



ICSSR NERC

ENGAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

**India's Northeast
and Neighbouring
Countries**

Edited by

C. JOSHUA THOMAS

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Preface

With the paradigm shift from state-centricism to interdependence and global cooperation, the Indian state has been sensitized about the geo-economic potential of its Northeastern Region (NER) as its gateway to Southeast Asian countries. India's Look East Policy, introduced in the early nineties, is, therefore, aimed at gradual integration of the NER with the thriving market across the borders, and thereby, opening up to the emerging opportunities in the Southeast Asia. The NER, because of its geographic location cradled by five Asian countries – Nepal, Bhutan, Tibetan-China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, has natural geo-economic advantages to become the economic bridgehead of South East Asia. The implications of India's relations with her north and northeastern neighbours for NER are far deeper than any other regions of the country. Hence, the prospect of development of NER lies in the strong, stable and mutually beneficial relationship between India and her north and northeastern neighbours.

Keeping this background in focus ICSSR North Eastern Regional Centre invited diplomats, journalists, academics, administrators, research scholars and social activists to a *National Seminar on Partnership for Development: Holistic Approach to Northeast* to deliberate upon the essence of bilateral relations between India and her northern and northeastern neighbours. The Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi sponsored and funded the two-day seminar that was held at Gangtok, Sikkim on 8 and 9 May 2002. This volume is the outcome of that Seminar. We profusely apologize for bringing out this volume so late due to some unforeseen and unavoidable reasons. However, the message of the seminar is as relevant today as it was four years ago. The views expressed in the papers presented and

in the discussions that followed have been put together in this volume under the rubric: *Engagement and Development - India's Northeast and Neighbouring Countries*.

There are a number of officials, scholars and friends who have directly and indirectly helped in organizing this seminar and also bringing out this volume. We would like to put on record our deep appreciation for all their help, assistance and encouragements. But some of them deserve to be mentioned here.

We are grateful to ICSSR, New Delhi for extending financial support to this Seminar and we appreciate much Professor Andre Beteille, Chairman, Professor T.C.A. Anand, Member-Secretary and Dr. Vinod K. Mehta, Director of the ICSSR, for giving us the privilege to edit this volume and bring out in this present book form and without their timely intervention and encouragement this book would not have seen its light.

Special thanks to Professor Mrinal Miri, former Vice-Chancellor, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) and Chairman, ICSSR-NERC, Shillong for his key note address in the seminar and also for his encouragement. Professor David Reid Syiemlieh, Department of History, NEHU and former Honorary Director, ICSSR-NERC deserve our thanks for helping in many ways in the organization of the seminar. Professor P. Tandon, Vice-Chancellor, NEHU and Chairman, ICSSR-NERC for his constant attention to the activities of the NERC.

A word of appreciation to all the paper presenters for accepting our invitation to prepare their research paper and also personally making it a point to present their papers in the seminar at Gangtok and they are: Ambassador C.V. Ranganathan, Mr. B.G. Verghese, Dr. P.D. Shenoy, Dr. Walter Fernandes, Professor Sujata Miri, Mr. Sanjay Hazarika, Mr. Subir Bhaumik, Dr. Gurudas Das, Professor Sajal Nag, Dr. Partha S. Ghosh, Professor A.C. Sinha, Dr. Samir Kumar Das, Professor R. Gopalakrishnan, Dr. Konsam Ibo Singh, Dr. Udai Bhanu Singh, Professor L.S. Gassah, Professor Bimal Pramanik and others. We are also grateful to Dr. V. Bhattacharjee of Gangtok and Dr. Sujata Dutta Hazarika of

Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati for their assistance in the seminar.

Mr. Sanat Chakrabarty, Editor, *Grassroots Options*, Shillong deserve special thanks for sparing his valuable time to do the copy-editing for this volume.

We are fortunate to have a small team of talented young supporting staff in the Centre and their ungrudging help and cooperation, which made the entire work both during the seminar and also during the editing process much easier to accomplish. Their unassuming services deserve to be recorded here: Ms. Christine Blah, Ms. Narisha Kharbuli, Ms. Cerilla Khonglah, Mr. Romauldo Pasi, Mr. T. Aier, Mr. Rupert Momin and late Mrs. Jean M Blah.

Dr. Gurudas Das, formerly, Reader, Department of Economics, NEHU and currently Head, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Silchar, who literally shouldered most of the preparatory works of the seminar deserves a big thank. Mr. M.P. Misra, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, has been a friend of NERC's publications and we are grateful to him.

Last but not the least both Kalai and Lind deserve special thanks for their love and understanding.

July 2006

C. JOSHUA THOMAS

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	v
<i>Contributors</i>	xiii
<i>Introduction: C Joshua Thomas</i>	xv

SECTION I NORTHEASTERN REGION AND THE REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

1. Security, Engagement and Development:
Development Interest of India's Northeast
and the Art of Conduct of India's Relations with
Neighbouring Countries 3
—*Gurudas Das*
2. Unfinished Business in Northeast 26
—*B.G. Verghese*
3. The Paradox of Development 38
—*Sujata Miri*
4. Shortages, Ethnic Conflicts and Economic
Development in Northeastern India 45
—*Walter Fernandes*

SECTION II INDO-CHINA AND BHUTAN RELATIONS - IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTHEASTERN REGION

5. India's China Policy: Implications for the Security
and Development of the Northeastern Region 75
—*C.V. Ranganathan*
6. Ethnic Engagement in Bhutan and Its Regional
Consequences 86
—*A.C. Sinha*

