

Upper Assam and South East Asia: A brief study of sadiya pasighat frontier

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Abstract: History tells that story of how commercially Assam was connected with China, Tibet and Myanmar. The Ahoms and several other Tai Shaan groups migrated from South East Asia region and ruled over Assam. So politically Assam had close relation with South Asia. In maintaining such relations, frontier areas always played a vital role as they witnessed the migration process and other economic activities throughout the centuries. Sadiya, located in the extreme eastern border of Upper Assam was one such Frontier. Since Ancient times, Sadiya was a commercial centre for its geo-political importance. Sadiya got its prominence as a trade Centre of easternmost Assam since time of the reign of Chutias .It was a common commercial transaction Centre for the frontier hill tribes residing in extreme east and the people resided in the plain areas. As the region became a connector to Burma and Tibet there was always a possibility of trans border trade and exchange of commercial goods. Again the hill tribes resided in the extreme north-east frontier of Assam provided various important goods to the Ahom state. Crossing the medieval boundary of Ahom state the traders from Assam reached the countries of the hilly tribes from where these tribesmen exchanged their products with the traders from Assam and they took it to Tibet and china through Burma, Manipur and other routes. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the linkage of Upper Assam with South East Asia . It highlights the how the north eastern frontier of Upper Assam had a close cultural and commercial relation with the South east Asian regions specially with Myanmar and Thailand. This paper tries to understand the Historical importance of the Sadiya frontier region in connecting Assam with rest of Asia .

Keywords: Assam, Ahom, Burma, Chutia, communication, Frontier, Trade.

INTRODUCTION:

History tells that story of how commercially Assam was connected with China, Tibet and Myanmar. The Ahoms and several other Tai Shaan groups migrated from South East Asia region and ruled over Assam. So politically Assam had close relation with South Asia. In maintaining such relations, frontier areas always played a vital role as they witnessed the migration process and other economic activities throughout the centuries. Sadiya, located in the extreme eastern border of Upper Assam was one such Frontier. Since Ancient times, Sadiya was a commercial centre for its geo-political importance. Sadiya got its prominence as a trade Centre of easternmost Assam since time of the reign of Chutias .It was a common commercial transaction Centre for the frontier hill tribes residing in extreme east and the people resided in the plain areas. As the region became a connector to Burma and Tibet there was always a possibility of trans border trade and exchange of commercial goods. Again the hill tribes resided in the extreme north-east frontier of Assam provided various important goods to the Ahom state. Crossing the medieval boundary of Ahom state the traders from Assam reached the countries of the hilly tribes from where these tribesmen exchanged their products with the traders from Assam and they took it to Tibet and china through Burma, Manipur and other routes. In this paper an attempt has been made to trace the linkage of Upper Assam with South East Asia . It highlights the how the north eastern frontier of Upper Assam had a close cultural and commercial relation with the South east Asian regions specially with Myanmar and Thailand. This paper tries to understand the Historical importance of the Sadiya frontier region in connecting Assam with rest of Asia .

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Almost all the books like Mahavir Singh's edited book, 'Home Away from Home: Inland Movement of People in India'(2017) , Hamlet Bareh's edited work 'Encyclopedia of North-East India, Volume 1', Bhagat Oinam and Dhiren A. Sadokpam's compilation titled 'Northeast India: A Reader'(2018) not only highlights the geo political history of the North Eastern regions but also discusses the socio cultural diversity of the region. Again books on Sadiya like 'Sadiyar Buranji' by Bhabananda Buragohain and 'Sadiyar Barnamoi Buranji' by Shree Kumar Dahutia deals with the trade and communications developed in the Sadiya region with the neighbouring countries like China, Burma and Tibet. However none of the books mainly related to the concept of Look East Policy but they provides ample reference for the academic discourse of Assam's South Asian connection before the coming of the British.

MATERIALS:

The area of study is only limited to the Sadiya region of Assam. To trace the colonial history both primary books like travel accounts, govt statistical records, archival records are taken into consideration. Besides these the secondary books, edited journals are also taken into account.

METHOD:

The approach of this research is historical and exploratory in nature. Both conventional and analytical methods of research are followed to achieve the objective. Due care has been taken to make interpretations rational and scientific.

