

LIVING IN THE PERIPHERY: THE CASE OF WOMEN IN MOREH TOWN

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INTRODUCTION:

National borders are political constructs, imagined projections of territorial powerⁱ. A borderland is usually understood as the region in one nation that is significantly affected by an international borderⁱⁱ having their own social dynamics and historical developmentsⁱⁱⁱ and border economics are always strongly influenced by political measures and political process on either side of the borders^{iv}. Periphery implies the existence of a “center” it also serves to target the asymmetries generated by the liberal version of globalisation^v. According to W. Ziemann and M. Lanzendorfer, the term Peripheral societies in all cases refer to the peripheral-capitalist countries of the so called third world^{vi}. The expansion of trade into world trade and the rise of the world market, there has developed, since the days of European colonial expansion, an international economic system in which the production and reproduction of all societies in the world are integrated^{vii}. Since their integration in the world market the peripheries are capitalist, despite non-capitalist modes of production, because they are integrated via the world market in the extended reproduction of metropolitan capital^{viii}. Hartmut Eledenhas described the relativity of centre and periphery ultimately shaped local economies from their position in such a global system^{ix}. The integration of the periphery to the world market has inevitably drawn the feminist academia to the issue of marginalised (women/gender inequality) into the limelight and therefore, the metaphor of heartland and periphery became a central one for the study of women’s history. Over a quarter of a century ago feminist historians saw it as their task to reclaim a place for women in history and, in doing so, challenged the view that women and their concerns were peripheral to mainstream historical enquiry. They not only questioned what should be seen as historically significant but, by bringing gender relations to the heart of their research, also reconfigured a familiar historical landscape^x. Most world-system analysts either ignore these crucial ideas, or they utilise them in ways that exclude questions about women. Women’s history exists in a kind of frontier zone, respectable these days but still a little dangerous, part of the mainstream but at the same time peripheral^{xi}. According to Braudel,^{xiii} history was the unveiling of “a succession of landscapes” consisting two major levels of human existence: the realms of major historical events and the ground floor and the first story of history that lay in “images of daily life”^{xiii}. And that the task of the historian is to reveal the dialectical interplay between the upper and lower levels. But the lower level is too often ignored, so that everyday life has been “the great absentee in history”^{xiv} taking into perspective how the world-system has structured “a modern form of patriarchal relations, in which women experience a social reality very different from

their brothers in capital or labor”^{xv}. In light of the continued challenges women in formal trade face, it must be understood that the nature and severity of challenges is distinctive and differs from one region to another based on cultural traits, traditions and belief system. For this region, it would be interesting to get the picture of the situation of women in close proximity to the Indo-Myanmar border on their socio-economic status. Through this paper I would like to throw light on the peripheral lives of women in the town of Moreh, which shares an international boundary with India and Myanmar and which today has occupy an as economic, strategic and diplomatic importance to India’s national interests, acknowledge as the Gateway to Southeast Asia. It is a study of the everyday economic activities of women engage in informal trade.

Rationale: Over the years Moreh has seen a significant rise of informal sector activities such as hawking, street vending, and daily wage labour, among others as a result of the Indo-Myanmar border trade. However, the contribution of the border trade to the informal sector, particularly to the livelihood of women, remains underexplored. It is imperative to understand the effect of the border trade on the socio-economic wellbeing and autonomy of the vulnerable women vendors of Moreh. There is, however, a dearth of studies on how these women are pushed into the petty vendor trade because of poverty and unemployment. Therefore the present study aims to fill the following research gaps. The objective of this study is to explore and analyse some major research questions and findings related to the women vendors in Moreh town emphasizing on socio-economic, demographic conditions status and livelihood. It examine the peripheral women of Moreh town negotiating their everyday activities within the “border” against the conflicting geopolitical site and the “centre” policies of the much hype LEP to Act East Policy. To obtain concrete opinions about the various issues involved a micro level study was conducted in the area markets through interview schedule which consisted of open ended and closed ended questions prepared keeping in mind the objectives of the study. The study is based to understand and capture the live experiences of women in Moreh including women who stay in the town during daytime, crossing over from the Myanmar border as hawkers, small traders, vendors, porters, etc. The women were interviewed in the market during their working hours when there was no customer to attend to. A total of 50 women vendors were contracted and interviewed from the different markets^{xvi}.

