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## TRADE RELATION OF AHOMSWITH THE NEIGHBORING REGIONS DURING SEVENTEENTH - EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES AND ITS PORTRAYAL IN THE LARGER INDIAN IMAGINATION

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### ABSTRACT :

*Generations of historians has seen Assam with an approach where it was represented as a buffer zone between the mighty Mughal territory and the other eastern regions like Tibet, Myanmar, Bhutan, and China and so on. But, careful study of the regional sources allows seeing the importance of Assam not just as a producing region but its peculiar character of being followed different economic policies to run its financial affairs.*



**KEYWORDS :** economic relations , application of economic theory , historical reconstruction.

### INTRODUCTION :

For explaining the economic relations of Ahoms historians generally look for models and typologies and the intellectual market is full of commodities of pan-India approach. So, a very little choice is left for the emerging scholars. But, as R. S. Sharma has opined that Economic history is not an application of economic theory with 'retrospective' effects<sup>1</sup> can be a path breaker for the new generations to follow other methods to reconstruct the history of the societies where source materials are not accessible at ease. In this paper an attempt has been made to see the trade relations of the Ahoms with its neighboring regions from a perspective where Assam is not presented just as a liminal zone. Here, the importance of the topography was taken into consideration for its trade relations with both the mighty as well tiny neighbors for the historical reconstruction.

Assam, located in the north east of India, is geographically bounded by the Himalayan mountain ranges of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the north, the hills of Nagaland and Manipur (also known as the Patkai Hills) in the east, Mizoram and Tripura in the south and present day Bangladesh in the south and the west. The river Brahmaputra flows through the plains of Assam from the north east to the south west, dividing the entire valley into uttarakula anddakshinakula creating a geographical basis for the emergence of a regional particularity.

The present day Assam is not as similar as the medieval Assam ruled by the Ahoms from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (1228 AD) to the advent of the British in 1826 AD in terms of its geographical entity. In medieval period border of a country was malleable as it depended on the

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<sup>1</sup> R.S. Sharma, Rethinking India's Past, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2009. P. 1

capacity of the ruler to defend its existing border and policy of aggression against the enemy state. The losing a battle or winning it defines the border of a medieval state. Assam was not different from it, as it can be seen the war with Koches in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and later with Mughals during 17<sup>th</sup> century changes the realm of the Ahoms frequently. So, this paper tends to concentrate on the Trade relation of the ruling domains of the Ahoms with the neighboring regions.

This above mentioned region though important both strategically and economically, has for years been approached as a liminal zone in the Indian imagination largely. It marked the border area of the buffer zone, beyond which lied the foreign powers with whom India was involved in trade. Though Assam exchanged many items of both luxury and mass consumption, it was never seen as a producer of commodities. Hence, the complex network of Assam's trade as a producer and export with three regions, Bengal and Ganga valley, states of Burma and Yunnan, and the Hill 'polities' and western zomia<sup>2</sup> is a matter of further studies.

Whenever the question of Assam's trade relations comes up, the stereotypical way is to look at its relations with the provinces of Bengal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Yunnan etc. Its relations with the smaller yet important areas under the various hill chiefs are out rightly neglected. Therefore, the object of this study is to look not only into the relations with the bigger regions but also with the smaller ones under the respective chiefs as far as the Sham states. Though there are references about the trade relations of Assam with the neighboring regions, but it is not adequately understood to form a model that explain the regional particularity. Assam was seen basically as a transitory border zone as it was not considered as a large producer of commodities though it exported many agricultural as well as manufactured goods such as pepper, pulses, stick lack, row cotton, gold and silver etc.

