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## The Nature of Border and Border Trade of Northeast India

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### Introduction

Trade is a natural economic activity, it is transaction of goods/products or exchange of things for the purpose of earning and meeting needs. Trade is a flow of commodities from producers to consumers. The commodities can flow between persons, human groups and countries. The exchange of things can take place in kind and cash. If such exchange of goods is done on the international boundary line or in the vicinity of it by the people living there it is known as 'border trade'.

Border is a peripheral land of a country, adjacent to the international boundary. It can also be called a frontier. In fact, border is a relative term. Relative to the point from where it is looked at. For example, the entire Northeast is a border land in terms of India as a whole. But within the Northeast, the peripheral areas along the international boundary are considered as border. On the other side of the international boundary, contiguous to our border, lies the border zone of the neighbouring country. Therefore border is never a singular entity. It is always in context of the neighbour's border. It means borders of two neighbouring countries exist together.

The borders have their own natural environment, human

F endowment, history, strategic importance and problems. Trade is bound to occur between people of two borders, for both the borders lie on the periphery of the respective country, far from the mainland or production centres. Therefore, the trade activity between people of adjacent borders helps them to get things of their requirement from each other. Owing to spatial proximity and socio-cultural relations, the economic linkages develop automatically for the mutual benefit of the people of the borders. Trade is a result of law of comparative advantage and exchange of relationships and goods between people having different modes of production. Such trade activities have been traditionally going on in most of the border areas of the world. However, various physical and human environmental conditions of the borders govern the intensity and nature of the traditional border trade practised there. And this is the main theme of the present paper. The paper is based on fieldwork, study of maps and information collected from books. In this connection the works of Allen et.al., (1979), Dalton (1960), Elwin (1959), Fisher (1978), Mackenzie (1979), Mukherjee (1992), Rutomji (1981) and others can be mentioned here.

In the strict sense, naturally occurring trade between the people of the borders is called border trade. Traditionally, this has been in operation in the North-eastern part of the Indian sub-continent from centuries at different levels and dimensions. A number of hats (market/fair centres) have emerged here in due course of time to carry-out border trade at higher levels and dimensions. Generally these hats have come up in the plains, especially in the Brahmaputra valley in front of the mountain passes, e.g., Udalguri. The indigenous border trade has been going on from centuries in the Northeast India. Of course, it has been influenced by the social, cultural, economic and political situation prevailing in the region. This trade can be called informal trade or done by the people themselves naturally. Whereas there is another type of trade, known as official trade, in which the enlisted commodities

are exported and imported through the permitted gates, e.g., Moreh, Dawki, Karimganj etc. The central government is interested to open some more gates in Northeast India for such trade.

### **Types and Levels of Border Trade**

Theoretically, the border trade can be of different types and it can take place at various levels and dimensions. The first and most important is the transaction of surplus goods, especially agricultural and horticultural products, between the people of two adjacent borders. This is done daily or at regular intervals at the suitable places on international boundary. In such cases, the boundary becomes 'a place of meeting' instead of 'a line of separation'. The people trade in the products produced by themselves with the people across the boundary line. They are permitted to sell and purchase goods by the guards on the boundary. The distance of the place of trade is usually within one day's march. This is real and basic border trade where barter is common. Such border trade occurs in the border areas of Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura with Bangladesh. It is but natural, for people trade with the people living in close proximity to each other. This happens everywhere — in the mainland and on border of a country. The only difference is of an international boundary in the latter, and that makes it a border trade. Otherwise, this is almost similar to trade among people having different modes of production or living in different habitats (ecosystem).

The second level of border trade exists among the people of villages on both sides of the boundary line at more than one day's march. They also trade in goods produced by themselves in their respective habitats. Generally it takes place daily, but in weekly markets on borders as well. This is slightly higher level of border trade but with lesser frequency, and found almost in all border areas of the Northeast region.

