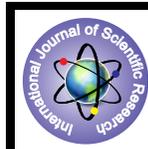


## Bodo-Bhutia Border Trade Relations In Colonial Era



### History

**KEYWORDS :** Border trade, Bodos, Bhutias, Economy

**Asha Basumatary**

Assistant Professor, Department of History Cachar College, Silchar P.O. Silchar, 788001

### ABSTRACT

*Border trade is an overland trade operated by the way of exchange of certain commodities by the people living along both sides of the international border. It differs from trade carried through air, land and sea ports. Since North-Eastern states of India shares land borders with the countries of Bhutan, Tibet, China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Bodo tribes inhabiting the northern foothill regions of Assam and Bengal have maintained border trade relations with the Bhutia (Bhootea) tribes of Bhutan hills and the western Arunachal Pradesh hills since long time. Through the hill tribes, their trade was further extended to the Tibetans and the Chinese traders. This article thus intends to explore how Bodo tribes carried out border trade with Bhutia tribes of Bhutan during colonial times, and also to examine how far it contributed to the growth of their economy.*

### Introduction

Assam is the homeland of numerous indigenous tribes came from different directions for ages. It had once been a melting pot of which the different tribes took shelter with their different multihued culture and traditions professing different religious beliefs and practices. Such tribes include Bodo/Boro, Mishing, Rabha, Garo, Hajong, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari, Dimasa Kachari, etc. Of these tribes, the Bodos consist of one of the largest Kachari tribes of Assam, who represents approximately 40.9 percent of the total tribal population of the state. Racially, they are Mongoloid origin. Their ethnic substantiation comes firstly from Endle's remark wherein a generic term, 'Kachari' is invariably applied to a number of ethnic groups (Endle, 1911). The view of many scholars unfolds the western China near Yang-tse-kiang and Hwang-ho rivers to be their erstwhile original home. This utterance appears because of their having Mongoloid features. The language what actually they speak now, represents the branch of Tibeto-Burman dialect. They were once ruling tribes of ancient Assam and their kingdom is still clearly reflected on various archaic literatures under the name of different dynasties. Their dynasty historically represented the Kacharis, Chutiyas and Koches (Barua, 1969) whose sway lingered on different regions of ancient Assam in different historical periods. The Bodos are now spread in different parts of northeastern states, in some parts of north Bengal and neighbouring countries of Bangladesh and Nepal. Their main occupation is primarily the peasant based economy fully dependent on agriculture, but the rearing of animals and birds as well as weaving too remained the main activity for their family income. This was probably not sufficient for them to maintain their family. However, the opportunity for trade came to them when they, after having migrated from the Sino-Tibetan border regions through numerous passes (*duars*), resided densely in the northern foothill regions of Bengal and Assam, adjoining to the hills of Bhutan. This resulted in bringing the Bodo tribes into closer contact with the hill tribes of Bhutan kingdom. They were, however, successful in setting up the trade links with the bordering hills tribes of Bhutan on the north and then through them, the Tibetans and the Chinese traders. The name of all the tribes inhabiting the hills of Bhutan and the western Arunachal Pradesh is collectively called Bhutia (Bhootea) as defined by Ajay Roy (Roy, 1995). Ethnically, they are Tibetan origin and their language belongs to Tibetan dialect. Having migrated from Tibet through the different passes (*duars*) in the Himalayas, they gradually spread themselves into Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim, eastern West Bengal and also, in some other parts of India. But this article tends to focus on the Bhutia tribes of Bhutan and Tibet with whom the Bodos carried out border trade in the past.

### Border Trade

Border trade is normally carried out through standard export or import within the frameworks of nations. This occurs, espe-

cially representing the increase in trade in certain areas or regions, whereas the crossing borders are comparatively easy and the products are much cheaper in one place than the other. In case of trade existed in between the Bodos and Bhutias some locally produced commodities were traded by way of exchange in the markets of the Indo-Bhutan border during those times. The trade was often acted through numerous passes (*duars*).

### Kachari Duars

The trade was not carried directly due to the lack of easy routes, but there were some passes or *duars* (*dooars*) especially in the north frontier of Bengal and Assam. In Bodo literary term, *duars* or *dooars* means gateway or door. The *duars* is usually a large region extending from the Darjeeling foothills of West Bengal to the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. This region nurtured the gateway to Bhutan from India. The *duars* linked to the plains of eastern Bengal and Assam. There are eighteen gateways or passages through which trade was carried. Some of these *duars* are Alipurduar, Kalikholaduar, Jomduar, Burwigma duar, Gwrholia duar, Chirang duar, Chapaguri duar, Bijni duar, Chapakhmar duar, Buxa duar, Khaling duar, ect. (Goswami, 1986). This large region is divided into two parts, namely western and eastern *duars*. In Bengal, there are eleven western *duars* popularly known as Bengal *duras* and the rest seven *duars* in Assam as eastern *duars*. These passes come to be known as 'Kachari *duars*' meaning door or gateway opening to the Kachari tribes who inhabited the plains of Assam adjacent to the Bhutan hills. The passes still existed in between Assam and Tibet through Bhutan (Barua, 1969). Through these passes the Bodos used to carry trade with the hill tribes of Bhutan and Tibet.