DISCUSSION:

One of the major factors that connected Upper Assam with South and South East Asian region was trade economy. Almost all the trade routes, documented in the medieval texts reflect the importance of trade connection of Assam with China and Myanmar through the easternmost frontier of Assam i.e. Sadiya. There have many references regarding the trade and commerce during the medieval period in Sadiya region. Sadiya got its prominence as a trade Centre of easternmost Assam since time of the reign of Chutias. Iban Battuta, an Islamic traveller from Morocco mentioned that the region extending from Sadiya to Lakhimpur had flourishing trade and commerce during the 15th century¹. The Chutia kingdom had trade relation with China, Burma, Tibet and Bhutan. The age old trade route extending from Khaibar Range of North Western India to Rima of South China went through Sadiya. Again there was sub route of this route linked with Chauna (a two month journey from Lasha, capital of Tibet). As the Chutia kingdom has a standing naval force, may be they were involved in the commercial activities with the Kamata kingdom. The Chutia title like Mudo, Barmudo also indicates towards the existence of naval traders. As there was no reference of coins, the commercial exchange took place in the form of barter system.

Even after the fall of the Chutia kingdom, Sadiya still stood as an important trading centre in the east where people from the plains and the neighbouring areas came to exchange their products. The tribes from the frontier of Tibet came with musk, yak's tails, the Abors from North west came with cotton rugs named Aborijhim, the Khamtis came from the east with the Khamti cloths, paddy and swords. The Khamtis and the Singphos who brought to such hats their swords and spears, medicinal plants and ivory, copper and silver which they collected from Tibet and China. The Miris and the Adi tribesmen exchanged their spicy vegetables, dry fishes, madder, wax and cotton blankets, for the products of the plains mainly rice and paddy. In one of the famous market of Sadiya, popularly known as "Sadiya Hat", fair held regularly in the month of February wherein the tribesmen like the Abors, Dafalas, Mishmis, Miris (Mishings), Singphos, Nagas, sold rubber, wax, musk, amber, ivory, rhinoceros, horn and took return eri-cloth, broad cloth, opium, iron pans, brass utensils and beads². However, since 1880s, the trade was on the decline³.

ANALYSIS:

The Mishimis who resided to the north of Sadiya frequently came down to Sadiya to exchange their products. They worked as an intermediary in between the people of Assam and the Adis and the people of Hukang valley (Burma). The Digaru Mishimis had trade intercourse with Tibet and the Chulikata Mishmis traded with the plains of Assam. The Mishmis brought the Lama swords, spears, Mishmi Teeta (a medicinal herb), Ganthyan (a vegetable much esteemed by the plains people for its peculiar but rather smell and used chiefly in anointing the hair), Mishmi Bih (a kind of poisonous aconites or a kind of poison pasted upon swords and spears) to the Sadiya hat. The Mishmis exchanged Mishmi Teeta for glass beads, cloths, salt, and money. Again, the Mishmi tribesmen took cattle, paddy, salt in exchange of their goods. Besides these they also brought woollen cloths of Tibet, musk bags Lama swords and spears from Hukang valley. According to John M' Coch the Swords, that the Mishmis brought to Sadiya were manufactured by a wild race called Kunungs and they were situated in the extreme branches of Irrawaddi. The Daus or swords are of a high order and *daus* are so much prized as to bring 12 rupees a piece in market. The facilities offered by the Ahom government must have been greatly appreciated by the Mishmis, who avoid causing any offence to it, lest it would result in the closing of all traders with the plains.

The Singphos came to Sadiya with the products like ivory, copper and silk clothes collected from the frontier areas of China. The Dafalas, Adis and Miris brought goods like munjista, long pepper, ginger, maize, manjit (madder), wax, mirijim (a kind of cotton blanket), bison etc. to the markets of Sadiya. Macoosh mentioned about a poison known to the Abors which was used to kill animals. He said that the Abors brought it to Sadiya which was tied up in little bundles and it looked like a small fibrous root.

