

# A Brief Account of Greek Merchants in the Southern Region of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills from the Eighteenth Century to the Early Nineteenth Century

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**Abstract:** *The foothills of the southern Khasi-Jaintia region, historically known as the Pandua Hills, played a crucial role in trade and commerce since the Mughal era, expanding further under British colonial rule. With the annexation of Assam in 1826, the British sought to integrate the region's economy, linking the Surma and Brahmaputra valleys through market networks. European merchants, including Greeks, French, Dutch, and Armenians, became key players in the limestone trade, which flourished under colonial policies. However, Greek traders faced restrictions from British administrators like Robert Lindsay and John Willes, leading to their gradual shift away from limestone trade to other ventures in Bengal and Assam. The integration of local markets into the colonial economy reshaped the region's economic landscape, connecting tribal communities to the global capitalist system. Despite its decline, the Greek presence left lasting imprints on the trade dynamics of the Khasi-Jaintia foothills and Sylhet.*

**Keywords:** Khasi-Jaintia trade, Greek merchants, colonial economy, limestone trade, British East India Company

The foothills of the southern region of the Khasi-Jaintia situated closely to the plains of the Surma valley in Sylhet were historically known as the Pandua hills. Trade and commercial activities had commenced in this region since the days of the Mughals. When Bengal was colonised by the East India Company in 1757 the eastern frontiers of Bengal, which is Sylhet also came under the control of the British. By 1826 Assam came under the control of the British, this provides an opportunity for the East India Company to expand its commercial and economic activities. Therefore, it was necessary for the British to connect the trading activities in the Surma valley with the commercial activities in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley.

Accordingly, with the advent of the colonialism the trading pattern continues to flourish but with some changes. Some of the border *hats* or markets also lost their influences while some were able to expand its influences as far as Bengal. Such markets of great influences were those markets who were engaged in the limestone, iron, orange, and bay-leaf. Items such as betel-nuts, betel-leaf, iron tools and implements were displayed only in the internal markets of the plains of Sylhet. As British imperialism expanded and took firm control after the Khasi resistance to British rule in 1829-1833, and the annexation of the Jaintia hills and *parganas* in 1835, boundaries were further redefined. The new relationship led to the emergence of new markets in which Europeans merchants like the French, English, Greeks, Dutch and the Armenian were involved in limestone trade. The limestone extraction resulted to proliferation of limestone quarries throughout the entire Pandua region which was supply to Calcutta and to other parts of the British colony. [1]

After the Battle of Plassey 1757, Bengal became the colony of the British. Robert Clive, the Governor of the East India Company to protect the newly acquired colony adopted the system of administration known as the dual government, whereby the administration will be handed to the Nawab, but the revenue collection will be handed over by the British Company. Thus, the English Company enjoyed the right not to only trade freely without paying any toll taxes, but they enjoyed so many privileges right too in their trading activities

from the Nawab who is by now was just a puppet of the Company. After the Battle of Buxar 1764, the East India Company was granted the *diwani* Right in 1765 to collect revenue of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Hence, Sylhet district which fall under the control of the Nawab of Bengal, becomes the frontier line of the English company whereas, the territories at the foothills of the Pandua region lying adjacent to the plains of Sylhet became the frontier of the Khasi-Jaintia's chiefs. [2]

It is important to take note that the commercial activities at the foothills of the Pandua region and in the plains of the Surma valley improved with the advent of colonial rule in Bengal. Thus, the economic exchange of goods and other commodities among the two groups of communities - the Khasi-Jaintia and the plains people of Surma led to the formation and development of a market- system. [3] It was during this period that the many Europeans like the English, French, Greek, Dutch and Armenian traders arrived at the foothills of the Khasi-Jaintia for commercial activities especially in limestone trade. In was during the time when the Revenue Collectors like William Make peace Thackeray the first Collector Sylhet, Mr. Summer. Mr Holland, Robert Lindsay Mr. Willies that Greeks traders and their activities were found mentioned in their official's reports to the Governor -General-in-Council Calcutta. [4]

Since the ancient time the Greek has had a long-distance trade relationship with the Indians, the Indian Ocean was the central to the economy of both the countries. The presence of the and Greek merchant in India can be trace from the time when the third Persian King Darius-I of the Achaemenid Empire who had extended his empire till the mouth of the Indus River. In 510 BC he sent Scylax a Greek trader to return to Persia by exploring a route by sea viz the Red Sea. [5] This article does not intend to discuss the detail commercial activities of the Greeks in the entire Indian sub-continent. However, it dealt in-depth with the Greek merchants who were involved in limestone trade and other trading activities at the foothills of southern slopes of the Khasi-Jaintia hills. It will briefly narrate how the Greeks traders left the foothills of the Khasi hills and

shifted to other commercial activities to other parts of Assam and Bengal.