7. Bhutan and India: Partners in Progress 100
—*P.S. Ghosh*

SECTION III

INDO-BANGLADESH RELATIONS - IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTHEASTERN REGION

8. Bangladesh and the Northeast: Facing Migration, Ending Rhetoric, Embracing a Realistic Strategy for Change 113
—*Sanjoy Hazarika*
9. Ethnicity and Security in Assam: A Plea for Greater Indo-Bangladesh Partnership 134
—*Samir Kumar Das*
10. Partnership in Indo-Bangladesh Economic Development: The Case of Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya 164
—*L.S. Gassah*
11. Indo-Bangladesh Relations and its Implication for Northeast India 189
—*A.N.S. Ahmed*
12. Plight of Minorities in Bangladesh with Special Reference to their Exodus to Northeast India and Related Issues 194
—*Bimal Pramanik*

SECTION IV

INDO-MYANMAR RELATIONS - IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTHEASTERN REGION

13. Burma Policy and Its Impact on India's Northeastern Region 217
—*Subir Bhaumik*
14. Indo-Myanmar Relations Since 1988: Its Implications on India's Northeast 236
—*K. Ibo Singh*
15. Geo-Economic and Geo-Strategic Importance of Myanmar in India's 'Look East Policy' 249
—*Udai Bhanu Singh*

SECTION V
LOOK-EAST POLICY, SECURITY ASPECTS -
IMPLICATIONS FOR NORTHEASTERN REGION

16. Importance of Northeastern Region in India's
Look East Policy 287
—*P.D. Shenoy*
17. India's Eastern Neighbours and Insurgency,
Small and Heavy Arms Proliferation and
Narcotics in Northeast India 308
—*Sajal Nag*
18. Some Geo-Political Aspects Concerning
Internal Security in Northeastern India 334
—*R. Gopalakrishnan*
- Index* 343

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Partnership in Indo-Bangladesh Economic Development: The Case of Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya

—L.S. GASSAH

The Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya was inaugurated on 22 February, 1972. On 16 November, 1869 A. Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal issued a notification to the effect of declaring the whole of Jaintia Hills as a Subdivision, then known as the Jowai subdivision, with its headquarters at Jowai. The subdivision then included under its jurisdiction the whole of the Jaintia Hills and it continued to be so even after India's independence till 1971. Before the new district for Jaintia Hills came into being, a separate District Council under the provision of the Sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India was created for Jaintia Hills on December 1, 1964 but became operative only from 1 February, 1966 after its bifurcation from the then United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council.

The district, which lies to the eastern part of the State of Meghalaya, covers a land area of approximately 3900 square kilometres. The northern part of the district is a highland area covered almost from one end to another with rolling hillocks, small bushes in between and towards the easternmost

and southern parts are covered with thick forests. The southern portion has a highly irregular feature. As it recedes further towards the south and moves closer to the border of Bangladesh, the sudden drops and depressions become more prominent till they abruptly end in sheer precipices. It is in these precipitous slopes that a large number of different horticultural crops are grown - the most prominent ones are oranges, betel nuts, betel-leaves, and fruits of different varieties.

The estimated population of Jaintia Hills is about 3 lakhs, according to the figures of the year 2000. The district is predominantly inhabited by the Jaintias who belong to the Scheduled Tribe category. "JAINTIA" is a generic term, which covers the Pnars or Syntengs and other sub-groups such as, the Mikirs (Karbis), the Biates, the Bhois and the Wars.

The Jaintias are among those tribes who lived under the traditional formations of the hills until the area was integrated into the British Indian colonial State, although their economy had already been linked with the markets in the bordering plains of the Sylhet district (now in Bangladesh). The Jaintias living in the hills portion of the old Jaintia kingdom practised slash and burn method of shifting cultivation, although this practice cannot be said to be so prominent as compared to other hill tribes of Northeast India. The agricultural economy of the Jaintias is far more advanced. They were terraced-builders even before the coming of the British. They had also used small irrigation canals for bringing water to their fields and had more lands under wet-rice cultivation. Unlike other hill tribes in Northeast India, the Jaintias had been using the plough drawn by bullocks long before the British came to their hills.¹ A.J.M. Mills also confirmed that cultivation had greatly extended in the hills portion of the Jaintia Hills and chiefly confined to the villages where rice was grown. Ploughs were used in some places.² Another source stated that paddy had long been found in the low lands in parts of Jaintia and Bhoi, the only places where the plough was found.³ This suggests the knowledge of the use of plough by the Jaintias at a much earlier period and the influence of its use by their neighbours in the plains, especially that of the Sylhet plains.

The Jaintia kingdom was one of the oldest kingdoms in Northeast India. It was ruled by many *Syiem*s (kings) or *Rajas* till 1835 A.D. The kingdom extended over both the hills and plain areas. In 1835, the British annexed the southern plain territory of the kingdom, known as 'Jaintia parganas'. The Jaintia *Syiem* having declined at the time of the annexation of his territories in the plains to retain the hills portion, knowing fully well his power and status over these areas, they lapsed to the British East India Company's government and were placed under the administration of the Political Agent at Cherrapunji. The British Political Agent took over the administration of the hill areas on March 15 in 1835. In 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. These traditional chiefs were allowed to continue functioning during the British rule and they continue till today aiding and assisting the District Council in running the district and village administration pertaining to the welfare of the people.

When the British first took possession of the Jaintia Hills (hills portion), no change was made in the indigenous revenue system, which consisted simply of the payment of a he-goat once a year from each *Elaka* (administrative unit) of a *Doloi*; the *Syiem* or *Raja* deriving the greater portion of his income from the plains. The country remained un-taxed by the British until the year 1860, when a house tax was imposed, whereupon the Jaintias broke into rebellion. The rebellion was put down after stiff resistance. In 1862, the Jaintias again rebelled, this time owing to the imposition of the income tax, and later the stamp tax. The outbreak was not completely put down till 1863.

