

## **Trade, Capital and Conflict: Frontier Towns of Northeast India and Myanmar A Case Study of three frontier towns: Moreh-Tamu and Champhai**

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SnehasisMitra and Soma Ghosal's study of "Trade, Capital and Conflict: Frontier Towns of Northeast India and Myanmar A Case Study of three frontier towns: Moreh-Tamu and Champhai" gives a reasonably thorough picture of the problems and prospect of border trade along two traditional trade routes along which the three towns mentioned, Moreh, Tamu and Champhai falls.

### **Moreh-Tamu**

Moreh and Tamu are sister townships, the earlier on the edge of India territory in Manipur's newly formed Tengnoupal District, and the latter about 5km away from Moreh in Myanmar's Sagaing region. The two are companion townships and each play a pivotal and complementary part in the border trade, both official and unofficial.

This article profiles these two townships in quite some details, giving the reader statistics of their populations, ethnic compositions, trade volumes each handles, general occupations and lifestyles, unemployment rates, gender equations etc. The authors are quick to notice Tamu is a more disciplined town and has a more planned look with straight roads and pedestrian walks etc. This is expected as Myanmar was under a military dictatorship till less than a decade ago. The authors also note that despite this, residents of Moreh consider Tamu more of a village. Indeed the latter town comes alive in the morning hours and has little life in the afternoons. It also lacks much of the everyday civic amenities, such as electricity, college education, quality health facilities etc., and look to Moreh and even much beyond in Imphal to avail them.

Trade happens through two Gates at Moreh. Official custom regulated trade happens through Gate No. 1 while unofficial border trades, is generally through Gate No. 2. Just across Gate No. 2, right where a No-Man Land strip should be, a new marketplace referred to at Namphalong has sprung up since about three decades ago. This has in time become a bustling marketplace, and a favourite of tourists of all kinds and visiting shoppers from Imphal and other towns of Manipur. A good number of the vendors at Namphalong as well as the morning market at Tamu are Nepali women.

While this paper makes no serious attempt at tracing the history of the Nepali population at this unlikely and remote region, they do give an interview based explanation of how generally it is Nepali women not men who do these vending businesses. According to their findings, men go away to greener pastures in the richer South East Asian countries as wages in Myanmar, both in the government and the non-government sectors are very low, leaving their women to handle their businesses on this front.

Beyond these marketplaces of small time vendors, selling anything from third country electronic items, consumables, wet cell batteries, battery inverters, blankets, garments etc., there are also other less visible but bigger volume trades. These are generally run by bigger shops and contact points in Tamu and their counterparts in Moreh. On the Myanmarese side, much of these bigger businesses are run by business establishments, a good number of them are owned by Chinese businessmen. The paper however does not take a deeper look into this, other than noticing that Chinese influence at Tamu was evident in the dominant prevalence of Chinese made scooties on its roads.

## **Champhai**

The authors also do a similar profile of Champhai border town in Mizoram in the relatively newly formed Champhai district, which is also now an official border trading point. What comes across is again a reasonably intimate picture of the hilltop township and its people. As for instance they note that 30 percent of the population of the town are Chins of Myanmar origin. This became so especially because of migration during the pro-democracy unrest in Myanmar in the 1980s and 1990s, and the military crackdowns that followed. The profile also gives a hint of the ethnic tension that resulted because of this, although the Lushais and other smaller tribes which today constitute Mizos, and Chins are ethnic and linguistic kin. Hence in 2003, the authors note, a rape case involving a Chin resident trigger a widespread call for the eviction of the Chins from Mizoram by the influential Young Mizo Association. Unlike the Moreh-Tamu border, Champhai does not have a twin town in Myanmar. Complementary trade nodes therefore are the larger towns of Myanmar deeper into the country, such as Kalewa, Kalembo and Mandalay. But Champhai remains important because of the ambitious Indo-Myanmar joint project of Kaladan Multimodal Transit Project which will connect Champhai with Myanmar port of Sittwe. This being the case, trouble in the current Rakhine state may become a big hurdle in the growth of trade here. Quite expectedly, as of the present, border trade volume is much larger at the Moreh-Tamu border.

What this paper has not taken a serious look into is the border trade at these two points combined has remained very small despite the trade volume between India and Myanmar as a whole having grown considerably in the last decade, ever since Myanmar opened up politically and much of the rest of the world, including India, decided to re-establish trade relations with the country. According to the figures provided by the authors for instance, the bilateral border trade volume (source: Ministry of Commerce, Myanmar), has grown from 15.41 million USD in 2005-2006 to 48.63 million USD in 2013-2014.

By contrast, the India-Myanmar Bilateral overall trade volume in 2013-2014 (Source: DGFT, Dept of Commerce, India), stood at 2182.68 million USD. Obviously a much bigger bilateral trade is happening elsewhere, and although the paper does not mention it, this is probably through maritime routes. This raises a much larger question. The preferred mercantile route of India's much hyped Look/Act East Policy is not the Northeast and Northern Myanmar. As noted earlier, probably these are the sea routes that connect the Bay of Bengal rim ports of India and the more prosperous Irrawaddy delta region of Myanmar. This being the case, if India's Look/Act East Policy is meant to develop and benefit the Northeast region and Myanmar's backward Northern heartlands, the entire approach to the project would have to be reoriented to suit the purpose better. Perhaps the Look/Act East Policy has to be split into two components. One can look at improving bilateral trade between two countries regardless of which route the trade happens. The second must be not just about trade but also lay emphasis on integrating and developing a sub-region constituting of Northeast India, upper Myanmar and perhaps Laos, Cambodia and Northern Thailand. The Asian Development Bank sponsored Greater Mekong Sub-region, GMS, initiative, which has proven a big success, can be a model in this.