

# The use and practices of barter exchange in Garo Hills

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A barter system is an old method of exchange. This system has been used for centuries and long before money was invented. People exchanged services and goods for other services and goods in return. In ancient times, this system involved people in the same area. The value of bartering items can be negotiated with the other party. Bartering is an ancient concept. Before the creation of currency, it was the sole form of purchasing goods and services between individuals.

The Internal Revenue Service defines bartering as "the trading of one product or service for another." The key difference between bartering and buying is that bartering does not involve a monetary transaction.

The initial stage of exchange is known as barter exchange. Under barter economy, the goods are exchanged for goods. This implies that if one wants some commodity, this can be exchanged only by giving some other commodity in exchange.

## **History of bartering**

The history of barter as an exchange of goods and services may surprise with its complexity. Bartering has typically not been the only method of exchange of goods and services that a society used, since it can't operate by itself. The barter system was used as a complement to another economic system and bartering was traditionally done by strangers or enemies. Bartering has evolved today into a legitimate method of exchange of goods and services.

One of the first evidences of bartering is in 6000 BC. The barter system traded all sorts of goods and services, such as weaponry, food, or tea. One of the most popular things traded in the barter system was salt, because it was so valuable.

Bartering grew and flourished as people began to travel more during the Middle Ages. The barter system began to be more successful as there were new goods and services being introduced. The Europeans introduced new things into the barter system market that Americans didn't have access to and also didn't have the money to afford. During the Great Depression, the barter system began to grow even more rapidly than it had been. The Great Depression is one of the most significant time periods throughout the history of bartering. Money was

scarce and people had a difficult time getting what they needed. It allowed people to get food or clothing when they needed.

Money is something which is generally accepted as a medium of exchange. It is one of the most basic and significant inventions of mankind. Before money came into use, exchange took place through barter system, i.e., goods were exchanged for goods. Barter means direct exchange of goods.

### **Barter exchange among the A·chiks (Garos):**

In *Rengsanggre* by Robbins Burling mentioned that the Garos does not always use the products of his own industry, Labor and goods are exchanged. He also mentioned about the non-monetary transactions among the A·chiks. There is a case where goods or services given and received by the two parties to the transaction are of the same kind and of approximately equivalent amount, and sometimes for quite different items.

In *A·chik Aganbewalrang* or *Original Tales of the Garos* by Harrendra W. Marak also mentioned about the barter exchange in chapter called '*Dimrimbre Pal-wang A-dingko Katchini Anti Cha-ani*' he mentioned about the exchanging of horn (adil) for one long basket of cotton.

The initial exchange among the A·chiks was barter exchange. The barter exchange was used during those days as the economic status of the general A·chik was very low. It is very difficult to get money during those days as most of the A·chiks were farmers and they lived their day to day life by cultivating the field by practicing jhum cultivation. The A·chik practice the barter exchange between two parties among the group of A·chik people who live together in the given community.

There are many cases for which the A·chiks exchange their goods. The exchanges of good are sometimes for unrelated items. There is a case where if one party required a pig or a cow and the other party required rice/paddy, the exchange was done without much thinking just because they needed that particular item or commodity. Thus one basket of paddy was exchanged for one big pig or one basket of rice for one cow. There is a case when goods were exchanged for related items such as basket of rice was exchanged for a basket of sticky rice. The weight and value of the goods or quantity may not be equivalent but the exchange was done because both the parties agreed with the exchange as they would get the goods that they required whenever the requirement was there.

The practice of barter system during those days helped to replace the goods which they wanted or needed. The barter exchange satisfied both the parties who exchanged their goods whatever goods may be. During those days the barter exchange was used as the A·chik society accepted it and did not bother much about the value and quantity of the things. It was practiced among different A·chik family members. Their essential goods

which they wanted for everyday need could be attained through this system and barter exchange fulfilled the needs of two parties.

In *History and culture* of the Garos by Milton S. Sangma, he mentioned that during the Moghul period the main staple trade was cotton which the Garos brought down annually in large quantities to barter for cloth, dry fish and salt.

In *The Garo Jungle Book* by William Carey, he also mentions that during the Moghul period, the Chaudris, created powerful Zamindars who administered their great estates at enormous profit and practically independent of control, they established markets for the Garo cotton by which their revenue was still further swelled and for fulfillment of their contract was done with the imperial power.

“Mr. Eliot went half-way around the hills and he gives a panoramic view of the life at these frontier hats (weekly markets)... Though the neighboring district millions of ryots made their clothing, thread, and quilts from the cotton grown on the Garo Hills, and Bengali merchants were eager to buy as the Garos were to barter for their needs. The Chaudris levied duties from both parties and reap a lucrative harvest.” (*The Garo Jungle Book* by William Carey p- 28)

### **Barter exchange of goods available in Garo hills with other communities:**

#### 1. Barter Exchange in South Garo Hills:

The barter exchange started among the A·chiks to get their essential commodities. The A·chiks from South Garo Hills started to exchange their raw materials with other communities to their neighboring country, Bangladesh. The raw materials found in abundance in this place are cane (ray), broom, agor, bay leaves (tezpat), ginger, turmeric, black pepper, yam, fruits like orange, jackfruit, mango, banana, tamarind, etc. are exchanged for goods like, utensil, cloths, salt and dry fish. The barter exchange among the A·chiks and the neighboring Bangladeshi people are things such as a straw of one wheel cart exchanged for one packet of salts, one basket of chilies for some clothes, basket of ginger for 1kg of dry fish, paddy for fish, etc.

