

Chapter 3

Assam

Udayon Misra

1. The Ahom Period (1328-1826)

The impression has long sought to be created that the “North-East” is a landlocked area and that its geographical isolation is a major factor contributing to its economic backwardness. Not to speak of the pre-Ahom period when Assam, made up primarily of the Brahmaputra Valley, had quite an active interaction with the northern part of the Indian subcontinent, even under the Ahom rulers (1328-1826) who were known for their closed-door approach, there was active trade between Assam and her western neighbours, Bengal and Bihar as also with Bhutan, Tibet and Myanmar. Describing the kingdom of Assam during the height of Ahom rule in the seventeenth century, the historian S.K. Bhuyan states: “The kingdom of Assam, as it was constituted during the last 140 years of Ahom rule, was bounded on the north by a range of mountains inhabited by the Bhutanese, Akas, Daflas and Abors; on the east, by another line of hills people 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 in the Bengal district of Rungpore. The kingdom where it entered from Bengal commenced with the Assam Choky (gate) on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, opposite Goalpara; while on the south bank it commenced from the Nagarberra hill at a distance of 21 miles to the east of Goalpara.

“The kingdom was about 500 miles in length, with an average breadth of 60 miles. The above limits had remained stationery since 1682 when the Moghuls were for the last time expelled from Lower Assam, and the old western boundary of the Manas river restored. The Ahom kingdom of Assam thus roughly corresponds to the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley Division -- Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, and portions of the Sadiya Frontier Tract”. (Bhuyan 1974: 1) [Present-day Assam is made up of these districts plus the Goalpara region and minus the Sadiya Frontier Tract which has become part of Arunachal.] Assam’s relations with her immediate neighbours during Ahom

rule were marked by policy of accommodation and diplomacy.

Force was used only when considered absolutely necessary. Barring the kingdom of Jayantia, Ahom relations with the Kacharis, the Khasis and Garos were quite cordial. Assam's contacts with the Garos were mainly confined to the tribes living in the south bank of the Brahmaputra and the Ahom policy was one of conciliation and friendship so that commercial intercourse could be there.

Cotton was the main product which the Garos traded with the plains. While Cachar was given a feudatory status, there were strong commercial ties with the Khasi state of Khyrim. With the kingdom of Manipur, there wasn't much contact during Ahom rule, while there was no contact with Tripura till the year 1710 when an emissary of the Ahom king Rudrasingha was sent to the Tripuri court. Assam's relations with the Mizos were also quite marginal, while with the Nagas the Ahoms followed a carrot and stick policy. The Ahom-Naga relationship is chronicled in the *Buranjis*. To the Ahom kings, the Naga Hills had plenty of strategic importance, for "it was through the land of the Nagas of Patkai and the Tirap Division of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) that the Ahoms came to Assam over the Patkai mountain and it was this route that they had to use in maintaining relations with their kith and kin in Burma" (Lakshmi Devi 1968: 21).

The Ahom *Buranjis* are full of accounts of retaliatory raids into Naga territory and the acceptance of Ahom suzerainty by the different Naga tribes bordering the upper Assam plains. However, Assamese relations with the Nagas were mainly confined to the tribes inhabiting hills south of Sivasagar and Lakhimpur districts, from the Dikhow river to the Nurhi-Dihing. On the whole, the Ahom rulers followed a policy of accommodation with the Nagas and gave them revenue-free lands and fishing rights in areas bordering the plains and these were known as *Naga-Khats*. The Nagas in turn paid tribute in the form of elephant tusks, spears, cloths and cotton to the Ahom kings. A lively barter trade flourished between the Naga tribes and the Assamese flourished in the weekly *haats* or village markets that were held the Assam-Naga Hills border areas. The growth of the Nagamese (a *patois* Assamese mixed with certain local words) as a language is evidence of this.

