

**Historical perspective of Ahom Period of Assam kingdom :- An Empirical Study****Author: Dr. Nayan Kalita****Associate Professor & HoD****Department of History****Goreswar College, Assam, India.**

The perception has long been intended to be generated that the "North-East" is a landlocked region, with geographical isolation playing a significant role in its economic backwardness. Not to mention the pre-Ahom period, when Assam, primarily comprised of the Brahmaputra Valley, had quite an active interaction with the northern part of the Indian subcontinent. Even under the Ahom rulers (1328-1826), known for their closed-door approach, there was active trade between Assam and her western neighbours, Bengal and Bihar, as well as Bhutan, Tibet, and Myanmar. "The kingdom of Assam, as it was established during the last 140 years of Ahom rule, was surrounded on the north by a range of mountains inhabited by the Bhutanese, Akas, Daflas, and Abors; on the east, by another line of mountains inhabited by the Akas, Daflas, and Abors," historian S.K.Bhuyan writes hill people bounded on the north by the Mishmis and the Singhphos; on the south by the Garo, Khasi, Naga, and Patkai hills; on the west by the Manas or Manaha river on the north bank and the Habraghat Pargannah on the south bank in the Bengal district of Rungpore. The kingdom where it entered from Bengal began at the Assam Choky (gate) on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, opposite Goalpara, and the kingdom on the south bank began from the Nagarberra peak, 21 miles east of Goalpara.

"The kingdom was around 500 miles long and 60 miles wide on average." The aforementioned boundaries had remained stationary since 1682, when the Moghuls were finally driven out of Lower Assam and the original western boundary of the Manas River was restored. Assam's Ahom kingdom so approximately correlates to the Brahmaputra Valley Division's five districts: Kamrup, Darrang, Now gong Sibs agar and Lakhimpur, as well as parts of the Sadiya Frontier Tract." Bhuyan (Bhuyan 1974: 1) [Today's Assam is made up of these districts plus the Goalpara region, excluding the

Sadiya Frontier Tract, which has been annexed by Arunachal Pradesh.] During Ahom reign, Assam's ties with her near neighbours were characterised by a policy of conciliation and diplomacy.

Only when absolutely required was force utilised. With the exception of the kingdom of Jayantia, Ahom ties with the Kacharis, Khasis, and Garos were relatively amicable. Assam's connections with the Garos were primarily limited to the tribes dwelling on the Brahmaputra's south bank, and the Ahom policy was one of conciliation and goodwill to allow for commercial interaction. Cotton was the primary commodity traded by the Garos with the plains. Cachar was given feudatory status, but it had extensive trading relations with the Khasi state of Khyrim. During Ahom control, there was little interaction with the kingdom of Manipur, and there was no touch with Tripura until 1710, when an embassy of Ahom king Rudra Singha was dispatched to the Tripura court. Assam's relations with the Mizos were equally marginal, while the Ahoms used a carrot and stick approach with the Nagas. The Buranjis detail the Ahom-Naga relationship. The Naga Hills were strategically important to the Ahom rulers because "it was through the area of the Nagas of Patkai and the Tirap Division of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) that the Ahoms got to Assam across the Patkai Mountain, and it was this path that they had to take in keeping in touch with their relatives in Burma" (Lakshmi Devi 1968: 21).

The Ahom Buranjis are replete with stories of retaliatory expeditions into Naga territory and the recognition of Ahom suzerainty by the many Naga tribes surrounding the upper Assam plains. However, Assamese ties with the Nagas were primarily limited to tribes living in the highlands south of Sivasagar and Lakhimpur districts, from the Dikhow River to the Nurhi-Dihing. Overall, the Ahom monarchs pursued a policy of accommodation with the Nagas, providing them with revenue-free lands and fishing rights in areas bordering the plains known as Naga-Khats. The Nagas, in turn, offered the Ahom monarchs tribute in the shape of elephant tusks, spears, textiles, and cotton. In the weekly haats, or village markets, a bustling barter economy existed between the Naga tribes and the Assamese that were detained in the border areas of Assam and Naga Hills. The expansion of the Nagamese language (a patois Assamese combined with particular indigenous terms) as a language is proof of this.