The use of barter exchange among the A·chiks of South Garo Hills became one of the main sources of living because this exchange could support them to live their day to day life. Through this exchange both the parties got their needed goods whenever they wanted it. Till 1980's this barter exchange was done among the A·chiks of these areas.

This economic exchange has changed the life of the A·chiks as it has helped in the development of the people and also exposure to other cultures in a tremendous way. It has helped the people because it meets the needs of both the parties to acquire the commodities which they need in order to survive.

## 2. Barter Exchange in West Garo Hills:

Similarly barter exchange was started among the A·chiks of West Garo Hills to fulfill their needs for everyday life. The A·chiks from West Garo Hills also started to exchange their raw materials with other communities of neighboring Bangladesh. The raw materials found in abundance in this area are different varieties of fruits such as mangoes, jackfruit, banana, guava, tamarind, pineapple, orange, etc. and also betel nut, betel leaf, cotton, melon, ginger, turmeric, pumkin, chilli, brinjal, yam, etc. are exchanged for essential goods such as cloths, salt and dry fish.

There was also bartering of goods within the A·chiks of this area. The bartering was done for related and unrelated items or goods for goods between two parties.

There are many cases among the A·chiks of these area that some families are very poor and do not have a meal for a day to eat, thus the parents and the elders work whole day in a rich family, where service is exchanged for goods in return such as; the parents work the whole day for 1 kg of rice, service for 1 piglet, for 1 kg of sticky rice, for 1 kg of millet, etc.

## 3. Barter exchange in North Garo Hills:

Similarly barter exchange started among the A·chiks of North Garo Hills to fulfill their needs for day to day life. The A·chiks from North Garo Hills also started to exchange their raw materials with other tribes of the same area such as Boro and Rabha and also to other communities. The raw materials found in abundance in this area are different varieties of fruits such as mangoes, jackfruit, banana, tamarind, pineapple, wild berries, litchi, paddy, etc. and also betel nut, betel leaf, pumkin, etc. are exchanged for essential goods.

There was a case where the A·chik families kept a cowherd and maid servants for the whole year the service was exchange for 5-6 maund (1 maund is equivalent to 40 kg). The other case is that the A·chik villages appointed a *paria* (informer) who used to give general information decided by the *Gaobura* (the village head man). Some of the information was *tomani* (emergency meeting), social work, etc.

The barter exchange was done in these areas for a meat. There was a case when one cow is slaughtered then 1or 2kg of meat are given to each family who wanted the meat. Thus the meat is exchanged for some paddy. There is also another case where the family has a paddy field but does not have cows so the cows are borrowed to work in the paddy field from the other party in exchange for paddy.

## **The advantages of Bartering**

There is an advantage of bartering as goods are directly exchanged for other goods. In other words, barter refers to exchanging of goods without the use of money. Money was scarce during those days and A-chik had a very difficult time in getting what they needed. Through this system it allowed A-chiks to get food or clothing essential commodities when they required it. A-chik exchanged services and goods for other services and goods in return. The A-chiks tried to negotiate the value of bartering items with the other party. Bartering does not involve money which is one of the advantages. One party can exchange an item by exchanging another item what the other parties no longer need.

Another advantage of bartering is flexibility. The A-chik exchange one related item for another such as, plain rice for sticky rice, cock for hen, or two completely different items – such as a cow for cotton, paddy for pig, paddy for cock, gong for paddy, etc. through bartering neither the party had to spend money. It is a simple system devoid of the complex problems of the modern monetary system. Under the barter system, goods are exchanged just to meet the needs of the society.

## **Disadvantages of bartering**

The disadvantages or complication of bartering is that sometimes one does not know how reliable the party is. Thus person with whom the bartering is done should be reliable. Bartering may not have any proof or certification that they are legitimate. This means that services and goods you are exchanging may be exchanged for poor or defective items. No one would like to exchange a big cow that is healthy and in perfect working condition for a big pig that looks healthy is worn after few days. It may be a good idea to limit exchanges to family and friends in the beginning because good bartering requires skills and experience. Another disadvantage of bartering is that the value and the quantity of goods may not be same as bartering is done for both related and unrelated items. There is a case where a big cow is exchanged only for some paddy, one basket of cotton for some salt, etc. Thus it should focus on related items or unrelated items with similar value -- such as one large appliance for another must be done.

## **Conclusion:**

Thus, A-chiks practiced barter exchange (or bartering) by which goods or services are directly exchanged for other goods or services without using a medium of exchange, such as money. The bartering was done without thinking about the weight, quantity and values of goods. The valuation of commodities is not always the same. If paddy is given in exchange of a cow it will depend on the strength the cow is able to work. It may also depend on the owner of the cow or how much he would change for it. The A-chiks were happy to use this system during those days as their needs were simple. It satisfied both the parties as it could fulfill their needs. In

the villages, even now we do not have to pay while building the roof of the thatch houses. The whole villages come and help the owner of the house. Barter exchange or bartering was useful for the A·chiks when the money was not available. But, even after the introduction of money people still exchanged their service for paddy as it was their basic needs.

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