

Effects of Partition on the Border Marketing of Jaintiya Hills

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On the southern frontier of Jaintia Hills, the people had frequent and direct contact with the people of Sylhet District, especially, in their trade relations at a very earlier period. The period may be traced back to the time of the Mughal rule over Sylhet and during the British rule when the latter stepped into the former's place. Although occasional raids and skirmishes in the frontier took place between the fierce tribes of the hills and the plainsmen, yet business transactions were also carried on between the two. In Jaintia Hills too, the area occupied by the War Jaintias was more exposed to the plains of Sylhet. Jaintiapur, the ancient capital of the Jaintia Kingdom, was not far from the War border area. Thus, Jaintiapur besides being the capital of the kingdom, also served as an entrepot between the people of the hills and of the plains which led to an extensive commercial relationship between the two areas. To quote Pemberton, 'A considerable trade in cotton, iron ore, wax, ivory, paan (betel leaf), and cloths, is carried on between the plains and hills, and Jynteeapoor (Jaintiapur) the capital, is the great entrepot in which all commercial dealings are transacted between the inhabitants of the plains and the hills. The articles specified are bartered for salt, tobacco, rice, and goats, but the intercourse was much obstructed by injudicious monopolies and heavy transit duties. . . this trade had been very seriously interrupted for some time by a feud between the different tribes, which was at length satisfactorily adjusted by Mr. Inglis, an officer temporarily attached to the Sylhet Light Infantry, who was deputed by Captain Jenkins

for this purpose in April 1834. The negotiation proved completely successful, and the merchants of Sylhet, who had been awaiting the result with extreme anxiety, in half an hour after the settlement of the disputes, made advances far more than five thousand rupees worth of ivory, wax and stick lac. to be delivered in less than a week'.¹ Thus this account gives us a clear picture of the commercial dealings transacted between the Jaintia people from the hills and the plainsmen of Sylhet in the period as far back as 1834.

Bareh mentioned that 'according to the local tradition, one Minister (Myntri), U Iuma Laskor, opened four markets on the hills and five in the plains. Markets on the hills were Nartiang, Raliang, Sutnga and Shangpung. Those in the plains were at Borkhat, Kulakhat, Iaplem, Mulakor and Jaintiapur. These are still small market centres even now'.² Of the five markets in the plains, the last three were frequently visited by the War Jaintia people in the pre-Independence period as they do even now. Iaplem and Mulakor are also locally known as Ju-plem and Danakor respectively and these are the nearest market centres along the international border with Bangladesh. Till today, the War Jaintia people go to these markets on market days to sell their goods, mostly betel leaves, betelnut and oranges: they bring back from these markets commodities like fish, dry fish, eggs, etc., for sale in the border markets (Indian side) especially in Dawki and Muktapur.

An earlier contact in terms of trade relations was also possible because of the presence of easy road and river communications between the War Jaintias in the hills and the people of the plains. There has been a road connection between Shillong and Sylhet since 1933 when this road was declared open by His Excellency, Sir Michael Keane, the Governor of Assam at that time. This road which passes through Dawki, the main market centre in the War border area, connected Sylhet, the centre of the Surma Valley at that period of time, with Shillong, the capital of Assam province, and Gauhati, the key city of the Brahmaputra Valley. After the road was completed it took only five hours' pleasant journey by car between

Shillong and Sylhet through Dawki. Earlier it took thirty five hours of weary journey by road and rail between Shillong and Sylhet.³ This road also connects Dawki with Sylhet and Shillong. Thus through this road, the War people could easily transport their goods and other agricultural produce to Sylhet and Shillong markets. Sylhet has a great demand for betelnut, betel leaves, bay leaf (tezpata) and oranges besides other horti-cultural crops. The War Jaintia border belt is also famous for the production of the various horticultural crops especially betelnut, betel leaves and oranges. Oranges were exported to Sylhet and from Sylhet the traders transported them to Chatak and Calcutta via the river ports of East Bengal (now Bangladesh). The presence of road communication opened a better avenue for the people of the area to transport their produce outside. The agricultural produce of the people in the hills was easily traded to the plains which has a tremendous demand and ready customers to purchase them. Thus, their produce found suitable markets in the plains. There has been also an exchange of goods from both sides. The people from the hills bought from the markets in the plains essential commodities like fish, dry fish, goats, etc., which were not easily available in the hills. Thus before partition, there was free trade and commerce between the hills and the plains and the people lived a prosperous life. Old people till today used to refer to their wealth, prosperity and comfort that they enjoyed in the past.⁴

