

Cowries and Forest Resources: Commercial and Cultural Transactions in Northeast India and Beyond (c. 5th -13th centuries CE)

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ABSTRACT

Northeast India, a physiographically land-locked area, forming the easternmost part of India has culturally and commercially maintained close relationships with the Ganga Valley, Bhutan and Southeast Asia as early as the 5th century CE. While the riverine and overland trade network connections accorded the region its economic character, exotic items of trade such as cowries and forest resources were often peddled through these routes which demonstrated the global significance of the region of Northeast India as a part of the larger Southeast Asian, South Asian and the Indian Ocean context. This paper is an attempt to understand that Northeast India played an active and dynamic role for long-distance trade and has drawn connections between the neighbouring regions of Yunnan (South China), Bhamo (Northern Myanmar) and Bhutan for over half a millennium.

Keywords: Northeast India, Cowries, Forest Resources, Trade, Networks

INTRODUCTION

Northeast India in present day is the easternmost part of India which represents both a geographic and political administrative division of the country. Historically gleaned from literary, archaeological and epigraphic studies, this region has maintained close relationships with the Ganga Valley, Bhutan and Southeast Asia. Positioned within the girdle of the Eastern Himalayas, the Patkai, the Brahmaputra and the Barak plains; this land-locked area finally merges with the north Bengal region. Situated at the confluence of the Indo-Malayan, Indo-Chinese and Indian biogeographical realms, this region has emerged as an interaction zone among diverse cultures and civilisations.

Physiographically speaking, Northeast India is a land-locked area. The hydrography of the region has considerably influenced the settlement

pattern and communication network. This land-locked region finds its only outlet to the sea through the Bengal delta; the delta being the only *a-samudrahimācala* (stretching from the Himalayas to the sea) region in the entire Indian-subcontinent. The interplay between the Himalayan forelands and the Bengal delta accentuated by the geography of the place provided feasible conditions for networks of communication (Chapman & Rudra, 2015: 2-4). In addition to the riverine networks of connectivity, the overland trade routes also have given the region its economic character. It is these networks which places Northeast India within the trade routes of Southwest Silk Route. The Southwest Silk route refers to a route network linking Southwest China (Sichuan and Yunnan), with Tibet, Southeast Asia and beyond. The Southwest Silk route included four main branches with numerous sub-branches. The first links Si-

chuan and Yunnan to India, via Burma. It is called the Road of Chwan-Dian-Mian-Yin (Sicuan Yunnan-Burma-India) (Yang, 2004: 281-322). These rubric of networks and communication patterns enhanced the role of Northeast India in transregional interactions.

This paper is a desideratum to work on the region of Northeast India with a particular focus to present almost half a millennial perspective of the commercial and cultural transactions on certain exotic items of trade such as cowries and forest resources (aloes wood, yak tails, musk deer and rhinoceros' horn) between 5th to the 13th centuries CE, bearing the chronological label, the 'early medieval' (Sharma, 2009). In that endeavour, it shall aim to demonstrate the global significance of the region of Northeast India as a part of the larger Southeast Asian, South Asian and the Indian Ocean context. The focus shall be to argue that Northeast India played an active and dynamic role for long-distance trade and has drawn connections between the neighbouring regions of Yunnan (South China), Bhamo (Northern Myanmar) and Bhutan for over half a millennium. We shall try to understand if these routes of communication constituted a network supplementing each other spatio-temporally. The interconnectedness of the historical region with its adjacent/contiguous area- sort of a connected history will be divulged into.

A region is a part of a given whole; the whole is often taken as a nation state. However, the period of research did not experience a nation state. So, the study of this historical region in relation to its neighbouring areas go beyond the parameters of a nation state. The aim is to trace certain possibilities of networks of connections, both through cultural networks and trade linkages. These networks which acted as arteries of commerce, facilitated the movement of man and material. To understand these networks, we shall study both stated and unstated linkages as gleaned from copper plate charters, geographies, literary texts and travelogues.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The most challenging task is the effective methodology of handling sources. The proposed paper will pay particular attention to multiple genres of sources. The methodology is to use the sources in terms of their temporal and spatial moorings; in a diachronic manner and not in a synchronic style. This aids us in identifying the forces of continuity and change thereby offering better explanations of the past. The use of diverse sources in a non-synchronic manner might leave an impression of a uniform, immutable past for half a millennium which was unlikely to have been static in terms of socio-economic, political and cultural experiences beyond dynastic shifts. The diversity of sources offer multiple images of the past in terms of the biases, perspectives and aims of respective authors. It is then that we can present the past as a complex entity and not as a descriptive narrative.