The British 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 not only from the Jaintia Hills but also from the neighbouring areas, especially that of the Khasi and the Garo Hills. But the trade

relationship between the hills and plains had at times been adversely affected by the retaliatory challenges of the Jaintias to the British imperialism. The British thought of the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills as troublesome marauders upon the plains of Sylhet, where they were much dreaded. It was reported that their ravages between 1780 and 1790 were specially mentioned as severe. A line of forts was kept under the hills to check these incursions.⁴ However, in spite of those frontier troubles between the people of the hills and the plains, the British period stands out as the most crucial phase in the socio-economic transition of the Jaintia society, and the development in the post-independent era could not be in exclusion of the colonial hangover as change and continuity co-exist as a historical process.⁵

The 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 to which the tribesmen engaged in trade. In most cases the people used 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 cloths.⁶ 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, traveling as far as Dacca, or even Calcutta, during the cold season.⁷ In particular, the Jaintia traders were very adventurous in extending their areas of trading as far as Calcutta, Udalgiri and Bhutan.⁸

Jaintia Hills is endowed with rich mineral resources. Their presence had a tremendous effect on the changing economic pattern of the society both in the past and at present. But the exploitation and economic utilization of these minerals have been very slow. In many cases, the people have only recently started exploiting and making use of the minerals available, especially that of coal, into commercial enterprise.

As early as 1879, it was reported that coal has been discovered in Jaintia Hills in Amwi, Lakadong, Narpuh, Sutnga and Shyrmang areas. Among these, Lakadong has the most extensive coal beds. The coal fields of Jaintia Hills were computed at that time to expand over 0.394 of a square mile, and the estimated yield of the mineral was about 1,100,000 tons. The coal at Cherrapunji (in Khasi Hills) and Lakadong (Jaintia Hills) is in quality equal to some English coals; as a gas-producing coal it is considered superior to English produce, both as regards to quality and purity of the gas.⁹ Another Survey report by La Touche, estimated that the Lakadong coalfield would have contained some 1,164,000 tones of coal.¹⁰ These vast coal reserves are found both in the cretaceous and nummulitic formations. The Census of India in 1961 reports that in the Jaintia Hills the largest deposits of nummulitic coal are found at Lakadong and Narpuh and cretaceous coal is found at Wapung or Bapung.

The presence of these vast coal reserves in Jaintia Hills, encouraged the local people themselves in exploiting this mineral even in the past, though it was done in a very primitive way and essentially for their domestic consumption and local supply. For example, the town of Jowai got its supply of coal from the small bed at Jarain, a village about 30 kilometers away to the south. The method employed by the people to mine the coal is said to be rather wasteful. The local people themselves mostly did the mining, and many of them were doing it on a cottage industry basis. Scientific mining machineries have not yet been used to exploit the coal.¹¹ Even then, it is well known that individuals have embarked on mining and quarrying with the expectations of large profits, which in some instances at least have been realized.¹² The British authorities right from the time of East India Company had realized the abundant reserves of coal in the area and with their farsightedness, soon embarked themselves on commercial exploitation of it. The coalmines of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were then leased out to Messrs Inglis & Company and others as well, out of which a huge amount of revenue was received annually by the British Government.

Besides coal, limestone of excellent quality is also found in abundance both in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The needs and demands of the people in the neighbouring 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 is known as 'Sylhet Lime', and obtained by quarrying from the beds of stone, which line the base of the mountain 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 were met from these Hills for a long period in the past. In the Jaintia Hills, limestone quarries were located in Chunchhora, Lama-pushi, Lithang, Myrli-punji, Nongtalang, Rupnath and Rowai,¹³ and other deposits were also found to be more extensive at Iakadong, Syndai, Sutnga, Nongkhlieh and near Hari Prang and Lubha.¹⁴ The Jaintias used to work and exploit these lime stones, and also engaged themselves in the trade of this mineral. They therefore practically had the monopoly over the entire supply chain to Bengal. The demand for this mineral was so great from lower Bengal that trade in limestone brought more employment and wealth to the people until the coming of the British. When the British came, they took over the limestone quarries by declaring all of them to be under the exclusive right of the Government and leased them out to their own people. The trade in limestone was placed chiefly in the hands of Messrs. Inglis & Company whose depot was at Chatak on the banks of the Surma river.¹⁵

In the southern slopes of Jaintia Hills, the War Jaintias are mostly engaged in their economic activities in the cultivation and production of oranges, betel leaf, and betel nut. The plantations begin from the plains and foothills bordering the Sylhet district of Bangladesh and rise to an elevation of about 1500 feet above the sea level. It is upon this small precipitous area of both Khasi and Jaintia Hills that the greater part of Bangladesh and Assam depend for their supply of oranges. The British officials reported that before and after they took over the administration of Jaintia Hills, oranges formed one of the prominent goods exported

by the Khasi and the Jaintia people to the people of the plains of Assam and Sylhet. The British Government received annually handsome revenue also from the export of oranges to Sylhet and Assam side. For example, Hunter estimated that in the year 1874-75, the export in oranges alone was worth of Rs. 78,750.¹⁶

Besides mining and quarrying of coal and limestone and the production of oranges, betel nut, betel leaf and other fruits, the Jaintia people also grew cotton to a limited extent. The Jaintia cotton is of a small round-boiled variety and is said to be the best cotton in the then province of Assam. Cotton was mostly grown on forest clearings or *jhums*, except in the few places where it was mostly grown in the plains.¹⁷ The Jaintias having their own local production of cotton, got themselves engaged in the spinning and dyeing of cotton thread and weaving, especially that of eri silk. Cotton spinning and dyeing can be found at Khyrwang and Nongtung villages, Biate villages, Mynso and Sutnga; eri-worms rearing and silk industry at Khyrwang and Nongtung villages and now at Um-mulong and Moodymmai. In the past and even today (though in a very limited way) the people weaved their own cloths and shawls. This trade, however, did not develop into a commercial enterprise.