### Trade and Commerce of Assam with Larger Regions:

During the medieval period, a major bulk of India's trade with the eastern regions beyond the Himalayas like Tibet, China and Yunnan, was conducted through the trans-Himalayan routes<sup>3</sup> that reached Kashmir via Ladakh on one hand, while Nepal created the gateway on the eastern front, and on the other hand the third entranceway passed through Bengal to southern China via Kamrup (Assam). Tabaqat-i-Nasiri, a 13<sup>th</sup> century account by MinhajuzSiraj has mentioned that there were about 35 such routes which passed from the territory of Kamrud (Kamrup) Assam to Tibet.<sup>4</sup>

There were primarily three routes from Assam to Bengal one by water and the other two by land. The river Brahmaputra was an excellent water way for the movement of vessels. Of the two land routes, one was from Tezpur (Darang district of Assam) to Lakhnauti (the capital of Bengal Sultans) through the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara, in the north of Brahmaputra while the other one started from Sibsagar and passed through Nowgong- Gauhati, in the south of Brahmaputra, crossing over it, joined the path, respectively, at Tezpur and Barpeta in Kamrup. The other route went from Sibsagar (across the Jayantiya hills) to Sonargaon (Dacca) via Sylhet and

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<sup>2</sup>Zomia is a geographical term coined in 2002 by historian Willem van Schendel of the University of Amsterdam to refer to the huge mass of mainland Southeast Asia that has historically been beyond the control of governments based in the population centers of the lowlands. The highlands of north Indochina (north Vietnam and all Laos), Thailand, the Shan Hills of northern Burma, and the mountains of Southwest China; some extend the region as far west as Tibet, Northeast India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The hill tribes of north east India especially the *Adis, Mishimis, Miris, Khamtiset* come under this concept of *Zomia* as lived in a society which was out of the control of the so called state of civilized world.

<sup>3</sup> Bin Yang, Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Sep., 2004), pp. 281-322.

<sup>4</sup> Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate Politics, Economy and Coins*, Manohar Publication, New Delhi, 2003. P.273.

Mymensingh.<sup>5</sup> Those traders who were interested in sea-trade normally preferred the second route as it had connection with the river. Lakhnauti, the contemporary capital of Bengal had the line of connection with Tibet via Kamrup.<sup>6</sup> Thus the region of Assam acted as the bridge for Bengal with the east.

There were another five routes which linked Assam with the eastern regions from Sadiyato Tibet or China. The pass of Dibong, the Mishimi route, the Phungan pass to Manchee and China, the route by Manipur to the Irrawaddy and the Patkai pass to Bhoma were important for connectivity with the regions like Myanmar and Yunan.<sup>7</sup> The easiest one was on the north eastern site over the Patkai to the upper Burma and thence to China. It was this route the Ahoms used to come to Assam in 1228 AD.<sup>8</sup> All these routes are the evidence of rich commercial ties that Assam had enjoyed with its eastern neighbors. Economic affairs of Assam were not confined to only with Bengal or Bhutan. It equally maintained its commercial associations with other regions too rendering to its advantages. Trading activities in Assam was not as developed to be compare with the Mughal India. The Mughal India had the organized money lending system known as the hundi, which Assam was lacking.<sup>9</sup> Yet it had its own unique system of trade where the small paddler known as Mudoi did handle the internal trade to a limited extent in forms of the weekly hats. On the other hand the Barmudois (traders and merchant with considerable amount of capital) handle the external trade with regions like Bengal, Bhutan, Lhasa etc.<sup>10</sup>

Among all the neighboring hill tribes of Assam the Bhutanese alone had an organized government. It was since the middle of the 17th century that Bhutan was ruled by a diarchy consisting of Dharma Raja with supreme religious and political power, while Dev Raja was in-charge of the general administration. The two rulers were jointly called Dev-Dharma Rajas.<sup>11</sup> Assam and Bhutan enjoyed close trade relation with exception of small conflicts at times regarding the possessions of the duars. Among the thirteen duars, the four duars were under Bhutan along with the Posa<sup>12</sup>. While the rest of the eight duars were under the Ahom kings till the middle of the 17th century when by a written documents the Ahom secede the territory as far as the Gohain Kamal Ali to the Bhutanese in return of a tribute.<sup>13</sup>

The Bhutanese traders travelled down to Assam for the disposal of Bhutanese goods, and traded back with the Assamese ware to count profit in both ways. The Tibetans also used this route (duars) as a path in the Tibet-Assam trade route. A broader network of that formed an important leg of the southern 'silk-roads'.<sup>14</sup> There was, however, another path in the Tibet-Assam route that bypassed Bhutan. It ran via Tawang to Hajo in Assam through the Kooreah Parrah Duar.<sup>15</sup> Originating

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<sup>5</sup>Nisar Ahmad, Assam-Bengal Trade in the Medieval Period: A Numismatic Perspective, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1990), pp. 169-198.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid,

<sup>7</sup> S.L. Barua, A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2013. p. 441

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 441.

