

# Trade and Markets in the Khasi Jaintia Hills

## Changed Conditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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“The development of the shop can be traced in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills from its very earliest beginnings.”

*B.C. Allen, Assam District Gazetteer, Vol. II*

It is fairly established that the Khasi-Jaintias were a society who were engaged in trade and commerce over centuries. They have the advantages of living in a land endowed with mineral resources which could be exploited; salubrious climate; varied vegetation and located in a geographical area which came to their advantage in trade. Trade was largely with the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys. It covered a wide range of exports produced in the hills including fruits and spices, pan, areca nut, limestone and iron.) The import of commodities the hill people did not produce was largely salt, rice and cloth. (Certain items of trade such as *muga* originated in the northern plains and was taken across the hill section of the plateau and sold in the southern plains.) We do not have reference to any organized markets in the hills in the pre-colonial period though there could have been some exchange of goods from one village to another or across the Bhoi, Khyntiam and War areas of the land.<sup>1</sup> An interesting feature of the village formation and settlement in the hills was

that villages were located largely in the Khyntiam region and the southern foothills. It may be assumed that apart from other reasons, the proximity of the villages to the trade centres to the south was a motivating factor for the location of the villages.

The two known trade routes from Assam and Sylhet through the hills passed by some of the large settlements such as Nartiang, Jowai and Jaintiapur on the Jaintia side and Nongkseh and Sohra on the route through the Khasi hills.)

The cross-plateau and frontier trade was largely in the hands of the hill people who jealously asserted their claims and control of the trade and markets. There are numerous references in Bengali and Ahom literature of the markets and trade conducted in the foothills of then Khasi-Jaintia Hills.) There are several descriptions of the Khasi markets and trade in early British accounts. Alexander Lish, a missionary of the English Baptist Mission of Serampore who resided in Cherrapunji (now Sohra), from 1832 to 1836, wrote a long account of the Khasis, in which he enquired how the people lived. He wrote:<sup>2</sup>

The Khasis have always been in the habit of bartering the spontaneous productions of the hills for those of the plains. Oranges, honey, iron, bee's wax, ivory, Indian rubber, these they give in exchange for rice, fish, salt, but more frequently for specie. Fruits and grains of different kinds, with potatoes grown in the interior and in the valleys are brought by the inhabitants to the principal markets in the hills and are also taken to the plains.

He continues his narrative:<sup>3</sup>

Considerable intercourse is likewise carried on by the Khasees with the Assamese, by whom they are supplied with cloths of different kinds, such as the moonga commonly worn by them and various coloured and flowered silks which are highly prized by the Khasees. Limestone which abounds in the hills is another course of profit for the Khasees. Lime is burnt to a considerable extent on the banks of the Soormah and brought down to Calcutta and Dacca. But their greatest profit has, till of late years, been derived from their iron works. The digging, washing and smelting of the ore, employ many besides the gains it brings to the masters of the

works. They manufacture their own swords, hatchets axes and &c. and fit their own arrows.

Lish makes a note of the Khasis exchanging their produce for specie which in all probability was gold if the jewelry of the Khasi women was any indication. However the volume of trade is not assessed as there are few references to this aspect of the trade. That the limestone trade had been in operation for perhaps a century is noted.<sup>4</sup> The iron trade from all accounts seems to suggest that this industry preceded limestone extraction and processing.<sup>5</sup> The variety of traded commodities would indicate the trade was not insignificant.<sup>6</sup>

Another reference of a market in the hills is to be found in the journal of William Griffiths. Griffiths was Superintendent of the East India Company's Botanic Gardens at Calcutta. He noted an entry in his diary of 1835 while on a botanic collection in the Khasi and Jaintia hills:<sup>7</sup>

November 12th-Nurteng (Nartiang) occupies a large place in these hills, perhaps next to Joowye (Jowai), ... The market, which took place today, is outside the village and close to our bungalow: it is well attended, but the amount of persons could not exceed 100 to 200, and those form a considerable amount of all the persons capable of bearing burdens from the neighbouring villages. The luxuries exhibited are all Khasyan (Khasi), consisting of stinking fish, some other things of dubious appearance and still more dubious odour, millet and the inferior grains, and the fashionable articles of Khasya clothing and the adjuncts to that abominable habit pawm chewing. There was plenty of noise, but still order prevailed: no other rupees than the *rajah's* were taken, and even pice were refused. Iron implements of husbandry of native manufacture were vended; in short all the various luxuries or necessities of a Khasya are obtainable.