Lac and the income derived there from its sale added something to the economy of the people in the northern side of Jaintia Hills. In 1906, the Sub-Divisional Officer, Jaintia Hills, during his tour of the Subdivision was able to make experiments in the growing of cotton and rearing of lac in the Raliang *Elaka*. In a few other *Elakas*, cotton and lac were already grown. The same year (1906) it was reported that there were villages where the inhabitants made very fair profits by growing cotton and rearing lac. These villages were situated in the Bhoi, Mynriang, Langsoh and Nongphyllut circles. A little cotton and lac were also grown in the Nartiang and Raliang *Elakas*, in places occupied by the Mikirs (Karbis)¹⁷. In the Mynriang Sirdarship, the people cultivated both cotton and lac in addition to their *jhums*. They realized considerable profits from the sales of cotton and lac. The price of these two articles was sufficient to indicate that the people

earned a good sum.¹⁸ The villages where cotton and lac were grown, situated in the north of the then Jowai Subdivision. Other industries which the Jaintia people were and still engaging themselves can be found in the smelting of iron ore for manufacturing of ploughshares, hoes, bill-hooks, etc. These are located at Tuber and Biata villages. Apiculture is also predominant in the War villages and pottery industry at Larnai village, where earthen pots were made without the potter's wheel, as is known among the Konyak Nagas. Nowadays, the people have also engaged themselves in horticulture, pisciculture, poultry and farming. The Jaintias are also good stock breeders. They used to rear cattle, driving them either to the Sylhet plains or to the Khasi Hills, and presently to the Mikir (Karbi Anglong) and North Cachar Hills.¹⁹

Some of the economic activities mentioned above are to be found exclusively prevailing in the northern and northeastern parts of the Jaintia Hills district. The southern part or the War area of the district presents quite a distinctive feature as far as the economic activities of the people are concerned. The people in the War area engaged themselves in agricultural activities and subsist on cultivation of horticultural and cash crops for their livelihood. The cultivable lands in the area are mainly used for the cultivation of cash crops and various kinds of horticultural and plantation crops such as - orange, betel nut and betel leaf, pineapple, banana, jackfruit, black pepper, bay-lea or tezpata, etc. Of these, orange, betel nut and betel leaf are the most important crops grown in large quantity. Rice, though it is the staple food of the people, holds a less exclusive place among the crops cultivated. The reason is due to the non-availability of suitable land for such cultivation as the land is quite rocky and stony in character. But wherever arable lands are available, especially in the foothills along the international boundary with Bangladesh, these are made for wet-rice or rain-fed paddy cultivation. In the War uplands, plots are so small that their produce is very less and not even enough for household consumption. Small irrigation is also practiced to maintain constant water supply to the fields. But unfortunately as those rice fields are mainly situated along the international

boundary, troubles always flared up with the people from across the border especially during harvest season. Sometimes, the same thing happened during plucking season of oranges, betel nut and betel leaf.²⁰

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. It was thus remarked that from the time Sylhet emerged out of the blue water of what is now known as the Bay of Bengal, the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills must have been the first to put their feet on it and as things started to grow there, they must have been the first customers of all products of the vast plains of Sylhet. With this background of necessities, trade grew up between the hills and the plains and continues till the modern times.²¹

On the basis of the account of trade relations and commercial dealings between Sylhet and its highland neighbours, two important features were explicitly noticeable in which the Khasi and the Jaintia people contributed to their neighbours living in the southern plains. One is 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 the produces' in the plains of that district. This, therefore, explained and confirmed the extent of trade and the intimate 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, limestone and oranges, the natural outlet for the latter being in the plains, there were hosts of things that went to the plains which included big stones (one man drop, for embankments and such other works), *Silbatas* (grinding stones), potatoes, fresh vegetables and fruits, the hot favourites of Sylhetees, the *Sathoras*, *tezpatas*, timber fuel, *Jarul* timber for boat making and coal. As against these, the Sylhet people produced coarse rice, dry-fish, the hot favourite in every home in the hills. Fish and a lot of other things and 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 the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills.²²

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. Jaintiapur, besides being the capital of the old Jaintia kingdom, 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, and Jaintiapur, the capital, was the great entrepot in which all commercial dealings were transacted between the inhabitants of the plains and the hills. The articles specified were bartered for salt, tobacco, rice and goats, but the intercourse was much obstructed by injudicious monopolies and heavy transit duties.²³ This led to a serious interruption of trade and commerce for quite sometime. This account gives a clear picture of the trade and commercial dealings transacted between the inhabitants of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the plainsmen of Sylhet during the period as far back as 1834.

The chiefs of the hills and their people attached great importance to the establishment of markets as these would surely help them in the exchange of articles. While the markets in the hills were important to the economy of the people in trading of goods among themselves, they also showed a keen interests in the establishment of markets at the foothills and the plains. This would add more avenues for the people from the hills as there were always great demands of their produce from the people of the plains. Bareh mentioned that according to the local tradition, one *Myntri* or Minister, U Iuma Laskor, opened four markets in the hills and five in the plains. Markets in the hills were at Nartiang, Raliang, Sutnga and Shagpung. Those in the plains were at Borkhat, Kulakhat, Iaplem, Mulakor and Jaintiapur. These small market centers exist even now.²⁴ Of the five markets in the plains, the last three were frequently visited by the War Jaintias in the pre-independence period. Iaplem and Mulakor are also locally called as Ju-plem and Danakor respectively and these are the nearest market centers along the international border with Bangladesh. Till today, the War Jaintia people especially those

inhabiting the villages within the Bangladesh territory go to these markets to sell their goods. The articles they bring to these markets for selling are mostly betel leaf, betel nut and oranges; they bring back from these markets other essential commodities like fish, dry fish, eggs, etc. for sale in the border markets (Indian side) especially at Dawki and Muktapur.