SOCIO-CULTURAL DEMOGRAPHY OF MOREH TOWN:

In order to have clear understanding of the lives of women in Moreh it is necessary to study the cultural practices of Moreh town. Moreh, the international border town, is located in Tengnoupal district of Manipur. It lies in the southeast of Manipur on the Indo-Myanmar border. It is often referred as India’s gateway to South-East Asia. Moreh the only urban areas in the district with a geographical area of one sq. km. is cosmopolitan in character and are inhabited mostly by Kuki, Meitei, Tamil, Nepal and Muslim. Minority people like Bengalis,

Biharis, Marwaris, Punjabis, etc. also exist in Moreh. The distance between Moreh and Imphal the capital of Manipur is 110 km^{xvii}. Road is the only means for transportation of goods and services. A new road linking Imphal to Moreh is being constructed to facilitate trade with South East Asian countries in view of the India's LEP^{xviii} Moreh is divided into 9 wards for which elections are held every 5 years. The Moreh small town has population of 16,847 of which 8,670 are males while 8,177 are females as per report released by Census India 2011. The town has an administration of over 3,231 houses.

The development of Moreh border trade is expected to expand several folds and contribute to the economic development for the people of Manipur. This trade is governed by certain rules and regulations made and enforced by the state from both sides. Overtime, trade has become increasingly commercialized due to the government's initiative in constructing a network of modern roads and communication on both sides. The rapid growth of population due to migration from other areas as a result of better economic opportunities at Moreh town is also another factor for the increasing unemployment, income inequality and poor standard of living.

WOMEN, BORDER ECONOMY AND MOREH MARKET:

Moreh market is popular because of Namphalong market. Goods from Namphalong market are imported in Moreh. Over 90 per cent of Namphalong market's customers are Indians (TNN, 2013)^{xix}. Most of the traders and buyers in Namphalong market are Indians; while no traders and buyers from Myanmar enter Moreh to buy Indian goods^{xx}. Goods available in Moreh are dearer due to the Imposition of illegal tax by insurgents and bribery by Indian customs and security officials^{xxi} (Burma library, 1997). Both Moreh and Namphalong market are selling a mixture of goods produced in their respective countries and third countries. Most importantly the market in Namphalong is flourishing, as the result of Indo-Myanmar BT agreement; however, Moreh market is trailing. All formal trade, except informal head load transportation goods, take place through Gate Number 1^{xxii}. The border trade at Moreh is regulated through Gate Number 1 and 2. Gate No. 1 regulates trade as per the trade rules of the government and Gate No. 2 regulates the unofficial trade^{xxiii}. Trade through gate number 2 are permitted for the local residents but settled within a radius of 40 kms on both sides of the order of India and Myanmar. Most informal cross-border traders (ICBT) fall within the category of largely seasonal agricultural traders who seek to send produce and goods where they are needed across the borders often in the search for better prices than what is offered in the immediate locality of their residence^{xxiv}. Women and girls constitute the largest number of these traders often transporting the produce on their heads or on their backs. Typical characteristics of ICBT have been documented as being informal meaning that they are not registered as traders and neither do majority belong to any trading, business or even agricultural societies^{xxv}.

Notable feature of Moreh town is the large scale engagement of women in informal economy as vendors to cater to their family needs and are often the sole income earners of their family whereby a major proportion of their earnings are used for household expenditures.

Most of the women in Moreh are engage in non agricultural activities such as hawkers, vendors, artisans, domestic helpers, garment workers, construction workers, salesgirls and in other roles which require minimum skills, knowledge and training. Maximum of the women are engage in delivering and trading of goods ranging from fruit and vegetables to mattresses, stereos, duvets, footwear and other household foods to electronic goods, tea stalls and small shops and sellers of second hand items. Those engage in trans border activities carry with baskets on their heads and back, on bicycles selling their small goods in the streets and roadsides, while some are engage ferrying seasonal products, a few are engage in timber business and charcoal business too.

In every markets and wards, lane corners, along the parking areas, rows of women vendors selling items ranging from seasonal vegetables and fruits to eateries from Myanmar and small tea stalls lining alongside the road is a common feature.

There are four important market centres:

- i. Prem Nagar (also known as Morning market)
- ii. Hao Keithel (tribal market)
- iii. Dharamshala
- iv. Meitei Keithel (also known as parking market)
- v. Hong Kong Market.

