

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

NINTH SESSION

GUWAHATI ; 1988

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General Secretary
on behalf of

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PREFACE

The ninth session of the North East India History Association at the Gauhati University was indeed the fulfilment of a long cherished objective of the Association to hold a session in the premier University of the region. In fact, there had been efforts on the part of the Association ever since it came into existence in 1979 to hold a session at the Gauhati University. We are thankful to the authorities of the Gauhati University for inviting the ninth session and organising it in an excellent manner.

Shri Bhisma Narain Singh, the Governor of Assam, inaugurated the session. Professor D. P. Barooah, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. N. Phukan, Head, Department of History, Gauhati University did the Association a great honour as Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor Bhupen Qanungo of the North-Eastern Hill University. More than one hundred and fifty delegates attended the session in which eighty-five research papers were presented and discussed.

The present volume is the proceedings of the ninth session of the North East India History Association held at the Gauhati University on November 3-5, 1988. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. M. S. Sangma and Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research for the generous financial assistance extended to the Association.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

Shillong

The 25 August 1989

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Trade routes and trade relations between Jaintia Hills and Sylhet District in the Pre-independence Period

L.S.Gassah

The Jaintia kingdom covered a large tract of plain territories in its northern and southern frontiers; upto Nowgong and other neighbouring places in the north and Sylhet district in the south or the Jaintia Parganas. The kingdom being so extended, the Jaintia people have therefore had a long and direct contact with the plains people, especially in terms of trade and commerce. Notwithstanding, the importance of the relations between the Jaintia people and those of the northern plains portion of the Jaintia kingdom, however, this paper proposes to highlight only the relations between the Jaintia people and their neighbours in the southern frontier of the kingdom, that is, the Sylhet district.

The contact and exposure between the Jaintia people from the hills and those of the Sylhet plains was more explicit in terms of their trade relations and commercial dealings especially in the pre-independence period. This of course, would not have been possible had there been no easy routes of communication between the two adjacent but different areas. Against this background, it may be mentioned, 'from the time Sylhet emerged out of the blue waters 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 the things started to grow there, they must have been the first customers of all the products of the vast plains that is known as Sylhet... and with the background of necessities, trade grew up between the hills and plains and continues till the modern period'.

On the basis of the account of trade relations and commercial dealings between Sylhet and its highland neighbours referred to above, two important factors were explicitly noticeable in which the Khasi and Jaintia people contributed to their neighbours living in the southern plains; one is—they were 'the first from the hills to put their feet on the soils of Sylhet', and secondly, they were 'the first customers of all products' in the

plains of that district. This, therefore, further explained and confirmed the extent of trade and the closer ties in terms of trade relationships between the Khasi-Jaintia people with that of the plains of Sylhet district in the pre-independence period. Moreover, trading between the two was not a one-sided affair but rather there was an equal exchange of goods and commodities from both sides. Thus, besides trade in limestone and oranges (the natural outlet for the latter being the plains), there were hosts of other things that went to the plains and an equally good number of essential commodities were bought by the hills people from the plains.

During the British period, the fast development of trade and commerce between the Jaintia People and that of 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 roads. Though some of these means of communications were in crude form, but they served a useful purpose in transportation of essential goods and materials to and from the hills and plains.

As far as bridle path is concerned, we found the presence of one such which connected Jowai, the Subdivisional headquarters from the hills with Jaintiapur, the capital of the kingdom, in the plains of Sylhet. The length of this bridle path is 30,1/4 miles. Besides these bridle paths which were properly maintained by the British, we also found all over the country the Khasi paths which were generally passable by a mounted man². S.M.Ali also mentioned of the presence of a 'foot track from amchoi (in Kholahat) in Nowgong district leading to Jaintiapur. It goes southwards through Bar Amni, Bara Rangkhohi, Umpanai, Nartiang, Jowai, Jarain, Muktapur up to Jaintiapur... This bridle track is maintained by the Public Works Department. The same track seems to have been the highway connecting Nijpat, the capital, with the outlying parts of the dominion. J.H. Hutton travelled along this track during his visit to Jaintiapur in 1925³. Through these bridle paths and foot tracks, the people from the hills walked a long distance carrying their goods on headload. This was the traditional way the hill people transported

their produce from one place to another and from one market to another for sale of the same.