The fast development of trade and commerce between the Jaintia people and that of the inhabitants in the plains of Sylhet was possible and encouraging because of the presence of different means and types of communications like bridle paths, navigable rivers up to certain points, and during the British period, they also built roads to connect certain points between the hills and the plains. Though some of these means of communications were in crude form, they served useful purpose in transportation of essential goods and materials to and fro the hills and plains.²⁵

As far as bridle path is concerned, an important one was that which connected Jowai, a prominent administrative and market center in the hills, with Jaintiapur in the plains of Sylhet; its length is 30.25 miles. Besides the bridle paths, there were all over the country the Khasi paths, which were generally passable by a mountain man.²⁶ S.M. Ali also mentioned of the presence of a foot track from Amchoi (in Kholahat) in Nowgong district leading to Jaintiapur. It goes southward through Bar Amni, Bar Rangkhroi, Umpanai, Nartiang, Jowai, Jarain and Muktapur up to Jaintiapur. J.H. Hutton travelled along this track during his visit to Jaintiapur in 1925.²⁷ Along these bridle paths, the people from the hills walked a long distance carrying their goods on head loads. This is the traditional way of how the hills people transported their produce from one place or market to another.

In the Jaintia Hills, three rivers, Hari or Myntdu, Piyain or Myngngot and Lubha, being navigable, served as important means of communication between the hills and the plains. Goods were transported by means of boats and canoes. Against this background, it may be noted that though the rivers of Jaintia Hills are not very largely used for the purpose of navigation, canoes penetrate for a short distance into the hills from the district of Sylhet. Hari or Myntdu is navigable

for canoes carrying from 25 to 30 maunds as far as Borghat; the Lubha is navigable for canoes as far as Lahalein, but is dangerous when the river is swollen in the rains.²⁸

Colonial Transformation

Jaintia Hills came under the direct British administration with effect from 15 March, 1835. Before that, the British had come in possession of Sylhet in East Bengal as well as Assam. They left the Jaintias for sometime undisturbed and carried on trade and exports and imports with the hills people which they amassed immense profits. In fact, the British first came into contact with the people of Khasi-Jaintia Hills since 1765 when the East India Company obtained the *Diwani* of the Province of Bengal. The British after their occupation of the Sylhet plains came directly in contact with the Khasis and the Jaintias on the southern frontiers with Sylhet in the later half of the 18th century. Thus the first westerners whom the Khasis and the Jaintias met on their borderlands were the merchants of the East India Company. The contact between them became more frequent, as the interest of the Company gradually increased and expanded in the district of Sylhet, which had a hundred mile of common frontier with the territories of the independent chiefs of the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills.²⁹ Another earlier contact between the Jaintias and the British took place when the former were attacked by a force under Captain Ellerker in 1774. This was supposed to have been done in retaliation for the aggression by the Jaintia Raja, Chatra Singh, on the inhabitants of the adjacent plains of Sylhet. Such action rendered chastisement necessary on the part of the British to protect the security of their territories and subjects in the plains.³⁰

In 1824, a treaty was signed between the British and the Jaintia Raja, Ram Singh II assuring him of his independence and help against the foreign invasion particularly the Burmese. Some trade relations were also stipulated in the treaty. As a result of this treaty, the Jaintia king allowed the British to build a road-link connecting Nowgong with Jaintiapur, the capital, to facilitate communication between the British areas of Assam and Sylhet.³¹

Ram Singh II reigned from 1789 to 1832 and initially had a peaceful relationship with the friendly British until his death. However, after his death, the incident of 1832 in which three British subjects were alleged to have been sacrificed by the Raja of Gobha, a dependent chief of the Jaintias, led to an unfriendly relationship between the British and the Jaintias which ultimately culminated into the incorporation of the Jaintia Hills under the direct British rule in 1835 by treating it as a 'British Area'. In doing so, the British intention was to administratively hasten their control over the area and promote their commercial interest which was in fact one of the primary purposes of the British in India in general and the hill tribes of Northeast India in particular. The Jaintia Hills was not an exception. The British brought it under its direct administration to control the local economy. That the British were concerned about the security of the territories and their subjects in the plains was only to ensure the increased flow of revenue from the hills. They also gradually realized that the Jaintia Hills could be used as raw material producing area and as market for the British goods.

The British interests in Jaintia Hills in particular can be broadly divided into two main categories - Political and Economic. On the economic plane, the British were interested in the exploitation of the rich natural and mineral resources. The presence of rich coal and limestone deposits in Jaintia Hills immediately drew the attention of the British. Besides these, the abundance of iron ore of the best quality and superior quality wood of various kinds adaptable to ship building, and cash crops like cotton, lac and oranges, all this prompted the British to find a way out for their immediate exploitation. And this they did which became the major source of revenue coming from the hills. The British merchants and traders also manipulated trade and commerce. The British were also trying to raise their sources of revenue by imposing different kinds of taxes on the Jaintias. This led to three bloody wars between the British and the Jaintias. Much before these incidents took place and during their initial period of administration over Jaintia Hills, the British even went to the extent of asking the *Dolois* to continue the payment of he-goats every year to the British authorities. Prior to the

coming of the British, the *Dolois* from the hills presented annually one he-goat from each of their *Elakas* to the Jaintia kings. These he-goats were actually used by the kings as sacrificial animals during their religious ceremonies performed at Rajbari in Jaintiapur. To the British these animals became a source of revenue as they were auctioned every year. A considerable amount of revenue was realized by the sale of the tribute goats. Besides this, the British undertook various measures to raise their revenue from the house tax, income tax, and stamp tax, the rent on land leased by the Collector of Sylhet, the rent on coal mines, limestone quarries; fines imposed for offences and duties on *hats* in the form of rents and toll tax. Revenue from forests and forest products was also collected by way of leasing the right of tapping the trees.