The eastern *duars* are still located in Bodo populated regions, such as Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Chirang, Baksa, Udalguri, Sonitpur, etc. covering an area of approximately 1,000 square miles connecting the hills to the plains (Goswami, 2012). Interestingly, some districts and constituency of Bodoland Territorial Council created recently under the sixth schedule of the constitution of India in 2003 CE represents the name of several *duars*, such as Chirang, Baksa, Chapaguri, etc. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE the Bhutan had an exclusive control on these *duars*. But, according to a Sinchula treaty signed on 11 November 1865 CE after the Anglo-Bhutan war, the British took possession of this region. When the British regime in India came to an end in 1947 CE, the *duars* region gradually merged with dominion of independent India.

### Bhutia Mela

There are many border markets on the plains of Assam, adjoining to the Bhutan hills. Of all these markets, Udalguri market was considerably the biggest one, where the Bhutia *mela* continued to be held annually. This occurred, often because of the existence of a famous border trade route so called Lhasa (Tibet)-Tawang-Udalguri (erstwhile Darrang district of Assam) route

between the hill tribes of Tawang and Bodo tribes of Udalguri region. This trade linkage was further extended into the core of Tibet and China. It is stated that, the tracts from the Tawang valley to the last part of the hill range north of Udalguri remained under the control of Tawang Lama authorities. The authorities often worked out their power in the foothills area adjoining to the Udalguri region (Roy, 1995). The Kachari *duars* came under the exclusive control of Bhutan authority during the rule of the Ahoms. This is clearly evident from the fact that the Bhutanese received some gifts known as '*posa*' annually from the Ahom king for maintaining a peaceful atmosphere in that area (Goswami, 2012). But in the last part of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, there was an unsteadiness and anarchy that rampant in Assam due to the frequent occurrence of a Moamaria uprising and the invasions of Burmese troops. For this, the Udalguri-Tawang-Lhasa (Tibet) trade route was interrupted which made an adverse effect on trade. This, however, led to the deterioration of the Bodo economy at a snail's pace.

Towards the end of the 19th century CE, there was, certainly, an attempt from the British East India Company to open an overland route stretching from northeast India to the interior of western China, a large part of China. At that time, the British traders, although situated at Macao and Canton on the eastern coast of China were not allowed to enter into her western part. But, the Chinese Imperial authority's imposition of certain restrictions on the Company made an adverse effect on latter's thriving China trade especially in tea and opium. Of course, there had already been a trade route between Udalguri-Tawang-Lhasa (Tibet) and China despite of long dilapidated. But the severe turmoil frequently arose along the Udalguri-Tawang road (Roy, 1995). This resulted in closing up of trade with Tibet and China.

Apart from Udalguri, there are a few other bordering markets operated through the *duars*. In order to sell their commodities in Assam, the Bhutanese and the Tibetans merchants came regularly to the markets of border regions, such as Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Chirang, Simla, Darrangamela, etc. It is said that, the caravans of Bhutan and India used to gather annually and thereafter the trade and barter carried at the markets on the Indo-Bhutan border of Darrangamela of the present Baksa district wherein Bhutia *melabazar* used to be held (Chakravarti, 1992). Such activities not only brought about increases in the volume of India's foreign trade, but also provided some economic benefits to a section of local traders who are mostly poor Bodo tribes.

#### Items for Border Trade

The commodities sold by Bhutanese merchants into India's mart were mainly woollen blankets, yak's tail, Chinese silk, mules, ponies, musk-wax, rubber and gold dust while the export of items from Assam of India mainly consisted of rice, iron, cotton yarn and cloth, otter, Assam silk yarn, buffalo-horns, pearls, dried fish, etc. It is referred in Pemberton's report on Bhutan that the hill traders used to bring silver bullion to the amount of one lack of rupees to purchase rice, Assam silk, iron, otter skin, buffalo-horns, pearls, etc.(Chakravarti, 1992). This unveils that trade in the border mart occurred mostly on commodities although there is reference of bringing of the pony from Bhutan.

