

HAATS: CONNECTING THE BODERLANDERS OF ASSAM-NAGALAND

Dr. Swakshyar Saurav Talukdar

Assistant Professor, Madhabdev University

Dr. Ankita Borgohain

Assistant Professor, B.Borooah College

Syamanta Hazarika

Associate Professor, Madhabdev University

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15605929>

Abstract

The Haats or the market places from a long time in history have been occupying an important place in interlinking various communities together. They not only connect different communities together but also reflect the social and economic life of the peoples. In regards to the Haats in the foothills they imitate a different picture of ambiguity. Turning back to the pages of history from the pre-colonial times, the Ahoms and the Nagas had a long trading history. The borderlanders in the foothills of Assam-Nagaland had their own stories of trading in the Haats. They carry along with them their own experiences of trading. Therefore this paper is an attempt to understand the Haats and its role in connecting the borderlanders of Assam-Nagaland.

Keyword: Haats, Asam-Nagaland, Foothills, Ahom-Naga, Boderlanders.

Discussion:

The people who live in the border areas of Assam and Nagaland have their own experiences and reasons for belonging to the Haats. The relationship between the people of the hills and the plains in Assam and Nagaland dates back to pre-colonial times when there was no such concept of arbitrary demarcation between them. The Ahoms came into contact with the Nagas as their immediate neighbors. Haats are typically periodic markets that are an essential part of the rural market system. The relationship between the Ahoms and the Nagas is described in depth in the Ahom or Buranji chronicles. The majority of their trading activity was conducted through a barter system, in which products were traded for one another. At first, the inhabitants of the plains and hills were independent, and their disparate geographic locations further distinguished them from one another. Such attempts to build relationships between the plains and the hills did not exist before to the arrival of the Ahoms. As the Ahom kingdom grew and the needs of the plains people increased, they established ties with one another that allowed them to maintain their economy. Naga Khats, or revenue-free territories, were given to Naga chiefs under the rule of Ahom monarch Pratap Singha (1603–41). The Khats turned into a hub for trade, bringing together the Ahoms and Nagas to trade products. Additionally, it served as a boundary line for the Nagas, allowing them to freely descend to the plains and exchange their wares. Because they defended the Ahoms against the invading Nagas, the Khats held similar significance for them. Bori, Ao, Konyak, Lotha, and Phom were among the Nagas who

benefited from Khat privileges. The Bori Nagas were allowed to engage in direct trade with the Ahoms in order to safeguard the nearby plains settlements. In exchange, the Ahom kings entrusted them with the responsibility of caring after the fields, ponds, and fisheries. Because it was exchanged in a circular fashion, salt served as a vital commodity between the Nagas and the Ahoms. The Ao Lothanagas carried back the salts from the plains, which they subsequently sold to their neighboring Nagas, whereas the Konyak Nagas exchanged salt from the salt mines to the plain areas.

The Ahoms and the Nagas alternated between friendship and animosity, as the Buranjis mention. A variety of metal objects, cowries, and other items were utilized as the system of monetary exchange was established with the arrival of the British. One of the biggest barriers to establishing any new interactions between the people of the plains and the hills is this topographical aspect. The areas were covered with rivers and extremely deep forest. Furthermore, because the Nagas had lived in a close-knit community, they did not see the need to interact with the plains people. Their culture and traditions were filled with various kinds of myths and taboos too which might have stopped them to make any connect with the plain people.