<sup>9</sup> Jahnobi Gogoi, The Agrarian System in Medieval Assam, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2002. P. 157.

<sup>10</sup> Nisar Ahmed, Assam-Bengal Trade in the Medieval Period: A Numismatic Perspective, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1990), pp. 169-198.

<sup>11</sup> M.K. Chowdhury, Assam – Bhutan Trade relations till Medieval period, IJAHMS. p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Posa was a system of payment to buy off raids by tribes of hills such as Bhutias, Miris and Daflas. It was introduced by Ahom King Praatap Singha or Susengphaa. It was an excellent system to deal with tribes of hill area surrounding Ahom Kingdom.

<sup>13</sup> S.L. Barua, A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2013. p. 371

<sup>14</sup> Indrajit Ray and Ratna Sarkar, "Reconstructing Nineteenth Century Trade Route between Bhutan and Assam: Evidences from British Political Missions", in [http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publicationFiles/JBS/JBS\\_Vol13/13-1.pdf](http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/publicationFiles/JBS/JBS_Vol13/13-1.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid,

from Tawang a road, however, traversed to Tashigang in Bhutan to serve as a link between the two paths of the Tibet-Assam route. It was through this route that the Tibetan Kumpas carried their trade with Assam. The Kumpas were so predominant in this route that some authorities considered the Kumpas those of Bhutanese who lived in tents or in temporary booths, and were employed in the carrying trade down this passage.

According to a later record by a British official Pamberton more than 2,000 Kumpas were regularly involved in this trade route. This traffic was not constant in nature since the bulk of the Assam-bound commodities were traded through seasonal fairs.<sup>16</sup> Though, in most instances, the fairs in Assam were symbolic to some religious festivity, those were by and large the spots of commerce. Assam's annual fair, however, took place generally in the winter, and this timing was convenient for journey in the Bhutan-Assam trade route because, in summer the heavy rainfall and jungle route made the journey almost impossible. The commodities which generally exchanged were Mughal silk which even traded with Tibet and China also had demand in Bhutan too.<sup>17</sup> They imported items like rice, pulse and other food grains along with buffalo horn, silk, lac, skins, iron, pearls, some amount of cloth, salt etc. According to Tavernier there was large trade of tortoise shells, bracelets and sea shells as large as egg which was sawn into small circles and there were bracelets of coral and yellow amber also which have been worn by the rich people.<sup>18</sup> While Bhutan exported items such as yak tails, ponies, musk, gold dust, blanket, daggers etc.<sup>19</sup>

In India particularly the Gangetic delta was never been productive for horse-breeding. Hence, most of the war horses were brought from the central Asian regions in the north-west and from Tibet via Assam. Thus, in the medieval period the Bengal sultans tried to gain a stronghold on these regions of Assam.<sup>20</sup> However despite these attempts being futile, Bakhtiyar Khalji and his successors, till the times of the Ilyas Shahis and finally the Mughals, continued to attack Assam to bring it under their control.

The war horses which were brought to Bengal from Tibet via Kamrup (Assam) were known as tanghan or tangan horses.<sup>21</sup> Abu'lFazl has mentioned that Tanghan horses were brought to the imperial Mughal court from Kuch (Behar).<sup>22</sup> Actually these horses were brought from Yunnan and China as is evident from the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* which mentioned that overland trade was carried between Bengal and Tibet via Kamrup (Assam). These horses were traded in a market known as Karbattan (a place near the foothills of the eastern Himalayas) where daily 1500 horses were sold and it is from this place the war horses were brought to Bengal and then to the Mughal imperial court.<sup>23</sup>

Bengal and Assam shares a strong trade relation from antiquity. A 12<sup>th</sup> century traveler Al Idrissi has mentioned about Assam – Bengal trade in his writings by stating that Aloe wood was imported from Kamrup to Samandar or Chittagong in 15 days journey by a river identified with

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid,

<sup>17</sup> S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2013. p.438.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Baptist Tavernier, *Travels in India* translated by V. Ball, Orient Books, New Delhi, 1977. p. 223.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.371.