Although during the Ahom period, Assam's links with the Arunachalese tribes bordering the plains was limited to the Apa Tanis, the Adis and the hill Miris., yet commercial exchange was there in the weekly markets. It was out of these trade

relations with the plains of Assam that the Arunachalese dialect may be said to have developed. However, it was with the Singhphos of the Sadiya Frontier Tract that the Ahom rulers had a turbulent relationship. The Singhphos carried out repeated raids into Ahom territory and were never finally curbed by the Ahoms. It was only with the coming of the British that Singhphos raids into the plains of Assam finally stopped; and that too after several bloody clashes with the British. But the Singhphos were also good traders and it was through their territory that the Patkai starting from Jaypur ran. According to M'cosh, there was a viable trade route from Sadiya to Tibet across the Himalaya and parallel to the Brahmaputra. Of the several routes to the kingdom of Ava (Myanmar), the most commonly used was known as the Patkai route which ran through the territory of the Singhphos and other Patkai tribes into the valley of the Hakwang and reached Munkung or Magaung on the bank of the Irrawadi river. From here travellers to Ava went downstream and those to China proceeded upstream for about 200 miles to the frontier of China. It was through this route that the Mishmis carried their barter trade with the Kachins and the Chinese, and this was also the route frequently used by the Burmese during their invasions of Assam. (Barpujari 1992: 127) Thus, on the whole, the Ahom rulers of Assam had a well-worked out policy to deal with the different hill tribes of the region. This policy was marked by great pragmatism and was oriented towards maintaining close commercial ties with the neighbouring regions.

However, it was with the Bhutanese that the Assamese had strong trade relations right from the beginning. The Bhutanese kept up their links with the plains of Assam through the usual *duars* or gates. The *duars* through which the Bhutanese carried on trade with Assam were actually strips of land given to the Rajah of Bhutan for facilitating trade. During the latter half of the eighteenth century the Bhutanese Deva-Dharma Rajahs took possession of these *duars*. There were eleven such *duars* in Bengal and seven in Assam. Apart from the regular trade with Bhutan, there was also trade with Tibet through the Kariapar *Duar* and S.K.Bhuyan writes: "All the Assam trade with Tibet passed through this Kariapar *Duar* at a place called Chouna, two month's 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 with their commodities at Geegunsheer, four miles from Chouna. The articles offered for sale by the Lhasa merchants consisted of rock salt, woollens, gold dust, cowries, Chinese silk etc. The Assam

merchants carried the following goods,--- rice, Tussar cloth or coarse silk woven by Assamese women, iron and lac, buffalo horns, pearls and corals etc. About the year 1820, the Lhasa merchants brought with them 70,000 rupees to buy Assam staples(Bhuyan 1974: 35). “The Koriapar *Duar* bordering Bhutan and lying on the on the east of the Buriguma and inhabited by the Kamppos and Monbas was held by the *Sat rajahs* or seven chiefs who were subordinate to the Chief of Tawang who was in turn a feudatory of the authorities at Lhasa. It was here that the Kariapar fair was held annually and was the principal channel for trade between Tibet, China, Bhutan and Assam. Francis Buchanan as quoted by Mackenzie in his *History of the Relations with the Hill Tribes*, refers to the fair as an annual event in which traders from “all parts of Tibet, from Lhasa and places east, west, and even north of it, were present in the crowds some of them in Chinese dresses...” (Sanghamitra Misra 2004: 93).