In Jaintia Hills, the two rivers Myntdu or Hari and Lubha, being navigable, provided the means of communication between the hills and that of the plains of Sylhet where goods were transported by means of canoes up to certain points possible. Against this background, it may be mentioned thus: 'the rivers of the district (Jaintia Hills) are not very largely used for the purpose of navigation, but canoes penetrate for a short distance into the hills from the district of Sylhet. The 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'. Besides these two rivers, the river Surma itself after entering British territory on the north has a number of chief confluent in Khasi and Jaintia Hills like the Hari and Lubha, Piyain, Bogapani and Jadukata. Thus these rivers provided necessary means of communications for easy transport of commercial and essential goods between Sylhet and Khasi - Jaintia Hills.

Besides the presence of the above mentioned bridle paths, foot tracks and river communications, Jaintia Hills and the Sylhet plains were also linked by roads. Subsequent upon the decision to get themselves totally involved in the administration of the hill areas of the Jaintia country, the British introduced a number of measures, both administrative and otherwise to improve the administration as well as develop the area for their own interest. One such measure undertaken was the construction of roads to link the areas, both in the hills and plains particularly with the subdivisional headquarters at Jowai. 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 hilly country for proper and easy movements throughout the country for administrative supervision of the area concerned. In this regard, it is worthwhile to quote him. He said:

"We must have roads; we can do nothing; we can set nothing properly going without them; we cannot have proper supervision; we cannot introduce Police; we cannot efficiently administer justice even without roads. All Military and Political administrations urge the construction of roads upon us. We shall never have real possession of the country until we have roads. In the absence of roads the strength of a barbarian enemy is increased tenfold, and commerce, the great civilizer, cannot find him out" .

Subsequently, Hopkinson made repeated requests to the higher authorities of his government and the Public Works Department in particular to sanction necessary amount of fund for road construction in Jaintia Hills and other parts of Khasi Hills too. During the time when Captain Morton was the Deputy Commissioner in charge of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, he prepared a Memorandum of the roads chiefly required; one such road would connect Jowai with Jaintiapur covering a distance of thirtytwo miles . W.J.Allen in Report of 1858, recommended the annual repairing of the old road between Sylhet and Assam which passed through the hills viz. Jaintiapur and Jowai to Jaggee Chowkey in Nowgong. This was a very useful road to the people of the Jaintia Hills, and was their direct communication with Sylhet and Nowgong. A considerable traffic passed along this road to Sylhet and Nowgong . There has also been a well maintained motorable road which connected Shillong and Sylhet through Dawki, one of the main market centres in the Jaintia Hills since 1933 when this road was declared open by His Excellency, Sir Michael Keane, the Governor of Assam at that time. This same road also connected Shillong with Gauhati (Gauhati). This road by linking Sylhet-Shillong-Guwahati, thus became the life-line of trade and commerce. Besides this, it played an important role because of the fact that it connected all the major and important administrative centres, both in the Surma and the Brahmaputra Valleys.

The presence of these various means of communications, opened to the Jaintia people a better avenue

and an encouraging opportunity to venture for the exchange of their local produce even outside their own territory. The commercial crops produced by the people from the hills were therefore with much ease traded to the plains which has a tremendous demand and ready customers to purchase them. Their produce also found suitable markets in the southern plains. It is important to note that before the partition of 1947 took place, there was free trade and commerce between the hills and plains, and on this basis, the Jaintia people 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 area of Jaintia Hills started soon after 1947. The reason being the closure and sealing off of the border markets which led to the dwindling down of the border trade.

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