

Locational Pattern of Markets In Pre-And Early British Period In North East India (Specific Reference to Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hill)

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Market as a concept of economic exchange' between individuals or 'culture groups', perhaps, emerged during the late Neolithic, subsequent to the emergence of agriculture as a secured, sedentary and fruitful means of sustenance compared to the tireless wanderings of the hunter or the nomad of the yester years. Initially, of course, in the semi arid foothills of Central Asia or Iran where agriculture first originated was, perhaps neither as successful to be any alternative to the early pursuits. But, transfer to the great river valleys and use of water to irrigate the fields led to a vast change in productivity (Gordon Childe, 1942 : 98). Thus, might have arisen the first surplus of the farmer over his own family needs. At this phase of human history, the neolithic and the pameolithic or the farmer and the hunter co-habited side by side (Mumford, 1965) and had a peculiar form of trade; the farmer provided a part of his surplus to the hunter, for protection (service) of his life and crops from the marauding animals, a skill the farmer has long lost. So, the concept of trade, after all, has emerged, albeit in a peculiar form. When these village communities got more organised, politically and economically, they found their peculiar valley location put them short of certain materials like timber, asphalt and later, the precious metal, copper which remained the mainstay of the Bronze Age Civilization for two to three thousand years, until the usages and production of iron had become common. So, trade emerged between specialized 'culture groups' based on different skills, technologies and material bases, tucked away in their special environmental niches. At this stage 'trade' as a concept of 'economic exchange', to a great degree, got a spatial expression in form of the 'market place', mostly at a convenient location: whether within large settlements (the cities, like *agora* of the Hellenic civilization) or between culture groups.

A number of spatial theorists have tried to explain the genesis of the market place. The received theories provide two views :

- (i) First, the *endogenous development* of markets took place within all the peasant societies as a response to the growing surplus and product specialization (crops) arising out of technological improvements, and better adaptation with the given matrix of physical resources (at the micro-scale) Pale, 1971 : 171)
- (ii) The second view relates to development of market centres (and periodic markets) due to *contact between two spatially differentiated 'culture groups*, particularly, along the long trade routes (as happened in case of the silk route between Europe and the East ; China and India and the Caravan routes across the desert of Agrica) (Hodder, 1974 ; Polanyi, 1957).

II

Any study of genesis of market centres in the North Eastern Region of India cannot be entirely explained in light of the above received theories. The peasant markets of the Ahom period (though, not numerous) can be well explained by the endogenous development model. However, the development of market centres in pattern of garlands surrounding the hills and plateaus of the region inhabited by numerous tribes remains to be fully explained. The end eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the period of gradual British entrance in the region can provide a vantage at viewing this pattern of development of market centres, supported by recorded historical data. For the sake of convenience and economy the study is limited to market centres to the north and south of what is known as Meghalaya plateau now, the ancient home of the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos.

III

During this period, very broadly speaking, North-East India had a large number of culture groups, many large, many small ; some living with limited external contacts and others in their *cul-de-sacs*. However, on the basis of their technological levels and types of social organization of production they could be grouped into two, (i) the 'peasants' in the great river valleys of Brahmaputra and Surma, with an established farming technology and crop based economy (and fishing as a subsidiary hunting activity) with some

surplus, some crop specialisation, quasi-monetisation of the economy, incipient development of internal and external trade. (ii) On the other hand, the 'tribes' inhabiting their little *cul-de-sacs* on the verdant hills and plateaus were still dependent on hunting and gathering activities, though crop culture was not entirely unknown or not practised. However, their degree of subsistence was far greater and the surplus, practically unavailable. The differentiation of these culture groups from the valley civilizations was more a matter of degree of their crop dependence. Moreover, many of the hill tribes differed greatly among themselves in their level of technologies and material cultures and type of contact with other culture groups.

Conceptualization of trade and economic interaction between the peasant and tribal culture groups, i.e. the hill regions and the valley regions in the context of the dualistic situation as stated is to be viewed in light of the nature of economics, product specialisations and surplus generated in their respective economics. In response to emerging crop specialisation and surplus, some internal trade did emerge in the valleys, as evidenced from the number of periodic markets, observed in which the trade transactions were largely carried out by barter, but to some extent through money under the supervision of the Ahom Kings. On the other hand, in the hills, within the *cul-de-sacs* of the tribes there was a complete absence of internal market centre, be it the Meghalaya plateau, the NEFA tribal areas or the Naga or Lushai culture areas. This may be explained *a posteriori* because of the complete absence of surplus in their economics.

However, as evidenced from historical records of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century a large number of periodic markets (*hats*) were found more or less, at the *interface of the two culture areas*, the peasant's and the hill tribe's indicating the specific nature of their distinctively different economic formations resulting in a peculiar spatial expression, the strings of market centres surrounding the hills and tribal culture areas. Genesis of this peculiar spatial formation can be referred as the *contactual genesis* model of market centres, a distinction peculiar to the particular phase of history of the region and different from the two theoretical positions explained earlier.

