



UDALGURI TRADE FAIR: RECOLLECTING THE HISTORY OF FRONTIER TRADE

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ABSTRACT

Udalguri was an important trade place of Mangaldai subdivision under the district of Darrang. Bhutia traders of Towang and other hills tribes used to come down with their products to Udalguri for trading in winter season of every year. Therefore, the colonial authority established civil station at Udalguri to communicate with Sath Raja of Kuripara Duar as well as Deb Raja of Towang. The British government established annual trade fair at Udalguri, which started from January to March in every year. Udalguri trade fair become largest fair in the whole frontier areas of Darrang district where Monpas of Kuriapara and Bhutanese of Bhutan as well as the Tibetans and the people of Assam visited. The district authority of Darrang hold a Darbar at the time of last day of the trade fair to distribute posa to Deb Raja of Towang as well to meet the Sath Raja of Kuriapara Duar to discuss common issues of the frontier.

KEYWORDS: Udalguri, British, Duars, Trade fair, Kacharis and Hills tribes.

INTRODUCTION

In colonial period, Udalguri was a village under Mangaldai subdivision of Darrang district. It lies on North West of the Darrang district with 26° 46' N. and 92° 7' E., near the foot of the Himalaya.¹ The etymology of Udalguri is derived from *Odal* (a tree) and *Guri* (roots or surrounding) and it was named because originally the area developed around an Odal tree. On the other hand, second tradition highlights as that this very Udalguri name is coming from a hermitage of sage *Uddalaka* and to the third tradition, the name is derived from two Bodo words *Ordla* (wide and spacious) and *Gundri* (powder object).²

Before the coming of the British in Assam, Bhutias traders used to visit at Udalguri trade fair to barter their goods with the traders of the plains.³ The Udalguri trade fair was situated in northern part of Mangaldai subdivision under Darrang district. It is located about 10 miles from the foot of the hills and about twenty-five miles north from Mangaldai.⁴ However, Udalguri trade fair was very close to the boundary of Kuriapara duar for which the Bhutias of Bhutan and Khampa Bhutias of Towang bring down their goods on sturdy little ponies to the trade fair.⁵ It is to be jotted that the Bhutias of Towang were entirely independent from the Bhutan but they were directly under the ruler of Tibet.⁶ Inadequate products compelled the Bhutias to barter with the plain products to run their livelihood, and on the other hand, hills products became must for the people of plains.⁷

Bhutia traders attended at Udalguri trade fair with gold dust, rock salt, musk, ponies, wollen, yak tails and chinese silk which they bartered for rice and dried fish.⁸ The rice was very dear to the Bhutias for which they had to come down to the plain to exchange their hills products. On the other hand, the salt of Bhutan was necessity to the Kacharis because there was huge scarcity of salt in Assam. For this reason, Udalguri became the centre point of trade transaction between Bhutias and Kachari peasants and traders of Assam, where bartering of salt for rice had been extensive. For political exercise and promotion of European

good in the frontier area, British Government took interest in border trade for which they organized trade fairs at number of places in the submontane areas.⁹ Number of Bhutanese, European, Chinese, Tibetan and Marwari traders attended at Udalguri trade fair, held in winter season.¹⁰ On the last day of the trade fair, a delegation of Deb Raja of Towang along with Sath Rajas of Kuriapara arrived at Udalguri to receive the *posa*¹¹ (annual pension) as the share of the revenue of the Duars.¹² The British government established a *Darbar* (civil station) at Udalguri for distribution of *posa* to Chiefs of the hills tribes.