The experiences of the haats founded close to the boundaries are typically different from those of the same group at a particular location. Because of the ongoing border conflicts, the Assam-Nagaland border is seen as problematic. The idea of a map and boundary emerged with the arrival of the British. The boundary's demarcation divided the groupings into distinct areas or sections, upending their formerly cohesive existence that was unrestricted by the barrier. As a result, some Naga tribes were relocated to Burma, while others were scattered among several northeastern Indian states. The idea of political or territorial control was unknown in the hills until the British arrived and signed the Yandaboo Treaty in 1826. The British started to view the Naga regions as belonging to their colonial interest after annexing Assam. However, since annexing the hill regions did not benefit them, they adopted a policy of non-interference with the Nagas. By using administrative means to construct the binary of hills and plains, they were successful in presenting the concept of "Hills" and "Tribes" to the people of Nagaland and Assam. They also succeeded in bringing about a new political consciousness among the Nagas. From the establishment of the Naga Club in 1917 to the establishment of the Naga National Council in 1946, they progressively started the process of becoming a new, independent country. The idea that the Nagas were a "separate" and "independent" race was propagated during the process of reconstructing the past in the new nation's imagination.

This issue had not been resolved by the Indian State after colonization either. Despite Jawaharlal Nehru's request for the Nagas to live with more autonomy inside the Union of India, the post-colonial Indian state actually made every effort to compel Nagaland to become a part of India's "body politic." Following the declaration that the political fronts operating in Nagaland were "illegal," the central government moved with military zeal and established a number of laws that restricted the political front's freedom of movement and made its operations illegal. Under Phicio's command, the Nagas also reacted violently, causing numerous casualties. A sixteen-point resolution was accepted during three conventions in 1957,

1958, and 1959. during further discussions, it was determined that the Naga Hills-Tuensang area would become the 16th state of Nagaland. Additionally, Nagaland became a fully fledged state on December 1, 1963, although the question of the state's geographical boundaries remained unresolved politically. Furthermore, the state's geometry was still an open topic. The story of the politics of the two states of Assam and Nagaland is driven by lines, geometry, and cartography. The states' border regions are still up for debate. Furthermore, without delving into the specifics of the border concerns, this paper will concentrate on the border regions of Assam's Sivasagar district, which is also next to Nagaland. The Haats of Bihubar and Geleki were selected in order to comprehend the function of Haats in uniting the Boderlanders.

On the Assamese side, the weekly Haats of Bihubar and Geleki are appropriate. However, it is possible to observe buyers and sellers from both Assam and Nagaland. Here, the Haats serve as a symbol of the two communities' separation as well as their unity. Togetherness in the sense that one can envision both states working together and engaging in active trade, as well as division as the latter loses ground to the former's numerous initiatives seizing the lead when the Haat collapses on the Assam side. To a certain degree, the Haat's presence seems to fortify and foster a connection. individuals on the opposite side are drawn to the things that individuals from the other side display, which creates the conditions for a friendly relationship. It showcases not only the products but also the long-standing trading relationship between the two states. With the exception of copper and brass articles, the majority of the goods purchased for sale were agricultural and forest products. In the Haats, naga doas are in high demand. There is a great demand for goods like dried fish, red chillies, pumpkins, betal nuts, and pan leaves, among others. The researcher has seen the market overrun with forest products during fieldwork, including bamboo products like baskets, mats, hats, fishing gear, farm tools, bamboo ropes, wet and dried bamboo shoots, ivory, honey wax, lac, hoes, and more. . It showcases not only the products but also the long-standing trading relationship between the two states. With the exception of copper and brass articles, the majority of the goods purchased for sale were agricultural and forest products. In the Haats, naga doas are in high demand. There is a great demand for goods like dried fish, red chillies, pumpkins, betal nuts, and pan leaves, among others. The researcher has seen the market overrun with forest products during fieldwork, including bamboo products like baskets, mats, hats, fishing gear, farm tools, bamboo ropes, wet and dried bamboo shoots, ivory, honey wax, lac, hoes, and more. As stated by Dolly Kikkon, market transactions have underscored the ways in which power dynamics are strengthened and intensified through the senses of touch, smell, and taste. Therefore, the Haats represent not only the goods being sold but also reflect the social indicators of the border. The border dwellers relied almost entirely on the weekly Haat for different categories of essential goods. Since pre-colonial times, betel nuts have served as a significant item of trade in the Haats located in border regions, as historical records indicate that betel nuts have consistently been a primary gift exchanged between the two communities. The text also states that the Ahoms presented betel nut saplings to the Namsang Phom as a gesture of appreciation when the Phom Nagas offered refuge to the Ahom and protected them from Burmese attacks. The impact of betel nut remains very significant even at present. Nearly all the Naga households located near the borders cultivate betel nut plants in their gardens and have a strong preference

for chewing betel nuts. The borderlanders believe that the Haats unite individuals, serving as a gathering place for two distinct communities with the common goal of enhancing their own interests or economic situations.