The pattern of trade outlined in the references above, continued till the third decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By then British colonial interest in political control and with it some trade interest and economic control was becoming evident. British control of Sylhet after 1765 and Assam after 1826 meant that the Khasis had perforce to negotiate with the new political masters. The

Khasi-Jaintia *Syiems* soon realized that their control over the foothills and border markets had undergone change and though they were still in control of the markets located there; these no longer signified their independent control over the *hats* and the hinterland. Though border *hats* continued to trade by barter for sometime more, they had lost their position as indications of the extent of the geographical limits of the Khasi *himas*. Boundaries were demarcated first in 1790 and 1799 and plotted in maps beginning with Fisher's map of the independent Khasi estates 1829.<sup>8</sup> As British imperialism expanded and took firm control after the Khasi resistance to British rule 1829–1833, and the annexation of the Jaintia hills and *parganas* in 1835, boundaries were further defined. The new relationship affected in large part the pattern of trade, its volume and the nature of the markets.

Money economy was introduced but gradually in the hills after the British assumed political control over the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Barter trade however continued well into the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the exchange of those commodities which the European and Bengali traders were not engaged in — fruits, spices, iron to name a few. The use of money and money economy came in slowly in the hills. It had started with the use of cowries as a medium of exchange and tax in Sylhet in the early part of British rule in that district. By 1835 the Company's silver rupee had become the legal tender in British India<sup>9</sup>. The Company legal tender was also used in the "natives states" with whom the colonial state had indirect relations.

British colonial rule brought about significant change in the economy of the Khasi-Jaintias. The introduction of new vegetables and fruits by the British added a new dimension to the economy<sup>10</sup>. Hitherto agriculture had little relevance to the tribe. The cultivation of potatoes for instance first introduced in the hills by David Scott in 1831 dramatically changed the purpose of production largely for markets beyond the hills. The annual production was estimated in 1853 at 30,000 *maunds*.<sup>11</sup> Joseph Hooker the botanist mentioned that within twenty years of its introduction Calcutta was supplied potatoes from the Khasi hills.<sup>12</sup> W.J. Allen who made a report on the administration of the Khasi and Jaintia hills in 1858 mentioned an attempt of a Khasi trader to market potatoes in Calcutta.<sup>13</sup> The cultivation of the tuber was initially confined to the central portion of the hills.

The demand had grown so enormously in Calcutta that Allen noticed an increase in area in the cultivation of the crop in the Jaintia Hills and in the west towards Maharam *hima*. 50,00 *maunds* were reported to have been exported in 1858.<sup>14</sup> By 1876–1877 the production had increased to enable an export of 200,500 *maunds*.<sup>15</sup> Similarly the demand in Calcutta and Bengal for the hill oranges resulted in increased cultivation of the fruit. The trade in oranges was for some time almost entirely in the hands of Henry Inglis, the Assistant to the Political Agent of the Cherra Political Agency. He was able to secure leases on almost all the orange groves in the southern hills. Pineapple, *pan*, *tezpat* arecanut and some amount of cotton grown on the northern foothills continued to be exported.<sup>16</sup> Though varieties of rice were grown in the hills,<sup>17</sup> the grain was the largest of the imports from Sylhet.<sup>18</sup> As is evident from the account so far, the greater portion of the trade in the Khasi-Jaintia hills was carried on with Sylhet. Trade with Assam was comparatively insignificant being largely a barter trade.<sup>19</sup> Trade with Sylhet was about equally balanced.<sup>20</sup>

British intervention in the economic activity of these hill brought them substantial revenue and profits for individual traders. The colonial government first under the East India Company and later under the British Indian state derived revenue from the limestone trade. Little revenue appeared to have been collected before 1853, when the amount principally from rents of limestone quarries was Rs. 1047. By 1858 revenue collection increased to Rs. 23,023 as a result of more extensive working of the limestone quarries. By 1877–1878 rent from limestone quarries fetched the government revenue of Rs. 66,963.<sup>21</sup> Henry Inglis' Company also had a monopoly of the limestone trade through the 1840s and into the 1880s. Armenians and several Indian lessee holders were also involved in this trade.<sup>22</sup> As in the previous century the trade largely supplied Bengal with its requirement of lime. Coal was another mineral the British secured rights over. Coal was first discovered in and around Sohra in 1832. However, the vast deposits of coal could not be worked profitably as the expense of carriage prevented it being of much commercial importance. Coal was extracted and sold commercially from its locations in Sohra and Lakadong in the Jaintia Hills.<sup>23</sup>