Although there is no historical evidence of direct trade ties between Assam and China during the period of Ahom rule, yet there was a time when the North Eastern Region occupied quite a central place in the matter of trade and communication between the middle Gangetic valley and south China through Assam and northern Myanmar. P.C.Bagchi in his *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations*, describes the Assam-Burma route to China in the following words: “The Assam-Burma route to China started from Pataliputra (Patna) which was the ancient capital of India, passed by Champa (Bhagalpur). Kajangala (Rajmahal) and Pundravardhana (north Bengal) and proceeded to Kamarupa (Guwahati) in Assam. From Assam the routes were three in early times as now: one by the valley of the Brahmaputra up to the Patkoi range and then through its passage up to upper Burma; the second through Mnaipur up to the Chindwin valley; and the third through Arakan up the Irrawady valley. All these routes met on the frontier of Burma near Bhamo and then proceeded over the mountains and across the river valleys of Yunnafu, i.e. Kummin, which was the chief city of the southern province of China.” (Lahiri 1991: 149) The earliest reference to the Assam-Burma route dates back to the second century and refers to Szechuan bamboo and cotton stuff being traded through India to Bactria. There are also references to the Yunnan-Assam-Burma route in seventh century Chinese writings, including those of the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang who visited Kamarupa.

Thus, there is historical evidence of the existence of the Assam-Burma route, also known as the Silk Route, from the seventh century onwards. The excavations at

Ambari in Guwahati also point to clear archaeological evidence of the Chinese link with Assam and the North Eastern Region from the seventh century onwards. (Lahiri 1991: 157) Seventh century Chinese accounts also refer to the existence of two routes leading from Chengdu in Szechuan to India via Burma. The southern route went through Longling and Ruili and the Shan kingdom of Burma into Manipur and the rest of India through the Brahmaputra Valley. The northern route left Zhugeliang and came to Mongaung through Tengchong and finally into the Naga Hills and the Brahmaputra. British records also refer to the existence of as many as five trade routes from Assam to China. Among these, the one by the Patkoi pass to Bhamo and then to China was the least difficult and the most frequently used. Bhamo was a flourishing trade centre and hundreds of Chinese came there every year to transact business.

However, during Ahom rule these passes fell into disuse, although the Burmese army would use the Bhamo route to enter Assam in 1821-22. Since there was no direct interaction with southern China during the Ahom period, it may be presumed that Chinese goods reached Assam through the Tibetan, Singhpho and Bhutia intermediaries. Actually, the Bhutias were the main middlemen in the Assam-Tibet trade. There had been regular traffic between the people of the hills and the plains. Every winter through the *duars* the Bhutias and their neighbours in the east would come down with mule-loads of rock-salt, gold-dust, musk, woollens, yak-tails, Chinese silk etc. and went back with different kinds of cloth, raw-silk, rice and dried fish. The Mishmis who served as the middlemen with the Kachins on the one hand and the Chinese on the other, bartered salt, woollens, ivory, copper, gold, amber, honey and mishmi-teeta (*copus-teeta*). However, the Burmese invasions during the last years of Ahom rule and the unfriendly relations with the Bhutias greatly reduced the volume of this interaction. And, finally, with the coming of the British, trade with Bengal and beyond developed at the cost of trade with Bhutan and by the first decade of the twentieth century this trade almost petered out (Misra 2000: 107).

Assam's relationship with neighbouring Bengal upto the middle of the seventeenth century was marked by what may be termed as a close-door approach. This aversion towards foreigners was because of the several waves of Muslim invasions from the west, beginning from the early years of the thirteenth century. But, despite the close-door approach, there was a considerable amount of commercial interaction between the two regions. There are various references to overland and river routes to Bengal. Thus, the river route from Goalpara was

down the Brahmaputra and via the Jennai from Jamalapore, and then after some distance along the Pabna river, a navigable branch of the Ganges. The first overland route from Bengal to Assam lay through Murshidabad, Dinajpore, Rungpore, Bagwa and Goalpara and it was the line of the Calcutta *dak*. This was the most frequently used overland route. But it was the river route through which most of the commercial traffic passed. (Bhuyan 1974: 55-56).

The attitude of the Ahom rulers towards foreigners underwent a change after the final expulsion of the Mughals in 1682 and commercial ties with Bengal were resumed. The setting up of the Hadira *Chokey* (*a chokey or chowki, also spelt chowky, is a trading or police post*) (1669) during the temporary cessation of hostilities heralded the change in trade ties between the two regions. Finally, it was during the reign of Rudra Singha that Assam-Bengal trade got a new boost. Rudra Singha abandoned the earlier policy of isolation and showed keen interest in developing trade ties with the neighbouring countries.