The British rule had superseded the traditional political isolation of the Jaintia Hills and integrated the area in their colonial empire primarily for the purpose of economic exploitation. In turn, they had reconstructed the socio-economic system of the traditional economy, mainly based on a primitive type of agriculture, into a modern economy. This produced a multi-structural economy, which continued till India's Independence.

In the process of colonial transformation of the country, the Jaintia Hills, like its other neighbours, was also affected. After all, the hills were either annexed or incorporated in the British *raj* not primarily for the hills but for protection of the more yielding plains that were at times ravaged by the predatory tribal raids.³² In the case of Jaintia Hills, the raids over the plains were too frequent to make the British authorities unattended as such raids are bound to create insecurity to the British subjects and territories in the plains. This, however, did not change the basic policy of the British to make the hill tribals pay for the administration.

Moreover, in the hills, the British could, as they did, exploit the natural resources, extract the raw materials and market their imported goods.³³ This British policy had vitally affected the Jaintia economy and whatever natural resources available in the area had gone into the hands of the British authorities. For example, since the entire Jaintia Hills was declared as

'British Area', the Government of the day, claimed unto itself as the sole proprietor of all the limestone quarries in the area.

The British impact on the economy and the material condition of the Jaintia people was, however, a mixed one. The loss of the most fertile plain territories, known as the 'Jaintia parganas', had dealt a severe blow on the economic life of the Jaintias. They were left with only the larger area of the hilly tracts with the exception of few flat lands for wet rice or rain-fed paddy cultivation. These lands are however poor substitute compared to the ones lost in the Sylhet plains.

The Jaintia uprisings led to the extensive destruction of their economy and it took years for its recovery. However, in spite of the loss of the fertile plain territories and the destruction of the hilly economy due to the Anglo-Jaintia wars, their economy of subsistence subsequently developed under the British administration, into one of surplus. This was possible due to the initiative taken by the British in introducing a number of changes in agriculture and horticultural activities of the Jaintias. They introduced crops and fruits which were earlier unknown and foreign to the land and its people. The initial experiments made on their cultivation however proved successful on a large-scale. Having found that these new crops and fruits were adaptable to the soil and climate of the land, the Jaintias did not lose time to cultivate them in a much larger scale. The British also popularized the cultivation of fruits, vegetables and medicinal herbs of foreign origin. Foreign fruits like pears, plums and peaches were also introduced.³⁴ Growing of cotton and rearing of lac were also experimented and encouraged. Potato was another important crop introduced by the British in 1830 in these hills. W.J. Allen opined that potato had been the greatest boon that a British ruler had conferred upon the Khasi-Jaintia people.³⁵ The cultivation of potato in the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills proved to be very successful right from the time it was first introduced and since then till date potato has remained the principal crop and an important item of export. Its yield is also quite spectacular. It has therefore become a great source of income of the people. Other measures were also adopted

by the British for the improvement of agriculture and horticulture among the people. These included introduction of rotation of crops, proper drainage of the fields and change of the mode of cultivation. The British therefore brought a tremendous improvement on the agricultural practices and the means of communications for better trade and commerce of the Khasi-Jaintia people.

To consolidate their exploitation of the natural resources available in the area under study, the British established a network of roads that connected the hills with the adjoining plains and the main market centers in the borders along the foothills. The construction of roads to link the area both in the hills and the plains particularly with the sub-divisional headquarters at Jowai was immediately undertaken. One of the British officials responsible for this innovative plan was Henry Hopkinson. He strongly advocated the construction of roads in order to open up the Jaintia Hills country for easy communication and movement throughout the country for proper administrative supervision of the area.³⁶ Hopkinson pleaded that without roads the British authorities could not do anything; proper supervision would be jeopardized and commerce, the great civilizer, cannot find out the people of the area concerned. He therefore repeatedly impressed upon the authority and the department concerned with these matters to sanction necessary amount of funds for road construction in the Jaintia Hills. During the time when Captain Morton was the Deputy Commissioner in charge of the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills, he prepared a memorandum of the roads chiefly required; one such road would connect Jowai with Jaintiapur covering a distance of 30 miles.³⁷ W.J. Allen in his report in 1858 recommended for the annual repairing of the old road between Sylhet and Assam, which passed through the hills, namely, Jaintiapur and Jowai to Jaggee Chowkey in Nowgong. This was a very useful road to the people of Jaintia Hills as it provided them direct communication with Sylhet and Nowgong. A considerable traffic passed along this road to Sylhet and Nowgong.³⁸ There has been also a well-maintained motorable road, which connected Shillong with Sylhet through Dawki, one of the main market centers at the foothills of Jaintia Hills since

1933 when this road was declared open by His Excellency, Sir Michael Keane, the then Governor of Assam.³⁹ This road also linked Shillong with Gauhati. The road by linking Sylhet-Shillong-Gauhati thus became the lifeline of communication for trade and commerce. The economic condition of the Jaintia people was much stable and improved during this period of time due to the facilities that were made available at their disposal.

The presence of the various means of communications, opened up to the Jaintia people in general and the War Jaintias in particular, a better avenue and an encouraging opportunity to venture for more extensive trade and commerce even outside their own territory. The crops produced by the people from the hills were transported in a faster rate to the plains due to better communication facilities coupled with a tremendous demand of the same. Thus their produce found suitable markets in the southern plains. It is important to note that before partition took place, there was free trade and commerce between the hills and the plains, and on this basis, the people of the hills lived a somewhat prosperous life. Hills-plains trade was therefore at the peak of its flourishing height during the British period. Deterioration of trade especially in the border areas started soon after 1947, the reason being the closure and sealing off of the border *hats* which led to the collapse of the booming border trade.

