

**NORTHEAST INDIA'S PLACE IN
INDIA - CHINA RELATIONS AND ITS
FUTURE ROLE IN INDIA'S ECONOMY**



INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL STUDIES KOLKATA

**NORTHEAST INDIA'S PLACE IN
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[Professor H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures, 2002]

HARAPRASAD RAY

**INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL STUDIES
KOLKATA**

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PREFACE

In September, 2001, I received an invitation from Prof. B. N. Mukherjee, the then Director of the Institute of Historical Studies, Kolkata, to deliver the H. K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures for the year 2001-2002. I was extremely happy to accept the offer as it gave me the rare opportunity to repay my debt to my place of birth. It also afforded me the rare honour to offer my humble homage to Prof. Barpujari, the doyen of historians in Assam, and the inspiring figure for historical studies in Northeast India. It is sad that he is no more with us to see the book in print.

Two lectures were delivered by me at the Institute on 16 and 18 March, 2002. Based on primary data from Chinese records, these lectures were developed into the present monograph for publication by the Institute. I have substantially benefitted from Prof. Mukherjee's valuable comments and the suggestions and remarks by the scholars present at the lectures.

I am particularly beholden to the present Director Prof. Sukumar Bhattacharyya and the Registrar Mrs. M. Chatterjee for their constant encouragement and advice during the entire process of publication of this tome. The manuscript has been typed by Swarnali of the Datacom Institute at Santoshpur under the guidance of its bright and young Principal, Mr. Dilip Sengupta. I am grateful to them.



Introduction

My primary obsession during the last two decades or more has been Indian Ocean Studies and Maritime trade between India and China with Southeast Asia as a nexus.

My family is settled in Assam for the last four generations. My link with Assam has undergone many vicissitudes. The wartime turmoil, the Indian evacuees from Burma, the famous Stillwell Road leading from Assam to South China through northern Burma (Bhamo), the Chinese soldiers evacuated from the Japanese-occupied China parading the streets of our small town — all these images, ever fresh in my mind, fired my imagination about China, and I wanted to study the eastern route from India to China.

In 1993 the International Congress of Asian and North African Studies (ICANAS) during its 34th session at Hong Kong, asked me to organise a panel on “The Southern Silk Route” as it is known in China. As a result two essays were prepared by me dealing with the Indian historical and literary evidence on this so-called Southern Silk Route. One of them was published in the *China Report* (31.2.1995). The theme has subsequently been expanded to include the Tibetan and Bhutanese routes of the traditional trade in the vast area comprising south and southwest China, Myanmar (Burma) and eastern and northeastern India, i.e., the land of the ‘seven sisters’ — this area being given the new denomination of Trans-Himalayan Region. Next, I concentrated specially on the economic potentiality and the importance of mutual cooperation for development of this vast Trans-Himalayan interface.

This is the *raison d’être* behind the making of this monograph.

The strategic importance of Northeast India is incomparable. In some aspects it is more implosive than Kashmir. The inhabitants of this region suffer from the sense of alienation due to territorial estrangement.

Northeast India comprises one-fourth of our country and is one of India's richest segments in terms of natural resources. The region can contribute immensely to the nation's revenue if industry is properly developed and overseen by the various agencies.

It is with the purpose of drawing the attention of the people of this region as well as the neighbouring countries that I ventured upon writing this monograph. To make out a strong and convincing case I have drawn upon all dimensions of the issue.

Before delving into the heart of the topic we have thought it fit to draw upon the various areas of common origin in the fields of religion, culture, traditional cults and customs. Linguistic affinity, rice, snake-worship, sericulture, Tantrism and ethnicity are some of the areas where parity or similarity has been established.

The Route

We have enough proofs to establish the existence of a direct trade between Northeast India and Southwest China. Chinese historical records tell us about the failure of the Chinese Emperor Wu's attempts to open up the trade route from the Chinese capital Changan to Northeast India through the hostile independent local rulers of Yunnan and the adjoining areas. If there was no trade existing in the region then these rulers would not have resisted the Han traders, rather they should have welcome the prospect of trade with them. Yunnan ruler's resentment against the establishment of direct trade between China and India at the cost of his profit as the middleman, prevented the Chinese from getting access into India; but the trade in *cinapatta* and the south Chinese square bamboo continued unabated.