Although Assam's contacts with the Arunachalese tribes surrounding the plains were confined to the APA Tanis, Adis, and hill Miris throughout the Ahom period, commercial interchange took place in the weekly marketplaces. The Arunachalese dialect may have arisen as a result of economic links with the plains of Assam. The Ahom monarchs, on the other hand, had a tumultuous relationship with the Singhphos of the Sadiya Frontier Tract. The Singhphos conducted frequent forays into Ahom

territory and were never stopped by the Ahoms. Only with the arrival of the British did Singhphos' excursions into the after several deadly fights with the British, the plains of Assam ultimately come to a halt. The Singhphos, on the other hand, were skilled traders, and the Patkai, which began in Jaipur, passed through their domain. M<sup>c</sup>osh claimed that there existed a viable trade route from Saidiya to Tibet that crossed the Himalaya and ran parallel to the Brahmaputra. The Patkai road, which stretched through the land of the Singhphos and other Patkai tribes through the valley of the Hakwang and reached Munkung or Magaung on the bank of the Irrawadi river, was the most regularly used of the various ways to the kingdom of Ava (Myanmar). Those going to Ava went downstream, while those going to China trekked upstream for roughly 200 kilometres to the Chinese border. The Mishmis conducted their barter trade with the Kachins and the Chinese via this channel, and also, during their invasions of Assam, the Burmese took this road frequently. (Barpujari 1992, p. 127) As a result, the Ahom rulers of Assam had a well-thought-out policy for dealing with the region's various hill tribes. This approach was characterised by pragmatism and was aimed at preserving tight trade connections with neighbouring regions.

However, the Assamese have close commercial links with the Bhutanese from the outset. The Bhutanese maintained contact with the plains of Assam via the traditional duars or gateways. The duars the Bhutanese used to trade with Assam were actually strips of land granted to the Rajah of Bhutan to facilitate trade. These duars were taken over by the Bhutanese Deva-Dharma Rajahs in the second half of the eighteenth century. There were some there are eleven of these duars in Bengal and seven in Assam. Aside from regular trade with Bhutan, there was also trade with Tibet via the Kariapar Duar, as S.K.Bhuyan writes: "All Assam trade with Tibet passed through this Kariapar Duar at a place called Chouna, two months' journey from Lhasa; and in the first decade of the nineteenth century, it amounted in value to about two lakhs of rupees per year."

The Assam merchants used to be stationed at Geegunsheer, four miles from Chouna, with their wares. The Lhasa merchants offered for sale rock salt, woollens, gold dust, cowries, Chinese silk, and other items. Rice, Tussar fabric or coarse silk weaved were among the items transported by Assam merchants by Assamese women, iron and lac, buffalo horns, pearls and corals, and other materials. Around the year 1820, Lhasa merchants brought 70,000 rupees with them to purchase Assam essentials ( Bhuyan 1974: 35). "The Koriapar Duar, which bordered Bhutan and was populated by the Kamppos and Monbas, was held by the Sat rajahs or seven leaders who were subservient to the Chief of Tawang, who was in turn a feudatory of the authorities in Lhasa." The annual Kariapar fair was held here, and it served as the primary trading

route connecting Tibet, China, Bhutan, and Assam. As reported by Mackenzie in his *History of Relations with the Hill Tribes*, Francis Buchanan alludes to the fair as an annual celebration at which traders from "all throughout Tibet, from Lhasa and regions east, west, and even north of it, were present in the masses, some of them dressed in Chinese costumes..." (Misra, Sanghamitra, 2004: 93)

Although there is little historical evidence of direct trade relations between Assam and China during the period of Ahom sovereignty, the North Eastern Region played an important role in trade and communication between the middle Gangetic valley and south China via Assam and northern Myanmar. In his book *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations*, P.C. Bagchi defines the Assam-Burma route to China as follows: "The Assam-Burma road to China began in Pataliputra (Patna), India's ancient capital and travelled through Champa" (Bhagalpur). Kajangala (Rajmahal) and Pundravardhana (North Bengal), and then went on to Assam's Kamarupa (Guwahati). There were three routes from Assam, as there are now: one along the Brahmaputra river up to the Patkai range and then by its passage up to upper Burma; the second through Manipur up to the Chindwin valley; and the third through Arakan to the Irrawaddy valley. All of these routes met at the Burmese border near Bhamo and then went over the mountains and across the river basins of Yunnafu, i.e. Kummin, the chief city of China's southern region." (Lahiri, 1991, p. 149) The first mention of the Assam-Burma route dates back to the second century, when Szechuan bamboo and cotton goods were exported through India to Bactria. The Yunnan-Assam-Burma route is also mentioned in seventh-century Chinese texts, particularly those of the Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang, who visited Kamarupa.