<sup>20</sup> Nisar Ahmad, *Assam-Bengal Trade in the Medieval Period: A Numismatic Perspective*, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1990), p. 171.

<sup>21</sup> Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate Politics, Economy and Coins*, Manohar Publication, New Delhi, 2003. P. 273.

<sup>22</sup> Abu'lFazl, *Ain-I-Akbari*, vol.-I, translated by H. Blochmann, Low Price Publication, Delhi, 1989. p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate Politics, Economy and Coins*, Manohar Publication, New Delhi, 2003. p. 271.

Brahmaputra.<sup>24</sup> Trade with Bengal provided the Assamese people with commodities like sugar, ghee, varieties of silk, Muslin, finest products of cotton dresses, perfumes and salt.<sup>25</sup> While goods like mustard seeds, Muga cloth, pepper, stick lac, raw cotton, gold and silver etc. were exported to Bengal.<sup>26</sup>

According to Alexander Hamilton Assam used to export 15,000 mounds of mustard annually to Bengal.<sup>27</sup> In Dichai there was commercial transaction between Assam and Bengal. A large quantity of silver coins of Bengal rulers from Ghiyasuddin Iwaz to Hussain Shah have been found in various medieval trade centres in Assam like in Nowgong, Gauhati, Sibasagar and Karimganj which depicts the trade relation that Assam enjoyed with Bengal.<sup>28</sup> According to Syed Ejaz Hussain some of these coins might be brought during the war time during the invasion by the Bengal sultans, but a considerable number of coins reached there through trade also.<sup>29</sup> The coins found at Gauhati and Nowgong from the period of Bengal sultan Firuz Shah 1 established the fact, as Firuz did not invade these places.<sup>30</sup>

The other important item of import to Bengal from Yunnan was silver. This precious metal reached Bengal both directly and indirectly in exchange for other commodities from Bawdwin (in south China) via Kamrup (Assam) in the north-east, Tripura and Sylhet in the east and Chittagong and Arakan in the south-east. This trade was conducted by the Tai or Dai traders.<sup>31</sup> The Tibetans, incapable of minting coins, sent chunks of silver to the Ahom rulers who minted coins on their behalf and sent them back to Tibet. These coins were known as Tsang-Pao to tap the Tibetan trade.

This region of Assam gained importance as far as trade was concerned during the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. for India as the Gurkhas took over Nepal from the Newar rulers of Malla dynasty and blocked all the passes through Nepal to Tibet and China. So, the volume of trade as well as the trans-Himalayan diplomacy with east was totally depends on the region of Assam.

Assam even took part in the greater Indian Ocean economy indirectly though it played a nominal role. According to Richard M. Eaton the minted silver coin from Yunnan, which were transferred through the Irrawaddy valley of Arakan and the upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam also absorbed these region into the larger Indian Ocean economy.<sup>32</sup> Even John Dayell has mentioned that silver which was not minted in Bengal or anywhere near of this region was imported from the Burma-Yunnan border region into the delta (Bengal) via overland and river routes leading to the Arakan coast and the upper Brahmaputra valley.<sup>33</sup> The trade routes between Assam and Yunnan via

<sup>24</sup> S. Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate, Politics, Economy and Coins*, Manohar Publications, Delhi, 2003. p. 272.

<sup>25</sup> Jahnobi Gogoi, p. 157.

<sup>26</sup> S.I. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *A New Account of the East edited by William Foster*, The Argonaut Press, Empire House 175 Piccadilly, London, 1930. p.58.

<sup>28</sup> Nisar Ahmed, *Assam-Bengal Trade in the Medieval Period: A Numismatic Perspective*, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1990), pp. 169-198.

<sup>29</sup> Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate, Politics, Economy and Coins*, Manohar Publications, Delhi, 2003. P. 271

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 272.

<sup>31</sup> Bin Yang, *Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective*, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Sep., 2004), pp. 281-322.

