

Historical background of Barter system and trade activities of Nyishi Tribe of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Traditionally, the Nyishis practiced only mutual exchanges of goods and services with their close relatives and friends. With the intervention of the British in Assam, the Nyishis of adjoining Assam were actively engaged in monetising trade with the British subjects. The British wanted to establish good relations with the Nyishis and also made them get into habits with the British goods. Therefore, they opened markets and trade fairs in adjoining areas of the Nyishis and also welcomed them to purchase British goods. The Nyishis brought their own products to the markets and purchased goods from the British subjects. Later, many conflicts occurred between the Nyishi traders and the British subjects due to trade activities. Hence, this paper intends to highlight the different dimensions of British-Nyishi trade relations.

Keywords: British, Nyishi, Trade, Trade-fair, Conflict, Arunachal Pradesh.

Introduction

Before the British intervention, the frontier tribes (present Arunachal tribes) had limited access to the outside world for their day-to-day use of commodities. They only depended upon their own produce from agriculture and natural resources collected from the forest and river which were available in their surroundings. Moreover, people were self-sufficient in view of their limited wants in life and also situations of inter-clannish or inter-ethnic confrontation compelled them to content themselves with their own means and mode of production '(Das, 2005:23)'. Generally, inter-tribes trade or trade relations with long distance people was difficult access due to various reasons such as inter-tribe feuds, mutual suspicion of attacking, absence of market facilities, lack of transport and communication and absence of modern education or awareness '(Jha,1985:393)'. Although, tribes of Arunachal Pradesh lived in isolation from the rest of the world but little interaction amongst the various tribes and also established little trade relations amongst themselves. The trade relations with outside people were also done but reasonably limited. Accordingly, the exports and imports from outside people were meagre. To travel long distances for trade with outside people was full of risk of attack by other tribes. Therefore, villagers used to travel in groups either village-wise or clan-wise to cross the territory of other tribes. There was no professional agency to carry out the trade transactions in the regions and also no markets system existed in the regions. Generally, trade was based on a barter system and money was not used.

The situation had repeatedly changed after the British intervention in Assam and subsequently, they also intervened in the tribal land. The British annexed lower Assam in 1826 after defeating the Burmese and entire Assam in 1838 A.D. Thereafter, the British demarcated their administrative jurisdiction which is popularly known as Inner Line Regulation of 1873 and identified plains regions of Assam as their administrative control (Sharma & Sharma, 2006: 47-49)'. Throughout the colonial period, the British government of Assam used to organise trade-fairs at various places on the adjacent of hills tribes (present Arunachal tribes) to promote the trade relations between the hills tribes and plains people. The aim was not to bring prosperity to the people of the regions, but to push the items 'made in England' into this remote area. Moreover, the British government was always seeking new outlets for their manufactured goods. The British chose some places in the foothills areas as trade-fairs centre namely Udalguri, Doimara, Sissi, Laimekuri, Lokhra, Sadiya, etc. and Sadiya was biggest trade-fairs centre for hills tribes '(Pandey & Triparthy, 1997: 159-160)'. Some major changes in the trade transactions under the British

rule were opened up of the markets and weekly markets, transaction through money and encouraged to trade with outside people particularly with British merchants.

The Nyishi people settled in the northern part of Lakhimpur and Darrang districts of Assam were also actively involved in the British trade activities. During the colonial period, the Nyishis were called as “Daflas” ‘(Hina, 2012:26-27)’ but the government of India by its Constitutional Amendment Act (Scheduled Tribes), 2008 has changed the term ‘Dafla’ to ‘Nyishi’. The British established trade relations with the Nyishi people as an important policy to win their confidence and make it easy to control them. They used to organise trade-fairs and markets in adjacent foothills areas of hills Nyishi which encouraged the Nyishi people to get involved in the trade activities. Hence, the paper intended to bring out the various dimensions of the British-Nyishi trade relations.

Objective and Methodology

The main objective of the paper is to review the traditional barter trade of the Nyishi and development of Nyishi trade activities with the British. Hence, the present paper has attempted to examine the following issues:

1. To understand the brief historical background of the traditional trade activities in Arunachal Pradesh
2. To examine the traditional barter trade system of the Nyishis and
3. To evaluate the British-Nyishi trade relations.

In order to construct a systematic analysis and interpretation of the paper, both primary and secondary sources are used. Few relevant books used as secondary sources but primary sources mostly archival materials like the British Survey Reports, Tour Diaries, Official Correspondence and Political Proceedings collected from the National Archives, New Delhi; State Archives, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar, Government of Assam, Guwahati have come to great help to develop this paper.