The third level of border trade includes the sell and

purchase of those commodities, which are not only produced by the border people in their habitats but also at production centres in the mainland of their respective country. It means goods produced beyond the border area are also brought for sale. The place of transaction may lie beyond the border and trade is done once or twice a year at hat. Such trade used to take place at Udalguri, Sadiya, etc., which can be called transmountain flow of commodities. At smaller scale such goods can be sold in the second level of border trade mentioned above. In the third level of border trade even, people not living in border area may take part. Thus, the level and dimension of border trade goes higher but frequency is further reduced. Sometimes it may happen that the products and people involved in such trade are from far away places than the border. In such a situation the role of border dwellers become secondary. However, the level and amount of transaction is very high in this level of border trade, which is allowed by government to take place through the main trade routes. Various examples of such trade can be cited, but for lack of space. However, the above-cited books can be consulted for details. So these are the types and levels of border trade. In the strict sense, the author does not include the trade of commodities, which takes place through the border, in which people and goods are not from the border area. Hence, here border trade means trade of goods produced in the borders and sold by the people of the borders. It is simply inter-border trade. Even the intra-border trade is not part of it.

In contrast to the above the flow of goods across the border on a few routes is actually a case of 'international trade' in which goods produced far away from the border and even in foreign countries are involved. The border people are not main operators in it. This international trade can be of two types. In the first, the products of two neighbouring countries are traded. Whereas in the second the products of foreign countries are traded through the borders, e.g. Moreh, Champhai, Dawki, etc. The latter type of foreign trade does

not help in the development of agricultural and industrial economy of the two neighbouring nations in general, and of the border areas in particular. A third party is actually benefited financially and industrially from such trade, e.g. Japan, South Korea etc. This trade is usually done unofficially, called smuggling. While in the first case a list of permitted items of export and import can be announced by the governments after mutual agreement, which definitely helps in the development of these countries.

✓ The above-mentioned types of border trade and 'international trade' have been going on from centuries in the Northeast part of India. However, this paper discusses the nature of real border trade practised by the border people of the Northeast, and also the influence of the nature of border on the trade.

### **The Nature of Border**

The nature of border is divided into physical and human. The physical nature includes the topography and location of the border. The discussion on nature of our border will remain inconclusive, if the nature of border of adjacent country is not taken into consideration. Understanding about nature of border is significant because it influences the nature, magnitude, extent and degree of border trade.

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To understand the nature of border, it is necessary to start with formation of external boundaries of this region, which led to ultimate creation of borders. Frankly speaking, formation of North-eastern border of India is a geographical, historical and cultural legacy. Geographical in the sense of its location and topography. Location wise this region happens to be on the periphery of the Indian sub-continent itself where the orientation and extent of mountain ranges and river valleys have helped in making it a geographical region. From historical point of view formation of its external boundaries is the result of different historical events. Whereas

the racial, ethnic and cultural traits of the people make it a separate region. These are result of assemblage and miscegenation of racial and cultural elements in the crucible of Northeast India under the influence of various human migrations through this corridor. All these have given rise to a unique region having well integrated but diverse physiographic units, number of ethnic groups, varied cultures and typical economies.

✓ The North-eastern part of India became a 'land locked' or 'blocked land', in course of time, due to formation of historical Indo-Bhutan boundary, Indo-Burma boundary in 1826, Indo-Tibet in 1914 and Indo-Pak boundary in 1947 (subsequently turned into Indo-Bangladesh border in 1972). The 'land locked' situation can be understood by the fact that 98% of its boundary is international, touching neighbouring countries, viz., Bhutan, Tibet, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Only a narrow belt of land connects the region with the rest of India. This piece of land can be called 'umbilical cord' (though popularly known as Siliguri neck) because the role it plays in the joining the Northeast region with rest of India. The 'umbilical cord' has only 2% of the total boundary of the Northeast. In the beginning it is about 65 km wide on the Assam-Bengal boundary. This 'umbilical cord' narrows down and passes through the Siliguri neck, which is 23 km broad between the international boundaries of Nepal and Bangladesh. On the other side, one of the southern points of the Northeast region is hardly 25 km away from the Bay of Bengal. The lack of infrastructural facilities has enhanced the isolation. All these put the region in a very sensitive, strategic and economic situation. Due to it, the people of the Northeast in general and of its border in particular are directly or indirectly compelled to maintain the traditional trade relations across the boundary for their subsistence and survival ✓

