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## A note on the trade of the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh during pre- colonial and colonial period

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**Abstract:** *The Khamtis are one of the enterprising tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They have contributed a lot to the history and culture of Arunachal Pradesh. They played a significant role in the frontier history of India's north eastern region and the resistance, they offered to the British rulers marked them out for special attention in the administrative history of the area. They belong to the Shan stock of the great Tai race and bear similar cultural trait with the people of South East Asia in general and Myanmar and Thailand in particular. They are good agriculturists and inveterate traders. With exception to other tribes of the state, they practice settled wet rice cultivation. The objective of the paper is to provide an outline of the trade activities of the Khamtis with reference to the trade fairs during the British rule and their impact in the economy of the Khamtis in a historical perspective. The paper also tries to provide a background study on the trade of the Khamtis during the Ahom rule. The methodology followed in the paper is both historical and analytical. Primary and secondary sources are utilized in the present study. Intensive archival and library works have been carried out to collect the relevant materials. For better grasp on the topic, individual and group interviews are taken during the course of field survey to supplement the archival and published materials.*

**Key words:** Arunachal Pradesh, Khamtis, trade, trade fair, trade route.

### Introduction

Among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh the Theravada Buddhist tribes are significant. The Khamtis are the largest Theravada Buddhist tribe of the state, migrated from upper Burma in the middle part of 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Khamtis were originally a branch of Shan tribe, whose head quarter was round Mougong in upper Burma. Their kingdom, Pong was conquered by the Burmese king Alomphra in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Following the dismemberment of their kingdom, they entered into the Ahom kingdom and with the permission of the contemporary Ahom king Rejeswar Singha (1751-1769 AD), they settled in Tengapani area of present Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Khamtis have contributed a lot to the history and culture of Arunachal Pradesh. Their tangible cultural heritage in the form songs, music, dance, drama, art and crafts, economy, traditions, religious belief and practices, rituals, way of life is much more influenced by the religion and culture of Myanmar and Thailand. They

belong to the Shan stock of the great Tai race and bear similar cultural trait with the people of South East Asia in general, and Myanmar and Thailand in particular. Almost all the British writers and administrators of the colonial period designated the Khamtis as one of the most civilized, cultured and brilliant tribes of north-east India. They have their own scripts and credited to have possessed a rich corpus of religious as well as secular texts. They are good agriculturists and inveterate traders. With exception to other tribes of the state, they practice settled wet rice cultivation. Their geographical location refers to their contact with two civilizations- the Brahmaputra valley civilization of Assam in one side and of the Burma (Myanmar) on the other. At present the Khamtis are mainly concentrated in Namsai and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Their settlement roughly lies between 27°30' and 27°55' North latitude and 95°45' and 96°20' East longitude.

### **Discussion**

Trade is the activity or process of buying, selling or exchanging goods or services between people, firms or country. It is a commercial transaction involving the sell or purchase of goods, service or information.

From the time of yore, trade has been an important means of livelihood. Prior to the Independence, economic activities of the people of Arunachal Pradesh were limited to production through elementary methods. There was no organized system like guild or chambers of commerce to carry out or to regulate the trade and commerce, nor any regular

markets. The internal and external trades were localized. Trade relations were mainly based on barter system. There were some trade centers along the foot hills, where traders from the hills and plains met and used to exchange their goods. Due to absence of money economy the commodities were exchange according to the bare needs of individuals, families and villages.

It is said that the Khamtis are inveterate traders. Trade is a major subsidiary economic activity of the Khamtis. For better understanding of the trade activities of the Khamtis, the topic has been discussed under the headings of trade routes, cross-country trade, inter-tribal trade, trade fairs and local markets (*hats*).

### **Trade routes**

The people of Arunachal Pradesh had maintained extensive commercial relations with the neighbouring region through the ages. There were a number of trade-routes to Tibet, China and Burma from upper Assam through Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> There was an open road from upper Assam into Burma through the Patkoi pass the line of trade after Sadiya passes by Bisa across the Patkoi range of mountain and through the valley of Hookong to the market of Mookong, situated on a navigable branch of Irrawaddy called Namyang.<sup>2</sup> This is the famous route by which the Burmese

had invaded Assam in 1817AD. There were several other routes by which the trade relations were kept up with the inhabitants of Hookong.<sup>3</sup>