Traditional Barter system of the Nyishi

Traditionally, the Nyishi had limited trade relations with the outside world for their day-to-day use of commodities. They largely depended upon their own produce from agriculture and forest resources and people were self-sufficient from their own produce in view of their limited wants in life. To maintain trade relations with outside people was full of risk and difficult access due to various reasons such as inter-tribe feuds, mutual suspicions of attacking, absence of market facilities, lack of transport and communication and absence of modern education or awareness. The Nyishi had little interaction as well as trade transactions with other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh namely the Akas, the Monpas, the Mijis, the Apatani, and also established little trade relations with outside people like Assamese and Tibetans. For example, N.L Bor, the British Political officer mentioned that during his tour, he came across with Hajari, the Gaonburah of Veo village (presently Pijirang circle of East Kameng District) was wearing a magnificent silver crown originally of Tibet which he had purchased from the Akas for two *mithun* (*bos frontalis*) ‘(Bor Report, 1833)’.

The mutual exchange and barter system were popular practices in the traditional Nyishi economy which was based on goods and services exchanged. All kinds of goods and services could be changeable. Labour exchange was popular in the constructions of houses, pathways, traditional bridges, cultivating agriculture, and ritual performance. Sometimes, skilful labour could also be exchanged with goods like goat, pig, paddy, maize, etc. The goods to goods exchanges were very common in the Nyishi economy. Popular exchanges commodities were agriculture products, handicrafts, domestic animals, ornaments, forest gathering articles, and food and drinks items. Generally, exchange was done through the inter-family, inter-clan, inter-village and intra-village barter. It was done on the basis of easy access particularly with close friends, relatives and neighbouring villages. The process of exchanges could not maintain equivalent and balance at all times. Value of goods and services to exchanges among the people is dependent on situations, seasons, locality and availability of the commodities. Give and take of goods and services could be on the basis of mutual reciprocal benefits of exchangers. The Nyishi traditional economy was a natural economy, which ethnologists and sociologists have termed as ‘non-monetary’ or ‘subsistence economic’ ‘(Showren, 2009: 151)’.

Traditionally, the Nyishi had barter trade within the Nyishi as well as with the neighbouring tribes. However, demand and supply was as per availability of villages and shortages of their counterparts. It was not

operating under a regular market system but person to person exchanges of available goods and services were taking place with their close friends and family relations.

British-Nyishi Trade Relations

To trace the British-Nyishi relations, first time the British military officer's gave reference of their encountered with Nyishi people in upper Assam during the Anglo-Burmese war in 1825 (Panda, 1988:165). After the annexation of Assam, they found Nyishi people in the North Lakhimpur and Darrang districts of Assam. They were one of the dreaded and strongest tribes of northern Assam (present Arunachal Pradesh) who repeatedly conducted raids and outrages in the British territory but the British military failed to check them and also launched expeditions against the offenders due to inaccessible hills and deep forest of areas. Therefore, the British applied several policies of conciliation to maintain good relations with the Nyishi and trade was one of them.

To promote the trade with Nyishi, they organised the trade-fairs at various adjacent places of the Nyishi foothills and also opened new markets. The Nyishis of Kameng region used to visit Charduar, Balipara, Lokhra, Itakhola, Udalguri, Buxa-Duar, Hantupara, Chamurchi and Subankhala trade-fairs and Nyishis of Subansiri region used to visit Dolungmukh, Pthalipam, North Lakhimpur, Dijoo and Naharbari markets of Assam. The Nyishi brought their own produces like chillies, gingers, natural vegetables, arts and crafts, etc. in the British markets '(Jha, 1985:398)' and purchased glass, iron, rice, husk, metals, grains, pulse, salt, silk, sugar, tobacco, silver, earthenware and porcelain from the British merchants '(Annual Report, 1910)'. The trade transactions with the British subjects were based on the cash payment. The British government in Assam had emphasised monetary trade which was first experienced by the Nyishi people. Hence, monetisation trade especially with the British merchants had evolved in the Nyishi world but exchanges of goods to goods and services had also been continued amongst the Nyishi and other tribes of the regions (Interview with Naye).

The Darrang and Lakhimpur districts of Assam were the main administrative centres of the British to maintain trade with the Nyishi people. Initially, the seven Mauzadars (Area revenue Officers) were entrusted to carry out the trade records of Darrang district and a few police officers were entrusted to keep trade records of Lakhimpur district. The Nyishi trade records were maintained throughout the year, but business was almost confined within the months of November to April or May. The British appointed their officer in-charge like Mauzadar or Police officer in every trade centre and entrusted them to keep register for the trade records except in the case of forest products. Trade of forest products (caoutchouc, timber, bamboos, canes, etc.) between Assam districts and the various trans-frontier tribes including the Nyishi was being registered by the local forest officers and consolidated returns were received from the Deputy Conservators '(Strong Report, 1910)'.