In one of his communications to the Mughal *faujdar* in 1713, the Ahom monarch ridiculed the former's idea of establishing trade ties with Assam by sending only a few boats laden with merchandise. He wrote to the Mughal official that regular commercial intercourse would mean sending his merchants (*shah-mahajans*) to Jogighopa and Goalpara and Assamese merchants would proceed to Kandahar chokey with their goods (Barpujari 1996 *Chapter III:129*). Gradually traders from Bengal settled at Goalpara with their merchandise while the Assamese merchants stayed at Bangalhat. Assam's exports to Bengal were made up chiefly of lac, of which 10,000 mounds were reported to have been exported in the year 1809. Other major items of export were cotton, mustard seed, muga silk and ivory. However, the balance of trade was never in Assam's favour primarily because of its total dependence on salt imports from Bengal. For instance, in the year 1809, out of a total import of Rs 2,28,330 from Bengal, salt imports alone accounted for Rs 1,92,500.

Thus, in conclusion it may be said that all the resistance towards opening up notwithstanding, the period of Ahom, rule in Assam was marked by a general stability which was conducive towards building trade ties with the peoples and kingdoms bordering it. Therefore, it would be a simplification to suggest that Assam under the Ahoms led an isolated existence and was cut off culturally and commercially from its immediate neighbours. It is relevant to note here that although with the coming of the British certain major changes in the region's

communication and trade and commerce were initiated, yet in several matters dealing with commercial and administrative relationship with the tribes, the British built up on what the Ahoms had left.

2. The British Period (1826-1947)

The British occupation of Assam brought with it certain major changes both in the administration and the economy. While the boundaries of Ahom Assam gradually increased to include most of the areas which today constitute the North-East, the introduction of tea and the discovery of petroleum and coal were accompanied by the growth of the railway network and the development of new communication routes. Even as the British consolidated their hold over the region by carrying out successful expeditions against the Khasis, the Garos, the Nagas and the Manipuris, new land revenue regulations along with revised trade practices in keeping with the Company's policies were introduced. Although in dealing with the different hill tribes of the region the British followed a policy of non-interference up to a certain extent, yet force was invariably used to suppress all signs of revolt.

With the development of the tea, coal and petroleum industries in the Brahmaputra valley, the British embarked on a forward policy aimed at bringing all the neighbouring tribes under their control. But, while the British rulers took full advantage of territorial control of the Naga Hills to protect British interests in the Brahmaputra valley, considerations of expense deterred them from investing in the development of the hill regions. Instead of opening up trade and communication links with the Assam plains, a series of regulations were introduced which pushed the Naga Hills into a virtual state of isolation. Measures like the Excluded Areas Act, the Partially Excluded Areas Act and Inner Line Regulations though ostensibly aimed at protecting the hill areas from the plainsmen, yet they virtually put an end to the interaction between the people of the Brahmaputra valley and their hill neighbours. The Acts and regulations referred to here were various rules created and implemented by the British to enable them to maintain a tight grip on conditions and populations in the region. The rules essentially regulated the ingress of plains dwellers and other Indian settlers into the region. They were also to enable close monitoring of the local population, ostensibly for their own protection since they were regarded as underdeveloped, and keep a check on the economic, political and social activities of settler groups. The Inner Line Regulations involves the issue of a permit by a

local official which allows a non-resident Indian to visit areas specified in the visitor's application for a specific period; this is still valid today and prevails in Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram; for foreign nationals, there is the Restricted Areas Permit which is issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi.