Among the trade fairs of frontier area, Udalguri trade fair was the largest.¹³ Officially, this fair held for only three days but the actual trade usually continued from January to March.¹⁴ Apart from Udalguri trade fairs were also held at Sadiya, Khagrapara, Datma, Subankhata and Darrang and Doimara of Assam during colonial period.¹⁵ Udalguri trade fair had been continuing since the rule of Ahom but it was halted during the Burmese invasion.¹⁶ However, Lieutenant Rutherford, who was then in-charge of Darrang district administration, restored the trade fair in 1833.¹⁷ It was restored with a view to increase trade and to promote political relation with the Bhutan.¹⁸ T.C. Robertson, the then agent to the Governor General, mentioned about the importance of trade fair in a letter to the government on 6th December 1833 as..

“The Booteahs not only require the produce of the plains for their support, but seem disposed to become the customers of the Assamese for various commodities which the latter can either supply by their own industry or procure from Bengal to be exchanged among other articles for gold, of which metal there seems reason to suspect that the regions to the north of Bootan yield no considerable quantity”.¹⁹

He also anticipate that the trade fair should bring political understanding between Bhutan and the British.²⁰

Udalguri which is 16 km away from the foothills and about 40 km from present Mangaldoi.²¹ The Monpas from Arunachal Pradesh and Tibetans from Tibet, known as Khampas, frequently visited Udalguri through Dhansiri Pass using Amratol-Udalguri trade route.²² The only important trade road to Udalguri, which starts from Lhasa to Tsetang and Tsona then to Tawang and via Dirang Dzong to Udalguri in Assam.²³

In 1838, Captain Vetch, the collector of Darrang district proposed that Bhutias should not be allowed to collect *posa* in kind from the ryots as they did during Ahom period but *posa* should be paid in cash. The Bhutias did not satisfy with this proposal and refused to surrender their rights in consideration of cash payment.²⁴ The angry attitude of Bhutias of Kuriapara Duar always created trouble upon the people of frontier area of Darrang district. An inhuman character of Bhutias brought an outrage to the district authority of Darrang for which Kuriapara Duar was brought under the control of the British in 1839.²⁵ In the same year, District authority established a Police Thana at Udalguri for suppression of the marauders and for enforcement of British law.²⁶ Additionally, the British Government established a military fort at Udalguri for the emergency control of the frontier of Darrang district.²⁷ Every winter season, 46 soldiers of Lakhimpur military police battalion were garrisoned in the fort of Udalguri.²⁸ Oppression upon the ordinary people along the border, particularly the Kacharis of the Duars was stopped by the British through tightly controlled and smooth administration.²⁹ By 1841, Bhutias raids in the frontiers had been stopped successfully.³⁰

In 1844, Sath Rajas and two agents (Geleng)³¹ of Deb Raja of Towang came down to Udalguri and made a treaty with Captain Gordon, who was an assistant to the Governor General's agent. In this treaty, Sath Rajas and officials of Towang Durbar relinquished all claim of the British on the lands of the Kuriapara Duar in consideration of annual payment of Rs. 5,000.³² Therefore, district authority of Darrang selected Udalguri fair a centre point to pay *posa* (annual tribute) to the Raja of Towang and annual stipend to Sath Rajas of Kuriapara Duar and to bring cotton and others goods from the hills as well as to find out trade route towards Towang and Lasha.³³ The Bhutias of Kuriapara station at Amratol throughout the cold session. It was place about half-a-day's journey across the frontier whence they come down to Udalguri.³⁴ The road from Orang to Udalguri which is about 22 km used to be trade traffic during fair days.³⁵ Therefore, the British kept military and police guards at the time of fair for better convenience.³⁶ A *Mauzader* was entrusted to keep records of the accounts of imports and exports.³⁷

