

The Marwari Trading Community Of Assam: A Study In Historical Perspective With Particular Reference To The Golaghat District Of Assam

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Abstract

The Marwaris are primarily known as the business community all over the India. They are successful in dominating the Bazar economy of India. The first entrance of the Marwaris in Assam can be seen during the Ahom reign and later they firmly established themselves in Assam with the coming of the East India Company. Most of the time they were accompanied with the Company in the remote areas where company made settlements or established tea garden. Their role in that time was not only to provide commodities to local people but also they act as moneylenders. Above all the Marwaris are assimilated with the local cultures and history.

Keywords – Marwaris, Business, Assam.

Introduction – The name ‘Marwari’ comes from the term ‘Marwar’ a region of Rajasthan, is the prime business community of India. They had dominated the bazaar economy of North India for centuries and their activities were mainly focused in their homeland Rajasthan. Later one group of Marwaris moved east with the Mughals and established business headquarters along the Ganga Jamuna valley as also in Bengal, which is epitomized by Jagat Seths and the Varanasi Agarwals.¹ After the establishment of British political control in India especially during the century after the Battle and of Plassey, they expanded their trading. The

¹ Timberg, p.5

British trading activities were needed some partners and the Bengalis were coordinated them in this purpose. Bengalis like Dwarakanth Tagore was able to gain major financial profits with the collaboration of the British. The business scenario of Calcutta was changed in the early nineteenth century and there was a need of a lot of community resources, such as mutual help from the fellow communities, honest and trustworthiness in dealings that were sensitive to information. The Bengalis lacked such of community mutual support. After 1848, the Marwaris altered the position of Bengalis and were became the most prominent business associates of the Company in India. Subsequently the Marwaris enters into Assam with the Company traders and managed to settle here.

It is difficult to find out the exact date when the Marwari businessmen first entered in Assam and later became the prominent of the economy of Assam. But according to Thomas Timberg, the Jagat Seths and the early Agarwals of Varanasi are reported to have arrived in the trails of the Mughal armies in the seventeenth century and Jagath Seths and most of the contemporaries were the Oswals of Jodhpur. These Bengal Oswal families initially settled in Murshidabad and continued to be prominent in Assam and Bengal in jute trade.² Benudhar Sarma on the basis of an unpublished vamsavali asserts that the first Marwari settled in Assam during the reign of Rajeswar Singha (1751—1769)³. It can be assumed that the Marwaris who were flourished in Bengal in that time also moved towards Assam. There is also a reference that comes from the S.K Bhuyan's Anglo Assamese Relations that the Marwari migrant to Assam can be traced back to the period of Company's initiation of trade with Assam in the year 1771.⁴ Jagath Seth, the famous banker of Murshidabad had firms in the areas of Goalpara, Jugighupa and Gauhati during the year of company's trade in Assam.

In modern Assam, the Marwaris had a great role to the economic history of Assam. They started to opening shops in the rural areas and supplied the essential commodities to its local people. There is a famous quotes – 'Jahan Naa Pahunchi Rail Gadi, wahan Pahunche Marwari' meaning Marwaris reach there where train even cannot reach. The Marwaris played vital role not only in opening shops in rural areas but also act as bankers who made loans to the people. The Marwaris in Assam is not only confined to the business purposes but also they have socio cultural and political contributions towards the formation of greater Assamese society.

² *ibid*,p.20

³ Nag, p.3

⁴ S. K Bhuyan, p.101

Review of existing literature –

Thomas A Timberg in his pioneering book discuss about the emergence of Marwaris in the Bazaar economy of colonial and independent India.⁵

Tirthankar Roy in his remarkable contribution in the economic history of colonial India has highlight the role of Marwaris as merchant and business class. ⁶

Sajal Nag in his article emphasized the trade and financial activities of the Marwaris in colonial North East India.⁷

Elizabeth Hardgrove in her unpublished PhD thesis discusses the Marwaris of Calcutta.⁸

Methodology of the Study –

The research article has been prepared on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary source includes report of the British officials and secondary sources such as books, articles and unpublished PhD thesis. Here the researcher is using descriptive and analytical method to carry out the research.

Discussions-

Marwaris of Golaghat District -

Golaghat district is situated on the bank of river Dhansiri in the central part of upper Assam. It attained the status of district in 1987 and before that it was a subdivision of Sivsagor district. The district is surrounded by the Karbi Anglong in the west and the Naga hills in the south, Jorhat district to the east and Nagaon district to the west. Dhansiri is the principal river, originates from Laisang peak of Nagaland. The Golaghat region was known as Doyang Dhansiri valley in the ancient and medieval times. The region was emerged as an important centre of various commercial and cultural activities from ancient times. In the ancient and medieval times the region was dominated by the Kacharis and later by the Ahoms. During the Ahom rule Golaghat gain major economic concern for its geographical importance. Numbers of hats (markets) were established and Kacharihat was prominent among them which was an

⁵ Thomas Timberg, *The Marwaris from Jagat Seth to the Birlas*, Penguin Random House India, Haryana,2014.