Post-Independence Trends

The transfer of power in 1947 and the change of administration thereafter, had severely hit the economic life of the Khasi-Jaintia people, their relations in trade and commerce with their counterparts in the plains, and caused a set-back in exchange of goods and essential commodities. There was also a setback in marketing facilities after the Partition of the country into India and Pakistan and later on Bangladesh in 1971. One writer was of the opinion that the ultimate halt of the entire trade between the hills and the plains of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Sylhet was due to the short-sighted policy of the erstwhile government of Pakistan, the policy which was to starve the neighbouring areas in India, their avowed enemies, of their normal and

legitimate facilities.⁴⁰ There was therefore a tremendous after-effect on the economic life of the Khasi-Jaintia people due to the closure of the border trade and commerce immediately after 1947. Marketing facilities from both sides of the border were stopped, as the people could not cross over the border. Economic activities came to a standstill. The worst sufferers were those people who lived in the border areas of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Sylhet. They were so much dependent on each other and the markets in the border that they did not know what else to do with their produce after the Partition due to the total dislocation of trade and commerce.

At a particular period of time, an agreement was arrived at between the Governments of India and Pakistan to free the people from both sides of the border from trade suffocation. According to this agreement, certain commodities produced in Meghalaya were allowed for export to the then East Pakistan. These items were - candles, Indian ware, earthen ware, turmeric, vegetables and fruits of local produce, limestone, ginger, spices, hardwood, detergents, betel leaf, pots, fuel, thatching grass, bamboos, stones, boulders and shingles.⁴¹ But unfortunately, this agreement was purely temporary and a short-lived one. It did not bring any relief to the affected people of both the areas. The only alternative was to find out markets in the uplands, which was very difficult as most of the orchards and fruit plantations are situated in the areas of deep precipices. Direct communication with the market centers in the uplands is almost an impossible task. Due to this difficulty and the lack of other facilities, the local produce such as fruits and other perishable goods worth lakhs of rupees were left to rot in the plantations. The trade of betel nuts, betel-leaf and tezpata, which usually exceed the volume of income yielded by potato is then limited both in production and circulation.⁴²

Liberation of Bangladesh: Expectation in Partnership for Development

There was an air of expectation for things to improve, especially in terms of trade and commerce between India and Bangladesh after the liberation of the latter in 1971. The people of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills especially those inhabiting

the border area with Bangladesh eagerly 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 channelise the much-needed trade between the bordering neighbours and allow them to exchange their normal necessities through official routes, but this was short-lived. Therefore, once again it 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 came into a near standstill.

However, the re-opening of a few border *hats* for a brief period between December 1970 and March 1971 seemed to suggest the fact that the people living in both sides of the international border shared the same anxieties and sufferings arising out of the closure of the markets. Thus after a prolonged negotiations in March 1971, a few border *hats* were declared open for transaction in listed articles only. Before the other developments ensued, the maintenance of relations was upset by the Bangladesh affairs bringing with it influx of refugees into the State of Meghalaya.⁴³

The influx of refugees from Bangladesh during and after the war of liberation of that country in 1970-71 to Meghalaya was alarming. This state of affairs brought immense suffering on the people living in the border area of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills districts. The influx was much beyond the expectation of the State Government. It put the Government of Meghalaya into a precarious situation, which was far beyond *its* capacity to handle such a sea of human beings within its small territory. But the worst sufferers due to the influx were the people living in the border area with Bangladesh. They suffered a great deal of hardship. The whole economic life of the people was completely disturbed. It was impossible for the people of the area to work in their orchards or to cultivate, plant and harvest as the whole area was swamped with the refugees. The entire economy of the local people had to undergo severe stress and strain owing to this influx of evacuees from Bangladesh. The socio-economic tension accompanied such a

heavy influx, more particularly when the economy of the border areas of Meghalaya has been badly disrupted ever since the creation of Pakistan and where even in normal time special border programmes have to be undertaken to rehabilitate the border economy.

Meghalaya was formed as an Autonomous State in 1970 and two years later became a full-fledged State. During these 30 years, much development has taken place. There was improvement in road communications, electricity, water supply and other technological development in agriculture. In many districts of the State, the people have accepted the new improved technology in agriculture and other allied fields and this led to the improvement in the economy of the people to a large extent. As far as Jaintia Hills district is concerned there are however many fields left unattended for better improvement of the economy of the people.

In terms of formal border trade, agreements were signed between India and Bangladesh in order to alleviate the sufferings of the people living near the border areas on both sides. The first Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement which was signed on 28 March, 1972, made a specific provision for the border. Article IV of the Agreement reads as follows:

“In order to meet the day-to-day requirements of the people living within the sixteen kilometer 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 trade 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 the 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.⁴⁴

However, this expectation in trade partnership did not last long. Only after a six month period, that is, in September 1972, the Government of Bangladesh complained of large-scale smuggling by unscrupulous traders. In October 1972, the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh told the Indian High Commissioner that there were stories that border trade was responsible for large-scale smuggling of jute into India and thus wanted the border trade to be scrapped. During the mid-term trade talks held in early October 1972, the Bangladesh side wanted border trade to be suspended on the ground that meaningful implementation of the provisions of the border trade was not possible unless adequate checks and controls could be established along the entire length of the Indo-Bangladesh border. Accordingly, border trade between the two countries was suspended with effect from October 13, 1972. Though the border trade legally stands cancelled, position was different on the ground and *de facto* border trade in the form of smuggling continued. Most of this illegal trade was in the form of head-loads, which diluted the anti-smuggling drive and seizures made represent only a fraction of what actually moves across the border.⁴⁵ The fact remains that in spite of the failure of the formal or legal trade agreement between India and Bangladesh, the need to participate in trade and commerce continues. The border people's perception of their needs and interdependence may not be the same as that of their Governments. The failure of the Governments did not stall their participation, however illegal it might be.