Deputy Commissioner of Darrang had shown a statement of the quantity and value of the products bought and sold at Udalguri fairs in the year of 1875. The article brought for sale by the Bhutias were 250

ponies valued Rs. 15,000 (an average of Rs. 60 each; 111 sheep valued Rs. 333; 23 dogs Rs. 115; 1989 *maunds* of salt for Rs. 9945(Rs. 5 per *maund*); 80 tolas gold at Rs. 1600; 5058 blankets at Rs. 15,174; 101 yak tails valued Rs. 101; 42 tolas(qy.) musk at Rs. 420; 158 *maund* wax Rs.6320; 100 *maund* lac at Rs. 1000; 10,000 walnuts at Rs. 31 annas 4; 10,813 bundle dye at Rs. 56 annas 5; 6060 needles at Rs. 47 annas 5 paisa 6; 15,844 of turnips was at Rs. 247 annas 9; 26½ sers onions at Rs. 5 annas 3; 3½ sers garlic at 10½ annas; 128½ *maunds* chillies valued Rs. 321 annas 12; 118½ *maund* of spices Rs. 591 annas 8; 506 pieces of Bhutia Bags at Rs. 126 annas 8; The total value of import was Rs. 50,425 annas 14 paisa 3.

In exchange for the above articles, the Bhutias took away with them the following items as 2436 *maunds* paddy valued Rs. 2436 (Re 1 per *maund*); 2236 *maunds* rice amounted Rs. 4472 at rate of Rs.2 per *maund*; 919 pieces of *dunko lepa* cloth valued Rs. 4135 (Rs Rs. 4 annas 8 per piece,) 1289 pieces of *kharu* cloth amounted Rs. 3867 (Rs. 3 per piece); 305 brass pots weighing 30 ⅓ *maunds* at Rs. 60 per *maund*, total Rs.1807 annas 8; 3 *maunds* of Kakor pots (qy) at 2 annas a piece, Rs. 80 a *maund*, total Rs. 240; 246 pieces of bar iron at 12 annas a piece, Rs. 184 annas 8; 345 small brass pots at 2 annas each, Rs. 43 annas 2; 418 bundles of pan leaves, Rs. 3 annas 4 paisa 3; 474 pons of betel nuts, Rs. 84 annas 4; 13 *maunds* molasses (gur) Rs. 39 annas 8; 8 peacock at Rs. 8; 13 parrots at Rs. 6 annas 8; 20 bundles of cotton thread at 5 annas; 149 dried fish and flesh at 2 annas per ser, Rs.18 annas 10; 1 *maund* 25 sers tobacco, Rs.16 annas 4; 20 sers rape seed at Rs. 1 annas 4. The total value of exports was Rs. 25,712 annas 1 paisa 3 or almost exactly one-half the value of the imports However, the balances being taken away in money.³⁸ In1876, blankets and ponies were most valuable articles brought by the Bhutias at Udalguri fairs. In this year, the sales of blankets and ponies amounted to Rs. 15,174 and 1, 50,000 respectively and the sales of imported salt amounted to Rs. 9, 945.³⁹ In the same year, wax which became a primary raw product was sold amounted Rs. 6,320.⁴⁰ However, the trade of ponies and blankets was decreased but at same time, the import of gold dust was high in 1877.⁴¹ In 1877, British Government sanctioned Rs. 300 for construction of substantial buildings at Udalguri to run smooth trade fair.⁴² Henceforth, 50 military guards of 44th Sebundy Light Infantry and a group of police guard consisting of 1 sub-inspector, 1 head-constable and 10 constables were stationed at Udalguri during the fair for security measures.⁴³

Year wise statistics of the trade transactions value of Udalguri were as follows:

Years	Exports Rs.	Imports Rs.
1875	50,425	44,439
1876	50,426	25,712
1877	44,439	13,805
1878	1, 16,189	50,677
1879	81, 694	61,492
1880	87,069	22,573
1881	51,970	36,631
1882	2,35,308	78,504
1883	74,436	43,891
1884	64,689	45,153
1885	1,20,792	90,380

The demand of ponies and blankets were high at Udalguri fairs. Natuarally demand of blanket was high in winter season for which prices exceed from Rs. 13,852 in 1884 to Rs. 30,648 in 1885.⁴⁴

The value of the imports from Bhutan to Udalguri trade fair estimated at Rs. 8,464 and the exports from Udalguri trade fair at Rs. 7,460. In 1902, the export was at Rs. 8,598 and imports were at Rs. 8, 280.