S. Dutta Choudhury, writing on the trade routes of the Khamti area of Arunachal Pradesh mentions that “A number of trade routes from the present Lohit District to Burma also existed. A route leading from Kibithoo ran along the river Dichu in upper Lohit Valley to the Irrawady basin in North Burma. Another route along Ghalum led to the Putao District of North Burma. A path along the Lati river led to Burma through the Lohit Valley. This was used by the Khamptis. There was yet another route from the Kamlang valley and Khampti area to Changkhari Dakhru, wherefrom the route followed the courses of Lam and Twang rivers. Formerly, the traders from Lohit and Dibang Valleys could travel through the present Tirap District by the Chaukang route to reach some market places on their way to Burma. But this route was not safe as ‘*the Singphos*’ were also always ready to levy blackmail on traders and other who passed through their villages or to rob them. This was the greatest complaint in connection with the Chaukang route.”<sup>4</sup>

The most important trade route lies in the south-east direction from Hookang Valley, from which the Chinese district of Kakyao Wainmo could be reached in eight days.<sup>5</sup> By this route the Chinese traders frequently travelled. Another route called Chaukang route through the Choukham pass was frequented by the traders of Lohit and Dibang valley to reach Burma.<sup>6</sup> Another route from Dau Valley to upper Lohit valley following the river Tho Chu right from its origin runs up to the neighbourhood of Kibithoo near the international border.<sup>7</sup>

The existence of numerous trade routes indicates the fact beyond doubt that the Khamtis, along with the other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh had a long tradition of both external and internal trade. They used to trade with China and Burma as well as with Assam.

### **Cross-country trade**

Archival materials, writings of the contemporary British writers and the *Buranjis* reveal that the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh carried out trade intercourses with the people of Bhutan, China and specially with Burma. The north eastern region is noted for mineral products, textile and other forest products. Many of these articles were not only exported to the neighbouring states but also found their way into Tibet, China and Burma by different routes. Moreover, the region is inhabited by the great Indo-Mongoloids. Their racial cum cultural affinity and their original habitat proved advantageous for them to successfully carry on trade with China, Tibet and Burma.

In 1837AD, on the Khamti settlement of Suddia (Sadiya) and its trade, John M’Cosh reported, “Its trade is rapidly increasing; all the necessaries of life are procurable: its exports are gold and silver, amber, musk and ivory; Kangti (*Khamti*) daus, Chinese and Burmese trinkets; Bisa- poison, and dye-stuff called Mishmi-tita and manjit. The Mishmi-tita, manjit, and lime, triturated with water, and allowed to digest

in an earthen pot for a month, makes a beautiful permanent red dye.”<sup>8</sup> To quote the observation of William Robinson in 1841AD, “The Khunungs inhabit the lower mountains beyond the Irrawaddy, and also a poorer and more savage race than those of the higher ranges. The former supply the Khamtis with salt, and possess the art of forging the *daws* or swords, so much in request.”<sup>9</sup> In 1873AD, on the trade of the Khamtis T.T. Copper writes that the Khamtees are said to be inveterate traders and to their industry Northern Assam is much indebted for the best rice and vegetables, especially potatoes.<sup>10</sup> Although there was no regular trade and commercial intercourse between the people of Burma and Lohit district, an early trade relation existed between the two. The Kachins of upper Burma and the Khamptis and Singphos of Lohit traded in ivory, elephant and opium.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that people of Burma, Assam (including that of the present Arunachal Pradesh, notably the Singphos and Khamtis) and China carried on their trade activities mainly through barter system in their respective products and Indian traders received bullion from Chinese traders.<sup>12</sup>

From the above accounts, it may be concluded that the Khamtis once formed a trading class between China, Burma, Tibet and India through north-eastern routes. Their original inhabitant and socio-religious as well as racial affinity proved advantageous for them to carry out trade relations with the neighbouring countries specially with Burma and China and vice versa. Their trade relations with these countries helped a lot not only in exchanging ideas but also went a long way to cultivate sense of good neighbourhood and fraternity.