#### Agreement for Border Trade

The impossibility to control the ferocious tribes all along the road across the hills made the British Government under Captain J.T. Gurdon, the then Principal Officer of Darrang district to negotiate with tribal hill chiefs who often created hurdles in the Udalguri-Tawang road. On 5th February 1844 at Balipara near Tezpur, an agreement was signed by Captain J.T. Gurdon and the seven Bhutia chiefs known as 'Sat Rajahs' and representatives of Tawang as well as Lhasa (Tibet) authorities. According to the agreement, the British Government agreed to pay an annual sum

of 5000 rupees to the Bhutia chiefs as a guarantee for maintaining safety and peace all along the route up to Tawang. As a result, the Udalguri-Tawang-Lhasa trade route again opened and thereafter an annual Bhutia *melabazar* held at Udalguri, and continued till recent past. There is, of course, a reference of annual *posa* paid continuously to the Bhutia representatives in 1944 CE (Roy, 1995).

#### Beginning of Monetary Transaction

The mere barter trade ceased to work due to a considerable going up on the volume of trade and so, the monetary transactions began to take place. With the peaceful law and order as well as with the improvement of communications, many traders from Guwahati and other places came to *melabazar* and sold their commodities to the bordering hills tribes and purchased from them too, many hill products coming from Lhasa and Tawang.

Since the monetary transaction was in need of time the barter system became obsolete. This became very difficult for the poor Bodo traders to deal with that situation. So, their transactions more or less remained to barter trade of small volume only. Despite the fact, they continued the trade on their personal relation with Bhutia traders who sometimes used to stay with them in their houses as their guests (Roy, 1995). When the Bhutias came to their house they brought some oranges, corns and grinded pickle along with their horse. Very interestingly, their grinded pickle is called 'Gongar bathwn' by the Bodos. It is generally made of various edible wild plants, pulse, chili, sesame, etc. The Bhutia is often called Gongar by the Bodos.

#### Entry of Marwari and Barpetiah Traders

The border trade current on the *duars* region brought many outsider trade communities, like Marwari. The capitalist Marwari traders popularly known as *Kaiyahs* in Assam took the opportunity of shortage of money of the Bodo traders and gradually monopolized the wholesale trade. Having brought commodities from Guwahati and Calcutta markets at very cheaper rates, they sold them at much higher rates to the hill traders and the dwellers of *duar* areas in the border markets. Apart from them, there is a section of Assamese traders of Barpetia area alleged Barpetiahs who had already hogged the trade in lower Assam came as mustard traders. Their business earlier remained on exporting the seed outside Assam for oil extraction. But their excellent proficiency in business facilitated them to explore a new avenue of trade, especially the border trade with hill traders. Their trade was, however, not only confined into the forwarding of mustard seeds, but also extended to other locally produced grains where they earned a lot of profit. According to the report of the Government, the total volume of border trade in Udalguri region alone was about four *lakhs* rupees per annum (Roy, 1995). Such type of profitable trade was far away from the control of Bodo traders at that time.

#### Illegal Transfer of Land

Another most important aspect occurred during the border trade was the illegal transfer of land from the poor Bodo farmers to the Barpetiah traders. This was done by some lower revenue officials who were mostly Assamese and Barpetiahs traders. The Bodo farmers were mostly illiterate at that time. Being money lenders the Barpetiah traders easily made the unauthorized and illegal transfer of land from the Bodo peasants to themselves on the strength of mutilated or even false mortgage deeds (Roy, 1995). In this way, the Bodo farmers always became victim at the hands of Barpetiah fortune-hunters. Such Barpetiah traders are still found well settled in some Bodo inhabited border regions.

#### Contribution to Bodo Economy

Since the Bodo people were mostly forest dweller representing the occupation mainly agriculture based economy, they were not much drawn towards border trade with Bhutia tribes of Bhutan.

Only a few numbers amongst them carried the trade because of the acute shortage of money. And also, whatever they did business, actually existed on barter trade of small volume only. In comparison to other traders, like Marwari and Barpetiahs, the Bodos are less expertise on trade. So, this lucrative border trade became totally out of their active involvement whenever the monetary transactions cropped up.

### Conclusion

The Bodos and Bhutias have thus a historical border trade relation since long time. Their border trade remained mostly on commodities. The volume of barter trade was not actually at all substantial, but significantly, it contributed to the growth of Bodo economy. Nonetheless, this trade paved the way for many outside traders, especially Marwari and Barpetiahs to pour and settle temporarily or permanently in the Bodo inhabited border regions during those times. Further, it also witnessed the illegal transfer of land from poor Bodo peasants to the outside Barpetiah traders. Despite the fact, it seems that both the tribes shared their cultural traits through which their cordial bilateral border relations have further been strengthened.

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