John Macoosh observed that as there were no silver mines in Upper Assam, silver was mainly imported from China in a state of bullion and according to him the bullion in silver was the main article for trade between Assam and China. A

¹ S.L.Baruah, (Ed.), Chutia Jatir Buranji, (2012), Chutia Jatir Buranji Pranayan Samiti, Guwahati, Print

² Ibid, p233

³ Captain R.B Pemberton, (1966), Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India, Reprint, Guwahati, p43

kind of coin, named Kucharoop was purchased by the hill tribes of Assam. The Singphos purchased Kutcha Roop or silver from the Chinese provinces and carried these on back of mules in parties of twenty to thirty at a time armed with swords and matchlocks to Mainkhown in Hukwang and thence to Assam. Again, as the best iron ores were found in Bor Khamti area (located in Burma), the daus (a kind of sword) made by the Khamtis were of great demand in the markets of Sadiya and its nearby areas. Again, the rivers flow through the frontier contains gold ore and gold washing was prevalent at Sadiya since the Ahom rule. As per British documentation the best quality of gold dust was collected from the rivers like Jengloo and Dikrang, having the value of 10 rupees per tola⁴.

The Ahom state also maintained commercial relation with China, Burma, and Tibet through Sadiya. The Abors and the Miris bartered madder (*Rubia cordifolia*- a kind of dye), copper, wax, jimcloth (a kind of cotton blanket) for products of the plains. Different items were exported from Sadiya like gold, silver, amber, musk, ivory, khamti daus, Chinese and Burmese trinkets, Bisa poison, dye stuff, Mishmi teeta, manjit etc.

Since Ancient times, Sadiya was a commercial centre for its geographical importance. According to Bronchi Kumar Barua, through Sadiya the commercial activities from Afghanistan to Burma, Tibet and China took place. Dr. Mohini Kumar Saikia mentions that the eastern Sadiya the people of the Yunan province had maintained commercial exchange generation after generation. In Assam during the medieval time it was known as Rajgarh ali, the most convenient way to travel from west Asia to South East Asia. Dr. Saikia even opines that through this route traders and other people came to India from China and from Greece to China. As the region became a connector to Burma and Tibet there was always a possibility of trans border trade and exchange of commercial goods. And the hill tribes resided in the extreme north-east frontier of Assam provided various important goods to the Ahom state. John, M'Cosh, mentioned five probable routes connecting Sadiya and Tibet which were used for trade purposes also such as the Dibong pass, the route passed through the Mishmi country, the Phungan Pass to Manchu (China), the route through Manipur to the Irrawaddy river in Myanmar. According to M'Cosh, there was trade route from Sadiya to Tibet. After going through Sadiya passes by Bisa across the patkai one could reach Hokong valley. From there they could reach Moon Kong, situated on the bank of Namyang, a tributary river of the Irrawaddy. From there the merchant could either go to Ava, the capital of Burmese king or to China by ascending the Irrawaddy to Cat-Mao, At cat -Mao, the merchants had to disembark their goods and conveyed them on mules over the San country and reached Yuan, a province of China. The trade route through patkai range to the Hukaong valley near the Irrawaddy river and from Irrawaddy river to the frontier of China had its importance till the British rule. Through this route, the Mishimis and the other hill tribes exchanged their produces with the people of Kachin province and the frontier people of China. M'Cosh is of the opinion that probably the Traders from Sadiya went to the extreme borders of China which was supported by renowned Assamese Historian S.K. Bhuyan but this view was rejected by another noted historian J.N. Phukan due to the long distance and tedious journey through the mountains to China from China Without proper transportation service. Even M'coosh admitted that after the introduction of the British rule the trade with Tibet was almost stopped. But M'coosh mentioned that Lt. Wilcox travelled through a much shorter route to Burma with the knowledge of navigable branches of the Brahmaputra. Tracking upto the Nao- Dihing, a branch of the Brahmaputra, few miles above Sadiya Wilcox reached Moon lang after nine days. However it could be assumed that crossing the medieval boundary of Ahom state the traders from Assam reached the countries of the hilly tribes from where these tribesmen exchanged their products with the traders from Assam and they took it to Tibet and China through Burma, Manipur and other routes. For example The Khamtis and the Singpho tribesmen had good connection to China due to trade purposes. They knew the trade route to Tibetan frontier of southern China through Rima and Irrawaddy valley. While his journey to Irrawaddy valley through Sadiya and Rima, Mr. Macgregor stated that the Chief of Mung Lung, wearing a Chinese robe showed him the goods bought from Chinese sellers like guns, beads and even slaves from Chinese sellers. While extensively visiting the frontier tracts of North eastern region, F.J. Needham (the first political officer of Sadiya) stated that the various tribes acted as a mediator in terms of communication and trade purpose with the western authority. For Example, the Mijus, a tribe lived in the eastern border of Sadiya had very few connection with the British. The Digado, whom the Mijus (a tribe lived in the eastern border of Sadiya) considered as 'Half -Brothers' had extensive control over trade in between Sadiya and Rima. They maintained a cordial relation with the traders from Assam government and by acting as mediator they prevented the Mijus to retain the trade in their own hands. All foodstuffs except for the normal indigenous population are imported, also all other domestic supplies.