The only exception, however, was in the case of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Manipur, Assam's relations with the latter always being quite marginal. British relations with the Singhphos and the Bhutias were marked by hostility and the earlier trade routes gradually fell into disuse. Although certain British officials had, during the initial years of occupation of Assam, emphasised the need to strengthen the already existing frontier trade routes with the Kachins and the Chins and open commercial traffic with China through upper Burma, yet these schemes did not work out. (Barpujari 1996: 273) The British dispute with Bhutan over the *duars* finally resulted in the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1865 which ended with the Treaty of Sinchula which, in turn, gave distinct advantages to the British. But although the treaty formalised the annexation of the Eastern *Duars* by the British, provided them access to a road to Lhasa and placed them on a strategic advantage to deal with any aggressions against Assam and Northern Bengal, yet the trade relations between Assam and Bhutan which marked the Ahom era were never to be restored during British rule (Barpujari 1996 Chapter IV: 167).

It was only in post-independence India that trade with Bhutan received a new impetus, especially after the closure of the trade routes between Bhutan and Tibet in the 1960s and the building of roads to connect the plains of Assam and Bengal with the Bhutan hills.

As the British consolidated their hold over the market, trade through the frontier *duars* or doors gradually petered off and the only major outlet remained the western *duar* or the Hadira or Khandahar chowkey situated at the confluence of the Manah and the Brahmaputra rivers. The Hadira chowkey was brought under direct British control in 1833 and two years later the customs *chowkey* was abolished and free movement of goods introduced. The abolition of the Hadira chowkey resulted in a sharp rise in the trade with Bengal which received an added boost because of the introduction of regular river traffic on the Brahmaputra, the first steamboat being put into service in 1847. Assam-Bengal trade took a new turn with the growth of the tea industry in the region. Tea came to occupy the foremost place among the exportable commodities from Assam. The extension of

tea cultivation in upper Assam and the operation of coal mines demanded an increase in the import of iron and steel needed for the laying of the railways. It also led to a large influx of indentured labour to man the tea estates. Thus, by the second half of the nineteenth century the entire pattern of trade had changed, with tea, mustard and jute replacing items like lac, cotton and ivory.

For instance in 1839 the Garos traded in some 50,000 mounds of cotton, half of it being bartered by the Nagas. But the increasing import of foreign textiles and the consequent decline of the cotton industry in Bengal affected the cotton growers of Assam. By the year 1900, almost the entire trade of Assam was with Bengal, Trade with regions other than Bengal amounted to less than one per cent of the whole (Barpujari 1996 Chapter IV, 124). Thus the introduction of river and rail traffic along with the new colonial commercial policies radically changed Assam's trade relations with the bordering regions. While trade with Bengal took on new dimensions, there were closures on other fronts. For instance the trade with Bhutan and Tibet declined markedly and by the first decade of the twentieth century British officials dismissed this frontier trade as being of little importance. (Sanghamitra Misra 2004: 107). The railways may have dramatically reduced the distance between Assam and Bengal; but at the same time Assam's traditional ties with its eastern and northern neighbours became increasingly marginal. The expansion of agriculture brought in hundreds of thousands of poor peasants from neighbouring Bengal, thereby bringing about a shift in the demographic balance and sowing the seeds of future discord between the indigenes and the outsiders.

Thus, two major demographic changes took place during the years 1874-1905 – (a) a shift in the ethnic composition of the population and (b) a change in its spatial distribution over the districts. Non-indigenous elements came to constitute at least a quarter of the population of Assam proper in 1901 (Guha 1977: 39). But the most significant aspect of the colonial economy was that the people of the region did not stand to benefit much from the “enclave” economy that was being developed by the British. The extracted surplus from the tea industry as well as a substantial portion of the wage bills went outside the province and there emerged a serious imbalance between the growing modern sector comprising the tea plantations, coal-mines, oil-fields and the associated infrastructure on the one hand and the near-stagnant traditional agriculture on the other (Guha 1977: 40). With most of the head offices of the tea companies being located in London and Calcutta, the indigenous sector of the economy may be said to have only marginally benefited by the colonial development pattern. Thus, almost all the

expenses related to the tea industry benefited outsiders.