As mentioned above the Greek had arrived in India since the beginning of the second century BC. Under Alexander, they had conquered a large part of territories in the north-western part of India, but they failed to maintain its control over its newly created kingdom. However, among the Greek ruler *Menander* also known as *Milinda* (165BC-45. BC) was one of the most successful Greeks rulers in the north-western part of India. Later, the Greeks became assimilated to Indian culture. Malinda was greatly influence by the ideas of Gautama Buddha and he later became a follower of Buddhism under the guidance of *Nagasena* [6]

Another source regarding the Greek traders in India was the account by an anonymous Greek traveller '*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*', which give an account on the Arabian seas and the ports, harbours along the Malabar Coast of western part of India. Pliny, another Greek traveller of the first century AD refers to the silk products that came from China and passes through the Brahmaputra valley. Besides silk Pliny also mention about the iron products, animals hides and other forest products. He also mentions about the Garos and the Khasis as Mande. Ptolemy a Greek astronomer, geographer and mathematician mention the geography of the Khasi hills in which the Shillong peak is refers to as *Alosanga*". [7] However Other Greeks traders that But, had arrived in India passing through land route from Persia. But some of them preferred to journey through the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. [8]

The Greeks that arrived at Calcutta in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century were those merchants who had migrated from the Ottoman Empire and carried on trading activities with the non-Muslim beyond the Persian Gulf and into India along the Malabar Coast. The multiple war between the Ottoman empire and Russia followed by the Greek War of Independence in which they achieved their independence on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1821, paved the way for the migration of the Greek traders towards the Indian sub-continent. Greek traders from outside Thrace migrated to India and other parts of the world. Around more than 120 families' Greek traders arrived had settled down in Calcutta by the early phase of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [9]

From the archaeological source like the catholic cemetery of Calcutta, two graves' cenotaphs in Latin mention the dates of the death of two Greeks traders of the year 1713 and 1728. However, the exact year of the arrival of the Greek at Bengal cannot be ascertained. By 1770s till the 1800s the numbers of Greeks traders were approximately around two hundred who had settled at Dhaka and in Narayanganj. [10] Like all foreign merchants the Greeks merchants possessed a strong guild which investigates the welfare of all their traders in India. However, among the Greek merchants it was the Railli Brothers who operate their business activities from the Red Sea to the India Ocean that took the initiative to expand the business activities of all the Greek traders in India. [11]

Bengal and Decca prior to the onset of the Industrial Revolution in England they were well known for their cotton goods and other jute items. Therefore, Greeks in their early stage of business activities were involved in textiles goods.

Cotton cloths (calicoes cotton Shirts), jute materials were supplied to Europe and to another region around Asia-minor like Basra, Eden etc. However, because of the 'Industrial Revolution' the Greeks were ousted by the English from this trade. As a compensation for the loss in the textile trade, the Greeks were allowed by the British to come and invest their capital at Bengal in salt, lime and other goods of the natives. [12]

The limestone trade in Sylhet sustained since the time of the Mughals and further expanded with the arrival of the Europeans like the Greek, French, Dutch, Portuguese and the Armenian. During the time of the Mughals, limestone trade was the monopoly of the state as the Mughal Government directly leased the quarries from the Khasis. Limestone was sent down to the plains of Sylhet and from there, it was carried to Dacca and Calcutta. But, when Bengal came under control of the English East India Company, limestone trade was open to all. Consequently, limestone trade gained importance as it contributed major revenue to the English East Company. This resulted in the growth and development of limestone trade and the opening of more quarries which provided the Europeans traders like the Greek, French, Armenian and the Dutch to invest their capital on the limestone trade throughout the entire foothills of the *Pandua* region, and the entire southern part of Jaintia hills. [13]

Traces of the remnants of the Greek settlement can be found till today at *Phool Bagan* on the eastern part of Calcutta. These remnants include the Greek Orthodox Church, Epitaphs and a Greek cemetery. [14] According to the caretaker of the Greek Orthodox Church, Sister Nectaria and Basanta Das the caretaker of the cemetery, the Greek had arrived at Calcutta since the seventieth century. [15] The Greek Church which presently stands at *Amratollah* Street was founded in the year 1780 under the initiative of the family of Alexsios Argyree Panaghiotis of Philippopolis who was one of the renowned Greek traders. Though Argyree himself did not live to see the day the church became functional since he already died on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1777, at Dacca. However, his family fulfilled his dream as he had made a pledge to God that if God will safe him from drowning while he was sailing form Calcutta to Mocha and Jeddah, he will construct a Church for the Greek community living at Calcutta. The church of the society of 'The Orthodox Brotherhood of Greeks' as they were known at Calcutta was finally sanctified and bless by Father Parthenio, as its first minister. [16]

Among the European traders, the Greeks were the first merchants to be brought under control and surveillance. Later on it was the French, and then followed by the Armenian and the Dutch. In 1780 Robert Lindsay the Collector prevented the Greeks from manufacturing limestone on grounds that they did not possess valid trade licence. In 1783 the Greek merchants under the initiative of their leader Constantine Parthenio appealed to the Board of Directors at Calcutta to allow them to manufacture limestone which ought not to jeopardise the position of the company. [17] However, Robert Lindsay met the Greeks traders and informed them that they must buy limestone from him and they were not permitted to manufacture the *chunam* as directed by the Board of Directors from Calcutta. The excuse that Lindsay prevents the Greeks to manufacture limestone was that they had tried to set-up a