About 29.44% of boundary of India run on land. About one third of which lies in Northeast region. Interestingly, the

total length of international boundary of the Northeast region is 5211 km, i.e., 98 % of total boundary. Out of about 1596 km long boundary is with Bangladesh (touching Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura), 1640 km is with Myanmar (along boundaries of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland), 800 km is with Bhutan (meeting Assam and Arunachal Pradesh) and 1175 km is with Tibet Autonomous Region of China (touching Arunachal Pradesh). A 65 km long boundary, i.e., 2 % only, running along the state boundary between Assam and West Bengal joins the region with the rest of India. The Siliguri neck lies further west because of international jagjawsaw boundaries of Bangladesh. Otherwise, the Brahmaputra Valley is 100 km wide in the west where it merges in the vast plains of the Ganga River. Therefore, a transit route through the Bangladesh is a necessity of the Northeast. A recent news item (The Hindustan Times, 30.7.99) indicates that the government of Bangladesh has permitted a road transit to India. This transit will connect the western side of the region for easy transport of goods from one part of India to another. It is suggested that India should also request Bangladesh to agree to a road transit to Bay of Bengal either from Tripura or Mizoram which are hardly at 50 km distance from the sea, especially the Chittagong port. If this transit comes into existence, the land-locked condition of the Northeast region will be removed to some extent.

Now we come to discussion on physiographic nature of borders. Here, it is noted with a sense of dismay and surprise that accurate data on length of international boundaries of 'Seven Sisters' is not available. Therefore, here only nature of border is discussed. The Assam-Bangladesh borders are in plains allowing easy movement of people and goods from both Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley. Important border settlements on our side of border are Golakganj, Dhubri, Mankahar, (in the Brahmaputra plains), Karimganj and Kalkali Ghat (in the Barak valley). The latter two are connected with Sylhet of Bangladesh.

The hilly border areas of Meghalaya and Mizoram meet the plain border areas of Bangladesh, except some western ranges of the Mizo Hills touching the Chittagong Hills as borders. Tripura has mixed border, i.e., both hills and valleys merging with the border of Bangladesh. Assam border with Bhutan is the only border where the plains meet the hills. Whereas the rest of the border of the Northeast is hilly country, including the higher Himalayas and Indo-Burma ranges, which meets the hilly border of Bhutan, Tibet and Myanmar. Some exceptions are found in the eastern Manipur border where hills meet the plain border of Myanmar.

In terms of topography and ecosystem the nature of the Northeast region can be clearly understood with the help of the following Chart 10.1. It shows nature of two borders.

It is easily discernible from the Chart 10.1 that broadly four types of physiographic situations occur when our border meets with border of neighbouring countries. These are: i) Hills to Hills, ii) Hills to Plains, iii) Plains to Hills, and iv) Plains to Plains. The border trade is expected to be more where two types of borders are found. It is because people are able to get products from each other's ecosystem or habitat. That's why hill and plain people do better trade than only the peoples from plains do or hills do.

### **Nature of Human Environment on Borders**

Border trade is also governed by the kinds of human groups living in border areas. By this we mean the ethnic composition on both sides of the international boundary. If similar human groups are settled in borders or when spatial distribution of an ethnic group transcends the international boundary, the trade is bound to be intimate and stronger.

Some communities of Northeast India are distributed on both sides of the international boundary. These groups are the Garos, Khasis, Tangsas, Nagas, Kukis etc. In this category the Buddhist communities of Arunachal Pradesh, especially

CHART 10.1  
Nature of border of the North-east India

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Nature of Borders</i>
1.	Assam and Bhutan	Brahmaputra plains to Himalaya Mountains
2.	Assam and Bangladesh	Plains to plains (part of the Brahmaputra plains)
3.	Meghalaya and Bangladesh	Hills to plains (Meghalaya Plateau with the Surma Plains)
4.	Mizoram and Bangladesh	Hills to Hills and Hills to Plains both
5.	Mizoram and Myanmar	Hills to Hills
6.	Manipur and Myanmar	Hills to Hills and Hills to Plains both
7.	Nagaland and Myanmar	Hills to Hills
8.	Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan, Tibet and Myanmar	Hills to Hills
9.	Tripura and Bangladesh	Hills and Plains to Plains.

of the western part (Tawang and Kameng), can also be included, who have more or less akin Buddhist groups across the international line in Bhutan and Tibet. The social, cultural, religious and the ethnic similarities among human groups encourage stronger economic ties in the form of border trade. The history is full of such relations, which are still continued despite formation of 'impermeable' boundaries.

Border trade can be between more or less similar people or dissimilar groups. Border trade practised by the Monpa, Na, Memba, Khamba, Tangsa, Naga, Kuki, Garo, Khasi and Jaintia is generally between more or less similar groups living across the boundary. Whereas, border transactions done by the Bodo, Aka, Miji, Nishi and Mishmi people are with different groups of people across the boundary.