FINDINGS:

Migration from Myanmar and Changing Demography

Besides trade economy, South East Asia was also linked with North East India through the demographic settlements. Regarding the physical appearance of the Chutia, E.Gait opines "they have in their frames a considerable infusion of Shan blood." This may be possible because the Chutias were next neighbors of the Shans of south-East Asia. There are different branches of Chutias still present in Assam. For example Deori Chutias, Borahi Chutias, Ahom

⁴ Dahutia, Shree Kumar, Sadiyar Barnamoi Buranji, Banful Prakashan, Jorhat, p2016, p37

Chutias, Miri Chutias, Lalung Chutias, etc. deoris were the priestly groups of Chutias. Even after the Ahoms invasion of the Chutia Kingdom the Deoris were given due respect and given the opportunity to continue in their place and their cultural customs. In the course of time the Chutias were resettled in different parts of Ahom kingdom among different communities. Again Assam witnessed numerous incidents of migration from Burma, China and Thailand.

The late medieval settlers of the Tai-Shan group, especially the Khamtis migrated from the bank of the Irrawady River in Upper Myanmar or Bar Khamti country, called Khamti-Long by the Burmese to Sadiya between 1780 to 1794.¹ Approximately 200 people under the leadership of the khamti Chief Chao wilung Kingkham entered the Na Dihing area and Swargodeo Rajeswar singha Settled them at first in Tengapani Region of present Assam Arunachal border. Probably the common Tai Linkagae helped the Khamtis to get the frontier areas for settlement. From that time, Chao wilung Kingkham was known as Bura Raja and his nephew was known as Deka Raja. After getting warm response from the Ahom rulers, another four hundred people entered Sadiya –Tengapani , Dirak- Dihing region during the last decades of the 19th century⁵.

As per their oral traditions, the Singphos unable to resist the superior might of the Burmese, left their original home, crossed the Patkai ranges of hills on Indo-Burmese border and entered Assam in late 18th century A.D. They are estimated to have a fighting strength of 10000 men. After the coming of the Khamtis , the Singpho tribe slowly and silently penetrated in to the Brahmaputra valley through the frontier routes. Singphos bounded on the North by the Lohit river, on the East by the Langtan mountains, which separate them from the Bor-Khamtis and on the West, by a line drawn South from Sadiya. The Tungkhungia Buranji and the Ahomar Sesh Yugar Buranji refers in certain terms to their migration to Assam sometimes in 1793 A.D. During the reign of Gaurinath singha, they drove out their arch rival Khamtis from Tengapani (East of Sadiya tract) and settled there. The Singpho country lay to the East of the Matak and was bounded on the North by the Lohit River and on the South by the Patkai range.