<sup>32</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204 – 1760*, Oxford University press, New Delhi, 2014. P. 95.

<sup>33</sup> John Dayell, "The China Connection: Problems of silver supply in medieval Bengal", in J.F. Richards (ed.), *Precious Metals in the later Medieval and Early modern world*, Carolina Academic Press, 1983, P.207-24.

John Dayell notices, "A separate apparently well-traveled and renowned route led from the region of the Upper Yangtze-Mekong-Shalween Rivers through Tibet. Passes led through Bhutan and Nepal into Kamarupa and Hindustan respectively." (Bin yang, p.11).



Tawang and Assam- Szechan and Upper Burma via Mishimi hills also depict Assam's trade links with these countries. Assam silk had a good market in the neighboring regions of Bengal in Mughal India as far as the Coromandel and Malabar Coast because of its long durability and texture.<sup>34</sup> Bhutan also exchanged the Assam silk in exchange of their goods like horns and wool which were brought from Lhasa, in Simalabari hat.<sup>35</sup> Hence, it can be seen that Assam had a strong trading connections with various regions. But, it failed to get its due recognition in the writings of the scholars as it has been portrayed as a liminal zone for connecting to regions for commerce.

Thus this is the overall picture of the trade of Assam that usually has been depicted in the writings of the scholars who has worked on trade and commerce of Assam. Though Assam conducted much fruitful trade with neighbors, it was neglected as a producer of commodities.

### **Intra-Regional Trade of the Ahoms: A Peculiar Economic Affair:**

The medieval Assam was bounded by the different hill tribes with diverse customs, manners, and languages. Thus the Ahom king had to maintain a diplomatic relation with the chieftains and kings of the tribes both in terms of political as well as economic matters. Generally the Ahom kings followed a policy of conciliation towards the tribes with the backing of military actions at the hours of need to maintain a peaceful environment with the hill polities.<sup>36</sup>

It was during the reign of Pratap Simha, the Ahom came in contact with the Jayantiya for the first time. The reigning monarch the Jayantias was Jasma Manikat that point of time. The Ahoms approached the Jayantias in order to punish the Kacharai king, who also had a long enmity with the Jayantiyas.<sup>37</sup> Subsequently the Jayantiya king got permission to establish markets and trade centres in the foot hills of Assam. But due to the issue of Dimarua their relation met with an end and it was only in 1682 after the battle of Itakhuli, the Ahom king Rudra Simha and Jayantiya king Lakshmi Singh tried for reconciliation of their relation as Ahom king give up its claim over Dimarua.

Garos traded cotton to the plains of Assam and imported rice and other agricultural products. Pandua located in a hillock close to Shella, was a mart where the Assam, Bengal and Garo products were bought and sold.<sup>38</sup> With Mizoram there was not much contact during the Ahom rule and it was only in 1710 A.D. the Ahoms established a direct contact with the Tripura. Nevertheless the kingdom of Tripura too remained passive to retain relation with Ahoms till the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the only exception in matters of exchange being silver.<sup>39</sup> The kingdom of Manipur also restrained from keeping any contact with the Ahom rulers till the rule of Khagemba as mentioned in Cheitoron Kumpapa.

On the Assam foot hills of the Khasi-Jayantiya were located Naduar (the nine passes opening the Hills to Kamrup). Some prominent local marts situated here was the Barduar, Rani and Sonapur.<sup>40</sup> Like the Jayantiyas, the Khasis (mainly those of the Khyrim or Khairam state) of Nongkrem got the free commercial intercourse with the plains and allowed to establish markets there

<sup>34</sup> M. Momin and Cecile A. Mawlong (ed), Society and economy in north east India, (volume-1), Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2004. p.323.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 323.

<sup>36</sup> S.L Baruah, A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2013. p. 370

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 379.

<sup>38</sup> David. R. Syiemlieh, Control of the foot hills, khasi-jayantiya trade and mart in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century." In M.Momin's society and economy in north east India (volume-1). P. 329.