Deputy Commissioner of Darrang had an interview with representatives of the Sath Rajas of Kuriapara Duar on his visit to Udalguri in February 1884. During his visit, Sath Rajas requested the Deputy Commissioner to visit their country; they also informed about the five easy ways to reach their country from the plains.⁴⁵

The problem of salt price became a big issue at Udalguri trade fair, which started from February 1885. Deputy Commissioner had an interview with the six chiefs of Kuriapara Duar and one Geleng who was representative of Deb Raja of Towang. In this meeting, Deputy Commissioner gave an order for dealing smooth transaction of business with the ryots of the district. However, the rising problem between ryots and Towang traders was on the reduction of salt price. Salt was a major imported item of Assam at Udalguri fair. Unlike other article, salt was not sold in cash but it was bartered with the products of the plains.⁴⁶

“The reduction of the salt - tax having lowered the value of Bhutia salt and the price of rice having risen in consequence of the comparatively short outturn of this crop in the district, the exchange values of these commodities differed from those of the previous year. The Bhutias, in consequence, objected to the rate current in the local markets, and some cases resorted to violence to obtain their demands. The attention of the deputy Commissioner was directed to the complaints, which reached him on this subject, and he obtained satisfactory apologies from the offenders and the restoration of the goods, which had been improperly taken”.⁴⁷

In the last day of February 1885, Deputy Commissioner, accompanied by the assistant commissioner visited Amratol, the temporary trade depot of the Bhutias in the hills to resolve the crisis over salt and rice price. They were cordially warmly welcomed by two Geleng. There was a large number of person encamped at Amratol, the place being used during four month of the year as a granary for all the supplies brought up from the plains prior to their removal to the higher ranges.⁴⁸

Udalguri fair flourished till the end of 1885 but later it was declined due to the reduction in salt value. By the middle of January of 1886, the Towang traders started to assemble at Udalguri. On 18th January, Assistant Commissioner of Mangaldai had an interview with Prengambo (a chieftain among the Sath Raja) to know the how peoples of Towang lost their cattle in last rains and on the 30th January of 1886, Deputy Commissioner held a preliminary darbar. In this darbar, Kacharis villagers complained that Towang traders demanded more value in their barter of salt for rice. Therefore, Deputy Commissioner consulted with the Sub divisional Officer and finally the exchange rate had been fix eight (8) seers of rice to one seer of salt. In the meantime, the exchange rate of country salt also came down six (6) seer of rice for one seer of salt. Formerly, Towang traders use to get fifteen (15) seers of rice for one seer of salt. It is huge different as compare to previous years and disrupted the salt trade in the bordering areas. On the other hand, other materials like blankets and ponies were highly demanded in the district.

In 19th February 1886, darbar was held at Udalguri. In this time, the Commissioner of Assam Valley Districts, and Assistant Commissioner of Magaldai were presented at darbar. They delivered *posa* of Rs. 5,000 including 7 pieces of broadcloths and 54 bottles of rum (to which six bottles were added as a present) were given to the delegates of Towang. It was first time where seven chiefs (Sath Rajas) attended at Udalguri darbar. The seven chiefs were as follows: (i) Garpa (ii) Lamaringhsha (iii) Gumansena (iv) Guonwang (v) Pema (vi) Darangshoo (vii) Kesang.⁴⁹ In this year, district authority conducted a sport of pony races for promotion peace and tranquility among the people of bordering area.