Greek colony at the foothills of the Pandua region which is a threat to the British rule. [18]

By 1788, John Willes had replaced Robert Lindsay as the new collector of Sylhet and it was during his tenure that the Greeks suffered the worst suppression in their chunam business. The Greek were able to get a leased of limestone quarries from a local chief at Tillu Kall. However, Willes claimed that the said quarries were already leased by the Raja of Pandua to the British company and that the company had leased the said quarries to a local Zamindar Puroya Raj for 16 rupees per annum. As regard to the conflict of these quarries we have very few information. But by 1788 Willies had notice that the Greeks traders had come into a very intimate relationship with one of the Khasis chiefs by the name of Ganga Sing whose territories ends right at the company land. Therefore, J. Willes had sent report to the British authority at Calcutta to send more troops to guard the frontier of the British company. The Greeks as well as the French had supply arms to the Khasis chiefs this can be proven by the facts that Ganga Singh had used the modern arms when he and other Rajas of the Pandua foothills attacked the company station which situated in the Pandua region. [19]

In 1790 the Court of Director sent the British troops to quell the rebellion led by Ganga Sing. Ganga sing was arrested and later released. Thus, in 1790 the Court of Directors decided to demarcate the boundary between the plains and the hills of the Pandua region. Consequently, of the demarcation the hills come under the control of the Khasis-Jaintia's chiefs and the plains come under the control of the company. Hence, social barrier was created between the Khasis and the Bengali society of the plains. The processed of manufacturing lime was permitted to processed only in the plains of Sylhet in places like Sunamganj and Companyganj. [20]

By the beginning of the ninetieth Companyganj developed into a nodal point of the company's trade relations with the Khasis-Jaintias chiefs of the Pandua region. In 1799 the limestone business or the chunam trade was once again open to all merchants. However, the Greeks like Alexander Panioty had already left Sylhet and had shifted their trading activities to salt and rice trade. [21] By this time the limestone trade was mostly under the control of the English merchants. However, most of the Greeks merchants had already shifted their trade and focus to other business activities in places like Calcutta and in Assam. For instance, Alexander Panioty left the lime business and concentrated on the salt business in Narayanganj. At last, the British merchants established their monopoly over the limestone mines in Sylhet. [22]

By the end of the eighteen century the English merchants had dominated the limestone trade. Among English the most prominent trader was George Inglis who arrived in Sylhet in 1794 as an authorised trader and resided in the district till his death in 1850. George Inglis met Henry Thomas Raitt who resided in the same district together coordinate and launched a joint stock company known as the Raitt-Inglis & Company presumably in the year 1794. From the very beginning both Raitt and Inglis worked with tremendous effort and through their cooperation and co-ordination they were able to set up a workshop in Raitt's land. Later they rented a house at *talook* number 29. By the nineteenth century the new company

expanded which necessitated bigger warehouse. As such the East India Company granted them the right to purchase a new plot of land at Chattack through the persuasion of John Morris and William Robertson. Chattack which was once a small village was slowly developing into an urban centre and emerged as one of the most important trading centres of the British Frontier. [23]

Eventually most of the Greek merchants left Sylhet as they failed to get the *Parwana* or licence. A Greek merchant, Constantine Theodosius, was able to shift his commercial activities from Sylhet to the Brahmaputra valley and engaged himself in transporting rice and salt through the Brahmaputra River. Afterwards other Greek merchants joined him and by 1790 the Greeks who were employed by the Company attempted to gain monopoly of the Assam trade from the *Baruas*. [24] or local businessmen or traders. The dawn of the ninetieth century saw the migration of the Greek traders from Sylhet to mainland Calcutta, Dacca and to the rest of the Indian Sub-Continent. Some of them work as clerks in the English East India Company. Thus, most of the Greeks limestone traders did not die out, some of them when to Calcutta. Some Sylhet Greeks traders by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century invested their capital with the famous Greek trader and its company known as the Ralli Brothers who were involved in the export of Jute, cotton and spices from Bengal to Europe. [25]

In conclusion we observe that commercial activities of the Greek merchants in the foothills of Pandua was only for a short time. Before Sylhet came under the control of the East India Company the Greek like Alexander Panioty, Constantine Theodosius and others were involved mostly in *Chunam* trade. However, when Bengal came under the colonial rule the lime trade, though open to all Europeans were given first preference to the English merchants. British Sylhet collectors like Thackaray, Robert Lindsay, Willes and others passes many rules and regulations to prevent the Greek, Armenian and the French to gain accessed to the foothills at Pandua. Later the Greek traders left the foothills of Pandua and shifted their activities to Bengal. The lime trade and other forest products in the Khasi Hills marked a vital phase in the integration of Northeast India into the colonial economy. It highlighted the interplay of local resources, indigenous labour, and colonial demand, leaving a lasting impact on the region's socio-economic structure. The Simple economy of the tribal community that had existed since the time of the Mughal rule was link to the market in Bengal with the advent of the colonial rule. Thus, the local markets were link to the national market which link it to the international capitalist market. Hence, the tribal economy was amalgamated into the world capitalist market with the investment of the Europeans merchants in limestone trade.

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