<sup>39</sup> Syes, Ejaz Hussain, Silver Flow and Horse Supply to Sultanate Bengal with Special Reference to Trans-Himalayan Trade (13th-16th Centuries), Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, 56 (2013) P. 264-308.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 329.

by the Ahoms.<sup>41</sup> All are depicting a strong trade relation between Assam and its neighboring hills of the Jayantiya king. JahnobiGogoi has mentioned an Assamese merchant called Jayahari traded with the Jayantiya kingdom who invested a capital of 8000 rupees with the permission of the Ahom king and his Prime Minister (Burhagohain).<sup>42</sup> This is an indication of the volume of trade that Assam enjoyed with its hill polities. Hence, the absence of mart in the hills does not mean the prevention of cross hill trade. The prime products that were exchanged by the hill people with plain were mainly iron that was the single largest commodity exported to the plain of Sylhet from the Jayantiya hills.<sup>43</sup> While rice was imported to the Jayantiya hills in forms of barter but the use of cowries as means of exchange in a limited extend can not be overruled out rightly.

Assam – Naga relation was kind of mutual understanding to share the products of necessity of each other. While the Ahoms gave the Nagas revenue free land and fishing rights in the areas near the borders known as Naga– Khats, the Nagas in return paid tribute in forms of elephant tusks, spears, cloths, cottons etc. There were even weekly hats on the Asaam Naga hill borders, where both the parties exchanged goods in form of barter. Thus, it was a peculiar arrangement to exchange products according to each other's need and advantages

Fairs and festivals (mela) were another space for economic transaction in Assam where the different hill people of the region used to come down and bartered their products with the people of the valley. The JonbilMela of Nowgaong district still bears that customs. These fairs hold the socio-economic and cultural concerns of the region. Tilottoma Mukherjee quoted Buchanon Hamilton and says that a fair held on the banks of the river Brahmaputra near Chilmare where 40,000 to 50,000 worth of goods were annually sold.<sup>44</sup>

The other important centres of fairs in Assam were Sadiya in the foot hills, Udalguri, Daimara (in Darrang) etc. where the hill people assembled to exchange commodities. From these fairs they bought their annual requirements and cattle.<sup>45</sup> In Sadiya different hill tribes came for their annual requirements and sold their products. The Khamtis and Singphos had sold swords, spears, medicinal plants, ivory, and copper, silver which they procured from China.<sup>46</sup> According to M.L. Bose the Khamtis and Mishimis were inveterate traders. The Mishimis carried their barter trade with the Kachins and the Chinese through the route commonly known as Patkai that runs through the land of the Singphos.<sup>47</sup> While the Akas and the Mompas carried extensive trade and acted as middle men for the hill tribes of present day Arunachal. The commodities which they imported were salt, a small amount of clothes, utensils and agricultural implements and some ornamental beads in exchange of gold, yak tails, wool and woolen blankets, ponny, sheep, dogs musk, ginger, wax, honey, chilies, spices, madder, walnuts, rock salt and oranges.<sup>48</sup> Rubber and elephant tusk were onetime objects of lucrative trade.<sup>49</sup>

Slavery was another institution that existed on the hills and there is strong possibility of slave trade among the hill tribes as well as with the Ahoms too. As Tavernier has recorded all mines of gold, silver, lead, steel and iron belongs to the king who employed only slaves to work there and

<sup>41</sup> S.L. Baruah, A Comprehensive History of Assam, MunshiramManoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2013. p. 431.

<sup>42</sup> JahnobiGogoi, The agrarian system of medieval Assam, Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 2002, p. 158.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 331.

<sup>44</sup> Tilottoma Mukherjee, Political Culture and Economy in 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2013. P.121.

<sup>45</sup> M.L. Bose, History of Arunachal Pradesh, Concept Publications Company, New Delhi, 1997. P.33.

<sup>46</sup> S.L. Baruah, A Comprehensive History of Assam, MunshiramManoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> H.K. Barpujari, The comprehensive History of Assam, vol. 2, Publication Board of Assam, 1992, p. 127.

<sup>48</sup> See both S.L. Baruah, p. 442, and M.L. Bose. P. 32.