In 1887, Assistant Commissioner of Mangaldai reported as follows:-

“The trade of Udalguri fell off considerably. This is attributed to the reduction in the price of salt. As mentioned in the report of the last year, the price was reduced from 15 seer of rice for one seer of salt to 8 seers of rice for one seer of salt. Even though this reduction left the price of salt far above the market rate, it has had the effect of reducing the international trade. There was at first idea abroad in Bhutan that no salt would be admitted into British territory this year, and traders from a distance did not therefore bring down usually supply. Afterwards when this idea turned out to be unfounded, salt was brought down from the nearer villages, but it was too late to get in the usual amount. The reduction in the price also made it less profitable to sell. The fall in the price of salt has increased the difference in the money value of the traffic to considerably more than the difference in the quantity actually imported. Several sub-darbars with Sath Rajas and Sangpo, the special sangpo of the Kampa Deb, were held by the Deputy Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner prior to the great darbar., which was held on the 12th February. This was attended by the Commissioners of Kamrupa and Nogatowng were also present. On this occasion, the Geleng themselves

appeared for the first time to receive the *posa*. It had hitherto been their custom to send down Narpas Sangpo, Pema, Premgambo, and other Bhutia headmen. At this *darbar* the salt question was again raised, and the price virtually fixed at 6 seers of rice for one seer of salt. This reduction apparently has accepted, mainly, I think, owing to the fact that the Gelengs themselves were parties to the agreement. Last year the arrangement was made with men who had no power to act, and there were, therefore many subsequent disputes between villagers and Bhutias. This year the Gelengs appear to have issued orders on the subject, and disputes have consequently been few. Some of the Dewangiri Bhutias again appeared in Sopojar, and there were a few complaints of exactions. On the 15th March, I visited Amratol at the request of the commissioner, and asked them if they would let me go to Towang or at least as far as Thaklung Jong, which latter place is less than 40 miles in. They declined to allow me to go to either one place to the other. This refusal I partly attribute to their having heard of the refusal of Grand Lama to let the Darjeeling Mission proceed".⁵⁰

By the February 1888, Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner started the *darbar* at Udalguri to give *posa* where Geleng and Jongpens of the Taklungjong district, two Narpas and Prem Gambo, Pema and Sangbo of Sath Rajas were present. In this *darbar*, no issue had been raised on salt but other materials especially raw wools and brick tea were given much attention for trading. In 1889, Assistant Commissioner of Darrang received no complaints regarding salt issues from the Kacharis.

The Kacharis of bordering areas of Darrang district produced huge quantity of rice, which was very essential to the Bhutias. Therefore, exchange of salt for Kacharis' rice was prominent at Udalguri trade fair. As previous years, Bhutias and Khampa traders from Towang came down to Udalguri fair in January of 1889. During this period, Kacharis came know the value of rice and saw that buffalo carts come regularly from Tezpur to buy rice at Orang and Udalguri for which the price of rice rose rapidly. The price of rice went up from 2 paise to 3 paise, therefore, the value of salt fell down enormously as compared with value of rice. Due to the rise in the price of rice, Bhutias traders forced Kacharis to exchange 15 seers of rice for one seer of salt but Kacharis were not willing to pay, whatever price Bhutias traders demanded. On 6th February 1889, Deputy Commissioner arrived at Udalguri where he found more than 200 Kacharis assembled with complaints for Bhutia traders left salt at Kachari's house for which they demanded rice in return varying from 12 to 15 seers of rice for one seer of salt. Therefore, Deputy Commissioner called up the head of Bhutia men who said that there was great scarcity of rice in Bhutan because of this they would like to dispose their salt at the old rate, otherwise their trade in the plains will be closed. In this moment, the Deputy Commissioner pointed out to Bhutia traders that the British Government derived no benefit from their trade in salt, and added that 'we are not urging fixed prices for blankets, ponies, yak-tails etc. and even Kacharis ryots did not ask us what prices should be fixed'. He informed all the Bhutia traders that the *posa* had been paid annually to Deb Raja of Towang in lieu of all claims what they possess over the ryots of the district as per the agreement of 1844. Thereafter, on 16th February, all Bhutia traders and Geleng were present at Udalguri *darbar* to resolve matters where Deputy Commissioner directly told Bhutia traders to communicate his orders to the Geleng and to Deb Raja of Towang that British Government would not pay the *posa* this year unless they agree to the following terms:

1. To sign an agreement in which they humbly apologized for the illegal exactions of the Bhutias.
2. To agree that the rate of exchange between rice and salt would be in the ratio of 4 to 1.
3. To hold themselves personally responsible for any infraction of this agreement.⁵¹

On 16th February of 1889, a *darbar* was organized by Deputy Commissioner. In this Mr. Lyll, Commissioner, Assam Valley District and Mr. Gait, Assistant Commissioner, assisted by a large gathering of European planters witnessed a proceeding. The Galleng came in the usual ceremonious manner, proceeding with flourish of trumpets and accompanied by a rabble of uncleanly followers. They presented a few Bhutia Blankets, yak tails and a pony and they expressed their desire to live on amicable terms of the agreement noted above, and pointed them clearly that they would receive no *posa* unless they sign the aforesaid

agreement. Deputy Commissioner also informed them that if we find any Bhutias collecting exactions from our ryots, the convicts would be tried and punished according to our laws.⁵² The Geleng pleaded hard for an amelioration of the terms, first suggesting 8 to 1, then 6 to 1 and finally 5 to 1, as the rate of exchange of rice and salt. The deputy commissioner firmly refused to alter his terms, and after much discussion, they finally agreed to sign the following document placed before them:-

“We the undersigned Gelengs do hereby beg to apologize to the British Government for the disturbance made by our Bhutias in their attempts to extort from the ryots of the Empress of India and excess of quantity of rice in exchange for salt, and do hereby agree that from henceforth the Bhutias will receive only four seers of rice from the ryots of the Empress of India in exchange for every seer of salt given them by the Bhutias”.⁵³

The Deputy Commissioner had paid regular *posa* along with cloths and rum to Sath Raja and Geleng of Deb Raja of Towang. The salt left in the house of Kachari ryots was returned to the Bhutias.

However, the popularity of Udalguri trade fair reduced gradually due to the increase of permanent *hats* in the border areas but the *darbar* was held every year to distribute *posa* to the Sath Rajas and Deb Raja of Towang. This was no place, rather than Odalguri fair where besides the Bhutias and the Tibetans, the Chinese and people from every part of Bengal assembled for trade.⁵⁴ Thereafter, no such problem had occurred on trade between Kacharis and Bhutias in frontier area of Darrang district. The traders of Bhutan attended largely at Udalguri trade fair during first decade of twentieth century.⁵⁵ The trade with the Bhutias continued to record a steady decline in the following year because of the reduction in the price of salt and enhancement in the price of rice by Kacharis. On the other hand, the increasing of *hats* in the bordering area of Kamrup district and Darrang district for which Bhutias stopped to come at Udalguri fair. As a result, the economic significance of trade fairs considerably declined as per the record of trade statistic of 1929. Subsequently, the importance of Udalguri trade fair declined gradually. Due to many reason, British proposed to move Udalguri trade outpost to Bhairabkunda where Bhutia can easily camp up there.⁵⁶

NOTES

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¹¹ *Posa* was system of payment to buy off raids by tribes of hills such as Bhutia, Miris and Daflas. In first, Ahom King Pratap Singha or Susenpha introduced *posa* system for keeping good relation with frontier tribes. Under this system, villagers paid certain commodities to hills tribes. In return, the recipients of the compensation had to stay away from raiding plainmen. *Posa* was an excellent system to deal with tribes of hills area surrounding Ahom Kingdom.

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- ³⁴ Lalit Kumar Barua, *India's North- East Frontier: The Colonial Legacy (Incorporating the continuation of Jonh Mitchell's Report)*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 2010, Chapter- I, p.1.
- ³⁵ *Assam District Gazetteer, Vol. XI*, Assam Government Press, 1928, p. 5.
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