If the working and capital investment in limestone and coal was largely European, the iron industry was entirely in the hands of the Khasis. We have made reference to this industry in an earlier volume of this series.<sup>24</sup> Here we may go into the details of the trade and marketing of iron in the period under review. The principal sites for the mining operations were Myllem, Nongkrem, Laitlyngkot, Nogundee and the region around Sohra. The open mines were worked during the monsoon to take advantage of the rains to unloosen the iron nodules. Water was also required for its collection in troughs. From these mining sites the iron was carried to the smelting furnaces which might not have been far. There are several descriptions of this smelting process and sketches of the furnaces.<sup>25</sup> The iron industry must have been large and spread over a number of villages. Joseph Hooker was moved to write that from the summit of the Kyllang Rock in the west Khasi hills "the tingling sound of hammers from the distant forges on all sides was singularly musical and pleasing; they fell on the ear like 'bells upon the wind', each ring being exquisitely melodious, and chiming harmoniously with the others."<sup>26</sup>

The pig iron in lumps were then carried to the markets in the southern foothills not very different than what Robert Linday, the Superintendent of Sylhet had described in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> At Pandua iron was sold in lumps called 'biri' at Re 1 and 5 *annas* per *maund*.<sup>28</sup> In Nongkrem iron was sold at Re 1 and 2 *annas* a score, about a dozen pieces went to the *maund*. At Pandua they were sold by weight at Re 1 and 4 *annas* a *maund*.<sup>29</sup> At Chattack iron could be purchased at Rs. 1 and 4 *annas* to Re 1 and 6 *annas* per *maund*. Better iron which was beaten into bars called 'peti' was sold for Re 1 and 10 *annas* to Re 1 and 12 *annas* per *maund*.<sup>30</sup> Over a period of fifty years 1829-1879, the cost of iron in Sylhet was relatively stable. The cost of carriage from the hills to the markets in the plains was about 6 *annas* per *maund*. The Khasi traders who had a control over this trade got on average profit of only 2 *annas* per *maund* sold.<sup>31</sup> It is estimated that in 1858 between 45,000 to 50,000 *maunds* of iron was exported valued at Rs. 67,000 and more.<sup>32</sup> In 1876-1877 Rs. 7000 worth of iron implements were exported from the hills against nails and ironmongery imported to the value of Rs. 18,000.<sup>33</sup>

Bengali blacksmiths of Sylhet preferred Khasi to other iron produced in the region because of its malleability. The iron brought down to Sylhet underwent a second fusion to remove impurities after which it was fashioned into agricultural implements and put to a number of uses including double hook-like nails for fastening planks for the ship and boat built in the district. Interestingly of the boats constructed, a variety called 'barki' were almost exclusively used to transport limestone from the base of the Khasi hills to the processing depots in the plains. The import of cheaper English iron into India and the region was the cause of the near collapse by the 1870s of the Khasi iron production and trade.<sup>34</sup> Remnants of this industry can be seen even today in and around Myllem. The blacksmiths continue to fashion implements and the like using technology and designs that go back several centuries.

The principal markets at the foot of the hills on the Sylhet side were Bholagunj, Chattack, Lakhat, Jaintiapur, Jafiong, Pharalbazar, Maodong, Ponatit, Molagul and Lengjut. The markets were held at regular intervals of eight days to enable the hillmen to visit the different *hats* in rotation. The *Syiems* of Sohra and Khyrim levied market dues at Lakhat and Bholagunj respectively.<sup>35</sup> Other *Syiems* with land towards sylhet also had control over the markets from which they derived *khrong*, a levy. The trade in these border *hats* was largely in the hands of the Khasi-Jaintias and a few Bengali traders. The latter called "box *wallahs*"<sup>36</sup> were amongst the first of the traders from the plains to set up shop in the hills after British colonial state had exerted its political control over the several Khasi *himas* and the Jaintia *Raj*. In all probability these were the traders John C. Thornton, a medical doctor makes mentions of while referring to the grain dealers, oil sellers and other petty trades' people who supplied the wants of the soldiers stationed in Sohra in 1860–1862.<sup>37</sup> The entrepot markets towards the northern foothills were located in Gobha, Rahar, Sonapur, Rani, Bardwar and Boko among others located at the *duars* opening into Kamrup and Nowgong districts of Assam.<sup>38</sup> Bengali and later Marwari were amongst the first of traders to set up shop in Shillong soon after its foundation in 1866. The growth of urban centres at Sohra, Shillong and Jowai and the requirement of the provincial and district administrations to staff the administrative and military

and police services further encouraged the economic activity of the Khasi, Jaintia, Bengali and Marwari traders to meet the requirements of the town people and supplying other material to the smaller *hats*.