The Ahoms of Assam, known as the Tai Shans (the Burmese called the Yunnanese Tais on the northern Burmese border as Shans) followed the old route through the Patkai Range from Maulung in the Hukong

valley in Upper Burma and arrived at Tipam near the coal town of Mergherita in the Eastern Brahmaputra valley around A.D. 1252. A branch of it had even migrated to Assam, Cachar, Tripura and Manipur as early as the eighth century A.D. The Tai people were distributed all over from *Yunnan to the southernmost extremity of Thailand*.

For various reasons, both topographical and political, this route had to be supplemented or replaced by alternative route passing through Tibet into India. It is even presumed by some scholars *that the Shubu (Sichuan fabric) and qiong-bamboo (from Yunnan) that Zhang Qian found in Bactria in the 2nd century B.C. should have gone on the shorter and easier way via Tibet. We cannot say with certainty if this route was used* for this particular instance, but we have definite proof of its use during the Tang and later periods. During the Qing Dynasty (British period in India) both the Tibetan and the Bhutanese trade routes were used by people of both sides for exchange of goods and sales and purchases. Apart from the Nathula pass which led into India directly from Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyangtse, Yadung and Phari, there were three other routes, two via Bhutan, the first from Tashi Lumpo (Tibet) through Paro Pilo (Bhutan) to the Buxa near presentday Alipur Duar in North Bengal from where Rangpur town in Bangladesh was approached, the second by the valley of the Monas River via Tassgong and Dewangiri and Hajo, north of Guwahati in the foothills, the third took the eastern course of Tsangpo (Brahmaputra in Tibet) and passed through Zedang, Tawang and further on to Hajo.

The communication and trade was (and still is) entirely carried only by the Tibetans and a few of the Bhutanese (all of them were known as the Bhutias). They brought down principally red and partly coloured blankets, gold dust and silver, rock salt, chowries (mostly Yak tails), musks, and some Chinese silks, munjeet and bees wax, these they exchanged in India (Northeast India) for rice, lac, the raw and manufactured silks of Assam, iron, cotton, dried fish and tobacco. Arriving

here during winter, they took care to return during February and March before the return of the hot weather or rains.

The road north of Guwahati near Hajo was an important passage to Tibet via Tawang (India), Cuona (Tsona) on the Tibetan border reaching Zedang south of Tsangpo, and thence to Lhasa from where the route spread eastward to Chamdo, the all-weather route to China through Chengdu, capital of Sichuan. The importance of this road is confirmed by the fact that the Muslim conqueror of Bengal, Muhammad-I-Bakhtiyar Khilji chose this route to Tibet in his wild dream to conquer this roof of the world around 1202.

According to Taranath of Tibet (author of *The Rising of Indian Dharma*) who belonged to early thirteenth century, the *pandits* and the other priests and scholars of Bihar and Bengal fled to Assam, Arakan and even to such far away countries as Cambodia in Southeast Asia, after the massive invasions of Bakhtiyar Khilji. This account shows that the land routes to sea through Arakan, and to Cambodia, etc. on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, and South China Sea were still being used by people of various descriptions.

The areas through which the overland trade route from Northeast India to China passed, are inhabited by many ethnic minorities whose political, economic and social organisations are more than primitive and backward. They are at loggerheads with each other which is extremely harmful to the advance of trade and safety to the route.

The traditional trade route came into being first as a track, then as a road and developed into an overland trade route with the expansion of commercial activities. It also brought about socio-economic development in the entire region.

The combined waters of the Brahmaputra and the Meghna fall into the sea. There were navigable rivers connecting the Brahmaputra with

the Ganga. Later (as per Rennel's map of 1783) the Jenni (Jamuna) which issued from the Brahmaputra near Sherpur (in Bangladesh), joined the Ganga near Jaffargunj below Pabna and Ruttongunj. This facilitated direct navigation from the farthest point in Assam to the mouth of the Ganga (near Tamralipti and Gange) on the sea. This route requires to be reactivated now.