⁶ Tirthankar Roy, *The Economic History of India 1857-1947*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi,2000.

⁷ Sajal Nag, 'Traders, Merchants and Usurers: Marwari Business Community of Colonial North East India'*Academia.edu*.

⁸ Elizabeth Hardgroves, *Community as public culture in modern India: the Marwaris in Calcutta c.1897-1997'*

important interstate trade center for neighboring hill tribes.⁹ In the colonial regime, the Marwaris played an important role to carry out the business activities. River Dhansiri which is flowing through the heart of the town was the major station and a hat was held at the river port of Dhansiri.¹⁰ There is a popular saying regarding the origin of the name of Golaghat. A shopping centre or a market place is called Gola in Assamese. As the river port of river Dhansiri accommodated the Golas of a Marwari, that place came to be known as Golaghat.¹¹ After the introduction of tea industry in Golaghat the Marwaris were placed themselves in the tea garden areas where they opened shops that was popularly known as Keya's shops. In every tea garden there was a keya's shop who also acted as moneylenders and traders. By 1852, Golaghat had eighteen Marwari shops.¹² Thus the Marwaris fasten the urbanization process in the district.

The Marwari community of Golaghat district is not only confined themselves to the economic and business activities but have immense socio cultural contribution towards its society. They industrialized the Golaghat town area by opening tea garden as well as tea manufacturing companies along with shops. They bear social responsibilities as well. Some of the Marwaris took active participation during the freedom struggle of India. They have an important role in the development process of the district Golaghat.

Marwaris of Golaghat in freedom struggle – there were instances of Marwari people who were actively joined in the freedom struggle movement of India. Gojanand Jalan was prominent among them.¹³ He offered cooperation to the movement in various ways. Podumsukh Agarwala of Sarupather area was another personality fought against the British in the freedom struggle.¹⁴ Bhagawati Prasad Ladia, a book publisher took an important part in the movement by offering helping hands. Padumsukh Agarwalwa was arrested in 1942 quit India movement.¹⁵ During the 1942 movement, a British official's tea bungalow was set fire by some rebels. The bungalow was situated near Numligarh which is presently popularly known as Purabangla that means burned Bungalow. Ratiram Dowarah, Bhogai Dowarah, Maniram Neog, Boloram Saikia were actively engaged in the burning of the bungalow. Kanailal

⁹ Tilok Gogoi, p.48

¹⁰ Ibid,p.126

¹¹ Ibid,p.31

¹² Ibid,p126

¹³ Ajit Barau, *Golaghat Golap Ful*, p.28

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Ibid, p.41

Agarwala, a Marwari businessman assisted the rebels in the incident and he contributes Kerosine oil in the burning of the bungalow.¹⁶

Marwaris of Golaghat and their Socio Cultural Contribution - the Marwaris of Golaghat has remarkable contribution in the socio cultural field of Golaghat. They work to the greater development of society beyond their business interest. The formation of Union Library in Golaghat in 1930 is a consequential epoch in the history of Golaghat. Along with several Assamese personalities Bhagawati Prasad Ladia, an ardent Assamese Marwari had played a leading role in its growth and development. Ladia was born in 1920 and he owned famous book shop and publishing house Navin Pushtak Bhandar in Golaghat. While Ladia was entering into the book distribution business another Marwaris were entered in the cloth business which was more profitable than the book. But he chooses the societal benefit or intellectual growth of the society and that is why he served the need of time. Ladia was also took great part in the establishment of schools in Golghat district. He was very active in the establishment of Hindi High school in Golaghat.¹⁷

Many Marwaris like Gojanand Nawka, Gaurishankar Nawka, Gojanand Jalan, Mohonlal Jalan were prominent in establishing educational institutions in various regions of Golaghat. They made significant contribution in the intellectual growth of the place. Joydev Khandellal is another important figure, representing Marwari community make donations to various institutions of the district. He made a great contribution for the construction of a maternity ward and children department ward in the Kushal Konwar Civil Hospital. In every year he bestowed Rs. 10,000 (Rupees Ten thousand) to the Golaghat Sahitya Sabha Branch(A literary society) for the encouragement of non Assamese writers who are working in the Assamese literature.

Conclusion -

Migration and assimilation is an integral part of human history. Men tend to migrate one place to another for survival purpose whether it is economic or social. The Marwaris are found all over the Indian subcontinent as shoppers or traders. They established shops in the remote villages and promote the economic transactions in that area. In present day India, Marwaris are regarded as successful business community and most of the businesses are in their hands. Golaghat district which assumed district hood in 1987 has a great impact in its growth of urban features by the Marwaris. They supplied essential products by establishing shops in the remotest areas all over the district. They provide loans in the time of need to the local people. In that sense

¹⁶ Ibid,p.42

¹⁷ Ibid, p.78

the Marwaris can be credited to the development of modern banking system and make aware to the system. Marwaris are not seen only in the economic purposes. They act as freedom fighter, social worker, and educationist and so on. We cannot deny their role in the formation of Assamese society and economy as well.

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