There are numerous instances of conflict that occur during the weekly markets. Throughout the fieldwork, it has been observed that personal disputes between the Assamese and the Nagas in the Haats escalate into significant border conflicts between Assam and Nagaland due to the nature of the conflicts occurring in the border areas. The effects of this situation can be seen in the weekly Haats, as they may remain closed for several weeks or even months. It has been noted that the Nagas have been directed to limit their movements in the flat regions. Conversely, this had a negative effect on the lives of the border residents from both states, as they became the most affected.

The Haats are usually filled with different kinds of stories. Different types of border disagreements that occur between the two states are essential components of the Haats. Upon investigating the government records regarding who imposed restrictions on the Nagas after a conflict, it was concluded that no official notifications were issued to the residents near the border. Instead, it was their own willingness and fear that limited their movement. The tax collectors at the weekly markets played a role in spreading rumors between the Naga and Assamese communities. When the Nagas attended the markets, they were likely to seek revenge for the personal conflicts that often occurred there, and the same was true in reverse.

The primary language used in the Haats is essentially Nagamese. The Naga residents living near the border are more familiar with the Assamese language than those in the interior regions. Nagamese serves as a shared language for both the Naga and Assamese communities, facilitating effective communication between them. Both communities readily comprehend it, thus facilitating their trading activities. The participants in the Haats include not only the Nagas and Assamese but also individuals from the Bengali and Adivasi communities. When observing these interactions among various communities at the same meeting place, the border here appears to fade away.

The Haat inherently seems to represent both 'unity' and 'division.' Unity can be understood as the observable collaboration and lively commerce occurring between both states and divisions. The latter gradually loses its influence as the former becomes more prominent, particularly as the Haat takes place on the Assam side. The presence of the Haat seems to enhance and foster a connection to some degree. The products showcased by individuals from each side attract people from the opposite side, which consequently fosters a friendly relationship. This event is not solely a display of products but also a showcase of the long-standing trade relationship between the two states. In such circumstances, borders appear to be open, and movement seems unrestricted. The vendors indicate that the border issues do not appear to be a concern for them, as they view it as a man-made problem designed to serve specific interests.

The stories indicate that when the borders are opened, a greater number of individuals gather. The sense of belonging and the sharing of culture can be observed. The fairs and weekly markets that take place in the border region serve as the connections between the two states.

During the exchange of goods, individuals often appreciate one another. Besides the Haats, the coal and stone quarries significantly contribute to comprehending the emergence and dissolution of borders. The strong growth of businesses in Bihubar and Gelekiare has led to a focus on economic activities, which has somewhat obscured the presence of strict borders. The mobility aspect in this context refers to the commercial and socio-economic factors that facilitate cross-cultural communication and engagement. The notion of an external threat seems minor to the community, as shown by the manner in which the residents have lived together peacefully for many years.

It can be concluded that Haats play a significant role in the social and cultural lives of those living near the border. These Haats create excitement for many villagers who lack access to large towns and cities. They demonstrate the strong friendship shared between two distinct communities. Sensory emotions like fear and excitement can be depicted visually. Therefore, below the trade of goods, these Haats signify the social indicators and meanings in the lives of those living near the border. The weekly Haats serve as a gathering place where various flavors of Assam and Nagaland engage the community's capacity to embrace the social environment. The individuals living near the borders consider the Haats to be significant markers of historical, social, cultural, and political connections that span across the borders.

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