The Bengal-based transportation companies pocketed the transportation charges while almost everything needed by the industry from brushes and paints to iron pans, hoes and bill-hooks were imported from England. Till the middle of the 1850s, packing boxes too continued to come from England, with Chittagong and Calcutta becoming the main centres of such supplies later on. In conclusion, it may be said that the British rule in Assam was marked by a swift opening up towards the west and the gradual closure of the openings towards the east. Earlier Ahom ties with the Bhutias, Myanmarese, Tibetans and, even if remotely, with the Chinese, started drying up. Within the administratively unified province of Assam, further closures were made by raising barriers in the form of different regulations between the peoples of the hills and the plains. British rule, apart from introducing the highly extractive enclave economy, opened up the migration routes from east Bengal and within a period of some thirty years from the start of the twentieth century, Assam's demographic profile underwent a major change. Ethnic fears of being reduced to a minority came to be voiced and serious ethno-linguistic rivalries started surfacing. All this was bound to have its impact on Assam's relationship with neighbouring Bengal as also with the other regions. Even as pressure on cultivable land kept increasing, the politics of accommodation and interaction gave way to that of mistrust and confrontation.

3. Independence and After

The immediate impact of the Partition on Assam and the North Eastern Region was that it was cut-off from the rest of the country. With East Bengal becoming a part of Pakistan, the traditional trade and communication routes with Assam were snapped, and with the earlier frontier routes having died down, Assam now became a landlocked region in the true sense of the term. It took almost a year for the rail link with the rest of India to be restored. Even after the rail link was restored, it was quite a tenuous link passing through a narrow strip of land known as the Siliguri corridor. Partition had a truly negative effect on the region's border trade with the neighbouring countries and those who depended heavily on their trade with eastern Bengal suffered the most. With industrial development being slow and agricultural growth at a minimum, Assam soon fell behind the other states of the Indian Union.

The province's economic woes were compounded by the large-scale flow of refugees from newly-created East Pakistan, the almost incessant migration of poor peasants from her western neighbour, the growing pressure on land and the after-effects of the extractive colonial economy of the British. Even as the province's economic problem increased, the demands for the creation of separate states increased and soon Assam was divided to make room for Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. With the creation of these states, Assam now had international borders only with Bangladesh and Bhutan. And when river traffic by the Brahmaputra through East Pakistan was put an end to after the Indo-Pak War of 1967, Assam's only commercial route was now through the Siliguri corridor. Unlike Manipur and Meghalaya which continued quite some measure of border trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh despite major obstacles, Assam now had to depend almost solely on the circuitous railway and road routes through the 22 km-wide corridor of North Bengal for the dispatch of its goods.

It was indeed a pity that the most convenient rail route through East Pakistan/Bangladesh lay disrupted and the river route was no longer operational. It took several decades after independence for the rail and road communications with the rest of India to improve. But by then, the state's economic problems reached a stage of no-return. In the absence of a proper communication network, industrial infrastructure in the state could not take off and trade and commerce suffered badly. Capital shied away from investing in Assam because of the transport bottleneck and the lack of infrastructure facilities in the form of cheap power and good roads. As development suffered, populist movements became the order of the day and these in turn gave way to the rise of armed militancy. The vicious circle of under-development and insurgent politics had begun. While the unsettled law and order situation put the brakes on development, shrinking avenues of employment for the educated young continued to fuel 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 which needed to be solved by force, yet the course of events finally made the Centre realise that the economic factors nourishing insurgency needed to be tackled and that a simple military solution could never be worked out.

As part of the growing awareness of the need to develop the economy of the region, the Look East Policy was envisioned. The possibility of opening up the North Eastern Region towards South East Asia proved to be an exciting one, especially in view of the Myanmarese and Chinese Government's willingness to

work out the possibilities of opening trade routes with this region. Though initially the Government of India was a bit hesitant about opening up the North Eastern Region to South East Asian trade, yet the possibilities presented by such an opening up seemed too strong to resist. However, the process of building a common economic front of the South Asian countries has been a relatively slow one.