When Chu ka pha left his original place and began his journey from Mounmit to Assam , his maternal brother king Sukhyanfa sent several groups to bring news about Su Ka Pha but they failed. Then the king formed a group of people from 9 clans and selected 9 leaders to lead the campaign. These people came but couldn't get the exact news of Sukapha⁶. After 7 years of investigation when the group met Sukapha, he clearly express hi unwillingness to return to his homeland. Su Ka Pha requested the people to settle in Assam Myanmar Border, so that they could act as a mediator. Then they got settled at Nong Kheo Nang Khek Jang of Changlang district near Indo Myanmar border. No kheu means Lake of blue water which is popularly known as lake of no returns. The Tai Khamyang people migrated along with the Ahoms but they settled near for almost 500 years. At Khamyang or Nong Kheu , the Khamyang tribe lived for almost 500 years. In 1780 , they migrated to Namsung (tengapani) and Maung teula (sadiya) .

RESULT & ANALYSIS :

The above stories of migration formed the very basis of Assamese identity in Assam. The Ahoms who itself a outsider group initiated the process of Ahomiozation by marrying different local tribes of Assam such as Morans, Borahis and it was the Ahomization culture which helped in forming a common identity to the people of Assam as Asomiya . Sadiya frontier also witnessed such demographic amalgamation. Even in the third decade of the 20th century sadiya region witnessed the impact of migration and post migration socio political structure. The Borahis who were aboriginal tribes of Assam got extinct from Assam as they were submerged in the Ahom community through the process of Ahomization. The Chutias, the aboriginal tribes of Sadiya got displaced from Sadiya due to the divide and rule policy of the victorious Ahoms. This was the reason, why they were not shown in the demographic table enlisted below⁷.

Fig 1 Miscellaneous Statistics of Population in Sadiya Tract till 1928

Population group	Total
Miri	4719
Abor	11526
Assamese	6364
Bengali	1040
Khamti	2085
Singpho or Kochin	1424
Manipuri, Meiti Kathe or Poona	104
Mishmi	778

⁵ Gohain, U.N., Assam under the Ahoms'R.K. Publications, Guwahati, ,(1992), p40

⁶ S.L.Baruah,(Ed.) Chutia Jatir Buranji, (2012), Chutia Jatir Buranji Prananyan Samiti, Guwahati, ,P 231

⁷ Assessment Report on villages in the Sadiya Frontier Tract , Secretariat Administration(Record &Library) Dept., Assam Secretariat, Dispur, June 1933, p21

Again a report deals only with villages in the vicinity of Sadiya and Saikhowa (most of the Frontier Tract is not included in this report) reveals the demographic distribution till 1933-34 like this⁸

Fig.2 community wise family

Community	family
Ahom	635
Sonowal	149
Nepali	410
Ex-coolies	525
Bengali Bhodrolok	7
Nadiyal	157
Mawari	26
Koch	2
Kalitas	16
Christians	29
Muslims	60
Up country men	24
Khasi	1
Anglo Indian	1

CONCLUSION:

The above discussion reveals the fact that Assam was not isolated from the contact of the South East or South Asian regions before 1947. Even till the British time and pre British era, the frontier region witnessed close connection with Burma, Tibet and even China. The trade and commerce through the eastern frontier of Upper Assam supported the statement that while rest of India was more or less disconnected with the south Asian region geographically Assam and some other North Eastern States shared borders with China, Tibet and Burma and the geographical locations increased the trade, cultural and other bilateral. Transliterated connection between the two sides. Even the European geographical explorers documented that the demographic settlements of the North eastern frontiers of Assam and Arunachal had its root in China, Myanmar and Thailand. The Ahoms who ruled Assam for 600 years had their ethnic origin rooted in Thailand and China. Almost all the Tai Shan groups entered Assam through the Patkai range from Myanmar. The Khamtis and the Singphos one of the notable frontier tribes also migrated from Myanmar. So the present demographic pattern of Assam were mostly influenced by the migration from the South Asian region. After examining such aspects it can be said that though the traditional historians were of the opinion that Assam or North East India followed a seclusion policy but to certain limit it is not true. The above analysis highlights that the seclusion or close door policy was mainly followed in the context of Northern and western direction. In the eastern direction the close door policy had never been a major issue. Since ancient times the ruling and trading class even the normal people shares socio- cultural and political linkages with the South Eastern Asia. So, Look East Policy might be lucrative idea for the rest of India but in the context of Assam it can be termed as a continuous process which is more or less hampered by the trans border and inter state conflict in the post world war global scenario.

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⁸ Ibid, p23

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