As a result, there is historical proof since the seventh century, the Assam-Burma route, often known as the Silk Route, has existed. The excavations at Ambari in Guwahati have also revealed clear archaeological evidence of the Chinese connection with Assam and the North Eastern Region dating back to the seventh century. (Lahiri, 1991, p. 157) According to seventh-century Chinese accounts, there were two routes leading from Chengdu in Szechuan to India via Burma. The southern route passed through Longling and Ruili, as well as the Shan kingdom of Burma, before entering Manipur and the rest of India via the Brahmaputra Valley. The northern route began at Zhugeliang and led to Mongaung via Tengchong before entering the Naga Hills and the Brahmaputra. The term "British records" also refers to the There are up to five commercial routes connecting Assam and China. The one via the Patkoi pass to Bhamo and ultimately to China was the simplest and most commonly used. Bhamo was a thriving trading centre, with hundreds of Chinese visiting each year to conduct business.

During Ahom administration, however, these passes fell into usage, though the Burmese army used the Bhamo route to invade Assam in 1821-22. Because there was no direct engagement with southern China during the Ahom period, it is reasonable to assume that Chinese commodities arrived in Assam via Tibetan, Singhpho, and Bhutia intermediaries. In fact, the Bhutias were the primary intermediaries in the Assam-Tibet trade. There had been constant interaction between the residents of the lowlands and the hills. Every winter, the Bhutias and their eastern neighbours would travel down via the duars with mule-loads of rock-salt, gold-dust, musk, woollens, yak-tails, Chinese silk, and so on, and return with various kinds of cloth, raw-silk, rice, and dried fish. The Mishmis, who acted as middlemen between the Kachins and the Chinese, bartered salt, woollens, ivory, copper, gold, amber, honey, and mishmi-teeta (copus-teeta). However, the Burmese invasions in the final years of Ahom sovereignty, as well as the antagonistic relations with the Bhutias, significantly diminished the volume of this connection. Finally, with the arrival of the British, trade with Bengal and abroad grew at the expense of trade with Bhutan, and by the first decade of the twentieth century, this trade had nearly died out (Misra 2000: 107).

Up until the middle of the seventeenth century, Assam's relationship with neighbouring Bengal was characterised by a close-door attitude. This antipathy to foreigners stemmed from many waves of Muslim invasions from the west that began in the early years of the thirteenth century. Nonetheless, despite the closed-door attitude, there was significant commercial engagement between the two regions. Several allusions to overland and river routes to Bengal can be found. Thus, the river path from Goalpara was down the Brahmaputra, via the Jennai from Jamalapore, and then along the Pabna river, a navigable offshoot of the Ganges, after some distance. The Calcutta dak was the first overland road from Bengal to Assam, passing through Murshidabad, Dinajpore, Rungpore, Bagwa, and Goalpara. This was the case the most commonly used overland route. However; it was the river route that carried the majority of the commercial traffic. Bhuyan (Bhuyan 1974: 55-56).

After the final expulsion of the Mughals in 1682, the Ahom rulers' attitude toward outsiders changed, and trading relations with Bengal were restored. During the temporary respite of hostilities, the establishment of the Hadira Chokey (a chokey or chowki, also spelled chowky, is a trading or police post) (1669) signalled a shift in economic links between the two regions. Finally, it was during the reign of Rudra Singha that Assam-Bengal commerce saw a significant increase. Rudra Singha abandoned his previous strategy of isolation and expressed a strong desire to expand trade ties with neighbouring countries.