A variety of reasons contributed towards the growth of a rather insular mindset as far as India's ties with its immediate eastern neighbours were concerned. But from the late seventies the mindset started changing and the need for closer co-operation between the South Asian countries was increasingly felt. One of the reasons for this was the urgent need to develop the North Eastern Region of India. This mood was reflected in the Shukla Commission Report entitled *Transforming the North-East: Tackling Backlogs in Basic Minimum Services and Infrastructural Needs* (March, 1997). This document clearly spelled out the imperatives in opening up the North Eastern Region.

Thus, almost 25 years after the Bangkok Agreement of July 1975 which was the result of the initiative taken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP), one comes across the Kunming Initiative of August 1999. Meanwhile, BIMSTEC (Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Co-operation) started in June 1997 followed by the South Asian Growth Quadrangle (SAGQ) and the South Asia Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC). The South Asia Growth Quadrangle and the Kunming Initiative sought to give a new dimension to sub-regional co-operation between Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and the north eastern states of India and West Bengal. What SAARC had not been able to achieve in the sphere of sub-regional co-operation, SAGQ and the Kunming Initiative (known also as the meeting of Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar—BCIM) has attempted.

The “locational disadvantage” of the North Eastern states of India is being sought to be overcome by opening up to the eastern neighbours and by renewing old cultural ties. What is indeed important is the change in the mindset that has occurred in the last few years regarding South Asia co-operation. It is only too obvious that development of trade and communication links between different countries is not dependant not just on government policy but more so on the trust and good will at the people's level. Once, this is achieved, the opening of new routes leading to closer co-operation is actually only a matter of time. In the light

of all this, SAARC and ASEAN of which India became a summit partner in 2001 are bound to attain new significance.

Though much has been written about the possibilities to be opened for the North Eastern Region by the Trans Asian Highway/Railway project ultimately linking Singapore with New Delhi passing through the major cities of Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Bangladesh and India, yet questions are being raised as to how such a highway will benefit states like Assam. Without the development of proper infrastructure facilities, would states like Assam be turned into mere corridors of commercial traffic? How far would the indigenous people of the region benefit from such opening up? For, the post-1947 experience of some fifty years and more has shown that the fruits of “development” do not accrue to the local people. Rather, they are garnered by capitalists and entrepreneurs from the Indian heartland. The apprehension is also there that the traditional products of Assam in the sphere of handlooms, bell-metals and bamboo craft would be driven out of the market by cheaper and more readily available goods from the countries like China and Malaysia. Even in the field of agriculture, wouldn't the Assamese peasant further lose out to products like Burmese rice?

There was much fanfare over the Indo-ASEAN car rally which was flagged off from Guwahati on the 22nd of November, 2004. The rally passed through only a small segment of Assam before entering Nagaland to continue its onward journey through Manipur into Myanmar and beyond. But as the euphoria over the rally subsided, it became clear that Assam did not stand to gain much from such extravaganzas. Without the adequate infrastructure to sustain its development, Assam would remain a spectator to the change that is in the offing—like those hundreds of spectators who lined the streets to cheer the passing vehicles without really knowing how this would affect their lives. And, once the cars left, life would return to its unchanging groove. Therefore, there are many who believe that the benefits of the Look East Policy cannot be uniform for the different states of the North-East.