The transfer of power in 1947 and the change of administration thereafter, brought a heavy attack on the economic life of the War Jaintias, their relations in trade and commerce with their counterparts in the plains and a set-back in the exchange of goods and essential commodities in the border markets. There was also a setback of marketing facilities after the partition of the country into India and Pakistan and later on Bangladesh. The after-effect of this partition was untold miseries brought to the people of the area who were the worst sufferers. Thus 'the prospects of the once flourishing trade were dimmed by the partition of India (1947) resulting in further border insecurities and closure of trade

with East Pakistan in the South. The trouble is this—the fruit plantations in the southern slopes are situated mostly in areas of deep precipices and it is difficult to have direct communications with market centres in the uplands. In fact communication in some places is more accessible to (East) Pakistan. Because trade facilities are not available, the local produce such as fruits and crops worth lakhs of rupees are left to rot in the plantations. Moreover, staple food such as rice which was obtained from Sylhet is now not available due to the closure of markets and reports of both food scarcity and near starvations are heard from time to time to the extent that the people feed themselves with wild vegetables and roots The trade of betel and nuts and tez leaves which usually exceeded the volume of income yielded by potato is now limited both in production and circulation'.⁵

The whole area of Jaintia Hills along the international border with Bangladesh is famous for the production of many horticultural crops. The main horticultural crops grown in the border area, to mention a few of them, are—oranges, betelnut, betel leaves, pineapples, bananas, jack fruit etc. Of these, oranges, betelnut and betel leaves are the most important crops grown in large quantity. They are also the best of their kind to be found in the whole State of Meghalaya. Before partition, these crops found suitable markets in the Sylhet district as there was a great demand by the people of the then East Bengal. But all these marketing facilities came to a standstill after the partition as the border markets were sealed off. Therefore, the people living in the border area were at a loss not knowing what to do—whether to continue their old traditional agricultural practices or stop it which meant total starvation. In such a critical situation, some sections of the War Jaintias were compelled to leave their homes in search of new lands for cultivation in other areas like the Bhoi area in Khasi Hills, Cachar District and Diphu in North-Cachar District of Assam. Some other sections of the people risked their lives and crossed over the border.

The sealing of the border markets brought another

immense crisis on the War people as most of the crops produced by them were perishable goods. The problem was not so acute in the pre-partition period because such goods when brought to the markets were sold on the same day. The closure of the markets across the border delayed the disposal of their produce. Due to late disposal of the same, huge quantity went waste. Many a time, businessmen took advantage of the situation. They bought the goods and paid the local producers a throw-away price. The local people had no other alternative but to accept whatever was paid to them as the goods could not be stored anywhere once they were brought to the market due to the absence of cold storage and other facilities to preserve these perishable commodities.

There was an air of expectation for increased volume of trade and commerce between India and Bangladesh after the Indo-Pak war of 1971 came to an end. The people living in the border area with Bangladesh expected that better relationship would prevail between the two countries and this would also lead to the re-opening of the border markets. But this expectation was belied when trade between the two countries was stopped and the whole border was again sealed off and markets across the international border were closed soon after the war. Thus, marketing facilities for the sale and exchange of the agricultural produce were also severely affected. The economic prospects of the people came to a near standstill. A comment in the Calcutta newspaper on Meghalaya held this view—'the present volume of trade and output is a trickle compared to pre-Independence figures, since the economy was oriented toward East Bengal plains and the available riverine facilities. An official dossier records that the prices of produce sank to unbelievably low levels. Worse still, there was no one to lift the produce in the absence of easy transport link with the alternative markets in the rest of India. Attempts to develop a food crop economy and to diversify agriculture, the dossier says, were unsuccessful because suitable land was not available. A people specialising in orchard cultivation were at a distinct disadvantage in learning the technique of food crop cultivation. With the

opening of a few vital roads alternative markets were found, but transporting the produce to the focal points posed a problem. Transport by headloads was primitive and possible only in the non-monsoon period.⁶ The re-opening of a few border *hats* for a brief period of time between December 1970 and March 1971, seemed to suggest the fact that the people living in both sides of the international border shared in the sufferings arising from the closure of the markets. 'Thus after a prolonged negotiation upto the quarter ending 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 influxes of refugees into the State (Meghalaya)⁷. The influx of refugees from East Bengal during the Indo-Pak war of 1971 created another unprecedented set-back in the border markets in particular and in the whole State of Meghalaya in general. Some steps were taken after the liberation of Bangladesh to normalise trade relations following the signing of a Trade Agreement, but it was suspended later on.

It is interesting to note that though the border markets with Bangladesh were sealed off, the War border people and a few local petty businessmen (mostly women) secretly and at the risk of their own life still continued their trading business and exchange of goods with the people living on the other side of the border (i.e. the people of Bangladesh). This operation continues even though not very successfully but still it helps to minimise the problems of the rural border markets in Jaintia Hills to a very limited extent.

Since Meghalaya became a full-fledged State in 1972, there has been a fast development of road communication between the War border area and other commercial centres in the State. But this recent development does not ease the problem of the border markets because of the fact that the demand of the agricultural produce of the War people is not that great as compared with the demand of the people in the plains, across the border in the pre-Partition days. The War Jaintias are still facing the acute problem of marketing their horticultural

produce and they are, therefore, constantly trying to find out alternative markets for their produce and even alternative means of livelihood.

References

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