The Ahom monarch stated in one of his talks to the Mughal faujdar in 1713: criticised

the former's plan to develop trade links with Assam by sending only a few boats filled with goods. He wrote to the Mughal official that regular business interaction would entail sending his merchants (shah-mahajans) to Jogighopa and Goalpara, while Assamese merchants would travel to Kandahar choked with merchandise (Barpujari 1996 Chapter III: 129). As time passed, traders from Bengal settled in Goalpara with their goods, while Assamese merchants remained in Bangalhat. Assam's main export to Bengal was lac, of which 10,000 mounds were claimed to have been exported in 1809. Cotton, mustard seed, muga silk, and ivory were among important exports. However, the trade balance was never in Assam's favour, owing mostly to It is completely reliant on salt shipments from Bengal. For example, in 1809, salt imports alone accounted for Rs 1, 92,500 of a total import of Rs 2, 28,330 from Bengal.

In conclusion, despite the opposition to opening up, the time of Ahom control in Assam was characterised by a general stability that was favourable to forging commercial links with the peoples and kingdoms neighbouring it. As a result, it would be an oversimplification to argue that Assam under the Ahoms lived in isolation, culturally and commercially isolated from its immediate neighbours. It is worth noting here that, while the arrival of the British brought about significant changes in the region's communication, trade, and economy, some issues remained unresolved The British built on what the Ahoms had left by dealing with commercial and administrative relationships with the tribes.

### **1. The British Period (1826-1947)**

The British control of Assam brought about significant changes in the administration and economy. While the bounds of Ahom Assam eventually expanded to incorporate the majority of what is now known as the North-East, the introduction of tea, as well as the discovery of petroleum and coal, was accompanied by the expansion of the railway network and the construction of new communication routes. While the British were consolidating their influence on the region by conducting successful expeditions against the Khasis, Garos, Nagas, and Manipuris, new land revenue regulations and improved trading procedures in accordance with the Company's policies were implemented. Although the British pursued a policy of non-interference with the region's many hill tribes to some extent, force was generally utilised to quash all signals of resistance.

The growth of the tea, coal, and petroleum industries in the British launched a forward campaign in the Brahmaputra valley with the goal of bringing all neighbouring tribes under their rule. However, while the British authorities took full advantage of territorial control over the Naga Hills to defend British interests in the Brahmaputra valley, cost

considerations prevented them from investing in the hill areas' development. Instead of establishing economic and communication linkages with the Assam lowlands, a series of prohibitions were imposed, effectively isolating the Naga Hills. Measures such as the Excluded Districts Act, the Partially Excluded Areas Act, and the Inner Line Regulations, while nominally intended at safeguarding the hill areas from plainsmen, effectively ended interaction between the inhabitants of the hills and the plains the Brahmaputra valley and its surrounding hills. The Acts and Regulations alluded to here were different restrictions devised and enforced by the British to allow them to maintain a tight grip on the region's circumstances and populace. The laws primarily controlled the inflow of plains residents and other Indian settlers into the region. They were also to allow for close monitoring of the local population, ostensibly for their own protection because they were considered underdeveloped, as well as to keep tabs on settler groups' economic, political, and social activities. The Inner Line Regulations entail the issuance of a permit by a local official allowing a non-resident Indian to visit areas specified in the visitor's application for a specific period; this is still in effect today and is applicable in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram; for foreign nationals, there is the Inner Line Regulations. The Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi issues a Restricted Areas Permit.

The main exceptions were the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Manipur, with Assam's connections with the latter usually being minor. The British had a hostile relationship with the Singhphos and Bhutias, and the former trading routes eventually fell out of usage. Although several British authorities emphasised the necessity to strengthen the already existing frontier trade connections with the Kachins and Chins and open commercial traffic with China through upper Burma during the initial years of their colonisation of Assam, these proposals did not work out Barpujari (1996) p. 273. The British disagreement with Bhutan over the duars eventually led to the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1865, which ended with the Treaty of Sinchula, which granted the British significant benefits. However, despite the fact that the treaty formalised the British annexation of the Eastern Duars, provided them with access to a road to Lhasa, and placed them in a strategic position to deal with any aggressions against Assam and Northern Bengal, the trade relations between Assam and Bhutan that marked the Ahom era were never to be restored during British rule (Barpujari 1996 Chapter IV: 167).