For the proposed paper inscriptional, field archaeological, textual, numismatic sources and travelogues will be utilized to demonstrate the vitality of studying these networks in order to construct a more comprehensive picture. This shall add a new dimension to Sino-Indian, Indo-Malayan and Indo-Burmese exchange and communication. The proposed research aims at looking into this region, as gleaned from the following variegated sources:

The cultural materials from the major archaeological excavation at Sekta burial site excavation in Manipur (c. 4th -5th centuries CE) will be analyzed. Extant inscriptions in this region assigned to the 6th -13th centuries CE records land grants which are legal documents issued by political authorities to record the perpetual gift of revenue-free landed property (*agrahāra*) to religious donees (individual, collective and institutional) to be maintained by functionaries and people in the locality. Replete with information on rural settlements, society and material culture, these records offer insights into the state and economy of early Northeast India.

Coins have often been analysed to study the linkages between spaces in a specific temporal context. Our numismatic sources for the period till 13th century CE come from a hoard discovered at Paglatek lying on the south bank of the Brahmaputra about 15 km to the west of Goalpara district. The same type of coins of the 7th and later centuries CE has been found in Bangladesh and Tripura. An alternative face of the monetary history of the region is the acceptance of cowrie shells as a medium of exchange. This will be one of the primary exotic items to be elaborately discussed in this work.

The importance of textual importance to study economic life is fairly established. Literary sources like Bānabhatta's *Harṣacarita* of the 7th century CE and the *Rāmācaritaṃ* of Sandhyākāranandin of the 12th century will be probed into. Travelogues and pilgrims' accounts have often hinted on the history of a region. Their observation has directly or indirectly reflected on the agrarian life, geography and topography, social and cultural life of the areas they visited. Some of the travelogues which shall be discussed are- the geographies of Sulaimān Al-Tājir (*Akhbār Al-Šīn Wa'l-Hind: An Account of China and India, A.D. 851*) and Ibn Khurdādhbih (*Al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik: Roads and Kingdoms, A.D. 912*) and the lived experiences of Ibn Battuta (*Travels in Asia and Africa: 1325-1354*).

COWRIES

This brings us into our first section of discussion. A study of the commercial and exotic items of trade between these regions can yield details about the network of connectivity. This is the Northeast Indian trade and cultural connections with its neighbouring regions as illuminated from the presence of cowries. The commercial connections of the Northeast were through two ways. One was towards the east i.e., towards Myanmar and China and the other to the west of it i.e., towards Bengal.

Our first evidence comes from the *Harṣacarita*, a 7th century CE text by Bānabhatta

which lists black and white cowries gifted to Harṣavardhana of Kanauj by Bhāskaravarman of Kāmarūpa in the 7th century (Barpujari, 2007: 262). This is followed by the Tezpur rock inscription of Hajaravarmana of 829 CE which mentions *vuṭṭikā*. This term has been widely translated as cowries.

There could have been a slightly later notion of the Northeast India being in contact with the Bay of Bengal on one hand and Yunnan-Bhamo on the other hand. This is reflected from the evidences of cowries as found from contemporary Bengal. Sulaiman, [*Akhbār Al-Šīn Wa'l-Hind (An Account of China and India)* (A.D. 851)] stated that in the kingdom of Ruhmī which is the Pāla empire "trade is carried on by means of *kauris*, which are the current money of the country" (Elliot & Dowson, 1867: 5). The *Rāmācaritaṃ* written in the 12th century CE states that, "Madanapāla maintained his large army by cowries and daily bread" (Mukherjee, 1982: 68). Minhāj-ud-din Abū-Umar observed in the 13th century CE that in the country of Rae Lakhmanīah "as in the country of Kauri (shells) is the current money in place of silver" (Mukherjee, 1982: 68-69). Ibn Battuta [*Travels in Asia and Africa (1325-1354)*] observed that in Bangāla not long after the end of the rule of the family of Daśarathadeva in that area "the rates of local commodities are terms of dirham", but stated that the local people used cowrie shells in exchange of rice, used them as money (Mukherjee, 1982: 68-69). Further, in the words of the 14th century CE traveler, Ibn Battuta:

From these lands islands there are exports of fish which we have mentioned, coconuts, cloths and cotton turbans, as well as brass utensils, of which they have a great many, cowrie shells and qanbar...the inhabitants of these islands use cowrie shells as money. This is an animal which they gather in the sea and place in pits, where its flesh disappears, leaving its white shell. They are used for buying and selling at the rate of four hundred thousand shells for a gold dinar, but they often fall in value to twelve thousand for a dinar. They sell them in ex-

change for rice to the people of Bengal, who used them instead of sand (as ballast) in their ships. These shells are used also by the negroes in their land; I saw them being sold at Malli and Gawgaw at the rate of 1,150 for a gold dinar. (Battuta, 1983: 243)

Cowries are clearly a marine product which was obviously procured from the sea coast of Bengal. The Assam cowrie hoards provide us the evidence of processing of these shells during their export through the Southern Silk Road. These were found in Amiyanagar, Hojai, Lanka, north Lakhimpur. The evidence of these hoards clearly is indicative of their export to China through Assam. The work of cutting cowrie shells was accomplished in Assam in the process of transport. They were either transported from the Maldives to the Bengal coast or Odisha. These were then sent through the Southern Silk route to China and Yunnan (Majumdar, 2014: 596).

Cowries are still valued by tribes inhabiting Northeast India. For instance, in Nagaland cowries are worn by tribal elders as a mark of their status. Bin Yang while describing the cowries in Yunnan cites Michele Pirazzoli-t' Serstevens that 'the most frequent cowry species found in Tien tombs are *Cypraea annulus* Lin. This seems to have been a special highly prized form of money, a statusmarker, and a certain form of prestige goods, accumulated as stores of value and used in intersocietal exchanges between elites, exclusively' (Yang, 2004: 306-07). Thus, based on this statement Bin Yang states that 'these cowries serve as strong evidence for the southwest silk route, or trade of luxuries between Yunnan and the Indian Ocean Zone' (Yang, 2004: 306-07).

Although beyond the scope of this paper, another significant prestige good which were sent deep into the Indian northeast through the 'cowrie trail' were the Indo-Pacific beads. This is clear from hundreds of Indo-Pacific beads (circular & tabular) excavated at the early historic site of Sekta in Manipur. The site of Sekta which flourished between 200 BCE to 600 CE was located at crucial crossroads of the traditional land routes.

These Indo-Pacific beads at Sekta are the same as those produced at Arikamedu (Gupta, 2018: 9). There is all likelihood that these beads might have moved through land and sea routes to India's northeast into Myanmar and thence to Southeast Asia.

FOREST RESOURCES

This brings us to the subsequent section of our discussion. One cannot overlook the melange of forest resources Northeast India has to offer. The circulation of these commercial and exotic items of trade between these regions can yield details about the network of connectivity. In this regard, the importance of two forest products of the Northeast, especially of Kāmarūpa: black aloes trees which made the woodland dark (*agaru*) and rhinoceros' horns is equally vital.

As reflected from the Paschimbhag copper plate of Śrīcandra of 930 CE, this charter states that the banks of the Brahmaputra were adorned with numerous black aloes trees which made the woodland dark (*kāl-aguru-śyāmalaḥ*) (Sircar, 1973: 27). This fact is also corroborated by the accounts of Arab geographers. The geography of Ibn Khurdādhbih of the 12th century CE was the first contemporary Persian account to have ascertained this linkage. It is interesting to note that Ibn Khurdādhbih never visited the Indian subcontinent and relied on the travel reports of voyagers and merchants. The author states that aloes wood was brought from the land of Kāmrūn (Kāmarūpa) through the Brahmaputra down the river to Samundar (Sonargaon on the east coast of the Bay of Bengal) (Ahmad, 1989: 5). The geographers mention the fine quality aloes wood from Kāmarūpa and rate it second to the wood of Mulfan.

Khurdādhbih's awareness of the rhinoceros' horn as a trade item with China is a testimony to the widespread popularity of this animal as a highly priced trade item (Ahmad, 1989: 6). The rhinoceros' horn was believed by the Chinese of possessing medicinal properties, an aphrodisiac. This gave this exotic item its overwhelming price.