Such a prospering economy could not have been possible without a more extensive network of road communication. There were eight principal roads in the district in the 1870s. The main road connected Shillong with Gauhati which was opened to wheeled traffic throughout its length in 1877. The road built by David Scott in 1828–1831 traversing the entire hills from south to the north continued to be in use to the Khasi *himas* of Sohra, Mawphlang, Langrin and Nongkhlaw which were required to meet part of the expenditure for its repair. Other roads led to Mawphlang, to Nongstoin towards the Garo hills, to Jowai and on to Jaintiapur in Sylhet and another from the subdivision headquarters to Nowgong. A road connected Shillong to Sohra.<sup>39</sup>

From small shops that were the beginnings, there grew a number of markets in the hills. B.C. Allen makes an observation in the official gazetteer.<sup>40</sup>

The development of the shop can be traced in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills from its very earliest beginnings. Along certain roads there is always a large traffic on market days, and an enterprising woman takes her seat with a basket full of goods at the roadside... . If her undertaking proves remunerative she builds a little shelter... . Yet none the less they form one end of the scale of trade whose higher notes are represented by Liberty or Harrod's stores.

By the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were eight principal markets in the Khasi hills and eight markets in the Jaintia Hills with markets held at different days in the War, the southern foothills, where it is by now apparent much of the trade and commerce was located. The Khasis had an eight day week because the markets were usually held every eighth day. The location of the markets gave the names of the days of the week. The Khasi markets were located at Lynkat at Barapani or Khawang; Nongkrem; Mawlong, a mart at Laban, Shillong; Ranghep held at different dates in one of three locations at Sohra, Mawtawar close to Shillong and Nongkhlaw; Shillong and simultaneously at Laitlyngkot; Pomtiah, a small market in

Mawkhar in Shillong; Umnih; and Iewduh the largest market in the hills located in Shillong.<sup>41</sup> The Jaintias held and named their markets after *hat* Jaintiapur; Khyllaw at Sutnga; Pynsing; Mawlong at Nartiang; Musiang at Jowai; Muchai at Shangpung; Pynkhatat Mynsoo and Thymblien.<sup>42</sup>

Trade had sustained the Khasi-Jaintias over time. The economic activity provided employment and profit. Traders of whom mention may be made of those from Mawsynram became known for their business acumen. However things were not progressing for the Khasi-Jaintias in general a point noted by David Roy, sometime Dewan of Myllem Syiemship in the 1940s. Referring to the economic activities of the Khasi-Jaintias just before independence he was concerned that trade was "only a primitive form of selling their produce and buying small necessities of life for sale in their villages. The merchandise is carried in the ancient way in baskets strapped across their foreheads." "How long is this form of trade to survive against the mass dispersal of mass production," he asked. Roy realized that the existing pattern of trade and commerce needed to be augmented by industries and the inflow of capital.<sup>43</sup>

It is of interest to note that though the political and administrative connections of the hills were increasingly connected with Assam by the turn of the century, the economic links were stronger with the Surma valley. The construction of the Shillong Gauhati road and beginnings of motor vehicles for passenger and goods in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to some extent increased the economic activity on this route.<sup>44</sup> The partition of the subcontinent and the tumultuous developments with the collapse of colonial rule further increased the dependence on this route for trade and commerce. Fortunately the facilities for communication were in place by 1947. Partition on the other hand severely affected the trade and *hats* in the southern hills. Overnight a new boundary and an international one at that was erected which almost closed the once flourishing trade. The fallout of this had its effects on the trade and commerce of the southern sector of the hills. Consequently over the past half century attention has increasingly been drawn to the markets higher up and towards Shillong and Jowai. The dislocation of the business that had been in operation for generation so affected the War people that large numbers have relocated their *pan* and arecanut

business and started other trades in the Bhoi area. What were once border markets in the days of Khasi-Jaintia control over the marts continue as border *hats* today. The changed situation however has not been of advantage to the people.