Only after the closing of trade routes between Bhutan and Tibet in the 1960s and the construction of roads connecting the plains of Assam and Bengal with the Bhutan hills did trade with Bhutan acquire a fresh push in post-independence India.

As the British consolidated their influence on the market, trade through the frontier duars or doors steadily declined, leaving the western duar or the Hadira as the only important outlet. Khandahar is located near the confluence of the Manah and

Brahmaputra rivers. In 1833, the Hadira chowkey was brought under direct British administration, and two years later, the customs chowkey was dissolved and free trade was established. The repeal of the Hadira chowky produced in a significant increase in trade with Bengal, which was boosted further by the advent of regular river transportation on the Brahmaputra, with the first steamboat entering operation in 1847. With the expansion of the region's tea business, Assam-Bengal commerce took a new turn. Tea rose to the top of the list of Assam's exportable goods. The expansion of tea growing in upper Assam, as well as the operation of coal mines, necessitated an increase in the import of iron and steel required for railway construction. It also resulted in a massive influx of enslaved labour to work on the tea farms. As a result, by the second half of the nineteenth century; the entire trade pattern had shifted, with tea, mustard, and jute replacing products such as lac, cotton, and ivory.

For example, in 1839, the Garos traded 50,000 mounds of cotton, with the Nagas bartering half of it. However, the increased import of foreign textiles and the resulting decline of the Bengal cotton industry impacted Assam cotton growers. By 1900, practically all of Assam's commerce was with Bengal; trade with regions other than Bengal accounted for less than 1% of total trade (Barpujari 1996 Chapter IV, 124). As a result of the advent of river and rail transportation, as well as new colonial economic rules, Assam's trading relations with neighbouring regions were drastically altered. While trade with Bengal took on new dimensions, other fronts were closed. Consider the trade with Bhutan and Tibet, trade declined dramatically, and by the first decade of the twentieth century, British officials dismissed this frontier trade as unimportant (Sanghamitra Misra 2004, p. 107.) Although railways greatly reduced the distance between Assam and Bengal, Assam's traditional relationships with its eastern and northern neighbours became increasingly marginal. Agriculture boom brought in hundreds of thousands of destitute peasants from neighbouring Bengal, causing a shift in the population balance and sowing the seeds of future conflict between indigenes and outsiders.

Thus, during the years 1874-1905, two major demographic changes occurred: (a) a shift in the ethnic composition of the population and (b) a shift in its spatial distribution across the districts. In 1901, non-indigenous people constituted at least a quarter of the Assamese population (Guha 1977: 39). However, the majority of a significant aspect of the colonial economy was that the people of the region did not stand to benefit greatly from the British-developed "enclave" economy. The extracted surplus from the tea industry, as well as a significant portion of the wage bills, were sent outside the province, resulting in a serious imbalance between the growing modern sector, which included tea plantations, coal mines, oil fields, and associated infrastructure, on the one

hand, and the near-stagnant traditional agriculture on the other (Guha 1977: 40). With the majority of the tea businesses' headquarters in London and Calcutta, the indigenous sector of the economy may be considered to have benefited only little from the colonial development pattern. As a result, practically all of the expenses associated with the tea industry benefited outsiders.

The transportation businesses in Bengal collected the transportation fees, while practically everything needed by the industry, from brushes and paints to iron pans, hoes, and bill-hooks, was imported from England. Packing boxes continued to arrive from England until the mid-1850s, with Chittagong and Calcutta eventually being the principal sources of such supplies. To summarise, British rule in Assam was distinguished by a rapid opening up towards the west and a progressive closing of the openings towards the east. Previously, Ahom ties with the Bhutias, Myanmarese, Tibetans, and, to a lesser extent, the Chinese began to deteriorate. Further closures were made within the administratively unified province of Assam by establishing barriers in the form of various legislation between the peoples of the hills and the plains. Apart from developing the extremely extractive enclave economy, British administration also opened up the Assam's demographic composition changed dramatically over a thirty-year period beginning in the early twentieth century as a result of migration routes from east Bengal. Ethnic worries of being reduced to a minority became public, and major ethno-linguistic rivalry arose. All of this was destined to have an impact on Assam's relations with neighbouring Bengal as well as the other areas. Even as the demand for cultivable land increased, the politics of conciliation and dialogue lost place to those of mistrust and hostility.