Northeast India is a land-locked place with hilly region all round. One of the solutions to its problems will be to open the southern gate to the sea by entering into friendly trade link with Bangladesh. As it is, even normal trade with Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) which existed till 1965, is at a standstill due to apathy from both sides, and in the circumstances it will be building castle in the air if we think of any breakthrough in this regard in the near future.

This and Dispur

There are many facts in history which remain obscure or neglected due to oversight or misinterpretation by historians who have scarce knowledge about the topography and ancient history of Northeast India. Today the capital of Assam is situated at Dispur. The word is made up of 'Dis' and 'pur', a corruption of Pragjyotishpur. In ancient times the place and the country was known as Pragjyotish (as in *Raghuvaṃśam* (*cakampe tirna-Lauhitye tasmin Pragjyotiṣeśwarah* = the king of Pragjyotisa trembled when he (Raghu) crossed the river Lauhitya (Brahmaputra) (IV. 81). In ancient period also, the tribes around the country as well as the foreigners called the country *This* as is evidenced in the *Periplus*. This valuable truth has been discussed at length by a great historian of this region, the late N. K. Bhattasali.

The fact that *This* of the *Periplus* is none else than Pragjyotisa is further proved by the manner in which the well known malabathrum (*tejpat*) trade of the country of *This* is referred to in this work. The

description of the tribe Besatae with flat faces and leave-plaited baskets which they used as mats and the proximity of their land to the country of *This* give a clear indication that *This* is *This* of Pragjyotish, the term surviving till today in 'Dis' of 'Dispur' (capital of Assam and corruption of the word Pragjyotispur). Besatae tribe bears similarity to the Khasis, Nagas and the Bhutias; in these areas malabathrum is grown in plenty.

Traditional Trade

Assam's and for that matter Northeast India's prosperity was closely related to the development of its local handicrafts, natural products, silks and other textile products, forest products, etc, as well as its easy access to the different parts of India in the west, Myanmar and Southwest China in the east and north through the tribal intermediaries, and a direct route to the sea.

Arthasastra of Kautilya contains references to the silk. It mentions Suvarnakudya where excellent silken fabrics were produced. Suvarnakudya has been almost correctly identified with Sonkudiha in the Kamrup district of Assam, nine miles from Hajo which remained an important mart for Tibeto-Indian and Bhutan-Indian trade till recent times. The same area also produced a kind of perfume called *tailaparnika*, *aguru* (agallochum, resin of aloe) and sandalwood and malabathrum (*teipat*), all transported down the stream of the Brahmaputra and the Ganga for export to South India, Sri Lanka and the western countries.

The goods that the Bhutanese traders brought to India were: debang (China silk), hill ponies, wax, musk, etc, while they purchased from India, indigo, cloves, nutmeg, sugar, cardamom, camphor, copper, *endy* cloth, *gugul*, tobacco, dried fish, etc. The Tibetans used to bring to India goods like coloured blankets, gold dust, silver, rock salt, besides those brought by the Bhutanese. Of the items exported to Tibet were: lac, raw and manufactured silks of Assam, cotton fabrics, dried fish, tobacco and many other commodities which were also carried to China.

Even the trade agreements signed between India and China do not exceed the limits of traditional exports and imports, for instance, coffee, tobacco, iron ore and concentrates, chrome ore, finished leather and leather products, iron and steel bars etc., chemical dyes and dye intermediaries, sandalwood, myrobalan, wax, and such other natural products and mineral are invariably there in the inventory for export from India. From China, India normally imports: beans, sulphur, borax, gypsum, silk and piece goods, wool, paper, nutmeg, musk, vermicelli, porcelain, resin, glass wares, etc. Moreover, in this age of discovery, machinery and other scientific products are also exchanged. Nutmeg used to be exported to China from India since ancient times, but later China became its exporter.

It seems that traditional trade during the entire medieval period had mainly been conducted through Tibet, and the old items still continued to be traded right up to the British period. Both the Bhutanese and the Tibetans carried their merchandise to northern Bengal at Rangpur and Hajo in northern Assam.