While certain states like Manipur are bound to be directly benefited by this policy, Assam's case could be very different .because it is landlocked within the North-East, having an relatively short international border only with Bangladesh and Bhutan. The type of interaction that Assam under British rule had with her neighbours is no more possible because today's Assam is made up only of the

Brahmaputra and Barak valleys and is surrounded by states carved out of its erstwhile territory. Therefore, instead of expecting too much from enterprises like the Trans Asian Highway or the Stilwell Road [the prospects of re-opening it being not too bright at present], it would be advisable for Assam to work out better transit and trade relations with Bangladesh and Bhutan. Rail and road connectivity through Bangladesh to the rest of India would greatly help the development of trade and industrial infrastructure of the province and act as an incentive to industries like tourism. As regards trade with Bangladesh, the possibilities right now aren't too encouraging for Assam.

Of the 25 commodities on which Bangladesh has been demanding zero-tariff access, textiles, woven fabrics and ready-made garments form a substantial part. If the Bangladesh's wish is acceded to, then it would obviously pose a threat to the handloom industry of Assam which is already in the throes of a crisis. Moreover, Assam has little to offer Bangladesh by way of exports. For instance, Bangladesh imports from India in FY2001 were taken up mainly by cereals (15%), textiles and textile articles (25%) (Inoue et al 2004:11). But the opening up of the river and road routes through Bangladesh could bring about major changes in the trading pattern. Goods from the rest of India the South East Asian countries could be charted through Bangladesh to Assam and the North East and then onwards to Myanmar and beyond. At present some 25 million tonnes of freight move to and from the North Eastern States and the rest of India. By the year 2007 this is expected to rise to 52 million tonnes.

A recent study has shown that about 25 per cent of this in-transit traffic could be diverted through Bangladesh with minimum investment (Inoue et al 2004: 17). There is at present no bilateral motor vehicle agreement between Bangladesh and India and rail transit has remained suspended. The Inland Water Transit Protocol provides for transit between Kolkata and two points in Assam without touching Meghalaya or Tripura (Inoue et al 2004: 18). Transit facilities through Bangladesh to goods from the rest of India to and from the North-East would greatly benefit the former country as well, apart from substantially reducing the transportation costs. Energy co-operation between Bangladesh and India would also benefit Assam which has great hydro-power potential.

Thus, opening up to Bangladesh would hold greater meaning for present-day Assam than trying to open up to countries like Myanmar and Cambodia. But this opening up would also involve ironing out some of the security issues between

the two countries. Apart from Indian allegations that Bangladesh has been harbouring several insurgent groups from North East India and has been abetting terrorism by allowing agencies like the ISI a free hand, there is an in-built suspicion and mistrust between each other that is proving to be a major obstacle in restricting trade and travel restrictions. The problem of influx (Hazarika 2000 chapter 13) into the North East from Bangladesh and the growing fear that the indigenous populations would be eventually turned into minorities in their own homeland would have to be seriously addressed if trade relations between the two countries are to improve. Bangladesh has long been resisting the granting of transit facilities to India's North East on the plea that such facilities would be misused by the Indian army and would eventually pose a security threat to Bangladesh. However, unfounded such fears might be, they do reflect a particular mindset in Bangladesh regarding India. Similarly, historical and economic factors leading to the continuous flow of people from Bangladesh to Assam have given rise to grave questions about the former's motives. In such a situation, one cannot expect trade relations to flourish.

Sanjoy Hazarika, in his *Rites of Passage*, has suggested a list of "doable" programmes, which could reduce confrontation and encourage co-operation between the two countries (Hazarika 2000: 257-266). Measures such as those suggested need to be given a serious try. Thus, only when proper bridges are built between the peoples of the two countries and mutual apprehensions are reduced, can one expect a true opening up between Bangladesh and India. To begin with, as a step towards winning the confidence of the north eastern region, Bangladesh must accept the problem of influx in the North East (particularly in Assam) and prove its sincerity about checking it. Assam, on its part, must learn to see the problem of influx in a more pragmatic manner and educate its people about the need to develop a healthy relationship with its neighbour.

Those who believe that boundaries are fluid and regions are paramount, need to be reminded that issues like ethnicity and nationalism still retain their relevance with people who are struggling not only to find their identity but trying desperately to defend it against forces of globalization.

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