## **2. Independence and After**

Assam and the North Eastern Region were split off from the rest of the country as a result of the Partition. With the incorporation of East Bengal into Pakistan, the old commerce and communication connections with Assam were severed, and the former frontier routes had died out, leaving Assam as a landlocked territory in the literal sense of the term. It took over a year to reestablish the rail link with the rest of India. Even after the train link was restored, it was a precarious link that passed through the Siliguri corridor, a short strip of land. Partition had a significant detrimental impact on the region's border trade with neighbouring countries, with those who relied primarily on trade with eastern Bengal suffering the most. Assam quickly fell behind due to poor industrial development and low agricultural growth the Indian Union's other states. The province's economic troubles were exacerbated by a large-scale influx of refugees from newly-created East Pakistan, the practically constant migration of destitute

peasants from her western neighbour, increasing land pressure, and the aftereffects of the British extractive colonial economy. Even as the province's economic problems worsened, the clamour for separate states grew, and Assam was soon separated to make room for Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. As a result of the formation of these states, Assam now shared international boundaries with just Bangladesh and Bhutan. When river commerce on the Brahmaputra through East Pakistan was halted following the Indo-Pak War in 1967, Assam's only commercial route became the Siliguri corridor. Unlike Manipur and Meghalaya, which maintained some border trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh despite significant hurdles, Assam was forced to rely almost entirely on the tortuous railway and road routes through the 22 km-wide corridor of North Bengal for the delivery of its commodities.

It was unfortunate that the most convenient rail route through East Pakistan/Bangladesh had been blocked, and that the river route was no longer functioning. Rail and road connectivity with the rest of India took decades to improve following independence. However, by that time, the state's economic troubles had reached a point of no return. In the absence of a proper communication network, the state's industrial infrastructure could not take off, and trade and commerce suffered greatly. Because of this, capital has shied away from investing in Assam. There is a transportation bottleneck, as well as a shortage of basic facilities such as inexpensive power and excellent roads. As progress stalled, populist movements proliferated, giving birth to the growth of armed insurgency. The cycle of underdevelopment and insurgent politics had begun. While the unrest in law and order slowed progress, shrinking work opportunities for educated young people fueled insurgent politics. Although the rise of insurgency in Assam, as in other parts of the North Eastern Region, was initially viewed by New Delhi as a law and order problem that needed to be solved militarily, the course of events eventually convinced the Centre that the economic factors fueling insurgency needed to be addressed and that a simple military solution could never be devised.

As a result of the increased public awareness of the Look East Policy was conceived in response to the need to develop the region's economy. The prospect of opening up the North Eastern Region to South East Asia appeared enticing, particularly given the Myanmar and Chinese governments' readiness to explore the idea of developing trade lines with this region. Though the Indian government was first reticent to open up the North Eastern region to South East Asian trade, the opportunities afforded by such an opening up were too compelling to pass up. However, the process of South Asian countries establishing a unified economic front has been somewhat gradual.

A lot of factors contributed to the development of a very isolated attitude, like In terms

of India's relations with its immediate eastern neighbours. However, beginning in the late 1970s, the thinking began to shift, and the necessity for tighter cooperation among South Asian countries became increasingly apparent. One of the reasons behind this was the critical necessity to develop India's North Eastern region. The Shukla Commission Report, *Transforming the North-East: Tackling Backlogs in Basic Minimum Services and Infrastructural Needs*, echoed this mindset (March, 1997). The imperatives for opening up the North Eastern Region were clearly stated in this document.

Thus, nearly 25 years after the Bangkok Agreement of July 1975, which was the outcome of an effort launched by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Kunming Initiative of August 1999 comes into play. Meanwhile, BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand) is meeting in Bangkok Economic Cooperation), which was followed by the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) and the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation) in June 1997 (SASEC). The South Asia Growth Quadrangle and the Kunming Initiative aimed to add a new dimension to sub-regional cooperation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and India's north-eastern states and West Bengal. What SAARC could not achieve in terms of sub-regional cooperation, SAGQ and the Kunming Initiative (also known as the meeting of Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar—BCIM) attempted.