Among these, Prem Nagar is the largest, while Prem Nagar and Meitei Market remain open both in the morning and in the evening; the Hao Keithel and Dharamshala remain open only in the morning. In Hao Keithel, the vendors are notably Kukis, the items of commodities sold include vegetables, rice and grocery items. In Prem Nagar, Burmese Shans including men and women sell goods ranging from readymade garments, cosmetic products, electronic items, vegetable products, chicken, fish products, rice and the like. The market is open till 12 noon and there are Burmese women selling in the market. Most of these women sell their wares from early morning walking long distance on foot or ferrying their goods by bicycles and by noon return back to their villages situated in the periphery of the border town such as Namphalong and Tammu.

There are two Meitei market shed constructed on either side of the road which is situated near the parking, they commonly refer these markets as evening market although it is open

throughout the day. While one market exclusively deals in selling vegetables, small eateries and tea stalls are also set up, the vendors comprise of women from all communities such as Meitei Pangal, Kukis and Meiteis, a few Burmese are also seen selling eateries, a maximum of 50 women are found engage in selling vegetables. The vegetables that are being sold are mainly from Myanmar, with a few vegetables also supplied from the villages grown in nearby Moreh town and villages situated in the periphery. Some of them also bought the vegetables from Pallel, Kakching etc. but maximum of the vegetables are mainly bought from Myanmar and sold by the women. There are rows of three large shed and two smaller sheds. In each shed there are about 10 women engage in selling vegetables, dry fish etc. on the other side of the road is another market where only rice is sold. There are about 9 women and one men selling rice, of these women two are Meitei women, five belong to the Kuki communities and of the three Myanmar's two are women and one is male. The rice sold in this market is mainly exported from Namphalong and Tammu by the Burmese. The weight and measurement is of Burmese standard where one Tang is equal to 32 kgs.

Hong Kong market situated in gate no. 1 is famous for dog meat, literally it is a corrupted version of Burmese *Hong Koh* which means dog meat, how it came to be modified in Hong Kong Market nobody knows but the name have stuck as such. Due to its demand dog meat has become a lucrative business for the women engage in this culinary business and so over the years the prices of dog meat has soar. Mrs. Lalam^{xxvi} commented that it once was very cheap to buy dog meat but today it has become so expensive due to its high demands, most of these dogs are exported from Burma and supplied to the women who cooks and sells them in this market, visitors who are into such culinary visit this market. In Hong Kong market in the early morning from 6 a.m. many Burmese women are seen sitting near the road side selling eateries such as rice cakes, sticky aromatic rice, pan cakes, Burmese chow mein etc. it is a flurry of activities as many came to have breakfast by 8 a.m. the business activity is close.

The main items of trade mainly carried out by the women are agricultural products and seasonal goods such as rice, bamboo shoots, fruits such as watermelon, apple, grapes, flowers, second hand goods etc. Mrs. Lalam^{xxvii} narrated, 'depending on the availability of goods we sell them, when it's the time for water melon, we sell water melon and so forth'. She also narrated that of all the seasonal goods *Parkia speciosa/Yongchak* (local name) trade is the most lucrative business. Ask how they conduct their trade, she inform that, 'a group of women pool our money together and then buy the fruits or vegetables at whole sale rate from the Burmese from Tammu' after counting the goods it is loaded on a lorry hire at Tammu till Namphalong gate no. 2 it would be transported, from there we unload it again and carry them at the market near the parking lane and sold individually. At the end of the day we pool all the money accrued after selling again and after deducting the capital, depending on the profit, it is equally divided amongst us' majority of the women responded that they are unable to tell

the exact amount since it varies depending on the sale of goods depends on the season and festivals. On an average when there is a large number of people visiting Moreh, the women hawkers and potters inform that they are able to earn as much as Rs. 200-500 in a day. And those engage in charcoal vending told us that during winter sale is very high as much as Rs. 500-1000 in a day while during Yongchak season the profit fluctuate from Rs. 500-1000 and is the best among all other business. Mrs. Nenem^{xxviii} a rice seller inform ‘although selling rice is not so profitable however it is a quick cash business; however there are days when I am unable to sell in a day too. Minimum sale in a day is two Tangs (1 tang is equal to 32 kg.) and maximum sale is 4 tang when business is good, profit depends on the sale ranging from Rs. 500-1000’. Some groups of women engage in timber business as middle person sates that, ‘we buy timber from the person who own or buy the land where timber is grown in the borderland. We don’t directly trade in timber but are sort of middle person and we sell it again in moreh town. Though the profit is minimum it is cash payment and so instead of supplying in the Imphal valley where many of the timber business owner tend to exploit us by refusing to give cash payment we prefer to sell to the timber merchants in moreh^{xxix}.