From 1st April 1909 onwards, the British appointed registrars to maintain registration of the frontier trade which replaced the duty of *Mauzadars* and police officers. The registrars were placed under the direct control of the Director of Agriculture. The Registrars of respective trade centres had to submit their reports and accounts to the Director of Agriculture. It was consolidated and compiled the monthly wise reports and finally, submitted to the British Government of Assam. The British government also appointed the Inspector of Trade Registration Officers to inspect the work of the Registrars. They found many inaccuracies in the trade reports being submitted by the Registrars during their inspections. Therefore, the British government directed all the registrars to take steps to ensure the collection of accurate statistics in future '(Strong Report, 1910)'.

The British annual report of 1909-10 on Trans-Frontier Trade, some of imported trade items and their values were declining under the heads of all the principal articles, viz., Indian piece-goods, musk, *ghee*, wax, timber, lac, blankets and yak tails. The value of living animals was slightly increased but the value of ponies was less than the previous year, because more accurate registration was done on the ponies. The value of lac was decreased due to the fall in the market price. The timber imported from hills to plains was 48.2 per cent in that year which was 2.9 percent less than previous year. The timber quantity decreased due to the opening of some new routes in the Jalpaiguri district of Assam because some trade passes through these routes but the registration was not properly maintained. Hence, a large number of low quantity timbers had been imported to

the plains without proper verification. Similarly, exports with frontier tribes were also decreased under the heads of cotton piece-goods, silk, betel nuts, sugar, iron, tobacco and silver and the accuracy of the export items was maintained. It was reported that both Indian and European twist and yarn trade was highly flourishing and exports of brass and copper also flourished' (Annual Report, 1910)'.

The total imported trade value of the regions was Rs. 3, 11,225 in the year 1909-10 and Rs. 4, 10,358 in the previous year which showed a decline of Rs. 99,138 or 24.1 percent. The total exports amounted to Rs. 1, 69,351 in 1909-10 and Rs. 2, 74,189 in the previous year which showed a decline of Rs. 1, 04,838 or 38.2 per cent. It was also reported that in 1909-1910, the Frontier tribes including the Nyishi visited to the Kamrup and Darrang districts for trade were less in number to the previous years but figures of the year were more accurate statistics than those recorded in the previous year's '(Annual Report, 1910)'.

The British Trade with Nyishi was not registered properly till 1921 but considerably it had been practiced. According to the estimate recorded in the 1921 Annual Report of Balipara Frontier Tract, the trade imports with Nyishi was Rs 15000-0-0 and exports Rs 25000-0-0/. '(Political Proceedings, 1922)'.

The numbers of unrest had happened between Nyishi traders and the British subjects for different reasons like arguments for prices of the items, cheating in trade, collection of natural resources (natural rubber, natural vegetables, coal, hunting etc.) in the Nyishi territory and so on. But the British administration of Assam always used to amicably settle down the disputes and trade was allowed to happen continuously with little interruption in between. Therefore, trade was a great help to calm down the British-Nyishi relations.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the British rule in Assam, the Nyishi had very limited trade relations with their neighbouring tribes and people of Assam. The agricultural produce and natural vegetables found in the Nyishi areas were a great help to Nyishis for their livelihood. Very limited barter trade was done on the basis of their personal relations and friends. With establishment of British rule in Assam, the trade activities of the Nyishis of the adjacent Assam were largely active due to encouragement of the British government in Assam. The British wanted to have good relations with the Nyishis and also made them get into habits with the British goods. Therefore, the British opened different markets and trade-fairs in adjoining areas of the Nyishis and welcomed them to purchase British goods.

The Nyishis used to visit trade-fairs centres and markets in foothills areas of Assam like Charduar, Balipara, Lokra, Itakhola, Dolungmukh, Pathalipam, North Lakhimpur, Itakhola, Dijoo, Naharbari etc. for transaction of goods. The Nyishis brought their own products like chilies, ginger, vegetables, arts and crafts, etc. to the British markets and purchased rice, brass, iron, utensils, cloths, liquor, etc. from the British subjects. Later, little interrupted in trade due to conflicts between Nyishi traders and the British subjects but unrest was amicably settled down. Both the British and Nyishi get benefits. The objective of the British was to partially succeed, to control Nyishi village in the plains, partially made them inhabit with the British goods, and explored the resources available in the Nyishi hills. Large numbers of the Nyishis regularly come to the British markets to sell their goods and purchase the British goods. Similarly, the Nyishis also get benefits like selling their produce in the British markets; explorer the important trade items in their hills, purchasing different new items for their day-to-day uses, and so on. Hence, trade became an important part of study to the British-Nyishi relations.

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