### **Inter- tribal trade**

In fact, mutual co-operation in the field of economic activity is the character of the tribal people. For certain essential commodities such as salt, agricultural implements, cattle, clothes, utensils, metals etc. they had to depend upon the adjoining areas. This led to the growth of inter-tribal trade and the medium of exchange was carried out through barter system. There was a considerable inter-tribal trade between the Khamtis and neighbouring tribes during pre-Independence period. Their trade was carried out with the Mishmis, Singphos, Adis and mostly with the Assamese. Animal husbandry was one of the important economic activities of the Khamtis. They domesticated animals like buffalo, cow, pig, goat, hen, elephant etc. These cattle, they generally sell to the Mishmis who came down from the hill and purchase the cattle for sacrifice in different ceremonies.<sup>13</sup> The Khamtis made use of buffaloes and oxen as means of barter with the Mishmis. They are expert elephant tamers, and they traded in elephants.<sup>14</sup> The Mishmi used to procure from the Khamtis, oxen and buffaloes for sacrifices, food and other items such as metals, utensils and other articles which they brought from Assamese counterpart. The Khamtis are the merchants who trade with the Assamese and other tribes.<sup>15</sup> In the past, they acted as a liaison between the tribal's of Assamese plains.<sup>16</sup> The Khamtis trade in grains, ornaments, handicrafts etc. Some high family Khamtis are dealing in big timber business.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, to fulfill the deficiencies of certain essential articles and to give an outlet of their surplus, the Khamtis restored to inter-tribal trade during pre-colonial period. Very often, they acted as mediatory between the hill tribes and people of plains in Assam. Due to the common origin with the Ahoms and ethnic affinity with the Burmese it was advantageous for the Khamtis to carry out trades with these tribes than the neighbouring tribes of their business counterparts. They procured goods such as silver, copper and other items from Burma and sold it to their kinsmen, the Ahoms. Thus, the Khamtis economy linked up with the neighbouring tribes specially with the people of Assam.

### **Trade Fairs**

After the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 AD, the process of the British annexation of Assam started which brought the British into contact with the people of present Arunachal Pradesh. The new regime tried to augment the hitherto existed trade-relations between the people of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The early years of British rule in Assam served a preparatory period when markets were established and trade fairs were organized in the foot hill areas. In 1874AD, the administration of Assam was brought under Chief Commissionership. By that period annual trade fairs were held in Sadiya, Udalguri and Doimara.<sup>18</sup>

The motives of the British to organize these trade fairs were many folds. The north eastern frontier was an important region to the British from defensive point of view. During their early rule in Assam, the British were suffering from possible Burmese attack; therefore, they did not want to annex the eastern territory of their dominion bordering Burma to their direct administration, at the same time they were anxious to extend their sphere of political influence over people living in the area. Moreover, they wanted to have their share in the lucrative trade with Burma, China and Tibet. The rigorous restriction of trade as a result of rigid close door policy of the Chinese and the prohibition of importation of opium to China by the Chinese government diverted British attention from maritime to overland route.<sup>19</sup> Though the opium war resulted the opening up of five ports to Europeans, the preference of British on land route was not minimized. The piracy on sea and river was rampant and beyond the power of imbecile Government of Peking to suppress.<sup>20</sup>

It was essential for the British to penetrate through Arunachal Pradesh to find an outlet of their merchandise into the heart of China and Burma. Their mission was to access Bhamo, the then trade emporium of Burma would be possible if they could able to cross the Khamti- Singpho territory. The need for opening up of additional land routes to China through Khampti-Singphos territory attract the attention of the British. The British government wanted to keep friendly relation with these tribes and to use their territories for opening up of trade routes to Burma and China.<sup>21</sup> As a means for achieving these ends, the government encouraged trade fairs in places like Sadiya, Udalguri and Doimara. The trade fairs were officially held in winter season

for three days but trade transactions were carried on usually from January to March and sometimes from the end of December to the beginning of April.<sup>22</sup>

The origin of trade fairs may be traced back to the Ahom rule. The Ahom rulers encouraged the trade fairs for mutual benefits of the hill tribes and their own subjects on the basis of barter and exchange. The fairs at Udalguri (*Kariaparaduar*) and Doimara (*Charduar*) dated back to the Ahom rule and these were continued throughout the British period.<sup>23</sup> The Sadiya fair was of course, introduced by the British in 1867AD.<sup>24</sup>

“The Sadiya fair catered to the needs of the Adis, Mishmis, Singphos, Khamptis and other neighbouring tribes. The items offered by the Tibetans, Bhutias and these tribesmen for sale in these included pony, sheep, yak’s tail, rock salt, blanket, musk, pepper, spice, dye, lac, wax, ivory, rubber, madder, *Mishmi teeta*, *Mishmi* cloth, *Addi* cloth, spear, *dao*, basket, bag, mat, amber, honey, rhinoceros horn, rug etc. Goods purchased by the highlanders from the fairs include paddy, rice, *eri* cloth, cotton cloth, brass pot, betel leaf, betel nut, molasses, dried fish, tobacco, rapeseed, iron, silver, muslin, broad cloth, opium, buffalo, bell metal pots, cotton yarn, *eri* yarn, English yarn, Assamese *gamocha* (napkin), American drill, tea, sugar, cambric, tea cup etc. Some of the items brought by the tribesmen for sale were not produced by them but procured from the Tibetan and Chinese traders in exchange of goods obtained from the trade marts. In this manner trans-Himalayan trade flow still continued though of a much reduced volume.”<sup>25</sup>