Accounts of Sulaiman dated as early as 851 CE is one of the earliest available Arabic accounts taking note of this fact. The merchant observed that girdles made of horn of rhinoceros, exported to China from Rahmi used to fetch 2,000 to 4,000 dirham each (Ahmad, 1989: 6).

The Arab geographers also mention about Yak tail as an important commodity of the kingdom of Dahum. Further, the Paschimbhag plate of 930 CE illuminates that Śrīcandra's force in the course of their conquest of the Kāmarūpa country (*Kāmarūpa vijaye*), entered the woodlands near the Lauhitya, which was covered by the clouds, had banana groves that were tawny owing to the ripening of the leaves or fruits and in which monkeys were roaming and had many plains on which drowsy yaks were ruminating leisurely (*romanthalasa baddhanidrā chāmarī-samsevita prāntara Lohitasya vanasthali-parisaraḥ kālaguru-śyāmalah*) (Sircar, 1973: 27). This no doubt indicates that the floral and faunal resources of the Northeast had an outlet to the Indian Ocean network through coastal Bengal, especially Samandar (Sonargaon on the east coast of the Bay of Bengal).

Northeast India's trans-regional role can be ascertained from a later source of a 19th century report by the British. Captain R.B. Pemberton in his *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India* has mentioned the presence of 'four Meerwaree merchants from the eastern extremity of India' at Sadiya (Lahiri, 1990: 135). These merchants imported broadcloths, muslins, long cloths, coloured handkerchief, chintzes, and various other kinds of cloths, salt and opium, liquor, glass and crockery ware, tobacco, betel nut and rice for the troops. He further mentioned that these articles were bartered by the merchants with different surrounding tribes in the hills of Sadiya for gold dust and ivory, silver, amber, musk, *daos*, a few Burmese cloths and some small Chinese boxes and he had furthered that 'this trade is gradually extending across the mountains to the Hookong valley on the Burmese side of the pass.' Captain Pemberton goes on to discuss the lines of communication

with Burma. The most important route according to him is the extensive tract of the mountainous country near the 'Patkoe pass.' According to him it was through this tract that the Shans came to Assam in 1228 CE. It was through this route that the Burmese army came to Assam in 1818 CE and 1822 CE. This suggests a continued use of the route from Assam to Burma which as Pemberton has conformed 'presents facilities of transit, not offered in any part of the long chain of ranges south-east of Assam' (Pemberton, 1966: 66).

Contrary to this route was the route to Bengal. F. Hamilton states in his *An Account of Assam* that in the beginning of the 19th century CE the exports from Bengal to Assam marked of salt, pulses, ghee, sugar stone, beads, coral, jewels, cutlery and glassware, spices, paints, copper, red lead, English woolens, taffetas, Banaras silk cloth, satin, gold and silver cloth, shells and muslins amounted to Rs. 2,28,300. The exports from Assam to Bengal made of stic lac, Munga silk, Munga cloth, Manjistha, black pepper, long pepper, cotton with seed, ivory, bell metal vessels, mustard seeds, iron hoes, slaves amounted to Rs.1,30,900 (Wade, 1963: 46). This trade was conducted through the Brahmaputra and this trade goes back to the early medieval times. But the question which arises from this discussion is that, if there was trade and exchanges what items were exchanged and what was the medium of the exchange. However, our sources are silent about the items of exchange except some indirect inferences.

CONCLUSION

The trade and exchange in these luxury items illuminates the global importance and strategic location of Northeast India in the crucial crossroads of the traditional routes penetrating Yunnan, Bhomo and Bhutan. These exotic items got absorbed into the prevailing cultural milieu of the regions and became markers of power, status and hierarchy. Additionally, this trade in this region left significant marks on the regional societies and cross-

regional networks of communication. On careful examination of the available genre of literature, it can be argued the trade networks of connectivity played a significant role in the context of early medieval Northeast India. A close examination of the context and the contents of the sources clearly underline the global significance of the region of Northeast India as a part of the larger Southeast Asian, South Asian and the Indian Ocean context. These networks which enabled the sustained interactions of the Northeast India with adjacent areas resulted in remarkable cultural plurality and dispels any monolithic construction of the past. Frontier areas like the Northeast India demands to be freed from national and regional boundaries and barriers and studied in a wider context from a broader perspective. This global historical approach can fully explicate issues that have conventionally been confined only within the contours of national histories. This will make Andre Gunder Frank's plea for a 'world-system' history comprehensible.

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