IV

Such *deductive* explanation would be incomplete without relevant historical data of the period of reference. For economy

and clarity, the study is confined to market centres to the north and south of the plateau of Meghalaya. The plateau has been the traditional habitat of the Khasi, the Jaintia and the Garo tribes for a long period of time. Moreover, this plateau region is located in between two large valley civilizations, in the north, the Brahmaputra valley and in the south the Surma and its extension into the vast plains of Bengal. Thus, the tribes living here have been traditionally exposed to technologies and culture of the peasants in the valleys, particularly along the borders with the plains. But, they lived in *relative isolation*, a subsistence economy based on partly hunting and partly agricultural with no significant surplus, but a distinct cultural identity of their own. Towards the late Ahom rule, some regular economic interaction between these tribes both the north (with Assam) and south with Bengal has emerged, in form of barter at periodic markets (*hats*) at the border between the hills and the plains, approximately at the interface between the two sets of culture areas, of the tribes and the plainsmen. The Khasis and Jaintias (*Syntengs*) traded largely with the south of the plateau, i.e. with the Sylhet (*Srihatta*) in the Surma valley. The principal markets were Bholaganj, Chhatak, Lakhat, Jaintiapur, Jaffang, Pharalbazar, Maodong, Ponatit, Sonapur, Molaghul and Lengjul which operated on the Khasi calendar of 8-day week to facilitate the Khasi and Synteng traders to operate on all the markets (Hunter, 1879 : 241). The chief exports from the Khasi-Jaintia areas were limestone, oranges, smelted iron, cotton, betel-nuts and potatoes (the latter, first introduced in the hilly by David Scott in 1830). The chief imports were rice, dried fish, cotton clothes, salt and tobacco (Hunter : 236-37. The total import and export were estimated to the tune of Rs. 1.6 million. On the other hand, the trade with the north was insignificant, amounting to about Rs. 15,000/- mostly through the markets of Burdwar, Rani and Sonapur. By the middle of nineteenth century, the degree of peasantisation of the Garos was much greater than the Khasis and the Syntengs since the latter two tribes depended considerably on import of their staple food, rice, while Garos produced most of their subsistence needs. The main trading points of the Garos to south (Mymensingh) were Hebraghat, Naluabari, Phulbari, Ghospur, Durgapur and Nazirpur while to the north, in Goalpara the markets were Damra, Jira, Nibari, Lakhshampur, Bengal Khata, Tikri-kill, Rajalealla, Singimari, Mankachar and Putimari. (Hunter : 152) (See, Map I). The main exports of the Garos were cotton (Hunter estimated : 35,000 maunds in 1874-75) chillies, wax, lac,

India-rubber and timber while the imports were animals (cows, pigs, goats and fowls), salt, earthenware, swords, spearheads and clothes.

The commodities which the tribes sold can be classified into three types : (i) the forest produce, resulting from the prevalent hunting and gathering activities like lac, hyde, ivory etc. and (ii) special crops like cotton (in Garo Hills), potatoes and betel-nuts (in Khasi Hills) which were specially grown for trade and possibly, introduced from outside, and (iii) minerals and semi-processed metals, like limestone, coal and smelted iron from Khasi Hills (Oldham, 1858 ; Syiemlich, 1987). The imports were chiefly foodstuffs (rice, salt and dried fish) and iron implements like swords, arrowheads, *daos* and *kudalis* (hoes) etc. essential to the defence and farming needs.

The peculiar locational situation of the markets allowed for some economies of exchange. The Khasi and Jaintias were expert traders themselves particularly those living close to the southern border and most of the trade was carried out by themselves. On the other hand, in the Garo Hills area, the traders were the Bengali and Marwari merchants from the south and even the Europeans towards the end of the eighteenth century who wanted to monopolize the cotton and iron trade which was valued elsewhere (Datta, :13-15).

The emergence of trading and trading centres at the foothills of the plateau led to a number of changes in the economies of the tribes by the middle of nineteenth century. Limestone and coal in Khasi Hills have become economic commodities by early part of the century. Commercial smelting of iron which held the away for a century (the role supplier of soft pig iron), by middle of the century has started vanishing due to competition of the European steel (Oldham, 1858). New commercial crops have already been introduced especially cotton and potatoes and the age old subsistence economy was breaking. The forest produce which had at best, some esoteric value assumed 'economic value' once it reached the market. Even, labour, though to a limited extent, became commodity, especially the porters who carried the mineral produce to the markets (Allen, 1909). The markets changed the world view of the tribal man, exposed him to new necessities and in the process started changing his life.

The markets affected the tribal culture and economies profoundly in two ways : (i) that within the tribal culture groups the introduction of money economy and introduction of tolls on market

entry (a form of alienation of surplus) of commodities from the hills by the local chieftains and their officials led to economic and social differentiation. (ii) Secondly, the process of integration of the tribal *cul-de-sacs* and economy with the larger economy of the colony and even, the 'world market' (the cessation of iron production being a good example) was accentuated. The level and nature of alienation of surplus from the tribal produce was extracted at various stages, by various interest groups and by varied methods, whether they were the Ahom Moghal officials, the Bengali merchant, the Marwari trader or the British officers and traders in later years. Gradually, in the process of consolidation, the doors of the tribal *cul-de-sacs* were thrown open and markets emerged in the interior of the territories, in contradiction to the period just prior to it (Hunter : 226). The historical and economic inevitability of integration was nearly complete by the end of nineteenth century.

Notes & References

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