The reports from the officers concerned with the trade on the India-China border are very disheartening, as the trade is dwindling. The Chinese are discouraging the border inhabitants of Tibet from having any contacts with those on the Indian side for fear of contamination with the Tibetan refugees in India. At the same time, after their entry into the World Trade Organisation, the Chinese are innovating all possible ways to dump their consumer goods in the metropolitan and smaller district towns of India. This state of affairs calls for analysis of the situation and immediate remedy for the benefit of the Indian traders. Besides there are several hindrances which should be removed by both sides. The first impediment is ascribed to absence of Yuan-Rupees exchange ratio and nonexistence of banking system. Secondly, during the 35-odd years after the cessation of border trade, economic life of the

inhabitants concerned has undergone immense changes. Many among the young generation have taken up jobs or changed their vocation. The land reform carried out by the Chinese government has given some people the opportunity to revert to cultivation. Thirdly, both the countries have already held more than dozen rounds of official level talks, still no permanent solution to the border dispute has been found till to date. Nothing short of border settlement will induce people to resume large scale border trade. In the mean time smuggling and other forms of illegal trade will continue of flourish.

The present syndrome

On the Tibetan border our trade continued till it was disrupted after strict Chinese control was enforced on the entire region of Tibet. Trade in this area had been going on since ancient times, and it is quite possible that it was more in use because of its easy accessibility to India in the south and inland China in the north. This is clear from our discussion in the relevant chapters. After a long closure, some of the townships like Taklakot (*Puran Dzong*) etc. on the northern border of India have been opened to trade. This is an extremely inadequate step. The most viable route emerged from the wellknown textile manufacturing town of Hajo and led to Tibet via Tsuona (Cuona), and thence to Chengdu, capital of Sichuan through the all-weather road to China's heartland. This link should be reopened for the mutual benefit of the traders of both sides.

Northeast India's Tibet trade used to be disrupted whenever the Chinese asserted their role there. Since their permanent occupation of Lhasa they closed Tibet against the inhabitants of India, and the inhabitants of the neighbouring countries like Bhutan could pass the boundary only under the sanction of a passport. Not only on this part of the border, they enforced similar restriction in relation to the coastal trade with the other Asian countries and the West. Such sanctions

undermined the border trade. Gradual expansion of the Muslim rule to the northeastern part of India in the medieval period did the same damage.

British rule in India caused untold misery to the people of India. They adopted systematic measures to disrupt our village economy and enforced subversive economic measures to destroy our economy so that the very foundation of our textile industry and trade got jeopardised.

Apathy of the ruling politicians towards the importance of a comprehensive system of production and opening of our doors to our neighbours for mutual give-and-take is stalling our development. Suspicion, distrust, and mud-slinging on each other have to be got rid of. Political stability is the *sine qua non* for economic progress. This and the determination to stand on one's own two legs will smoothen the way for the progress of the Northeast. All the factors that go into the making of such an atmosphere are already there. British economy flourished at our cost. The textile and other native products which brought prosperity to us were banned for the benefit of our foreign rulers. The benefits of scientific discoveries followed by the industrial revolution were all monopolised by the western countries and denied to us.

Much has been done after independence. Now it is high time that other border posts be opened for trade, especially the Nathu La corridor, the one joining Hajo and Guwahati with the Tibetan area of Zedang and the Stilwell Highway. This will facilitate trade with the Tibetan as well as the Bhutia traders.

The Remedy

In our development programme which includes all productive activities and trade, we have not given any attention to indigenous products and the traditional items of trade based on them. No serious attempts have been made to identify and study scientifically the native products, classify them according to their value as commodities, apply

modern scientific experiment to develop their uses to suit modern diversified requirements and put them to competition in foreign markets. Ginger, catechu, putchuk, myrobalan, asafoetida, *emblica officinalis* (*amla*), etc. should be chemically analysed and their medicinal and food traits should be assessed for our needs. Modern sophisticated technology should be utilised by the local entrepreneurs to improve the quality and increase the varieties in the production of tea, silk, *endy*, *muga*, forest products, paper and sugar of which there is abundance in Assam.

