It looked as though the missing link will be brought back again to life and prosperity would come in the way of the people living in the border which had so long eluded them. But unfortunately, this arrangement was purely temporary and shortlived one. It did not bring any relief at all to the affected people of the area under study.

There was an air of expectation for things to improve better and specially in terms of increase in volume of trade and commerce between India and Bangladesh after the liberation of the latter in 1971. The people living in the border areas with Bangladesh expected that better relationship, at least in trade would prevail between the two countries and this would lead to the reopening of the border markets. There was no doubt an attempt between the two governments to officially channelise the trade between the bordering neighbours and exchange their normal necessities through official channels, but this too, as it happened before with the Pakistan government was short-lived and therefore once again belied the hopes and expectations of the people when the whole border was again sealed off and markets across the international border were closed down. The economic prospects of the people therefore came to a near standstill. The precarious condition of trade and the sinking of prices due to the closure of the border markets was noticeable all along the border belt. The volume of trade and output at that point of time, were at bottom level since the economy was oriented towards the Sylhet markets in the plains. An official dossier records that the prices of produce sank to an unbelievably low levels. Worse still, there was no one to lift the produce in the absence of an easy means of transport link and communication with the alternative markets in the rest of India. The people specializing in orchard cultivation were at a distinct disadvantage in learning or initiating any new techniques of cultivation of other crops. With the opening up of a few vital roads, alternative markets were found, but transporting the produce to the focal points posed a great problem. Many a time, unscrupulous businessmen took advantage of the situation. They bought the goods from the

local producers and paid them at a throw-away price since there is no other alternative left to them.

The reopening of a few border *hats* for a brief period between December 1970 and March 1971, seemed to suggest the fact that the people living on both sides of the international border shared the same suffering from the closure of the border and markets set up therein. In 1972, there was another agreement signed known as Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement, 1972. Article IV of the agreement reads as follows:

In order to meet the day to day requirements of the people living within a sixteen kilometre belt of border between West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram on the one hand and Bangladesh on the other and with a view to providing facilities to these people to dispose their goods, border trade shall be allowed in specified commodities in accordance with 'Schedule B' attached to the Agreement.

The salient features for the operation of the border trade were (i) entry of the individual trader was to be regulated by the issue of permit by the local authorities on both sides, (ii) only the specified items in given quantities could be exchanged or purchased, (iii) border trade would not be subject to the normal export, import and exchange regulations as well as custom formalities, and (iv) each trader could carry an amount not more than Rs/Taka 100 when crossing the border from either country into the other. Although border trade between the two countries started in middle of April 1972, in actual effect, it did not take off the ground because firstly it took considerable time to devise instructions for the issue of special permit, which was the principal instrument of control and then finalization of measures on routes, check posts, travel and custom documents and common inspection facilities. However, after a six-month period due to complain by the Bangladesh government of large-smuggling, accordingly border trade between the two countries was suspended with effect from 13.10.1972.¹¹ Position of the ground realities is however a different story altogether.

The above analysis of the economic situation that prevailed in Khasi and Jaintia Hills both during the pre and post

British period as well as India's independence, shows the interlink and mutual feeling of dependency of the people living on both sides of the international border on each other. Even after the official closure of the border markets, it is noteworthy to state that economic necessities know no border. The people from both sides of the international border on their own initiative still continue to have unofficial contact and trading.

Economic liberalization must take into consideration this kind of frustration and economic suffocation created by building up walls of separation. Against this background, perhaps the recent initiative taken by both the governments of India and Bangladesh to relieve this frustration is a welcome gesture. The official opening of the trade relations in the border areas of Meghalaya with that of Bangladesh has come at the right time. The recent official delegations from the North Eastern States having experienced the difficulties faced by their own people have done an appreciable act to liberate the people who had suffered economically for a pretty long time. The past experiences of opening up of border markets or trade relations for a short period only and then close them down must not be perpetuated. Past experiences call for a lasting economic liberalization.

The search by the Khasi and Jaintia people for better economic avenues and opportunities led them not only to have some kind of understanding with their counterparts across the international border, be it during the time of the Government of Pakistan or Bangladesh today, but this economic dependency urged or shall we say, even forced them to physically cross the border and look for greener areas of cultivation. Migration of the trans-border people is therefore a two way traffic. The official closure of the international border could not stop them.

There are few pertinent issues which may be raised here regarding the question of ethnic identity of those people who have voluntarily migrated to the then East Pakistan or Bangladesh of today. With the question of ethnic identity, such other issues like adjustment and adaptation of these people in a foreign land, their socio-economic condition and

activities, their relationship with their kith and kin in India, the problem of religion as well as their children's education and the whole issue of ethnic identity crisis in a foreign land with foreign culture and religious belief—all these issues need to be analyzed empirically.

Majority of the Khasi-Jaintia people who crossed over the international border to settle down in the then East Pakistan continued to remain there even after Bangladesh came into existence. Almost cent percent of them came from the border villages of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The people who inhabited the precipitous slopes of Khasi and Jaintia Hills are experts in betel-leaf, betel-nut and orange cultivation. The failure to grow and produce betel-leaf in the slopes and foothills of Khasi-Jaintia Hills due to certain plant diseases, forced these people to look for new cultivable lands. They found the forests and soil of the then East Pakistan and now Bangladesh as better alternatives. This led them to leave their hearths and homes in India in pursuit of their agricultural activities in a foreign land. Though a majority of these people are illiterate, they however did well in their economic activities. The soil and forests of Bangladesh provide them a better opportunity to continue their profession even if it is in a foreign land.

As far as the question of adjustment and adaptation in a foreign land, it does not pose much of a problem. It may be noted that even if these people come from a neighbouring foreign land, they are not much disturbed both politically and socially by the local government. The fact is that they try as far as possible not to get themselves involved with the politics of that country and concentrated only on their economic activities. Secondly, the local government received a good amount of revenue out of the betel-leaf, the production of which is done by the Khasi-Jaintia people. This is another reason why they are not much disturbed by the local authorities.

Though Bangladesh follows Islam as one of its religions, the Khasi-Jaintia people living in that country who are mainly Christians by faith, are not restricted or debarred to continue worship in their own religion. In some of the villages inhabited

by the Khasi and Jaintia people where the author visited, found that they have full freedom of worship in their own religious faith. On Sundays, it was found that all the village gates were closed and business transactions stopped; no interference from outside was allowed. In terms of the children's education there are some problems due to the absence of schools where their own vernacular is taught. This is of course compensated by sending their children to schools and even colleges taught either in Bengali or English medium. Few such students have studied even at the University level. This view is of course an impressionistic one, and it is therefore felt necessary to have a more empirical study on this very important aspect.

With regard to the relationship of those people who have crossed the international border to settle in a foreign land with their kith and kin on the other side of the border, the same way of their unofficial economic relationship may be applied. Some of them keep on coming and going or crossing the border in their own way or arrangement without disturbing the custom officials or border security forces. That way, their relationship with their kith and kin on both sides of the border poses not much of a problem.

Crisis of ethnic identity broadly speaking is sometimes unnecessarily created due to hatred of each other either politically or culturally. This hatred also emanated because of the fact that we keep in thinking that our neighbour's garden on the other side of the fence is always greener than that of our own. This may be termed loosely as an ethnic fad.

References

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