It was in this situation that the two countries agreed to sign the second trade agreement on 5 July, 1973, which came into force from September 28, 1973 to cope with the completion of the outstanding contracts of the previous agreement. Practically, the second agreement was an extension of the previous 'Rupee Trade' as well as the 'Trade in Hard Currency', beneficially called the 'Balance of Trade and Payments Agreement'.

The fact that such agreements were concluded from time to time clearly indicates the interdependence between the two neighbouring countries in terms of trade and commerce. The Northeastern States bordering Bangladesh have frequently requested the Union Government of India not only to revive the trade agreement with Bangladesh but strengthen them so as to enable the State Governments to continue the trans-border trade with a view to bring about an economic revolution in the otherwise insurgency ravaged and underdeveloped frontier Northeastern region. In most of the requests and proposals put forward by the State Governments of the region, they stressed upon the basic need of continuous diplomatic dialogues with the Government of Bangladesh for opening up of all border points and markets for trading. As far as Meghalaya is concerned, a dozen or more such border markets were in operation with the then East Pakistan or the present Bangladesh before the Partition of the Indian Sub-continent. The same feeling was also expressed by the Government of Bangladesh from time to time in which it also wanted the border trade with India in general and the neighbouring States of Northeast India in particular to be resumed. Bangladesh economy has been severely affected owing to the closure of border trade.

The Indira-Mujib accord was signed in order to revive and facilitate the traditional border trade, particularly between Meghalaya and Bangladesh. The accord was also signed with the good intention of allowing the border trade to continue for the benefit of the concerned people of both sides. The Indira-Mujib accord had allowed eight kilo metres of free-zone all along the border between Meghalaya and Bangladesh to help grow and enhance in the participation of border trade

and commerce along the international boundary of the two countries. However, due to the political changes in Bangladesh following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the subsequent leaders in Bangladesh had flouted the provisions of the accord.

There are of course, as stated earlier, attempts to revive the border trade but it is an on and off situation with so much of frustration on both sides. In these days of liberalization of global trade, neither India nor Bangladesh can play a role of passive onlooker. They have to have a perception of closer participation in trade and commerce to improve the economy of both the neighbouring countries.

What is urgently needed today is the perception on partnership for the overall development of the economy of the areas along the Indo-Bangladesh border. It is obvious that the past economic history of the people living along this international border had to heavily depend on each other in terms of trade and commerce. Realizing the importance of partnership, the affected people of the border areas have demanded some kind of a trade zone. Of late, a ten-kilometer free trade zone on either side is also being demanded. This perception clearly indicates and reflects the psychology as well as the feelings of the people at the grassroots level who are more worried about their means of livelihood rather than the complexities of international politics. All efforts have therefore to be made to sincerely address the problems, and shift the focus from mere cosmetic treatments to seeking holistic solutions to the basic problems and issues at stake.

NOTES

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45. *Ibid.*, p.31.

With the paradigm shift from state-centricism to interdependence and global cooperation, the Indian state has been sensitized about the geo-economic potential of its Northeastern Region (NER) as its gateway to Southeast Asian countries. India's Look East Policy, introduced in the early nineties, is, therefore, aimed at gradual integration of the NER with the thriving market across the borders, and thereby, opening up to the emerging opportunities in the Southeast Asia. The NER, because of its geographic location cradled by five Asian countries - Nepal, Bhutan, Tibetan-China, Myanmar and Bangladesh, has natural geo-economic advantages to become the economic bridgehead of South East Asia.

This book earnestly attempts to deepen the understanding of issues that the Northeastern region of India is faced with and calls for accelerating the engagement process with the governments of the neighbouring countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal—and opening of the borders for trade and people to people contact, which will be beneficial both for India's Northeastern region and its neighbouring countries. It seeks wider readership cutting across the academia, policy makers, diplomats and the northeast watchers.

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Opinions...

A comprehensive analysis that locates the economic development of India's Northeast within the context of its complex linkages with the South and South-East Asian neighbourhood. A focused and well argued case for what is increasingly seen as an essential paradigm within which the alienation and lack of development in the Northeast can be addressed.

Ajai Sahni

Executive Director

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Engaging with the projected prospects of a "post-national" and "post-Wesphalian" globalized order shall be preposterous if one does not take into account the experiences and realities of the "ordering of space" and the twin rationales of development and security of the modern "nation-state", and the state-system of the present "international" order. And, for those people who were once under the dispensation of the colonial rule, a critical assessment of the promises and actual transformations that have marked the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial in South Asia cannot be anything but an indispensable aspect of a meaningful engagement. I suspect that as far as the "Northeast India" is concerned, these issues have yet to be coherently and meaningfully grappled with, leave alone understood or articulated. In this context, the present volume, comes as a valuable attempt to initiate a dialogue on some of those issues. Although one may not agree with some of the views of the contributors, the essays undoubtedly provide us the glimpses of a wide range of pertinent issues such as the impact of the "partition" of South Asia in 1947, Indo-China and Indo-Myanmar relations and the emergence of Bangladesh, and facets of the preponderance of the security concerns in thinking about the region. Besides, the essays also register a differential tenor of perception between those from within the region, and without. I am sure that the volume shall serve as an important step towards further engagement with some of the crucial issues addressed by the contributors, and go a long way in generating informed and meaningful perspectives on the region, its present and future prospects.

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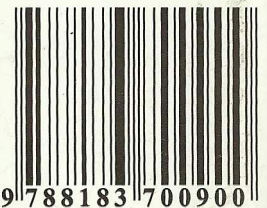
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