#### END NOTES

1. Bhoi — the northern; Khyntiam — the upland; War — the southern part of the Khasi-Jaintia hills.
2. Alexander Lish, "A brief account of the Khasees," *Calcutta Christian Observer*, 1838, p. 138.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See for instance the numerous references in Robert Lindsay, *Anecdotes of an Indian Life*, with an introduction by David R. Syiemlieh (Shillong, 1997).
5. David R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern* (New Delhi, 1989), pp. 8–9.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–102.
7. William Griffiths, *Journal of Travels in Assam, Burma, Bootan, Afghanistan and their Neighbouring Countries* (Calcutta, 1847), p. 169.
8. For a general description of the survey of Sylhet and the hills see, R.H. Phillimore (comp.), *Historical Records of the Survey of India, 1815–1830*, Vol. II (Dehra Dun), pp. 49–52.
9. Dharma Kumar (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. II c. 1757–c. 1970 (Delhi, 1984), pp. 768–769.
10. David Scott, Agent to the Governor General North East Frontier wrote to his friend Thomas Watson soon after the start of the Cherra sanatorium that he was taking up with him to Cherrapunji some plums and apricot trees. He makes mention of planting potatoes, turnips and beet roots. See David R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
11. A.J.M. Mills, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills 1853* (Shillong, [rep.]), pp. 3, 37–38.
12. Joseph D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. II, (New Delhi) p. 278.
13. W.J. Allen, *Report on the Cossyah and Jynteah Hill Territory*, Calcutta, 1858 (Shillong 1903[rep.]), p. 50.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
15. W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. II, reprinted (Delhi, 1972), p. 225.
16. W.J. Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–51.
17. W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, pp. 223–224, mentions thirteen varieties of rice cultivated in the hills.
18. A.J.M. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 4; W.J. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
19. W.J. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
20. W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
21. Annual Report of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in *Assam Annual Report 1877–1878*, p. 5.

22. For details of the limestone trade refer to Rita D. Dkhar, "The Inglis and Company and the Lime Trade in the Khasi Hills, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, North Eastern Hill University, 1987; also refer to J.B. Bhattachajee, *Trade and Colony, The British Colonisation of North East India* (Shillong, 2000).
23. David R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern*, *op. cit.*, pp. 52, 100-101.
24. D.R. Syiemlieh, "Technology and Socio-Economic Linkages of the Khasi-Jaintia in Pre-Colonial Times", in M. Momin and Cecile Mawlong (eds.), *Society and Economy in North East India, Vol. 1* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 21-34. A longer article of the subject was earlier published; see D.R. Syiemlieh, 'Khasi Iron Culture and Iron Trade with Sylhet in the Late Eighteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,' *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Eighth session, Kohima, pp. 242-250.
25. W. Cracroft, "Smelting of Iron in the Kasya Hills," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. I, 1832, pp. 150-151; a detailed study of the extraction of the ore, the labour involved and the wages paid to the workers is given in Lt. Yule, "Notes on the Iron of the Kasia Hills," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, No. 129, 1842, pp. 854-855. Earlier H. Walters wrote a short note on the Khasi iron industry in "Journey across the Pandua Hills near Sylhet in Bengal," *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. XVII, 1832, p. 505. Walters, Cracroft and Joseph Hooker in *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. II, reprinted, Today and Tomorrow's Printers and Publishers, New Delhi, pp. 306, have sketches of iron smelting furnaces in the Khasi hills.
26. Joseph Hooker, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-293.
27. Robert Lindsay, *Anecdotes of an Indian Life*, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.
28. Captain Jones, "Some Particulars regarding the mineral productions of Bengal," *Gleanings in Science*, Vol. I, 1829, p. 284.
29. Lt. Yule, *op. cit.*, p. 856.
30. W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
31. W.J. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
32. *Ibid.*
33. W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
36. J.C. Thornton makes mention of these traders in *Memories of Seven Campaigns* (Westminster, 1895), p. 108.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
38. Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi Peop* (Guwahati, 1985 [revised and enlarged edition]), p. 436.
39. W.W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.
40. B.C. Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.
41. P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis* (Delhi, 1996 [rep.]), p. 190.
42. *Ibid.*; Shobhan N. Lamare, *The Jaintias: Studies in Society and Change* (New Delhi, 2005), p. 136.
43. David Roy, *Whither the Khasi Hills?* (Shillong, 1947), pp. 3-4.
44. See Imdad Hussain, *op. cit.*, pp. 35, 38, 88-89 for a short account with photographs of the first motor vehicles on the Cherra, Shillong, Gauhati roads.