✓ The nature of human groups has profound influence on border trade and economy of the people living in the border zone. Border trade is more strong and necessary where borders lie in different ecosystems (i.e., hills and plains). This is because different kinds of things are produced in the two distinct ecosystem. That leads to exchange of surplus goods of one ecosystem with another. Both the ecosystems offer something to each other. For example, border people of the Northeast take their agriculture, horticulture, forest, animal husbandry and handicraft products to plains to sell there. These include maize, millet, chilli, clothes, forest products, etc. Coal is exported from Meghalaya to Bangladesh. On the other hand they procure items produced in the plains, such as rice, fish (dry and fresh), utensils, cotton cloths, etc. Tourist centres of the hills do attract plain dwellers. The Balphakram National Park of the Garo hills has special interest of the people of Surma Plains. While the fish, especially Hilsa is very much in demand among the hill-dwellers. This type of border trade is seen in along the border of Meghalaya, and also in the western border of Mizoram and Tripura where the hills meet the plain areas of Bangladesh.

Undoubtedly, economic linkages are smooth, strong and natural between more or less similar people settled in both side of the borders. These economic ties are further strengthened when the similar groups are living in different physiographic borders, e.g., hills and plains. The Garo, Khasi and Jaintia have such advantageous border trade relations.

The Northeast India has a few communities who are not living near the boundary; even then they have developed border trade relations with people across the boundary. Arunachal Himalaya can boast of such human groups who brought/bought goods from Tibet and then sold it to their hill and plain neighbours. In this case name of Miji, Sherdukpen, Bokars, Bori, Nishi, Ramos, Pailibos, Adis, etc., can be mentioned, who had trade relations with the Tibetans and also with their countrymen. The flow of commodities was two ways. Rock salt, silver and bead ornaments, utensils, woollen clothes, swords, etc. were main items brought from Tibet. While the items carried there were chillies, hides, raw wool, plant dyes, maize, millet, etc.

On the other hand, the Tibetans used to bring their goods from Tibet to Assam plains to sell them in yearly fairs and hats. The items included were rock salt, iron implement, hand woven cloths, swords, musk, ornaments, etc. Now some hindrances are felt in pursuing such traditional border trade due to maintenance of impermeable international boundary.

### **Conclusions**

Border is a peripheral land lying along the international boundary and in context of border of the neighbouring country. The two borders are complimentary to each other. The Northeast India is a landlocked region. About 98% of its boundary are international and the 'umbilical cord', which connects this region with the rest of India, has only 2% of its boundary. Though isolated in one sense, but the region has never been devoid of socio-cultural and economic relations with its neighbours. A flourishing border trade did exist

here. There is a need to revive and strengthen it in the changed situations for the benefit of the border people.

\* The borders have their own natural and human environment, which influence the trade, taking place between them. Economic linkages develop naturally between people of two borders, for both have spatial proximity and both are far away from the mainland or production centres of their respective country. Therefore, surplus products are bartered or purchased by each other to maintain their survival. Such a trade is most strong and necessary where borders are in different topographic units or ecosystem, e.g., hills and plains, and also in the borders occupied by more or less similar people. Border of Northeast India has several examples of such strong trade relations with neighbouring border people. Though the traditional border trade has been affected by formation of old and new international boundaries, even the trade goes on as a necessity of the border people. Plans should be made to further encourage and strengthen the border trade, so that the economy of the border people gets a boost. This will definitely bring development and prosperity among the border people. Mutually beneficial border trade helps in having a better bilateral relation between two neighbours, which is one of the agenda of SAARC also. A prosperous, peaceful and developed border can be pride of a country. But all these cannot be done at the cost of security and integrity of our country. Hence, a strong vigilance has to be maintained against illegal trade, unlawful activities, and infiltration in the border without jeopardising the interests of the border people.

✓ The border trade and economy are beneficial to each other. Hence all efforts should be made to develop both. Establishment of 'fair' border trade is necessary for the development of economy of the people because most of the border areas have difficult terrain, isolation and lack of infrastructure. The border people face insurmountable problems in selling their products, especially the perishable

agro-horticultural products. Therefore, the planners, politicians, administrators and academicians have to pay attention towards the development of trade and economy of the border people. So that peace, tranquillity, and prosperity can usher in the border to strengthen the country as a whole. Definitely, a strong and prosperous border means a strong and happy nation.

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