There is scope for India and Southwest China to start joint ventures and develop new products for the world market. Both Yunnan and Northeast India (including Tripura) have a number of subtropical exotic fruits with high nutrition and possessing medicinal values. The Yunnan canning industry can collaborate with Indian companies to develop canned fruit (and vice-versa), fruit juice and natural drinks and enter world market. Like India, Yunnan and Guizhou of China have rich resources of medicinal herbs. The resources, modern technology and traditional skills of the two countries can be pulled together through joint ventures in order to transform the hills of North and Northeast India into plantations, laboratories and factories of indigenous drugs which can be popularised in the western countries.

The International Highway

The Burma Road, also known as the Stillwell Road, linking Northeast India and Southeast Asia, may soon become the international highway stretching from Guwahati to Beijing through a motor-cum-rail route. From Ledo in Assam to Bhamo (Myanmar) and then to Kunming (capital of Yunnan province in south China) across the Patkai Range, the road covers 1680 kms (1050 miles). From Kunming Chinese railway lines spread all over China.

This war time Stillwell Road was built six feet-wide to make room for the American one-tonners. The first truck plied on the road in October,

1944. For almost 16 months unending convoys of the USA and other allied countries passed that road from Assam to China. The road is in poor shape beyond Jairampur (near India-northern Myanmar border). After massive repairs of the sections damaged due to landslides and human neglect, this road as well as the rail lines may soon facilitate international trade with Myanmar, China and the southeast Asian countries, while on the western sector both railroad and inland waterways down to the Bay of Bengal port of Chittagong through Bangladesh, and farther to the Kolkata and Haldia ports will boost our business with the Indian Ocean littorals.

To achieve this end both the government at the centre and at the state level have to be forward-looking and circumspect, and take bold and imaginative measures in order to promote India's foreign trade. The region can contribute tremendously to the nation's revenue if industry is properly developed and overseen by the private entrepreneur under the aegis of the central authorities. It should be given developmental privileges as accorded to our existing Special Economic Zones so that the eight states can trade as a 'unified bloc' directly with foreign countries.

A senior Chinese expert in India, Dr. Haraprasad Ray, the author, is one of the few scholars in India who is able to use original Chinese sources. He has already established his reputation as one of the very few Indian scholars dealing with India-China relations both during the historic and recent times. He has contributed to a number of international seminars in Germany, Hong Kong, China, the U. S. A, London, Paris and other places.

Dr. Ray is the author of *Trade and Diplomacy in India-China Relations : A Study of Bengal during the Fifteenth Century AD*, and *Hindi-Chini Primer*, (the only text-book available for learning Chinese through Hindi medium); besides he has already authored more than five dozens scholarly articles on such diverse subjects as Sino-Indian studies, Asian trade, Maritime studies, Chinese language, literature and linguistics; these articles and papers have been published in scholarly journals both in India and abroad.

Dr. Ray was Sino-Tibetan Research Scholar in Chinese at Calcutta University during 1953-56, and taught Sanskrit in various colleges in West Bengal, and assisted the editor of the *Indian Historical Quarterly* from 1956 to 1958. In 1959 he joined the Ministry of Defence as a Chinese language expert and held responsible posts as a senior Chinese Translator and Instructor, being in charge of training ininterpreters for various Ministries of the Government of India. His service was transferred to the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in 1975, where he organised and established on a firm footing the 5-year Chinese Programme in M.A. After retiring from JNU in 1996, he was successively made Senior Fellow of the Society for Indian Ocean Studies and the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi. Presently a Research Professor at the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, Dr. Ray is now engaged in exploring data on South Asian history from Chinese sources covering the period from the earliest till late 19th century for which records are available, the first two volumes of which are in the press.

Dr. Ray has also contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*.

Dr. Ray's book "*Northeast India's Place in India-China Relations and Its Future Role in India's Economy*" analyses the possibility of having an integrated approach for the upliftment of the economy of Northeast India by making judicious use of the resources of the region in collaboration with the contiguous areas of South and Southwest China. This is necessary in view of the morbid state of Indo-Chinese trade through Tibet where Northeast India has no share and thus, the region's economic interest is given a short shrift. The development of the vast natural resources of Northeast India as a whole in harmony with the corresponding areas of China will definitely give a fillip to the development of this vast region of Asia.