<sup>49</sup> M.L. Bose, History of Arunachal Pradesh, Concept Publications Company, New Delhi, 1997. p. 32.

these slaves he mainly brought from the hill tribes.<sup>50</sup> Even M.L. Bose also noted that the unyielding and unproductive terrain of the Himalayas was perhaps conducive for slavery among the tribes of the present day Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>51</sup> The institution of slavery was more strengthened by the beliefs and superstitions among tribes that believed that the number of slave one person is possessing would accompany him in the life after death. These shows about the slave trade of slaves among the hill tribes, so, that one could get possession over more slaves.

Hence, it can be seen that Assam enjoyed a strong commercial ties with its various neighboring hill polities. The trade relation with the hill tribe was more or less in form of exchange of goods or sometimes conciliatory measures to share produce of each other. The Posa system is the best example of this kind of conciliatory measures. The Ahom king give a right to these hill tribe to share the produce of the subjects of him in the foot hills in return for a guarantee of peace and acceptance of Ahom suzerainty. The hill people of Abors, Miris, the Bhutias, the Nagas, the Khamtis all enjoyed this advantage.

### CONCLUSION:

Assam was always ignored as a producer of commodities in the greater Indian imagination, though we can see it produced both agricultural and non-agricultural products in abundance and traded with the neighbors. It had a strong trade links with immediate hill tribes or even with the greater powers like Bengal, Tibet, Yunnan and also with the Mughals. Tavernier has mentioned that the kingdom of Assam is one of the best countries in Asia, for its products, all that are necessary to the life of men.<sup>52</sup> Assam had important mines of gold, silver, lead, iron, steel etc. in the southern part of the country.<sup>53</sup> He also noted that Assam had produced abundance of shellac and large quantities of which were exported to the countries like China and Japan.<sup>54</sup>

The nature of trade in this region was strikingly different from the rest of India which influenced the regional particularity. Weekly hats and fairs adorned the economic scenario. Cotton was traded by the Garos to the plains of Assam in exchange of grains and there were strong commercial ties with the Khasi state of Khyrim. The commodities of exchange were food grains and dried fish.

With the Nagas, however the Ahoms followed a carrot and stick policy as has been recorded in the Buranjis. The Ahoms followed the posa system with the Adis, Miris and Abors of Arunachal Pradesh. Through the routes which passed by the territory of the Singhphos, a good deal of trade was carried by the Mishmis. This trade was in the form of barter with the Kachins and the Chinese. This was also the route frequently used by the Burmese to attack Assam.

Thus Assam had a complex network of trade, where it acted not just a transitory border zone as depicted in the larger Indian imagination, but, produced goods and exchanges with the neighboring regions too. Its geographical location restrict it from the oceanic trade and it was one of the cause for the late contact of Assam with the Europeans; which cost Assam with its late incorporation into the wider world of trade, especially with the west. But Assam definitely enjoyed a greater role in trade and commerce beyond just as a transitory border zone; which usually presented in the generations of Indian imaginations.

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<sup>50</sup> J.B. Tavernier, Travels in India translated by V. Ball, Orient Books, New Delhi, 1977. p.223.

<sup>51</sup> M.L. Bose, History of Arunachal Pradesh, Concept Publications Company, New Delhi, 1997. P. 27.

<sup>52</sup> J.B. Tavernier, Travels in India translated by V. Ball, Orient Books, New Delhi, 1977. p. 220.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.220.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 221.



Assam maintained uncharacteristic economic affairs with its neighbors by giving concessions to Adis and Abors, by conducting weekly hats, yearly fairs and so on. All these make it a peculiar economic affair and enabled the Ahoms a fruitful conduct of trade with their neighbors though in a different approach. This forms a different identity for Assam. R.S. Sharma has argued about the characteristic of Feudalism that it lays in the consumption of surplus by the authority. The manner in which it might be consumed is not the prime concern. Thus, it can be argued that trade does not only mean the exchange of goods in a designated market or through the traders. It can be done through many ways but the main character is that of 'exchange'. The hill polities did it enjoyed the luxuries of having big hundis or markets, but, they have done it in different means, like conducting Mela, weekly hats or enjoying concessions in return for assurance of peace, accepting the nominal suzerainty of the Ahoms and so on. Thus all these peculiar arrangements created a geographical particularity.

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