CONCLUSION

Although men and women in Moreh town participated in the production for the direct benefit of the family, power dynamic clearly favoured men^{xxx}. Since women are engage in informal trade have to travel, they often face serious risks, the security posted have also sometime created unnecessary stress to the women when they often return late at night. They often worry about road accidents and when they have to stay overnight they would worry about their children at home. Much of the trade involve labour intensive work with little profit. The monopolisation of goods by big business has hampered their trades to a great extent and as such women vendors have found it difficult to get profit as they once did. Since many of the whole sellers are able to buy goods in bulk directly from Myanmar at a cheaper rate and sell them in Imphal at a reasonable rate, many women vendors have find it difficult to remain in the competition. Men continue to regard women as petty traders whose opinions are not taken into considerations in formal trades. Again as border regions are places and spaces of different cultures and ethnic populations and identity, and with diverse cross-border interactions, there are new roles for rural women, new problems associated with living in the borders areas and the prospect of radical changes in status as well. The rural women migrants have to adjust and adapt to language differences and border cultures, and create new relationships with local communities and ethnic groups in the border town thus there is a communication gap and the value of currency which maximum of the women are facing. Numerous Regional studies offering explanations for raising inequality across places, including economic restructuring, immigration from poorer countries, governmental regulations, and market-induced transformation of local economies” has fail to reach the crux of the issues where women are in informal trade and whose livelihood depends on it. Many place-based studies have also

found that the erosion of low-skill wages has contributed to increase in income inequality. Therefore in the Indo-Myanmar border land one sees a lot of income inequality and marginalisation of women which a policy makers have ignored to address. The relatively low participation of women in the work force is the effect of low education, strong gender affinity and lack of empowerment which are embedded in the culture, traditions and social system. No wonder the town has gained its notoriety for its nefarious contraband trade. Women working in the informal sector also suffer from wage irregularity, unconducive working conditions, economic vulnerabilities, discrimination and harassment. The abject poverty and the lack of avenues for people to earn a living, compounded by the lack of quality infrastructures like schools, hospitals, roads etc. only add to the cycle of vulnerability which has manifested in cases of trafficking of children by agents. As women living in the borderland and working in unregulated field prosperity is fragile and for the women the harsh reality of lives is compounded by armed conflicts drawn out between various factions of non state forces and the one between state and non state armed forces. Women in Moreh town are generally middle-aged, married, illiterate, landless, and poor. They are mostly from the disadvantaged social groups, who are driven into vending activities out of economic necessity. A majority of the women are dissatisfied with their work and would like to stop if their economic conditions improved. Women vendors from better socio-economic background have more likelihood to have better earning and women with comparatively small earning spends more on their households needs which reflects that they are mostly the main source of livelihood earners at the household level. Border areas provide the women with opportunities to earn and sustain their income at the same time it also serve to enhance their financial contributions to the region and the state's economy, however the daily lives and activities remains a neglected history.

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 - ii. Ibid, p.4
 - iii. Ibid
 - iv. Ibid, p.5
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 - vii. Ibid.
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- xiii. Fernand Brudal (1979), *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*, translated by Patricia Ranun, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univerity Press, pp.28-29.
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- xxiii. NS Lokendra (2004). *Reopening of the Stilwell Road: Experience from Moreh*. In D Nath (ed), *Reopening of the Stilwell Road: Prospects and problems*. Delhi: Anamika Publishers. Pp. 133-40.
- xxiv. Masheti Masinjila (2009) 'Gender Dimensions of cross-border trade in the East African Community – Kenya/Uganda and Rwanda/Burundi Border', African trade Policy Centre, work in Progress no. 78
- xxv. Masheti Masinjila (2006) *Women & Cross Border Trade in East Africa – Opportunities and Challenges for small Scale Women Traders*, Friedrich Ebert stifing and Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development, pp. 34-35.
- xxvi. Mrs. Lalam (Name change) a widow in her early forties is originally a residence of ward no. 1 and engage in seasonal informal trade to support her five kids.
- xxvii. Mrs. Lalam has been in this business since her husband's untimely death 20 yrs ago.
- xxviii. Mrs. Nenem Baite age 50 yrs. is from Sinnai Veng, Moreh and she has been in this rice selling trade for the past 20 or more yrs.
- xxix. Mrs. Kikim (name change, are engage in timber business and they came from moreh ward no. 1
- xxx. A.A. Gordon, (1996) *Transforming Capitalism and patriarchy: Gender and Development in Africa*, London; Lynne Reinner Publishers Inc. p.81.