The "locational disadvantage" of India's North Eastern states is being addressed by opening up to the country's eastern neighbours and reviving historic cultural ties. What is significant is the shift in mentality that has occurred in recent years towards South Asian cooperation. It's just too bad it is apparent that the development of commerce and communication linkages between different countries is dependent not only on government policy but also on people's trust and good will. Once this is accomplished, it is only a matter of time until new paths leading to closer cooperation open up. In view of this, SAARC and ASEAN, of which India became a summit partner in 2001, are likely to take on new significance.

Though much has been written about the opportunities that the Trans Asian Highway/Railway project will open up for the North Eastern Region by passing through the major cities of Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India, questions have been raised about how such a highway will benefit states like Assam. Would states like Assam be ruined if sufficient infrastructure facilities were not built become merely commercial traffic corridors? How much would such an opening assist the region's indigenous peoples? For example, the post-1947 experience of some

fifty years or more has demonstrated that the rewards of "progress" do not benefit the local people. Instead, they are attracted by capitalists and entrepreneurs from India's heartland. There is also concern that Assamese traditional products such as handlooms, bell-metals, and bamboo craft would be pushed out of the market by cheaper and more readily available goods from countries such as China and Malaysia. Even in agriculture, wouldn't the Assamese peasant lose ground to products like Burmese rice?

The Indo-ASEAN vehicle rally, which began on November 22nd in Guwahati, received a lot of attention. The rally merely went across a few streets a tiny section of Assam before entering Nagaland and continuing on through Manipur into Myanmar and beyond. However, when the enthusiasm of the rally faded, it became evident that Assam stood to gain little from such extravaganzas. Without proper infrastructure to support its development, Assam would remain a bystander to the changes that are taking place, just like the hundreds of people who lined the streets to cheer on passing automobiles without knowing how this would effect their lives. And, after the cars were gone, life would resume its regular rhythm. As a result, many people believe that the benefits of the Look East Policy cannot be distributed evenly across the North-states. East's

While certain states, like as Manipur, will undoubtedly profit directly from this approach, Assam's situation may be extremely different because it is landlocked in the north-east and has only a few international borders with Bangladesh and Bhutan. The type of engagement that Assam had with its neighbours under British rule is no longer conceivable because today's Assam consists only of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys and is surrounded by states created out of its former area. As a result, rather than expecting too much from projects such as the Trans Asian Highway or the Stilwell Road [the possibilities of re-opening it are not promising at the moment], Assam should focus on improving transit and economic relations with Bangladesh and Bhutan. Rail and road connectivity from Bangladesh to the rest of India will substantially aid in the development of the province's commercial and industrial infrastructure, as well as provide an incentive to businesses such as tourism. In terms of trade with Bangladesh, the Assam's options aren't looking promising right now.

Textiles, woven fabrics, and ready-made garments account for a sizable portion of the 25 commodities for which Bangladesh has requested zero-tariff access. If Bangladesh's request is granted, it will undoubtedly pose a danger to Assam's handloom industry, which is currently in trouble. Furthermore, Assam has little to offer Bangladesh in terms of exports. For example, grains (15%) and textiles and textile goods (25%) accounted for the majority of Bangladesh imports from India in FY2001 (Inoue et al 2004:11). However, the expansion of river and road links through Bangladesh could

result in significant changes in the trading pattern. Goods from the rest of India and South East Asia might be sent through Bangladesh to Assam and the North East, and then to Myanmar and beyond. Approximately 25 million tonnes are now available shipments of freight to and from the North Eastern States and the rest of India this figure is predicted to climb to 52 million tonnes by 2007.

According to a recent analysis, around 25% of this in-transit traffic might be rerouted through Bangladesh with minimal investment (Inoue et al 2004:17). There is currently no bilateral motor vehicle agreement between Bangladesh and India, and rail transit is on hold. The Inland Water Travel Protocol allows for transit between Kolkata and two Assam sites without passing through Meghalaya or Tripura (Inoue et al 2004:18). Transit facilities moving commodities from the rest of India to and from the North-East through Bangladesh would benefit the former country as well, in addition to significantly lowering transportation costs. Energy cooperation between Bangladesh and India will also benefit Assam, which has a high potential for hydropower.