During the British rule, among the trade fairs, the most important and the biggest was organized at Sadiya and was visited by the Khamtis, Singphos, Mishmis, Adis etc. Sadiya was the original homeland of the Khamtis; hence, they attended the trade fair in large numbers. The Sadiya trade fair was attended by the Adis, Miris (Misings), Mishmis, Khamtis and Singphos and other tribes.<sup>26</sup> The Adis, Miris (Misings), Mishmis, Khamtis and Singphos, used to bring pepper, munjit, ginger, wax, ivory, cotton etc which they exchanged for glass, beads, cloths, salt and money.<sup>27</sup> In 1876, the Sadiya fair recorded the visit of 3,000 tribe men belonging to Miris, Mishmis, Khamptis and Singphos.<sup>28</sup> Only Khamptis could bring down considerable quantity of surplus rice in the Sadiya fair.<sup>29</sup>

H.K. Borpujari writes on the Sadiya fair that the tribes in the further north-east namely the Abors, Mishmis, Khamtis and Nagas resorted to Sadiya fair held regularly in the month of February wherein the tribe men sold rubber, wax, musk, amber, ivory, rhinoceros horn and took in return *eri* cloth, broad cloth, opium, iron pans, brass utensils and beads.<sup>30</sup> In the year 1875AD, Singphos and Khamptis took mound of opium at the value of Rs. 960.<sup>31</sup> In the same year the Khamptis bring rice to the value of Rs. 1,000 speak well of their industry. Singphos and Khamptis were good hunters as they used to bring down elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns.<sup>32</sup>

From 1880's the trade was on decline. In 1881AD, as reported by Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, "The attendance was very small compared with earlier years. The Abors, except four or five individuals, as usual, were not present. The Khamtis and Singphos made a good show and the *Chulikata* Mishmis appeared, but not in nearly such strength as in previous years."<sup>33</sup> The attendance of the tribes including the Khamtis went on decreasing in the Sadiya fair in the last part of the Nineteenth century. In 1883AD, 224 Khamptis attended the Sadiya fair and only during 9<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1884, 138 Khamptis visited the said fair.<sup>34</sup> In 1885AD, the number of the Khamtis visited the Sadiya fair was reported to 150.<sup>35</sup>

As far as the exports and imports items of the hill people at the Sadiya fair was concerned, the export items included rubber, wax, *Mishmitita*, Mishmi cloth, *adi* cloth, spear, *dau*, knife, basket, bag, mat, elephant tusk, boat, bell metal, plates, steel, rice rhinoceros horns and rug while the import items included *eri* cloth, bead, iron utensils, silver ear rings, knives, silver ankle, muslin, iron, broad cloth, coral, opium, buffalo, cattle, tobacco, oil, English thread, handkerchief, American drill, tea, sugar, cambric, molasses and cup.

"The Adis, Singphos and Khamtis did not care much for silk cloths, which the other tribes purchased eagerly. The Khamtis being nearer to Assamese and having trades among them, supply themselves silk clothes from time to time as required and were not dependent on *Mela* besides which they were fond of broad cloth. Only Singphos and Khamptis whose were the principal exporters of rubber and they could able to afford to purchase such luxurious articles as tea, sugar, molasses, handkerchief, oil etc. Such articles of luxuries penetrated into hill areas and became popular among the Singphos and Khamtis. In 1877AD, at Sadiya fair colonel Graham took the opportunity to commit Lieutenant Woodthrope's survey party to the care and good offices of the Singphos and Khamti chiefs."<sup>36</sup>

Although, the Annual Administrative Reports for the province of Assam indicate that the Sadiya fair was held after 1885AD, however, due to the advent of the Marwaris, who followed the British in Assam and penetrated every nook and corner of the tribal areas with their merchandise, the importance of Sadiya fair faded away after few years.

The Marwaris set up their shops in the interior village induced the hill tribes to sell their produces. The tribes were attracted by the greater facilities offered by the Marwaris. Moreover, markets (*hats*) were opened in many places like Saikhowa, Sadiya, Dibrugarh, Nizamghat etc. The importance of the Sadiya fair to the Khamtis diminished from the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the establishment of local markets (*hats*).

### **Local markets (*Hats*)**

The origin of the local market (*hat*) dated back to the Ahom period. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century in order to facilitate the flow of hill products in the plains the Ahom

government had opened market (*hats*) in the foothills, which was, later on, retained by the colonial regime. When the trade fairs were declining, endeavours had been made by some local authorities by setting up fairs at the foothills where exhibition halls were built and attractive merchandise kept. Jenkins found during his survey in 1831-32AD the establishment of Marwari merchants at Sadiya and Beesa wherein they had bartered with neighbouring tribes broadcloth, muslin, coloured handkerchiefs, salt, opium, glass, gold, ivory, silver, amber, Burmese cloths and Chinese wares.<sup>37</sup>

The volume of trade between Assam and Border States and tribes in Sadiya were assessed as<sup>38</sup>

	Year	Import (in rupees)	Export (in Rupees)
Abor, Mishmi	1880-81	1,21,122	47,178
Khamti and Nagas	1881-82	64,296	35,073
	1902-03	33,602	4,074
	1904-05	2,12,360	3,365

In 1835AD, R.B. Pemberton rightly commented that “The protection offered by this presence (presence of police and military) has induced four native Murwaree (*Marwaris*) merchants from western extremity of India to seek fresh channels of profitable traffic in this remote corner of our eastern possessions. They reside at Sadiya and import broad cloths, muslins, long cloths, coloured handkerchiefs, chintzes and various other description of cloths, salt and opium, liquor, glass and crockery ware, tobacco, betel nut and rice for the troops: these articles occupying the surrounding hills from whom they obtain in exchange, gold dust, gold, ivory and silver, amber, musk, *daos*, a few of Burmese cloths, and some small Chinese boxes.”<sup>39</sup>

In due course of time, the local trade became more popular due to greater facility offered by the Marwaris. Along with the other tribes of the Khamtis also said to have frequented at such trading centers in search of their essential commodities. They brought their agricultural products and exchanged their goods, which they could not produce. They have established close business links with the marwaries.<sup>40</sup>

Besides Sadiya, a number of trade centers and weekly hats had developed in and around Khamtis inhabited areas where considerable trade intercourse occurred between the Khamtis and the neighbouring peoples. The Khamtis used to visit the trade centers or markets in erstwhile Assam to make their fortunes and procured their essentials. In this connection, S. Dutta Choudhury writes, “From early times the Mishmis, Khamptis and the Singphos have trade relations with Assam. The markets of Sadiya and Saikhowa were visited regularly during the winter by the tribesmen inhabiting the Mishmis Hills. Some of them took a month or more to reach the markets in the plains traversing dense forests and rugged hills. The Khamptis ‘have been trading with Assam ever since their early settlement in India. The old time trade

routes descending from the hills into the plains of Assam passed through dense forests, passes and rivers. The Khamptis crossed the rivers by boats. They formed caravans and journeyed in the direction of Assam markets following one of these routes.”<sup>41</sup> Weekly market in the Khamtis dominated areas continued even after the departure of the British.

In addition to annual trade fairs, the local trade relations established between the Khamtis and the people living in their settled habitat’s during the colonial period. The volume of trade between the Khamtis and Burma and other countries reduced to a great extent after India’s Independence in 1947AD. However, age old trade relations with the plains of Assam and other neighbouring tribes continued after Independence.

### Conclusion

Trade and commerce are the supplementary means of the economy of the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh. The Khamtis were inveterate traders and activity participated in the border trade with Burma in the pre- Independence period. The existence of trade routes though their territory facilitated them to carry out their merchandise to distant places. Moreover, their racial and cultural affinities boosted their trade interactions with Burma and China. The Khamtis had a mutual economic intercourse with the neighbouring tribes. Their trade was mainly carried out with the Mishmis, Singphos, Adis and mostly with the Assamese. Sometimes they acted as intermediary between the traders of Assam and the hill tribes.

During the British period they participated the Trade Fair held at Sadiya. They also visited the local markets (*hats*) of their area. Historical documents reveal that they were the chief exporter of rice, opium, ivory items, rhinoceros horns, iron implements etc and highest purchaser of the British manufactured luxury items in the Sadiya trade fair. It is to be noted that the Khamtis practiced settled wet rice cultivation and acted as the principal rice exporter of the area. Moreover, the use of elephant facilitated them to carry out their merchandise to the distant places. Due to their business enterprises they used to receive good office from the British officials. They frequented to the local markets (*hats*) with their surplus commodities. Even after the departure of the British, they established their trade relations with the Marwari merchants. Thus, started timber business with their Marwari counterparts and became the richest of all tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Timber and tea business still persist among the affluent classes of the Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh.

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