As a result, opening up to Bangladesh would be beneficial larger significance for modern Assam than attempting to open up to nations such as Myanmar and Cambodia. However, this opening would also include resolving some of the two countries' security difficulties. Aside from Indian allegations that Bangladesh has been harbouring several insurgent groups from North East India and has been abetting terrorism by giving agencies like the ISI free rein, there is an inherent suspicion and mistrust between the two countries that is proving to be a major impediment to limiting trade and travel restrictions. If commercial relations between the two nations are to improve, the problem of inflow (Hazarika 2000 chapter 13) into the North East from Bangladesh, as well as the growing fear that indigenous inhabitants will be turned into minorities in their own homeland, must be urgently addressed. Bangladesh has traditionally opposed the provision of transportation connections to India's North East on the grounds that such facilities would be abused by the Indian army, posing a security risk to Bangladesh. Regardless of how unjustified such fears are, they nevertheless reflect a distinct worldview in Bangladesh toward India. Similarly, historical and economic causes that have resulted in a constant flow of individuals from Bangladesh to Assam have raised serious concerns about the former's motivations. Trade relations are unlikely to grow in such circumstances.

In his book *Rites of Passage*, Sanjoy Hazarika proposes a list of "doable" programmes that could minimise conflict and foster cooperation between the two countries (Hazarika 2000: 257-266). Measures like those proposed must be seriously considered. Thus, only when suitable bridges are constructed between the two peoples and mutual

apprehensions are lessened can one expects a genuine opening up between Bangladesh and India. To begin, in order to gain the trust of the north eastern region, Bangladesh must acknowledge the problem of immigration in the North East (especially in Assam) and demonstrate its commitment to resolving it. Assam, for its part, must learn to view the influx problem more pragmatically and educate its people on the importance of developing a healthy relationship with its neighbour.

Those who feel that borders are fluid and regions are paramount should be reminded that concerns such as ethnicity and nationalism remain relevant with people who are battling not just to find their identity but also to protect it against globalisation influences.

### References

- Bhuyan, S.K. 1949 *Anglo-Assamese Relations 1771-1826*, Calcutta.
- Baruah, Sanjib. 2004 *Between South and Southeast Asia: Northeast India and the Look East Policy*. Guwahati: CENISEAS.
- Barpujari, H.K. (ed) *Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol 11, 1992; Vol III, 1994, Vol IV, 1992, Vol V 1993. Calcutta.
- Barpujari, H.K. 1996 *Assam in the Days of the Company* Shillong: NEHU.
- Basu, N.K. 1970 *Assam in the Ahom Age*. Calcutta,
- Devi, Lakshmi. 1968. *Ahom-Tribal Relations*. Guwahati.
- Gait, Edward. 1963. *A History of Assa.*, Calcutta,
- Guha, Amalendu. 1977. *Planter Raj to Swaraj*. New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House.
- Hazarika, Sanjoy.2000. *Rites of Passage: Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Limited.
- Inoue, Kyoko et al. 2004. *Sub-Regional Relations in the Eastern South Asia: With Special Focus on Bangladesh and Bhutan*. JRP Series 132, Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies.
- Lahiri, Nayanjot. 1991. *Pre-Ahom Assam*. New Delhi.
- Medhi, S.B. 1978. *Transport and Economic Development in Assam*. Guwahati.
- Misra, Sanghamitra.2004. *Spaces, Borders, Histories: Identity Construction in Colonial Goalpara*, unpublished thesis, SOAS, London.
- Misra, Udayon. 2000. *The Periphery Strikes Back: Challenges to the Nation-State in Assam and Nagalan*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Misra, Udayon and Jayanta Gogoi. *India's North-East: Exploring New Possibilities of Trade and Communication with Special Reference to China*,

unpublished seminar paper.

Nath, D. ed. 2004, *Reopening of the Stilwell Road: Prospects and Problems*.  
Kolkata.

Planning Commission, Government of India: *Transforming the North-East:  
Tackling Backlogs in Basic Minimum Services and Infrastructural Needs*,  
New Delhi (March, 1997), also referred to as the Shukla Commission  
Report.